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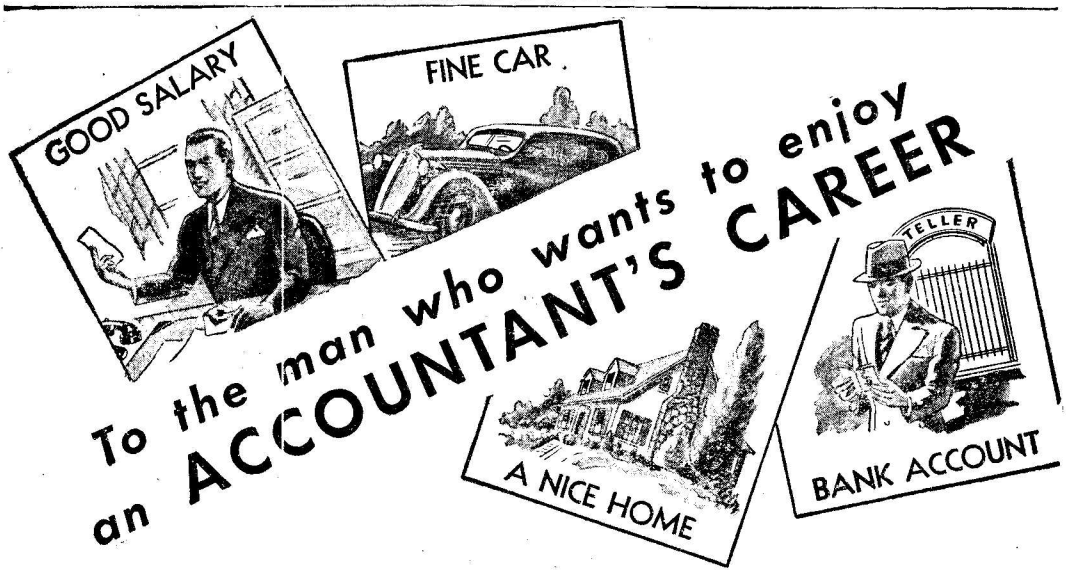

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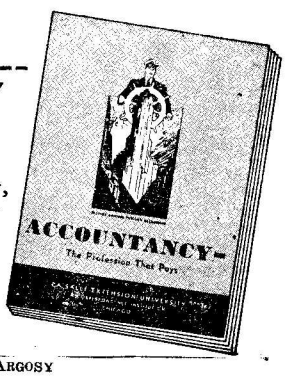

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This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President
THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD. PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE
8 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C., 4 111 Rue Réaumur

Published weekly. Single copies 10 cents. By the year $4.00; in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; Canada, $5.00. Other countries, $7.00. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Entered as second class matter November 28, 1896, at the post office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright and must not be reprinted without the publisher's permission. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Printed in U. S. A.

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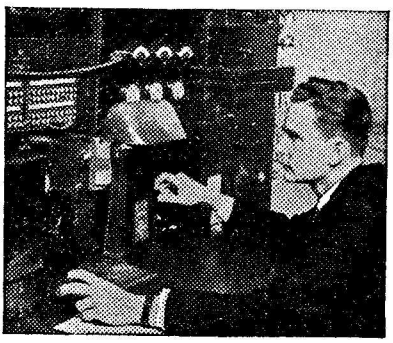

Jobs Like These Go to Men Who Know Radio

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

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The Whisper Trail

By WALT COBURN

Author of "Fenced Off," "Sons of Gun Fighters," etc.

Fair warning, you fast-gun gentlemen! This pilgrim from Montana who talks so prettily and whose smile is so slow and soft can puncture your skin-game with a throwing knife while juggling leaden lightning behind his back. Beginning an exciting Western novel

CHAPTER I

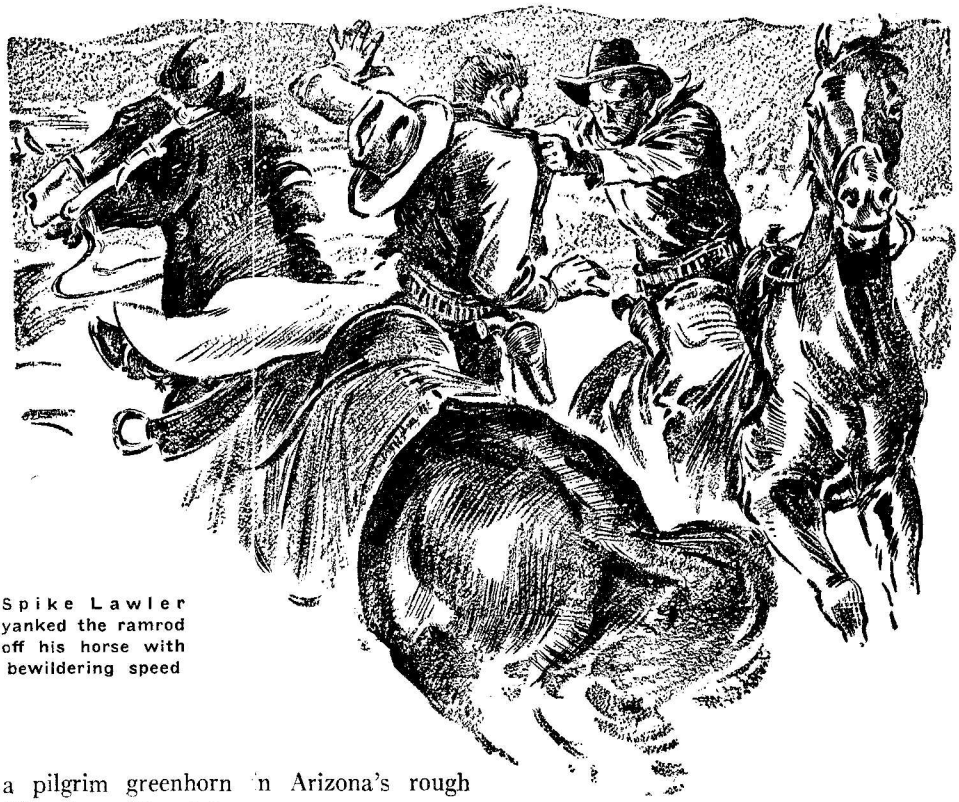
PILGRIM ON THE RANGE

JESS CLAGGETT had given his ramrod, Joe Lazar, and his cowhands orders to "count 'em 'round the hill" when they tallied over the Box C cattle to the four-eyed pilgrim from Montana. The crafty Jess was working a cow-country flim-flam game as old as the Claggett Box C iron. And the Box C cattle were some of the first to ever come up the trail from Texas to Arizona.

Now this flim-flam:

The Whetstones was rough country and made to order for this trick. Joe Lazar was foxy. His crew was made up of the toughest and fastest cowhands in Arizona. And the young, lanky, easy grinning Montanan wore steel rimmed spectacles that gave him a near-sighted appearance. He looked like a natural for this shabby range bunco game.

His name was Dave Lawler. His paunchy companion and self-styled ramrod, Bobtail Boggs, called him Spike because of his height and lean build. Spike Lawler might be a cowman in Montana but he was just



Spike Lawler yanked the ramrod off his horse with bewildering speed

a pilgrim greenhorn in Arizona's rough Whetstone Mountains.

Jess Claggett, thickset and black haired, and Spike Lawler sat their horses on either side of a long ravine through which Joe Lazar and the Box C cowboys were stringing the cattle. They kept count of the steers and cows that passed through the ravine below in a seemingly endless string. When a hundred head had passed a given point Jess Claggett would sing out:

"Tally a hundred!"

"Tally a hundred!" Spike Lawler would call back across the ravine.

The horse that had been roped out of the remuda for Bobtail Boggs to ride had cold-jawed with him. A Box C cowhand had ridden back to the ranch with Bobtail to get him another horse. And the delay was depriving Spike of his lone helper, leaving him at the mercy of crafty Jess Claggett.

Bobtail Boggs rode up as the drags of the cattle passed through the ravine and were lost to sight in the broken foothills.

"I tally two thousand, seven hundred and eighty-seven head, not countin' them big calves that any other man would count as yearlin's," said Jess Claggett. The thin-lipped mouth under his drooping black moustache twisted in a faint grin. His opaque, bloodshot black eyes watched the face of the lanky Montanan.

Claggett had been tallying the hundreds with .45 cartridges. He counted twenty cartridges from the right-hand pocket of his brush-scarred chaps. The brim of his hat was slanted across his narrowed eyes. His voice was a flat drawl.

Spike Lawler took off his steel rimmed spectacles and wiped them with a white silk handkerchief. His eyes were clear and as blue as a Montana rain washed sky. His wide mouth spread in a grin.

"Those cowboys of yours could never hold down a job in Montana, Claggett. They're too careless. They let a lot of cattle get back there in the herd after

they'd been counted once and even twice. There was one big brockle-faced steer that passed three times through the long coulee you call a ravine. There's a cow with a drooped horn that passed through twice. A brindle steer, a dun colored cow, a two-year-old steer with one horn knocked off, and several more. Markers.

"So we've wasted the best part of a day with this slipshod method of range counting, unless you want my check for one thousand head of cattle and a deed to the Box C brand. And I'd take those men to town and have 'em all fitted with spectacles. These steel rimmed specs of mine are very serviceable. And you'd be surprised how they'll improve a man's vision, Claggett."

Spike Lawler's smile was as guileless as a small boy's but a hardness had changed the color of his blue eyes until they looked as gray as new steel in the sunlight.

LAZAR rode up on a sweat wet horse. A tall, swarthy skinned man with yellow eyes, he looked like a Mexican and would fight to kill any man who called him one.

"You're talkin' damn' foolishness, Lawler," said Claggett. "Mebbyso a few head drifted back into the main bunch. Not more'n fifty head. Your man Boggs was supposed to be on the job to watch for little happenstances like that."

"Bobtail," said Spike Lawler, grinning, "drew a hard mouthed horse that took off across country with him the first time he turned a steer. He went to camp to change horses. Perhaps he lingered a while there to cool a cup of coffee. They say of him up in Montana that Bobtail is always a day late and a dollar short. Because of his incurable habit of drawing to a bobtail flush in poker games and never filling his hand, he was given the nickname Bobtail.

"So count him out. I'll pay you for a thousand head of cattle *and* the Box C brand. I've already been warned I was buying a bogus cow outfit. But that's my bid. Take it or leave it!"

Lazar spurred his horse alongside Spike Lawler's. His teeth showed white against his swarthy face.

"Why you four-eyed greenhorn—" Lazar's yellow eyes glittered.

Spike Lawler's knotted bridle reins dropped across his saddle horn. His long left arm reached out. His hand, long, bony, gripped the open collar of Lazar's shirt and faded denim brush jacket. With a heave and a twist Lawler yanked the Box C ramrod from his saddle and flung him through the air as if he were made of rags. It might have been sheer luck or it could have been skill that landed Lazar in a huge patch of branching cholla cactus.

Lazar fell on his back in the spined cactus thicket. He let out a howl of pain. The gun that he had in his hand was flung aside. He was cursing wildly, the fight gone out of him. His only thought was to free himself from the cholla bush.

The cholla has countless jointed branches which when the spines cling to anything, break off easily at the joints. Lazar was fighting free of the cactus now and short joints of it were clinging to his clothes and flesh. It was very painful.

A gun appeared somehow in Bobtail's hand. His voice had a whisky huskiness. His friendly brown eyes were like round, polished agate.

"Stand your hands, gents! That Mexican lookin' feller asked fer it. Don't rile Spike, Mr. Claggett. He kinda goes off locoed when he's called names. Take 'er easy. I don't want my boss to kill no more men. I done promised his ol' daddy—"

"You've got my bid, Claggett." Spike Lawler's cold blue eyes belied his easy grin. "If you're accepting it, take your men and get off the Box C range. I'll meet you in town and pay cash for your cattle.

"I've already bought the mortgage on your land and I'm takin' over the outfit next week. If you don't want to sell your cattle, then drive 'em off my range. You claim you've worked the range clean and you've got your cattle bunched now. Keep movin' 'em."

Lazar had gotten free of the cholla and was on the hands and knees groping for

his six-shooter that lay on the ground under the cactus bush.

"Don't pick it up, Lazar," said Spike bluntly, "or I'll make you use it. And have it in your hand the next time you call a man a fightin' name."

"Simmer down, Spike," said Bobtail huskily. "Don't go killin' no more men. I done promised your daddy—"

"You'll find me in town tonight, Claggett," said Spike curtly. He reined his horse and headed back for the Box C ranch. "Come along, Bobtail. There's a juggling act billed at the Opera House at San Onofre tonight and I want to see it."

AS THEY rode away together there was a twinkle in the blue eyes behind Spike Lawler's steel rimmed spectacles.

"Human beings, Bobtail," he remarked, "are frail critters. Take Jess Claggett and Lazar. Strong men, crafty men. But they each were vulnerable. Because I'm wearing these glasses and speak the English they taught me at the university, they take me for a short sighted pilgrim.

"I'm breakin' in a new saddle and the horn isn't rope-marked yet, and it's a three-quarter rigged hull instead of a double rigged saddle such as they ride here in the rough country. So they count 'em around the hill on me.

"They stake you to a cold-jawed horse to get you out of the way. They mistake my good nature for weakness. If I'd left my specs in my pocket and talked range lingo, they'd never have tried to pull that shopworn trick.

"There's maybe a hundred head of cattle less than there's supposed to be in that gatherment. We'll gather at least five hundred head of renegade steers back in the rough country. Name your own odds, Bobtail and I'll bet that Jess Claggett will show up tonight at San Onofre for his money. We've bought the Box C outfit, lock, stock and barrel."

"You done bought a hornet's nest," complained Bobtail Boggs sadly. "On every side of you is outfits that's got fast cowhands a-draggin' hungry loops. Claggett's sold this outfit three-four times in the past ten years and bought it back fer a song and jig-dance when the owners couldn't make 'er pay account of rustlers stealin' 'em blind.

"Your daddy left you a nice little grubstake and you blow it fer a gold brick. They'll rob you blind. If you put up a scrap they'll bushwhack you some moonlight night. That's Jess Claggett's way."

Spike did not seem to hear. He took off his spectacles and polished the lenses and heavy steel rims, then put them back on his large, homely nose. He spoke softly, as if musing aloud.

"This jugglin' act must be a dinger if the handbills tell the truth. He juggles beer bottles. Keeps ten in the air at one time. The best I've ever kept goin' is six. And he has a knife throwin' act for a curtain ringer."

"Yonder," said Bobtail heavily, "inside that bob-wire fence on the high knoll behind the ranch buildin's and corrals, is six-eight graves. Folks calls it the Box C boot-hill and they claim every man inside that graveyard was killed by Claggett and Lazar. When you bought the mortgage on this layout, that cemetery was throwed in too. Like as not me'n and you will git to stake our last an' final claims inside yonder bob-wire boot-hill corral."

"It's a cinch!" Spike's voice raised excitedly and his blue eyes shone behind the polished lenses of his spectacles.

"Uh?" Beads of sweat stood out on Bobtail's round face. His eyes rounded with apprehension.

"You won't show up as classy as a gal in red tights for a human target but it'll be the same idea. We'll knock 'em flat, Bobtail!"

"Who?" Bobtail wanted to know. His expression was owlish.

"Let's lope along. Change to our own horses at the ranch. Make San Onofre in time to catch that jugglin' act. We'll give 'em the good old Wild West act."

Bobtail Boggs groaned feebly and rubbed his bald head with a none too steady hand.

"I'll need likker fer a brave-maker, Spike. One of these times you'll aim a little to one side and it'll be Gabriel, blow your bugle."

"You'll live to gather all the wild cattle in the Whetstones, Bobtail. This is a cowman's paradise and I got it dirt cheap."

"Yeah. Dirt cheap. You done bought a bear trap all set fer you to step into. Claggett has sold his outfit before and got 'er back. Claggett will move off the Box C range. He'll throw in with Shane McTeague and Pod Gifford. They'll whittle on your stock till they crowd you into sellin'. They'll try to run you out.

"If you don't coyote they'll cut you down from the brush some night and plant you in the Box C boot-hill. That law sharp at San Onofre sold you a gold brick. Only it's a gold brick loaded with dynamite and it'll blow up in your hands.

"That law sharp that calls hisself Judge Ambrose is a snake. He packs a sneak gun with notches on it. He's the Law at San Onofre. Him and that town marshal gunslinger they call Big Dud Dudley. Let a man who don't work in with the Box C outfit holler louder than a whisper in San Onofre and what happens to him? Big Dud parts his hair with a gun barrel and throws him in the calaboose. When he comes alive he's drug into court. Judge Ambrose fines him all the money he's got and gives him till sundown to be outa the country."

Spike Lawler grinned widely. "Some boys we knew up in Montana are winterin' near the Mexican border where the climate suits their clothes, Bobtail. They'll be driftin' into San Onofre about now. They don't spook easy. Not even the bull roaring of Big Dud would have much of a frightening effect on men like Long Henry or the Powder River Kid."

Bobtail Boggs gulped, choked, sputtered. An uncertain smile played across his red moon face.

"Those border jumpers," said Spike Lawler, "will be all the roundup crew we need to work the Whetstones. We're fightin' fire with backfire. . . Let's lope. I've got to catch that jugglin' act."

CHAPTER II

THE LAW HAS GREEN EYES

BIG Dud Dudley, town marshal of the border town of San Onofre, was uneasy. There were half a dozen strange cowpunchers in town. And Big Dud had a mistrust for all strangers. Especially men who packed saddle guns and looked and acted as if they'd be hard hands to prod around with the barrel of a six-shooter.

"There's six-eight of 'em," he told the lantern jawed Judge Ambrose. "They come from the Mexican side and they're stayin' too sober to suit me. I can't read the blotched brands on their horses."

"Jess Claggett," said Judge Ambrose, brushing cigar ashes from the liquid spotted front of his black frock coat, "has some queer associates south of the Line. Let 'em alone, Dud."

"Them fellers ain't no friends of Jess's. They ain't declared theirselves one way or another, but I'd lay a big bet that they ain't here to meet Jess Claggett."

"Then keep an eye on 'em, Dud. Jail 'em if they step out of line. If you need help, swear in some deputies. Now ease on down the street. I've got these papers to make out for Jess and this Lawler sucker to sign. I saw Lawler ride into town half an hour ago. Where is he?"

"Over at the Opera House. He's behind the curtain jugglin' beer bottles with that show feller. Locoed as a sheepherder, if you want my guess. His windjammer pardner is augerin' with them strangers at the Palace Saloon next door to the Opera House. Actin' like he's knowed 'em since they was pups together. 'Long time no see you, Bobtail,' they tell him, and hooraw him about has he filled a short flush lately."

Judge Ambrose scowled, his pale blue eyes narrowing. "Look through your old reward dodgers. If there's any of 'em fit the description of criminals, jail 'em on suspicion. Jess Claggett pays you fighting wages. This is his town. Don't let it get loused up with outsiders. Clear out. I've got work. Take your bellyache outside."

Big Dud's bloodshot gray eyes narrowed a little and the two men stared hard at one another, their hands near their guns. In that meeting of glances there was hatred.

Then the town marshal shrugged his heavy shoulders and walked out of the office and onto the dark street, closing the door behind him. Judge Ambrose relaxed and his mouth twisted in a faint grimace.

There came the sound of shod hoofs outside. Men's voices. Jess Claggett opened the door of Judge Ambrose's office and came in, slamming the door shut behind him. There was an ominous glitter in his black eyes. The judge brought a bottle of whisky and two glasses from his desk.

"You look perturbed, Jess," he said, coldness in his voice.

"That four eyed, long eared, single rig, grinnin' jackass ain't such a fool as you claimed he was. We counted 'em 'round the hill on him and he called the turn. And he throwed Lazar into the cactus. You played hell when you let that sucker grab the hook. The deal's off. Tear up the papers! I got a hunch we've roped a wampus cat."

"Lawler's already laid his cash on the line. I followed out your instructions and hooked him. He owns the Whetstone range."

"Buy back the mortgage," snapped Claggett.

Judge Ambrose smiled thinly and rubbed his hands together. He motioned towards the bottle of whisky.

"You need a drink, Jess. I've closed the deal with Dave Lawler. The papers are ready for your signature."

"To hell with the papers. I'm signin' no more papers—"

"Take a drink, Jess. Then sign on the dotted line. It would grieve me to attend your hanging. At the last hanging I witnessed the trap wasn't properly sprung and the poor devil with the black hood over his head strangled to death at the end of the rope. It took many minutes before he quit kicking and the doctor pronounced him dead.

"He was a man who had doublecrossed me, Jess. He was tough enough till they put the rope around his neck. Then he begged like a yellow dog. I almost felt sorry for him. But in business there's no room for sentiment.

"Sign the papers, Jess. We'll let Lazar worry about the disposal of Lawler. Sign right there where I've pencil-marked an X."

The lawyer's voice was still oily, but his pale green eyes were glittering pin points.

"You slimy—"muttered Jess Claggett as he reached for the pen on Judge Ambrose's desk. The lawyer's right hand gripped the little sneak-gun he carried in a specially made pocket of his coat.

JESS Claggett signed the papers and poured himself a stiff drink. Ambrose folded the papers and shoved them into the pocket of his black frock coat.

"So this Lawler pilgrim has your innards chilled?" The lawyer's voice was taunting. "He's harmless looking and on the foolish side of thirty. What's he got that makes you crawl, Jess?"

"He's got a heap more savvy than he let on when he first come out to look over the outfit. And he lifted Lazar clean out of his saddle and tossed him into the cholla like he was an empty sack. Then backed his play with a six-shooter. And this windjammin' Boggs got there in time to act as witness if there was a killin'. And this Boggs, for all his braggin' won't quit Lawler in a tight. He had a gun in his hand and he acted like he'd used it before."

The big slug of whisky had warmed Jess Claggett's insides. He tossed off another drink and grinned at the attorney.

"Speakin' of hangin', Ambrose—when I swing, you'll be stretchin' rope from the same tree. But bullets is faster than ropes. I kin be crowded just so far—"

"That's been tried by faster men than you are, Jess. Whenever you or Lazar feel a lucky streak coming on, fill your hands. I'll be anticipating your gun moves."

Jess Claggett's black brows knit in a scowl. "Forgit it. Make out a transfer of

the Box C brand, deedin' it to Lawler. I'm sellin' the cattle. He's payin' me for a thousand head. I'll have to take it and like it. I'll make him bleed white before I'm done."

"That's the proper viewpoint, Jess. I've already got the papers made out for the transfer of the Box C brand. Sign here. And if Lazar can't hold down his job, get rid of him."

"Lazar," said Jess Claggett, "rode to town standin' high in his stirrups. He's full of cholla needles. A walkin' pin-cushion. He'll kill Lawler when the sign's right."

"When the sign is right," Judge Ambrose nodded. "Tell Lazar I want to see him right away. Good night."

Jess Claggett helped himself to another drink and left the lawyer's office. When he had gone, Judge Ambrose took the signed papers from his pocket and locked them in a big steel safe.

He poured himself a drink and twirled the filled glass between thumb and long, big-jointed fingers, holding it to the light to get its amber color. He loved whisky, but generally he drank sparingly. On rare occasions he disappeared to go on a ten-day drunk. But he had just begun a big deal and he'd have to postpone his drinking.

"Jess Claggett," he mused, "should know better than to sign a paper of any sort without first reading it carefully. You've served your term of usefulness, Jess. You've lost your grip."

He had finished his drink when Lazar rapped on the door and came in. He limped painfully and his face and hands were swollen from the tiny cholla spines buried beneath the skin. He scowled and shook his head when the lawyer motioned to an empty chair. But he helped himself to a drink.

JUDGE Ambrose took a sheaf of bank-notes from his inside pocket. His beady eyes were studying the swarthy Lazar. His voice was barely audible in the room.

"Jess seems to think you're slowing up, Lazar. That you've lost your warp."

"The hell he does!"

"And you know what happens to men Jess don't need any longer," the lawyer continued softly.

"Jess Claggett never seen the day when he would could beat me to a gun, mister."

Ambrose shrugged his bony shoulders and smiled. "A fair draw wouldn't be Jess' method in a case where he knew the other man to be faster with a gun."

"Why that bull necked, bushwhackin' son—"

Ambrose motioned Lazar to silence with a brief gesture. "If anything should happen tonight to Jess Claggett the suspicion would fall on Lawler. Claggett and Lawler locked horns today regarding the range count on the Box C cattle. This Lawler is a stranger and a jury would be anxious to convict him for murder if Jess Claggett's dead body was found out behind the Palace Saloon with a bullet in the back."

"You mean—" Lazar's face whitened under its swarthy color.

"There are two thousand dollars in my hand, Lazar. If you happened to hear a shot and saw Lawler fading into the night with a gun in his hand and then stumbled upon Jess Claggett's dead body in a dark alley, I'd gladly pay that amount over to you as a reward for your keen vision and alertness."

Lazar wet his dry lips with his nervous tongue. His eyes shifted under the lawyer's beady green stare. The Box C ramrod helped himself to another drink.

"I can't cut 'er," he said huskily. "It's too risky. I got reason a-plenty to hate Jess Claggett. He cussed me out this evenin', blamin' me fer that fake cattle count Called me a half-breed greaser. Said I'd lost my guts. But this'd be murder—

"And murder, Lazar, is something you've never touched? Your memory's getting bad. You seem to forget that I saved your neck from the noose. I've got enough on you to hang you so fast that you wouldn't have time to remember a prayer."

Judge Ambrose flipped the sheaf of banknotes and locked them in one of his desk drawers. "I'll expect you to collect that reward money before sunrise. Pull the door shut behind you as you go out, Lazar."

Lazar's face was putty colored when he left the office of Judge Ambrose and headed down the street for the Palace Saloon.

Ambrose allowed himself one more drink before he blew out his lighted lamp, locked his office, and walked slowly down the street towards the Palace.

He caught a brief glimpse of Big Dud leading a prisoner off toward the jail at the edge of town. The town marshal was arresting one of the strangers who had come to San Onofre without the sanction of Jess Claggett.

CHAPTER III

JUGGLER WITH A KNIFE

SPIKE LAWLER got a broom and swept the litter of broken beer bottles into a dustpan that the little juggler held. Spike took the dustpan full of broken glass and grinned sheepishly. Sweat trickled down his warm, flushed face.

"Butter-fingers," he said, his grin making him look much younger than his thirty years.

"It takes practice, mister," said the little juggler. "You're better with heftier stuff than I am. And you're goin' to be a good knife tosser, the missus says. She knows talent when she sees it."

"The cowboy's got a good wing," said the female half of the juggling act. "And a sure eye for a man that wears windows. Here's one of Lefty's old practice knives, mister. It'll do till you get a set of your own."

"I won't embarrass you by offering to pay for it." Spike held the heavy, diamond shaped throwing knife in his hand. "But the gift of sharp steel is bad luck—so my pardner Bobtail, who is a superstitious gambler, claims. So here's a dollar. And you'll be my guests at supper after the show. I'll watch your act from the box. And many thanks for your fine patience."

Spike dumped the broken glass in a trash barrel. The juggler and his wife stood there, the man in his clown make-up, his diminutive, rather pretty wife with an old dressing gown spotted with grease-paint, pulled over her red tights and spangles.

"You done swell with six bottles," said the juggler's wife.

"But six plus four still make ten beer bottles," said Spike.

Holding the throwing knife in his hand, he let himself out the stage door. Perspiration had fogged his spectacles. He slipped them off and dropped them into his shirt pocket. Coming from the lighted backstage, he stood for a moment in the dark alleyway between the Opera House and the Palace Saloon, blinking to adjust his eyes to the darkness.

He saw the back door of the Palace Saloon open. Jess Claggett, walking a little unsteadily, stepped out into the alleyway and stood there, outlined against the lighted doorway.

Then out of the corner of his eye Spike caught a furtive movement over behind a pile of empty cases and beer barrels. He saw a man crouched there with a six-shooter in his hand, outlined faintly against the starlit sky beyond. The man was gripping the six-shooter in both hands, lowering it slowly, deliberately, to take a pot shot at Jess Claggett.

Spike's long arm stretched back. His hand gripped the throwing knife. Then his arm flipped like a catapult spring. The heavy knife sped swiftly, silently through the darkness. It struck the crouched bushwacker a glancing blow on the shoulder. The six-shooter exploded with a roar and a streak of flame. The man let out a sharp yelp of startled pain and took to his heels, ducking behind the beer barrels and disappearing into the night.

"What—" barked Jess Claggett, his gun in his hand, his tipsy voice harsh with alarm.

"With practice," said Spike, his voice calm, "I could have hit the gun. The knife

made a half turn. The flat of the blade struck his shoulder. Just a moment, Claggett. I want to pace off the distance between here and where he was crouched."

Spike covered the ground with long legged strides, counting aloud. Jess Claggett staring at him speechlessly, his gun still gripped in his hand.

"Twenty paces, Claggett." Spike groped on the ground and picked up the heavy throwing knife. "Lefty could have knocked the gun from his hand at that distance. It takes more than just practice. There's a knack to it. However, it turned the trick. Spoiled the gentleman's aim. He missed you by a wide margin, Claggett."

SPIKE carried the knife into the shaft of yellow light that came from the open doorway. The shooting had attracted no attention. San Onofre was noisy tonight and the saloon was filled with the music of a Mexican stringed orchestra and the sound of voices.

There was a little blood on the heavy polished blade. Spike wiped it off on the side of his boot and shoved the knife out of sight inside his flannel shirt.

"You ain't wearin' your specs," said Jess Claggett.

Spike grinned and took his spectacles from his shirt pocket. He polished the lenses and put on the glasses. Claggett noticed the startling change a pair of steel rimmed spectacles can make in a man's appearance. They somehow weakened the strong, roughly hewn lines of Spike's face.

"Look for a man with an injured shoulder and you'll have your bushwacker, Claggett."

Jess Claggett nooded. "My back was turned that direction," he said, measuring every word. "I'd have gotten that hunk of lead between the shoulders."

"He wasn't exactly givin' you what you'd call a fightin' chance," admitted Spike. "I could use a bottle of beer. I've been back-stage with Lefty and worked up quite a sweat. Did you ever try to keep ten beer bottles goin' in the air at one time, Claggett?"

Jess Claggett shook his head slowly. He kept staring at Spike. Then he spoke in a guarded tone.

"Let's keep this thing just between me'n you, Lawler. I got a notion or two about it. You didn't lose nothin' just now when you horned in."

"Chalk it up to target practice." Spike dismissed the subject.

"Twenty long-legged paces," said Jess Claggett slowly, "and without your specs. And that overgrowed butcher knife didn't make no more noise then a rock bein' throwed through the air. I'm scairt of a knife," he added bluntly.

"That goes double," agreed Spike. "Blacks and Mexicans like 'em. But a gun is a white man's weapon. I just happened to have the thing in my hand. Let's get that beer. Trying to keep ten beer bottles in the air is dusty work."

Bobtail's bulk filled the doorway. His wheezy voice called: "That you, Spike? Kin you lemme have twenty-five? If I'd filled that straight I'd be buyin' wine fer the dance gals. But—"

"A day late and a dollar short," chuckled Spike, reaching into his pocket.

Bobtail recognized Jess Claggett. He gave a little start of surprise.

"Thought that was Shorty with you, Spike. Say, you ain't gone off your handle and killed another man?" He stared at some blood on Spike's hand.

"Busted beer bottle nicked me," said Spike. "I got eight of 'em goin' once but they tangled on me."

He gave Bobtail twenty-five dollars and walked to the bar with Jess Claggett.

LONG HENRY, the Powder River Kid, Shorty and a couple more of the quick triggered outfit that rode the hoot-owl trail were lined up at the bar. They gave no sign of recognition till Spike grinned and nodded.

"These are some of the boys I hired to help me work the Whetstone roughs," he told Jess Claggett.

"The hell you say!" Jess Claggett looked hard at Spike; then his black eyes

studied the crew of cowpunchers. He nodded to Long Henry. The tall, quiet outlaw cowpuncher nodded in return.

"Whisky," said Claggett to the bartender. "Give the boys what they want. Where's Lazar?"

"He was around a while ago, Jess. Kinda swole-up and unsociable and gettin' a little too much likker aboard. Mebby he stepped out in the fresh air to walk 'er off. They say he's stuck full of cholla. Them things poison a man till he's shore sick."

Jess Claggett's searching black eyes found Judge Ambrose standing at the far end of the bar talking to red bearded Shane McTeague and to a leathery little man named Pod Gifford. Ambrose's right hand was out of sight under his black coat, holding the pearl butt of his blunt nosed sneak-gun. His green eyes were watching Claggett as a snake watches its prey.

"Yonder," said Jess Claggett, indicating the attorney with a nod of his head, "stands the coldest blooded human that ever crossed up a man that was fool enough to trust 'im. Ambrose is treacherous. He's rank poison. Remember that when you dicker with him, Lawler."

"Thanks," said Spike, drinking his beer from the bottle, "I'll bear it in mind. He's an odd character to be holding down the job of Justice of the Peace here at San Onofre."

"He's the only lawyer around here. A man has to know law to be a Justice of the Peace."

"That's right," agreed Spike amiably. "And it's often the blackleg shyster who out-smarts an honest attorney. But sooner or later the blackleg law sharp will make some mistake. Trip himself up. Then he's finished. What have you decided about that cattle count, Claggett, and the transfer of your Box C iron?"

Jess Claggett grinned crookedly. "I shore got tangled in my own rope on that deal, Lawler. You ain't so green as you looked. You kin pay me for a thousand head and I done signed the transfer of the Box C brand. Ambrose has it at his office."

"Then let's get Ambrose and we'll close the deal for the whole outfit. The transaction takes in all the land you own, all the cattle and horses in the Box C iron, all the leased government grazing land you hold. I'm willing to let you cut out your string of private horses. And that gives me all the Whetstone range and the strip of lower range between the Whetstones and the Gifford and McTeague ranges."

"You're kinda wrong there, Lawler. That mortgage you bought don't include my lower range. And the brand transfer takes only the cattle in the Box C iron. I keep every horse in the Box C brand. I ain't sellin' that remuda of cow ponies to no man. Not unless he pays a hundred dollars a head for 'em.

"Then your friend Judge Ambrose has either misrepresented the deal to me and laid himself wide open for legal trouble. Or he's set a bear trap and you've walked into it." Spike consulted a heavy silver watch he carried in the watch pocket of his overalls, anchored by a buckskin string to a metal suspender button.

"The juggling act don't go on for an hour. That gives us ample time. We'll get Ambrose and go to his office. And we'll find out which of us he's lied to."

Jess Claggett downed his drink and hitched up his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter.

"I ain't trimmin' no man that just kept me from bein' shot in the back, Lawler. I don't know how far Ambrose has trimmed you, but from here on you git a square deal from Jess Claggett. Let's take a look at Ambrose's hole card."

JUDGE AMBROSE smiled thinly at Spike, but his little eyes kept watching Jess Claggett's gun hand.

"The papers are all ready for your signature, Lawler. There's really no need for Jess Claggett to come along. He's already signed the papers."

"Claggett," said Spike blandly, "is coming along just for the leg exercise and a sniff of fresh air."

"I'd like you to meet a couple of your neighbors, Lawler," said Ambrose. "Shane McTeague of the M Bar. Pod Gifford owns the Lazy P outfit."

Judge Ambrose's eyes darted swiftly around the smoke laden room, searching for Big Dud. But the burly town marshal was nowhere in sight.

Spike caught Bobtail's eye and a signal passed between them. Bobtail went on playing poker.

"I've got to be back in time to catch the juggling act at the Opera House." Spike started for the door. "Come on, Judge. Let's get goin', Claggett."

"If you don't have any objections, Lawler," said Ambrose smoothly, "McTeague and Gifford could act as witnesses."

"No objections on my part," said Spike. "We need a couple of men to sign as witnesses. It's real friendly and neighborly of 'em, I'm sure."

Jess Claggett grunted. "After you, Ambrose. I've already let a friend of yourn git a look at my back this evenin'."

"You should cut down on the booze, Jess," said the gray faced attorney. "That forty-rod is doing things to your imagination."

He took Spike's arm and led the way outside. McTeague and Gifford followed them. The red bearded giant and the little bowlegged cowman made an odd looking pair. Jess Claggett trailed them, heavy black brows knit in a scowl.

CHAPTER IV

WAIT FOR A BOOT-HILL BURIAL

JUDGE AMBROSE halted abruptly on the wide plank walk in front of the low roofed adobe cabin that served as his office and his home.

The front window had been broken. The front door stood partly open and a light burned inside. The desk drawers had been smashed, and their contents littered the floor.

The lamp stood on the desk, and at the edge of its light a girl in cowpuncher overalls and flannel shirt sat back in the lawyer's old swivel chair, her spurred boots on the desk. The girl had a thick mop of black hair that was tinted with coppery highlights. Her face was tanned and there were freckles across her short nose. Her eyes were such a dark shade of gray that they looked black under the fringe of her lashes. Her red lips parted in a wide smile that revealed a set of strong white teeth.

"He was trying to shoot the combination off your safe when I spooked him, Judge."

She swung her legs from the desk and her silver mounted spurs jingled as she came to her feet with a lithe swiftness.

"Who?" Judge Ambrose's voice was sharp.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. Spike met the scrutiny of her frank stare and flushed a little. She spoke to Jess Claggett.

"I hear you're selling out to another sucker, Jess. So I rode to town to look over our new neighbor and horn in on any celebration you might be throwin'. The last time you peddled that shopworn layout, you pitched a dance that ended up with as sweet a free-for-all as ever I hope to see. So I played hookey from my ponies and tied my town clothes to my saddle and honored San Onofre with a visit."

"And while she's waitin' for the fun to start," rumbled the deep voice of Shane McTeague, "she spends the time bustin' into the Judge's office and wreckin' his desk. She gits them notions from the mother's side of her fam'ly. The black Irish av her.

"There's bin red McTeagues hung fer horse stealin' mebby, but never was there a common house burglar in the red shanty lot av the McTeagues. But concernin' the crimes of the black O'Connors, I'll say just nothin' and let nature take 'er course with the young 'un.

"While Ambrose is settin' things to rights, Lawler, shake hands with me one and, the Lord be praised, only offspring av the marriage between Shane McTeague and Molly O'Connor. Her name's Sheila and she's the best cowhand south av the Whetstones or north or west or east av 'em for that matter. Now git ye gone, brat.

We got business to tend to. Go on to the Opera House. There's a show goin' on there. Git!"

"You're a sheep amongst wolves," she told Spike, gripping his hand hard. "Say the word and I'll stay here and check any shenanigans they try to pull. Though I heard you tossed Lazar into some cactus for tryin' to count 'em around the hill on you. I'd kiss you for that if you didn't wear those schoolmaster specs. *Adiosita!*"

Sheila tugged her father's red beard, winked at Spike, saluted Jess Claggett airily, and poked Pod Gifford in the ribs. Then she was gone. The grin left Pod Gifford's leathery face. Big Shane McTeague heaved an audible sigh of relief. Jess Claggett started after her, changed his mind, closed the door and leaned his back against it.

JUDGE AMBROSE picked up his littered papers and put them back in the desk drawers. The sheaf of banknotes he had shown Lazar had disappeared. He opened his big safe, but he made no comment whatever. Some seething inner rage stained the cheekbones of his gray face.

He took the papers from the safe and spread them on the desk. He motioned to Spike.

"Look 'em over, Lawler." His tone was again oily. He stood with his back against the safe, his hand hidden inside his inner coat pocket.

Spike glanced hastily through the papers Jess Claggett had signed earlier in the evening. The papers deeded to Dave Lawler Claggett's entire ranch holdings and all the stock, cattle and horses that wore the Box C brand. It was a clear transfer of the Box C brand on all livestock.

Ambrose had doublecrossed Jess Claggett. The cowman was watching Spike now as he quit reading the papers. Claggett was coldly studying the expression on Spike's face. Waiting for the Montanan to speak.

Shane McTeague and Pod Gifford had unobtrusively backed out of the line of fire between Ambrose, Spike and Jess Claggett. Their hands were near their guns, but they were making it plain that they were playing neutral parts. The silence in the room was tense, dangerous.

"You've made a rather careless error here, Judge," said Spike. "The papers bear Jess Claggett's signature, but the signature was not legally witnessed when executed. As Bobtail's poker playing friends would put it, there's been a mis-deal. Unless Claggett wishes now, in the presence of these two witnesses, to acknowledge his signature on these papers, they're as worthless as so much Confederate money. I'll pass the deal to Jess Claggett. And I'd advise him to read carefully any documents to which he sets his name. It's your deal, Claggett."

Spike backed away from the desk and took off his spectacles, smiling vaguely as he groped in his pocket for a handkerchief.

"Just a mere technicality," said the lawyer blandly. "I had Jess sign the papers earlier in the evening to save time. Naturally, he's willing to acknowledge his signature now in the presence of two witnesses. Besides, I have his signed power of attorney to act for him in such matters. You're in error, Lawler. *I'm* still dealing. And I always hold aces when I deal. You can't beat aces, Jess."

The color drained from Jess Claggett's face, leaving it muddy yellow. His right hand was on his holstered six-shooter. But he lacked the nerve to make the draw. He had seen this gray faced Ambrose kill men with that double-action sneak-gun. The lawyer's thin mouth twisted faintly.

Jess Claggett's hand came slowly away from the butt of his gun. His black eyes shifted from Ambrose to Spike Lawler. There was a bitter smile on his lips.

"I signed them papers. McTeague and Gifford kin sign as witnesses. You've bought yourself an outfit, Lawler. And before you've had time to learn your range, you'll be rearin' to give the outfit away. McTeague and Gifford have cowboys that kin work them Whetstones blindfolded of a dark night and ketch more mavericks

than your crew of green hands kin gather on a month's roundup. And Lazar already has your grave dug in the Box C boot-hill.

"Mebby you bought off Ambrose. But most likely he's doublecrossin' you like he just done me. And there'll come an evenin', just like tonight, when he'll have his right hand shoved outa sight under his coat and he'll tell you you're licked. And if you don't back down like I'm a-doin' right now he'll pull the trigger on that pearl handled sneak-gun of his and he'll come clear in court on a plea of self-defense. You've shore bought yourself somethin', Lawler."

"So it seems," agreed Spike, smiling faintly as he put on his spectacles. "I'm paying you for a thousand head of cattle on that range count. Thirty dollars a head. Who gets my check for thirty thousand dollars?"

"Make 'er out to me," said Jess Claggett. "I'll need it for a South America stake. I'll be quittin' this country some night in a hurry."

Spike took a checkbook from his pocket. He spoke quietly to Ambrose.

"Have your two witnesses sign those papers, Judge. I'll write Jess Claggett his check for the cattle. And I'll make you out a check for the balance due on the Box C outfit. And you and Claggett can argue out the divvy on the proceeds."

McTeague and Gifford signed the several papers, witnessing the signatures of Jess Claggett and Dave Lawler. Spike wrote out two checks, giving one to Jess Claggett, the other to the lawyer.

The silence in the room was tense and the four men watched one another warily. Only Spike seemed relaxed and at ease.

SPIKE folded the signed papers that made him sole owner of the Box C outfit. The two checks he had just written had taken the bulk of all the money he had in the world. And while he'd gotten the outfit for perhaps a third of its actual value, he had Jess Claggett's word for it that he had bought himself a white elephant loaded with dynamite. But nothing about his easy grin betrayed any regret or doubt or fear of the future. Jess Claggett mistook the meaning of the Montanan's calm satisfaction.

"It looks to me, Lawler," he said harshly, "like you connivered with Ambrose from the start to give me this trimmin'. And I ain't so dead certain right now that it was me that was goin' to be bushwacked tonight. I got a notion it was Lazar behind them beer kegs in the alley. And it could have bin you he was layin' for.

"One thing I do know fer certain is this. I've bin flim-flammed out of the Box C outfit. And you got a look on your face like the cat that just et up the cream. You got a crew of tough hands hired to work your range. They'll shore earn their fightin' wages. And like I said Lazar dug a grave for you in the Box C boot-hill. I'll gamble you fill it."

"You wouldn't make that a cash bet, Claggett? I'll cover that thirty-thousand-dollar check of yours with another."

"It's a bet," snapped Jess Claggett.

"Who'll hold the stakes?" asked Spike.

"Put both checks in the bank," suggested Ambrose. "I'll draw up a written acknowledgment of the wager. McTeague and Gifford can witness it. What's the time limit on this unusal wager, gentlemen?"

"Thirty days?" Jess Claggett's black eyes gleamed in the lamplight.

"Thirty days," agreed Spike. "If I'm alive in thirty days I collect. If I'm killed and buried in the grave Lazar so thoughtfully prepared for me in your Box C boot-hill, the sixty thousand dollars goes to Jess Claggett. But if, by any chance, Jess Claggett should die before the thirty-day limit has expired, I'll donate the yawning grave and collect the wagered money. Are we agreed, Claggett?"

"It's a deal."

Jess Claggett's black eyes narrowed a little and his mouth pulled sideways under his black mustache.

"Why don't you cut yourself in on this deal, Ambrose? You've horned in on

the dicker all the way along. Make it a three-handed jackpot. Ninety thousand dollars. And the man who lives to bury the other two claims the stakes."

"I thank you, Jess," said Ambrose softly, "for cutting me in on the deal. It's a three-way bet. A three-man jackpot. My check for thirty thousand dollars will be posted at the bank with the agreement of a wager made.

"Lawler, will you have one of your men prepare another grave in the Box C boothill that you've acquired along with the other assets and debits attached to the Box C outfit? Lazar may not be immediately available for the gravedigger job. I have a notion that he is somewhere south of the Mexican border picking cholla needles out of his rascally hide."

Judge Ambrose made out the strange agreement and read it aloud. He put his signature to it. Spike and Jess Claggett signed beneath the lawyer's name. Shane McTeague and Pod Gifford again were witnesses.

"And now," said Spike, moving toward the door, "I'll be on my way to the Opera House. I promised Lefty and his wife I'd be on hand to watch their juggling act."

SPIKE opened the door and almost collided with the paunchy Bobtail. "I ain't missed nothin' have I, boss?" wheezed Bobtail. "I was holdin' a straight. Jack high and all of 'em red and everything in my hand but the seven of hearts. And the pot as sweet as a bucket of honey. And I'd have swore I ketched sight of that seven in the pack and headed my way.

"But I'm a son of a gun, Spike, if the man on my left didn't git that seven and I drawed an ace as black as that dealer's heart. And I just now pushed back my chair and quit their cold-deck game. I done fell amongst thieves and robbers and . . . You ain't got into no ruckus, boss? You ain't killed no more men? I done promised your ol' daddy I'd—"

"A day late and a dollar short," said Spike. He took the big throwing knife from inside his shirt and handed it to Bobtail.

"Pack this a while. It's rubbing my hide raw. We'll gather the boys and see the show."

Tall, lean-jawed Long Henry, the youthful looking Powder River Kid and some others took shape in the dark shadows.

"We was outside that busted window, Spike," said Long Henry, "ready to back ary gun play you made. It looked for a minute like Jess Claggett and Ambrose was goin' to lock horns. Then Claggett backed down. And don't think he's yaller because he ain't. I've seen that law sharp use his sneak-gun. He's chain lightnin'.

"You bought yourself a outfit, Spike. Hangin' onto it is somethin' else. But stake us to good horses and we'll work them Whetstones clean as a set of hound's teeth. And you're a cinch to win that bet. The Kid here was all for walkin' in and shootin' Ambrose and Claggett right now before the ink was on the agreement. I had a time talkin' him out of it."

"Given time," said Spike, "Ambrose and Jess Claggett might elminate each other. That would simplify things."

Spike saw Jess Claggett heading for the Palace Saloon. Ambrose, McTeague and Gifford were just leaving the office.

The Powder River Kid was dangling some keys on a round metal key-ring. He showed Spike a long barreled, bone handled six-shooter and metal badge with *Town Marshal* stamped on it.

"That policeman," he said, a hard grin on his beardless face, "tried to arrest me. I had to lock him in his own calaboose to keep him peaceful. Long Henry wouldn't let me hang the big ox."

Spike led the way to the private box he had rented for the performance. Sheila McTeagle was sitting in one of the front chairs. She greeted Spike with a quick smile.

"They told me you had the box reserved. I didn't think you'd mind staking me to a chair. I won't take up too much room. And a little favor like this may pay you big dividends. They've unloaded

the Box C outfit on you and you're goin' to need every friend you can claim before the moon changes. I said all I could to queer the deal at the office. But I don't suppose you got wise to yourself and backed out?"

"I bought the outfit. Thanks for your takin' an interest in my affairs, but I went into the deal with my eyes wide open."

"Wide open but wearin' specs that couldn't help you see through Ambrose's game. And it's not your personal interests I'm worried about, mister. That big red whiskered gent is my dad. The only father I've got. He's handled a few 'dobe cattle out of Mexico and they've hung a tough rep on him, but he's my dad and I'd crawl through Hell on my hands and knees for Shane McTeague and don't forget it.

"Ambrose has something on him and Pod Gifford. That shyster will use Shane and Pod and Jess Claggett to crowd you out. And in spite of those specs that make you look like a he-schoolmarm I've got a notion you don't crowd easy. And I don't want Shane McTeague to get hung, shot or sent to the pen for rustlin'.

"I didn't come to town to see a show. I came to make a dicker with the man who bought that pig-in-the-poke called the Box C spread. I'll side you every way I can if you'll protect my father if he gets in a bad tight." Her voice was low, meant only for Spike's ears.

Sheila McTeague's smile was gone. Her dark eyes were pleading as her hand found Spike's and gripped it hard. He felt the slight tremor of her fingers and read genuine alarm in the depths of her eyes.

"Call it a deal, Sheila." His face felt warm. Sitting behind him were Bobtail and the half dozen border-jumper cowhands. They were, he knew, grinning and nudging one another and swapping meaning looks. They'd hooraw him a lot when they got the chance.

"What do your friends call you?" she asked, smiling quickly.

"Spike."

"It's a deal, Spike."

Bobtail poked him in the back with the point of the throwing knife.

"There's another lady wants to talk to you, boss. You shore kin attract females like honey fetches bees. She says it's important."

It was the wife of Lefty the juggler. She was wearing a cloak over her red tights and spangles and her heavy stage make-up could not disguise the worried look on her face.

"We're in a tough spot, mister. Lefty took on too many shots of red eye. He's passed out cold and it's time for the act to go on and he's flat on his back. He's the grandest little guy in the world but once in a blue moon he steps off the water wagon to get his hat and when he does he goes out like a light.

"You're the best amateur I ever saw work. If you'd take Lefty's place tonight it'll save us from bein' stranded here. I'll split the money with you. Give you Lefty's cut. Gee, mister, if you'll—"

"Shore thing he will, lady," said Long Henry. "Spike's a jugglin' son of a gun. And he's got one trick that your Lefty pardner couldn't do in a hundred years. Have at 'er, Spike. Show 'em the one you done that night in Chinook, Montana, and Bobtail holdin' the cards."

Long Henry and the Powder River Kid were shoving Spike out of the box. Bobtail groaned feebly and pulled the cork on a pint bottle he was carrying for refreshments.

"We'll be hollerin' for you, Spike!" Sheila called after him as he followed Lefty's wife out the door that led to the stage.

CHAPTER V

COWPOKE, TAKE THE STAGE

SPIKE LAWLER wore no stage make-up. He stood there on the elevated stage as the curtain rolled up noisily and the "professor" played something on his tinny piano. Beside him the wife of Lefty in her red tights and gold spangles looked smaller than ever.

There was wild applause from Spike's box. He grinned self-consciously and his grin stiffened as he saw Jess Claggett sitting alongside Sheila, a scowl on his tanned face. Claggett was not hollering or clapping his hands; he looked annoyed and ugly and a little drunk.

In the opposite box sat Judge Ambrose, Shane McTeague anl Pod Gifford. The red bearded McTeague, a little tipsy, lifted his big voice in a shout.

"It's the four-eyed gent from Montana. I knowed he wasn't a cowboy, but I'm damned if I thought you was unloadin' the Box C on a play-actor, Claggett!"

Spike grinned, but his eyes eyes were cold.

"And look at the little filly in the red tights!" shouted a half tipsy Box C cowpuncher who sat at a table near the stage. "Did you fetch her from Montana, Lawler? If she's goin' on the roundup I'll hire out right now fer nothin'!"

There was a big basket of rubber balls painted to represent oranges. Lefty's wife, billed as Chiquita, the Human Knife Target, indicated them. Spike shook his head and walked over to the second basket that held a couple of dozen eggs that were dyed like Easter eggs.

He began juggling the eggs. His hands moved swiftly, deftly. Red and green and orange and blue eggs formed a rainbow circle in the air. Then the circle became a long multi-colored streak. The first egg struck the drunken Box C cowpuncher square in the face. Then the second and third eggs landed. They were thrown swiftly and with unerring aim.

The eggs had not been selected for their freshness. The Box C man was blinded, his face smeared with the unsavory mess. Spike had been juggling ten eggs and not one of them missed its mark.

Spike now held a beer bottle in each hand. His voice sounded over the sudden hush that had fallen.

"The next loud-mouth that makes a crack about the little lady gets one of these between the horns. Does the act go on or do you want to play games?"

"Go on with your act, Spike!" called the Powder River Kid. "Us boys will keep them quiet. The bouncer kin toss that scrambled eggs feller out while he's still on his feet or pack him out feet first with a belly full of lead."

"Where's Big Dud?" called Judge Ambrose.

"Where was Willie when the lights went out?" The Powder River Kid called across to the other box. "Your Big Dud's bin put on ice, mister. Go on with your show, Spike!"

The big ex-prizefighter who acted as bouncer herded the egg spattered, cursing Box C man outside and told him to go soak himself in the river.

Spike juggled beer bottles. Cigar boxes. The painted balls. He went through Lefty's routine with far better success than he'd hoped for. But the audience was getting impatient for the knife-throwing act that was the curtain ringer. Now and then some tipsy celebrant would call out for him to start tossing his Bowie knives.

"I'll risk it," Lefty's little wife whispered as Spike paused to mop his sweat dripping face and polish his spectacles.

Spike shook his head. "Not for a million dollars, lady. I watched you toss the pigstickers this afternoon. Yonder's the big board. You sling a few knives while I get my wind. And I'll satisfy the customers with one of my own."

SPIKE walked toward the box were Shane McTeague, Pod Gifford and Judge Ambrose sat. His voice carried clearly in the hush that followed the lukewarm applause given Chiquita's knife throwing.

"I'm not as handy with the knives as Lefty, whose place I'm taking here tonight. But if you gentlemen will lend me your six-shooters I'll substitute a little gun juggling act of my own."

"Sorry," said Judge Ambrose flatly, "I don't loan my gun to any man. You forget we've got a bet on. I've enemies here who would jump at the chance to catch Judge Ambrose without his gun. I think I'm

speaking for McTeague and Gifford likewise."

"You don't git my hawg-laig, mister," snapped Pod Gifford. "It looks like another aig-bustin' to me. I'm stayin' heeled."

"I'm keeping my shootin' iron handy, Lawler," said Shane McTeague. "Furnish your own hardware."

Spike grinned and crossed over to the other box. Jess Claggett scowled at him and shook his head.

"You an't pullin' my fangs that easy, mister."

"How many guns you need, Spike?" asked the Powder River Kid.

"Four. I have my own. Bobtail will donate his. If any of you boys happen to have an extra equalizer—"

The Powder River Kid handed him four six-shooters he collected from the others in the box.

Spike said: "Bobtail, if you'll step up on the stage—"

"I'm kinda sick, boss. Somethin' I et. I'm in horrible shape. Git the little gal in the red tights to hold them cards in the air. I'm doubled up with cramps inside. Honest, Spike!"

Bobtail's face was greenish, beaded with cold sweat. He looked actually ill.

Sheila McTeague left her chair and was on the stage with a quick vaulting leap.

Jess Claggett muttered something and started after her. Long Henry grabbed the back of his denim brush jacket and yanked him back into his chair roughly.

"Set still, Claggett, or I'll bend a gun between them ears of yourn."

"The boys have been throwin' a scare into Bobtail," said Sheila. "They've ribbed him till he's scared sick. Wipe off your specs, Spike, and tell me what I'm to do."

For a long second Spike felt as sick as Bobtail looked. The girl's low pitched voice snapped him out of it.

"Don't let 'em see you weaken. If you re half as good as your men claim you are, you'll be givin' gun slingers like Ambrose somethin' to worry about. Where do I stand?"

"At that big plank wall where Chiquita stands for the knife throwin'. But I want to try the pull on these guns first."

THE plank wall was on wheels. Spike pushed it against the back wall. He took a playing card from a deck on the tables that held the juggler equipment and pinned it to the wall. He stood back and at a distance of twenty feet fired a shot from each of the four guns as fast as he could pick one from the table with his left hand, shift it with a whirling toss to his right, and pull the trigger. The Opera House echoed with the roar of gunfire.

Spike walked over to where the card was and took it down. The four shots had obliterated the ace of spades black marking in the center. He showed the card to Sheila. She nodded and smiled.

"Hold two cards fan-wise in each hand. Stand with your back to the planks and your arms outstretched straight from the shoulders."

Sheila McTeague obeyed quickly. Spike stood with his back to the house, and before the spectators knew what was going to happen he was juggling four six-shooters in the air.

Shane McTeague started to shout something, but his big voice choked. Spike heard that stifled outcry. He knew that McTeague, Gifford, Ambrose, Claggett, half the men in the house had guns in their hands. That if any harm came to Sheila McTeague they would riddle him with bullets.

The four juggled guns were spinning in the air, blued steel barrels flashing in the stage lights. Then, as a gun flipped upward from his left hand, turned in the air, fell precisely butt first into his right hand, he pulled the trigger. The gun roared. Sheila McTeague stood like a carved statue, black hair tinted with coppery highlights, red lips in a frozen smile.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Swift shooting. Deadly accurate shooting. Spike tossed the guns on the table and strode quickly to where Sheila stood, white faced, still smiling. Each one of the four cards had been drilled by a .45 slug.

"Where," the girl's voice was a shaky little laugh, "are your specs, cowboy?"

Spike yanked the spectacles from his pocket and put them on. Then he took Sheila's arm and faced the audience, walking with her to the box where her father, Gifford and Ambrose sat rigidly.

"Deal 'em each a card," whispered Spike. "Save one for Jess Claggett."

"You bet," she whispered at him. The color was back in her tanned cheeks now. She handed a card to each of the three men in the box. The skin above Shane McTeague's red beard was ashen gray.

"Ye've aged me twenty years," he muttered. "Av all the fool things to be doin'. There's a shenanigan trick to it, av course, but just the same—"

"No trick to it," said Sheila. "My pardner Spike's just a natural with a six-shooter, that's all. An ace for Shane, the queen of hearts for you, Pod, to bring you luck in love. I'll save this dirty deuce for Jess. And you get the Joker, Judge. With a bullet hole square in the middle."

Then Sheila McTeague, taking Spike's arm, walked across the stage and tossed the deuce of clubs into Jess Claggett's hat where it lay upturned on his knees.

Lefty's wife, white as chalk under her heavy make-up, came forward to the center of the stage, and Spike stood there, holding the four six-shooters, Sheila and Chiquita on either side of him. The professor came out of his wide eyed daze and banged off a quick tune. The old painted canvas curtain on its heavy wooden roller came down with a bang. The audience roused from their stunned silence and their shouts and hand clapping and whistling made a terrific din.

"Take me out the back way, Spike," Sheila said. "Out the stage door. I could do with some fresh air. The powder smoke has me feeling just like Bobtail looked."

She swayed a little and Spike's arm was around her shoulders as he led her outside. He could feel her trembling, and as they stood there in the shadowed alleyway, Spike fought off the strong urge to hold her closer in both arms and kiss her.

THE stage door suddenly jerked open and the shaft of light from the door showed them standing there together, Spike's arm around Sheila, her dark head resting against his shoulder.

Spike saw Jess Claggett with a gun in his hand. He stood in the lighted doorday, bulking big and dangerous. Drunk on whisky and jealousy.

Spike threw the girl away from him roughly and dove for Claggett's legs. Jess Claggett's six-shooter spat flame. The two men went down with a crash and as they rolled over, Spike grabbed Jess' gun arm and twisted the six-shooter loose. Then they were rolling over and over like two dogs fighting in the dark alleyway. Bobtail, Long Henry, the Powder River Kid came out through the stage door. And then Shane McTeague and Pod Gifford. No sign of Judge Ambrose.

"I wouldn't miss this fight for all the 'dobe cattle in Mexico." Sheila's voice was a little shrill.

Spike heard her voice and grinned in the darkness. Jess Claggett heard her and fought even more savagely.

The men watching had spread in a wide circle. More men gathered when news of the fight spread quickly through the Opera House and into the Palace Saloon.

Nobody noticed the rider who eased his horse into the alleyway. The man on horseback could see down over the heads of the ring of spectators who were too busy watching the fight to pay any attention to him.

Then the six-shooter in the rider's hand streaked fire. He shot four times as fast as he could thumb back the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger. His shots were aimed at the indistinct moving tangle on the ground made by the two combatants. Then he whirled his horse and was gone before any man there had presence of mind to take a shot at him.

Spike felt the burning impact of a bullet boring into his thigh. He heard Jess Claggett grunt with pain. They let go their holds and rolled apart. Spike staggered to his feet. Jess Claggett got up slowly, holding his right hand against the bullet wound

in his left shoulder. He was looking mean.

"It looked for a minute," said the smooth voice of Judge Ambrose, "as if I had a chance to collect that ninety-thousand dollar jackpot."

"One of your hired men?" Spike's tone was brittle.

"Wrong guess, Lawler," Ambrose said. "I think it was your Easter-egg man working off a little steam. It's just my hard luck that he's a poor marksman."

Judge Ambrose turned away, entering the Palace Saloon by the rear door.

Spike limped over to where Jess Claggett stood holding his wounded shoulder. "You opened this game, Claggett," he said bluntly. "Play your hand out. Put up your dukes."

SPIKE'S long arm swung. His open hand slapped Jess Claggett across the mouth. The blow staggered Claggett backward a step. Then he came at Spike with lowered head and his right fist swinging.

Spike sidestepped. He straightened Claggett with a vicious upper-cut. Then finished him with a hard, jolting right hook that was perfectly timed and had all his weight behind it. Jess Claggett's knees gave way and he went down, rolling over on his back.

Spike turned his back on the fallen man and limped a few steps to where Sheila stood beside her father. There was a faint grin on his blood smeared, battered face.

"I hope I didn't hurt you when I gave you that football shove."

"You spun me like a top," said Sheila, "but I quit rolling when I hit the Palace wall. I haven't had time to look myself over for damages. Thanks for a right pleasant evenin', Spike. I think I'll go home. Drop by my ranch and I'll pay you off with an apple pie. Without his schoolmarm specs, Shane, and skinned up thisaway, nobody would take Spike Lawler for a sucker who buys a pig-in-the-poke, would they?"

Spike suddenly remembered his spectacles. They were still in his shirt pocket, but the lenses were smashed and the steel rims bent out of shape. He handed the remains of his eyeglasses to Sheila.

"Souvenir of the pleasant evenin', Sheila. I don't need 'em anymore."

"They served their purpose," she said. Spike nodded and they exchanged glances.

"If it's a bullet hole in your leg that's givin' you that game leg," she said, "get it tied up before you bleed to death. Shane's takin' me home. If you like dried apple pie—"

"I'll be ridin' the grub-line on your range in a few days," Spike told her.

Bobtail came up. He was holding the big throwing knife Spike had given him to take care of.

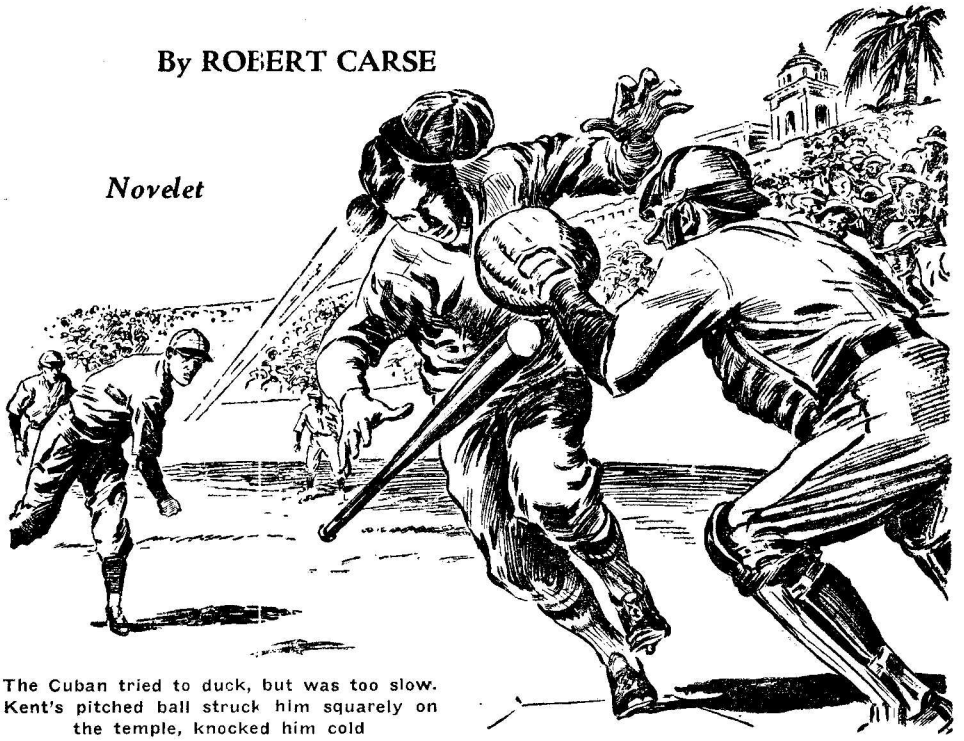
Spike grinned. He nodded goodbye to Sheila and the scowling, cold eyed Shane McTeague and limped toward the rear door of the Palace Saloon. Long Henry and the Powder River Kid went along. A couple of Box C cowpunchers were helping the groggy Jess Claggett to his feet.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Jack in the Box

By ROBERT CARSE

Novelet



The Cuban tried to duck, but was too slow. Kent's pitched ball struck him squarely on the temple, knocked him cold

There's dough for the pitcher who can outsmart the system, when *el presidente* owns umpires, diamonds, and bleachers—and plays on the other team

THEY were all watching him. Every last man in the locker room was worried about the kind of ball he'd pitch out there today, Luke Kent knew. He finished tying his shoe lace, went to the mirror to smooth back his hair before he pulled on his cap.

Smile when you turn around, he told himself. Don't let them see you've got the jumps bad. Maybe you haven't been doing so well. You still have the stuff, though. You can still win. The Series is in the bag right now. But not even Buttons thinks you can take it for them.

Buttons Spachek was coming towards him. The little, button-eyed, button-nosed man was already wearing his mitt. He ran his hand around the pocket, softly thumped it. "How do you feel, sport?"

"Fine," Luke Kent said. "But who told you to ask me that—Monagh?"

"No," Buttons said. "Monagh hasn't told me anything except I'm going to catch for you. It's Meg who wants to know how you are. She's there in the box, waiting to see you. I figure she's sorry about last night, and that big, tough and handsome crack she made at you. But, come to think of it, I can understand why she did."

Luke Kent cursed him. Sheer nervous rage made his whole body shake. He wanted to strike Buttons, hurl him back headlong against the row of lockers. But the team was in motion; Monagh had given the word, and they were going out the door.

They jostled against him and Buttons, and Twirp Dee took him by the shoulder. "Come on, fella," Twirp said. "Save that until Buttons drops a third strike on you. We got to play a game of ball, and we're all set to go."

"Sure," Kent said. He tried to laugh. "Sure." But Dee's face and the faces of the other men were grave. They didn't like him at all, he sensed. If he'd taken a sock out of Buttons just now, they'd probably have jumped him in a bunch. They were being nice to him just because Monagh had run through the whole string of Ranger pitchers and he was the only guy left to work the payoff game.

He stared over at Monagh as he picked up his glove, started for the door.

The bulky old Irishman seemed calm. "Take your time," he told Luke Kent.

THEY were almost at the gate through the bleachers onto the field before Monagh spoke again. "I've seen a lot of ball players," he said. "And you've been a dandy. But you've been gettin' a bit in front of yourself this last year. Buttons just called it right on you."

"The big, tough and handsome crack, you mean?" Luke Kent slowly said, his hands twisted tight about his glove.

"Yeah," Monagh said. "You got up to the top quick. You made yourself the best pitcher in both leagues in four years. It all looked swell. Even your girl took your line of hooey for a long time when she knew it wasn't nothing but hooey."

"Leave her out of this."

"Why? I'd ha' fired you right in the middle of the season if it wasn't for her. You been fighting with everybody—the umpires, the fans, the ball players and the newspaper guys that said you were slippin', and could prove it."

"So now you figure you have to scare me into pitching a real game of ball. You'll be telling me next that I'm through if I don't win for you today."

"Scare you! You know yourself that you're through unless you win this one. You don't, you'll never sign a big league contract again. I used to be your friend, and I'd still like to be your manager. But you got to go in there and lay it on the line.

"These other boys ha' been playin' fine ball all season, while you've been dickering around for Hollywood screen tests or gettin' tossed out of the game for sassing umpires. Now how about it? What you got to say?"

They stopped on the smooth green turf of the infield and looked squarely into each other's eyes. "I'll win for you," Luke Kent said. "But not because I like you or anybody on the ball club except Buttons. I'll do it for myself, and for Meg."

Monagh wryly smiled. "That's good enough for me," he said. "Go on over and see your girl. You've got a couple of minutes yet."

The fans yelled as Luke Kent crossed the infield towards the grandstand. The Blue Sox had just finished their practice, and the Rangers were coming out. But the fans gave their attention to him instead of the team. "Pose for the photogs, cutey!" one of them called. "Borry some rouge from your girl so's you're real tasty!"

He didn't look at them, or seem to notice them. He was looking at Meg.

She sat in a box right behind first base. Two or three of the other show-girls from the Sapphire Crescent were with her, but she was the only one in a front seat. Luke Kent took off his cap and leaned over the rail and said, "I'm glad you wanted to be here honey."

"I'll be glad," Meg said, "if you win."

HER words aroused a train of memory in his brain. She had said that once before, he remembered, when he had been pitching for the high school back in Chicago. She'd been a long-legged, goopy

kind of kid, and he was the big guy, the school star, and half a dozen college scouts were after him.

Then she was just Meg Doonan, another kid who knew all the school yells and cheers. She was in love with him, sure, but so were a lot of the other girls, and all he'd done was dance with her once at the Junior Prom.

"I can remember," he told her, "you saying that back in the old days. The time I pitched the game against Oak Park"

"You almost lost that game," she said.

"But I won it in the tenth. I put a homer out into left. I could hear you yelling when I came over the plate."

Meg leaned forward and took his hand. "Luke," she said," it's good to remember those things. But forget last night. I was strung up, I guess, and a litle bit tight. Really, I didn't mean that crack. I was worried bad about you."

"I'm all right," he said. "How about that Mexican, though, that guy named Arbizol?"

"He's not a Mexican," Meg said. "He's the president of a country called Caragua, somewhere down past Cuba in the West Indies. And when you came in, he'd only been at the table about half an hour. He doesn't mean anything to me. Luke. Nothing at all. Guys like him are always around a night club like the Crescent, wanting to buy the show girls champagne."

"He sure bought you a lot," Luke said. "Then, right in front of me, he had the nerve to offer you a job singing for him."

"Not for him. But in the National Casino in Caragua."

"Which, being the president of the country, he must run pretty slick and quick."

Meg wore a double silver fox scarf about her throat. It was a present he had given her last Christmas. Now she lifted her hand and touched it. "When you gave me this, Luke," she said, "you promised you'd never be jealous of me again. You—" She stopped. She was almost crying.

"Aw, baby," he said. "Meg, I'm sorry." Then he reached up over the railing of the box and kissed her.

Photographers were taking pictures all around them; he could hear the familiar click and rattle of the plates. "Pose us another, will you, Luke?" the photographers asked. "Just tell Miss Doonan to turn around so we can get her in profile."

"Go fry," Kent snapped at them. Then he stepped back, out onto the field, nodded to Meg. "Be seeing you later," he said.

She sat motionless, her face very pale under her little, turban-like hat. The sunlight made her blond hair brightly golden, gave her lilac-shaded eyes a deeper quality. "Win for me," she said. "Just for me, Luke."

He felt fine then, happier and stronger than he ever had in his life. The nervous tension, the nagging drag of worry in the back of his brain left him. While he warmed up with Buttons he was laughing, gay, kidded the catcher about what he was going to do with his Series money. But when he went out to the mound to begin the game, he turned and looked past first base at Meg.

A man was there now, sitting down beside Meg. He wore elaborate, expensive clothing, and the rings on his hands flashed as he gave Meg the corsage of orchids he had brought.

That's Virgulio Arbizol, the guy I met last night, Luke Kent thought. He's a good-looking dog, and plenty smooth. That's my box he's sitting in, and he's sitting with my girl. After the inning, I'll go over there and pitch him out on his neck. I'll heave him to the peanut boys to take home as a souvenir.

But then at the entrance of the Rangers' dugout he saw Monagh, and the slow, small sign Monagh made.

THE plate umpire was putting on his mask. Buttons was crouching down, his mitt raised. The Blue Sox's lead-off man stepped inside the white-marked batter's box, carefully set his feet. This was the game. Now, Luke Kent thought, you've got to pitch. Play ball.

He swung a bit on the mound, his weight forward, then back, his hands stretched far above his head. He let the ball go with all he had, bending far forward with the pitch.

It was his outcurve, the fast one, and it dipped low past Hanick's the batter's knees. Hanick took a cut at it. The umpire flicked up his thumb. The crowd roared while Buttons juggled the ball in his mitt before tossing it back. Over at first, Twirp Dee called, "Yuh got him, kid. Yuh got him for a fish. Let's take him quick."

The old thrill, the enormous exhilaration of his own power, returned to Luke Kent. He looked around him before he pitched the second ball, saw Dee, and Toussert at second, bow-legged Galto at short, Hughes at third. They were all swell ball players, he thought, whether they hated his guts or not.

But he was the best ball player of the lot. He was the best pitcher in either league, and now he was going to prove it again. He turned the ball in his hand, letting his fingers slowly grip about the smooth horsehide and the seams. Then he breathed deep, slid smoothly into the wind-up for the second pitch.

He struck out Hanick on three pitched balls, retired the next two batters on grounders that were easy outs. When he put his glove in his pocket and started for the dugout, the crowd was yelling his name. But the note of bitterness and scorn was gone. They were yelling for him once more as their hero, as the guy who'd win their ball game.

He sat quietly in the dugout, a mackinaw about his shoulders, not talking to Monagh or anyone but just thinking how he would pitch. . . .

Harry Hughes brought in a run for the Rangers at the end of the second, poled a long, beautiful homer right out past the flag pole in center field. He did that with two out; and Jock Streeter, the Blue Sox pitcher, lost his control for a bit and filled the bases. But then he caught hold of himself, retired the side.

After that it was a pitchers' battle, and for long minutes at a time the crowd sat silent, too thrilled to want to shout.

Each ball he pitched remained clear in Luke Kent's memory. But once the batters were out he forgot about them. It was as if he climbed a sort of ladder, a ladder of balls and strikes, and at the top was Meg, and all he cared for in the world. He didn't think of Arbizol, or even look towards the box where Meg and the man sat.

She was there, he kept telling himself. At the end of the game he'd go to her, take her in his arms. But only at the end of the game, when he was through pitching ball.

HE tired a bit along toward the seventh. The Blue Sox got two men on in that inning, and he had to work very hard to get rid of them. He tricked Shirsky, the Blue Sox clean-up man, into hitting into a double play. But the next batter was unexpectedly tough, and his arm ached right on back through the shoulder before he got him.

"You're holding it," Monagh told him as he came into the dugout. "You're keeping it right on ice. But how about Joey Baggs going in to finish it for you? The kid's good, and he can steam right on through."

"No," Luke Kent said. "I'll finish it. This is my game."

He looked over at Meg when he went out on the mound that time. She was sitting forward in her chair, right up against the railing. But Arbizol was close beside her, his sleek, long-featured head bent to hear what she said.

A convulsive thrust of jealousy went through Luke Kent. She knows I love her, he thought. She knows I'm pitching the ball game of my life. Don't listen to him, Meg. Don't look at him. Look at me. . . .

Buttons signaled for the high floater for the first ball. He refused it, instead burned in a fast curve.

The sound of bat against ball was sharp, solid. The crowd came erect howl-

ing. Out in deep center, the fielder took a diving tumble, knocked the drive down. But a man wearing blue stockings was on second base, grinning, wiping his face with his cap.

All right, Luke Kent told himself. So he did knock a double off you. Skip it. Work on the next guy. He rubbed the ball down his pants, flipped it over in his hand.

The next batter was Todd, an old-timer who had once hit right at the top of the league. His legs were going now, but he was still dangerous. Luke Kent worked carefully on him, walked him with four pitched balls.

Buttons came out from the plate then to talk. "This is the ball game," Buttons said. "We get rid of these guys, we're set. So take your time on the next guy. He's Bing Legere, and he's not too hot. Work with a low one. Don't try to strike him. Those guys in the outfield can still catch flies."

Legere waited for a count of one and one before he tried to hit. He caught a fast-breaking incurve down on the handle of the bat, and Twirp Dee took it easily striding out in short right. "Now you go," he told Luke Kent. "One at a time, fella. Just pitch to 'em. We're all behind you; you're going swell."

"Sure," Luke Kent said. He was staring at Meg. "Everybody's got that idea—except my girl."

But he tried not to think of Meg as he worked on the batter He gave of his ultimate strength and skill to strike out the man. He did it when the count was two and three, grooved a fast one right down the middle.

"Like a gate!" the crowd yelled. "The guy swung at it like a gate! What ya goin' to do, Hanick? Fan on three straight?"

Hanick grinned at the crowd. He tapped the dirt from his spikes and crouched lithely by the plate. The guy's style was tough, Luke Kent thought. Hanick was a hard man to get past; you had to drive him back from the plate.

He nearly beaned Hanick with the first pitch. Hanick had to go flat in the dirt and the crowd hoarsely hooted. Get him, Luke Kent kept telling himself. Pitch them so fast he can't see them. You haven't got much left. Your arm's almost shot.

He grooved one so fast that Hanick struck a foot behind it. But the umpire called the next one a ball, and the one after that. One and three, Luke Kent thought. You have to groove it, but give it steam. . . .

Hanick hit it shoulder high. Luke Kent heard the cracking impact, saw the ball in a blurred white flash of speed. It was coming right back at him, he knew, and fast, awful fast.

Duck, he told himself. Get out of the way. You can't stop that. But he didn't duck. He shoved up his hands and tried to stop it.

The ball went right through his hands, slammed against his right shoulder, knocked him flat. He saw the ball, bobbling down the mound, white and glistening on the short-cut grass.

He was stunned; moved in agony and with difficulty. When he got the ball and threw it, it was with his left, his glove hand. But Twirp Dee made the catch, touched first a full second before Hanick crossed the sack.

II

HE was in the locker room, stretched out on the rubbing table, when he came back to consciousness. Meg was there, right beside him, and behind were Monagh and all the team.

"Listen," he mumbled, "there's no reason to hold a wake. Go on back, you guys, and finish the game."

"It's finished," Monagh said. "Young Joey pitched the ninth inning. After your job, that bunch just wasn't any good any more. Joey took care of them one, two, three. We've got the Series."

"Fine," he said. "That's swell." But then the club doctor came through the

crowd, shooed them all away, even Meg.

"I have to tell you this," the doctor said. "You should know. That ball Hanick hit did several things to your shoulder."

"What kind of things?"

"I won't be sure of it all until I get the X-ray plates," the doctor said. "But I can tell you right now that some of the muscles and nerves are torn around the socket. You won't be able to pitch big league ball again, Luke. Your shoulder's going to stiffen up on you, get worse as time goes on."

"Right," Luke Kent said, and nodded. "Now let my girl come back, will you, doc? I'd like to talk to her."

Meg bent down close, kissed him very hard. "Don't try to tell me," she whispered.

"It's not as bad as that," Luke Kent said. "The Rangers have won the Series and we're in the big dough. As soon as the doc gets my shoulder bandaged up we'll celebrate. We'll take Buttons with us, and we'll start off at the Sapphire Crescent."

"Why the Crescent?" Meg said. "That's where I have to work every night."

"Not any more, you won't," Luke Kent said. "Not after tonight."

THE velvet rope was already up when Luke Kent and Buttons got to the Sapphire Crescent. It was near midnight, and the show was starting. Emile, the headwaiter, took them right down to a ringside table that carried a big reserved sign.

"Meg's going to sing," Emile whispered to Luke Kent. "The boss has given her quite a spot, after all them pictures of her and you the papers is carrying. You done very good, Luke. But keep your hair on if a guy name of Arbizol comes to the table. After all, he's president of this here Caragua, and we got to be diplomatic, see. Now how about some fizz on the house?"

"Swell," Luke Kent said. He'd had a couple of drinks of brandy while he dressed, and he felt no pain, just a deep, quiet satisfaction with life.

The crowd was giving him a hand. Everybody was standing up clapping and shouting. The big, blank-faced master of ceremonies, the man they called Whitey, had stopped the show, asked that the spot he turned on him at the table.

"I give you Luke Kent, boys and girls," Whitey shouted. "The best ball player of all time, the fella who won the World Series today single-handed!"

"With eight other guys on the same side," Buttons muttered. But he was up, too, clapping. "Come on, lug," he said to Luke. "Admit you like it. Stand and give 'em a bow."

Luke Kent pulled his tie points a bit straighter, then stood. "Speech, speech!" Whitey called at him.

"Thank you, all of you," Luke Kent said. The spotlight hurt his eyes, made him want to scowl, but he kept on smiling. "If I hadn't been supported by the finest bunch of ball players in the country, the Rangers would never have won that game."

He sat down then, for the spotlight was being swung from him, and the chorus was coming out onto the stage. They did a dance called the Hotchaconga, and the show girls joined them as they finished it. They were all tall, all quite lovely; but Meg was the only really beautiful one, he decided.

Meg wore two slender strips of rhinestones and a great ostrich feather headdress. She was more graceful than the rest, walked with quiet, easy strides. Her body was made lucent by the spotlight glare; she slowly turned and posed, her hands back from her sides.

Luke Kent heard the sighing sound the men behind him made. He stared at them, suddenly stirred by anger. They watched Meg, he thought, as if she could belong to any of them.

The crowd, the men, were just about as usual. Some of them were Broadway guys, gamblers and race track big shots, with a few of the Park Avenue souses in for a quick drink and a gander at the girls. The rest were out-of-towners, wholesale

buyers and like that, and their eyes were wilder, brighter, because this was the first time they'd seen the show.

"I don't like it," Luke Kent said aloud. "I'd like to punch each one of those guys on the nose."

"You wouldn't prove nothing," Buttons said. He poured a glass of champagne, shoved it across the table. "Have a drink and listen to Meg sing. You told me before, this here's her last night in the show."

A curtain had come down over the stage. Whitey was out in front of it, a microphone in his hand, making ribald, half-funny cracks.

"Boys and girls," he said, "I now give you Miss Meg Doonan. I don't really give her to you. Oh no; oh no. Because she belongs to that big, tough and handsome ball player down there at the front table. But she's going to sing a song for you. A little number our orchestra leader wrote himself. It's called 'Stars Shine On You,' and it's a honey. Now Miss Doonan, Miss Meg Doonan!"

MEG had changed to a simple black velvet dress. She was nervous as she started to sing, and her voice sounded thin, a bit off key. But the orchestra helped her, brought out the melody. When she began the second chorus she was singing her best.

Luke Kent sat back in his chair and poured himself another drink. He loved that kid like no other kid he'd ever met, he told himself. She'd taken a job in show business because her folks were broke and because she wanted to learn to sing.

But now he was going to take her out of here, no matter whether he ever played big league ball again, or whether she sang. They'd both been wrong, given too much to stay in the big time. . . .

Meg's applause was good, but short. Whitey was back at the microphone. The spotlights had lifted from the stage, were swinging to the center aisle, then to a table at the end of it. "Here's the hot stuff himself," Buttons grunted to Luke Kent. "The guy from Caragua, the guy we met last night."

"Yeah," Luke Kent said. He sat very still. "You mean Arbizol."

Arbizol came quickly striding down the aisle. He was preceded by Emile and a captain of waiters, but behind him was a pair of his own bodyguards. Those two men were of part Negro blood. They had thick lips, thick noses, and inside their tightly cut dinner jackets were shoulder-holstered pistols.

"Nice boys for an outing," Buttons said. "They take you out, you stay there."

"Quiet," Luke Kent said. "This place has got you as simpleminded as Whitey." He was watching Arbizol, staring fully at the man.

Arbizol seemed handsomer than he had last night. His suit of tails had been made by a Bond Street tailor, Luke recognized. There was a big diamond-set star on Arbizol's breast, the broad ribbon of some other decoration across his shirt front. Kent stood up as he passed the table, nodded to him.

"Why, how are you?" Arbizol said. He stopped and smiled.

"I'm fine," Luke Kent said, remembering last night and then this afternoon. "Sit down and have a drink with us. You know Buttons Spachek, the guy who caught for me today. Meg will be out in a minute, to join me."

Arbizol's smile changed a bit. The mouth lines grew tighter, and the eyes narrowed. "Nice of you," he said. He made a short motion, indicating that the bodyguards sit at the other table. Then he pulled up his tails, sat down. "I want to congratulate you for the game you pitched. I used to play some in school, just enough to know how good you really are."

"What school?" Buttons said, pouring more champagne.

"Cornell," Aribizol said. "It may sound funny when you think of my present job, but five years ago I played shortstop on the varsity there. Before that, I was on my prep school team. My father used

to be president of Caragua, and he wanted me to learn the game so I'd be able to teach it in my country."

"Pretty nutsy," Buttons said. "Luke and me will always have a drink with an old ball player. How about a dish of house champagne?"

ARBIZOL took the glass in silence. He was looking at Luke Kent. "You're certain," he asked, "that you're all right after that crack you got on the shoulder?"

This guy's trying to slip something fast over on you, Kent thought. Watch him. "The club doc examined me," he said. "Nothing serious was busted. I could pitch another game tomorrow."

"I'm very glad," Arbizol said; and then he turned, stared across the room.

Meg was there, with a big platinum blond show girl named Annabelle.

"Annabelle's for you tonight," Luke Kent said. "Get it straight that Meg's my girl and nobody else's."

Arbizol gave him a little bow. "Of course," he said.

"I'm charmed to meet you, President," Annabelle said, and giggled. Meg just sat and took Luke Kent's hand under the table cloth.

"The President's about due to buy a bottle," Buttons told Annabelle. "So give me a dance before it gets here. That band is hot."

Arbizol stared keenly after Buttons as he led Annabelle to the dance floor. "He's always like that?" he said.

"He doesn't drink at all during the season," Luke Kent said. "And not much out of it. But tonight he feels kind of happy and excited. This is the first time the Rangers have won a Series in quite a while."

Arbizol sat with his keen, hard glance first on Luke Kent and then on Meg. "I asked that for a reason," he said. "I'm organizing a new ball team in Caragua. It will be called the Caraguan All Stars, and I plan to have it good enough to beat every team in Cuba and Santo Domingo and Panama. How would you like to pitch for that team, with your friend to catch for you?"

Luke Kent took time in answering. He could feel Meg's hand tighten in his hand, and the dull, heavy throb of pain in his shoulder that the alcohol had started.

"Dough," he said, thinking of what the doctor had told him, "dough on the line has got a lot to do with making up a ball player's mind. How much'd you pay, and how many games would you want me and Buttons to play?"

"I'll pay you ten thousand dollars for a ten weeks' season," Arbizol said. "I'll pay Buttons five thousand, for the same. That would mean one game a week, and if you do well and you play a couple of exhibition games, a thousand dollars apiece for them."

TAKE it easy, Luke Kent told himself. The guy's kidding you; he must have heard that you've been hurt so bad you can never really pitch again. That's just too much dough for a ball club in some little banana-snatcher country.

But then Arbizol said, "I don't think you know how popular baseball is in Caragua. I've made it the national sport. Everybody goes to the games."

"And everybody pays, hey?"

"That's right. Everybody pays."

Luke Kent turned his glass in his fingers. "Fella," he said, "I'll have to talk this over alone with Meg. Sit here while we go have a dance. You're making me quite a proposition."

"Of course," Arbizol said. "But before you go, let me remind you that I've offered Miss Doonan a job singing at the Casino Nacional at Ciudad, Caragua."

"I'm not seriously in the market for a singing job," Meg said.

Arbizol shrugged. "But I believe," he said, "that you'd prefer a winter in Caragua to a show girl's job in the Sapphire Crescent."

Luke Kent looked around the room. It was held in a thick blue drift of smoke. The people on the dance floor moved with

a fixed, strained intensity. Over in a corner, a chorus girl was already drunk, was being taken out by a waiter. At another table, a fat man was buying all the flower girl's tray, flinging the flowers at the pale, unsmiling faces about him.

"I get the idea," Kent said. "Come on, Meg. We talk it over. The guy makes sense."

"But I don't want to go," Meg kept saying out on the dance floor. "I don't like him and I don't trust him. The States is where we belong, not down in any place like that."

"Listen, baby," Luke Kent said. "He's offering real big dough, and we can use it."

Meg got back so that she could see into his face. "What's the matter?" she said. "Won't you be able to pitch for the Rangers next year, Luke?"

"Ssh," he said. "I don't know. I'm not sure yet. But I can pitch well enough to be top boy in any honky tonk league in the West Indies. There's nothing for you to get frightened about. We're Americans, and I'm a really well-known guy.

"He couldn't make any trouble for us. If he did, I'd see our government got him fixed quick, and plenty. You want to sing. You want to get out of this joint. Now here's your chance. We'd be dopes not to take it. Let's go!"

"I hope you're right," Meg said. Her voice was still low, troubled. "Let's go. . ."

The waiter was serving a new magnum of champagne when they got back to the table. Arbizol had told Buttons, for the little man had turned his glass upside down, was very sober. Luke Kent had trouble in meeting his eyes. "You want to go, Buttons?" he said.

"You do, I will," Buttons said. "It's sure a bunch of bucks."

"That's what Meg and I think," Luke Kent said. "We figure it's a fair enough deal."

"Here's to the All Stars," Arbizol said, "and to Miss Doonan's success. Let the waiter fill your glasses."

"Not mine," Buttons said. "I'm starting training again. Maybe we'll do a lot of running down there, huh, Luke?"

Luke Kent didn't answer him. He was watching the way Arbizol smiled.

III

THEY left two days later on the Miami plane. Monagh came to say goodbye to them, spoke alone for a moment with Luke Kent.

"I had Ben Feiner look at those contracts for you," he told Kent. "Ben's a smart lawyer, and he says they're O.K. But don't go down there with the idea you can talk yourself out of losing a ball game."

"I don't get you," Luke Kent said.

"All right," Monagh said. "I'll make it real plain. You ain't hot any more. You get yourself in a tough spot, you'll just lose. And from what I hear, them fans don't take any phony decisions from the umpires. All the umpires in Caragua are hired by the government, and they can be as tough as they want on the players."

"But I'll be working for Arbizol," Luke Kent said. "He runs the government."

"True enough," Monagh said. "That's the trick. The government don't hire no ball players who can't produce for him. . . So long now, kid. Be sure you come back all in one piece."

Luke Kent pretended to sleep during most of the hours of the trip to Miami. He watched Arbizol, studied the man as he talked with Meg, or with Buttons or his two bodyguards. What's this guy leading me into? Kent repeated to himself time and again. What's the percentage, if I can't win ball games for him?

But at Miami he got over his doubt of the future. Meg was so happy she charmed all of them. She'd never been in a plane before, never been south of Philadelphia, and almost her entire luggage was filled with new evening frocks for her singing job.

She laughed like a kid when she saw the pelicans around the Miami airport; wanted to buy a coconut and drink the milk right

away. "This is the sort of thing you dream," she said. "I ask you, is this better than the Crescent!"

"Wait 'til you get to Caragua," Buttons said, his face somber beneath his down-pulled hat brim.

"That's right," Arbizol said, his glance on Meg. "Wait until you get to Caragua. It's far more beautiful."

They came to Caragua from an altitude of several thousand feet and out of a cloud bank that according to Meg was the color of pink whipped cream. The pilot leveled the plane a bit in his long landing dive, and they could clearly see the land.

It was mountainous, the wooded mountain slopes such a deep green that they seemed nearly blue. But the sea along the coast was a vast shimmer of sheer opalescent fire, and the surf broke and fell in tossing white curves flecked golden by the sun.

Meg was speechless. She sat with her hands locked, her nose pressed flat against the window. Luke Kent wanted to hold her close, kiss her just because of the happiness she felt. But the plane was landing, jouncing across the field.

Troops and a military band were drawn up there, and beyond was a big crowd. Arbizol got down smiling from the plane; and then his manner, his entire presence changed.

He walked rigidly erect, his eyes hard-staring as he inspected the troops. He returned to the three to tell them flatly, "Rooms have been reserved for you at the Miramar Hotel. You'll be taken there by my bodyguards, Pedro and Brugal. Tonight I expect to see all of you at the Casino Nacional."

"O.K., Mr. President," Luke said, wanting to laugh at the other's suddenly formal and commanding manner. But Arbizol had already wheeled, was marching in the middle of a group of officers to a car that had flags on the front fenders and machine guns on the running boards.

Buttons took a deep breath, let it go in a rough sound. "Some guy," he said. "Right now, the way he acted, I could slap him smack on the dial."

"Sure," Luke Kent said. "We kidded around with him pretty free and easy up in the States. We figured him for no more than just another feila. But he's the president of this place. He seems to have the whole business right in his pocket. That was something we—"

"Skip it now," Meg said. "Let's do our talking at the hotel."

The two big mulattoes, Pedro and Brugal, rode in the front seat of the car that took them to the hotel. Pedro could talk a little English. He turned around as the car drove through the dirty, sun-spilled streets. "Palace there," he said. "That prison, an' that cathedral. Very fine, hey?"

"Nifty," Buttons said. "It's the old system. One, two, three and you're out."

A CROWD was in front of the palace. It was a huge white marble building with balconies that faced a broad plaza. But there was nobody on the balconies, Kent noticed, and the crowd's cheers weren't very loud.

Most of the people were of part or full Negro blood. The men wore cheap white cotton clothing, the women black silk dresses stained with sweat. Only the police and the soldiers wore good shoes, and the guns they carried were of the latest type.

"I hope there's a bar in the hotel," Luke said. "This place gives me a bum taste."

Pedro turned again. "Bar," he said, "but *Señor Presidente* say you have just one drink."

They sat together in Meg's room after the two mulattoes and the fat proprietress were gone. The door was of flimsy lattice work, the ceiling partition didn't go all the way, and the mosquito netting over the bed was torn. "Crummy," Luke Kent said. "Even the Inniskillen in Forty-fourth Street is better than this."

"Stop the beefin', will ya?" Buttons said. "You're the guy who fell all over himself wantin' to get down here. But it ain't as bad as you think. Look."

He opened the door. Sunlight entered the room like a wave. The room was on a gallery above a wide, open court. Tall palms and trees that reared like great, red flowers grew there. Fountains made a dim and musical sound, fell glinting into pools rimmed with flowers. Macaws and parrots and other birds whose names they didn't know crossed back and forth in flight, lacing the shadows with color.

"I like it," Meg said, her hand on Luke Kent's arm. "Let's do our best to stay."

Luke smiled at her, and at Buttons. "You two guys put it up to me," he said. "You're right. I started this. But I'll win all of the ball games this local hot-shot wants.

"Now get yourself dressed, Meg. Put on the prettiest dress you got so you knock 'em out of their seats when you sing tonight. Buttons and me are going to have that one drink at the bar."

THE Casino Nacional was all marble columns outside, all red plush and gilt inside. There were gambling tables, faro and roulette and chemin-de-fer, then a big bar and then the dance floor and the stage.

Negro flunkeys in knee breeches were waiting for Meg, took her backstage. Another man who was the manager took Luke Kent and Buttons to where Arbizol sat.

Arbizol was dressed in uniform. It was made of dark green broadcloth with gold oak leaves thick on the collar, big loops of gold lace on the sleeves and breast. He wore a sword with a jeweled hilt, but on the other side of his belt was a perfectly plain Colt .45 automatic in an open-bottomed holster.

He nodded shortly to them, told them to sit down. "Tinita Morelos will sing first," he said. "She's been the star here, but Meg will replace her."

"I don't like that Meg stuff," Luke Kent muttered to Buttons. "Where's he get off calling her that so quick?"

"Take it or leave it," Buttons said. "Just remember what we doped out before: he runs the country."

Tinita Morelos was small, dark and quite beautiful. She wore a sequin dress with a long train, carried a fan. That's the old style Spanish hoky-poky, Luke Kent thought. They'd kid her off the stage in New York. But then she began to sing, and he knew that he was wrong.

Her voice was a pure, rich contralto. She sang Spanish folk songs, *jotas* and *flamencos*. She kept her glance on Arbizol as she sang, looked at him alone.

A swift and profound sensation of unease came over Luke Kent. This Tinita's getting the go-by, he told himself. Arbizol's pitching her out for Meg. And she can sing circles around my kid. . . .

The desultory applause was begun and ended by Arbizol. The roomful of stiffly dressed people didn't give one more handclap than their president. "A trained seal act," Buttons said. "But I bet ya Meg brings down the house."

Arbizol stood as Meg came out onto the stage, and all the people in the room stood. The clapping for her went on for almost five minutes. Sweat beads formed on Luke Kent's jaws, ran down his collar. They'll be the same way at the ball games, he realized. The whole bunch are stooges for this guy. Monagh was right. . . .

Meg's voice was husky and unsure. It sounded ordinary; Tinita had sung very much better. But each of her numbers received great applause, and at the end of the last one a five-foot high bouquet of roses was brought to her at the stage.

Luke Kent got up, started toward the door. Brugal stopped him. "Back," Brugal said. "Back, *hombre.*"

"Why?" Luke Kent said. He had shut his hands, was measuring the man. Then he heard Arbizol.

"You can't leave just yet," Arbizol said. "We are going to drink a toast to Meg's great success. Don't mind my calling her Meg. I call all of my favorites by their first names. Sit here. I wish to present you to Señorita Tinita Morelos."

Kent was still trembling with anger. He didn't trust himself to speak. If he did, he knew, he'd curse Arbizol worse than

he'd cursed any man. But a dance orchestra had started to play, and he took Tinita Morelos by the arm, led her out onto the floor.

They had danced twice around before he asked her, "You speak English?"

"Yes," she said. "I sang in London for several seasons."

"Then you were fool enough to come back to Caragua, hey?"

"That's right. But you're a fool to show anger with anybody here. In Caragua, anger is often unhealthy."

"You're telling me to lay off Arbizol, to just sit back and watch him steal my girl."

"Everybody around us is listening to you," Tinita said. "The president will have repeated to him every word we've said. But I'll be quite frank with you. If you can get out of Caragua, do it. This is no place for you, your girl or your friend. You made a very bad mistake when you came here. Do you understand me?"

"Plenty," Luke Kent said. "And thanks. But will this get you into trouble?"

Tinita slightly smiled. "No more trouble," she said, "than I'm in right now."

Army officers and their women made a double row about Arbizol's table. But they gave back, made room for Luke Kent and Tinita. "You missed the toast," Arbizol called to them. "But now we'll drink another—to Saturday's ball game. How's that, Kent?"

HERE we go, Luke thought. Here's where this guy and I tangle. He's forced me into it and I can't help myself.

"Saturday's too short a time for Buttons and me to get ready for a game," he said. "That's only day after tomorrow. You won't be doing us or your team any good to start us off as quick as that."

Arbizol glanced aside at Meg. "I've been very generous," he said. "But this man of yours is difficult. He is making himself something of a problem."

"Stop the double talk!" Luke said. His voice was rough with anger, and he stood with every muscle in his body taut. "Our contracts read to play just one game a week, and not one two days after we land."

Arbizol looked up from Meg's white, rigid face to the rows of officers, then to Kent. "Watch yourself," he said. His voice was quite calm, quite slow. "My officers aren't used to hearing anyone shout at their president.

"But you'll play that game Saturday. If you don't, you'll be liable for prosecution under Caraguan law for breach of contract. Now I think you'd better leave, you and Buttons. I'm beginning to find you a bit boring."

Buttons came upon Luke Kent from behind. He grasped him in a tight wrestling hold. "Pipe down, sap," he whispered. "You want to get the hell kicked out of you for keeps? He's got us. He's played us for a pair of fish. We signed them contracts of our own free will up in the States. Come on; we go. Don't argue with me, or I'll crown you myself. You got to get some sleep so you can turn in what looks like a game of ball."

Kent lay on his bed for hours before he finally slept. For a long time he listened for Meg, waiting for her to return. But she didn't come, and he slipped into a fitful, dreaming doze.

He recalled his life in full retrospect. He regained memory of the old days at high school in Chicago, and what his mother had once told him.

"You're a real handsome boy," his mother said. "You've got your Dad's good looks. But you know it. Those foolish little girls at school have let you find out you're attractive. If anything will ever get you into trouble, that will. You're smart, and you're strong. Get conceited, though, and you won't even do yourself any good."

That was the trouble, he thought. He hadn't remembered her warning. He'd gone on and got the swelled head bad.

But it'd all been so easy. Pitcher on the ball team his sophomore year in high school, and enter on the basketball team. Plenty of offers the next year from the

colleges. "No," the guys said. "You don't have to crack a book. We'll take care of you. All you'll do is play ball.

When he quit college for a tryout in the big leagues things had been a good deal harder. Still, at the end of his first six months he was pitching swell ball, and his contract with the Rangers was for a higher price than any rookie had ever got.

He was big, he was tough and handsome. For four years, he was on top of the world. Now, though, he was on the bottom. . . .

He heard Meg's footsteps over the creaky planks of the gallery some time later. But he didn't get up or call to her. Let her be, he savagely told himself. Let her lead her own life. If Arbizol can give her what she wants, she can have it.

You're a ball player—or used to be one. Go in there Saturday and pitch to win.

IV

THAT game was against a crack Cuban team. They were a smart, well-trained bunch, all good hitters and fielders.

The rest of the Caraguan All Stars, he found, were a strange collection of Dominicans, Panamanians and local talent. He was certain from the first inning that they'd have a very hard time against the Cuban club.

The field where they played was in a big new concrete stadium just outside the city. Arbizol had a silk-lined, canopied box behind first base, and Meg sat there with him throughout the game. Arbizol gave a speech before it started, threw out the ball and told the hard-looking umpires to start play.

Luke got through three innings before the Cubans put their hits together. He had only one out and two men on bases when the lead-off man came to the plate. He was a tall, slim boy who had played for a couple of seasons with the International League in the States. Now he smiled as he stood there, hugging the plate very close.

Get him back, Kent told himself. You can't make your stuff work with him so close. But his first two pitches were called inside balls, and Buttons had to jump high to hold the second one.

A kind of wild, despairing rage rose in Kent. They'll drive you right out of the ball game, he thought, if you can't handle this guy. So burn it in. Drive him back from the plate so your stuff will break.

He wasn't sure until the ball was out of his hand that he had meant to bean the batter. But he had made the pitch with all his strength. sent it straight for the Cuban's head.

The Cuban tried to duck. He was too slow. The ball struck him squarely on the temple. He took a staggering step, then another, sprawled unconscious, blood spurting from his nose and mouth.

A groaning roar came from the crowd. Some of the Cuban players started out onto the field carrying bats, yelling curses at Kent. But the umpires stopped them while the police held their carbines at the ready.

Buttons came to the pitcher's mound. His face was very pale, his eyes quite narrow. "Nice goin', killer-diller," he said. "That kid won't never play no ball again. You beaned him goofy. But I guess you win your game. Them other Cubans will sure have reason to be frightened of you."

"Cut out the nonsense," Luke Kent said. "He was too close to the plate. You know—"

"I know you're lyin' when you say that," Buttons said, and went back to the plate.

Gomez, the lanky All Stars' first baseman, got a triple in the next inning with a man on, then scored on an error. That was all the run making. After that, neither side seemed able to hit. The Cubans struck out one by one with mechanical regularity, jumping back from the plate whenever Kent let go his fast ball.

He turned around for a glance at Meg at the end of the game. She and Arbizol were leaving. Arbizol laughed as he told her some story. She listened intently to him, laughed in response.

"That's it," Luke Kent said slowly aloud. "All of it, your girl and your self respect as a ball player. You just pitched the one really lousy game of your life."

Buttons didn't want to talk to him when he came into the locker room. But he asked the little man, "You think I'm a punk for throwing that one?"

"You don't need me to tell you," Buttons said. "I gave you what I thought, out on the field."

"All right," Kent said. "I'm getting out of the hotel tonight. I'm going to another where I can live alone. Don't get worried; I won't be around where you'll have to duck me."

Buttons was throwing his shin guards into the locker. "Swell."

LUKE KENT got a little bit drunk at the bar of his new hotel after dinner. Then for a while he sat in his room thinking about Meg. He went out of the room slamming the door, and when he came back he was so drunk he had to crawl.

He was drunk pretty much all the time in the following weeks. His shoulder hurt him and was made worse by his drinking, but he didn't care. He'd come down to this place, he told himself, to make a lot of dough for Meg. But if Meg didn't want it and had taken a yen for Arbizol instead of him, nothing mattered.

Then one night he went over to the Casino and started to gamble.

He lost all his cash at the faro table, asked the manager for credit. "Only at the roulette tables," the manager told him. "But you're good for sixty thousand pesos. Just tell the cashier."

Luke Kent wasn't too drunk to do a little arithmetic in his head. Sixty thousand pesos, he knew, translated into dollars, was the total sum of his contract with Arbizol for the season.

"Very cute," he muttered. "Arbizol owns the ball club, and he owns the Casino. Out of one pocket and into the other. . . ." But he lost fifteen thousand pesos, signed a chit for it before he staggered over to the bar.

Tinita was there by herself, drinking vermouth and soda. "Let me buy you a drink," Luke Kent said to her. "You and I are the two guys on the short end of this game."

Tinita gravely nodded. "Bad luck tonight, *chico*," she said. "That wasn't very good. You should win, and buy yourself a shave and some new clothes."

"I'm a dirty guy," he said, laughing. "I like dirty clothes."

He took Tinita home when the Casino closed. They rode in an open carriage, and he pulled her head over on his shoulder. "I've lost three ball games in a row," he said. "But you going to let me make love to you?"

"No," she said. "I believe you're still in love with your old girl. Why don't you see her and get things straight?"

"What chance have I got of seeing her?" he said. "She's around with Arbizol all the time."

"Just now," Tinita said, "she's in my apartment, waiting for you."

Meg stood by a window at the far end of the shadowy room. She wore a cape with a hood, and Luke Kent didn't know she'd been crying until he had her in his arms.

"Aw, shucks," he said. "I'm not worth it. Even Arbizol's a better guy than me."

"But I don't love him," Meg said. "You're the guy I love."

He held her tight for quite a time then, telling her in broken, halting whispers what a fool he'd been and how she was too good for him.

"No," she said. "That's not true. But you've got to get yourself together again. You'll have to pitch the rest of the games in your contract. I'll tell Arbizol to take my pay for that money you lost tonight. Then you and Buttons and I can go home."

"I'm afraid I can't pitch much more stuff," he said. "I don't know if my arm's going to last. But if you—"

"I'll marry you, Luke," Meg said, "the day we get back to the States."

His hands trembled where they gripped

her shoulders, then became very steady. "O.K.," he said. "There won't be anything more like this couple of weeks. I'll win those ball games for you, and win them honest. Now what do you say we go and tell Buttons?"

"He's still your friend," Meg said. "He'll surely be glad to know. . . ."

LUKE KENT lived in a sort of daze of pain during the rest of the season. He decided time after time that the strain was too great. He was pitching with every bit of cunning and skill he possessed, but each throw he made caused him agony.

It was impossible for him to use his fast ball any more. All that saved him was Buttons' shrewdness in judging batters and the knowledge that when this was over, when he and Meg were in the North again, they'd be married.

Meg still sang nightly at the Casino, sat at Arbizol's table there, went with him to the ball games. She was gay and charming, gave him the idea she was half in love. But the strain was terrific for her also, and she showed it to Luke and Buttons.

"Listen, you guys," Buttons told her and Luke late one night in her room at the hotel. "We're doin' fine. Arbizol's backed up where he belongs. And one more game now and we're through. Then we make paper dolls out of them contracts."

His sharp eyes gleamed.

"Sure," Luke said. He spoke tonelessly, his head down on his chest. "Just one more game. But Arbizol's still getting set to outsmart us. He wants to keep Meg here, and he doesn't want to pay us our wad of dough for our contracts."

"But what's he goin' to do?" Buttons asked.

"I don't know," Luke said, and dimly smiled. "You've been pretty cosy with Tinita lately. You ask her. She still gets her palace gossip hot."

Buttons thumped the wall with his knuckles. "We see Tinita tomorrow night, then," he said. "I got me a date with her at the Casino."

TINITA was very nervous. "This isn't the place to talk," she said. "Not here. Arbizol may come in any moment."

"He's here right now," Luke Kent said. "And he's soused to the ears."

Arbizol walked staggering between two of his staff officers. His face and eyes were flushed, and his breath was heavy with brandy.

"Buenas noches," he said. "You make a very nice group. Almost too nice. But how's your arm, Kent? Do you think it's good enough to win your last game?"

"I figure that I can do all right."

Arbizol blinked at the officers. "I promised this man ten thousand dollars for a ten weeks' season," he said. "He was supposed to be the best pitcher in either league in the States. He's a fake, though. His arm's no good, and that's why he got so drunk. He won't last six innings against that Santa Ana team. They'll knock him out of the box."

Kent stood to his full height. He flexed his hands and set his body, all his hatred of Arbizol returning in a rapid, bitter rush. "O.K., sport," he said. "You make me out to be a mug. You say I can't win against Santa Ana tomorrow. I say I can."

"You'd like to bet on it?" Arbizol said, his lips back from his teeth.

"That's what I'm after. I'll bet all of my pay with you: every peso I've got coming. Even money, I'll last the whole game and beat Santa Ana."

"Taken," Arbizol said hoarsely. "That's a bet."

"Wait a minute," Buttons said. "How's for me sticking in my piece of dough the same way? I could use a few odd bucks up North."

Arbizol made a sweeping, wide-handed gesture. "Taken for you, too," he said. "But I didn't think you were quite as great a fool as Kent."

"Bigger," Buttons said. "All I do is catch for him."

Arbizol went away then; the officers took him off into a side room. "The girl who's supposed to take Meg's place is in there," Tinita said. "She's waiting for an

audition. But let's take a walk out on the terrace in the fresh air."

They halted close together and silent at the end of the terrace. It was several minutes before Tinita could bring herself to speak. "I don't know much about you *Norte Americanos,*" she said. "I wish I did, so I could help you more. Because now you two just got yourselves in serious trouble."

"How so, baby?" Buttons said. "Luke and me and the other boys can lick that Santa Ana team. Our boys ain't going to lay down on us, and I've seen the Santa Anas. They ain't very strong."

"Maybe they aren't," Tinita said. "But you still shouldn't have bet against them with everything you have. Tomorrow, Virgulio Arbizol is going to play third base for the Santa Ana team."

Buttons let go a long and slow curse. "So," he said. "So, the rat. And with every umpire around the place workin' for him. You remember, Luke? The guy told us in New York that he usta play once for Cornell."

"Yeah," Luke said, "I do." His voice and his manner were quiet. "And he'll make me pitch to him tomorrow, or the umpires'll call every pitch a ball. But that doesn't lick us. We can still dope out some way to outsmart him."

"What with?" Buttons sharply said. "Mirrors?"

"No. I'll show you right now, though, out at the field. Go and get Gomez and Hernando and meet me there. You girls go back in the joint. We'll be seeing you."

"But tell us," Meg said. "Let us know."

He shook his head at her and he was smiling. "It's secret stuff, kid. You'll find out, but tomorrow."

V

GOMEZ and Hernando were surly, suspicious when Buttons brought them to the field. Luke Kent was out on the pitcher's mound alone in the dark, dressed in his suit and with a flashlight and half a dozen balls at his feet.

"Look, you guys," he said. "I'll give it to you straight. Buttons and I got to win that ball game. You learn the stuff I'm going to show you now, and you turn in a good job tomorrow, I'll split half of what I get with you. A deal?"

"*Si, si,*" Gomez said. "But we don't want to get shot."

"You won't. Arbizol may be president around here, but he's trained his fans to know good ball when they see it. If anybody's shot, I'll be the guy. Now get out there at your positions."

Kent didn't sleep that night. He lay thinking of the play he'd worked out with Buttons and Gomez and Hernando. If that didn't go, he knew, they were licked. Right up to here, Arbizol had been ahead of him. The umpires were all in Arbizol's pay, naturally on his side. But they couldn't stop that play, and they couldn't stop the fans from seeing it.

. . . . Arbizol had a brand new suit and shiny spikes. He came out on the run with the rest of the Santa Ana team, sprinted gracefully around third base during infield practice. The guy's pretty good, Luke Kent thought. But he's too smart. Before this thing is over, he'll be getting in his own way.

The crowd was pretty silent as the game started. They were puzzled by Arbizol's playing for Santa Ana. But when he came up to bat in the second inning they yelled. He stood close, crowding the plate, swinging his bat through short arcs.

He remembers the way I beaned the Cuban, Luke told himself. He knows that the crowd remembers it, too, and he's trying to force me to walk him.

The first pitch he gave Arbizol was really too high and a ball. But the next two were perfectly good, right down the middle of the plate. The umpire called them both balls. Buttons cursed the umpire through his mask, but Arbizol hit the next pitch, another clean one down the middle, for a sharp single out in left.

Arbizol took a long lead off first, dancing up and down with his hands outstretched from his sides. Luke Kent threw

over to catch him twice, but he beat the ball back both times. "O.K., monkey," Kent muttered. "Later's when I want you. Not now."

He struck out the next batter and the two who followed flied out, leaving Arbizol stuck on first.

Gomez slapped Luke Kent on the back as they trotted in to the dugout. "You're gettin' heem ready," he said. "Next time we let heem have it, hey?"

"No," Luke Kent said. "We'll give it to him only when it really counts big. Now we got to get a couple of runs."

He brought in a run himself in the fourth, banged a double against the short center field fence and scored on an error and a long fly. Hernando made one right after him with the first homer of the game; but then a new Santa Ana pitcher came in, and he held them without further score.

IT WAS cool and quiet in the dugout. Luke hated to leave it after the fifth inning. He was shaking with fatigue and all his right side seemed on fire. When he went out onto the field the sun made him gasp, hurt his eyes so that he could hardly see Meg and Tinita where they sat behind home plate.

The first batter up got him for a ringing single, and the next two both hit, brought the leading man in with a run.

Buttons came to the mound for a talk. "We ain't got no other pitcher, sport," he said. "You know that. You got to ride this out yourself, and Arbizol's up in this frame. What you going to give him, the business we worked out last night?"

"That's got to be saved for a payoff play," Luke Kent said. "I can't use it too soon. But I can fan those next two guys."

He did, retired them with four pitched balls apiece, and the crowd yelled for him as Arzibol came to the plate. The umpire walked Arbizol right away. Buttons told the umpire he was a robber and a robber's son, but the umpire told him to be quiet or he'd throw him out of the game.

You've got to do it yourself, Luke Kent thought. Just you alone, big, busted and stupid.

He pitched very well, and the next batter popped out. That gave him confidence; he kept his control during the seventh and eighth innings. But in the beginning of the ninth an easy grounder took a hop over Hernando's head and the runner got down to second before the sack was covered.

Hernando's no good, Luke Kent thought. Gomez is the guy you'll have to use. And now's the time. After this next fella, Arbizol is up.

But that batter caught him for a double to right field. The leading runner held up at third base because the right fielder had thrown in and Gomez had the ball. Gomez brought it over to Luke Kent. "We do all right," he said. "But now?"

"Right," Luke Kent said. "He's going to walk."

Arbizol stood expressionless at the plate. He didn't strike at anything, even take his bat from his shoulder. But when the umpire called the fourth ball and he trotted up the base path he laughed at Luke Kent.

"Here's your ball game!" he called over. "What do you do with three men on and none out?"

"Catch the suckers," Luke Kent said, then turned and faced the plate.

HE HAD rehearsed the movement so many times last night that now it came very easily to him. He slid his glove off bit by bit, his hands against his chest. He kept looking at the plate, seeming to watch the batter.

But he was looking at Buttons, and the signal Buttons gave him was that Arbizol was taking a very wide lead off first.

When he rapidly swung, made the throw to Gomez with his left hand, it was with complete confidence. He had done it back there in that World Series' game, he remembered, after Hanick's drive had nearly killed him. What was hard about this?

The crowd's gasping yell, then his own blurred vision told him he'd caught Arbizol. Arbizol hadn't seen him slip back his

glove or even begin the left-handed throw. His back had been to Arbizol, and he'd still been facing the plate.

Gomez tapped Arbizol on the shoulder with the ball, swung and in the same stride threw to the plate.

The runner on third was going home. Buttons met him, tagged him at least a couple of feet in front of the plate. Back on second, the other Santa Ana runner stood slack-jawed, gaping. He stood squarely on the sack, though, and there was nothing to be done about him.

Luke Kent looked at Arbizol. A look of shock held Arbizol's face. He seemed like a man about to choke. His face was as red as the letters on his shirt, and veins distended quivering in his throat.

The crowd was laughing at him, every man and woman in the stadium. Their laughter pealed back and forth with an immense, bell-like sound. They rocked, holding their sides and jaws. "The President," they said, laughter all around and through the words. "The President was going to show us he was a baseball player. . . . *Ole, ole! Ay de mi!*"

Another Santa Ana batter was up at the plate, but the crowd paid no attention to him. They were still laughing at Arbizol, bawling questions and wise cracks at him. A beer bottle whirled down onto the field near him, and then another and then a lot.

Arbizol started to run. He put his hands up over his head and sprinted for the exit to the locker room. Only one policeman tried to protect him, and he was hit by a banana. Then he stopped and Arbizol ran on alone.

Luke Kent put in a pitch waist high and the pale-faced batter took a lunging swing at it. The ball went up and out, far into center field. The center fielder danced staring into the sun, stumbling over the beer bottles.

But then he got his hands on the ball, held it as he tripped and went headlong and the crowd roared once more.

It was Luke Kent's idea that thousands of people reached him at once. They picked him up on their shoulders, and they picked up Buttons and Gomez and all the team. "Stay here!" they begged Luke.

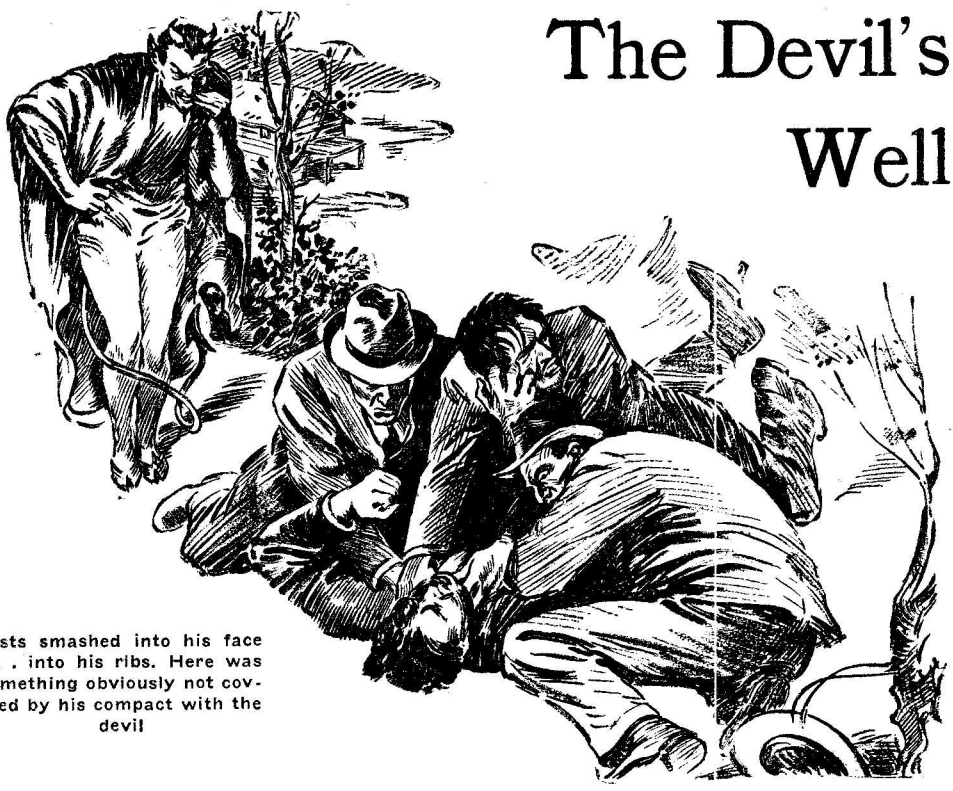
"I've got a girl over there, *hombres*," he said. "I promised her if I won this I'd take her back to the States to get married. But Arbizol hasn't paid us yet. Will you get us our pay?"

They laughed at that, trotted him and Buttons over to pick up Meg and Tinita. Then they went into the city in a great, shouting column. They stood in front of the palace and yelled until a man in general's uniform came out onto the balcony. He held three checks high above his head and they were passed down and through the crowd.

"Good?" asked one of the fans. "All good now?"

"Sure, good," Luke Kent said. Then he leaned over and kissed Meg very hard.

The Devil's Well



Fists smashed into his face . . . into his ribs. Here was something obviously not covered by his compact with the devil

This is the true story (oh, but indubitably!) of Dave Merrick, who may be another fellow named Jack Graves. We wouldn't know about that. One thing, however, is obvious: not even a skinflint can, in the end, get the better of the Old One

By KENNETH MacNICHOL

TWICE as mean as the devil, Dave Merrick was, meanest man ever born in Salem County. Strangers got fooled by him, though, because he didn't look it.

He had a laugh that rumbled up out of his belly same as a bull bellowing. He liked a drink well enough when someone else paid for it. Whenever he laughed or drank with a man, that was the time to look out for Dave Merrick. Next thing that man knew, Dave would have the pants off him.

Fact was he begrudged oats to his horses and grass to his cows. He hated to shave on account of losing his whiskers. It took a man mean as that to foreclose on old Nancy May's strip of pasture.

Some said the poor woman never had been real bright. Her folks once owned more than two hundred acres around Pole Tavern. Dave got hold of the lot except the one pasture. Every time he looked at the five acres that didn't belong to him, it was like the itch of a sty on his eye.

He offered to lend old Nancy May some cash money. Being an old fool, she took it. Dave got the land. Nancy May got a

new red petticoat and a trip to Camden.

Everyone knew about the old dry well in the pasture, and everyone said that it was a danger. Nancy May never had bothered to do anything about it. While she owned the land nobody could. Right away Dave Merrick went to work on it. The hole spoiled six feet of pasture that could be used to raise grass.

Being Dave Merrick he went at it the saving way; a cover over the hole and sod on the cover. Seems like, then, he had only the first two sill logs laid down, one over the middle and one crossways near the edge, when out of that hole came an infernal racket.

Dave, flat on his beamends, looked into the hole. It was dark as Tophet. Before he could see a thing he had to fetch a lantern from the farmhouse to let down on a plowline into the well.

IT'S AN honest fact: what he saw, then, was the devil, big as life; Old Nick himself squatted down in the well, horns, tail and hooves, black as a tarbarrel and ugly as sin.

Dave Merrick almost fell in atop of the devil. He might have been keeping the devil company yet only his first thought was to jerk up his lantern.

"Listen, you up there," the trapped devil squealed. "I'll do you no harm. Be a good fellow. Just one little favor? Take away the logs. Let me get out of here."

"What for?" Dave Merrick asked cautiously. " 'Pears to me like you're safe enough where you are.'

"Help me out!" the devil demanded angrily. "Idiot! Don't you know that you are playing with fire?"

"Big talk don't scare me," Dave Merrick shrewdly retorted. "If you could get out by yourself, I reckon you would. How you got in the hole is none of my business. Pulley-hauling you out ain't worth a cent to me.

"Anyway you got no right on my land or in it. Trespassing—that's what. Devil or no devil, I aim to go right ahead and cover this well."

Now from the pit there came such terrible howling that Dave was actually blasted away from the edge of the well. The devil begged, threatened, pleaded, offered just about anything for release.

"S'pose we get down to business," Dave prompted after awhile. "Words buy no butter. What I like is something I can wrap my fist around."

"Whatever you like, I tell you!" the devil moaned. "Only move the logs. Name your price—anything."

"That could be a big order," Dave argued reasonably.

"What more could you ask?" the devil shouted. "Whatever it is you want most in all the world!"

Name his own price: that seemed to be fair enough. It wouldn't be smart, Dave figured, to try the patience of the devil too far. Still, here was something for a man to think twice about. One thing, and only one thing? Looked at that way, it didn't seem quite so much.

Money, for instance? He might have the devil's own time hanging onto it. A long life? What use would that be when age twisted his joints? Besides, strong as an ox, he could live to be a hundred and never be sure that he had not tricked himself. A good wife? Trouble and expense. Dave figured that no woman was worth it.

PLAINLY, it would take a clever man to get the better of the devil; and Dave Merrick had long since learned to mistrust the word of a trader.

Seeing no cause to account for the devil's trouble, he would have to look at both ends of this bargain to keep the devil from getting the better of him.

"It sounds all right," he admitted reluctantly. "I might think it over. Then what? You might get after me if I help you out of that hole."

"I see that you are no fool," the devil said more pleasantly. "Yes, when a man deals with the devil, there are certain usual pledges. When the time comes I should have your soul. That's not important since it is already mortgaged to me.

Perhaps you have heard—a clever man can even avoid that payment. It's what I can do for you now that should interest you."

The old hellion, Dave thought, sure is a mighty smooth talker. The devil's frank admission did not disturb him. Dave Merrick was not at all sure that he had a soul. If he had, why couldn't he figure some way or other to save it?

He had saved everything else he had ever owned. What more he could get was what was worrying Dave.

"I still say," he resumed, "it wouldn't pay me to be in any tarnation big hurry." Let the devil whine if he didn't like that. Sure of the value of time in helping himself to a bargain, Dave Merrick picked up his tools deliberately.

"All I can allow," he grudingly promised the devil, "is that I don't mind holding off for a spell before I clap a lid over this hole."

For a minute or two the idea that he might lose something by waiting bothered the man. But no; the devil seemed to be caught safe enough. Anyway, if he did get out and leave, that might be even safer.

Dave Merrick gave no thought to the price he might finally have to pay for the devil's favor. But what could he ask for? What was the one thing that would pack every human desire into a single demand?

It was not until the next morning after a sleepless night that the easy answer popped into Dave Merrick's head—a wish so simple, complete, and perfect that once it was granted a man could want nothing more. Why, there was no flaw in it anywhere! If that old devil hadn't been lying, Dave thought, here was where he was due for a big surprise.

I figured it wouldn't be me if I couldn't outsmart him, Dave Merrick exulted. Mortgage on my soul! He'll never foreclose. Just let him keep to his word—and see, then, how much he makes by it!

He could hardly wait to get out into the pasture, afraid that the devil had vanished when he leaned over the hole. Not so much as a whimper came out of the well.

Hastily Dave Merrick let down a lighted lantern. The dim glow in inky darkness revealed only the warty back of a monstrous toad.

ALMOST unbearably disappointed, Dave Merrick started to draw up his lantern when a terrible howl came roaring out of the well.

"Take away the logs!"

Bewildered, his hands shaking, Merrick dropped the rope and the devil seized it. In vain, trying only to recover his plowline, Dave Merrick reared back, all his strength unable to raise an unbelievable weight. It was as if the demon were part of the solid earth.

Merrick gasped, grunted and groaned. He lifted the devil not the width of a single hair. The fiend in the well continued that awful howling.

"Fool! You'll never raise the devil this way. The logs! I tell you, hurry—remove the logs."

Now at last Dave Merrick saw the cause of the devil's misery. The logs, sure enough—the two logs crossed over the well! So that was it, was it? No wonder the devil was helpless. That was Dave's good luck. He could take his own time about getting the devil out of the well.

"Not so fast," he called down. "S'pose we get things settled. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't made up my mind. You'll see, you being you, I don't aim to put you to any trouble."

"Out with it, man!" the devil croaked peevishly.

"What I want goes like this." Dave was scarcely able to keep from twitting the devil with his great triumph. "If I do pull you out, then, whatever I do after that, I'm not to have a bit of trouble about it. Not anyway, you understand?"

"I'll do what I please from now on. You'll see that I don't get into trouble for anything that I do. That's the idea. If I should, maybe, happen to get into some devilment, it mustn't lead to anything I don't like."

"Fair enough," the devil promised with-

out hesitation. "You know, I suppose, just where that agreement leaves me?"

Dave Merrick chuckled.

"It took some studying out," he admitted. "But a bargain's a bargain. You hold up your end and I'll stick to mine."

"Move the logs, then," the demon demanded.

"When it's a deal," Dave Merrick hastily countered. "You ain't said yet how you reckon to fix things for me."

"Have it your way," the devil retorted bitterly. For a moment or two the squatting demon was silent.

"This," he said a last, "will be the easiest way. Go out on the road. Walk along toward the village. Hire the first man you meet on the road. He'll take care of our business, and serve you as faithfully as you intend to serve me."

"I see," Dave Merrick answered doubtfully. "Only I don't aim to keep a hired man on the place. Lazy devils; all they do is eat up a man's money. No, I ain't shelling out wages every day in the year."

"Did I say you should?" The voice of the devil rasped like a file on a saw. "Debts are unpleasant. You don't like to part with money. Think! Under our contract, are you to have any trouble about it? Means will be provided. Pay the man no more than a dollar a month, but be sure to pay him honestly. And now drop down just one penny into the well."

With some hesitation Dave Merrick fished a copper out of his pocket.

"To bind the bargain," the devil finished briefly. "When you deal with the devil, there's always the devil to pay."

"Well, just hold on," Dave advised. "I'll get help. Likely I'll be back with your hired man."

There was an instant of deep silence before the devil's harsh voice echoed hollow from the well.

"Be careful, Dave Merrick. Shall I put your penny back in your pocket?"

Stark fear shook the farmer, so deadly was the menace of that insolent warning. Hastily, without thought that it might be unwise to trust the word of the devil, he thrust one of the crossed logs aside.

With one great leap the devil cleared the brink of the well and stood beside him, a man like other men, handsome enough in his own hellish fashion.

"You may not understand, Dave," the devil said very politely, "but just now, and all your life, you have served me well. I shall remember that service. Continue to serve me and your reward is sure."

Dave Merrick shifted his eyes uneasily. He had not expected such courtesy from the devil whom he had bested in a curious bargain.

"That's all right," he began, and paused, mouth open, astounded.

There was only empty space where the devil had been. Dave Merrick had not even seen him vanish.

VERY thoughtfully Dave Merrick went down the state highway toward Pole Tavern. Naturally he was more than a little suspicious, afraid even yet that he had not actually made a good deal with the devil, and even more afraid that the demon would not keep his part of the bargain.

Misty sun was just rising over dew-sprinkled fields when Dave met the first man he had seen that morning, a ragged rat-faced tramp sitting beside the highway on chill cement, head bowed on his knees, his lean body shivering.

"Maybe you might be looking for work?" said Dave Merrick. "How about it? Are you any use on a farm?"

"Work seems to be looking for me," said the ragged man.

"Are you one of them that want a fortune in wages?"

"You know," said the man, "how much you can pay."

"Well, it's hard times. Plenty of farm hands are glad to work for their keep these days, but I'll go far as a dollar a month for extras."

"Needs must when the devil drives," the ragged tramp remarked oddly.

"It's a deal," said Dave Merrick. "Get moving before we waste any more time."

Just the same, he thought, he did not like the looks of his new hired man at all. Sneaky, he looked, and all-fired bad tempered along with it. Seemed like, though, he had to take what the devil offered.

"What's your name?" Dave asked.

"Jack Graves to you."

Dave Merrick looked startled. Something about this fellow made the farmer uncomfortable. It was not only because he was rat-faced and furtive, his skin dark as scorched hide, his veiled eyes strangely glowing like smouldering fires. He seemed to be impudent, even vaguely threatening, but nothing that Dave Merrick could reasonably complain about.

He followed the farmer silently, slinking behind him as if he shunned daylight or did not want to be seen.

The mailman drove his rattling car into the yard just as the two came up to Dave Merrick's white farmhouse. Jack Graves promptly disappeared behind a big red barn.

"Hear tell," said the mailman, "that old Job Harrington passed away early this morning, nobody with him but the doctor and a lawyer from Salem. Seems like, being sick, he made up his mind to cut that worthless son of his out of his will. 'Twas all drawed up, but the old man had a stroke afore he could sign it."

"Now ain't that too bad," Dave Merrick said, exultant.

It was the devil's own luck; there could be little doubt about that. The news was worth not less than ninety acres of good land to Dave Merrick.

Long ago Harrington's only son, a plausible scapegrace, had hurled himself deeply in debt to him. When the father cast the son out Dave, with burning regret, said goodbye to his money. He'd have it now, the last cent, with compounded interest.

Thus, so soon, Dave Merrick had valid assurance of the devil's interest in his welfare.

It was only the beginning. From that day forward good fortune followed every venture. Money, and ever more money, fell into his hands. That year everywhere in Salem County worms bored into the apples and potato bugs worked havoc among the vines.

Only on Dave Merrick's land bugs, worms and blight were absent. His crops brought a hold-up price on a famine market. It was not much longer before he had deeds to most of the land within a mile of Pole Tavern.

Despite his first doubts, Jack Graves, the new hired man, proved to be a better servant than even the devil had promised. The man was never tired. Merrick, no slug-a-bed, never did catch him sleeping. True, green plants blackened and shriveled if he bothered much with them; but outside of that Dave Merrick had only to wish for something and it was done.

He was not, sure enough, the easiest man in the world to live with. Overworked, underpaid, browbeaten when Dave Merrick was in a temper, Jack Graves was always silent, sour and sulky.

It made Dave Merrick grin like the devil when he thought about the dollar a month paid to Jack Graves as wages: the most profitable deal he had ever made in his life.

COULD such devil's luck last? Dave Merrick, after a while, had no doubt about it. Until that puzzling night when, playing poker in the back room of the grocery store at Kirk Alloway, he went in the hole more than a hundred dollars.

Unpleasant, yes—when the devil himself had given a guarantee against losses. Perhaps, that one evening, the devil, busy with other affairs, had been forgetful.

It seemed more likely to suspicious Dave Merrick that, despite all assurances, the devil had lied to him. If so, somehow or other he must refuse to think about it.

Confused and unhappy, the farmer permitted himself rash indulgence as a bottle of applejack passed from hand to hand. He liked his liquor hard, but he knew well enough that he couldn't take it! A night out with the boys had always been followed by a day of black misery.

Weaving home from the village, Dave had only one thought: how much more unhappy he would be the next morning.

Jack Graves, waiting up, rolled the farmer into his bed. Merrick awakened early. Still half asleep, he reached an exploring hand toward his aching head.

What the devil! There wasn't a sign of an ache. Dave could scarcely believe it. After all that. Of course, if he could still depend on the devil's promise—but then, neither should he lose money which was even more unpleasant than an aching head.

The problem was ever more puzzling by daylight than it had been by lamplight. The devil with it! Dave pulled on his clothes and hurried down to the kitchen determined, at least, to raise Hell with the hired man.

Jack Graves, having kindled the fire, was busy over the stove. He was pale, staggering, wearing a cloth soaked in vinegar tied tight around his head. His hands shook as he lifted the coffee pot.

"So you've taken to drink now," the farmer said accusingly.

"I have not," said the man.

"Tell me you got that headache lying in bed!"

"I did. It's your headache," Jack Graves retorted with sour emphasis. "The devil's own headache, and I can thank you for that."

Now, for the first time, Dave Merrick fully realized all in one flash the wonderful profit he had gained in his deal with the devil.

The secret was out. Here, indeed, was the perfect example of the devil's luck of Dave Merrick. It is a law of nature—the devil himself couldn't change it—that stones thrown into air must come down again, but not by necessity on the head of the fellow who throws them.

A man's deeds must be followed by reward or punishment. The devil had so arranged Dave Merrick's affairs that only rewards ever came his way. Punishment, when Dave Merrick deserved it, fell only on the head of dour Jack Graves.

Seeing so clearly how well the devil had served him, Dave Merrick's potbelly shook with a spasm of rending, convulsive laughter. There was something so funny in the black ugliness of the hired man's sullen face screwed tight in blinding pain that the farmer, overcome, collapsed on a chair.

He shouted. He roared. Tears flooded his eyes. He choked with laughter until his gasping throat hurt so much that he could laugh no more.

But Jack Graves did not laugh. He spoke just once, adding much to Dave Merrick's good humor.

"You may laugh on the other side of your face if you keep on forgetting to pay me my wages."

Why, of course—that explained everything. Dave Merrick himself had forgotten the devil's instructions. Jack Graves, unpaid, had nothing he could lose. Dave Merrick's bad judgment in drawing two cards to fill a straight could not kick back at the hired man.

So that was why luck deserted him at Kirk Alloway. Dave Merrick had to admit that the lesson was worth all it cost him. From now on he would play safe with the devil. He had everything to gain, nothing to lose, by strict attention to his own part of the one-sided bargain.

Easy enough when he could drink and feel good, shuffle the cards and empty only the hired man's ragged pockets, do as he pleased and suffer no harm from it.

Anyway it was proved now, up to the hilt, that a clever man could whip the devil around a stump and get paid for it. It did, in fact, beat the devil how honest the devil had been with him—lucky Dave Merrick.

SWOLLEN with prosperity, Dave Merrick let out his belt another couple of inches, stuck his thumbs in his armholes, bought a thick gold watch chain to string across his vest. Red-faced and merry, he laughed and drank with neighbors whom his good luck had robbed.

Now he could well afford to appear good-natured. A few people began to hint

that Dave Merrick, after all, wasn't such a cheating skinflint as some folks said.

Jolly companions helped Dave Merrick to be a good fellow who was pleased with himself. Sometimes he could even be generous to buy approbation. A dime or a dollar—where was the difference with the devil to see that he didn't lose anything?

Naturally, because the richest bachelor in Salem County was neither old nor ugly, hopeful women began laying snares for him. But Dave Merrick was wary. Even the best wife, he considered, might be an embarrassment.

Still, looked at another way, marriage could have certain advantages.

No act of his could even make him uncomfortable, thanks to the devil's favor. The question of choice was a little more difficult. While making up his mind, he looked around like a cunning trader. Only Dave Merrick and the devil who greased his tongue for him finally knew what promises he had received, and made.

Betting stayed about even on the most likely starters: Anne Harkness, a well-seasoned widow; Jessie Fulton, who had been married and wanted to be again; Bertha, a lady almost too well known in Salem; and the ambitious little minx, Stella, a saucy maid.

Dave Merrick turned like a weathervane from one to another. Jack Graves suffered from the farmer's indecision. He had to listen to all angry complaints when Dave Merrick, much wanted, did not choose to be found.

ONE night, then, when a convivial crowd seemed more amusing than feminine company, Dave Merrick strode homeward from Pole Tavern. The hour was late. He had filled his pockets and prepared another headache for Jack Graves.

Warned by glaring headlights swiftly approaching, the farmer curved to the shoulder of the highway.

A huge black car bearing a Philadelphia license plate skidded close beside him with screaming brakes. Dave Merrick did not like the appearance of those men who tumbled out of it.

One looked very much like a semi-human ape. Another saturnine slinker was almost the twin of Jack Graves. The third man, paunchy and huge, addressed the farmer pleasantly.

"If it ain't Jinx Caley! 'Course you don't know us, but we're glad to see you."

"Reckon there's some mistake," Dave answered, slightly worried.

"Liar," the big man said impersonally. "You don't know Jinx, do you?"

"There's a feller called Caley keeps a high-toned roadhouse over to'ards Alloway, if that's who you mean."

"It's him," the ape said, "red face, big belly and all. They said he went down the road. Let's get it over."

"My name's Merrick," Dave assured them. "I live right over there. 'Tain't half a mile. I'm going home now—ain't been no further away than Pole Tavern."

"Sure," the big man returned easily. "Get goin', Blinky. We been paid."

A stony fist, driven with the speed and precision of a high-explosive shell, crashed against Dave Merrick's chin. He reeled, staggering. A second blow straightened him for an instant before a wide swing lifted him from the highway.

Ribs cracked under the impact of brutal, destroying feet. Dave, shuddering, covered his head with folded arms. The voice of the big man hammered into Dave's dizzy brain.

"No killing, boys. Just an ambulance case."

Some time after an eternity of sickening pain and fear, Dave Merrick lost consciousness. It was Jack Graves who found him, bruised and bleeding, empty pockets turned out, a limp wreck lying beside the empty road.

MORE than three weeks Dave Merrick, bedridden, flat on his back, suffered the devil's own torture. Jack Graves walked about very healthy while the farmer nursed his cuts, bruises, shattered bones and terrible worry, all undeserved.

How had it happened? This impossible thing! Had the devil, then, broken faith with him? Or how had he transgressed against his firm pact with the devil?

"It was no fault of mine," Dave Merrick assured himself over and over. "I hadn't done anything. My money gone to blazes—over three hundred dollars! They took me for that rascal, Caley. Why, I don't even know the man."

He puzzled out the dreadful answer at last. "Whatever I do—" That was exactly what he had said to the devil when making his marvelous bargain. "Whatever I do, I'm not to have a bit of trouble about it. You'll see that I don't get into trouble for anything that I do."

And that was all the cunning devil had promised. That was all. Oh, what a hellish trick to play on a man!

He had not suffered for anything that he did. No, but for another man's actions —something unknown that he could only guess about, trouble in which he had no least little part.

And if that was true, as aching bones testified, what good had his bargain with the devil done him? Why, with no reason at all, anyone could still do anything whatever to him! That was the size of it; no doubt about that.

Anyway—Dave tried to console himself —he was still one long jump ahead of the devil. At least he had gained prosperity. At worst, he was still defended against his own acts. At last he would surely trick the devil. If he had a soul, the devil, by his own pledge, wouldn't be able to touch it.

But was that quite true? Worried, Dave Merrick remembered now how the devil had leered at him. "When the time comes I should have your soul—already mortgaged to me." And the fiend's final word, "All your life you have served me well. Continue to serve me."

"If I do pull you out," he had demanded in making his bargain, "whatever I do after that—" Only after that! All his life before he had still to account for. Dave Merrick new well enough what kind of a life that had been.

He believed now, terrified, that his soul must be precious. The proof was that the demon wanted it.

Jack Graves, grinning like a scorched ape, was probably thinking, "What a damned fool!" Dave Merrick could almost hear silent, sardonic, demoniac chuckling, although no hint of a grin appeared on the hired man's sullen face.

He cursed himself and the devil, lock, stock and barrel. It was no satisfaction to imagine what he could do if only he still had the devil safe in the well.

How had he failed to shape his demand more simply? "Not to suffer—not ever to be hurt— "

And then what? With that much only a man might as well be a stone. Was there no way a man could beat the devil?

His brain throbbed and strained at the torturing problem; but it was like hurling oneself again and again at a granite wall that bruised and stunned and remained immovable. No. There was no way to beat the devil.

No way, Dave Merrick thought hopelessly. "I'd be able to figure it if there was any such way."

LYING there on his back was mighty tiresome. Thinking that company would help him to forget his troubles, Dave welcomed the news when Jack Graves told him that he had a visitor.

"Prop me up," he ordered. "Ouch! Be careful, idiot! Yes, let her come upstairs."

"It's the Widow Harkness," Jack Graves announced.

"What! Tell her to go to the devil," Dave Merrick shouted.

Groaning, he sank back on his pillows. The sympathy of the widow, he felt well assured, would be much less endurable than misery in solitude.

He heard Jack Graves descending the stairs, a shrill voice raised in protest, another feminine voice interrupting; then a frightful clatter, the confusion of violent struggle.

Sounds like Hell broke loose, Dave Merrick thought, grinning.

It was more than half an hour before there was silence below in the kitchen and Jack Graves returned. The hired man stood in the doorway darkly glowering.

Dave Merrick ignored his utterly ravaged appearance. He seemed to cling to the door frame for support, the wreck of a man who had unwisely attempted to pillage a wildcat's den.

His face was bleeding; his blue shirt hung in tatters from his brawny shoulders and fell partly away from his matted chest. He was breathing hard, and there was agony and anger in his staring wolfish eyes.

"Don't you know enough to keep the place quiet?" Dave Merrick complained. "I'm a sick man. You're supposed to see that I'm not disturbed."

"She insisted on seeing you," Jack Graves interrupted. "Then that woman from Salem came." He dabbed at one bleeding cheek with a dirty handkerchief. "They both scratched," he explained. "I couldn't get rid of them before what's-'er-name—Fulton?—she thought that she could sneak past while I was busy. She got hold of the poker."

He felt his bruised arm tenderly. "I put out a couple of them. That crazy kid, Stella—she showed up just after I locked the widow in the closet."

Dave Merrick interrupted with a wild howl of laughter that was suddenly stilled by a twinge of pain.

"There's that left," he cried. "Not much, but it's something. At least, those women are not worrying me."

"How about me?" Jack Graves demanded darkly. He took one step nearer to the prostrate farmer's bed. "I'd sooner have the devil chasing me. Flesh cannot stand it—even my flesh. One would be too many, let alone four of them. It's more than the devil himself could bear. And I'll endure no more of it."

"Remember your place," yelled the startled farmer.

"There's no escape from them!" Jack Graves shouted louder. "I meet them everywhere, or they come looking for me. I don't look like you, do I? They tell me I'm a worse devil than you are, and that's a lie. You hide away from them. What devil's luck for you!"

"Will you shut up," Dave Merrick screamed at the hired man. "How dare you complain? It's no more than the devil promised me."

"They scratch like demons. They bite like the devil's imps. They beat me worse than the devil could ever do. I'd rather face the worst that Hell can offer!"

Jack Graves, for the first time, was paying not the least attention to orders. His demoniac eyes burned with the lurid light of eternal flames. Crooked hands seemed to be armed with avenging claws.

"I can't stand it—"

"You'll take it and like it," Dave Merrick furiously interrupted. With all his pain he sat straight up in bed. "You can't help yourself. I am protected!"

Jack Graves' anguish was all that was left to console Dave Merrick in his own helpless misery.

"Not against the acts of others!" the demon squealed. "Not against me if I disobey the devil's orders. The master may flay me when I'm snatched back again; but if I must, to get out of your clutches—to get away from them—"

He took one step further, then swiftly leaped on Dave Merrick and strangled him.

THAT'S the story they tell in Salem County about Dave Merrick, meanest man in South Jersey, who tried to whip the devil around a stump and was popped into Hell when he got too sassy.

Most folks know the story. A good few swear it is true.

Just the same, old Dave Merrick, a poverty-stricken dirt farmer, still hangs around Pole Tavern looking for free drinks—that is, when he can get away from his wife who was Widow Harkness.

For two whole days, folks claim, he was dead as a stone, then he opened his eyes and came to life again. The old folks around Salem explain it this way:

Dave Merrick died. He went to Hell and he is still there scratching cinders. Living old Dave Merrick, the dirt farmer, isn't the real Dave Merrick at all. He is, in fact, a demon, the same who was once Jack Graves, punished by the devil for his disobedience: sent straight back to earth to suffer in place of the man whom he had strangled.

That was a devilish punishment and nobody can deny it. Dave Merrick, or that demon who now had his body and his name, soon lost most of his land and all of his money.

He still had a few dollars when the Widow Harkness ran him down and married him. She had always been a mighty pious woman. In all Salem County there is no heftier talker nor one with a sharper tongue. Get her going good and she can find words to blister paint off the side of a barn.

And she has never let her husband forget the day and a night she spent locked in a closet. The devil himself would be helpless with such a woman.

To this day, folks say, old as he is now, Dave Merrick is a mighty good blacksmith when he can get a job, just as if fire itself had to obey him.

He is just about the world's worst makeshift as a farmer. Ever since that sickness he had, nothing will grow for him. Just let him look at a plant and it will curl up and wilt over.

That much is a fact and everyone knows it. And if that doesn't prove the whole truth of this story, nothing else could.

The shaman whirled in his fantastic dance, brandishing his rattle

The White Oomailik

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Start now this powerful, exciting story of the white world of Alaska

WHEN Sulphur-bottom Banning, head of the Maine whaling clan, deeded three of his best ships to his nephew Tim, the old man executed a characteristic maneuver. Shortly afterward Tim learned that the whalers were trapped in the Arctic ice, their crews stranded. Sulphur-bottom, knowing this, had handed Tim a fine mess of trouble.

Actually, however, Tim would have had the job of rescuing the stranded men anyhow. A lieutenant in the Revenue Cutter Service, he is ordered to Alaska, to organize a relief expedition. His task is an especially ticklish one because there are Ridley ships in the ice-locked fleet, and the Ridleys are the Bannings' bitterest rivals. Inevitably Tim will be accused of favoring the Banning interests.

As a matter of fact, the Alaskan catastrophe is a bonanza for the Ridleys. They have an enormous supply of whalebone and oil stored away, and now the ill fate of the fleet will send prices soaring. Tim, knowing

This story began in last week's Argosy

this, suspects that Bill Ridley may try to cripple the relief expedition. But up North Tim sees no signs of young Ridley's work.

HE IS, however, amazed to find Mary Ridley, Bill's sister, in Alaska. Mushing alone through a blinding storm, Tim comes on Mary's camp; she has planned to intercept him, for she is determined to accompany him to the stranded whaling fleet. In spite of his admiration for the lovely, courageous girl, Tim refuses to take her with him; he has an unwilling suspicion that Ridley matters may be more important to her than the success of the Overland Expedition.

So Tim leaves Mary and pushes north, alone. Surgeon Newton is following him, but Tim must get on ahead to the Eskimo settlements, in order to hire reindeer and herders to transport supplies. Then, after hours on the storm-ridden trail, Tim's reindeer, Old King Cole, is suddenly and mysteriously frightened; he bolts away with the sled. Exhausted, Tim plods in pursuit, but he cannot overtake the animal. He is lost in the white wastes, and all too swiftly the terrible cold sends him into beautiful, crazy dreams. . . .

CHAPTER VII

IGLOO TODDY

TIM BANNING shook the snow from his shoulders, then flailed his arms in an effort to restore his sluggish circulation. His mind retained a vague impression of screaming gale, an ice temple and a girl in caribou skin clothing who looked like Mary Ridley.

"I was freezing to death," Tim growled. "A man can't relax in this kind of weather. I heard sleigh bells, too. The girl and temple were part of a dream, but—the bells were real enough. I can hear them now."

He listened intently. Perhaps he was slightly out of his head and the bells were as unreal as the girl and the temple. If so, then he was going to run himself to death in an effort to follow them. Breathing into his parka hood to avoid the icy air that might frost his lungs, he broke from cover and floundered through the snow.

In the lee of the ridge where he had taken shelter the snow was deep and drifted, but in the open there was but a few inches on the ground. Most of it seemed to be in the air. He stumbled onto an odd mixture of deer, dog and sled tracks running northwesterly. He speeded up and caught a glimpse of vague shadows moving within the swirling curtain of snow.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "Hey, there!"

A lone musher, running ahead of a dog team and behind a reindeer sled, glanced back, then waved him to come up.

"Mary!" Tim gasped.

"Stop the reindeer," she answered. "I'll handle the dogs."

He saw with amazement that she had performed a very difficult feat. She had prevented the Malemute dogs from attacking the reindeer. The greater portion of the load was on the dog sled. A line extended from dog sled to reindeer sled, and the deer helped draw both loads. But the instant the dogs attempted to rush up and attack the deer they had to drag the entire sled load. This held them back.

Tim slashed the connecting line and brought the deer to a stop. He secured the animal to a hastily contrived toggle, then walked back to the dog team. Mary was sitting on the sled, holding the lead dog by the collar. The amusement he had expected to find in her eyes was there.

"It seems your deer got away from you," she drawled. "Remembering there was shelter at the inlet, he returned. I heard the uproar among the dogs and investigated, and there was Old King Cole and the sled. So I knew that the Overland Expedition commanded by that dashing lieutenant, Tim Banning, had bogged down."

"Go ahead," he urged. "Fry me in my own grease."

"Do you know, Tim," she went on without mercy, "some men simply can't get along without a woman's help. And it struck me that you must be one of them. And yet, remembering that you preferred to lash me to a bunk rather than be burdened with a girl, I wasn't sure for a while whether you really needed me.

"Then I realized that even Lieutenant Banning could freeze to death, and prob-

ably would, if something wasn't done. So I figured out this scheme; I didn't want to pass you in some drift, and I didn't want to arrive with Old King Cole inside of my dogs' stomachs. It's only a woman's way of doing things, of course; but it worked."

"You did a neat, commonsense job of it, Mary," Tim said humbly. "And if I hadn't heard your bells I'd be knocking at the pearly gates about now."

"I found the bells in the cabin and festooned King Cole with them," she said. "What had we better do now? If we perish here you won't be worth much to the Overland Expedition and I won't help the Ridleys' Arctic investment any."

"You shouldn't have left the cabin."

"I couldn't leave my worst enemy to die in the snow," she answered. "And while we're business rivals at war, you're not really my worst enemy, Tim."

He looked at her intently, but the fur of her parka facing completely masked her face. Her eyes were mysterious, baffling. "My deer was frightened by a dog musher, who was traveling fast and made no effort to investigate my tracks," Tim said. "In a country where men go hundreds of miles for a brief visit, that's queer. You don't know who he was?"

"No, Tim," she answered. "So far as I know the only other person interested in Ridley affairs is my brother, Bill. And he's somewhere north of us."

"I thought some of your men might be going through," he said. "And your men are likely to treat me as a Banning, not as a Revenue Cutter lieutenant assigned to a duty. Now, is your strength good for another ten or fifteen miles?"

"I . . . think so. Why?"

"Because they told me at St. Michael that Old King Cole would probably stop at Antuk's village. I'm depending on Antuk to act as guide to Cape Prince of Wales. He's a reindeer man, also, and I hope to pursuade him to help in the drive to Barrow."

"Then I guess we had better gamble on Old King Cole," Mary answered.

THEY divided up the load and gave the deer his head. From time to time Tim glanced over his shoulder at Mary. She clung to the gee pole, hour after hour, following the dogs, her feet moving mechanically, her head bowed in a grim determination not to falter.

He thought of the hundreds of miles that lay between the girl and Barrow and he felt she would never make it. He might even fail himself. To beat the North in the dead of winter, you should have relays of men to throw against the frost legions.

Tim heard her cry out suddenly and when he looked back he saw she was having trouble with the dogs. They were tired and stubborn, and intent on swinging sharply to the right. "I can't do a thing with them," she panted. "They want to turn into the teeth of the storm."

"Let 'em," he answered, "and we'll see what happens. They've been through this region, haven't they?"

"Yes. They're a Ridley team that was left to winter on Norton Sound," she answered.

The dogs increased their pace the instant the leader had his way. With tails up for the first time in hours, they drove into the gale. Tim followed with the reindeer. Old King Cole was plainly dubious when dogs were ahead of him. They stopped suddenly and Mary's startled cry floated back to Tim. "Stay where you are!" Tim bellowed. "I'll be up in a few minutes."

He tethered the deer and stumbled to join her. "I know this place," he said. "It's an abandoned fish camp. I looked it over two years ago last summer. There's a cave behind the drift, and plenty of wood, packed up from the beach. Antuk's place is two miles."

"It isn't the camp," she said. "Look . . . there!"

The dogs had come to this old camp site because they had probably buried bones and fish heads in warmer weather. But there was something else here, Tim saw—a new grave.

It stood two hundred feet from the cave entrance. Three pairs of driftwood poles in

line had been set in the frozen ground. Each pair formed a crude letter X. The body, wrapped in skins and securely lashed, lay in the crotches formed by the poles. Supporting poles at either end helped to keep the elevated grave upright.

Nearby similar poles supported a hand sled to which was lashed the dead man's belongings. It was the grave of a white man buried in Eskimo fashion. The wind had blown aside the skin covering the face, leaving the frozen, wasted features exposed.

Mary stepped toward the head, but Tim pulled her back. "Don't go nearer," he advised, "it isn't . . . pleasant."

"I knew him," Mary said in a tortured voice. "Jerry Deacon; in his day he was one of the strongest men in our fleet. Tim, do you think we can make it on to Antuk's? I can't stop here."

"I want to look through Jerry's belongings," he answered, "on the chance he may have kept a diary."

"Go ahead," she answered, "I'll . . . wait."

It was a slow business, searching through the odds and ends the Eskimos had lashed to the dead man's sled, but Tim located a book with scrawled notations. He stuffed it into his pocket and joined Mary. "Sorry," he said, "but I can't miss an opportunity to pick up information on conditions at Barrow." He patted her shoulder gently. "You have plenty of courage, Mary."

"But you were right, Tim—I'm weak. I can't drive myself hour after hour. I'm ready to fall in my tracks."

"And so am I," he replied. He started Old King Cole on the trail to Antuk's village. The native would not only relieve Tim of all doubts as to location in the future, but his cabin would give them warmth and shelter.

AN HOUR later Tim made out a snow covered cabin and several skin boats lashed to trestles well above reach of the dogs. But he saw no dogs. To all appearances the village was dead. Then he caught the faint odor of wood smoke. "Let's go in," Mary said.

There was an outer door, several feet of tunnel-like space, then the inner door. Mary followed close at Tim's heels, knowing there would be a double entrance to prevent the full blast from the outside entering the living quarters. Tim opened the inner door and recoiled. The stench was overpowering. Mary caught her breath sharply. Whimpers and moans came from the darkness. Tim retreated.

"I can't stand that," Mary said. "I'd sooner die out here in the clean air. What is it?"

"The whole outfit are drunker'n lords," Tim answered.

"On what?"

"A hellish combination of molasses and flour, fermented and called liquor," Tim answered. "I've encountered it before—drunken elders and neglected children. Let's see what we can find in the way of shelter."

An icy path led from the cabin to a smaller structure and Tim investigated. He forced open the door of the shack, struck a match and looked around. He found a candle stuck into a bottle and lit it. "This will do," he told her, "with a little house-cleaning. Here is what caused the trouble."

He indicated a coal-oil tin, rifle barrel and a tub. "The mash is heated in the coal-oil tin," he explained. "The rifle barrel, you'll notice, goes through the tub which is kept filled with ice. The vapor passing through the cold rifle barrel condenses and you have whisky!"

Whereupon he smashed the still and proceeded to make the place habitable. With Mary's help he cooked a meal, they ate and then rested a half hour. "Now to clean out the cabin," he announced. "You stay here. I'll be back."

He disappeared and returned with two small Eskimo children, weak from lack of nourishment. "Do what you can for the poor little devils," he said.

"Your hand is bleeding Tim," she said quickly.

"Antuk is crazy drunk, and he got nasty. I told him I was the White Oomailik, but he's not afraid of any kind of oomailik now. He tried to pin me to the wall with an ivory headed harpoon and I had to knock him out. The others were too drunk to stand. I'll see if I can straighten them out."

Tim returned and found Antuk crouched in a corner, muttering threats, but too cowed to fight. But Tim knew the incident might well prove costly; he had planned to rely on the Eskimo not only to guide him on to Cape Prince of Wales, but to act as interpreter in his dealings with a native who owned a large herd of reindeer.

He destroyed the remaining sugar and molasses he found in the cabin and then dragged a drunken young squaw to the shack to sober up and lend a hand with the children.

"I'm sorry to inflict her on you, Mary," Tim said, "but—"

"Someone must look after these poor things," the girl said. "They haven't been bathed in weeks."

"They don't bathe," Tim explained. "They oil themselves. We're going to have to spend a day here unless the storm lets up. I'm going to need Antuk, but he's worthless until he's had time to straighten up."

"If the storm lets up, you won't need a guide?" she suggested.

"Give me a shot at the sun and stars and I'll manage to navigate on land," he answered.

IT HAD been an exhausting day—a thirty-hour stretch for him and almost as long for Mary—and Tim was ready for a rest. But he set the candle close to his sleeping bag and began slowly to turn the pages of Jerry Deacon's diary.

"What does it say?" Mary asked.

"It's a pretty grim tale," Tim replied. "He begins by saying discipline is going to pieces, and the weaklings are letting down. He doubts if a fourth of the men will be alive next summer. Some need medical attention, and others are threatened with scurvy."

Mary's face was white. "Tim, you've got to get there quickly."

"He believes the strongest of them should strike south and give the weak a chance," Tim continued. "He expects the whaling fleet will be a total loss, because the men won't have the strength to take safety measures. His plan is to take a few provisions, bedding and clothing, lash everything to a hand sled and strike for St. Michael."

Tim turned the pages slowly, looking up from time to time. There was an item on scurvy. Jerry Deacon realized he was a victim. His teeth were becoming loose. Tim stopped suddenly and studied the next page carefully. It read:

This day located the igloo occupied by Bill Ridley and his native woman. Bill was away, she explained, and I was glad, though he might have helped me. I took no food for reasons any visitor would have understood. Praise God his fine sister doesn't know. For the first time I doubt even my great strength will see me through. Nightly I dream of great fields of green vegetables—carrots, green corn and potatoes. I'd like to eat my fill of raw potatoes."

Tim glanced at Mary, then quietly tore the page from the book. She straightened up suddenly. "Why did you do that, Tim?" she asked sharply.

"Jerry Deacon admits to himself for the first time that he isn't going to win through," Tim answered. "It's pretty tragic and I didn't want you to stumble onto it."

"Don't lie, Tim," she said, sitting up. "If you owe me anything for bringing your deer back to you—"

"I owe you my life," he said quietly.

"Then you can square the account by promising me you won't lie to me, ever. Not even to save me from something you think would hurt me."

"All right," he answered, "it's a promise."

"What did Jerry Deacon say about Bill?" she asked. "I've been expecting some reference. I know he wouldn't come through the country without stopping. Bill would help him if he needed help. Jerry taught Bill everything he knows about whaling."

"Here it is," Tim answered, handing her the torn page.

She read it through twice. "I wonder what he meant when he wrote, 'I took no food for reasons any visitor would have understood'?"

"That puzzled me, too," Tim said. That was one way of getting around the promise he had just made Mary Ridley. Tim had an idea he understood what the dead whaler had set down on paper.

He waited until she had settled back in her sleeping bag; then he glanced swiftly about the shack. The children, their stomachs full, were sleeping lightly, with occasional little tired murmurs. The squaw had fallen into a stupor. He decided that while she might be in a sullen mood in the morning, at least she would be sober. Tim pinched out the candle and was almost instantly asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

REINDEER MAN

EVERYONE in the shack was sleeping soundly when Tim awakened. He dressed quietly and built a fire. The Eskimo children opened their eyes and regarded him solemnly. The squaw groaned and set up, holding her head with both hands. She appeared to have difficulty focusing her eyes on objects, but presently her vision cleared and she scowled at Tim.

He walked over to her and glared. "You no-good mother," he roared. "You drink whisky all time. Drunk come. No good. Baby starve. Get sick. You no-good mother!"

Her attitude changed immediately. Tim's manner suggested he was about to beat her. She shot an anxious glance at the children and then smiled. "That's better," he said, patting her shoulder. "You Antuk's woman?"

"Yes!" she nodded. "Me Antuk married by the Book . . . damn-yes."

"She's explaining she and Antuk were married by a priest or a missionary," Tim said to Mary who had awakened. "The 'damn-yes' part is evidently something she didn't get from the missionary." He turned to the squaw. "What your name?"

"I Eve," she said proudly.

"Eve, eh?" Tim drawled. He pointed to the children. "I suppose him Cain and him Abel?" he suggested.

She beamed with pleasure and nodded.

"Well, that's getting down to fundamentals," Tim observed. "When they grow up you had better arrange for Cain to join the Marines. It'll save you a heartache if Cain runs true to form. Now tell me. Did white man come through here? Fast dog team."

She nodded. "Go fast, damn-yes. He say, man call White Oomailik come pretty quick. Man lie: him no good. Come steal reindeer. White Oomailik come summer on *umiak puk*."

"As I understand it," Tim said to Mary, "a white man passed through and told them that if I came along representing myself as a Government man, I was an imposter, here to steal their reindeer. That the real White Oomailik comes in the summer on a revenue cutter.

"That fellow, whoever he is, is spiking my guns rather effectively. The cutters always visit the North in the summer and an officer has never been seen traveling overland in the middle of winter. My troubles are piling up . . . damn-yes." He turned back to the squaw. "Who this man, travel fast?"

"Him Ridley man," she answered.

Tim whistled softly. "Are you sure, Eve?" he asked sharply.

"Sure."

"It would appear the North is cluttered up with Ridleys and Ridley men," Tim observed.

"I don't know anything about it," Mary

angrily insisted. "We've sent no one."

"Perhaps your father sent someone?" Tim suggested. "He didn't know you were going, of course."

"He didn't know until I was well on my way," she admitted. "But if he did send someone, Dad would never order the man to discredit the Revenue Cutter officers."

Tim Banning had his own views on that score. On many occasions Revenue Cutter men had prevented Ridley whalers from defrauding natives. "I'm going to have a talk with Antuk," he said. "I'll be back."

He crawled from the shack and expressed his opinion of the weather in words that Eve had never heard. The storm continued to moan down from the northeast and the snow was so thick he had to wait for a lull in order to locate the cabin.

TIM entered without formality. He turned the candlelight on a half-dozen natives. A seal-oil lamp lent a feeble glow to the interior and gave forth some warmth. Having exhausted the driftwood fuel, they had turned to the primitive method of heating. They slept in various positions on heaps of walrus hides, but Antuk was not among them.

Tim pulled off his parka, revealing his uniform coat which he hoped might prove more effective than words; then he aroused them with shaking and considerable cursing. They blinked at the uniform, then discussed the situation in dialect. Tim understood enough to realize they had concluded he was an imposter.

They knew nothing of Antuk's disappearance. When last seen he had been lying with his back against the wall, cursing Tim for destroying their whisky.

"Your man is raising the devil with my plans, Mary," Tim informed the girl when he returned to the shack. "Antuk, my guide, has gone. I'm going to try and beat him to Akadriak's village."

"Tim!" she exclaimed. "In this storm?"

"If Antuk can stand up under the storm, then I should. The instant a native people gets the idea the whites aren't superior, then the whites are finished in the North. Besides, I haven't forgotten what I read in Jerry Deacon's diary last night."

"I'll go with you, Tim," Mary said. "Two can accomplish more than one."

"No. You are remaining here. Not because I won't need you, but to get word to Surgeon Newton if I fail."

While she was getting breakfast, Tim scrawled a note to Newton, to be delivered by native runner if he should fail. He instructed Newton to turn his expedition—the heavy sledloads of suppies—over to a trustworthy native with orders to continue toward Point Hope. Newton himself was to turn westward, pick up the deer and start for the same point. Together the doctor and the native could continue on to Barrow.

"This is to be delivered only in case I don't make it through to Akadriak's village," Tim explained.

"All right," she agreed. "I'll stay until I hear from you. Then I'm going to streak north—alone."

"I wish you wouldn't," he said, though he had acquired a wholesome respect for her ability to drive a dog team and find her way about.

"For official reasons?" she asked.

"Partly," he growled, "but mostly for personal reasons."

He said little as he ate breakfast; even less while he lashed his load and hooked Old King Cole onto the sled. "Now do be careful," he insisted when he was ready to leave.

"You're the one to be careful—heading into this." She shuddered. "No wonder Eskimos believe the shades of the departed return. This wind sounds like the return of all the shades who have departed since the beginning of time."

Mary Ridley felt the strength of his farewell clasp, then stood in silence as the storm swallowed him up. "Good luck, Tim," she whispered softly. "Damn-yes!"

TIM BANNING laid out a compass course to make certain Old King Cole would head toward Akadriak's village,

then plunged on, riding the sled and keeping an eye on the compass. When assured the deer was really headed for the village and not doubling back, he let the animal pick his own trail.

There was plenty to occupy Tim's mind. The Ridley man, burning up the trail north; Antuk, no doubt motivated by revenge, heading into the storm; and the uncertainty of Akadriak's reaction to a request for deer—all these were problems he had to consider. Proof of treachery would be difficult—Tim realized that.

"I'd give plenty to know who this Ridley man is," he growled. "And it doesn't look as if there is a chance in the world of overtaking him."

All day the reindeer maintained a tireless pace. Tim alternately ran and rode, fighting off his growing belief that the deer had no idea where it was going. Yet, when he checked with the compass, the animal's course was roughly toward Akadriak's village. Suddenly he heard the click of many hoofs on frozen ground.

Old King Cole swerved, dropped so swiftly into a gulch that the sled threatened to ride his flying heels, then straightened out on a level stretch of wind-swept tundra. Ghostly figures came out of the swirling snow, then as quickly took alarm and dissolved into it. "Reindeer!" Tim bellowed joyfully. He was in the midst of a large herd. There were scores of the animals on both sides. They gave way ahead and closed in behind as he passed.

He yelled again and above the moan of the storm he heard an answer. An Eskimo appeared and Tim greeted him in dialect. The herder responded in fair, whaler English, which relieved Tim, for he was none too confident of his dialects. Tribes living close to each other often spoke a different tongue; others, hundreds of miles apart, sometimes used the same dialect.

"Where Akadriak?" Tim asked.

"I show you," the native answered. "Who you? Where you come?"

"I White Oomailik," Tim answered. "I come from revenue cutter—*umiak puk.*"

Even in the uncertain light Tim saw the native's eyes fill with suspicion. The Ridley man had passed this way, scattered his seeds of doubt, then gone on.

The herder led Tim to Akadriak's house immediately. As he entered, Tim saw Antuk slip into a back room and softly close the door. Tim looked about him swiftly. Although he had never met the native, he knew much of Akadriak's history. The man had materially assisted the government in establishing reindeer herds in the Arctic. As a reward for services rendered he had been given a herd of his own. A man of considerable intelligence, he saw that reindeer would help enormously to improve the lives of his people.

Accordingly, he had gathered several trustworthy herders about him. Although the herders were steeped in shamanism and believed all that the medicine man told him, they respected Akadriak and had full confidence in him.

As his herd increased, he promised to give them sufficient animals to start herds of their own. He dreamed of the day when Eskimo-owned reindeer would dot the tundra and ships would anchor in his cove, bringing trade goods from the white man's world in exchange for the frozen carcasses of his reindeer.

"And it's my job to take his entire herd and leave Akadriak and his men up in the air with their dream," Tim thought as the native approached him.

THE Eskimo is one of the world's most hospitable people. Anything that he has is the passing guest's. Akadriak came forward, smiling, masking any doubts he might have. Yet Tim sensed a definite distrust. The man was on the defensive, and worried. The Ridley man had talked to him and gone his way. Tim removed his parka and let the native and his wife see the insignia of his rank.

When he started speaking, Akadriak sent for two herders, each of whom knew a smattering of English. Tim made no mention of his authority to confiscate anything that might be needed for his expedition. Akadriak could not possibly under-

stand that angle of the white man's laws.

But he did understand that a strange, powerful *oomailik* existed far to the south; that this oomailik had brought reindeer into the country and had rewarded him for his services with more reindeer. "Tell him," Tim said to the two herders, "that white men are starving; the ice has sunk their ships and the deer are needed. If he gives his deer to me, the Government, the great *oomailik*, will give you more deer and presents."

As the herders translated what had been said, Antuk returned to the room. He leaned in the doorway, glowering, and watching Akadriak's face. Suddenly he turned loose a torrent of dialect. Akadriak's squaw shook her head; then the native himself seemed assailed with doubts. Tim said, "What is the answer?"

"Akadriak says you come to steal deer. You ain't *oomailik*. You Banning man," one of the herders answered. "Antuk say so. Ridley man say so."

Tim was in a mood to mop up the place with Antuk, but he kept his temper, knowing it would be costly if he lost it. A lifetime in dealing with the natives was his greatest asset. He tried several dialects on Akadriak without success, then turned to the herders again. "Tell him, Antuk turns good flour and molasses into whiskey. He lets his children sicken. His breath is foul and the words in his mouth are foul. My breath is sweet and my words are true."

Akadriak listened gravely, Then he walked over and sniffed Antuk's breath. With equal gravity he sniffed Tim's breath, and returned to his squaw's side. After they had talked several minutes, Akadriak spoke to the herders again. One of them translated. "He says you take deer, then you must bring 'em back. Or pay flour, molasses, sugar . . . " He went on naming various items of trade goods.

Tim understood. Akadriak was dealing with him directly and not as the agent of some mysterious *oomailik* the white men called the Government. He assured the native the entire matter would be his personal responsibility.

As the deer would have fawns in April, Akadriak felt he was entitled to consider the normal increase, also. Tim readily saw the justice of this stand.

"I will make allowance for the usual increase," he assured the interpreter.

Akadriak had once seen two white men seal a bargain with a handclasp. He extended his hand and Tim shook it with great enthusiasm.

CHAPTER IX.

SQUAW-RIDLEY

THE Ridley man lurked in the shadows of Akadriak's cabin, pressed his ear against a hole he had made in the chinks between the logs and listened to the conversation between Tim Banning and the Eskimo.

"The lieutenant is smart for a Banning," he muttered. "Antuk didn't stop the deal. But there's plenty of chance. From here Banning will go on to Cape Prince of Wales and make a dicker for Chandler's deer. He's a white man and he'll see the situation at a glance. There'll be no trouble with Chandler."

The Ridley man came to a decision as he leaned against the cabin wall. Few people were abroad in such weather. He had arrived unnoticed and none of the herders moving about the settlement saw him leave.

He made his way to a cabin two miles from Akadriak's. The interior was filled with dogs, chained there. Equipment and supplies were stored in the loft beyond reach of their fangs. The malemute, when hungry, will eat leather, harness and even tear open tin cans with his strong teeth.

Two of them leaped viciously at him as he entered. He slashed them across the nose with a whip, hauled down the sled and set about loading it. He was a powerfully built man, with fang scars on his hands and forearms and a knife slash across his left cheek. Everything he did was methodical and without emotion. In his dealings he was like a chemist making an experiment. Men, women, dogs and

reindeer were to him ingredients to be mixed in certain proportions with the hope of obtaining a definite result.

Few people noticed the man's straw colored hair, the breadth of his shoulders and the depth of his chest; they seldom saw beyond ruthlessness of his icy blue eyes. In addition to a forty-five calibre revolver he carried a knife of razor sharpness. The hilt and handle were weighted with lead—a knife that could split a man's skull if thrown by a skilled hand.

He fed his dogs and cared for their feet as a gunman cares for his weapons. There was no finer team in the North.

He left the cabin and headed northeasterly. Snow was flying, but the fierce blast that had badgered Tim Banning day after day had died down to a lazy breeze. The temperature was twenty degrees below zero. A man in deerskin clothing could work up a sweat with small effort. But the Ridley man wasted no energy. He rode the sled runners on the level stretches and even up hill.

Several days later he pulled up in front of an igloo made of driftwood, walrus hides and sod. Weighted sealskin lashings kept the walrus hides in place. Covered with snow, the igloo resembled a structure built entirely of snow. A tunnel fashioned of blocks of snow led to the door.

A half dozen gaunt, half starved dogs, rushed to attack his. He beat them off with a whip, located an igloo that might serve as a kennel and placed his team inside. He examined the pads of each for signs of iceballs between the toes, treated a cut or two, then made his way to the main igloo.

HE KNOCKED, and when a woman called out, he entered. The woman, a young native, was chewing seal skin to soften it up for her garment making. In her eyes, the visitor caught the proud gleam of the native girl who has successfully contested with her sisters for a white man's favor. The visitor saw that, and something more. "Oh," she exclaimed, "it is the Ridley man."

He nodded and looked at the white man sprawled on a bunk. Then his interest shifted to a still at the foot of the bunk. Raw liquor dripped from a rifle muzzle into a tin cup. Each drop made a musical note as it struck the bottom of the cup. The man on the bunk did not move, but lay with his mouth open, snoring heavily in a drunken stupor. Like the natives he had removed all of his clothing before going to bed, but a blanket, kicked back, revealed a wide pair of shoulders, beautifully muscled arms and a face that was handsome under the black stubble of beard.

His curly black hair was matted and fell just short of his shoulders. His brows were thick and black, his forehead wide and intelligent. His mouth was weak, and yet there was a kind of stubbornness about its set.

The squaw dropped her work, walked over and shook him. "The Ridley man comes," she said.

"Huh!" He opened his eyes and rubbed them; he stared at the visitor. Incredulous, he glanced back at the squaw, and, then suddenly he flung his feet over the edge of the bunk and his long, straight legs dangled a moment. "You, Scalzo?" he exclaimed. "What're you doing here in the dead of winter?"

"Looking after the Ridley interests, Bill, as I did for years," Scalzo answered. "You don't seem to be making a job of it. I heard you'd . . . gone native."

"And now that you're here, what's your opinion?" Bill Ridley demanded belligerently.

Scalzo glanced at the squaw again. She was not all native. There was a strong white strain in her. That, he thought, would help some in the eyes of the world. "Let's not fight, Bill," he said. "There's too much at stake. You knew the whaling fleet had been caught in the ice?"

"Sure. Three weeks ago I saw the Banning's *Audacious* in the ice, moving slowly toward the Arctic Basin," Bill answered. "It was a grand sight. She's done for—old Sulphur-bottom Banning's finest whaler."

"And you know you Ridleys have a big

quantity of whalebone and oil in storage; that if the whaling fleet is a total loss you'll more than make up for your loss in equipment in the rising price of bone?" Scalzo asked.

"I'm not forgetting that for a minute," Bill Ridley admitted. "Luck dealt us a full house, aces high, when the fleet was caught."

"And there isn't a chance for salvage because the crews will be too weak, too depleted, after a winter on starvation rations," Scalzo said.

"I understand that, too."

"Now here's something you don't know. And I've mushed all the way from Saint Michael to tell you, Bill," Scalzo said. "Old Sulphur-bottom got private advices that the fleet was caught and certain of his whalers destroyed. He deeded them to Tim Banning."

BILL Ridley roared with laughter. "That's like the old devil! And I'll bet Tim's frothing at the mouth."

"Tim isn't. Right about now he is probably at Cape Prince of Wales in command of an Overland Expedition the Revenue Cutter service has dispatched. He talked Akadriak out of his deer—I heard him. He'll have no trouble getting Chandler's herd. Chandler will help him outfit, supply him with native herders and start him on his way—if he doesn't come along with him.

"I don't believe it," Bill said. He leaned over and looked into the tin cup under the rifle muzzle. The cup no longer rang musically as the liquor dropped. It splashed; the bottom was covered. He emptied the cup in a gulp and set it down again. "I don't believe it," he repeated. "It's seven hundred miles from Wales to Barrow. The human being doesn't live who can drive food on the hoof that distance, in the dead of winter. And yet, Tim Banning is the man who'd try it," he added thoughtfully.

"If he fills their stomachs and fires them with fight, the Banning sailors won't stop at anything to salvage what they can of ships and bone. 'The Bannings look after their people,' isn't just bunk. They do, and whalers know it."

Bill Ridley nodded. "In our organization, Scalzo," Bill said slowly, "there were two men who influenced my life. Jerry Deacon never let up trying to stiffen my backbone. He wanted to make me the man my sister is—that's what he said. And you never lost a chance to kick me down and discredit me. That's why you were fired." He probed Scalzo's cold eyes a moment. "Now why this sudden interest in Ridley fortunes?"

"The Ridleys have been good to me—that's part of it," Scalzo replied. "I used to make a little money on the side trading with the natives. Then they began to get civilized and it was harder to make a deal. If this reindeer business is successful, natives like Akadriak will get all the way out of hand."

"And they'll want what their furs are worth?" Bill suggested.

"Sure. Suppose something should happen to that herd. The Government can't replace it with other deer, readily. The natives will be paid in trade goods and that'll end it. They'll get discouraged over the deer business, lose their faith in the Government and slide back into their old ways."

"There's more at stake than I thought," Bill observed thoughtfully. "Hmmmm."

Scalzo studied him intently. "Antuk is a medicine man," he argued. "He's losing his influence and knows it. He'll do anything to help you kill the natives' faith in Banning and get them under his control again." He winked. "Through Antuk we can do business pretty cheap."

"Yes, Antuk had quite a system," Bill said. "He had them believing he controlled the shades of the evil natives who had died. Unless he was paid plenty in furs he'd turn the shades loose. It scared some of them to death, literally. The others paid." He drained the cup again. "If this Overland Expedition is stopped, it's sure to mean the loss of lives and ships that might otherwise be saved. You understand that?" He looked hard at Scalzo.

"At a time like this, with hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million at stake," Scalzo answered slowly, "you don't count the cost when the other fellow is paying the bill. If that reindeer herd is lost, it'll set the country back twenty-five years. And I've heard a white man could make a barrel of money off'n the natives twenty-five years ago. It's time you cleared out to some igloo where there's no whisky and start straightening up."

"Yes, it's time I sobered up," Bill replied. "It's been a long spree. I was going to make it last all winter, but if the herd is swinging north, I'm through now."

The squaw cried out sharply and raised her arms in protest. "It's the white in her coming out," Scalzo muttered. "A full-blooded Eskimo wouldn't even blink."

BILL RIDLEY swung around to his wife, "What is it, Arnaretauk?"

"You no go now? You stay?" she pleaded.

"I've got to go now," he answered. "Don't ask me to stay. This is one time I'm not giving in."

"Bill." She caught his arm and her dark eyes were eloquent with their plea. "You stay with Arnaretauk."

"No, I tell you. I'm going through with this." He flung her onto a head of walrus hides. His half drunken face was set, and his voice was harsh with anger.

"I'm going before something changes my mind. Squaw Ridley, half the man his sister is!"

He pulled on his skin boots, his parka, tossed a few articles into a pack and was ready.

Then doubt came into his eyes. The hard glint in them softened. He started toward the crumpled figure. Scalzo held up his arm and shook his head. "You can't let any woman interfere with what you've got in mind. Come on!" He opened the door. "Remember, strike at the whole set-up through Antuk. I'll be working on my end of it."

"Sure. I know what I'm doing." He walked over to the walrus hide and dropped to his knees. He kissed the girl, then stood up. "Don't worry. Your people are here. You won't be lonely. You mustn't be afraid." He turned on his heel and stalked through the door.

Staring after him, Scalzo knew Bill Ridley would head for one of the shelter cabins on his trap line. In a week he'd be fit —a good man to take care of Tim Banning's expedition.

Scalzo regarded the sobbing Arnaretauk briefly, then went out and harnessed his dogs. He drifted south slowly, resting from the long, hard drive from St. Michael. The machinery had been set in motion, his role in the future would be that of engineer, to make certain all parts were in running order.

Many days later he pulled up on a windswept ridge and gazed into the valley below. Even his cold, emotionless eyes took on a momentary gleam of appreciation. The Arctic had seen nothing like it since the beginning of time, and it would probably see nothing like it again.

Nearly five hundred reindeer moved slowly northward, grazing whenever the moss was exposed and often clearing away the snow to reach it. The herders followed, assisted by Lapp dogs which were as skilled and faithful as sheep dogs.

A twenty-sled train drawn by reindeer followed. The train was composed of units of five sleds, and since the deer on each sled was attached to the sled ahead of him, a single driver managed the unit. Loaded with supplies Tim Banning had picked up at Cape Prince of Wales, the sleds moved ponderously.

Scalzo's eyes brightened with grudging admiration. Why couldn't Ridley be like Banning, maybe a fool but surely a man.

"It's the biggest gamble ever taken in the North," Scalzo muttered as he watched the expedition vanish through a notch in the upper end of the valley. "A bigger gamble than even Tim Banning realizes."

But Tim Banning, noting the slow advance the expedition was making each hour, was beginning to think the gamble was tremendous.

CHAPTER X.

DEER ON ICE

THE herd moved slowly northward and Tim Banning wrestled with the problem of increasing the pace. He wanted to reach Barrow before the fawning season, sometime after April 1st. For every fawn that survived the Government would be one deer ahead in the final settlement. But not even fawning must influence any decision he might make.

"I've got to figure this thing out on the basis of the needs of the whalers," he decided one night as he sat in his tent, scowling at a chart.

The area marked Kotzebue Sound was a challenge. He measured the distance across the ice. "Roughly fifty miles," he reflected. And though he had on several occasions calculated the distance he must travel if he followed the shoreline and played safe, nevertheless he measured it again. "And it'll be two hundred extra miles if I stick to land. That adds a lot of extra days."

The time when he must make a definite decision was approaching. If he followed the shore there was a chance he might pick up Surgeon Newton's trail; that would give him the advantage of the companionship and advice of a fellow officer the remainder of the way to Barrow. "Hell!" he exploded. "I wish Chandler was here. He might have some ideas." But while Chandler was willing to part with his deer, he had not felt physically equal to accompanying them.

Tim left the tent, walked over and looked at the herd. The animals were in good shape. A fifty-mile trek over the ice would not take off much weight. But could any number of drivers force the animals onto the ice and away from an area where food existed? He decided to consult Akadriak.

Akadriak explained that his herders were brave men and would not hesitate to venture onto the ice with the herd. But had the White Oomailik considered the chance of the herd stampeding, being caught on drifting floes and lost?

The White Oomailik had been considering that very thing. And he was worrying the problem several days later when an excited herder informed him that a strange native was running toward camp. Day was just breaking.

Tim ran out of his tent and saw a stocky figure trotting out of the north. The sight of the camp, and the herd, seemed to hearten the man. He broke into a swifter pace and arrived in a state of collapse. "White lady say you come like hell," he gasped in fair English.

"A white lady with a dog team?" Tim asked sharply.

"White lady got sled, but no dogs," the native explained. "She pull sled. No dogs."

Tim harnessed the freshest sled deer in the lot, lashed a few supplies to the sled and was off. There was only one white lady in the Arctic with a dog team to his knowledge, and the lady was Mary Ridley.

He crossed a low ridge shortly after noon and saw a figure in the distance relaying packs to the crest of another ridge. A few moments later, catching sight of him, she sat down on a pack and waited for him to come.

TIM stopped, loaded her sled and several packs onto his sled and presently drew up beside her. For a moment it looked as if she might break down and cry from relief. But instead she said, "I never thought I'd see the time when a Banning would look like an angel from Heaven, Tim. Thanks for coming."

"What happened? Dogs chase caribou and break away from the sled?" he asked.

"I've spent too much time dog mushing to be caught that way," she replied. "Somebody, I don't know who, sneaked into camp and turned them loose. One dog might get away, but not a whole team. It looked as if they had pulled their heads through their collars, but those collars were unbuckled, then buckled again."

"A neat job," he observed. "A native would do it." He was thinking of Antuk.

"Or a white man," she added.

"Have you anyone in mind?"

"No, I haven't, Tim. But I've had days and days alone on the trail and plenty of time to think," she said. "I'm frightened."

He studied her, admiration in his eyes. "You've got courage, Mary—plenty of it."

She shrugged her slim shoulders with a fatalistic calm that would have done credit to a native. "I had good dogs, a sled load of provisions, ample camp equipment and knowledge of the country, so why should I worry. Now don't say I lost my dogs, because I didn't. They were stolen. I knew you were coming along, so I intersected what I thought would probably be your trail. I met a native, hunting, and sent him."

"Now let's get back to your thinking, Mary," he suggested. "What frightened you?"

"Thinking of what would happen if your expedition failed—that frightened me," she said. "Thinking of what may happen if you're too late. Three hundred men may starve before you can get there. They'd fight like animals for the remaining food. And there's something else, so big that it's frightening—the advantage to the Ridleys if the Banning fleet is destroyed; the advantage to the Bannings if the Ridley fleet is lost."

"And the advantage to outsiders, perhaps, if both fleets are lost," he suggested. If she was acting, talking for effect, he decided, she was doing a perfect job. The next instant he hated himself for doubting her.

"The Arctic does things to people," she went on. He looked startled for he was thinking in a similar vein. "Men come into it filled with fine purpose and in a few weeks' time the only thing they can recognize is the pack law; their only purpose is to survive. You see I'm still thinking of my dogs. Releasing them might have meant my death."

Suddenly the suspicion came to him that this was a trick; that she had released the dogs herself. Angrily he put the thought out of his mind. He wondered if the strain of the past weeks was destroying all his sense of proportion.

"Where were you headed for?" Tim asked.

"My brother has a cabin west of Cape Espenberg," she answered. "I'm joining him. I know what people say. And the meeting may not be pleasant for me, but—" She grew resolute. "I'm going through with it." She gave him a questioning glance. "You look worn out, Tim. How are things going?"

"The expedition is making fair time." He took a shot in the dark, to test her. "But I can't make up my mind whether to shoot the deer over the ice or go around the Sound."

"Perhaps this will help," she suggested. She removed two boards from her sled. They were lashed together with sealskin thongs, and scrawled across the face of one Tim read:

Message Inside

"I found a rock cairn on a ridge," she explained. "It was impossible not to see it. I investigated and found this. The message was evidently placed between the boards for protection." She helped him remove the thongs. "I've already read it," she explained.

Tim read:

February first.

Several have left Barrow hoping to get through. We have no knowledge of their fate. It is my turn, but I am giving out. Barrow needs food, medicine and discipline badly.

Al Cooke.

TIM studied the handwriting intently. If the message was planted to trick him into sending the deer over the ice, then the author had paid strict attention to detail. "He—or she," Tim mused, "mentioned others who have attempted to reach help, and signed Al Cooke's name. And Al has been with the Banning fleet for years, but I'm damned if I ever remember seeing his handwriting."

The handwriting on the message was small and feminine. He looked up suddenly. "It strikes me as a strange coincidence a lone musher, traveling through thou-

sands of square miles of trailless country should encounter a message that should influence an important decision," he said slowly.

She flushed in sudden anger, Then, forcing herself to be cool, she answered, "It strikes me that way, too, I think I had better start along before my temper gets the best of me and I do something violent to you. You suggest that perhaps I cached the message myself—and perhaps I did. After all, if you are stupid enough to be tricked by anything I might do, why shouldn't I do it?"

"Yes, why not?" he agreed. "You haven't the equipment to continue on to your brother's, and I can't loan you any, so I'll just naturally freight your outfit to his cabin." Without waiting for an answer, Tim loaded everything onto the sled, hitched the dog sled behind and set off.

He stopped at the crest of the next ridge and waited for her to join him. Her parka hood was thrown back and he noticed her face was gray with exhaustion, and there were tired lines about her strong mouth. "Get on!" he invited.

"I won't!" She snapped.

"Get on! This is no time for squabbling. Get on!" She started doggedly ahead. He picked her up in his arms. "Now understand this, Mary. I'm going to suspect everything unusual. I'm going to think out loud if I feel like it. I'm making no inferences, pre-judging nobody." He dumped her onto the sled. "Now stay there."

"Nobody's ever treated me like this before," she stormed.

"Then you're having a new experience," he retorted. He started the reindeer down a long, gentle slope, then piled onto the sled with her.

As the sled skimmed over the snow, Tim reviewed what had just taken place. In a way it was all trivial. In another way it was important, providing his temper was on edge and might cloud the cold judgment so necessary to the success of the expedition. He had an idea the plodding reindeer herd was getting on his nerves. He was impatient to reach Barrow. The answer to that seemed to be to gamble on crossing the sound over the ice, then pushing on ahead, leaving the deer to follow.

In that moment he made his decision. Unless ice conditions were impossible, he would send the herd straight across.

Their course wavered late that afternoon when they searched for Bill Ridley's cabin. "Have you any description of the place?" he asked.

"None. A man who—goes native," she said in a grim voice, "doesn't send his address to the folks back home. There are two men known by reputation to the natives. One is called the Ridley man: his name is Scalzo and he represented us for years. The other one is Big Bill, my brother."

"There's an inlet" Tim said, "that I've seen when passing on the revenue cutters. Bill's place might be tucked in there. It's west of Cape Espenberg, which is now to our east." He stopped long enough to lay out a rough compass course.

"There should be smoke," Mary suggested.

"Yes, he would have a still going if not a cook stove," Tim thought. He looked up from his chart and said, "We should be there in a couple of hours."

An odd silence fell on her as they skimmed over the snow. He looked down, once, and saw the strain in her tired face. Now that she was within a few miles of her brother's igloo, she was summoning all her courage to go through with it.

Tim Banning plodded wearily at her side, dreading the scene that lay ahead of them. He didn't want to look at Mary Ridley's face when she saw what the North and his own weakness had done to Bill Ridley.

"Here's the place," Tim said presently and her hand went to her breast as if she had felt sudden pain. "But there doesn't seem to be anyone around."

"This can't be it, then," she said. "Besides Bill and his wife, there were her people. If the men were away hunting or sealing, then the squaws and children would be around. Let's go on."

"I'll have a look just for luck," he said. "The deer acts as if he scented a dog. A glance will tell if a white man has ever lived here. Hunting may be better up the beach."

"Yes," she answered bitterly. "A whale may have stranded and Bill and his people have gone there to camp until they've eaten it up. That would be going native with a vengeance."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SHAMAN'S RATTLE

TIM disappeared into the tunnel, then backed out. He motioned Mary to join him. "There's someone in there," he said, and she caught the significant expression in his eyes. "A woman, I heard her sobbing. When natives in this region quit a woman, it means but one thing—the stork is flying and he's flying low."

Tim's face was white and set. His hands balled into fists at his side. More trouble, more delay . . .

Mary Ridley was familiar with the brutal superstition which made a woman's people either quit her or send her out into the cold just when she needed help and shelter most. Generations of shamans had instilled in the native mind the belief that death and bad luck overtook all who in any way assisted or even remained in the vicinity of an expectant mother.

Tim had once found an Eskimo woman in the snow, striving to erect a shelter, and when he had carried her bodily into the warmth of her igloo, the other members of the family had nearly wrecked the place getting out.

Mothers and infants were frequently frozen to death. Yet when it was all over, mothers and infants were readily admitted to the igloo again and allowed to take their place in family life.

Mary and Tim would have to give this woman what aid and comfort they knew how to give.

"If what you think is true," Mary said, "we'll simply have to find some native woman and bring her here."

"If we do, we'll have to hog-tie her," Tim answered grimly. "Damn these shamans. Antuk and the rest of them, should be sunk in ten fathoms of water. Let's go in."

Tim led the way, opened the door and entered the igloo. Inside Mary paused, her arms tight against her sides.

She studied a young, attractive woman with frightened eyes who was lying on a heap of walrus hides. Finally her glance went to a book shelf. She stepped forward, opened a book with an expensive binding and looked at the fly leaf. A neat hand had written, *To Bill from Mary, with best wishes for many happy birthdays.*

"Does that book mean something?" Tim asked.

"I gave it to Bill on his twenty-first birthday," she answered. Then her eyes fell on the still. "Will you take that thing out and destroy it, Tim, and . . . not come back. I've arrived"—she caught her breath sharply—"at my brother's home."

Tim gathered up the still. "I'm not going to leave you," he said. "The deer have to cross somewhere on the ice, and we might just as well make it here. Besides, there may be a native among the herders who fears God more than the shamans. If so, he'll stay around and give you any help you need."

He lowered his voice. "That squaw has white blood in her veins and she probably hasn't the bedrock constitution that carries the full-blood through this."

AS TIM closed the door, Mary turned to the woman on the walrus hides. "Are you Bill's squaw, Arnaretauk?" she asked.

"Bill, me, marry by the Book," she answered proudly. Suspicion and sullenness crept into her eyes. "I know you. You Outside woman. You come get Bill, I say no. You go." She got up and opened a book. Mary's photograph fell from the leaves. "See! That you. You go!"

Mary stood irresolute. This wasn't her job, not any part of it. Then the Ridley in her won out.

"I'm Bill's sister," Mary explained, and it took courage to finish. "Your sister, Arnaretauk."

"My sister?" It was odd to see a native woman's eyes fill. "My—white sister." She sat down and sobs shook her. "I alone. Afraid. You come. White woman, she knows everything. Arnaretauk no afraid now. Missionary say, you scared, you pray to God. Arnaretauk pray—pray like hell. You come. God send you."

"You poor thing," Mary cried. She sat down and put her arms around Arnaretauk. "Why did Bill go? Why did he leave you at a time like this?"

"Ridley man come. Talk fast, get mad. He say, Bill straighten up. Bill say time to straighten up. I say no go now. He say must. He kiss me. Then go. Ridley man go," she explained.

"That *is* news," Mary said. "So Scalzo refused to stay fired? And he's working with Bill—or Bill thinks Scalzo is working with him." She turned to the native again. "Why did you marry Bill?"

"Bill drink all time out of rifle—water, hot like hell. Burn mouth. Bill like. Pretty soon drunk come," Arnaretauk explained. "He fall down in mud. Dogs all bark. Children laugh. Mud all over white face. Arnaretauk no like mud on white face. She most white. See?"

She pulled aside her clothing, revealing flesh that was whiter than her weathered face. "Arnaretauk pull Bill to igloo. Wash face, fix all up. Pretty soon missionary come and find out Bill going to stay all time. He look in igloo and say, 'Tut! Tut! This never do!' Then we marry by Book."

Mary nodded miserably. "I see," she said. Oh Bill, how could you have done this? How could you? But it was too late for that now. This girl needed help—all the help she could possibly get.

Mary asked Tim to bring in some of the provisions from her sled; then she set about preparing a meal. She put the room in order, spread her sleeping bag on a bunk and settled down for what rest she could get.

Tim awakened her the following noon. "I've been in twice," he explained, "but you were sleeping so soundly I didn't have the heart to wake you. Your dogs showed up at daybreak. I caught one and looked at his pads—they don't look as if they had been following any caribou or reindeer. They weren't worn.

"I imagine the dogs were released, followed up a stray scent or two, then set about locating the person who has been feeding them regularly for several weeks. The trail led here."

"They'll hang around," she predicted.

"That's not the point, Mary, I'm expecting the deer herd any hour now. They might stampede them."

"I'll be out in a jiffy," she promised.

Within ten minutes the dogs were tied up. "Now I've a proposition to offer," she said. "If all goes well with Arnaretauk, and you get the deer safely over the ice, suppose we take my dogs and head for Barrow? I think ships as well as men can be saved."

His hesitation was brief.

He realized she was offering the thing he desired most—to reach the scene as soon as possible. He also realized the deer herd would be in charge of natives and therefore exposed to the scheming of Bill Ridley and Scalzo. "If Surgeon Newton shows up, Mary, I'll accept that offer," he said. "And look—there's the Overland Expedition!"

THE first of the deer began flowing over the hill—a stream kept within its bounds by active Lapp dogs. Akadriak, riding a sled, skirted the herd and joined Tim and Mary. His interpreter was with him.

"Stop them down the inlet," Tim directed, "there's plenty of moss there. Tomorrow we start them over the ice. Mary, why not follow at a safe distance? If the ice gets dangerous you can make a fast retreat. If we make it, then you will be ready to join me in a dash to Barrow."

She did not answer. He turned to find she had gone. "She go there!" the inter-

preter informed him. "Squaw make hand motion say come!"

"Have you got a man who believes in white man's God?" Tim asked. "One who sings in church, and calls a doctor instead of a shaman when he has a pain in the belly?"

"Oopick go church all time," the man answered and launched into a description of Oopick's zeal which convinced Tim the native profited by his religion as he was the recipient of many gifts from the missionary.

"He's the man I'm looking for," Tim said. "Bring him here."

The interpreter disappeared and presently returned with a swarthy native whose tricky eyes never rested in any one spot very long. Tim tested his religious beliefs, asked him several questions, then escorted him to the igloo.

"Mary here's a man who'll do anything you want done. When you're ready to leave he'll stay on until Bill shows up. Or until Arnaretauk's family puts in an appearance. Now—"

Oopick let out a terrified yell as he realized what was soon to transpire. He started for the door, but Tim grasped his parka. "No you don't," he growled. "You've pretended to be a good convert, and you've profited by it, so you aren't going to run away."

Oopick wriggled like a scared animal, but Tim held him in a grip of iron. Then Oopick began to yell, wailing out his terror.

"If I stay, I die! I die!" Oopick's wail filled the igloo. He protested in a torrent of dialect. Tim heard mutterings outside the igloo, then a tense silence.

"You'd better let him go," Mary advised.

"I'll do nothing of the sort. If I picked up some heathen native it would be different. This man has had his picture in religious papers as exhibit A," Tim answered. "My private opinion is, he's been pulling the missionary's leg right along. But I'm going to kill that superstitious belief for all time to come. Oopick's going to stay, and the others are going to see with their own eyes that nothing sinister happens to him."

He tied the native and dropped him onto a convenient bunk. Then he went out to get some fuel from a stock of driftwood piled in an adjoining shack. "That fool, Oopick, could just as well be doing this," he complained. "There's a million things for me to do, and I'm filling the wood box."

Midway through the tunnel Tim stopped and listened. Mary was saying, "What will I do? What will I do?" As Tim didn't know, he remained discreetly silent, crouching near the door ready to respond should Mary call his name.

Suddenly his eyes brightened. "Son of a gun," he ejaculated, "that buzzard of a stork has arrived."

He entered the room in time to see Mary wrapping a squirming bundle in fawnskin. "What a help you were?" she tartly observed. "But thank the Lord it's over with."

Tim stoked up the fire and ignored the whimpering hypocrite on the bunk. A half hour later he released Oopick and escorted him outside. "Listen you—" he said, then stopped.

ANTUK, with a few of the trappings of the shaman, was standing before the entire group of herders screaming at them in dialect and shaking a shaman's rattle, the scepter of his office. The noise of that rattle seemed to drive all the teachings of the missionary from their minds.

Tim whirled on Oopick. "Look at yourself, pinch your faithless carcass and realize you are alive. Tell them what happened and that no shade, spook or spirit killed you. Then come back here and get to work or I'll kick seven kinds of hell out of you.

Oopick covered the distance between himself and his fellows on the dead run. Tim saw him go up, look Antuk squarely in the eyes, then start a harangue.

Tim returned to the igloo. "Now what is next, Mary?" he asked.

"You might get us something to eat," the girl answered. "I have my hands full. It's a boy, Tim, and he's a strong little fellow." She stopped abruptly. "Listen, I think I heard someone calling," she said sharply.

Tim listened a moment. "I don't hear a thing," he answered. He turned to the stove and set about preparing a meal. A half hour later he called, "It's ready, if you are!"

They sat down and began to eat. Mary ate hurriedly, ready to respond to the slightest call from the adjoining room. "There, I hear a man yelling," she insisted. "The same man I heard some time ago."

Tim dropped his knife and fork and stood up. "You're right," he agreed. "It's Akadriak."

Tim hurried out, prepared for anything but what actually faced him. Akadriak, feeling none too safe, held a frightened interpreter by the arm. "Oopick he stay in there with you. Oopick die. You die, white girl she die—"

"What're you talking about?" Tim yelled.

This was a bombshell. If it was true, it meant pretty nearly the end of Tim's slim hope. Tim couldn't believe it. It had to be a lie or a trick.

The interpreter pointed. "Oopick on ground, dead. Everybody go back home. Antuk say go. Everybody die like Oopick."

Tim was staggered.

The native had spoken the truth. Oopick lay on the ground, dead. And Tim knew he could never convince the herders that Oopick had not died because he had entered the cabin. The power of shamanism was riding triumphant over the same country it had ridden for centuries; Antuk held the cards. Akadriak nodded doubtfully at Tim Banning, then hurried south in the wake of his herders.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

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

· CAVALRY versus · BATTLE FLEET

To the Huzzars of France goes the credit of performing a deed unparalleled in history; that of cavalry defeating a Navy, in the latter's element. During the Holland campaign of 1795, the French horse found a Dutch fleet frozen fast, and charged it over the ice. The admiral, dazed by the incongruity of being summoned to surrender by a cavalry regiment, gave up without resistance.

· FIRST U.S. ARMY · EXECUTION

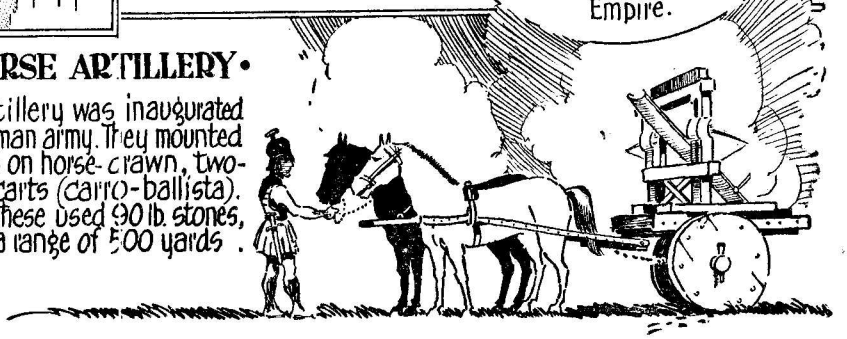
In June 1776, Thomas Hickey was formally executed by order of a court martial. He was convicted of conspiring to kidnap Washington and deliver him to the British.

·ARCHER CAVALRY·

The first long-range archers were not the English bowmen-infantry, but the cavalry of the Eastern Roman Empire.

· 1st. HORSE ARTILLERY ·

Horse artillery was inaugurated by the Roman army. They mounted catapults on horse-drawn, two-wheeled carts (carro-ballista). Some of these used 90 lb. stones, and had a range of 500 yards.



Commodore Crook

The Commodore

Permit us to introduce a charming young man of ten, who stuffs corpses in ice boxes and makes gangsters at home on his father's yacht—up to a certain point. From there on, it's smart figgerin'

By CHARLES GREEN

I

IT was really the ominous hush before the storm, but I had no way of guessing it then. Certainly the scene was peaceful enough to reassure anybody.

The Key West yacht basin shimmered forlornly in its post-season siesta. It was very still, very hot. The heat seemed to absorb everything: muffle all sound, suspend all motion.

I dangled my feet over the *Suzy Q's* stern, splaying and curling my toes in the tepid water. Madge sat at the wheel, listlessly checking her shopping lists. Perspiration dampened her soft, blond curls.

The Commodore, as I call my ten-year-old wild Injun of an offspring, still labored on the huge brown-paper kite lying on the binnacle box. At the "art stage" now, he painted weird, surrealistic tidbits over the face of it. There was a bead of sweat suspended from the very tip of his nose, and a paint smear just above it; and he panted away like an asthmatic old man.

And then that speedboat careened into the basin.

The abrupt violence of its entry had perhaps the effect of an exploding firecracker in a public library's reading room. Low and streamlined, built for speed, it plowed torpedolike, engine roaring defiance to the hot stillness, a creamy double flare ever opening and curving before the bow, a churning, bubbling wake pursuing the stern.

"Look at it whiz!" the Commodore yelled enthusiastically. "Hot *baby* doll!"

And I said, sitting up, "Hey!"

The speedboat seemed to be heading straight smack for the bow of my yawl where it lay tied up at the head of the pier. At dangerously close last moment, it made a slithering turn. The screw churned in reverse.

Now the slinky thing was gripped, checked and it whiplashed back abeam the *Suzy Q*. You could hear the silence again as they cut the engine.

There were five men in the rear cockpit, and looking back at us as they drifted closer and closer. They were a hard-looking lot. Two seemed to be Cubans, the other three were Americans. I could not recall having seen any of them, or their boat, in the five months that I'd been in Key West.

Some of them reached out and fended off when the boats were about to touch. Another man said pleasantly:

"You're Mr. Dawson, aren't you?"

HE WAS a plump little man, wearing shorts, a gaudily striped jacket and a British cork helmet. The outfit was ridiculous, for the shorts were too tight for him, the jacket too long, the helmet far too large.

The crack of guns followed the metallic din of the alarm; and then people started screaming

Exciting Novelet

Yet somehow the little man did not seem ridiculous. I mean, you wouldn't have laughed at him. He was no silly tourist. He was a mean-eyed, brown-faced little plug-ugly, masquerading.

"Yes," I said, "my name is Dawson."

He pushed up his helmet.

"Well, you see, Mr. Dawson, we read in the local paper here that you're pulling out for the Tortugas today. We thought we'd grab your place at the head of the pier here before somebody else sneaked in ahead of us."

"Sorry," I said, "but I've postponed the trip. Until tomorrow morning. My supplies came aboard too late."

"Tomorrow morning?" another man echoed. A peculiar terseness in his voice made me swing my eyes toward him. He was a hard-eyed, burly fellow, with a bluish stubble of beard on his massive, rather brutal underjaw. "Tomorrow is Sunday," he added.

I waited for some explanatory comment. None followed. The queer, awkward silence lingered on until Madge put in abruptly:

"Say, Bill, if tomorrow is Sunday—why, good Heavens, Bill, you've missed the bank. It stays open only until twelve today."

"I know it, honey," I said, "but I've still about ten minutes to make it in."

"Six minutes," the burly fellow corrected. "We've got to make that bank too."

The plump little man said:

"That's right. Look, Mr. Dawson, would you mind if we sort of hung on alongside of you here for a few minutes while some of us run over to the bank? It'll save us the trouble of tying up elsewhere, and our car is parked at the end of the pier here."

I shrugged.

"Go right ahead. I don't mind, of course."

They began scrambling aboard. One after another, they crossed the main cabin hatch to starboard where a ladder hung over the side of the pier. Apparently it needed four of them to make the trip to the bank, for only one of the Cubans remained in the speedboat.

The burly fellow had a canvas golf bag slung over his shoulder. I watched it bob on his back as he climbed the ladder. Why drag that ashore? Of course there was a country club with a golf course on the next key, but—

"Bill!" Madge prompted ominously.

I reached for my shoes. The Commodore, furtively rubbing with his heel a paint spot he'd got on the deck despite my grim threats, wheedled:

"I guess I can go with you, eh, Dad?"

"Not the way you're looking now," I said.

I felt strangely uneasy. On the pier above me I could hear the departing footsteps of the men who'd gone up there.

The Cuban left in the speedboat hung on with one hand to the yawl's shrouds. He was ogling Madge, her slim brown legs, her thighs. She wore her old red bathing suit.

That didn't bother me; after the first three years I'd got used to men ogling Madge. But I suddenly disliked the idea of *Suzy Q's* being tied up alone there at the end of the long pier, and not a blessed soul ashore in that noonday heat.

"Bill, dear, do you *want* to miss the bank?"

Her voice suddenly made my vague apprehensions seem silly.

"Going now, honey."

I put on my canvas shoes and scrambled up the ladder. Out of the shade, the heat that poured down from the blazing sun overhead was like something liquid and tangible. The healthy trade winds usually sweeping the keys took a holiday today. You could only too well believe now the Chamber of Commerce's boast that Key West, Florida, was six hundred miles farther south than Cairo, Egypt.

My rusty old battle-axe could maybe have baked a roast when I climbed inside of it. I started it, nursed its reluctant cough to some degree of ambition. It was then that I saw in the windshield mirror the new touring car some seventy-five feet behind me.

THE four men from the speedboat were in it now. There was also a fifth man, who must have awaited them at the wheel. They were just—sitting there. Sitting there in the blazing sun.

Why? Only a few minutes in which to make the bank, as seemed to be their object, and they were just sitting there. It seemed peculiarly and suspiciously senseless.

"So what of it?" I said aloud, suddenly angry.

I sent the battle-axe creaking along the winding road which led out of the yacht basin. The streets were deserted in the naked white glare. I rolled down the one-way main street, through the short business section, past the big five-and-dime store, past the famous Sloppy Joe's, who proved his boast of never being closed by permanently removing his entrance doors.

Another block, and I swung in before the little bank of Key West.

My wrist watch showed one minute to twelve. Rather proud of myself, I got out and strode into the bank. The guard was at the door now, ready to close it upon the stroke of twelve. There were still lines of people at the cashier windows, and people were grouped with scratching pens at the central writing counters.

Approaching a counter, I squeezed in and wrote out a cash check for fifty dollars. The balance it left was pretty sad. I was blotting the check, when I saw the

four men enter. The burly man still had his golf bag. Another man carried a black suitcase. They'd made it in the very nick of time, because the old guard now closed the door.

The little fat man left the group and walked toward the writing counter.

"Hello, Mr. Dawson," he said. "It's cooler in here. It might be still cooler on the floor. Try it, eh? The rest of you had better try it too."

He spoke so quietly and pleasantly, I did not get the idea at all. Nor did the people around me.

"Why?" I said. "What do you mean?"

He reached unhurriedly beneath his striped awning jacket. The blotter fluttered out of my hand. The automatic he now held was big and authentic.

"On the floor, everybody!"

WE OBEYED then, and I remember feeling a kind of silly incredulity as I dropped to my hands and knees and then stretched out. The very mechanics of getting your body prone on the floor seemed so ridiculous now.

"You people at the windows—down on the floor. Quick!"

It was the burly fellow who gave the last command, and he had an uglier weapon to back it up with: a sub-machine gun that he had slid out of the golf bag. His voice went on, clipped and curt:

"Every one of you cashiers—the dame at the desk on the left—the dame at the typewriter on the right—the manager behind his railing: if you folks want to live you'll freeze right where you are. First one who moves get his head blown off."

The lines at the windows began to melt. It was an amazing study. One man would stare, stupidly and incredulously, at his feet; then, abruptly terrified, he would also drop. And no two people did it in quite the same manner.

The old guard stood white-faced and trembling at the door. Though no one had told him to raise his hands, he held them shoulder high. They did not even bother taking the gun he carried on his hip.

The burly man with the sub-machine gun remained near the guard. The murderous nozzle of his weapon kept swaying gently. The little fat man had backed with his automatic to the opposite corner. His eyes and the barrel of his gun also kept moving.

The other two men hadn't drawn weapons. One of these held the black suitcase. And their footsteps were absolutely the only sound as they now walked to the manager's railing. They looked neither excited nor in a hurry.

Craning my neck, I could see the plump little manager. Sitting behind his desk, his hands folded on it, he looked for all the world like a chastised and badly frightened school child.

The two men walked past him to get behind the cashiers' cages, each of the latter now emprisoning what looked like a figure of stone. The suitcase accidentally swept off some object. It banged when it hit the floor. A very short, muffled scream came from someone.

Idiotically and with intense interest I tried to pick out who had made the sound. I decided it must be the fat woman on the left.

And then I found myself thinking: This is a hold-up. Actually. I've read about bank robberies, and written about them, and here I am in the middle of one. By God, this is really a hold-up.

The burly man said calmly:

"Don't bother with the silver, Nickie. It ain't worth it. You take a look inside the vault, Johnny."

"Right, Mac."

Casual voices. The scene, I thought, was burlesque and fantastic. You associate spectacular, dramatic things with bank robberies: noises and commands and shots; you think of violent action.

Nothing violent was going on here. Two men stood silently with guns, some twenty scared people made a foolish spectacle of sprawling on the floor, and two other men were packing a suitcase with the bank's currency somewhere behind the tellers' cages.

Time dragged. Only seconds, I suppose,

but it seemed long. Now I was beginning to hear life outside the bank. Normal, homely sounds of automobiles passing, of people talking as they walked by.

It taxed credulity to realize that no one outside knew what was happening here. And that there could abruptly be such a gulf and rift between myself on the floor here and the people out there. They were free; I was possessed of a body the continued function of which rested at the discretion of the two forefingers now curled on those two triggers.

II

THE alarm box in front of the bank went off with a tremendous metallic din. It had the stunning shock of icy water, of a telegram announcing tragedy. The burly man shouted:

"Step on it, Nickie! . . . Who was the wise guy, Hank?"

"I got him spotted," the little fat man yelled back.

The right corner of his mouth went down, showing his lower teeth. He fired. A whiplash crack of the gun, and a splintering crash of glass, and another shot. The gong kept up its din. Someone was screaming and someone else was screaming, and then there was a kind of nightmarish blend of sounds.

The two men who'd gone behind the cages came running back. The one with the suitcase held it as if it were a bundle, both arms encircling it. His companion now brandished a gun. It was he who, passing the guard near the outside door, struck the old man with the gun barrel. The guard crumbled. Blood stained bright and vivid the white hair near his left temple.

The burly man with the sub-machine gun was the last to run out. And I think I was the first to get up off the floor. The glass in front of the second teller's cage was a spider web of radiating cracks from two bullet holes. Some of the triangular wedges had fallen inward; one even now dropped with a tinkling crash.

And there was no one in that cage now.

I darted toward it, hurdling the bodies still on the floor. Fred Palmer, a blond, rosy-cheeked cashier with whom I'd been guzzling beer only a couple of nights ago, lay on the floor of the cage. His eyes were open, blank, staring. There were two bullet holes in his white shirt.

The cashier from the adjoining cage, Mr. Hendricks, had a grayish, twitching face pressed against the meshed partition, also looking down at Palmer. His lips were moving.

Both of us were suddenly staring at each other as gunshots crackled outside. Two close together, another, still another, and then—a stick rubbed quickly against a stake fence: a burst from the sub-machine gun.

I DID not remember turning away from the cage, crossing the bank. It seemed that I was suddenly out in the heat and glare of the street. My first impression was of people running, running. From every direction. Then I caught a glimpse of the touring car's tail end just as it swerved around the corner two blocks down the street.

Glancing the other way, I saw a grocer's delivery truck, parked obliquely in the middle of the street. A policeman lay in front of it. He sprawled on his stomach, bareheaded, his cap a few feet away. There was a revolver in his outstretched right hand.

He let go the gun now, jerked his hand back and slid it under his stomach. His body arched like a humping cat, and then sagged. He lay still after that.

And all the time the alarm gong over my head kept up its merciless din.

Another policeman came running with a drawn gun. He dropped to one knee over the man who was hurt. Then a big sedan came up swooping. Its right wheels jumped the pavement as it shot around the delivery truck. I saw gray-haired Chief Allen himself at the wheel. There were four cops with him.

Charlie, the taxi man, started out with

a gibberish in Spanish and then wound up yelling in English:

"They swung left into Palmer Street, Chief."

"Wait!" I screamed.

He probably did not even hear me, but I was on the running board before he could shoot away.

"I know where they're going, Chief," I yelled.

"Get in the back. Quick!"

I wrenched open the rear door and fell on the laps of the two cops there as Allen jerked away.

"Their boat is next to my *Suzy Q* at the yacht basin, Chief," I yelled. "It's a speedboat, a big Chris with—"

Allen snapped over his shoulder:

"You're sure, Mr. Dawson?"

"Dead sure. I saw them go ashore."

TIRES screamed as Allen skidded the nearest corner. He made another two-wheel turn at the next corner and we roared up Whitehead Street. Still another turn soon, the gates to the yacht basin.

I guess everyone of us yelled something when, ten seconds later, we saw the touring car at the end of the last pier. There was no one in it now.

"And there's their boat," I found myself screaming.

Going maybe forty miles an hour, the speedboat torpedoed into sight beyond the pier. It was streaking for the exit from the yacht basin, already two-thirds of the way across. A canvas storm cowl was pulled over its cockpit now, concealing the men.

My head nearly went through the roof as Allen swung the sedan onto the rough boards of the pier. He braked behind the touring car, wrenched open the door, threw one foot out on the running board and fired through the open window.

I don't know whether he had scored a hit, but certainly his second and third shots were useless. The speedboat had already catapulted through the exit from the basin. Out of sight now, only the roar of its motor still faintly audible.

We all piled out then. I beat Allen to the edge of the pier. Madge sat at the wheel in *Suzy Q's* cockpit. Her face as she looked at us was bloodless. Even her lips were gray.

"Are you all right, honey?" I yelled.

"Yes, I am perfectly all right," she said, her voice steady enough despite her appearance.

I suppose neither my question nor her answer made much sense..

"Mrs. Dawson," Allen cut in, "the speedboat which had just left here—did you notice who got into it?"

"Yes. Five men. Four carried guns, the fifth lugged a suitcase."

"That's it, all right, all right." Allen cursed viciously, then mumbled: "Beg your pardon, ma'm . . . Anyone hurt at the bank, Mr. Dawson?"

"Fred Palmer," I said. "Think he's dead. He gave the alarm."

People were now piling out from cars that had followed to the yacht basin. In the space of seconds, it seemed to me, there was a gaping crowd around us. I had that limp well-it's-all-over feeling, and I was getting a headache.

"Those rats can't get away," Allen rumbled. "The Coast Guard'll get 'em."

"Coast Guard cutter couldn't catch that speedboat," I said.

Allen glared at me.

"Maybe not, but the Coast Guard plane can—and will," he said, his voice unnecessarily savage. 'It won't take long for it to streak down here from Miami. The furthest they could go in one hour is forty miles. Half way to Havana, if that's where they're going. The plane will spot 'em. And we'll get 'em if they try circling back and landing up on the keys somewhere."

He shook a massive fist in the direction that the speedboat had disappeared.

"Radio and telephone—they can't beat that combination. Not from Key West. The rats were crazy to try it. We'll get 'em."

He glanced out to sea.

"Bill," Madge called, "come down here, please."

"Just a minute, honey," I said. "I must

tell the Chief something. Just thought of it."

"Bill, come down, *now*, please."

I descended the pier ladder, grabbed the shrouds and put one foot aboard.

"I know you must be terribly upset, but be patient for another minute, honey. Those men held up the bank. Don't you think it's queer the way they came up asking me if—"

I PAUSED abruptly. The expression in her eyes, the way she sat there, absolutely motionless, her hands still folded on her lap: she suddenly frightened me.

"Bill," she said softly, "you know how precious Richard is to both of us. I think I would die if anything happened to him. I want you to come aft here and sit by me. Don't question me; please do what I ask."

Something cold and heavy lodged in the pit of my stomach. Where *was* the Commodore? The least excitement always found his freckled little nose right in the midst of it. *Where was Richard?*

Madge's eyes pleaded, mutely, desperately. I dropped onto the floor of the cockpit, skirted Richard's kite where it protruded over the binnacle box, took two steps to the wheel, turned and sat down. Madge's arm encircled my back. Her fingernails dug into my biceps.

"Look down the companionway, Bill."

I did. Suddenly Madge's fingernails dug in deeper.

"Steady, Bill," she whispered. "People are looking at you."

The little fat man stood about four feet beyond the companionway ladder. His left hand was clapped over the Commodore's mouth as he held the youngster's head pinned to his chest. The automatic in his other hand was touching Richard's head.

The Commodore's eyes, looking up into mine, were fierce and popping and shiny. I have never seen his freckles stand out so vividly.

I closed my eyes, opened them. Yes, they were still down there.

Chief Allen's voice called down:

"What did you want to tell me, Mr. Dawson?"

I had the optical illusion of seeing his face as a white blob that was getting bigger and bigger. Though a score of men stood grouped up there, I just saw the expanding white blob of Chief Allen's face.

"Oh," I heard myself saying, "I thought maybe you wanted me to—to give you their descriptions. But so many other people saw them too—"

"Later, maybe," came from the blob of Chief Allen's face. "We know the getaway boat."

I did not hear much else of what he said. My eyes shifted furtively to the companionway. And now the little fat man jerked his head.

The gesture was clear enough. He wanted me to join him. I glanced up again. Chief Allen was now speaking to someone else. And all this time Madge's fingernails were digging, digging into my flesh.

"Darling," she said, quite loudly and calmly, "get me a glass of water, please."

The cold, heavy thing in the pit of my stomach had coils, and those coils were writhing now. I stood up and again circled the protruding point of the kite. I walked down the companionway ladder.

He was grinning at me, that little fat man who held a gun to my son's head.

"Hello, Mr. Dawson," he said very softly. "Who knows that you changed your plans about leaving for the Tortugas today?"

"Just my wife. We decided only—"

"Then you'll get under way. Now, I'll be watching every move you make. Mr. Dawson, the very first shot fired will go through the kid's head. You know this, don't you?"

The other men were behind him, some crowding in the little passageway to the fore cabin.

"I know it," I said.

"Shove off for the Tortugas, Mr. Dawson."

And the Commodore always watching me with his fierce, popping, shiny eyes.

I CLIMBED up on deck. The police had just left. They drew most of the crowd with them. George Wing, a pleasant Eurasian lad who ran a big market on the main street, called down:

"And you were right there when it happened, eh, Mr. Dawson?"

Again I heard myself speaking:

"Yes, George. I'd rather not talk about it, though. You know!"

"Yeah, I know," George agreed sagely.

"I guess I may as well shove off now. Mind casting off those lines, George?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Dawson."

"Thanks, George."

I went below again.

"You're doing fine," the little fat man told me. "Keep it up."

I moved aside the ladder, reached into the locker space under it and turned on my gasoline cocks.

"Ready at the throttle, Madge?"

"Yes, dear."

Her voice was calm, too. Only her eyes—oh, her eyes. She was thinking about the Commodore; and nothing, absolutely nothing else mattered to her. She was Commodore's mother.

Well, I was his father.

III

I FELT the bow of the yawl swing as George hauled in to get the slack. Then there was a thump of the hauser as he cast off and threw it aboard. A little while later there was another thump for the stern line.

I stuck my head out and repeated: "Thanks, George."

"Okay, Mr. Dawson. Have a nice trip."

I started the engine. Madge raced it, then throttled down. We moved away from the pier.

Madge said: "Take the wheel, dear."

"Just a sec, Mr. Dawson," the little fat man said. "The cashier at the bank there was a wise guy. Maybe you know what happened to him. You won't be a wise guy, will you, Mr. Dawson?"

"No," I said, "I won't."

"Okay. Take the wheel from her. The regular course to the Tortugas. We'll have another huddle later."

I relieved Madge at the wheel. She was about to say something to me, but she changed her mind and went below.

"You may let him go," she told the little fat man. "I promise you that he'll behave himself."

"Certainly, madam."

He released the Commodore. She lifted each of his grimy little hands and pressed them to her cheeks. Then she picked him up and carried him to the port bunk and sat down with him, holding him tight to her.

"Gee, I'm all right, Mother," the Commodore protested. "I mean, he didn't hurt me."

"Of course I didn't," the little man said. "He's a good little boy. We'll be great friends yet."

"Like hell we will," said the Commodore.

"Richard!" Madge said, and held him tighter.

The burly fellow who'd handled the Tommy gun laughed.

"Attaboy, kid. Don't let Hank get your goat."

The little man also laughed, showing broken black teeth. He looked abruptly vicious.

"We'll be pals yet."

"Like hell," the Commodore said.

Hank took a quick step toward them on the bunk there.

"Don't you dare!" Madge said.

The burly man grabbed Hank's arm and spun him around.

"None of your tricks," he said calmly. "I like the kid."

Hank straightened the cork helmet which had slid over his eyes.

"Sure. I like the kid too. We'll be great pals yet."

"Like hell," the Commodore repeated.

Everyone of them laughed now.

"Some kid," Hank said.

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes. That was my family down there. Down there was everything about which my life re-

volved, everything from which my life was fed—Madge and the Commodore.

If the world were flat and not round, whatever terrifying chaos one could conceive lying beyond the edges was as I saw myself suddenly without Madge and the Commodore.

"All nightmares end," I said to myself. "This one will, too."

I WAS some distance out of the yacht basin now. The speedboat was nowhere in sight. The red brick Fort slipped past on the port bow. I could see the channel continue on far ahead as a snaky bluish path in a sea that was smooth as glass.

The engine purred away, a rhythmic sound that was completely unobtrusive; otherwise it was very quiet and very peaceful.

I steered mechanically, obeying the iron-clad rule when leaving a harbor: red buoys on the right, black cans on the left. Several tarpon flashed their silver bodies. One of them was a huge and beautiful thing. They disappeared and then mirrored the sun in the channel. I could hear them slap.

The men in the cabin were all now at the starboard bunk, out of my line of vision. I guessed what they were doing from snatches of conversation:

"Here's four grand more in twenties . . ."

"Forget countin' them ones! Call it a grand and let it go at that . . ."

"No, we'd better not mess with those travelers' checks. They have the serial numbers. Let 'em go, I say . . ."

Madge and the Commodore were watching me. The grin I gave them must have been pretty twisted. The Commodore rubbed the back of his hand under his nose and smeared a mustache of paint over his upper lip.

Hank came to the companionway ladder.

"Howya doin', Mr. Dawson?" He grinned.

"Okay," I said.

"This the fastest she'll go?"

"Just about."

"How about usin' the sails?"

"No wind."

"Any craft near you now?"

I glanced around. Key West lay pretty far astern now. The twin naval towers and the new hotel on main street, the tallest building in town, were all you could still recognize. The rest was just a shore line with many different-shaped blocks unevenly sprinkled along it.

There were no vessels in that direction. Ahead, I saw a smudge of a steamer on the horizon, and a sailing vessel closer in, off the port bow. It looked like a Bahama schooner.

"Nothing within miles," I told Hank.

He came up cautiously, looked around, then dropped his caution and stretched.

"It's swell out here. Boy, this is the life. Come on up deck, you guys."

The Commodore was first out of the companionway. Hank grabbed his arm.

"I didn't mean you, squirt."

"Lemme go," the Commodore panted. "I always help Dad figger things."

Mac, the burly man, who came up next, growled:

"Let the kid go. What's got into you?"

"That's cause he knows I think he's a rat," the Commodore declared.

I said: "Take it easy, Commodore. It's no disgrace to be scared. You're showing it all the more that way."

As I spoke, I waited, tense, for Hank to slap him. He looked as if he would. But he didn't.

"Some kid you got there, Mr. Dawson," he said.

"I like him," I said. "Come and sit next to me, Commodore."

He did. Hank said:

"A crazy name for a kid."

"It isn't my name," the Commodore said. "It's just what Dad calls me."

"And you help your dad figger things, eh?"

"Sure. Like the time he had a dead woman in the icebox. He was a cook then and he killed the woman and he did not want the cops to find her. I figgered out the icebox."

They gaped at him.

Hank said, "What the —"

"On paper," I explained. "I'm a writer. I write detective stories."

"Oh," said Hank.

"But this'll be more fun to figger out because it's real," said the Commodore. "Isn't that so, Dad?"

"Yes, it's real," I said.

Mac said: "Come on up here, Johnny."

A THIN, lanky, blond fellow walked up the ladder. Though his arms were sunburned reddish-black, his face was pasty. If his eyes hadn't been set too close together, he'd have been quite handsome. He was the one who had slugged the guard.

"I found a bottle of gin," he said, "but there was only one slug left in it. Say, Mac, I still argue there's more than ninety-six grand there. Because if you count—"

"Never mind that," Mac interrupted. "Is he going right?"

Johnny looked around lazily.

"Yeah, that's right. Keep 'er in the Northwest Channel. Do you need a chart?"

"No," I said.

"Well, there are two red buoys just before you have to set your compass course. One is the regular channel marking. The other marks a long shoal there. That's where—"

"Wait a minute," said Hank. "You're going too fast for Mr. Dawson maybe. You don't want to confuse the guy. Let *me* explain. . . . Mr. Dawson, what were you going to tell the cops before your wife kinda headed you off?"

I said nothing because I didn't think he expected an answer, and he said:

"You're not going to get nasty, are you, Mr. Dawson?"

"All right," I said, "I was going to tell them that you men knew I intended to take a trip to the Tortugas, and that it must have had something to do with your getaway plans."

He beamed.

"That's right, Mr. Dawson. Our plans did call for somethin' like that, and you fitted in swell. That big slob of a Chief told the world that nobody can make a getaway from Key West. That they'll watch the keys all the way up, and Coast Guard cutters and the plane will spot the getaway boat. That fat Chief was pretty sure of himself, wasn't he, Mr. Dawson? You can't beat the radio-telephone combination, eh?"

"Get to the point, will you, Hank?" the burly man complained. "And—say, why *ain't* there a Coast Guard cutter on our tail?"

"There will be one before long," Johnny put in, "and you can bet your life on that."

"I guess that's just what we will bet," Hank said, "but we'll be using a stacked deck, so there ain't no chances of us losing."

"Let's hear the setup," the Commodore said. "I want to start figgerin'."

"Listen, squirt! You'll keep that little yap of yours shut while I'm talking, see? Or I'm going to twist it around to the back of your neck some place."

"You'll keep quite from now on, Commodore," I told him.

"Okay, Dad. It don't take much to get him sore, does it?"

Mac laughed.

"Some kid, all right, all right. Go ahead, Hank."

The little fat man twitched his nose. Then, quite abruptly, he lost his viciousness. He grinned and gestured, histrionic again.

"NOW, Mr. Dawson. That big-gutted Chief is only too right. The plane and cutters, radio and telephone—you ain't gotta chance making a getaway in that speedboat. We ain't that dumb, Mr. Dawson. Fact, we ain't dumb at all."

"He's gettin' modest," Mac murmured.

"Shut up. Everybody is going nuts searchin' the speedboat, but they'll never find it. And you know why, Mr. Dawson?"

I took the cue.

"No, I don't. Why?"

"Because Valdez and Moreno, the guys that took it out, are going to sink it off that buoy that Johnny was talkin' about. I guess they already did it by now. And

they're hangin' on to that buoy, gettin' behind it an' duckin' if any boat goes by. We'll pick 'em up. And you'll be takin' us places while everybody is lookin' for the speedboat which—ain't!"

He chuckled. The Commodore said:

"That's pretty good. Yeah, I guess it's pretty good. Isn't it, Dad?"

"Can't you keep your yap shut?" Hank said.

"Well, you oughtn't to get sore at that," the Commodore told him. "What I said is a compliment. But I know how you could of make it still better."

"Smart little squirt, eh? How?"

"Well, there's still another guy in on it with you, and he's got a plane. You keep going on the *Suzy Q*. A couple days later the plane meets you. You kill everybody aboard here"—the Commodore was getting enthusiastic now—"that's so that they can't talk. And then you get the plane and—and you go to Mexico or some place. How's that?"

"Listen, you little sap," Hank said, "if we had a plane, would we need this hooker? Why couldn't we all go in the speedboat and have the plane pick us up where we sink it?"

The Commodore shook his head.

"I guess you don't get it. If a plane comes up a couple days later, some place pretty far from Key West—why, nobody is going to suspect it, see? But if somebody spots the plane where the speedboat is supposed to be—why, they'll catch on, see? And then there'll be other planes out after your plane."

Madge, sitting on the companionway step, was laughing softly. There were tears in her eyes. Hank looked slightly dazed. The other men were grinning.

"Maybe it isn't that you're dumb," the Commodore concluded generously. "It's just that Dad and I had more experience in those things. We commit murder and stuff all the time."

Hank said, pushing back his helmet:

"Yeah, you're some kid. How would you like to join the gang and help us figger out—murder and stuff?"

"No," said the Commodore. "Because what I told you is only half of it. You wouldn't like the other half."

"What other half?"

"Well, to figure out how you get caught. You always got to do that, too. First you figure out how to kill somebody, then you figger out how the murderer is going to get caught."

"I get it," said Hank. "No, I don't think we'd like that other half. You got any ideas now how you goin' to get us caught?"

"Well," the Commodore confessed, "this is a pretty tough one here. If I was just me by myself, I'd get ideas quick. Like maybe groundin' the *Suzy Q*. or somethin'. But I can't take a chance on Mother and Dad bein' hurt. I gotta be thinkin' of them, and that's what makes it pretty hard."

There was a long pause.

"It's a funny thing about kids," said Mac. "They—they got somethin', eh?"

Hank said softly:

"I wish I had a kid like him." Then he laughed and added, raising his voice: "Sure I do—not. That was just a gag. Just—a gag. You got any liquor aboard, Mr. Dawson?"

"Sorry—no."

"We had a full quart in the speedboat. Oh, well! Keep thinkin', kid. Maybe you'll get an idea."

"Yeah, but it's pretty tough," the Commodore said. "I guess I better finish my kite. I can think better when I work on somethin'."

"Go ahead. And keep thinkin', squirt. And also keep thinkin' about your Mama and Papa maybe gettin' hurt."

"Why say that, Hank?" Mac asked quietly.

"Because the little dope kinda gives me the creeps. I'm goin' below and lay down. You guys got sense enough to scoot below if any boat gets near?"

"Okay, mastermind, we got sense enough for that."

Madge stood up and stepped out of Hank's way. He looked at her legs and then walked down.

IV

THE Commodore approached his kite. Dragging it off the binnacle box, he squatted with it on the casing of the little generator motor. His two cans of paint and brushes were there.

I watched him paint a huge, wobbly star near the tail of the kite.

"What was you plannin' to do at the Tortugas, Mr. Dawson?" Mac asked.

"Oh, just look at the dungeons and so on at Fort Jefferson," I said.

"Just *look* at 'em?"

"That's right. I thought maybe I could do a couple of stories with the old fort as the background."

"Yeah. Maybe you're gettin' better ideas for a story now, eh, Mr. Dawson?"

"Maybe," I said.

The dialogue petered out on that. Mac lighted a cigar and stood puffing on it, his legs far apart. Johnny, sprawled out lazily on the long, cushioned cockpit seat, seemed half asleep. The Commodore still fussed with his kite.

I could see Hank on the port bunk. The fourth bandit, who hadn't come on deck, lay in the other bunk. I saw his dangling leg.

Minutes thus dragged. We were all startled by a whoop from the Commodore. He'd let loose his kite before any of us knew what he was doing. He merely held it up and let the string slide out, the motion of the boat supplying enough wind pressure.

It soared up instantly the long tail of knotted rags brushing my face.

"Ain't she a beaut?" the Commodore cried enthusiastically.

The huge kite sailed prettily on a forty-five degree angle fifty feet or so behind the stern. Every once in a while it would make a slow, majestic dip, as if taunting the bubbling wake beneath it.

The weird circles, triangles, and stars of red and blue on the brown paper made a pretty pattern.

"Yeah, she's a beaut," Mac agreed.

Hank came up on deck.

"*What's all the excitement about? Oh!* I thought you're supposed to be thinkin' how we could get caught?"

"I am," the Commodore replied. "Can't I do two things at the same time?"

Hank grinned.

"Ain't kids really somethin', Mac? . . . Why don't you let it out some more?"

"No more string. This is just Dad's fishing line. I'll bet you couldn't make a kite as swell as that one."

"No," said Hank, "I guess I couldn't. Can I hold it a little while?"

"Nope," the Commodore said flatly. "I'm flying this kite."

"Better reach for your gat, Hank," Mac laughed.

Hank looked mean a moment, then his eyes became thoughtful. They began to vacillate between the kite's lazy flirtation with the bubbling wake and the Commodore's freckled face. Twice he lifted an unlighted cigarette to his lips. Each time he lowered his hand and continued staring slit-eyed at the Commodore.

AND I suddenly felt that some hidden drama now swirled between the two. Hank was suspicious about something—and the Commodore feared that suspicion. I knew that little devil of mine; and I knew only too well that whenever he looked cherubically innocent he was up to something.

"Mac," Hank said tonelessly, "that kid ain't flying a kite."

The other stared at him.

"Course not. He's embroiderin' your Aunt Minnie's petticoat. What you mean he ain't flyin' a kite?"

I saw the Commodore's shoulders begin to hunch, as if he were trying to shrink.

"He ain't no dumb kid," said Hank. "He knows what this is all about. All he's got to do is to take a look at his old man's face. Why should he suddenly wanna fool around with a kite?"

"He's a kid, ain't he?"

"I think better when I'm doin' something—that's why," the Commodore declared.

His voice was shrill and strained. Madge said quickly:

"Come down and I'll fix you some lunch, Richard."

And Hank said:

"Never mind that. Listen, squirt, I'm doin' some smart figgerin' now too. Maybe you got some special reason for foolin' with that kite now. When you was paintin' it, you didn't maybe print somethin' on the back of it, did you? Maybe it ain't a kite you're flyin' now, but a message for whoever comes up behind us in the channel? That couldn't be true, could it, squirt?"

"You have," the Commodore said, "what they call too vivid imagination. Course, I can't blame you for bein' suspicious-like. I myself—"

"Imagination nothing," Hank interrupted pleasantly. "I can *see* that somethin' is printed on the back of that kite."

"Young fella," Mac put in tersely, "that's right."

And now I, glancing over my shoulder, noticed it too. The kite soaring against the sun betrayed some sort of lettering on the back of it.

Hank stepped forward, jerked the string out of the Commodore's hand and pulled the kite aboard. It fell like a wounded bird over the dinghy. Trembling on its curved belly, it showed three huge letters painted vertically in red: *S.O.S.* And across the letters, in black, was printed: *Bank Robbers Aboard.*

Hank swung to the Commodore, who was now cringing back against the stays.

"Smart little squirt, eh?"

Hank's face was vicious.

"He's a child!" Madge cried. "For God's sake, you can't—you won't—"

And it was then that the Commodore went overboard. He did not fall; he dove overboard. There was the flash of his body, a scream from Madge. Automatically, I cut the engine and spun the wheel so that the stern with its deadly propeller swung out.

"Richard!" Madge screamed. *"Richard!"*

THE yawl drifted. Deep blue of the channel, and no Richard. Of course, the Commodore could swim like a fish, but—

Seconds, seconds, and now I was screaming in my mind. Until this moment, I had not realized what horror was. My stomach was bound up into knots and there was some huge paw strangling me.

And still only deep blue of the Channel—and no Richard.

"Bill," Madge said, "he hasn't come up. Oh, Bill . . ."

Mac said savagely:

"Hank, you'd better pray that kid don't drown. Because I'll croak you if he does."

"Stop it. I like the kid. I didn't tell him to—'

"Shut up!"

"Bill," Madge moaned, "he still hasn't come up. *Bill!"*

Those awful seconds: the blue of the Channel—and no Richard. Those seconds, piling, piling, each slapping away another prop from beneath hope. . . .

"I'm going overboard," I said.

"No, there he is!" Johnny yelled. "Hangin' on to the buoy there."

Sweat blinded me. I brushed a forearm over my eyes and smeared it more. But I could see now the little figure clinging to a red buoy some hundred feet away. The Commodore!

"Richard!" Madge did not scream now; she whispered the name. She looked as if she were about to faint. "Oh, thank God."

I reached for the clutch handle to throw the engine into reverse, when the Commodore left the buoy. With quick, sure strokes, he swam to the yawl. It was Mac who pulled him aboard.

"You little sap!" he said gruffly.

Madge grabbed him.

"Sorry, if I scared you, Mother," the Commodore panted. "I didn't mean—"

"You'd better sit still and behave yourself from now on," I said. "No more ideas. You—"

I broke off because I suddenly realized how harsh and angry my voice sounded. I hadn't meant it to be so.

Hank said:

"Okay, get this hooker movin' again."

The *Suzy Q.* forged on. I watched the Commodore in Madge's arms. Lord, how glad I was to see him there!

Hank dragged the kite into the cockpit. Very slowly, watching the Commodore, he crushed it with his feet.

"So you're not so smart, eh, squirt?"

"Oh," the Commodore replied, "not all ideas work out. Sometimes the villain discovers what you're doin'. Then you try somethin' else, see?"

Hank laughed.

"Yeah, I see. That kite gag wasn't so bad."

"It was a swell gag."

"It didn't work, did it?"

"Well, it was a swell gag just the same."

"Got any others in back o' your mind?"

"Sure," said the Commodore.

"What?"

"You don't expect me to tip you off about it, do you?"

"Some kid, all right, all right," Mac said. "Don't go jumpin' overboard again, kid, if we catch you at it. That's not so smart. What did you think he was gonna do to you, anyway?"

"Well," said the Commodore, "there's no telling what a guy like him is liable to do. It don't take him much to get sore."

"Listen," said Hank, "I don't maul around dumb little squirts like you who think they're smart. I—" He paused, wiped his nose and added abruptly: "No foolin', kid, I wasn't gonna hurt you. No foolin'. Honest I mean that."

"Okay, I'll know better next time."

"There won't be any next time," I said. "No more ideas, Commodore."

"I guess," said Hank, "your old man ain't got any faith in you."

"You haven't, Dad?"

"Sure I have," I said. "That was a nice try, Commodore. Only—no more, see? Because now it's my turn to try to pull something."

Still in Madge's arms the Commodore nodded very soberly.

"All right, Dad. Your turn is next."

LITTLE else was said after that, and time dragged on, indifferent to comedy-tragedy aboard the *Suzy Q.* It must have been almost an hour later when Johnny said:

"Say, there's something back there that I'm not so crazy about."

I glanced over my shoulder. There was a boat trailing in the channel, still pretty far astern. I could see the smoke-like white water cut by her bow. Going plenty fast, and it seemed larger than the average fishing cruiser.

Either it was the government tug which plied between Key West and the Tortugas, or it was—

Johnny worded it:

"I think it's a Coast Guard cutter. Wait!"

He ran below and returned a few seconds later with my binoculars. He looked through them, slowly twirling the adjustment.

"That's it!" he announced tersely. "Coast Guard. We'd better get below."

"Right," said Hank. "And the kid goes with us. Hold him with you in the forward cabin, Mac. That's so Mr. and Mrs. Dawson don't get bright ideas. I'll personally keep an eye on them."

The Commodore wailed:

"Why can't I stay up here? I won't yell or nothing like that."

"You're too good at figgerin' things, squirt. Come on, get below."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Dawson," Mac said with unexpected gentleness; "he'll be okay. Just don't try to pull anythin' funny on us, and you'll be okay. Come on, kid."

Johnny and Hank were already below.

"Sure, I'll be okay, Mother," the Commodore said, his eyes very bright.

Madge smiled at him, and he preceeded Mac down the companionway steps. They disappeared. Only Hank now stood at the ladder. His cork helmet just cleared the raised step. It looked like a horseshoe crab coming to the surface.

Madge strolled over and sat on the other side of the wheel. I reached out my right hand and she took it into both of hers.

Her hands were cold. She kept looking at the place where the kite string was secured, where the Commodore had been standing —a place now starkly and poignantly empty.

"Bill!" she said.

"Yes, honey?"

She did not speak again. She just squeezed my hand tighter.

Blue ocean, happy in the sunlight. The *Suzy Q* gaily forging ahead. The breeze going past us. How many times Madge and I had sat that way, side by side, the wheel between us, quietly, deeply happy.

"Bill," she said, "what—"

And again she did not, could not, finish.

Neither of us looked back at the Coast Guard cutter we knew to be overtaking us. Rescue behind us, deliverance, readmission to carefree happiness that Madge and I and the Commodore had shared so many years. Men behind us, guns, only too eager to help—if they knew.

And they would not know.

My mouth was dry and I felt a choking at my throat. Six feet ahead of me was the horseshoe crab of Hank's helmet. Sharp eyes watched beneath it. Eyes ever on Madge and me. Shrewd, knowing eyes that couldn't be fooled.

There was no sign I could make that cutter without Hank's instantly knowing it. And Hank held a gun; Hank held swift death at his command.

And the Commodore was in the forward cabin.

No, they would not know. The cutter would pass, and maybe someone would wave to me, and I would wave back, and then it would go on. Go on pass us. Go on out of sight, Men and guns would go past us—out of sight. . . .

V

I FINALLY could not resist the temptation to glance back. And my heart seemed to be caught, checked. I did not dream that the cutter was already so close. Yet it was understandable enough considering that her engines were pounding eighteen-twenty knots to my seven.

Yes, there she was, only three hundred yards away, dead astern. Long, gray and wolfish-looking—a pocket-size destroyer. I could see the gleam of the mounted guns stripped for action. I could see rifles some of the men held, cartridge belts around their waists.

Ready guns—and they would pass on.

Bells jangled on the cutter. I couldn't stand looking at it and turned my eyes front again.

"I can hear her, Mr. Dawson," Hank said, his voice low and even. "You're doin' fine so far. Keep it up. Don't get any impulses when she goes by. It'll take me two seconds to croak the both of you—and I'll do it, so help me."

"I'm playing ball, Hank," I said.

"So far, yeah. Keep it up."

Other bells jangled on the cutter. Why didn't she pass? Those Diesels pounding twenty knots, she should have shot past by now.

And then I heard the cutter come up on the port side. Heard the swish of water she cut, the muffled rumble of her engines.

Not passing! She was creeping up abeam, slowly.

"Ahoy!" a curt voice called. "Heave to!"

My eyes remained interlocked with Hank's.

"Okay," I heard him whisper. "He wants to tell you somethin', ask you somethin'."

I cut the engine. Drifted now, and the bow of the cutter inched up until it was abeam of the cockpit. I saw two men behind a machine gun below the bridge. Still another machine gun was swiveled so that it covered the yawl.

"What's the trouble?" I asked the man with the megaphone whose head was stuck out from the chartroom window.

"Are you William Dawson?"

"That's right," I said.

"We've got orders for your arrest."

"What!" I stared at him, for the moment even forgetting Hank at the companionway ladder. "My arrest?" I stammered. "Why—why, what do you mean? What's the charge?"

"Forgery and embezzlement."

"But—but there must be some mistake."

"Maybe," was the clipped answer. "If so, you can iron it out back in Key West. Where is your child?"

"He's below," I said. "Asleep."

"Get him, please. Your wife and child will make the trip back with us."

"Listen," I yelled. "Somebody is crazy. What's the idea?"

"The idea is that there might be a twenty-year rap facing you. And you'll be ahead of us, and you're drawing a third as much water as we do, and you might get the bright idea of trying to make a break for it across one of the shoals.

"If we must blast you out of the water, we don't want the woman and the child to be aboard. Get your kid and save all your arguments until you're back in Key West."

I met Madge's wide, blank eyes. She looked as if she were in a hypnotic trance.

"Okay," I said.

I SLID around the wheel, got up, crossed the cockpit. Hank, the automatic at his hip, slowly retreated before me as I descended the ladder. His teeth glittered, his lips were drawn back over his broken, black teeth.

"Hank," I said quietly, "so help me, I don't know what this is all about. I tell the truth."

Hank put his foot against my stomach and pushed me into the port bunk. The other men came up behind him. All now brandished guns. Mac held his sub-machine gun cradled across his right arm. His left encircled the Commodore's chest. I could feel death swirling in that cabin.

"You guys heard?" Hank said out of the corner of his mouth.

Mac said: "We heard. Hank, you was watchin' him and the dame all the time?"

"All the time, Mac. . . . You really wanted some place, Mr. Dawson?"

"No. It's just some crazy mistake. I played ball with you right down to the last second."

"Boyoboyoboy," Hank panted, "what a break! If we let him put the dame and the kid aboard the cutter, they'll tell. If we don't, then it's a brawl, and they'll blast us right smack outa the ocean. We ain't got a chance."

"How about tellin' 'em that we got the dame an' the kid?" Johnny suggested. "Tell 'em we'll bump 'em both—and Dawson, too—if they don't let us get outa here."

"You're on the ocean, you sap. They'll follow. They got a radio. No matter where we try to land—"

"Yes," the Commodore said, "that *would* be dumb figgerin'."

Hank shifted his eyes.

"Yeah, squirt? What would you call smart figgerin'?"

I could see the Commodore's Adam's apple working. His eyes were popping and shiny.

"Smart figgerin' would be to give yourself up. And then take a chance on bustin' out from whatever jail they take you to. Many guys have busted out of jails. Dad and I have figgered out lots of ways how—"

He paused and pursed his lips tight. He looked as if he were going to get sick and trying to hold it back.

"Some kid, eh, Mac?" Hank said. "What you guys think of his smart figgerin'?"

The clipped voice called from the cutter:

"Shouldn't take you so long to bring the kid out, Dawson. We're boarding you."

"I'm going to try it his way," said Mac.

He tossed his Tommy gun on the bunk alongside of me. Hank threw his gun there.

"I'm doin' all the talkin', see?" he said almost cheerfully.

"We know that without you tellin' us," Mac said. "Okay, kid, go to your old man."

I stood up as he pushed the Commodore toward me. I caught him and swept him up in my arms.

"Hello, Dad," he said.

HANK went up the companionway ladder. The others trailed him. I climbed it last, still holding the Commodore in my arms. Grappling hooks now se-

cured the *Suzy Q* to the coast guard cutter. Silent men with rifles were lined up at the rail.

Hank, making a sweeping gesture with his right hand, said:

"Hello, mugs." He added to the commander on the bridge: "You really hooked a big one, skipper, though you didn't know it."

"I did know it," replied the man on the bridge. "I was only trying to keep you rats from guessing that I knew. That was a very smart little stunt you pulled, Mr. Dawson. Though I still can't imagine how you did it without being caught at it."

"Somebody is still crazy," I said, staring at him. "What little stunt are you talking about, captain?"

"Are you kidding, Mr. Dawson?"

Dazed, I shook my head.

"Certainly not. I haven't the faintest idea of what you are talking about."

He turned, reached back for something. Then he thrust both arms through the window. The faint breeze ruffled the flag he held—an American flag over which the name *Suzy Q* was painted in bold black letters.

"We spotted it flying off a buoy some distance back. It was flying upside down—the internationally accepted signal of distress. It puzzled me, especially when I spotted your yawl bowling along nicely under power.

"I reasoned, then, that the holdup men must have boarded you, and that the flag on the buoy was your tipoff to us. I thought they'd kill you if they believed that you tipped me off somehow, so I pulled the arrest gag."

"Smart figgerin'," the Commodore said weakly.

I glanced at the locker where I kept my ensign—a locker near which the Commodore had been working on his kite.

"In your shirt?" I asked him. "You had it in your shirt when you flew the kite?"

"Yes, Dad. I was scared they'd notice the bulge, but nobody did. I had to have an excuse for goin' overboard, so I figgered I'd let 'em catch me with the kite, and then—and then I'd act scared—and you—you were cuttin' those red buoys close—"

Mac said something unprintable. And then: "But why didn't we see the flag flying off the buoy?"

Hank said: "It was wet. It hung down like a rag. But that sun is hot, an' it wasn't long before— Let's laugh, guys. Let's laugh until our sides split. The little squirt put it over on us, after all. Ow! . . . You knew then that I wasn't gonna hurt you, eh, kid?"

"Yes, I knew," the Commodore replied.

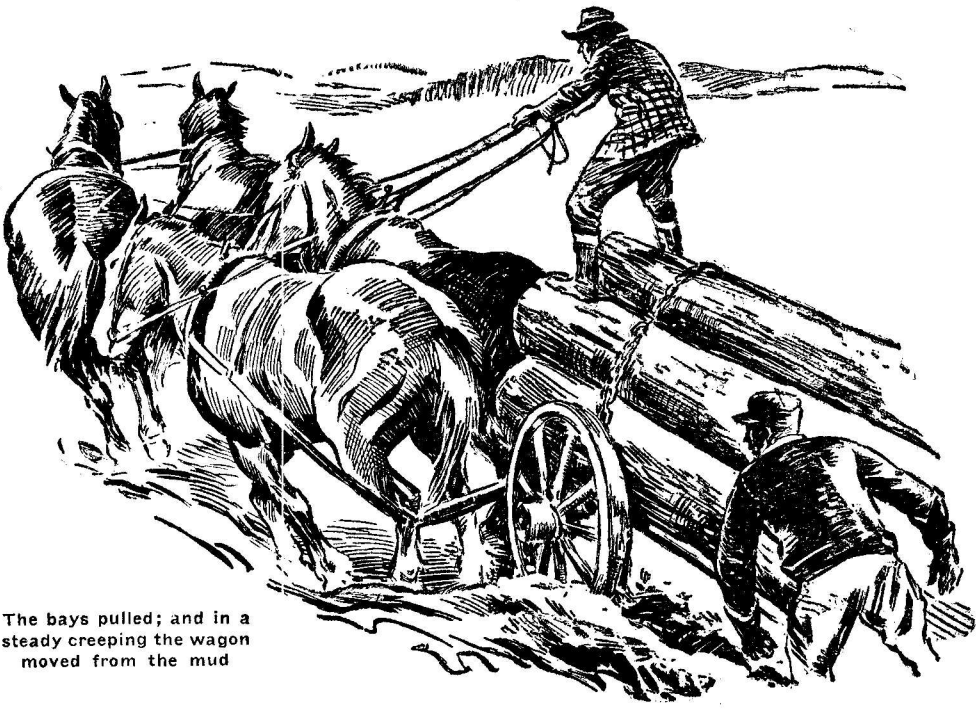
"Well, that's something. I'm glad of that."

"Yeah," said Mac, "he's some kid. You're a very lucky guy, Mr. Dawson."

The Commodore squirmed in my arms. I released him and he ran below. After a moment, Madge followed.

I knew where he'd gone. It wasn't smart figgerin' for a man to be seen bawling in public.

Yes, I was a very, very lucky guy.



The bays pulled; and in a steady creeping the wagon moved from the mud

Mudhole Pilot

Mr. Caspar Milquetoast—who always knew about horses—completes his education by learning his own strength

By JIM KJELGAARD
Author of "Crying Hound," "'I', Said the Sparrow," etc.

AT THE top of the steep pitch that made Hell Dive a teamster's nightmare, Joe Mann stopped his team. He jumped from the pile of logs on the wagon, catching himself on his good leg.

A sandy haired little figure with a sober face, he limped around the wagon, drew the brake chains from the end of the reach that stuck out behind, and put them on the back wheels.

The gee horse swung his head to make sure that it was being done right. Joe went to the head of the team and patted their noses while the two big bays thrust their heads toward the center of the yoke and vied for his attention.

Joe climbed back to the top of the load and picked up the reins again. The bays got under plodding motion, bracing their hind legs and pulling the yoke back against the tongue. Joe let the reins hang a little slack. The bays had been down Hell Drive a hundred times, and knew how to handle a load there.

Halfway down the Dive, the sliding wheels gritted across the bridge that spanned Skate Creek, whose tumbling waters foamed out of a narrow valley, rushed under the bridge, and poured themselves over a sheer hundred-foot decline into Spud Creek.

With a touch of the reins Joe pulled the team a bit closer to the cliff that rose from the other side of the road. The wagon swayed a bit. Joe rolled a cigarette,

and dangled his foot from the log he sat on.

At the bottom of the Dive, where the logging road leveled into straight going, the bays came to a stop of their own accord. Joe leaped from the wagon and took the brake chains off. He pulled the tug away from the right flank of the gee horse, and wrapped his own handkerchief around it, padding it into a soft ball. The horse had a harness sore there and the tug had been rubbing it.

Again he went to the head of his team, stroking their ponderous muzzles, reaching up to scratch their ears. The bays nickered softly, and nibbled his cotton shirt with their lips.

There was no better teamster than Joe in all the Telescope country. A child victim of paralysis, living in a country where all living was by rule of muscle, he had withdrawn farther and farther into himself as he grew older. Other men had bullied him, and those who had not had pitied him—which was worse.

Joe had turned to horses, which had always had a strange fascination because of their mighty muscles and size. As he came to know them better, found that they invariably responded to kindness and fair treatment and were the one strong thing he could control, his liking for horses had grown into a whole-souled love.

He sighed. His burning ambition was to own a team of his own.

But what with Sue going to have a baby, and with a farm to pay for, he supposed he was lucky to be working for three dollars a day. He and Sue could take most of their living out of the farm and save two-thirds of his wages. He had been working almost a hundred days now, and there was another year's work in Spud Hollow.

Joe climbed back on the wagon and wrapped the lines about a post while the bays chose their own pace. They splashed across Spud Creek, climbed the little pitch that led out of it, and settled down to work in the mud there.

A little farther on they pricked up their ears and looked interestedly ahead. Joe leaned forward and followed their gaze.

Powder Jergens, with the other team, had started an hour before Joe and should have been to the mill and unloaded by this time. But his loaded wagon was mired in the mud. Joe frowned. A teamster who watched where he was going needn't get mired.

POWDER'S wagon, with five big hemlock logs on it, was hub-deep. The grays that Powder drove were heaving, a spreading stain of sweat oozed down their flanks. They tossed their heads wildly, their lower jaws strained open as Powder sawed on the reins.

Powder held a whip, a short stock with a three-foot length of chain on the end. As Joe came up he jerked the reins again and belabored the grays with the chain.

Heads high, the grays dug furiously with their hooves. They leaped and plunged as the chain cut about their flanks, leaving a welt every place it struck. Powder swore, and shouted commands. The loaded wagon moved two inches and settled back into the ruts as the horses stopped from sheer exhaustion. Joe spoke mildly.

"They can't move it, Powder."

"They'll move it," Powder's jaw was tight, angry. "Those worthless brutes! I'll—"

"It ain't the hoss's fault," Joe protested. "Them grays is a good team."

Powder Jergens put his hands on his hips as he turned to look at his little employee. Known as a man with a fondness for nothing but money, Powder had hired Joe merely because there weren't three other men in the Telescope who could handle eight hundred dollars' worth of team and equipment on the Spud Hollow road. But whatever Powder handled he bossed, and he had no doubt that he was complete boss of Joe Mann.

"Don't you go gettin' so lippy," he snapped. "Maybe you think you can move that wagon? And don't forget there's other men can handle them bays as good as you can."

"I didn't mean to be sassy," Joe said mildly. "I was just thinkin' we could hook both teams on an' move that load."

"Hook 'em on," Powder snapped. "I thought of that myself."

Joe walked back to his own team, unhooked the tug chains, and drove his team up in front of the grays. He returned for the doubletree, which he chained to the end of the stalled wagon's tongue. He hitched the bays and hung the reins over the hames.

Then he took the grays from Powder. Sensing a new hand on the reins, an understanding one, they stopped their uneasy champing and stood still. Joe rolled another cigarette, of which he smoked endless quantities throughout the course of a day.

"We'll let 'em cool," he said. "They'll work better. Let's see that whip, Powder."

His eyes on the team, Powder handed the whip to Joe. He started a little, flushing angrily, when Joe flung it into the creek, but he controlled himself. He didn't know how to handle a four horse spread. Joe smiled placatingly.

"The best place for a whip like that, Powder," he said, "is in the creek." He spoke to the bays. "All right. We'll take it a bit easy. A little pull from both you boys and there ain't no hurry."

With the deliberate steadiness of all draft horses, the bays pulled the tugs tight. The grays settled into the harness, stopping their strength-sapping scrambling and giving everything to moving the load. Joe talked softly to the bays, controlling the wheel team with the reins.

The wagon moved an inch, two inches. Then in a slow but steady creeping it heaved from the mudhole onto the firmer ground beyond.

Joe unhitched the bays, and swung them back towards his own wagon. From his place beside the road Powder Jergens moved one cowhide boot, with its special diamond-shaped calks, and brushed a bit of mud from his elaborate corduroy trousers.

Powder was a hard master of men and horses. If you gave a horse his head he became headstrong, and the only cure was to beat the stubbornness out of him. A man had to be handled the same way—and Joe had thrown his whip into the creek.

"Ike Lainhart boned me for a driving job," he said. "He told me he'd work for a dollar and a half a day. Will you take that much, Joe?"

"But I can't," Joe protested anxiously. "I can't do it. Ike will work for nothin', Powder."

"I got myself to look out for," Powder Jergens said shortly. "Ike's a good man."

"I'm wuth more'n that," Joe pleaded.

Powder shrugged, and climbed on his wagon. Not looking back, he started the grays down Spud Hollow.

THAT was the last load of the day. Glumly Joe stabled the bays in the shed that Powder had built near Bill Hatfield's mill. He curried them, gave them fresh bedding, and fed them. Then he curried and bedded Powder's team. Powder fed horses because they had to have feed in order to stay alive and be able to work, but he had little or no regard for their comfort.

His chores done, Joe went into Bill Hatfield's little office waiting for Bill to wind up the day's work. Joe lived seven miles up the road, a mile below Bill's house, and he rode to work and home again with Bill.

He sank dejectedly into a chair. At a dollar and a half a day he couldn't possibly pay all the bills he had to pay. A dollar a day had taken care of Sue's doctor bills and everything they had to buy.

He had two hundred dollars buried in a coffee can in the back yard. But the baby was coming in six weeks, and Joe was determined that Sue would have it in a hospital where there was no chance of anything going wrong. That would cost seventy-five dollars that had to be paid in cash. Then in thirty days there was a two-hundred-dollar payment on the farm.

Most of his life he had been helpless before any situation that did not directly involve horses. He was bound up in them; in the girl who—miraculously—had become his wife; and in the hope that some day he would be able to give her a decent living. But he hadn't the faintest idea as to how to go about getting that living if somebody didn't help him or give him a job. And now this had come. Joe stared hopelessly out the window, and didn't even hear Bill Hatfield come into the office until he spoke.

"Matter, Joe?"

Joe raised his head. "Nothin' wrong," he murmured.

"Happy as a lark, huh?" Bill continued. "With your lower lip wipin' your toes that way? Won't the flies leave your team be?"

Bill Hatfield, a spare graying man who through sheer ability had worked his way from teamster to mill owner, busied himself about the desk. The road he had taken upwards was as plain as print on his face. Definitely a hard-headed business man, he had a secret nostalgia for the steps behind him that he had climbed, and could not repress a longing again to drive a team.

Joe Mann, as good a teamster as he had ever seen—the kind he would like to have been—struck a responsive chord in him.

But Joe's meekness, the protective shell he had built around himself, was more than faintly irritating. Something had happened to Joe up there in Spud Hollow today. What it was Bill didn't know, but Joe was taking it lying down. Bill was a shrewd judge of good timber, and recognized sound wood in the little teamster. If some way could be found to make him stand before a storm he might saw a lot of boards.

Bill finished his simple bookkeeping. Together they climbed into Bill's little car and started across the dirt road that led to the highway. Bill waited for a bus to pass, and eased the car onto the highway.

"You and Powder'll have to make them horses step faster," he observed. "I'm puttin' three new men on Monday and gettin' a new saw. Likely I'll need another team too."

"Oh," Joe said dully.

"Take a fairly decent team to bring a load out of Spud Hollow, and a fairly decent teamster," the mill owner continued. "Bad track in some places and a lot of mire in others."

Joe sat up. "Powder got mired today," he offered.

Bill Hatfield took his foot off the gas. When he was driving his emotions were reflected by the speed he chose.

"You and Powder have a set-to?" he inquired casually.

"I thrun his whip in the creek," Joe confessed. "It was a stick with a chain on it. You know yourself that that ain't nothin' to use on hosses. He told me he couldn't pay me only a dollar and a half a day from now on because Ike Lainhart'll work for that much."

"Oh," Bill Hatfield said thoughtfully. Powder was too harsh with horses to win the liking of a horseman; but somebody had to bring logs to the mill, and there weren't too many good teams for hire in the Telescope. Bill slapped his knee so suddenly and hard that Joe jumped.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "Why'nt you go in the haulin' business yourself? I got a wagon and a set of double harness in my barn that's in good shape. You could take them and pay me on time. Ain't you saved enough to get a fairly good team?"

"I don't know," Joe said uneasily. "Money's kind of scarce and all . . ."

Bill Hatfield shoved his foot suddenly down on the gas pedal. His jaw clamped shut. You could lead a horse to water but you couldn't ever make him take a drink. The car came to a jarring stop in front of Joe's house. Sue, fresh and clean, stood beside the road Bill Hatfield looked at her speculatively. Maybe now, if you held a horse's head in the water—

He leaned over the side of the car. "Howdy, Sue," he said. "I just been tellin' this ornery husband of yours it's high time

he got his own team. See what you can do with him, will you?"

JOE was just stopping his new team in front of the office next morning when Bill Hatfield drove his car into the mill yard. Bill looked the horses over approvingly, not a little surprised.

They were not a matched team—there was a white mare and a roan gelding—but they were obviously better than ordinary horses. Hatfield judged at a glance that they would weigh close to three thousand pounds, and wondered where Joe had raised the money to get them. Stock men in the Telescope didn't usually give credit to ordinary teamsters.

Nodding at Joe, Bill went directly into the office. He was busy at his desk when Joe came in. Bill Hatfield glanced up, and then out the window.

"I see you took the plunge," he said. "Powder's looking 'em over."

"I got a team," Joe said.

A faint frown creased Bill Hatfield's brow. If he had thought that owning a team would work any miraculous change in Joe, he was mistaken. Joe's demeanor was still that of a beaten dog.

"I'll pay you the same as Powder. Ten dollars a day for team and man. There'll be a dollar a day out until the wagon and harness is paid up. Okay?"

"Okay," Joe said mildly.

He turned to go out of the office and came face to face with Powder Jergens. Joe shifted uneasily. Powder's face was flushed, his manner truculent. Joe was sorry. His getting a team had made Powder mad, and he was afraid of Powder.

Powder jerked a thumb toward the window. "You puttin' on another team?" he blustered.

"Yes," the mill owner answered shortly. "Joe's bought hisself a team."

"Take him off," Powder ordered.

Bill Hatfield leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. Joe looked at him wistfully. Some day he would like to be like that. In command of a man like Powder Jergens. But he never would be. The only thing he knew anything about was horses.

"You runnin' this outfit?" Bill Hatfield asked softly. "And if so, since when?"

"My teams don't move out of the barn if that one goes up," Powder announced flatly.

"Then they stay there," Bill Hatfield said. "And I pay for nothin' that don't work."

Joe was glad to escape. Glad to be out of an atmosphere that was strained by men and away from Powder Jergens' rage distorted face. He had felt out of place in the little office, like a third hand that has no useful function. It was good to go from such a place to a wagon, and watch the familiar rhythm of the horses' muscles as they bent themselves into the harness. Once he glanced behind and shivered. Powder had been awfully mad.

He drove up Spud Hollow a little dazedly. Spud Hollow was a dangerous place for any man. Joe thought of Hell Dive, and the full load of logs he would have to bring down there. At the place where Powder had mired yesterday he stopped the team and went to the back of the wagon to make sure that the brake chains were there. But it would be all right. He could take his new team down Hell Dive. He understood horses.

With the instinct for road that all wagon horses acquire, the team plodded on to Hell Dive and started up the steep pitch there as if they had been doing it all their lives. Joe had known horses to balk at trying the pitch the first time, even when he was driving them. The white mare hesitated a bit at the Skate Creek bridge.

Joe stopped the team on the bridge to rest, and sat on the wagon looking into the decline. Again he felt afraid as he remembered Powder's face there in the little office, and started the team to shut the memory out.

AN HOUR later he stopped at the loading platform in Porcupine Hollow, smoked a cigarette with Tom Mc-

Nair who was stationed there, turned his wagon, and swung back to the platform.

"Ye look flustered," Tom McNair remarked.

"I'm all right," Joe said shortly.

Tom McNair, never a man of many words, seized a peavy and sunk it into a log. Joe took another peavy and the other end of the log. Together he and Tom maneuvered it into place. The wagon tilted as the first log rolled against the heavy stays, and came back into position as another log on the upper side balanced it.

Expertly they piled the logs on, loading so as to reduce to a minimum the danger of tipping and swaying. Then they passed the heavy bull chains around the load and tightened them.

Joe climbed on to take his seat on the topmost log. The new team started the load off slowly, as a good team should. They swung into the level stretch that led to Hell Dive. Not once did Joe drop the lines, or even slacken them completely. If he got this one load safely out of Spud Hollow, he felt that somehow he would be able to take all future loads out.

The wagon creaked and lumbered to the top of Hell Dive. Joe stopped, and as before got out to put the brake chains on. He went to the head of the team, and patted them while he glanced down the Dive. Never before had he hesitated to take a horse any place a horse could go. But now—

For a moment he considered unhitching the team and returning to the mill for Powder's bays. Then he thought of Sue, how she had urged him to buy the team and her bursting pride because he had. He thought of his baby, that would come into the world a charity child unless he got some more money.

Straining backwards, collars pulling the yoke back, the team started down Hell Dive. Joe braced his feet and stood with the reins taut in his hands. The wagon rolled and creaked. With expert rein touch Joe guided the horses over the best and safest places, showing them this first time all he had learned about Hell Dive.

Then, on the little dip into the bridge that spanned Skate Creek, the white mare put one front hoof on the bridge and drew it back. She threw her head into the air, a frightened neigh bubbled from her nostrils.

With sure hand and rein Joe talked to the horses. He ran across the logs to the upper side of the wagon. The white mare tossed her head and lunged against the roan. The wagon swayed to the precipice, trembled on the brink of it, and stopped.

Calmly, sure of himself in any situation that involved horses, Joe jumped from the wagon. Keeping the reins in his hands, assuring the horses with words that he had not deserted them, he went to their heads and grasped their bridles. They calmed, as horses always calmed for him. Slowly Joe worked his way around to the whiffletree and unhitched the tugs. He led the horses away from the imperiled wagon, and back to the top of the Dive.

The wagon had settled a bit when he returned to it. But three wheels were solid. All he would have to do would be to chain a block and tackle to a tree, and a single team would be able to pull the wagon back into the road.

But his interest was not in the wagon. He put a foot out onto the bridge and stamped up and down. The bridge, built to hold twenty tons, shook and quivered. Joe lay on his stomach and peered under it. The eighteen-inch stringers that had supported the bridge lay in a tumbled heap beneath it. They had been freshly sawed.

And in the dirt beside the creek was a single footprint left by a man wearing shoes that were studded with diamond-shaped calks.

BILL HATFIELD was still in his office when Joe rode his team up to the mill. He had taken them back to Porcupine Hollow, over the bank there, and had led them down Spud Creek to the road at the foot of Hell Dive.

Joe swung from the roan's back and left the team placidly cropping grass while he went up to Powder Jergens. Joe didn't

see the mill buildings, or the men around them, or Bill Hatfield looking up from his desk to glance out the window. He saw only Powder's wet boots.

Powder looked at Joe, then at the grazing horses; and what he looked for next he never saw because Joe hit him. Powder went down, and got up again. With all the strength of a hand that had been hardened handling heavy horses and heavy loads, Joe hit him a second time. He stood over the recumbent Powder, intending to hit him again as soon as he moved.

But before Powder moved, Joe was grabbed from behind by the wiry arms of Bill Hatfield. Bill's bark was, as everybody knew, much worse than his bite; but it was necessary to maintain discipline. After working hours his hard-boiled crew could fight as much as they liked; but during working hours there was to be no fighting.

"What the hell ya doin'?" Bill demanded.

"Lemme go," Joe panted.

Bill Hatfield jerked him back. Powder rolled over and got to his feet. He looked sullenly at Joe.

"What's the fuss?" Bill Hatfield demanded.

Joe Mann extended an arm, still too consumed by rage for articulate speech. Bill looked at him wonderingly, then happily. Somehow this morning the little teamster had undergone a change and become what his name signified—a man.

"He tried to kill my hosses!" Joe gasped finally.

"He's crazy," Powder Jergens growled.

"He did too!" Joe insisted. "He sawed the stringers out of the Skate Creek bridge. Come on. I'll show you."

He half dragged Bill Hatfield over to where his team was cropping grass, and reached down to seize their bridles. When their heads were pulled up, he took off his hat and flicked it in the white mare's face. She did not shy away, but only extended her head. Joe rubbed her nose.

"She's blind, stone blind," Joe explained. "That's how come I got this team so cheap. She wouldn't go on the Skate Creek bridge. Powder looked her over. If he'd knowed anything about hosses he'd knowed that much."

"You took a blind horse up there?" Bill Hatfield said, half to himself. "You brought a load of timber to Hell Dive with one blind horse?"

"They're as good as others if you know how to handle 'em," Joe said. "You just got to talk to 'em a little more, that's all."

Bill Hatfield whirled. "Powder, I want to see you a minute," he said. "Wait here, Joe."

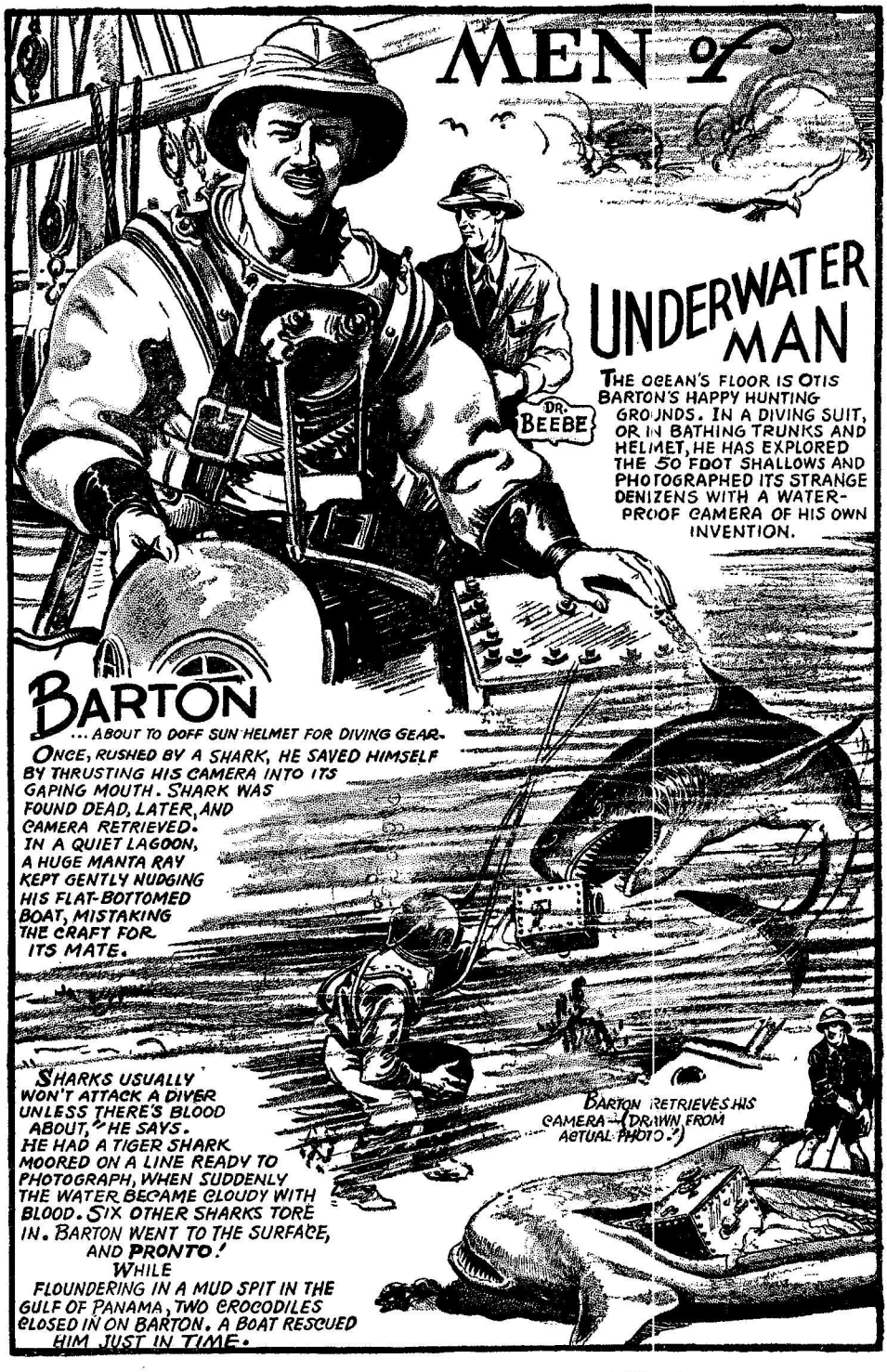
Joe was brushing his new team when Powder and Bill Hatfield came out of the office. Folding a check into his wallet, Powder trudged towards the highway. Bill Hatfield walked over to Joe. For a moment he stood without speaking. Then—

"Powder sold me his teams and wagons," he said finally. "I got to have somebody I can depend on to move those logs. But I can't run a mill and a hauling business too. Don't want to. I gave Powder sixteen hundred dollars for the outfit. Want to take it off my hands, Joe? You can hire a couple of drivers for the other two teams, and I can keep all three of them busy. Think you can handle it?"

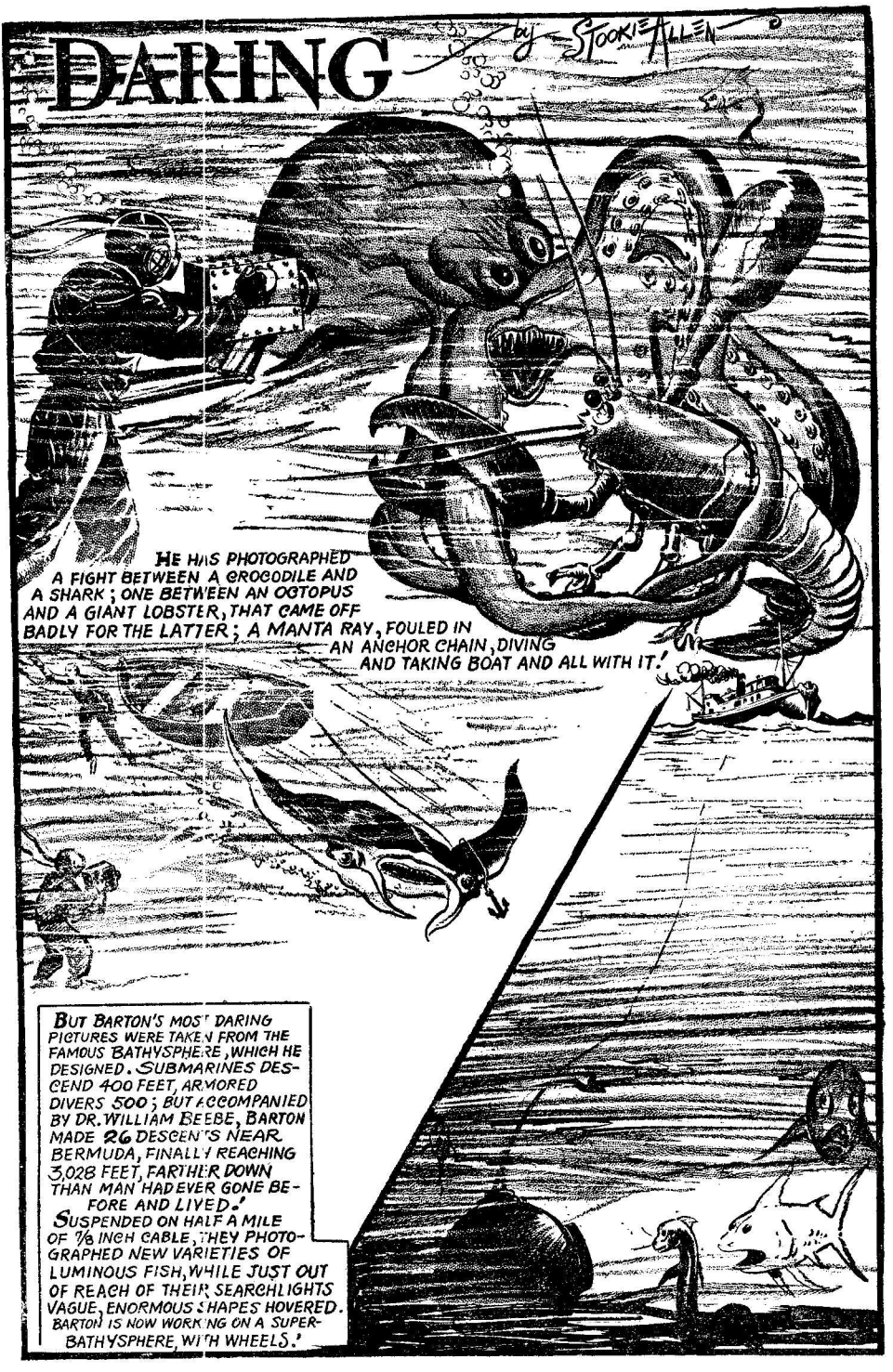
With a final brush at the blind mare's silken mane, Joe Mann straightened up. He looked wonderingly at his right hand, and sensed strongly the long dormant forces within him that had at last been awakened because of the impossible thing he had done with that hand—beaten a man bigger and stronger than himself.

He knew a strange sense of sureness within himself, and a little exultation. Somehow, he felt, he could now handle all other situations as well as he had always handled horses. He glanced quizzically at Bill Hatfield. Bill had thought he could be a success, and Sue had told him he could; but he had thought they were merely being kind. Now, at last, he knew they were right.

"I can handle it," he said quietly.

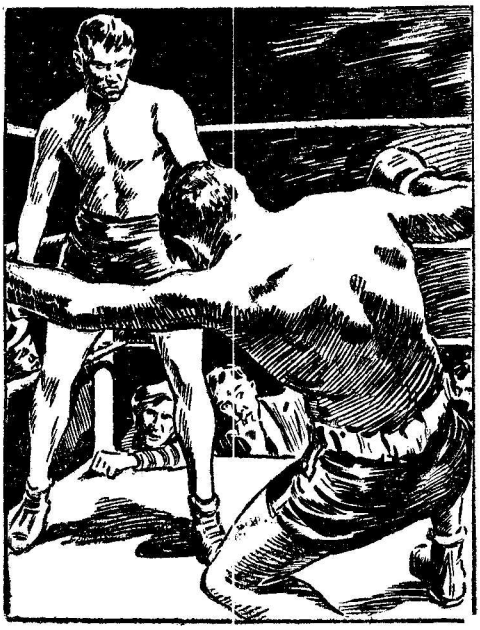


A True Story in Pictures Every Week



Coming Soon: The Codonas—Royalty of the Big Top

Reservation on Queer Street



You want a good stooge, Champ? Take a half-blind, slap-happy pug and kick him around all you want, but when you ask him about the jangling noises in his head—don't smile!

By EUSTACE COCKRELL

Author of "Second Sight", "Sweet-talkin' Man", etc.

MIKE SUTTON was half blind, but that really made it better because there are jokes that can be played on a person who can't see very well that won't go with a man who can. They could wire a chair and he wouldn't be able to see the wire that ran to it and he would jump in a very satisfactory manner when the current struck him.

There were lots of gags like that. They all worked fine.

The Champion, Louis Arnovich, was the one that played most of the jokes and the cruelest, which, I suppose, is natural because when a man is rounding into shape and gets drawn pretty fine he gets very irritable. The heavy quiet of the upstate training camp got on his nerves and practical jokes were an outlet for him and of course Mike was the natural butt of the jokes.

Mike was about forty-five and he hadn't been really a top-notch fighter. He'd taken so much punishment around the head that his ears rang dully most all the time and sometimes he thought he heard things jangling in his head. But it didn't disturb him much because this had gone on for a long time.

Louis Arnovich was a lightweight and champion of all the world in that division. His manager, a tight-lipped little man called Foxy McGinnis, had him upstate now training for his outdoor bout with Baby Face Gannon in the Stadium. It was very beautiful at the training camp, a little cluster of cottages and a training ring and a barn where the punching bags and other equipment were kept. Down in the thick green valley there was a sliver of water that was a lake.

But Arnovich, the champion, wasn't really much interested in that.

There were four sparring partners at the camp. Two undistinguished lightweights named Smith and Coon; Slip O'Dowd, a pretty fair ham-and-egger who could simulate Gannon's style; and a very fast colored featherweight named Billy Harvey. Harvey and O'Dowd were fighting preliminaries on the same card with Arnovich and Gannon.

The sparring partners got fifteen dollars a day on the days the Champion boxed, but Mike Sutton wasn't paid anything at all. He got his meals and a place to sleep and Foxy McGinnis would sometimes give him old clothes. Foxy was about the same size as Mike.

Mike rubbed down the Champion after his workouts and ran errands, but mostly he was valuable as a stooge. As a butt for the jokes that the Champion and Foxy would figure out.

And in a way, he had a real value to the Champion.

Louis Arnovich didn't read and he didn't like to listen to the radio. After he had done his road work in the morning and worked with the bags and skipped rope and boxed a round or two with each of his sparring partners in the afternoon, he had nothing to do. While he would play a little pinochle or maybe listen to one program on the radio, it bored him and he would be like some caged animal pacing around his cottage, all his splendid vitality boiling up in him.

Too, Louis Arnovich was no longer exactly a natural lightweight and it was more trouble as time went by for him to make the weight. It increased his irritability to be always hungry and for his mouth to be always dry; when you are trying to take off the weight, you must go easy on liquids.

So each time Louis Arnovich trained for a fight Foxy McGinnis would have Mike Sutton around for Arnovich to play cruel and elaborate jokes on. This would take up some of the Champion's idle time and ease his tension and provide a few laughs for everybody.

Mike didn't mind so much. He didn't hate the Champion for being cruel to him because he couldn't remember things long enough any more to keep on hating some one. Besides, it was worth almost anything to sit in the evening and look down the long green valley and hear the little things in the woods making chirping noises that drowned out the buzzing in his head and made him feel at peace. If Louis Arnovich gave Mike the hotfoot or sent him walking clear to the village for a left handed monkey wrench or a pie stretcher and Mike discovered it was a joke, he would think it rather natural, remembering dimly that fighters were mean when they were getting fine. He would take it as a good sign of Arnovich's condition and then forget it.

ONE thing scared him though; it made the things jangle loudly in his head and the sweat pop out on his brow. It was something that Arnovich would do if he was feeling mean. He had done it many times.

And it was perfectly simple.

"Mike," he would say, "some day they're gonna get you. They come for you in uniforms, not like coppers, but gray uniforms and they take you away to the booby hatch."

Then Arnovich would tip off Foxy or maybe it would be the other way around; maybe Foxy would say it first about the men in uniforms. That evening they would sit on the porch and one of them would remark casually: "I saw a couple of guys in gray uniforms down at the village, they were headin' up this way."

Mike wouldn't be able to hear the things chirping in the green woods, he wouldn't be able to think of anything for a moment, and then he would slip away. Sometimes he would hide until midnight, and all that time he would be crouched out in the woods or under the ring, and the effort of thinking, of watching for the men in gray uniforms, would drive the buzzing in his head to unbearable crescendoes. Finally he would come back and the next morning it would be only a vague fear far back in his jumbled mind.

But it was there.

As the day of the Gannon fight came nearer, Louis Arnovich became more worried. Gannon was young and very good. Louis Arnovich realized this and he was worried because he hadn't saved his money and he was getting older all the time. He had sometimes thought of retiring undefeated, but he always seemed

to be short, to be needing most of his share of the next purse just to get things straightened out.

The Gannon fight was only eight days away now and Arnovich weighed one thirty-nine, which was four pounds more than he must weigh the day of the fight. He knew he would have to dry out to make the limit and that is a disagreeable process.

The jokes he played on Mike became more frequent, more pointless, more cruel, and the sparring partners suffered, too. He was fine now and his punching was very sharp. The day the two important reporters came up he dropped Slip O'Dowd twice in one round and cut Billy Harvey's eyebrow in spite of the heavy helmet the colored boy wore.

Louis Arnovich came out on the porch after his shower, where Foxy was fixing a drink for the newspapermen. Mike was sitting on the steps, looking down the long valley at the little bit of lake, noticing how the setting sun on the water made it shine. His face under its tissue of scars was serene.

Louis sat down by the wall. "Foxy," he said, "did you see them guys in them gray uniforms down by the lake today?"

"Yeah," Foxy McGinnis said. "I saw 'em. The ones with the ropes."

"I guess they'll be gettin' up here in a few minutes now," Louis Arnovich said and he yawned.

Mike Sutton looked around. His face was pale and working.

"How are the bells, Mike?" Foxy McGinnis asked. He turned to the newspapermen. "Mike's got bells in his head. He's punchy."

"If something scares him," Louis Arnovich said, "it makes the bells ring louder."

Mike Sutton stood, looking fearfully around him. Then he wheeled and ran stumbling around the cottage.

Foxy McGinnis turned to the newspapermen and over Louis Arnovich's laughter he asked: "How's the kid look?"

"All right," one of them said. "He is a very strong kid. What made Handsome run away?"

"The Champ will cut him to pieces," Foxy McGinnis said.

"The Champ was great today," Slip O'Dowd said and he looked at the colored featherweight sitting over by himself on the bannister with the strip of tape very white over his eye. "He was great today, wasn't he?" O'Dowd said again, looking directly at the colored boy.

"Yes," the colored boy said. He got up off the bannister and walked around the house.

"What made the old guy run away?" the newspaperman said again.

"We tell him there's a coupla guys in gray coats lookin' for him to take him to the nut house," Louis Arnovich explained. "It scares the hell out of him. He may not be back till midnight. He'll hide somewheres." And he laughed again, more softly.

"The Champ's heart was eighty-one after the last round," Foxy McGinnis said, "and it went down to fifty in three minutes. I guess that shows the kind of shape he's in."

One of the reporters stood up. "Let's go down to the village and get some beer," he said flatly.

"This Baby Face," the other said, "they say he beats his grandma, but I guess he's a pretty nice boy. I only hope he's as strong and tough as he looks, that's all I hope." And as they walked away down the path to get into their car they heard the colored boy's soft voice out in the woods.

"It's all right, Mike," the colored boy was calling. "It's all right, Mike. They ain't any men, they was lying to you. It's all right, Mike, they was lying."

SLIP O'DOWD was fighting the semi-windup and Billy Harvey, the colored boy, was fighting a preliminary. Billy Harvey was out there now. The sound of the crowd was like a great mosquito down in the Champion's dressing room under the stands; a great mosquito that flew close and then drifted away, but never quite out of earshot.

Louis Arnovich was lying on a table with a heavy towel bathrobe wrapped around him. The bones in his cheeks looked very sharp. He had made a hundred and thirty-five with great effort, but the two-pound steak he'd eaten after weighing in that afternoon had helped his disposition. He was lying quietly, sucking a half lemon, waiting calmly until it was time for him to go up.

Mike Sutton sat on a folding chair over in a corner. His good eye gleamed and he was making little noises in his throat because the smell of the dressing room and the distant roar of the crowd pleased and excited him. He knew they wouldn't let him go up to the ring and watch, but he didn't mind that. Sitting down here with the familiar smells in his nose and the familiar sounds in his ears was enough.

He just waited and took it all in, and thought it was like the old days. And it was.

Foxy McGinnis was pacing aimlessly around the room chewing an unlit cigar and one of the newspapermen who had been up at the camp was standing looking down at Arnovich. "Did it weaken him to make the weight?" the reporter asked Foxy McGinnis.

"He was awful mean in camp the last week," Mike said, suddenly intelligible.

Nobody paid any attention.

"He is strong as a bull," Foxy McGinnis said. "Best shape of his career."

"The meaner a guy is . . ." Mike's voice trailed off as he forgot what he was going to say. The sound upstairs was suddenly greater and presently Billy Harvey came through the room, going back to the showers. He stopped and patted Mike on the shoulder. "I give him a lacing," he said. He went on then, not speaking to anyone else.

Somebody called at the door and Slip O'Dowd went out the door, skipping a little and lifting his arms as if the muscles in his shoulders were stiff.

Foxy McGinnis walked over and looked down at Louis Arnovich. "You've seen all his pictures," he said. "Just keep your left hand in his face and box him. Circle him to the right and keep your left hand in his face."

"He's a hitter," the reporter said, "and he's a kid that just keeps on coming. It ought to be a good fight." He walked to the door then, without saying anything more, and went on out into the stadium.

There was a long silence. "He didn't wish me luck," Louis Arnovich said finally.

"He musta forgot," Foxy said. "But you don't need luck. Just think, box him, watch his right. Box him and circle to his right. Keep your left hand in his face."

Then all at once a man who would work in Gannon's corner was in the room and he was watching Foxy bandage the Champion's hands. Then there were some more people in the room and somebody was laughing and a voice said: "Slip got stopped in the first."

A minute or two later, just as suddenly, the room was emptying. Mike came over and grabbed Arnovich's taped right hand. "Good luck, Champ," he said and his voice was thick with sincerity.

"Thanks, pal," Arnovich said and a little sardonic grin played across his face. "Don't let nobody get you while I'm gone." And they were gone.

MIKE heard the sound roll down the aisle with the Champion as he made his way toward the ring. When the sound told Mike that the Champion was in the ring, he walked over and closed the door. He looked carefully all around the room, half fearfully, then smiled a little and sat down. It was a joke, like the colored boy said. No one was going to get him. He turned his mind to envisioning the scene in the ring.

He could see it all quite clearly. Now they would be introducing the old champions and the challengers, and now they would be clearing the ring and the referee would be giving them their instructions.

Mike got up and shadow boxed slowly for awhile. Then he went back and sat down on his chair. Round one would be over now. The Champ had probably felt

him out that round. He'd probably walked around him like a cooper 'round a barrel stabbing him with his left hand, finishing the round in his own corner, his sharp dark face expressionless.

Mike stood up and stretched. Then he heard the voice. It was at the door.

"Let's try it, it oughtn't to be locked. Let's pick up a slug in here."

The other voice answered. "Okay," it said.

There was the noise of the door opening and the two ushers came into the room furtively. One was reaching for the bottle in the hip pocket of his gray uniform.

Mike Sutton stood up and looked wildly around. Then, summoning all his courage, he dived past the two men and through the door and was running down the interminable distance to the ring. Twice he fell and twice he felt hands that tried to catch him, but each time he tore free. Finally he was there, his face white at the apron of the ring and his voice shrill.

"Champ!" he screamed. "Oh, God, Champ, don't let 'em take me!"

Louis Arnovich, boxing cautiously at long range against the stocky blond youngster who was boring toward him, half dropped his hands and turned his head, recognizing the voice subconsciously.

And in that split instant, Baby Face Gannon came up with his right.

The roar of the crowd drowned out even Mike's shrill screaming. Louis Arnovich came up at *nine* and Gannon dropped him again with a left hook a shade too high, that broke Arnovich's nose and splattered blood across the clean canvas. Arnovich, his arms hanging at his sides, climbed to his feet without a count and stood there swaying, glassy eyed. Then the bell rang.

Mike Sutton felt himself seized; he saw with a sob of relief that these arms were clothed in the dark blue of the cops. They were dragging him, all three of them backing up the aisle. The cops wanted to watch the fight. They were stalling, wanting to see how Louis Arnovich came out for the next round after that pasting he'd taken.

Mike saw Foxy working feverishly with ice and brandy and ammonia. Louis Arnovich was coming around. His body was responding, but his eyes were still blank.

He came out stolidly at the bell, and walked in and started slugging, fighting Gannon's fight. That was all Mike saw.

"THEY'RE waitin' for me in the dressin' room," Mike said, above the ringing in his ears and the noise of the crowd. "In gray uniforms just like the Champ said."

"Who?" the oldest cop asked.

Mike tried desperately to get away. "There's one now," he said as an usher came down the aisle. "There's one of 'em."

"He's an usher," the cop said. "They's a gang of them guys around. Ain't any usher gonna bother you 'less you crashed in."

"I'm with the Champ," Mike said. "I was waitin' in the dressin' room when then come for me."

The oldest cop let go his arm. "You go back to the dressin' room," he said, "and don't run down yellin' no more. We want to get back and see the fight. Them guys is ushers, they won't hurt you."

"All right," Mike said. He walked back up the aisle, found his way to the dressing room and sat down on his chair by the wall. The place was empty and he sat there alone for a long time. There was no room in his head for anything but dull pain and sound gradually easing.

He didn't know how long he waited, but suddenly the room was swarming with people. The Champion came in, walking by himself very straight, and lay down on his table. He was badly marked.

The Champion lay there and Foxy worked on his cuts and his chief second gave him a drink of brandy. Then they cleared the room. Foxy McGinnis looked around and abruptly he walked over and hit Mike in the face with his soft fist. It didn't hurt.

Mike got up and got his bottle and went over and started rubbing down the

Champion's legs. The second was working on the cuts.

Louis Arnovich looked up and winked at Mike. "I'll be glad when the fight's over," Louis Arnovich said. 'These woods give me the willies." He closed his eyes then.

"He won in the eighth," the second said, "but he went up queer street when the guy dropped him in the second and he's still up queer street."

Louis Arnovich heard and looked up. "Eighth?" he said.

The second looked down at him. "Yeah," he said. "It's over; you stopped him in the eighth."

Louis Arnovich creased his brows and made the blood start flowing from one of them. "Not Gannon?" he said.

"Yeah." The second grinned. "He don't look like no Baby Face now."

"No?"

Louis Arnovich lay back and closed his eyes again. Suddenly he sat up and his eyes were wild and pleading. "Mike," he said, "what's it like?" And he shook his head back and forth quite hard.

Mike went on rubbing him, looking at his face. "It's kind of like a buzzing and that goes away and then its kind of like a jangling sometimes later on. I never noticed it until one night in the old Garden I was layin' just like you and I'd . . . I'd . . ." Mike stopped, trying to remember. Foxy McGinnis came over and looked down at the Champion.

"It was . . ." Mike began again.

Foxy cut him off. "Boy," he said, "did they love it when you walked in there and slugged it out with him? We'll let 'em angle us into another fight with that boy and we'll draw a half a million."

"It was like a buzzing," Mike said again, "at first . . ." He looked down at Louis Arnovich's face and though he had remembered what he was going to say this time, he didn't say it. Vaguely he wondered why.

The room was getting hotter. "My last patient," said Doc, "is going to get well"

Sinew

By ROBERT W. COCHRAN

Author of "Hero, Remember," "A Tower of Strength," etc.

For nerve, and what goes with it—a blue ribbon to the old Doc, who knew to the second what is the proper time for a man to die

OLD DOC STAPLETON hadn't had a patient in two years. And anyone in the New England countryside would testify that old Doc had been for fifty years as good a doctor as you would find between Boston and Martha's Vineyard.

But the New Hampshire college that numbered Albin Stapleton as the last survivor of the class of '79 had turned out a great many more modern and up-to-date practitioners in the sixty years that had intervened.

The fact that people saw fit to take their pains and aches elsewhere didn't particularly bother old Doc. With typical New England thrift he had put aside enough to care for his modest wants even should he live to be a hundred; and there was small likelihood of that, even though he announced in public that he felt "prime."

He had the big, rambling white house on West River Road, and it kept him pretty busy caring for the grounds and the flowers that bordered the circular drive.

He felt sometimes, at eighty-three, that Father Time had somehow overlooked him. He had been feeling like this rather persistently for the past year. And it wasn't the loss of his practice that caused it.

He had been a stubborn old man, set, determined, tyrannical. Once he laid a course of action, he carried it through come-what-would. He wasn't bullheaded; he would admit his mistakes, but he needed pretty evident proof that he had made one before he would do an about-face.

His son had died and his son's wife That had been twelve years before, and

he had tightened his lips and tried to hold his shoulders as straight as ever. When he succeeded, people marveled that he could go so calmly about his routine work after such a blow.

They didn't ask him how he did it, but if they had he could have answered them in one word: "Duty." He saw it as his duty to let the Lord take back what was His own without remonstrance; and then, too, he had a duty to the living as well as the dead, for his son left a ten-year-old girl child.

That's the long and short of old Doc's reputation of being set and determined and tyrannical; he saw it as his duty to chart a course and stick to it.

That's why eleven years after her parents' death Nelsie went away one night and didn't return. Old Doc should have known that it was only his own blood cropping out in his granddaughter. But if he ever considered it in this light he didn't admit it.

That's why for the past year he had become more and more convinced that fate had slipped a cog in the accepted pattern.

"Tyrannical," they called him, and he was tyrannical. "Set," they said, and "determined"; he was these things too. But he wasn't bullheaded. He could recognize his mistakes when he was given proof of them.

He had in his life canceled a lot of bills and a lot of debts that were more than just money obligations, when he thought that there was sufficient reason.

BUT Nelsie Cannon and her husband, since their runaway marriage, had never been inside the grounds of the rambling white house on West River Road.

Old Doc had brought Linder Cannon into the world, so that he thought he knew all about him. He knew about his parents and his grandparents. They had been trifling, all of them—except perhaps his mother, who had come from New Bedford and had died in childbirth.

He had watched Linder Cannon develop under the guidance of his father; and even though Linder wriggled into a job in the bank at Whitney, old Doc had been quite certain no good would ever come of it.

He was sure that the day would come when Nelsie would see her husband in his true colors and come back. He had waited a year, and he knew as he tended the early spring tulips on the border that he wasn't going to have a great deal more time to wait.

A car came down the street from the direction of Whitney. It slowed abruptly, turned, and came back, cutting into the circular drive and on around the house. One rear wheel crushed life from a dozen tulips as it swerved on the turn, and old Doc clenched his hands.

There were two men in the car when he came in sight of it where it had stopped at the rear of the house. One of them turned and looked at him; the other was sagged down in the front seat.

"We want a doctor, quick." The tall man behind the wheel jumped out and stood so that he faced old Doc and the white house.

"I'm not practicing," Doc Stapleton said; and anyone who knew him would have known that he was holding himself in check by the force of his will. "You ran over my tulips. There w'an't any cause for that."

"To hell with your tulips." The man slipped a hand into a coat pocket, menacingly. "Help me get this man inside."

"I'm not practicing," old Doc said. But sixty years of looking after sick people could not so easily be discarded. He came a step forward and stared at the white face of the man in the car.

"Listen, old man, you've got a sign out there. That's good enough for me. You'll take this case, see, if it's your last one."

OLD DOC'S shoulders straightened from the stoop that the past year had put upon them. He looked in the direction of the tiny office that had served his needs so long.

It held a lot of things, that office. Sandwiched in between the waiting room and

the living room. He had heard a lot of trouble in there and eased a lot of pain. And he had done perhaps a lot of things that weren't expected of him.

"Who's in the house, old man?"

Old Doc considered a moment. He had never been given to lying. "No one," he said finally. "The housekeeper's in town."

"Good. The man's manner became less strained. "You go ahead and show me the way. I'll carry him; no funny business.

Old Doc said, "I'm too old for funny business. What happened to this man?"

"It ain't healthy to ask questions. You got a phone?"

"Yes," old Doc said, "I've got a phone. That man's been shot. Here, let me get hold of him."

"That's better, old man. I was afraid I was goin' to have to get rough."

"Lucky Mrs. Keeler isn't here. Through that door. Easy, the man's bleeding bad." Old Doc's voice had power in it.

"Lucky for her, old man. Ain't you got any heat in here?"

"Never use it," old Doc said. "Just keep it warm enough to prevent freezing. Cut his undershirt open while I wash my hands."

"You wouldn't want to try anythin' funny, old man."

"Where was he hurt?" old Doc asked from the sink as he scrubbed the earth from his fingers. "How'd he get shot?"

"Hitch-hiker. We picked him up back there and he tried to hold us up. Then after he shot he got scared and beat it."

The wounded man on the couch opened his eyes and said thickly, "Hurry him up, Shorty, get me out of here."

"That's right, old sawbones. How you feelin', Chick?"

"This man ought to go to the hospital," old Doc said, straightening up from where he had made a first quick examination. "The bullet missed his lungs. I'm not a surgeon, anyway."

"You are now," the tall man standing beside him said. "And if I was you I wouldn't let nothin' happen to my first case."

"It's eighteen miles to Whitney; you could get him to the hospital there. . ."

"Shut up, old man. We know about mileage. You're goin' to start probin' for that bullet, and if he dies. . ."

"Light that kerosene heater," old Doc commanded. "If he dies it will be his fault, not mine." He prepared instruments, cotton, bandages; and placed a small blackened kettle full of water over a gas burner that he lit.

The phone in the living room began to ring. Old Doc started toward the open door, and the man, who had been standing silently watching every movement, sprang in his path. Old Doc said, "If I don't answer pretty quick, someone will be coming out to see what's the matter."

"You can answer it," the man said finally, stepping aside. "Just remember I'm here listening to you. It'd be terrible to have an accident at your age."

"HELLO," old Doc said; then, as he recognized the voice, he started to replace the receiver. Something hard jammed into his stooped back, and he didn't have to turn to know what it was. "Yeah," he said, putting the receiver again to his ear, "I'm listening."

"When?" he asked after a moment; then, "Is he hurt bad?" He listened a moment longer, conscious of that pressure at the small of his back just above his spine. "You needn't bother," he said, interrupting. "Get another doctor. I've never had any use for him; I'm not coming."

"Thought you didn't practice medicine." The man swung him about, his eyes defiant, when the receiver was on the hook.

"I didn't take that case," old Doc said. "Which one of you fellows shot that boy in the bank?"

They were back in the little office, and the man on the couch said, "I shot him. I ought to killed the damn fool, makin' a grab for a gun like he did."

"If old sawbones here don't get you fixed up I'll go back and finish the job. How about it, old man, want me to go back and finish off your grandson?"

"You—you knew," old Doc stammered.

"I got ears; I heard her call you grandfather on the phone. Too bad you didn't let her come out here. Maybe if I don't like the way you fix Chick up I'll call on her too."

The water boiled on the gas plate and old Doc started to extinguish the burner and stopped, staring at the blue flame. "It'll take a lot of water," he said, and emptied the contents of the kettle into a porcelain bowl.

" 'Tain't likely anyone'll walk in on us, but if I was you I'd shut that door into the living room."

The man on the couch said, "For God's sake, Shorty, make him hurry. I'm burnin' up."

"It's getting hot," the other agreed. "How about opening a window, old man?"

"Window!" Doc exploded. "You want to kill him? That air is cold raw. Turn that kerosene heater up a speck. If he gets a chill now . . ."

The man locked both doors, placing the keys together in his pocket. "Chick goes out of here or I go alone. Do you get that, old man?" he said threateningly.

"You mean if Chick stays, I stay?" Old Doc was almost jovial in his attitude.

"It'd be bad for your reputation to have your last patient die."

Doc was cleaning the clotted blood from around the wound; then on a sudden thought he looked up. "My last patient," he said, "is going to get well."

He looked once at the tall man who was standing with his back to the windows. "I'm burning up," Chick said. "God, he's killin' me, I can't breathe . . ."

"Watch it, old sawbones," the man standing above old Doc said.

"He's fainted," Doc said. "Just as well."

HE SIGHED presently and straightened up, the leaden slug in his fingers. He cleansed the wound and staunched the flow of blood.

"God!" the man who had been watching him said. "You guys ain't got no heart in you. I got sick watching you dig around in Chick's breast."

"Sit down," old Doc said, "he'll be coming around. This wasn't a bad wound; might have troubled him for a week or two. So that boy down at the bank reached for his gun. You're wrong; he isn't my grandson, but he married my granddaughter. I'm proud of that boy standing up to you. He wasn't hurt bad, either, Nelsie said; shot twice in the arm. He's my last patient."

"Maybe we're not through with him yet. Maybe we're not through with you."

"I looked for it to be like that," old Doc said. "I'll sit over here at the desk and write out a prescription; he's going to feel pretty bad after a while, Chick is."

"How long's he going to be that way?" The man swayed as he crossed the room to lean over the couch.

"Not long." Old Doc's voice held pride for a job well done. "Not long."

The tall man settled into a chair as Doc commenced to write:

DEAR NELSIE:

I was wrong about Linder. He had the nerve to do his duty and I'm proud of you both. We've got about three minutes in here, the man they call Chick is already unconscious. That kerosene stove has almost floored me once or twice with a door or window open. I can feel the pressure increasing around my temples, that's a sure sign of monoxide poisoning. The big man is getting up, no he can't make it he . . .

The pencil rolled across the desk as Old Doc's fingers relaxed their grip on it. The tall man put his hands to his forehead and seemed to push himself to his feet. He had a key in his hand when he reached the living room door, but the key refused to go in the lock.

Slowly, like someone moving through a sheet of water, he turned and started for the window. Old Doc's head was pillowed on his arms. The tall man's knees buckled and he fell, a dead weight, upon the floor.

The kerosene stove sent tiny sparks of flame upward, and steam rose in a steady plume from the kettle on the gas plate.

Minions of Mars

Mark's axe slashed out like something alive and malevolent

By WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

CHAPTER XXI

THE SENTIMENTAL AUTOCRAT

MARK fixed his eyes on the nearest of the guards. The man stiffened. Mark repeated the process rapidly—giving none a chance to realize what was happening—until all the soldiers in the room were under his control. All but one. Chumly, sensing immediately that something was wrong, looked expectantly toward Mark. He displayed his good sense by making no attempt to interfere.

"Chumly," said Mark. "Go at once to Jon, your master, and tell him to get his family to a safe place. Don't delay."

Chumly obeyed at once, without question. He left by the street gate. The guards, still in the hypnotic trance, Mark sent into the arena to do pitched battle for the edification of the crowd. He figured that this unexpected addition to the program, would keep the nobles puzzled for a while.

The attack would have already started before they would realize that the prisoners had been released, and that they had a rebellion on their hands.

The first installment of this five-part serial, herein concluded, was published in the Argosy for January 13

One of the soldiers was in charge of Mark's stainless-steel axe, and Mark relieved him of it before he sent him out. Then, hastily giving orders to the other prisoners, he sent them forth to obtain weapons. He took a last look across the arena, and had the satisfaction of seeing Jon hurriedly leave his box.

Erlayok was still seated, apparently unperturbed at the unusual battle going on in the pit.

Across the street several horses were tethered outside a drinking house. Mark untied two of them, and he and Smid rode off. In a few minutes, they pulled up in front of the haberdashery shop.

Leaving hasty instructions for the men who remained there, they immediately departed for Mark's prison. Some time ago Mark had decided to make the prison his headquarters during the attack. He half suspected that Erlayok knew that Smid's house was a meeting place of the rebels. The man had too many spies not to know it. He had probably left it alone for the reason that as long as there were rebels it was best to know where he could lay his hands on them, whereas if he raided the place they would only find a new headquarters he might not be able to discover.

But that reason wouldn't stop him once the rebellion was under way. It would be the first place he would think to crush in a belated attempt to stop the rebels. And Mark, for a while at least, wanted lines of communication kept open.

Even with the swiftness with which his forces would strike, there was always the possibility that certain bands would be repulsed and require reinforcements.

It was imperative that all the strategic points be taken, and it must be known immediately if any of the scattered forces needed help.

THE men who remained at Smid's would inform all contact riders of the change of headquarters. In the event of an attack on the old headquarters, they would leave safely by means of a passage into the adjoining houses.

By passing word at the last moment, Mark made certain that the information wouldn't be carried by spies to any of the nobles.

Already the streets were filled with groups of armed men. These were the vanguard of the rebel forces which would shortly take the city. They were carefully nonchalant in their movements, talking quietly as they walked. No two groups seemed to be traveling in the same direction, and no group paid any attention to any of the others.

In a matter of minutes these scattered groups would converge in a dozen places at the same time. The strongholds of the various nobles would be simultaneously attacked, and each would be too busy to help the other.

Mark hoped fervently that his men would find the going easy. He hoped that the palaces would fall without too much bloodshed.

On the way to the prison Mark commandeered the services of several rebels. These were to be Smid's bodyguard, for Mark had no intention of remaining at the prison headquarters. He had a job to do himself, and it would take him elsewhere. Smid would issue the necessary orders should any of his compatriots need reinforcements.

When he got to the prison Mark summoned the four guards and the captain, who had his office on the street side of the building. Briefly he told them of the sudden turn of affairs.

"The point is this," he concluded. "Are you going to help us—or do I tuck you all in a cell?"

The four guards were converted immediately, but the captain blustered and refused to understand that there would shortly be a change of authority. Mark wasted no time in ordering him into a cell.

"You can put these men to work, Smid," Mark said. "Send them out to commandeer fresh horses for the riders as they come in. And keep riders coming and going between here and every point of attack you

can. The more reports you have, the more certain will be our success. I'm leaving now. See you later."

Mark remounted and left the courtyard at a gallop. Already the din of a dozen battles could be heard from all quarters of the city. Mark rode furiously toward the palace of Erlaken, a lesser noble. Mark was relieved that modern feudal England was different from the England of ancient feudal times, when the lords had maintained their castles on their own lands, scattered all over the country. Such a condition would have made the present rebellion impossible.

Today, with all the nobles banded together, their strongholds situated in only four key cities of the whole nation, it was far simpler to strike them all at once. And yet the nobles had no doubt banded together originally for their own protection. Any attack by foreigners was easier defended against this way.

The nobles could surround themselves with their combined armies instead of scattering their forces all over the countryside. With the present system it was impossible for an enemy to defeat them, one by one. They had probably never considered the weakness in case of an attack from within.

THE palace of Erlaken was already in the rebels' hands when Mark arrived. Several hundred had forced the gates by storm before the handful of defenders could make out what was going on. A cheer went up as Mark rode through the gates to congratulate the captain of the rebels. Nothing had been destroyed, and the rebels were locking all the earl's men in the dungeons.

Everything had been done on schedule, and the rebels were ready to repel any attempts to retake the palace. The earl himself, it was planned, would be taken prisoner by those assigned to attack the soldiers and nobles at the arena.

Mark rode forth to visit the next nearest castle. He hoped the rebels had done as well there. As he galloped through the streets, his mind returned to Murf. Almost all of this had been planned by the redhead. Even to the course Mark was now taking to lend his moral support to the attackers.

All the elaborate timetable of the rebel forces, that their attacks would be simultaneous and unexpected, had been of his devising. He had worked for days on the timing, studying the distances to be covered and figuring the speeds which could be expected over the various available routes.

No detail had been overlooked, that the small rebel forces would be able to cover all the necessary points, and accomplish the work of a much larger body of fighters. It had taken military genius of the first water to do all this, and a tremendous amount of labor.

And yet the redhead was a traitor. It didn't make sense.

Mark reached his destination and again found the work already done. Things were going even better than planned. There was no doubt of it, the absence of so many of the defenders, who might otherwise have been there to fight if it weren't for the games, was responsible for the ease with which these two captures had been made.

Yet in the end it didn't matter much, for those same soldiers were still to be reckoned with. A good many of them would band together in an effort to retake their strongholds.

This castle had been taken without a casualty on either side, due to the fact that the gates had been open to admit a tradesman's cart. The rebels had rushed in and forced the defenders to surrender. The thing had been done in an orderly fashion. No pillage, no destruction. Discipline had been admirable. Each rebel detachment was under the leadership of an officer who had orders from Murf, Smid and Mark, to allow no rioting.

Further, it had been impressed upon all the rebels that for the time being everything captured was to be considered government property. And they had been told that under the new system of government

every citizen would own his share of the state's wealth. And if that wealth were destroyed or stolen, each citizen would suffer by the taxation necessary to replace it.

HERE again Mark was forced to think of Murf. For although it was Mark who had suggested that these things be impressed upon their men, it was Murf who got the idea of holding the officers of each group personally responsible for the conduct of his men.

It was he, also, who had decreed that any deaths which occurred, over and above those necessary in the course of the fighting, would be considered murder and the killers treated as such. This idea of Murf's would save many an innocent life.

Mark growled to himself as he rode off to his next point of call.

Twice on the way he lent his flashing axe to groups of rebels who had been attacked on the streets by bands of soldiers returning to their respective castles. Each time a rebel victory resulted.

These delays irked him, for although he fought with the fury of one possessed, several valuable minutes were lost on each occasion. These skirmishes had not been figured in the timing of his rounds. He feared the consequences of the departure from his carefully prearranged schedule. But his fears were groundless.

When he arrived at his destination he found the situation already in hand. The surprise element had again proved its worth.

There remained only one really important spot to be visited. Erlayok's castle. This stronghold was always overrun with soldiers, even during the games, and its walls were high—practically unscalable.

All other points of attack consisted of garrisons of soldiers and public buildings, and sufficient men had been allotted to these places to ensure their capture.

As Mark's speeding horse neared the castle of Erlayok, he sensed that there was trouble ahead.

There was altogether too much noise for the place to have been taken. His fears were realized when he came in sight of the castle. Not only had it not been taken, but from the looks of things it was doubtful if it would be.

The tops of the walls were lined with archers, pouring arrows down on the unprotected men who were trying to batter down the oaken gates with a heavy ram. Men were darting out from the cover of nearby buildings to take the places of their fallen comrades at the ram.

Mark pulled up and dismounted, leaving the horse out of arrow range.

He ran forward ignoring the flying shafts. He saw that occasionally a soldier would fall from the wall, a victim of a rebel arrow, but not often. Not nearly often enough. The few rebels who could handle a bow were no match for the archers of the earl.

As he neared the ram, his heart sank as he saw the rebels drop it and run for cover. The punishment had been too much for them.

Savagely Mark broke the shaft of an arrow which had gone clear through the biceps of his left arm. He retreated as he pulled the broken bits from his flesh.

The situation looked hopeless at first. The rebels had been unable to install any siege machinery in the vicinity before the attack. And the ram would never break through without some sort of contraption to protect the men as they plied it. Mark didn't waste time trying to invent an alternate plan but gave immediate orders to start construction of a huge bulwark to shield the ram.

But in another portion of the city, events had taken place which would shortly solve the problem of the siege of Erlayok's castle.

At the very instant that the perfectly timed attacks of the rebels were begun at the gates of the four castles of the reigning nobles, an entirely different scene was being enacted before still another great palace.

A compact force of two hundred men gathered at the castle of Jon, Duke of

Scarbor. They made no attempt to cross the bridge over the moat. The soldiers stationed there stared at them in alarm, but seeing that no attack was forthcoming, made no move to raise the bridge.

In a few minutes the Duke appeared. Without hesitation he singled out the two rebel leaders and beckoned them to him. They saluted and bowed stiffly.

"Explain this, please," demanded the Duke.

One of the captains bowed again and answered. "There is a rebellion in progress," he said. "We have been sent here to see that no harm comes to you or your family."

"Does anyone wish us harm?" inquired the Duke.

THE captain looked embarrassed. "Not many," he answered. "But there is a small group among us who think that no noble should be left to live, lest there some day be a return of the sort of government we have been subjected to."

"Then the majority wish my family well?"

"Oh, of course," replied the captain. "Mark, our leader, and Murf, his lieutenant gave orders that you were to be protected. In fact they don't want any of the nobles killed. Just removed from power. But there are many who would like to see all aristocrats dead, so it was thought advisable that you be guarded from harm."

Jon stroked a clean-shaven chin. "Very civilized sort of a revolt," he remarked. "I . . ."

He was interrupted by the clatter of a horseman who dismounted breathlessly. He saluted briskly, bowed briefly to the Duke.

"Orders from Smid, at headquarters: If no disturbance in vicinity of Duke's palace, dispatch one company to castle of Erlayok. Answer."

The two captains looked at each other. "That means you," said one. "They must be having trouble over there." He turned to the horseman. "Answer to Smid: All quiet here. Sending company immediately."

The dispatch rider mounted and galloped off.

"Just a minute," said Jon, as the second captain turned to address his men. "If there is trouble at Erlayok's palace, it can mean only one thing. His expert archers are preventing an attack on the gates. Do you have any archers to shoot them off the walls?"

The answer was obvious. All two hundred rebels were men from the farm lands, and there wasn't a bow among them. Some were armed with swords, a few had regular battle axes and the rest had woodcutting axes from their own farms.

The captains looked at each other and shook their heads. "But orders are orders," replied one. "Whether we can help or not."

"Yes," said the Duke. "But it would be much better if you had some archers. Suppose I lend you some. Will you make use of them?"

"You mean you would help our side to overthrow your own government?" said one, incredulously.

"It's not my government, as you well know," replied Jon. "And if my people want a change badly enough to fight for it, I shall certainly help them."

CHAPTER XXII

THE HAPPY REBEL

MARK watched skilled carpenters hammer together a long, narrow shield from pieces of wood of all shapes and sizes garnered from doors, sheds and a dozen other sources in the neighborhood.

The work was progressing speedily, for the castle of Erlayok had to be taken before any help could arrive from the scattered soldiery about the city.

There were no wheels available and the shield wasn't to be made like the conventional article. It wouldn't be a self-supported canopy to be rolled to the door, while men walked safely underneath. There wasn't time for that, nor material.

When this contrivance was completed it

would resemble a wooden roof, torn from a house. It would take a hundred men to carry it to the gates. But cumbersome and unwieldy as it might be, there would be safety beneath it for the men at the ram.

Aside from the importance of this last stronghold as a strategic place for either side to hold, Mark had another reason for wanting to get inside as quickly as possible.

He had just heard that Erlayok had left the arena in time to get here before the attack. He must have been warned by the unorthodox behavior of some of his own soldiers in the battle Mark had ordered. Further, he must have recognized that they were under hypnotic influence, and had jumped to the conclusion that Mark was behind it.

But whatever had warned him, he had left the arena before the rebels had blocked his escape, and was now inside. And Erlayok was the man who had to be destroyed.

A dispatch rider had informed Mark that the lesser nobles and their families were in custody. The rest of the spectators at the arena had been allowed to return to their homes.

The only deaths at the arena had been caused by a few soldiers who had shown fight. These had been few and were evenly divided on both sides. Most of the soldiers had immediately offered their swords in behalf of the rebel cause, upon being informed that the nobles could no longer pay for their services. And best of all, no civilian, man, woman or child, had been harmed in any way.

Mark was beginning to feel easier in his mind. He wondered if the distant cities in the other duchies were doing as Scarbor.

The great shield was almost finished when a commotion rose from another side of the castle wall. Shouts were heard and the sound of marching feet. Mark dashed to the corner of the wall to see what it was all about.

Two hundred men, half of them archers in the uniforms of Jon's little forces, were tramping in marching order down the street. At their head, marching side by side, were the rebel captain and Jon, Duke of Scarbor.

MARK grinned and realized that he wasn't very surprised. Something had told him that the Duke was more interested in the welfare of his people than in the continuance of his own government. It was when Mark realized that the Duke had burned his bridges behind him and was throwing in with the rebels, that he made up his mind that Jon was the man to head the new government.

Murf was definitely out, even if Mark still did feel a vagrant and undeniable affection for the redhead. His treachery had proved that however much he might have sympathized with the oppressed population of England, he still owed his chief allegiance to the Mics, their foe.

And from what Mark had learned of Jon's father, Alred, the present king, it seemed likely that with advancing years he had weakened considerably in his efforts in behalf of his people. Lately he had come to accept the domination of the nobles, and had lost much of his force. So Jon it would be.

The Duke returned Mark's grin. "I heard you needed some archers." Mark waved.

Jon's bowmen were deployed in the upper windows and on the roofs of the buildings across the street. It took them about three minutes to clear the walls of Erlayok's men. Every bolt loosed sped to its mark in the body of one of the defenders.

Mark rushed with a gang of his men to get the ram in action. Jon dashed forward with them, and though Mark waved him back he insisted on helping. Stepping over the bodies of arrow-pierced rebels, they picked up the ram where it had fallen.

A horde of rebel fighters crowded through the broken gates, the instant they succumbed to the battering blows of the heavy ram.

Mark went in with them, looking for Erlayok. As he had expected, the earl was not to be seen. The hand-to-hand fighting in the castle yard was violent and brief. Mark dashed into the castle, leaving mopping-up operations to his men.

Taking the stairs three at a time he burst into the corridor of Erlayok's private quarters. It was deserted and he went into the room where he had been chained a few days before. That was empty too. Frantically he searched every room on that floor but with no more success. Twice he saw frightened servants, but paid them no heed.

For some incomprehensible reason there was no one of importance in the whole castle. A thorough search, moreover, revealed no member of Erlayok's retinue, and very few of the surviving soldiers remained. There had been hundreds of the latter inside the walls, when the rebels had made their assault. But now, aside from the dead there was only a pitiful handful—those who had put up the losing fight in the castle yard.

THE answer to the mystery was supplied when one of the rebels found a passage, leading from the torture chamber beneath the castle, under the street and emerging in the cellar of a house a block away. But it was too late.

Erlayok was gone.

Mark encountered Jon some time later. The Duke was marshaling his men for the return to his own palace. Mark thanked him for the valuable assistance his men had given. But the Duke shook his head, smiling.

"Don't thank me," he said. "I've been a part of this rebellion for years. Rather I should thank you."

Marked looked at him incredulously. "I don't understand."

"You have forgotten that the forces of law have been under my command," the Duke reminded. "A thousand times I have suppressed evidence which might have broken up the movement. I realized it was the only way my people would ever gain their freedom. It was little enough to do for them. My men have trailed you and the other leaders in almost all of your organizing work. We've protected your members dozens of times.

"We've prevented raids on your headquarters, making all sorts of excuses to those who demanded that they be made. Time after time your activities have been reported to me by various nobles, but always my investigations proved that they had been misinformed. So you see, I've really had a hand in this all the time."

"I see," Mark said. "That's what you meant when you said you weren't entirely uninformed."

"Yes," said Jon. "And part of my information concerns you. I have been told, for instance, that you never eat. What kind of man are you?"

"It's a little too complicated to go into right now. I've got to trace Erlayok."

"I hope you get him," said Jon. "He's the real reason for things being so bad. The other nobles don't dare offend him. And he's given me plenty of trouble with his spies. They have been so diligent in uncovering rebel activities, that it's kept me busy covering up."

The two men shook hands and Mark mounted and rode off toward headquarters.

Perversely, Mark's thoughts strayed to Murf. He wondered if Jon knew anything of Murf's treachery. No, or he would have let the fact be known. Murf had gone about his job with such a thoroughness that his zeal had fooled everyone. Everyone, that is, except poor Sandy.

Mark urged the horse from a trot to a gallop. There were few people on the streets. Those who weren't actively engaged in the fighting were staying safely in their houses. And in this section of the city the fighting seemed to be over.

Approaching an intersection, his horse decided to show a mind of its own. It slowed its pace. Mark urged it on with a dig of his heels. The horse responded momentarily and then slowed again. Reaching the corner, it turned left. Mark pulled

its head around and tried to make it turn back, but the animal continued in the new direction.

THEN suddenly he forgot the horse's recalcitrance, and let it have its head. A block away he saw a shock of flaming red hair. At the sound of the horse's approach, Murf turned. For an instant it appeared that he would make an attempt to escape, but instead he stood his ground and grinned impishly.

Mark dismounted. Let Smid take care of the tracing of Erlayok. He would have already started on it by now, anyway. "Where have you been?" he asked, quietly.

Murf waved a hand, airily. "Where I was supposed to have been," he replied. "Leading the attack on the armory, as we planned I would."

Mark said nothing for a minute.

By his calculations Murf had finished his job of stirring up a revolt, and should be well on the way to meet the Mics which would be invading the country if Doog's message had gone through. Yet here he was aiding the rebellion. And though Murf didn't know that Doog would never deliver the message, it still didn't make sense.

He shouldn't be staying here and helping the rebels get control of the country. For the quicker order was restored, the quicker the Brish would be able to repel any attacks from the Mics. As far as that went, why had Murf planned the rebellion so well in the beginning? A poorly managed revolt would have served the purpose of the invaders a lot better.

"In case you're interested," Mark drawled. "Doog never got there."

Murf started guiltily. "Doog . . . You mean he was stopped?"

"Yes. I stopped him. I'm very much afraid your Mic army won't even know about our little shindig until it's too late to do them any good."

Murf bit his lip, muttering to himself.

"Come on, Murf," said Mark. "Let's have the whole story. I've nothing against you personally. And what's more I intend to give you a chance to escape."

"Escape! I don't want to escape. I want to see this revolt succeed! I want to see the new government in operation. But now . . . Oh, you won't believe me anyway."

He gestured hopelessly.

"Let's hear it just the same," Mark requested. "What comes after 'But now'?"

"But now you've spoiled it all!" Murf exploded.

"Calm yourself. How?"

Murf sighed.

"Well, listen, then. You won't believe me, but it's too late to matter now. If Doog had carried his message, here is what would have happened:

"Riders would have left Govern's headquarters and contacted all Mic and Mac commanders along the western and northern borders of this country. On all fronts a series of brief and ineffectual raids would have taken place. Little life would have been lost, but the Brish armies would have had their hands so full that none of them would have dared leave the borders unguarded for a minute.

"It would be made to appear that the country was in imminent danger of a massed invasion. The commanders of the Brish armies would have ignored a summons from any noble who might manage to get a message from one of the cities. As it is some noble is sure to get out of one of the cities, and will have no trouble dragging away a large force to fight the rebels."

"One already has, I greatly fear," replied Mark. "But let's hear some more. How do you know Govern would do all this, instead of waiting a day or two and then invading after some of the Brish armies were removed?"

"Who has escaped?"

"Erlayok. But he might still be inside the city. Suppose you answer my question."

"Gladly. Govern would have done as I said because I—ordered him to."

Mark shoved back his battered helmet and scratched his head. "Eludicate, my friend. This is getting screwier and screwier."

"NO DOUBT," grinned Murf. "There are a lot of things you don't know. In fact there are a lot of things none of the Brish know. Except, perhaps, Erlayok and a few army generals. I'll explain:

"I am Murf, second son of Rever, King of Eire, by his second wife, Ann Murfy. The plan to overthrow the despotic rule of Erlayok and his nobles originated in the council chambers of my father. And with the full knowledge of the ruler of the Macs. Not with the idea of conquest.

"But because we Mics and the Macs as well, are sick of the continual fighting on the borders.

"The Brish will tell you that their armies are purely defensive equipment. They believe it because Erlayok wants them to believe it. He couldn't make them pay taxes so readily otherwise. But the truth of the matter is that Erlayok has made repeated attempts to invade our territory, and has actually succeeded in grabbing a few small pieces.

"And though we can stop him by keeping eternally vigilant, the expense has raised our taxes so that we are little better off than the Brish. We want to stop it! We don't want our people to suffer as the Brish have suffered. And the best way to stop it is to set up a government here which will consider the welfare of the people."

"Pretty smart," Mark commented. "A puppet government to pay tribute to the Mics and the Macs."

Murf's face became as red as his hair. "No!" he shouted. "A government which will give us peace by disbanding its armies!"

Mark looked at the redhead quizzically. If Murf was telling the truth . . . He decided to find out.

Murf became suddenly calm as Mark's eyes bored into his own. He relaxed visibly. Mark hesitated and then began to question him, certain that under the influence of hypnosis he would tell the truth.

Bit by bit, Mark extracted the story. Several times rebels passed along the street, but it looked to them as if Mark and Murf were carrying on an ordinary conversation.

Sandy, he learned, had been killed in a perfectly legitimate duel, which Sandy himself had started. Murf had hit Smid to stop him from telling the dispatch riders of the changed orders. He had done it in good faith, genuinely afraid that if Mark's machines were installed, the rebellion would be impossible due to interference from the armies.

He considered his own plan of keeping them busy, a mere practical one. But he didn't dare tell of it without revealing his connection with the Mics, realizing that no Brish would believe it possible for a Mic to be anything but an enemy.

As an inspiration Mark asked about the status quo of the Brish borders, and was surprised to learn that they had been approximately the same for hundreds of years, except for the times when the Brish had grabbed a bit of land here and there. Erlayok's story of continual invasion from the west was a lie.

Satisfied, Mark released the redhead from his trance.

"I owe you an apology," he said. "You should have told me, and this would never have happened. I'm not Brish, you know. Get up on that horse. You and Smid are going to shake hands!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THREE DAYS OF DOUBT

BACK at headquarters Smid jumped up from his seat at the table when he caught sight of Murf. Mark motioned him down again and dismissed several rebel dispatch riders from the room. Smid's eyes were gleaming murderously and a hand involuntarily raised to caress the spot where Murf had broken the scalp.

Mark told him the whole story, not forgetting to mention the hypnotic trance which guaranteed its truth. As he talked he saw the hard expression leave Smid's eyes to be replaced by one of incredulity.

"But . . ." He started to object, and was silenced by Mark.

"I've told you it's all true," Mark stated. "Propaganda by Erlayok nothwithstanding. The Brish have been fooled for years. I can see that now. Nobody has a kick coming about the distribution of land. The Mics and the Macs don't want any more. And the Brish have all they need. The borders can remain as they are and the armies disbanded."

Smid nodded. "If you believe, then I can," he said, and turned to Murf. "Forget the bump on the head. It was included in your philosophy: No one man can stand in the way of the cause."

Murf stretched out his hand and Smid took it.

"Now that that's settled," said Mark, "what's the latest news?"

It was pretty nearly all good, according to Smid. The city was completely in the hands of the rebels.

Furthermore, their ranks has been swelled considerably by citizens whom they had been leery about approaching before, not to mention a good many soldiers who had no great love for the nobles.

News had come in from the duchy to the west that everything was under control. And best of all, there had been few unnecessary deaths and practically no wanton destruction of property.

But on the other side of the ledger was the fact that Erlayok, the most dangerous of the rebels, had escaped completely. No rider brought any word of him.

"There is one thing certain," said Smid. "The earl will send immediately for his entire forces at the border."

"Have Erlaken and Erlahul brought here at once," ordered Mark. "There is still a chance to checkmate him."

Under his direction Smid prepared official orders for the entire armies of the two earls to proceed under forced march to Scarbor. Completed, the orders only awaited the signatures of Erlaken and Erlahul to make them authentic. Smid already had the necessary seals at hand.

Mark turned to Murf. "Is there any chance that a move like this will cause Govern to investigate? If he moves any forces across the border, there will be trouble."

"He won't move an inch over the line without orders from me."

The two nobles were ushered into the guard room. In a few words Mark explained that he wanted of them. But as he talked he could see in their faces that the nobles had no intentions of complying.

"Your rule," he finished, "has been directed wholly by Erlayok. Here is a chance to do something useful on your own."

Erlaken laughed derisively. "We *have* been more or less ordered about by Erlayok, but our lands have been our own. *You* would place our wealth in the hands of the rabble. You'll get no help from us!"

"A misconception on your part," stated Mark. "When the new government is organized, your lands will still be your own. And you might even take useful parts in the management of that government, if your actions show you to be qualified. If we were so stupid as to kill off the better brains of the country, you would be dead now. But under the new government there will be no oppressive taxation, and no man will wield any power over the freedom of another man. High taxes won't be necessary, for a large army won't be needed. A fair income will be left you."

Erlahul sneered. "Armies won't be needed, eh? Shall we just send written invitations to our enemies?"

MARK'S face went grim. He saw futility of trying to convince these men. "I've no more time to waste," he said, turning to Smid. "These men have wives and children, haven't they?"

Smid nodded. The two nobles paled.

"There are some who think that all aristocrats should be exterminated," Mark said. "They can't seem to get it into their heads that you have countenanced the injustices meted out to them only because those things appeared to you to be the order of the day.

"They don't realize that such things have been entirely impersonal to you, and that you have never given any great thought to

the matter. That you are really only guilty of laziness. They seem to think that you are malicious and cruel by nature, and that you won't change. They want revenge!

"I guess the best thing for me to do is to let *you* convince them that they're wrong, and wash my hands of the whole thing. Women are eloquent talkers. I'll see that your wives are given a chance to talk to these thick-headed ones, too."

Without further ado, the two nobles stepped forward and signed the orders.

Mark had them returned to the safety of their own castles. His bluff had worked.

Strangely, to both Murf and Smid, Mark burst into laughter. He had just remembered that he could have obtained the signatures instantly by means of hypnotism.

THE day dragged on endlessly, with no word from any of the other cities. A courier of Erlaken's retinue had been dispatched with the orders for the return of the nobles' armies. The man was known to the generals of the armies. These forces were the nearest to the City of Scarbor of all the armies of the lesser nobles, and Mark fervently hoped they would arrive before Erlayok's men.

There was a good chance that they would for although Erlayok's forces had a shorter distance to traverse, the country was rougher and the travel slower.

At the best there would be no sign of either army for three days.

Working almost continuously, the rebel leaders, with the valuable help of Jon, utilized the time in getting all the fighting men at hand ready to defend the city.

By the third day the city was as orderly and quiet as if no rebellion had taken place. More so, if anything, for there were no rowdy gangs of carousing soldiers on the streets.

Mark noticed in the faces of the people a certain quality which hadn't been there before. Heads were higher, and everywhere people seemed to feel freedom from fear. It wasn't generally known that there was still a good possibility that this freedom might be snatched from them at any minute.

Mark had thought it better that way, for if everything went all right the armies of Erlaken and Erlahul would arrive in time to protect the city from Erlayok's forces. If they didn't, no purpose would be served by getting the civilian population uneasy by telling them of the impending battle. Everything was being done for the defense of the city which could be done. There were dozens of outposts stationed along the routes by which both armies would approach.

In matters of civil government Jon showed his ability. The smooth, orderly way the city's normal operation was restored was due mainly to his efforts.

Murf and Smid quickly realized that Mark's choice of the Duke as the future supreme ruler of the Brish was a wise one. He had been born to the job and was by far the most capable man for it.

During the morning of the third day dispatches arrived from the most distant of the cities informing them that the victory had gone to the rebels. Order had been restored and the rebel commanders were taking charge of all civil activities until such time as the permanent government took hold.

About noon of the third day, the blow fell.

A rider came into the prison courtyard, his horse covered with lather. He brought the news that Mark had been expecting. Less than ten miles outside of the city a large body of horsemen had been sighted—coming from the north. They were estimated at about five hundred. But by their comparative slow pace it was believed that they were followed by a much larger body of men on foot.

No word was forthcoming from the route to the west, the direction from which their own forces would come.

"How many horses have we?" Mark inquired of Smid.

"A bare two hundred," was the answer "But we can commandeer perhaps a thousand."

A hasty conference followed. It was planned to send only three hundred horsemen to engage the vanguard of Erlayok's forces. There was a thick wood to the west of the city at a distance of about two miles. The plan was for the rebel horsemen to engage the enemy briefly and then retreat, drawing them toward the forest. Previously placed in concealment would be as many archers as they could muster. These would pick off the enemy and capture as many horses as possible.

With the captured horses and the ones which could be commandeered, the rebels would be mounted and would be used against the main body of the enemy army. It was assumed, of course, that the enemy cavalry had all been sighted, and their total number was somewhere near five hundred.

It was a safe assumption, for it wasn't likely that any horsemen would be at the rear of the enemy forces. Their objective was directly before them and no flank was to be considered.

The big unknown factor in the rebels' plans was the number of foot soldiers they would have to fight.

CHAPTER XXIV

LONELY BATTLE

MARK rode at the head of the rebel cavalry. They approached the enemy from a tangent, slightly to the west of their line of march. Mark could see beyond the mounted force to the infantry behind it. And well to the rear he saw, bulking large in the midst of the walking soldiers, a horse and a rider. The animal was of tremendous proportion.

Even in the distance Mark could guess that it was a work horse pressed into service for an unusual purpose. On its back rode a huge man. Erlayok.

The rebel coup was carried out without a hitch. They engaged the enemy, and as Erlayok's cavalry began to execute a flanking move, by curling the ends of their formation into a crescent shape, Mark's horsemen retreated in what looked like a disorganized rout.

The enemy saw its chance to wipe out the inferior force, and followed at a gallop.

But when Mark's group reached the edge of the wood, it suddenly turned to give battle. And the archers got in their deadly work as the two bodies clashed.

Only a few escaped to return to the main body of Erlayok's army. And the horses taken were over three hundred.

At another conference between Mark, Jon, Murf and Smid, a plan for the next engagement was hastily worked out. Jon had taken part in the first brush, for the archers had been mainly his own men. But when the plans for the coming engagement were completed, he was surprised to find himself suddenly thrust into a cell.

To his indignant protests, Mark only grinned. Murf gave the key to the cell to Spud, with orders that if the enemy penetrated into the city to release the Duke and give him a chance to get his family to safety.

"You see," explained Mark. "One man won't make much difference out there. And it's going to be your job to run this country if we succeed in beating Erlayok. Men like you and Smid are not to be risked on the battlefield. You're too valuable."

They left him still protesting and went out to lead their forces, Mark with the cavalry and Murf with the infantry. They didn't delay, but put their plans into action at once. The further from the city the battle took place, the better.

Murf led his forces directly to the north, toward the center of Erlayok's main body. Mark remained out of sight with about twelve hundred horsemen, until the ground force was over halfway to the enemy.

The plan was to allow Erlayok's generals to observe that the opposing force was far inferior to their own. The obvious reaction would be to spread their men along a wide front, with the idea of flanking the smaller body.

It worked. But just before the two armies clashed and too late for the enemy to re-form, Mark's cavalry dashed around the sides of Murf's force and plowed into the far-flung ends of enemy formation.

The maneuver was executed with such perfect timing that Erlayok's forces were thrown into confusion. Their superiority in numbers was quickly cut down. The compact central body of Murf's fighters, even though untrained and poorly equipped, cut the enemy forces in half.

Mark, in the thick of the battle, was dividing his attention between murderous use of his flashing axe, and keeping an eye on the whole engagement.

He looked ahead to the point where he had last seen the ponderous white horse of Erlayok's.

For a few minutes, the business of keeping enemy swords from hamstringing him kept him absorbed, and the next time he saw Erlayok, Erlayok was urging his mount to a gallop, in full retreat. Mark glanced ahead of him. There, coming at a trot, was a large body of foot-soldiers.

Mark ordered a retreat, on the double.

The rebel cavalry allowed Murf's group to retire first, covering their retreat. But the shattered forces of the enemy made no attempt to pursue. They re-formed and waited for the new arrivals to come up.

It would have been folly to attempt to fight any longer out in the open. They were outnumbered two to one. The only hope now lay in keeping the enemy from entering the city. If they could hold Erlayok off until the armies of the other earls arrived, victory was certain.

Mark was assailed by a sudden fear when he thought of this. It was possible that something had happened to Erlaken's courier, and no armies would arrive! He had thought of sending several men for that job, but had hated to take any of his fighters away at a time when it appeared he would need every man.

Fortunately the City of Scarbor was not a scraggly affair with its houses thinning toward its outer edges. It had been built obviously for defense. Its edges were clearly defined and not jutting out haphazardly. The last house on each street came opposite the last house on the adjoining street.

Quite a few of the streets ended in high walls, joining the houses. There were only about thirty streets in the whole city which were not thus protected. Roads led out from these to the surrounding countryside.

Mark and Murf worked like Trojans, deploying their forces where they would do the most good. Jon's archers and as many of the rebels who could handle a bow were stationed on the rooftops. The rest were placed at the street entrances.

Chains were hastily stretched across between the buildings.

As Erlayok's formidable force approached it split into a dozen sections. Lacking siege equipment none attempted to assail the walls, but each body stormed the street entrance nearest to it.

Time after time the defenders beat them back. And time after time reinforcements were rushed to some street where too many deaths had weakened the defense.

MARK kept moving from point to point, lending his deadly axe when he spotted places which were weakening. The battle waged for an hour, the invaders not gaining an inch. But the victory was going to Erlayok just the same.

Althought his forces were suffering heavily, the dead beginning to pile up at the chained street-entrances, the defenders were dying also, though in lesser numbers.

But while Erlayok was holding men in reserve to fill the places of the fallen, Mark's numbers were strictly limited. Already he was having trouble keeping all the points of assault covered with sufficient men to hold them.

As his no longer gleaming axe became slippery with the red creeping up its handle, Mark's thoughts wandered away from the hopeless battle.

He still shouted meaningless encouragement to the desperate rebels, but fighting had become a mechanical thing. His tireless body and lightning reflexes protected him from too dangerous wounds. And it wasn't necessary for him to devote his undivided attention to the business of fight-

ing. His thoughts strayed. Strayed to the one he would probably never see again. Nona.

There was no hope in him any more. The end of his adventure was too clearly discernible in the way the fight was progressing. And as long as these courageous farmers and laborers continued to mock their fate, he knew that he would stay to the end.

And the end would be his end. Erlayok would see to that. The mad noble would carve his body into so many bits that not even a jig-saw puzzle expert would be able to put them together again.

The vision of the lovely Nona danced before him. He saw her now as he used to see her during those mock battles aboard the Viking ship. He smiled as he watched her determined expression, the flowing grace of her beautiful body, the flashing sweeps of the double-bitted axe in her hand. . . .

CHAPTER XXV

FAIR HARBOR

A LONE figure stood atop the little knoll and gazed toward the west. Eyes shaded from a sun that was low on the horizon, she seemed to be searching, perplexedly. A little while before she had seen a terrific battle in progress at the very place she was now inspecting.

She had been on board a vessel, coming toward the shore, when she had sighted the conflict. A rise of land had hidden it from her as the ship approached a landing. When her vessel had beached she had dashed ashore ahead of her shipmates and climbed to the top of the rise.

But in the interval the battle had finished and none but the dead and dying remained to mark the spot.

She looked beyond the site of the conflict and wondered if the men had vanished into the thick wood she saw there.

Then she turned and saw that all four of the ships of her fleet had beached, and pouring from them were hundreds of huge Viking rovers, all armed with axe and shortsword. These were the fighters she had brought with her, the breed who would rather fight than eat and whose appetites were tremendous.

Proudly she watched them swarm across the beach. They were all men who had rallied at her call, wanting nothing but the opportunity to lay down their lives for her and for her man, Mark. They had even been told that Mark would disapprove of looting in this country, but had come just the same.

As she watched them there came to her sensitive ears faint sounds, shouting, cries of pain, carried on a vagrant breeze. She turned her head, trying to locate the source.

Her eyes chanced on a city in the distance. In landing she had seen this city, but in her anxiety to see if her man was engaged in the battle on the plain, she had forgotten it. But now, looking more fixedly, she saw tiny groups moving toward the dark rectangles formed by gaps between the flat sides of houses and walls. Gaps which were street ends.

Still watching, she saw an occasional tiny flash of light within the shadowed recesses of these rectangles. Flashes such as might be made by stray beams of sunlight reflected on axe and sword-blades.

Suddenly she sprang into action, leaping down from the knoll and running toward her Vikings. In seconds she had the entire band in motion, trotting toward the city.

She sped along before them, not taking her eyes from the scene at its edge.

Getting closer by the minute she made out more and more detail. Occasionally she would get a glimpse of a dented helmet adorned with wings, moving about among the defenders. Then she would lose sight of it, only to see it reappear a hundred yards away, at another of the street-entrances.

She led her band directly toward the place where the greatest number of the invaders seemed to be concentrated, for it was there that the winged helmet appeared the more often.

With a wordless roar which had been heard in ancient Copenhagen, the Vikings plowed into the besiegers. Veterans of a dozen battles, every man of them, they made quick inroads into the mass of Erlayok's men.

AT THE deafening sound of the Norsemen's battle cry and the clashing of axes which immediately followed, Erlayok wheeled his ponderous mount and urged it to a clumsy gallop. He had been directing the attack on the city at a safe distance from the fighting. But now he suddenly found himself in the thick of it.

The Vikings were boring through his reserves and he was directly in their path!

Frantically he dug his heels into the flanks of his mount, at the same time flaying it with the reins. His one driving impulse was to leave the vicinity with all haste. This battle was already lost, he could see. His men would never be able to stand before these giant Norsemen.

But if he could get clear, there were many thousands of soldiers who could yet be rallied in a second attempt to retake the city. This time he would drag every regiment he could muster from the borders.

He should have done that in the first place, he realized now. But he had been confident that a few thousand soldiers would be sufficient to beat back the poorly equipped rebels and he had returned with the first few regiments he had contacted.

The draft horse he was riding was doing its best to obey his frantic urging and seemed to be getting every last bit of speed out of its ponderous body. The Vikings were pressing nearer, driving through the ranks of Erlayok's men with little effort.

Actually their advance was far too slow to cut off the flight of the Earl, but to him it seemed that they would be upon him in a few seconds. His horse was thundering away, parallel to their advance, and was almost clear when he again flayed at its shoulders with the ends of the rein.

It was a fatal mistake.

One end of the rein flicked momentarily at the horse's eyes as he made to strike again. At the sudden pain the horse faltered in its stride and reared, throwing off the Earl. He fell heavily, but was on his feet immediately.

Gone now was all thought of flight. He couldn't get clear if he tried. And with the knowledge he determined to take as many Vikings as possible before one of them got him. But even in this resolve he was thwarted.

His sword was barely clear of its scabbard when when a brawny Norseman gleefully cut at him with a battle-axe. The cut landed, cleaving through his helmet as if it were tissue paper. Erlayok went down without striking a blow.

Nona, her axe weaving and slashing with equal effect to that of the brawniest of her Norsemen, fought her way toward the spot where she could see the dented headpiece of her husband rising a foot above the head-level of the men he was battling.

As her flashing axe and darting short-sword cleared a path for her she saw his face, grim and sad. He was fighting with the mechanical precision and efficiency of a machine, but by his face his thoughts were far away.

Then his eyes seemed to light on her, as she fought her way closer to him.

She saw the smile that was at once happy and sad, but he still seemed to be moving and seeing in a dream. His axe sheared the arm from one of the invaders, and moved sideways to sink in the neck of another. His body weaved to avoid the lunge of a striking sword and he backstepped to allow a battle-axe whistle harmlessly past—but the expression remained the same through it all.

THEN it changed—and Nona found herself fighting for her life. She had forged too far into that mass of fighting maniacs. The enemy was on both sides of her as well as to the front. Her body weaved and dodged with desperate rapidity. Her axe slashed and bit deeply. Her sword wove a gleaming wall around her.

But in spite of it she felt the bite of a dagger in the flesh of an arm, and a hammering blow on her helmet. Time after time momentary flashes of pain marked the slice or stab of an enemy weapon.

Wildly her lips formed the word, "Mark!" And with a roar which drowned out all other sound, a fighting avalanche of furious bone and muscle dove at the enemy surrounding her.

They melted in the savagery of the onslaught. In an instant she was gathered in capable arms and raised aloft, carried back away from the din of the fighting.

For a long minute Mark crushed her to him, then released her to hold her at arm's length. He feasted his eyes for another long silent minute, then frowned.

"Nona—you crazy, wonderful lunatic! Where on earth did you come from?"

She smoothed down an almost non-existent dress and patted his cheek before replying. Her expression was elaborately casual though her eyes did give her away.

"I knew you'd get in trouble if you were left alone," she said. "So I gathered some of the boys to help out. You're so helpless, you know, that . . .

She couldn't continue, for her lips had suddenly become very, very busy.

LESS than a month later the four Viking ships were being provisioned for the return voyage to Stadtland. The Norsemen were well satisfied with the results of their little venture. True, they had wanted nothing, but the trip had been profitable nevertheless.

They had been fêted in half a dozen cities, and loaded with presents in each. The people of this land had suddenly found that they were in a position to be generous for favors received. The coffers of certain of the nobles who had fought to the last ditch, and whose property had been confiscated as a result, contained wealth in abundance.

Erlayok's riches alone would have paid for all the damage done in the rebellion.

Futhermore the Brish had found that there was no more need for the swollen armies they had been supporting, and their taxes were going to drop as a result.

Word had gone to the kingdoms to the north and the west, and a permanent peace had been established. Thousands of men were coming from the armies to enter industry of all kinds, and places were being found for them.

And the taxes which were necessary would be borne by a greater number. There would be a long period of industrial reorganization before everything would run smoothly, but during that period no man or woman would suffer. There were vast hoarded sums to carry the government through this period. More than would be needed.

Jon was carrying on, with the enthusiastic cooperation of everyone, as the new king. Smid was elevated to dukedom, and was working as he had always worked, for the betterment of his people. Murf, now admittedly the Mic that he was, remained as the ambassador of his father.

A new era had begun, and Mark's work was done. At the rail of the flagship as it left the shores of the land of the Brish, Nona looked up and read an uneasiness in his eyes.

"Now, Mark, when you get that look in your eyes— Oh well, I suppose there's no sense in arguing. More worlds to conquer?"

"Perhaps," he said, loftily. Then he smiled. "No, that isn't it. I've forgotten something, but I don't know what it is."

With a derisive tilt to her eyebrows she surveyed his single garment, and the belt from which hung his axe and a dagger.

"You didn't have much to start with, if I remember correctly," she observed.

"No," he pondered. "It wasn't anything like that. I believe it's something I forgot to do. . . .Oh never mind, I'll think of it sometime."

As he said this, they suddenly noticed a strange contrivance, on the deck beside them, which hadn't been there a minute before. It was a table-like affair of spools, wheels, needle and thread. A treadle situated between its feet was oscillating mer-

rily away without visible means of locomotion. Nona raised a hand to her lips.

"Whatever is that?" she asked through her fingers.

"A sewing machine," said Mark, resignedly.

At these words, the contrivance vanished and was replaced by a fearsome monstrosity which clanked, snorted and rattled. It was quite large and formidable appearing. Nona's eyes asked the question.

"A threshing machine," Mark explained.

There followed a bewildering procession of machines designed for every purpose imaginable, and most of them noisy and awe-inspiring. Nona was beginning to become a bit upset. There came a lull in the squeaking and clattering—an electric fan was humming softly and blowing Nona's hair at the moment—and Mark explained.

"THIS," he said, "is Omega's gentle reminder that I practically blackmailed him into stealing the designs of a certain machine. After which I promptly forgot all about it, and didn't even stick around to see if he succeeded. Very ill-mannered of me, and he's letting me know what he thinks about it."

Abruptly the fan disappeared and Omega revealed himself in his usual caricature of an old man, toothless and decrepit.

"I'll accept that as an apology," he said, crisply. "It's all I'm likely to get. And of course, not so much as a word of thanks."

"Things were sort of hectic," Mark said. "What with the revolution breaking out just after I talked to you." His apologetic expression suddenly left as he thought of the lion he had been confronted with at Omega's departure on that occasion. "Say at that maybe it's you who owe me an apology. You're as absent-minded as I am. That lion might have bitten an arm off me, when you decided to leave."

Omega chuckled. "I did that for revenge," he said. "But of course if he had managed to dispose of your arm I'd have given you a new one."

"Thanks. Well, we're even then. Where's the machine?"

"You don't need it, do you?"

Mark hesitated. "No, not exactly, though it might come in handy some time. I could drive a ship with it, you know."

"Nothing doing! The race which invented it not only drove ships with it, they did everything with it which required power. And once they had bent it to every purpose it could fulfill, they sat back and enjoyed the fruits of their work. They had a perfect mechanical civilization! Everything they could possibly desire was provided for them.

"But when the time came that their sun was approaching the point where it was about to burst, none of them had intelligence enough to move their planet out of harm's way. Yet they could have done that little thing if they had still possessed the knowledge that was theirs at the time of its invention."

Mark got it. "You mean that once they had achieved perfection, they let up?"

"Precisely," Omega affirmed. "They ceased to improve their minds and those minds stagnated. They had built a machine which usurped a function of their brains. That function still remains to be developed in your own brain, as well as the one which would give you control of telepathy, and you will have to develop them yourself.

"I'm not going to give you that machine! Given time, of which you have plenty, you should be able to master the function which will give you control over the forces of nature. You will learn to transport yourself, by mental action, anywhere you wish. You might even learn to create matter from energy. Crudely, of course. In your lifetime you'll never be able to learn how to construct living bodies or even good copies. Your descendants will, though. But they never would if I gave you this machine."

Mark grinned. "All right," he soothed. "Don't get all het up about it. I don't need the machine anyway."

"So I found out after I came back from

my travel in time. I dropped in on some of the leaders of the Mics and the Macs. All they wanted was peace and normal commerce between their respective countries and the Brish. The whole thing was an unnatural condition brought about by the lust for power in Erlayok.

"On one of my visits I overheard a conversation which told me of the status of Murf. So instead of coming back with the machine which you thought you needed, I decided to give you a chance to get things straight. Your horse was very surprised when I forced him to make that turn."

"You did that?" Mark exclaimed. "Why didn't you let me know you were there? You could have given me the whole story and saved a lot of time."

Omega chuckled. "Murf had no trouble convincing you. And besides, I prefer to watch things develop in a more normal manner. I don't like to go about confounding people."

"No, of course not," said Mark.

"Well, we've got that settled," Omega said. "I'll see you again sometime. So long!"

"So long!"

For sometime after Omega had made his usual abrupt departure, Mark and Nona, arms entwined, gazed out over the endless vista of the swelling sea. In Nona's eyes was an expression of supreme content and happiness. In Mark's, there was at first the dancing gleam which reflected his innate spirit of unrest. But as the soothing influence of the swelling billows penetrated, and he became conscious of Nona's cool, firm flesh hollowed in the crook of his arm, his eyes also reflected the serenity and content which was hers.

THE END

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The Readers' Viewpoint

PEOPLE have been trying to stick labels all over us, and we don't take kindly to it. In these last few weeks we have been told more than once: "Of course you have to publish a Western and a South Seas story and a detective story in each issue, but it's really too bad. The fantastics are the only ones with real imagination in them." Or, another variation: "Can't you break away from the formula? After all, the detective stuff is the only thing that interests the adult readers."

Well now, look, folks: What formula? This magazine is not divided into neat little pigeon-holes, each with its unalterable classification. We are not thrown into a panic when we're lacking a South Seas story for the next issue; in fact, we put in some other sort of story—any sort of good story—and manage to remain quite calm. We know that the detective story fans are adult readers, and we are aware that the fantastic fans have a real appreciation of original writing. We are equally sure that the devotees of the Northwoods, the South Seas, the Mysterious East, and the Wild West all are fellows with excellent taste. So we don't worry about them. Singularly enough, we choose our stories because they are good ones, not because they fit nicely into set, water-tight compartments. We don't buy stories to hang them on pegs; we buy them for the simple reason that we like them.

And here, by the way, is a species of fan we didn't mention. He wants sea stories. See how it is?

JACKSON ROLLINGTON

My father followed the sea until the day he died, and I too have my A.B. certificate. Also, I have been reading the ARGOSY for a good many years. In all that time I have had only one kick. Why don't you print more sea stuff? Richard Watkins is tops in that field, but you have several other authors who are also great. Of course some of them make some silly mistakes from time to time, but on the whole their stories are vivid and true and make darned good reading. As I said before, my only complaint is that you don't give us enough.

What has happened to Captain Hornblower and why aren't you featuring him more? Those were the best serials ever printed in your book, and several of my friends had trouble getting hold of copies, and some missed out entirely and had to read my copies, with the result that those issues of ARGOSY are a sad-looking lot.

Well, I guess I have yammered on enough, but please remember—more sea stories!
CHELSEA, MASSACHUSETTS.

OUR second correspondent, a tolerant gentleman, seems to like almost everything. He even likes this department, and that, we think, proves him to be a man of acute judgment.

MANTELL McNARD

Maybe it's a little early for a comparatively new reader to be sticking his neck out among all the old correspondents; but I'd kind of like to put in a word for some of the ARGOSY features that nobody else ever seems to notice.

The stories are fine—sure. Not that I like Westerns very much, but what the heck, I guess ARGOSY has to please as many readers as possible. And I don't blame you any for that. And the rest of your stuff is gorgeous.

But what I started out to talk about was the special features that nobody seems to notice. Argonotes, for example, where this letter would be printed if you didn't throw it in the wastebasket first (you probably will.) The fellow that writes that department and puts the letters together, etc., must be mighty clever.

Also I'm mighty interested in those scientific articles by Dr. Charles Ticknor Tolson. He's the best popularizer of science I've read, and that's saying quite a lot. Where does he get all that stuff; I mean, how can he keep up with everything like that all the time?

More power to him, I say, and more power to ARGOSY. It's tops all the way through.
CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA.

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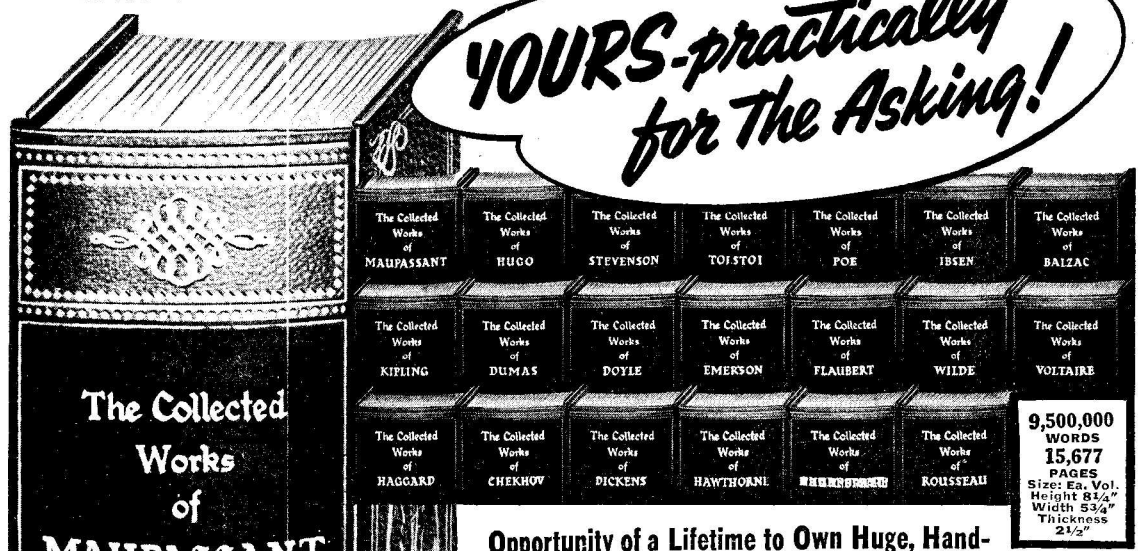

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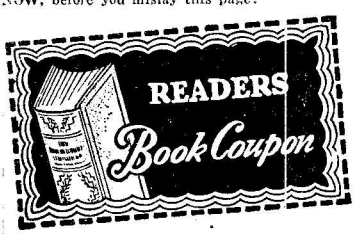

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