JUNE 29

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KURT STEEL'S GREATEST MYSTERY

ARGOSY

RED STAR MAGAZINE 629

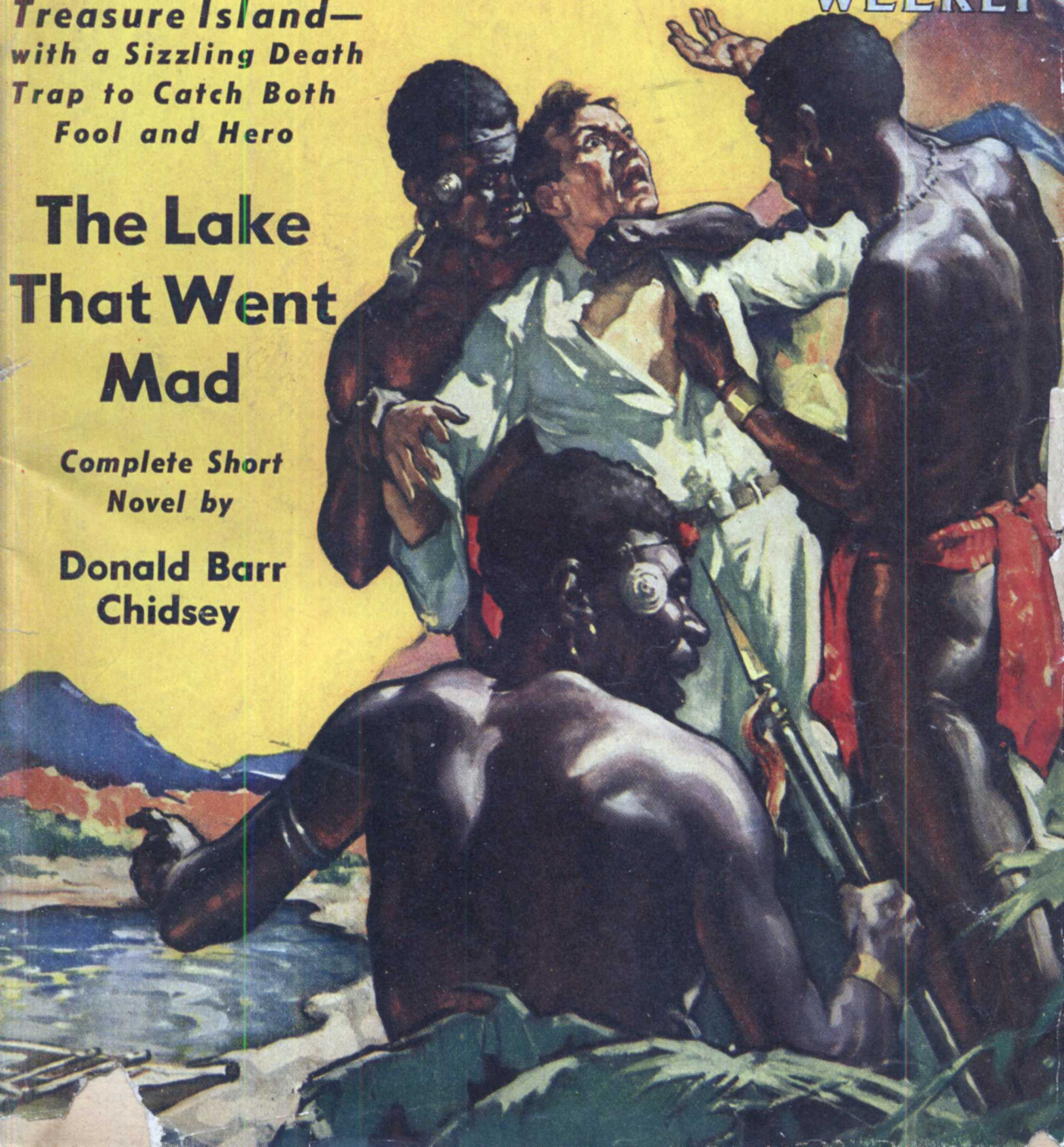
WEEKLY

Treasure Island—with a Sizzling Death Trap to Catch Both Fool and Hero

The Lake That Went Mad

Complete Short Novel by

Donald Barr Chidsey



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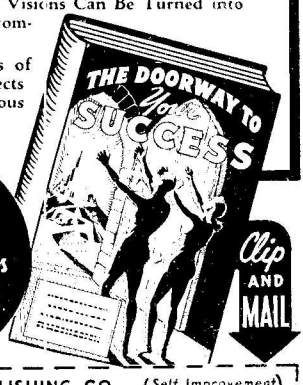

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ARGOSY

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Illustrating The Lake That Went Mad

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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Complete
Short Novel

The Lake That Went Mad

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY
Author of "Gateway to Oblivion," "Calamity River," etc.

CHAPTER I

KNIFE IN THE NIGHT

IT WAS not a story Dawson Wilde would ordinarily have believed; for he had knocked around in the South Seas long enough to discount ninety percent of what he heard. Dawson was not aggressively skeptical; but neither was he a fool.

He heard the tale in a smelly little pub in Sydney, as a result of what was virtually an accident. The place was crowded. Dawson, alone, leaned on one end of the bar and sipped beer.

He was going to start back for Tahiti the following day, by way of Noumea, and this fact made him glad and perhaps a little dreamy. He had no interest in the fight until, as bar-

Henry Ash screamed and jumped over the edge of the crater into the hissing, bubbling water

When the traveler to Tahiti wakes up at night with a knife at his throat, let him look out for other omens: a ghost in a ship's galley, a house furnished with blood, and a lake whose water is fire

room brawls will do, it thrust itself upon him willy-nilly.

The little man, birdfaced, beaky, though all of fifty knew how to use his fists—and likewise his elbows and feet and knees. Efficiently, with great speed, before anybody could stop them, before the porter could come around from behind the bar, this little man had fought his younger and huskier opponent half the length of the pub. Now, his back to nobody except the unnoticed Dawson, the bigger man, in a panic, reached for his hip pocket.

No, it was not a pistol, nor yet a knife. But it was a weapon which in these close quarters could have been almost as injurious. It was a set of what our British cousins call knuckle dusters; and we, regardless of the metal

involved, brass knuckles. Only Dawson could see it.

Now all this was none of Dawson's business. Still, brass knuckles seemed a bit out of line. Not quite sporting. And without stopping to think, Dawson lifted his right foot and kicked them out of the man's hand—from behind.

The man wheeled, screaming curses. He snatched a bottle from the bar, raised it. Dawson dashed the contents of his stein straight into the man's face.

It was all over after that, very quickly. The porter got into the field and handled the situation in a competent manner, so that in a little while everything was quiet again; or at least as quiet as any pub within an hour of closing time is likely to be.

Dawson, holding an empty stein, had just decided to call it a day, when there was an apologetic tap on his elbow.

"Thanks for what you done."

Dawson smiled.

"Forget it," he said, and started away.

"I sye, lemme get you another beer. Shall we go to a tyble?"

In a corner of the lounge the bird-like little man told the story. One more story, Dawson thought.

THE little man's name was Lorn and he was English—no Ozzie, no "Orstrylian." Yes, he was a limey. And he knew where there was a lot of money that could be had. Cash money.

Dawson nodded politely and politely asked where.

"I'm a syler, see?" Lorn's eyes went back and forth. He leaned far over the table, speaking in a confidential whisper. He was a tough little old man, tough as hickory, but just now very drunk.

"Couple of months ago I was on a B.P. coaster up in the New 'Ebrides, copra 'ooker, and we put in at Ndui Ndui in the island of Aoba, which is in the north part of the group. Eyen't many vessels ever touch at Aoba even them kind. We was only there a couple of hours. But I got ashore a little while, and who d'ye think I saw?"

"I give up."

Lorn said "'Enry Ash," and twinkled in triumph, immediately afterward darting glances here and there to be sure that nobody had overheard.

"I'm afraid that doesn't help," Dawson said.

"Y'eyen't never 'eard of 'Enry Ash? Y'eyen't never 'eard of the Godley Trust kyse?"

"I've only been here about a week. I'm an American."

"Ar, that explines it. Well, this 'Enry Ash . . ."

This Henry Ash, it seemed, had been a teller at the Godley Trust Co., Pty., Ltd., of Sydney, and three years ago he had disappeared, as had, at the same time, a matter of some twelve thousand five hundred pounds Australian. At the rate of exchange then prevalent, Dawson calculated idly, this would be worth almost fifty thousand dollars in American money.

Henry Ash had been sought without success. But not until more than a week after his disappearance had his employers learned that another teller, Ash's friend Charles Warren Macready, also had books that did not balance.

Macready, it seemed, had started his regular vacation the very day Ash disappeared. He was a bachelor and a small-boat enthusiast, and he had gone off in his twenty-eight-foot cutter, meaning to visit the Great Barrier Reef.

At the time it was supposed that he had been alone. But when his books

too showed crooked work, an alarm was sent out for him.

It was learned, too late, that Macready had shown up in his cutter at Port Vila, almost fourteen hundred miles from Sydney. He said he had been blown out of his course and had single-handed it the whole distance, entering Port Vila, though he didn't have clearance papers for that port, as a distressed seaman.

He had taken on an uncommonly large amount of water and supplies for one man (as it occurred to the local authorities later) and had sailed after an uncommonly brief stay, announcing that he was going to single-hand it back to Sydney.

It was later reported as a certain thing that Henry Ash had been aboard the cutter all the while it was in Vila. Natives swore they had seen him peeping out for a breath of air.

Anyway the cutter was never seen again. And neither was Macready. And neither was Ash—until Lorn saw him in far Aoba.

"What did you do?" Wilde asked.

"DO? WHY, I tried to find out everything I could about 'im. Y'see, when I saw 'im 'e was in a canoe with some niggers paddling *out,* whilst I was in the launch going *in* from the ship. Just passed 'im, see? But I recognized 'im from 'is pictures in the pypers. I'd syved the cuttings, d'ye see, like I often does with a kyse that interests me.

"Well, I described 'im to a tryder there in Aoba and to a missionary. They was Frenchies, an' I showed 'em the cuttings which they couldn't read, but they could see the pictures, and they both says yes, that was the syme man who'd just gone off in a canoe.

"'Is nyme was Blyke, they says, and 'e lived on a little island nymed Makama. 'E'd lived there about three years, they says. A tryder. The only white man there. It's a speck of a plyce and there don't any ships put in there at all. Copra's carried by canoes to the nearest island where ships ever call.

"They didn't see Blyke more than once in six months, they says, and then for just a few hours when 'e'd come to get supplies. They didn't know nothing else about 'im."

Dawson gulped his beer.

"So I suppose you told the police?"

"The *police!*" The little man was astounded. "D'ye think I'm *crysy?* 'Ere's a bloke's off on a little island and 'e's either got twelve thousand five hundred quid or 'e's got at least 'alf of it—because Macready might be with 'im still but those Frenchies was certain the cutter wasn't there anyway—but the cutter could have been sunk—but anyway, 'ere's this bloke 'iding out.

"Why go to the police? Go to *'im,* to 'Enry Ash 'im*self,* and don't you think 'e'd be willing to divvy with you for keeping your fyce shut? It's just a question of 'ow to get there. Now if you've got enough funds, myte—"

"Sorry, I'm broke," said Dawson. And to change the conversation: "What was that fight about, a little while ago?"

"Oh, that? I'd 'ad one over the eight, couple of nights ago, and I got chatty, which is something I very seldom do. And like a fool I tells some blokes—hard blokes they are too—I tells them about seeing Ash.

"But I won't tell them whereabouts it was, and right awye they wants to know. And right awye I shuts my fyce. And the more they wants to know, the more I keeps my fyce shut.

"Then they threatens to do me in. And I laughs and walks awye. Well,

that was one of them, just now. Wanted me to step outside and talk to 'im and 'is friends, 'e did.

"Not me! I got more sense. 'E gets narsty and tries to drag me out—and you saw what 'appened."

Waiters were crying "Drink up, gents!" Britishers take closing time—which in Sydney is 6 p.m.!—very seriously.

"Think you'll be all right going home?" Dawson asked. This was August, winter down there, and it was already dark. "Maybe you'd better get a cop?"

"I'm all right. I don't like cops. Never."

Dawson paid for the beers and walked outside with him. The little man was unsteady of step, but he refused to let Dawson see him home when at the corner Dawson hailed a taxi.

Dawson did not insist. Dawson was sorry that he hadn't, next day when he saw an inconspicuous item in the Sydney News.

SEAMAN FOUND DEAD
Stabbed and Beaten in Alley

Yes, it was Lorn, who had recently returned from a voyage through the New Hebrides in a Burns Philp freighter. In addition to several stab wounds and many bruises and contusions, suggesting that he had been severely manhandled, his right arm was broken. The police believed that he had been tortured.

Poor little Lorn! Dawson, who still had a few hours before his ship sailed, went to the files of the *News* and looked up the Ash-Macready case. It was very much as Lorn had said. Twelve thousand five hundred pounds, two tellers, and a twenty-eight-foot cutter had been missing for three years.

Even so, Dawson Wilde would not have given any more thought to the matter—had it not been for what happened in New Caledonia.

HE HAD a week to wait in New Caledonia for the French ship which would take him back to Papeete by way of Port Vila, and he spent this time with his friend Marcel Senac, who owned a sheep ranch out beyond Huéguénée.

Together they had a wonderful time until Dawson, climbing down a gully, trusted too much in a seemingly firm *niaouli* scrub which came out roots and all, precipitating him below in a shower of stones and causing him to sprain his ankle.

This in itself was not serious, though it was painful for a few days; but when he started back for Noumea, the port, at the south end of the island, he had to ride in such easy stages to the place where he could catch a bus that he arrived exactly an hour late—to learn that for once the French ship had sailed on time.

It would be six weeks before another ship would sail to Tahiti; and Dawson, cursing, hobbled along the waterfront asking about cutters and small schooners.

Was there anything going up to Port Vila, where at least he would have a change of scenery while he waited? Or better still, was there anything going to the Fiji Islands, from where it might be possible to catch a New Zealand freighter to Tahiti?

No. Boatmen and waterfront hangers-on shook their heads.

Unless, one of them said suddenly, Monsieur Pontalis came back soon in the little schooner he had just won. Monsieur Pontalis was somewhere outside the reef in that craft, trying out

its sailing qualities. He was a man who might undertake any sort of commission.

"You don't mean *Eduard* Pontalis? Tall, fat?"

Yes, that was the man. Eduard Pontalis. And of course he was mad.

"You're darn' tootin' he is!" Dawson cried. Then in French: "Where could one encounter this Monsieur Pontalis?"

"In Constans' cafe at the head of the Place des Cocotieres."

"Merci. Merci beaucoup!"

Dawson was delighted to learn that another Tahitian friend was in New Caledonia, though he was not in the least amazed. Most of the crackpot adventurers of that part of the world get to Tahiti sooner or later, and many settle there.

Eduard Pontalis, that exuberantly goofy though in some respects very clever promoter, had found it a place after his own heart. If he could have remained anywhere for any length of time, it would be Tahiti.

Eduard, however, was a man who simply could not stay put. He roamed. Singapore was his backyard, Nukuhiva his veranda. He would pop up in Batavia with a grand idea, launch it, make it start to pay; and then, because he was restless, sell it at the first price offered and clear out for some other unlikely city, where, surcharged with enthusiasm and bright thoughts, he would start something else.

Money itself he never really sought. It was just the excitement of the thing. He called himself a business man but in fact he was the most unbusinesslike person Dawson knew. He was a born gambler.

So now he had a schooner? Dawson chuckled. It would be good to see Eduard again, and listen to his gorgeous schemes.

But Eduard did not show up that night, and at closing time Dawson went back to his room in the Pacifique.

SOME time before dawn—it was a dark night—he was awakened by something, he did not know what. He sat up. A noise?

Instantly a hand was on his chest and against his throat something cold and very thin was placed.

"Lie back, *monsieur*, or you die."

The thing at his throat moved a trifle, and though he felt no pain he was conscious that it had drawn blood. It must have been razor-sharp.

"Lie back, slowly."

He obeyed, moving back as the hand pushed him. He could feel the warm blood on his neck now. He could not see the man who leaned over him, except as a blurred shapelessness.

The command to lie back had been given in bad French. Javanese, Dawson guessed.

"If he moves, slice him," said somebody in the middle of the room.

This second man, from his voice, was no Oriental; no Frenchman either, though he spoke in French. English, Dawson deduced from the accent. Or else Australian.

Dawson lay perfectly still, the metal at his throat. He heard the other man move quietly around the room. There was an occasional flare of light upon the ceiling—the man was evidently using a masked flash—but this was not sufficient to enable Dawson to see much.

After a long time, the man in the center of the room said calmly, "All right, we're going to go now." He spoke in English. "My friend here is a master at throwing a knife, so if I were you, Wilde, I'd stay right there in bed for a few minutes. *Allez!*"

The thing at Dawson's throat was

removed. The window curtains were yanked back. Two silhouettes flitted past the vague smear of starshine, across the balcony, over the rail. Two pairs of feet thudded on the soft earth of the garden.

Dawson was out of bed in a bound. He dashed to the windows, stooping. Something *slee*-ed past his head and clattered on the floor of the room. But the garden, thick with bushes and low-hanging tropical trees, was utterly silent; no shadow stirred there.

Dawson went back into the room. He snapped on the light, picked up the knife, joggled it. Yes, it was Javanese. He looked around.

They had done an extraordinarily thorough job. It was more than an hour before Dawson could be sure that in fact nothing was missing. Every article of his clothing, every one of his personal effects had been unfolded, taken apart, examined.

The room had been searched from end to end. The rugs had been rolled up. The lining had even been ripped out of Dawson's suitcases. But absolutely nothing had been stolen.

He held the knife again, staring at it. He sighed. "*Very* funny . . ." He turned out the light and went back to bed.

CHAPTER II

THE HAUNTED GALLEY

EDUARD PONTALIS, located at the cafe in the morning, was boisterously interested in the tale. He waved his arms, spilling his coffee. He spread his hands. But this was wonderful! This was the great chance for them!

Eduard was very large and very fat, and looked as if he ought to be lazy. As a matter of fact, he was a dynamo. He probably even tossed in his sleep. Awake, he was never still a minute.

Dawson looked at him, smiling.

"You mean to tell me you really think there's something in it?"

"*Absolument, mon ami!*" He thumbed back an absurdly small mustache set in the middle of his great fat face.

"Conceive. You have six weeks and no-thing to do. I have a small schooner and no-thing to carry in her. I wish to learn how she sails, this schooner.

"*Voila!* We go together, you and I, to Makama. If we find Ash there and Macready, either one or both, we make money, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Dawson was momentarily nettled. He had known that Eduard took up some pretty wild schemes from time to time, but this was the first intimation he'd had that the man might be crooked.

"You don't mean to tell me," he asked slowly, "that if you find them there you'd do what Lorn planned—hold them up for blackmail?"

"Ah, *non, non, non, non!* We are no criminals, *mon ami!* But there is the reward! Did you not read about it? Five thousand pounds for evidence leading to the arrest and conviction of those two!

"For evidence only, you conceive? We do not have to seize these men, or even threaten them. We have only to determine that they are there, on Makama, and report to the police. Then we divide five thousand pounds!"

Put this way, the idea appealed to Dawson. It was quite possible, after all, that Henry Ash was hiding on Makama.

The fact that Lorn had been murdered, with evidences of torture, had not at first impressed Dawson. Lorn probably would have had enemies. But the fact that his own room, Dawson's room, had been so thoroughly and elaborately searched here in Noumea . . .

Somebody had wanted to know the name of that island, Makama, and Lorn would not tell. Somebody had seen him talking in low tones with Lorn, in the lounge of that pub in Sydney.

Yesterday, here in Noumea, somebody who still wished to know the name of that island had seen Dawson and recognized him and followed him, and had heard him asking along the waterfront for a small schooner.

It fitted. It was fantastic, perhaps, but it fitted. It could be true.

In any event, as Eduard had pointed out, what could he lose? He had six weeks to spend somehow before the next Messageries Maritimes ship would sail for Tahiti. Why not spend them knocking around with Eduard, a good companion always, among the little-known islands of the northern New Hebrides? He could be back in Port Vila in plenty of time.

"Have you got charts, Eduard? We might look up Makama?"

"We will do so *immediatement!* Come along, my friend!"

On the way down to the water Eduard explained that he had won the boat three nights ago at *chemin de fer.* He had entered the game with only a few thousand francs all he had in the world. And now he owned a schooner, which until this morning he had not known what to do with.

Among his talents, which was many, he was a good navigator. But he had been bored by the prospect of ordinary inter-island trade, carrying copra here, calico and petrol there, knocking monotonously back and forth with no real opportunity to make money.

"She is call' the *Jab-ber-wock.* What is a jab-ber-wock?"

"Well, it's a sort of animal."

"Ah, *bien!* She is register' in Hong-kong; the crew is Chinese."

"The what?"

"His name is Ma Sing."

The *Jabberwock,* her owner declared, was easy to handle, though not fast. Certainly she was no beauty. Forty-six feet overall, with a Dutch beaminess, she was two-masted and ketch rigged (every sailing vessel in those parts, regardless of rig, is called a schooner) yet with it all she had a certain squat jauntiness, and she appeared sturdy enough to take anything the sea could throw at her.

Ma Sing, cook, steward and occasional deck hand, went with the boat. He was minute and looked rather like a monkey, acted rather like one too. A Cantonese, he was jumpy, expressive, excitable, as men from the south of China usually are, the antithesis of the fictional traditional impassive son of the East.

He jabbered, monkey-like again; and what he jabbered might have been pidgin English or it might have been almost anything. Dawson could catch a noun every now and then, and the adjectives were supplied by Ma Sing's never-still mouth and eyes, the verbs by his hands.

Eduard, who could understand at least a little of almost every known language, got along with him perfectly.

"He is a poor cook, but I think he loves me. He smokes not much—two pipes in the middle of the day, three pipes at night. That is all I allow."

Ma Sing grinned, yammering. Eduard and Dawson went below, and Eduard unfastened the chart rack.

MAKAMA they located, a dot slightly west of Maewo—perhaps two hundred miles north of Port Vila if you went as the crow flies, which because of innumerable intervening islands and reefs you couldn't do.

It is doubtful whether there could

be found anywhere in the world a spot less salubrious (it was tucked away just underneath the equator), or more lovely to look at, or more dangerous to visit.

For there are still cannibals in the New Hebrides. The two greatest colonial empires, not having been able to make up their minds which ought to grab this group, agreed at last to share it.

Two governments; and as a result, no straight governmental policy. If you push inland beyond cultivated country, or if you stop off at any of the smaller and more remote islands like Makama, you do so at your own risk.

"It will be the good sport, eh, *mon ami?*"

Dawson grinned, staring at the map. Dawson Wilde was a young man of great common sense, in ordinary circumstances, but there was no getting away from the enthusiasm of his friend.

"Yes, I think it might be the good sport, at that," he said.

"*Voila!* I will get papers to clear tomorrow! Today we stock water and provisions! Ma Sing! *Ici!*"

That night Dawson stayed aboard. They were to sail at dawn; for after many arguments, and much yelling and expostulating and waving of arms, they had got clearance papers and supplies.

They were ready. Ma Sing, grinning even in his sleep, was in his cubbyhole of a galley, where the five-foot bunk was plenty long for him. Pontalis, scorning the cramped skipper's cabin, slept, snoring magnificently, in a bunk opposite that of his friend.

Dawson himself, however, did not sleep. He would have denied that he was excited; but indisputably, though tired, he remained awake.

His position both disconcerted and amused him. That gusto of Eduard's —it caught on like fire. The last thing Dawson had expected to be committed to, a few hours earlier, was a trip in an ancient ketch, with a Frenchman and a Chinese, to a remote pestilential isle.

But Eduard and his enthusiasm—yes, it was like fire. It caught you up and—

Like fire . . . Was he asleep and dreaming? No, you don't sniff in your dreams: that was *smoke* he smelled!

Suddenly wide awake, he heard the scuff of a foot on deck. He yelled something to Eduard and scrambled up the ladder.

He never saw the man well. Another Javanese, or perhaps the same one, but Dawson did not see him well because of the glare.

A sack of old newspapers and oily rags had been split open at the foot of the mainmast, right in the middle of a lot of running gear which, from its odor, had been soaked in gasoline. The glare was blinding. And there was a similar blaze forward, just abaft the foremast.

Still yelling for Eduard, Dawson started to kick the flaming rags and balls of newspaper overboard. The man, seen dimly through the smoke, darted at him. Dawson sidestepped, swung a long and marvelously lucky left hook which caught the man flush on the side of the jaw.

Something stung Dawson's left forearm, something tickled on the deck, and the man, staggering, struck the cowling and tumbled backward into the water. Dawson went on stamping out fire and kicking it overside.

Eduard was doing the same thing forward now, with gibbering little Ma Sing to help him.

It took a good fifteen minutes, and when they had finished they were not pretty to behold, being black with smoke and at the same time slimy with sweat.

There was no important damage. The

five-gallon tin of gasoline they found aft, near where Dawson had tackled the arsonite, was more than half full. Fortunately it had stayed upright.

Dawson picked up something else. He joggled it on his palm. And he noticed a little blood on it, and for the first time became aware of the cut on his left arm. He pocketed the thing.

"I'm making a collection of these."

Eduard Pontalis faced him with arms dramatically outspread.

"*Mon ami,* we will not keep watch. *Non!* I am convince' now that we pursue the right track! We will sail *tout-de-suite,* eh? *Pourquoi pas?* Why not? It is after midnight."

"That's just swell," said Dawson. "Let's go."

The sun was preparing to haul itself up over the horizon when *Jabberwock* skirted an end of Ile Nou and faced her blunt stubborn dows toward the sea.

THEY stayed in Port Vila one afternoon and one night. In the afternoon Dawson sat in the shade of a deck awning and fanned himself, while Ma Sing toddled here and there ashore; and Eduard, red-faced, pop-eyed, drenched in sweat, signed his name a dozen times, argued explosively with port officials, and eventually got what he wanted—which was merely permission to sail the next day.

In the evening, leaving Ma Sing to guard the ketch, they went to Madame Martin's—the fancier of Port Vila's two hotels.

Dawson and Eduard sat in a corner like conspirators, and talked like that too, in low voices, their heads close together. The flies had retired but the mosquitoes had emerged, and the two men, perspiring, slapped themselves listlessly.

Overhead a spluttering kerosene pressure lamp attracted insects from miles around, so that every now and then the black barefooted houseboy had to climb up on a chair and scrape them off so that the customers could find their drinks without feeling for them.

An Englishman sat in a corner looking woebegone, looking as if he wondered whether he would be able to sleep if he went to bed; but for most part the crowd was French. A couple of youths in silk polo shirts obstreperously and unaccountably played pingpong. The others just talked, making a great din.

"Now we'll put in at Segond first—that's on Espiritu Santo and I know two traders there—and then we will ask—"

Out of the night, which was ninety above, came a girl of perhaps twenty-two or three, a slim straight-eyed girl in a blue linen dress and tennis sneakers. She looked around. She had a direct way of doing this. She saw Eduard and Dawson, and went right to them.

"*Parlez-vous Anglais?*"

"Ah, certainly, madame!"

"Sure," said Dawson.

"You are the men who came on that boat, the *Jabberwock?*"

They nodded.

"I hear that you're going up to the northern part of the group. Would you be going anywhere near an island called Makama?"

Eduard looked at Dawson and Dawson looked at Eduard.

"Won't you sit down," Dawson invited, "and have some whisky?"

"I'll sit down," she replied, and did, "but I won't drink. It's far too hot."

She tried to be crisp, even masculine; but watching her, they could see that she was taut; her nerves were twangy steel wires.

"My name is Margaret McLean and I'm a correspondent for the Sydney *News*. Do you want to see my credentials?"

She drew some papers out of a blue leather bag and placed them on the table, but neither Dawson nor Eduard paid them any attention. They were too much interested in studying the girl herself.

Undeniably she was pretty—straightforward brown eyes, dark brown hair in a shortish bob, a peach-and-cream complexion positively breath-taking in this anemic clime.

But she was nervous about something. Though she strove to keep her voice low and businesslike, there was an edge of hysteria to it.

THEIR silence and their scrutiny probably made her the more flustered. She hurried on.

"I want to get up a series of articles on life in the more distant islands. I came here on a French ship a few days ago"—this was the ship Dawson missed—"meaning to catch the little B. P. boat that goes around the group. But the connection was wrong, somehow. Anyway that B.P. boat doesn't go to the really remote places. Like Makama."

Eduard bowed gravely.

"I see, *madame.*"

"Mademoiselle," she corrected.

"Pardon. Mademoiselle."

She looked from one to the other. They gave her no help; so she plunged.

"Well, could you take me?—I—I'd be glad to pay my passage."

There was a considerable pause. Then Eduard cleared his throat.

"I am very sorry, *mademoiselle,* but we are a yacht—"

"Oh, I understand! It's probably a violation of some fool law to take paying passengers. But who's going to know?"

"It is not that, *mademoiselle.* But we are such a very small craft and already there are three—"

"If I'm not embarrassed I don't see why you should be. I don't mean to be brusque but—well, after all, this is 1940."

"True, *mademoiselle,"* the Frenchman murmured. "True . . . "

"If there's not room, I could sleep on deck. I wouldn't mind. It—it'd be a lark. And as far as being in the way is concerned, I never get sick. I used to sail with my—with a friend who had a small boat. I know something about it."

She was desperately anxious. Her lower lip trembled. Her brown eyes, very large, were moist.

"Those islands, *mademoiselle, they* are not exactly the place for a young woman—"

"I can take care of myself."

"I wish I could say as much." Eduard sighed. It was difficult for him to refuse anything to a lady. "But it must be no, mademoiselle. We cannot explain; that is, as you would say, too long a story. But it must be no."

For an instant it seemed as if she would weep. Then she rose, forcing a smile. Eduard too rose, and Dawson Wilde.

"Yes. Thank you. Good night."

Eduard cried, "Will you not permit us to see you to your home, perhaps? In this place—"

"No. No, thank you. As a matter of fact, I live right here in the hotel." Her voice was scratchy now and uncertain, and she kept her face turned away. "I—I just think I'll—I'll take a little stroll first."

She went out, not looking back, walking very fast, almost as if she feared she wouldn't reach the door in time. The hot night gulped her.

Once again Eduard looked at Daw-

son and Dawson looked at Eduard. The Frenchman gave an exquisite shrug. They sat down.

"A romantic. But charming, *n'est-ce pas?* Now let us have one more drink, *mon ami,* before we return to the boat, and I will tell you about these friends of mine at Segond who might . . . "

THEY rose at five o'clock and before six they were moving out of the bay. On either side, as they went through the pass, the Pacific thundered, lathering itself in rage on the reef.

Clear, the *Jabberwock* began to roll and pitch.

"It is a sight, *oui.* But I an not in the mood to appreciate. I think we had too much of whisky las' night. Ma Sing!"

The Chinaman, blinking and giggling, came up on deck.

"You big fella thief! You stealum tube *chandu* las' night when you guard boat! Now you all foggy-head!"

Ma Sing made unintelligible and unconvincing efforts to protest. Eduard poofed him away.

"*Two* pipes only at night after this! ! lockum up good! Coffee now! *Café, cochon jaune!* Right-away-quick! Lickety-split!"

Ma Sing disappeared in a whirl of strange sounds. Presently he was back, not grinning, in fact shaking all over. He hosed words upon Eduard, who was at the wheel.

Eduard laughed.

"He says there is a ghost in the galley. Of a certainty must keep that opium locked up after this! Go down with him, Dawson, and settle his fears, or we will never get coffee."

It was difficult to persuade Ma Sing to go below again, even though Dawson went first. The diminutive Chinese was terribly frightened. He pointed to a closet door in the galley. He gurgled.

"This, you mean?"

Dawson reached out to unlatch the door.

There was a sound from behind it, from the closet. Ma Sing fled, squealing.

Dawson frowned in puzzlement. He took his hand away from the latch. On tiptoe he went back into the main cabin and opened the locker in which, as he knew, Eduard kept two revolvers. Standing to one side, and using his left hand, he unlatched and threw open the door.

He said "Oh . . ."

After a moment, feeling a little sheepish, he uncocked the revolver and put it on the table.

"Were you there all night? It must have been uncomfortable."

CHAPTER III

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

SHE stepped out. Blinking, dizzy, her cramped leg muscles scarcely supporting her, she nevertheless waved him away when he offered to help her to a chair.

She still wore the blue linen dress and carried the blue leather bag with the initials M. M. in silver. But she did not look as neat and cool as she had looked the previous night.

"It *was* stuffy," she said dourly.

"A stowaway," he said in gentle reproof, "should always wait until the vessel is out of sight of land, before being discovered."

She did not speak immediately, and did not look at him. At last she asked, "Are you the captain? Or is it the other one?"

"It's the other one."

"I'll see him now. Let's go up."

Eduard goggled and his jaw fell.

"Here's the ghost," Dawson reported, saluting.

She went to Eduard. Her mouth, except in the corners where it trembled a little, was firm. Her eyes were determinedly dry.

"You must take me to Makama! I'll pay you for it!"

Dazed, the Frenchman nevertheless shook a slow head.

"No, *mademoiselle.* We will put about now and take you back."

"Is that your final word?"

"I regret, *mademoiselle,* but that is my final word."

"Well then, look at *mine!*" Her right hand flipped into the blue leather purse and when it came out again there was an automatic pistol in it. A bright absurd little thing, it looked a toy. But it wasn't.

She pointed it at Eduard. "This is *my* final word! You take me to Makama or I'll shoot you dead!"

It was Dawson who smashed the very considerable silence that followed. He couldn't help himself. He started to laugh.

Eduard held out a moment or two longer, perhaps because he was actually facing the girl and felt the need for politeness, perhaps because he had more recently become aware of her presence aboard and had not yet recovered.

But soon he was laughing too. Their laughter boomed out across the vast Pacific. Eduard gripped the wheel and swayed back, his head high, bellowing. Dawson leaned against the cabin house, holding his ribs for fear they would fly in all directions.

Ma Sing, still resembling a monkey, crouched at the base of the mainmast and watched them with startled eyes. Clearly—though he'd known this was a long while—there was no accounting for white men.

The girl flushed. She pointed the gun over the rail and fired it. It went *pip!* A spear of water rose, vanished.

"This *works,*" she warned angrily.

They sobered a little, wiping their eyes.

"But of a certainty it works, *mademoiselle.* We had not question' that. We laugh only at the thought that you —that you—"

"Pirates," gurgled Dawson, trying to control himself. "Right here in the middle of the Pacific!"

"You have a strange s-sense of humor, I m-must say!" She paused, biting her lower lip, which had been waxing twittery. She threw at Eduard: "Will you please explain what's so funny about this?"

"But it is not funny, *mademoiselle.* It is *magnifique!* But do you not know that there are two pistols and a rifle in the cabin?"

"I won't let you go down there. Not until we reach Makama."

"You would starve us?" Then: "And how could I navigate?"

She paused. She didn't know.

Dawson asked very gently: "How far do you think it is?"

"Well, I—I hadn't—"

"If this wind holds, which is a big 'if', we might get there in three days. On the other hand, it might take a couple of weeks."

"Oh."

"So, you see?"

She did see. She put away the automatic—and burst into tears.

THE story came soon. She was employed by the Sydney *News,* yes, but it was not in the interests of that journal that she was in the New Hebrides. Her name was not McLean but Macready. She was a sister of Charles Warren Macready.

"Oh," said Dawson.

"Ah," said Eduard.

She had been in England at the time. She had been educated there, and she was working for the London *Times*. Her mother and father were dead and she had no other brothers or sisters, no other near relations at all, except Charley.

She had a very small inheritance and while she went to school Charley sent her money. It was because of this, and because she knew he did not make much, that she had been so eager to earn her own living.

"He was the best brother in the world! I *know* he couldn't have done anything dishonest!"

When she heard of the embezzlement she had immediately quit the *Times* and taken passage back to Australia. Since then she had been looking for him.

Her job with the Sydney *News*, though it offered certain advantageous contacts, was primarily for the purpose of making enough money to finance her own private search. She could not afford detectives.

Practically all her time in the past three years had been devoted to running down rumors, interviewing friends and acquaintances of her brother and of Henry Ash, going over the whole matter in detail, writing and receiving letters, checking every suggestion of a clue.

And she got—exactly nowhere.

That is, until recently.

Recently she had heard, at third hand, of a little cockney sailor along the Sydney waterfront who when in his cups would tell of having seen a man resembling Henry Ash who lived on an island in the New Hebrides.

"You even got the name of the island?"

"I had some difficulty getting it, but I finally did."

Dawson smiled to himself. Clearly Lorn, despite his confidential manner, his shifty eyes, his whispering, had been anything but close-mouthed. He had shut up only when he saw that somebody was *trying* to get something out of him.

"I never myself even met the man who said he'd seen Henry Ash. This friend of my friend, as I understand it, got the name simply by pretending that he was not really interested."

"Yes," said Dawson.

Whoever it was killed Lorn, and searched Dawson's hotel room in Noumea, had surely been over-eager. He, or they, had seen easy money—and snatched too fast. But with underworld connections in Sydney, he, or they, could still, with a mite of patience, learn the name of the island.

And it was to be assumed that he, or again they, would do so. Was this going to be a race? Was an island practically nobody had ever heard of before suddenly going to be the scene of a gold rush?

"I'm sure that Charley didn't steal that money. I know him too well. He'd never do a sneaky thing like that. There must be some other explanation."

"Did you know Henry Ash?"

"Slightly. I met him just before I went to England. Charley used to write to me about him. They were very close friends."

"Would you know Ash if you saw him again?"

"I think so. In fact, I'm sure I would."

Dawson looked at Eduard, and saw that Eduard was thinking the same thing he was. If she knew Ash by sight, this girl could be useful. It would waste a lot of time to put back to Vila any-

way, while they had this wind; and time, it appeared now, might be important.

"I could cook for you. I could stand watch. I used to go out with Charley in the cutter and I really know something about sailing, even though I might have sounded silly just now"—she blushed—"when I talked about keeping you here till we arrived. That was hysteria. But I don't get hysterical often. Honestly I don't."

Eduard raised his eyebrows at Dawson, and Dawson nodded.

"All right," said Eduard. "You are sign' on. You are a forecastle hand but you use my cabin because we have no forecastle."

She said "Thank you," simply but with feeling; and she held out the little automatic, its butt toward him. He shook his head.

"Keep it," he growled. He raised a fat forefinger and his voice was lowered to a growl. "But *attendez bein, mademoiselle:* No more hold-ups! I will not tolerate them on my ship! Now let us have coffee. I pant for coffee."

FROM the beginning she proved herself useful. She could certainly cook circles around Ma Sing. She could, as she had said, hold the ketch on its course: she knew enough to bring the boat around to the compass card, and not try to bring the card around to the boat.

She did not again weep, she did not become excited. And even when for two days they were becalmed, in sight of a gray-purple smear they took to be Malekula, she stayed cool and affable.

She was somewhat cold, though never impolite, to Dawson. He thought he understood. It is difficult to forgive anybody who has laughed at you. Ma Sing of course was different. He had not known what it was all about. She kidded Ma Sing, who adored her.

Eduard Pontalis too was different. For one thing, Eduard was a much older man, and he was fat and funny-looking, a born clown. "Avast there! Take in the foresail a bit, and step lively!" So he'd thunder, pretending to be fierce but looking, as he always did, like Hardy of the Laurel and Hardy comedies.

"Aye, aye, sir," she would pipe, touching an imaginary forelock. "But how 'bout some biscuits first, while they're still hot?" Eduard loved it. He was having a wonderful time.

But Margaret Macready remained a shade distant, a bit careful, with Dawson.

. . . When they got the wind again it was good, and *Jabberwock,* as if she felt glad, started shushing through the water with what was for her great speed. Eduard turned the wheel over to Dawson, shot the sun, made a calculation, and retired for a siesta. Soon they heard him snoring down there, as only he could snore. Ma Sing too, folded in his galley bunk, was snoring.

Dawson looked sideways at the girl, but she did not glance at him. She was thoughtful, staring out over the water. It was the first time they had been alone together.

Once or twice he cleared his throat, meaning to say something, and then thought better of it. They bowled bravely along, with a fine following sea. The girl kept looking away from him, not stirring.

"There's some birds," Dawson cried suddenly. "No, not that way! Off the starboard bow!"

"Yes. A lot of them. Does that mean land is near?"

"It means fish are near. A whole school of them. Bonito, probably. Look at how they're squabbling."

The birds in fact were making a frightful clamor, flying very low, in a confused flapping clump. Every now and then one would dive, splashing. From the height at which they had been flying a little earlier they could, of course, see fish not visible from a boat.

"That's the way the Tahitians fish, by following the birds. I could alter the course for a while—it wouldn't be enough to throw Eduard off in his calculations—and sail right through them."

"Do bonitos make good eating?"

"Swell eating. And when you get a school like this, you can pull them in as fast as you can throw out a line—unless the sharks get there first. Why don't you nip down below and get a rod? You won't wake Eduard. Nothing could."

"Right-o!"

She was back a moment later with a rod. She enjoyed this. Her eyes were flashing, her lips parted. And she got the line overside, over the taffrail, just as Dawson put *Jabberwock's* bows into the mass of birds.

The din was terrific. Hundreds of white birds squawked and squeaked around them, slamming against them sometimes, indignant at this interference with their raid.

Yet through it all could be heard the snoring of Eduard Pontalis.

Margaret hooked one, yanked. It slipped her and fell back. She cast again—and half the line disappeared with a jerk.

"Sharks!" Margaret Macready lifted in the violated line. She was muttering something: Dawson suspected that like himself she was swearing.

"There's one of them out there now," she cried angrily. "Two of them! They're still following us."

He turned his head and saw a dorsal fin cut the water, then another. A black snoot, white underneath, was momentarily raised. The sharks, swimming blindly, stupidly, were still looking for something to eat.

"Shoot the beasts," Dawson growled.

"By Jove, I will!"

Jabberwock was rolling. It was not going to be easy to get a good stance. With feet spread, she tried two shots. Two spurts of water. The dorsal fin showed again; then the snout; then another fin.

She shook her head. The seas were running high, and standing on the deck she was too far down. She climbed up on the gallows frame behind Dawson, the frame upon which the mainmast boom rested when *Jabberwock* was not sailing. He handed the rifle up to her.

"Steady does it. . . Got a good grip?"

She had twisted both legs around an upright of the frame.

"I'm all right," she said, sighting.

He had his compass to watch, and the behavior of the ketch, for the seas were long and he didn't want to jibe and have the boom snap its preventer and come whistling around to dash their brains out.

So for a moment he did not dare to look behind him.

He heard the rifle crack twice. He heard a thin short scream, and the rifle fell on the deck. He whirled around. He was just in time to see what had happened. Her legs had slipped and she had fallen as *Jabberwock's* stern was topping a wave.

He had a fleet glimpse of her as she struck the taffrail and splashed backward into the water. He saw for an instant her soft brown eyes stretched big in fear, and her mouth open as she screamed.

Then the turbulence of the wake swallowed her—and *Jabberwock* rode gayly on.

IT WAS a time for fast thinking. He did not know whether the girl could swim, and if so, how well. To bring *Jabberwock* about in this blow would require at least twenty minutes, and even then he could not be sure that he had reached the spot where she had fallen in.

And there were the sharks, snapping at anything that got in their way.

With his left hand he spun the wheel wildly. With his right he unfastened the preventer stay. And he whirled on his heel and jumped over the taffrail.

He felt *Jabberwock* quiver under the shock, and rear like a favorite saddle horse cruelly and unaccountably spurred. He heard the gooseneck screech against the mast and had a flash of the boom hurtling toward him as *Jabberwock* jibed. Then he was in the water.

He swam overhand but not with any smooth crawl. Instead he splashed, flapping his arms down into the water, kicking his feet so that they came above the surface.

Things were suddenly very quiet; and he had a feeling that the ketch was already far, far away. He was alone. Even when a wave lifted him, so that he was dizzily high, he could see nothing but water. He did not turn his head.

He slid down that wave with sickening speed; then another wave slipped under him, lifting him. And once again, after a giddy instant of teetering at its peak, with foam spitting around him, he slithered into a hollow.

There he collided with her. It was abrupt and somehow ludicrous; there had been no previous sign of her, and now here she was. She had appeared from nowhere.

She was frightened but not panicky. She did not scream, or grab him. But he saw happy relief spring into her eyes.

"Can you keep up?" he yelled.

"Y-Yes."

"Good. I'll hold you if you get tired, but if you can keep up yourself it's better to do it that way. Splash! Don't try to swim, just splash! Make all the white you can!"

He was thinking of the sharks.

Once she gasped, "The—the boat!"

They could not see it. In the hollows they could not see anything but water and sky and one another, and when they were swooped up to a crest their faces were showered with foam, so that they had to keep their eyes closed. They couldn't know where the boat was.

"Eduard'll bring it around!"

"He was—asleep—"

"He won't be, now!"

Dawson had not been conscious of his ankle for several days, except that it was a little stiff mornings, but now it began to hurt like fury. The pain jabbed its way right up his leg, so that he felt like screaming.

He could see from the strained expression of Margaret's face that she was tired, she was suffering. He thrashed nearer to her.

"Are—you—all right?"

"I—I'm—all right."

Soon afterward her eyes closed, her arms ceased to slap the water. She had fainted from exhaustion. Dawson, watching for this, promptly swam up behind her and got a hand under her chin, tilting it just enough to keep her face out of water.

It was harder then. Not that she was any burden. But he had only one free arm with which to splash, to keep the sharks away, and now he could no longer get his feet above the surface. His ankle was hurting worse than ever.

IT SEEMED hours before he heard Eduard Pontalis' thunderous "Where are you?" and additional hours before the *Jabberwock* finally came alongside and Eduard with his mighty arms hauled them aboard.

Margaret Macready came to, a little later, in her bunk in the captain's cabin. Dawson was gazing anxiously at her. She looked right at him and smiled. It was the first time she had done that. She had smiled at Eduard and at Ma Sing, but never before at Dawson.

It felt pretty good. He grinned back.

Eduard was fussing around, trying to pretend that he was sore. He had in fact been frightened breathless; and he was not a man to be easily scared. He gave her coffee he had made himself, and insisted that she take a little brandy in it.

"Fine crew I have! Ma Sing hits the pipe; you go around sticking people up with pistols; Dawson here, he throws the boat into a jibe and almost makes us lose our boom and split our mainmast! Fine crew!"

She took a sip of the café royal.

"How—how did you ever wake up?" she whispered.

"How did I wake up? I was thrown out of my bunk! Fine crew! I take a siesta, and the man at the wheel he makes a jibe and it throws me right out on the floor! That's how I wake up!"

"Nothing else would have done it," Dawson chuckled.

"You laugh, yes! *Zut alors! Vous avez une araignée dans le plafond!* Such smart sailors, eh? You see! When we come to port I give you all the sack! I fire you all! Here, drink more of this, *mademoiselle.*"

She took another sip, and she smiled up at him, and she smiled at Dawson too, a nice warm smile. Her second.

"Well, we weren't chewed, anyway," she murmured. "It must have been because there weren't any sharks left. I must have shot them all."

"I guess that was it," said Dawson. "Fine crew!"

She put the cup aside and closed her eyes.

"I think I'll go to sleep," she whispered. "Do you mind?"

They tiptoed out.

CHAPTER IV

THE PIOUS MR. WHITBY

ON THE sixth day, early in the morning, they raised Makama. It was little and low and lovely—not an atoll merely, for it had a central peak, but an island that seemed none too firmly fixed. The peak, for example, was truncated.

"Used to be a volcano," Dawson said, by way of diagnosis.

"Admiralty chart shows a big lake in the interior," said Eduard.

They had not followed their original plan of putting in at Segond. The presence of Margaret might be difficult to conceal and even more difficult to explain. Also, with Margaret along, they would be able to identify Henry Ash. The chief reason why they had wished to stop at Segond was to get a full description of that man.

The reef was about half a mile out, and there was a pass not marked of course by buoys but unmistakable. Dawson climbed to the squaresail yard, an auxiliary yard, from where he could more easily make out dangerous coral. Eduard was at the wheel. They went in under forward canvas only, without a hitch. Dawson climbed down.

"That must be Ash's house. If it is Ash."

It stood halfway up the slope of the central mountain, which at this point was close to the beach. There were native huts in evidence, little batches of them here and there; but this was obviously a white man's dwelling.

It was a red-and-white frame affair and had the customary corrugated iron roof. A path which lost itself in undergrowth now and then but doggedly reappeared, led up to it. There was no sign of activity around the house.

There was however a group of natives on the beach. Thirty or forty of them. They did not move. Dawson Wilde studied them through binoculars while Eduard coasted, fumbling for anchorage.

"A welcoming committee, I guess. But it's hard to tell what kind of welcome they plan for us. They don't look too good-natured." The hook got a grip at last, and they put the tender overside. Then rose the question of who was going ashore. It was agreed by the men that Margaret at least shouldn't—not until they learned a little more about this place—but it was agreed by Margaret that they didn't know what they were talking about.

Ashore she would go.

Jabberwock was only about 100 yards offshore, and the natives still stood staring, expressionless. They were all men. Some held wooden clubs, a few had stone-headed spears. The beach, dazzling white, was splotched with tall jagged gray-brown boulders of coral.

Margaret remained stubborn—said she'd swim it if they refused her a place in the tender—so at last it was decided that she and Dawson should go, while Eduard remained aboard the *Jabberwock* with the rifle. Dawson and Margaret carried revolvers.

Dawson rowed; and when the boat grated on sand, sixty or seventy feet from the group of natives, he sprang out and beached it.

"I don't like their looks," he muttered, as he helped Margaret to step out.

Nobody would. They were stumpy men, pot-bellied, very dark, and covered from head to foot with all manner of tattooing. Their hair, black and frizzly, stood straight up.

Papuans, Dawson decided; maybe with a dash of negrito blood. They made no threatening gesture or movement, however. They simply stood there.

Dawson walked toward them with what he hoped looked like fearlessness. He did not touch his revolver.

"How! Where masta? Boy tellum where-along big fella Ash."

It was not good pidgin, but the savages probably wouldn't have understood it anyway. They did not stir until Dawson, still moving toward them, raised his arm in what he meant as a gesture of friendliness. Then they ran, yowling. An instant later they were lost in the shadows of the trees.

One man remained. He was even shorter than those who had run. His arms hung almost to his knees, and in one hand was a war club of native mahogany topped by a polished and sharpened stone held in place with sennit.

This man opened his mouth and shouted something several times. Dawson stopped. The savage lifted his club and hurled it, then turned and ran.

The throw was wild. Dawson ducked instinctively, though the club would not have hit him anyway, and as he ducked he drew his revolver. He could have killed the savage, whose chunky legs did not carry him fast; but why do that?

He lowered the pistol, and glanced

out toward the *Jabberwock,* where Eduard, he saw, was lowering the rifle. Eduard no doubt had had the same thought: let's not shoot unless and until we have to.

Eduard cupped his hands: "I think I'll come with you!"

Dawson shouted back: "I think you'd better!"

"I'll row the tender out and get him," said Margaret.

TEN minutes later they started up the path, Dawson leading, Margaret in the middle, Eduard the rear guard.

The land on either side was not jungle, but neither was it plantation. There were coconut trees, to be sure, but they appeared to be growing wild, and the ground beneath them was seldom cleared.

In some places lantanas grew, sinewy unpleasant bushes with their case-hardened little rust-and-purple flowers. In other places there were only weeds. Neither to right nor left, not yet behind or in front, did they see or hear any sign of human life.

"I've got a feeling that there's something funny going on in this place," Dawson said. The path wound relentlessly, and he was careful to peer around each curve before proceeding. "I don't know what it is . . . But I've got a feeling we're being watched."

The others nodded. They felt that way too. It eased the situation when at last they arrived at the clearing in front of the house.

Not that there was anything cheery about the structure. No shout of welcome greeted them. The shutters were all open and on the little veranda was a bamboo chair, a bamboo table. But nobody seemed astir. When they whistled and *yoo-hooed,* there was no answer.

In back of the house was a shed three times as large as the house itself. It contained about thirty sacks of what from its sickly sweet smell was unquestionably copra.

Behind the shed was a drying kiln. It was cold.

"Probably hasn't got a plantation. Probably the natives make their own copra and bring it here to him, and he dries it for them and sacks it and sends it to where a schooner can pick it up," Eduard explained. "They get so much rain here it's hard to dry copra out of doors."

"Yes. A trader, really. Not a planter."

"But the point is," Margaret said tensely, "who *is* 'he'?" She faced the house. "I'm going inside."

She went around the front way, and up on the veranda. There was a shell ashtray on the table, and there was a cigarette butt in it. Dawson felt the butt. Warm.

"Hul-*lo!*"

Nobody answered.

The door was unlocked. They walked in.

This door opened into a skimpily furnished living room. There was a straw mat. There were no pictures on the walls. On the floor in a corner was a newspaper. Dawson picked it up. He handed it to Margaret.

"Any of your articles in there? It's the Sydney *News* of three weeks ago yesterday. About the time I left Sydney myself."

She looked at it, bewildered, and as she did so he stooped to examine a wet stain on the floor, a stain revealed when he had picked up the paper. It was circular, about two inches across, and of a brownish, dark purple tinge. But when he touched it with a finger it became red.

He sniffed his finger, nodding. He did not say anything about this to the others.

"Let us look elsewhere in the house," Eduard suggested. "Here it makes me feel—how do you say it?—the creepies."

He shuddered.

There were two doors, one probably leading to the kitchen, the other to a bedroom. They started for the bedroom door.

It was thrown open before they could reach it.

Startled, they stepped back, and Dawson put his hand on the butt of the revolver while Eduard raised the rifle.

THE man who stood in the doorway was not Henry Ash. Even Dawson and Eduard, who knew Ash only from pictures, saw this immediately; and they saw too, when they glanced at their companion, that this man was not Charles Warren Macready either.

"I—I— Why, what's all this?"

He was small and had a high-pitched but not unfriendly voice. His face was bright pink, sunburned, and washed with freckles. He was perhaps forty years old.

He carried a shabby umbrella. He wore a white drill suit badly in need of pressing, a white shirt and a brown washable (though not recently washed) necktie. He peered at them, astonished, with pale blue eyes through glasses that had gold rims.

Dawson took his hand away from the pistol, Eduard lowered the rifle. Whatever they had expected, it was not this mild-mannered stranger.

"Sorry for barging in like this," said Dawson. "We didn't know anybody was home. Are you—uh—"

"I am Jonas Whitby of the Heavenly Reward Mission."

"Oh . . . We hadn't known there was a mission here."

"It's a new one, yes. Yes. Very new."

"Is—uh—Is this it?"

"This house? Oh, dear me, no! The mission's over on the other side. This is Mr. Blake's residence."

Dawson was remembering Lorn, in the Sydney lounge bar. ". . . 'is nyme was Blyke, they says . . ." He smiled an apology and extended his hand, introducing himself. The others introduced themselves.

"Ah, yes," said Jonas Whitby. "You came on that boat down there, I presume?"

He nodded toward the front door. Below, they could see the *Jabberwock* riding quietly at anchor in the lagoon.

"Is Mr. Blake home?"

"Oh, no, no!" Jonas Whitby had an expression of constant astonishment. It seemed to seem to him almost inconceivable that these visitors should not know that Mr. Blake was not at home.

"No, I left him up by the lake a little while ago. The natives have been acting very strange today and he's a bit worried."

"Is this Mr. Blake a tall man, thin, with dark blue eyes?"

"Well, yes. Yes, that fits him in a general way. In a general way. Yes."

Whitby nodded thoughtfully.

"How old would you say he was?"

"I happen to know that he was forty-six last month. Why?"

They looked at one another. Henry Ash, twenty-seven at the time of his disappearance, would be thirty now.

Margaret said, "You must forgive us for asking so many questions—"

"Not at all, not at all! Glad to help! It's so seldom we get any visitors. Mr. Blake will be delighted, I'm sure."

"—but is there a man here by the name of Henry Ash?"

Still looking amazed, the missionary shook his head.

"Oh, no! No, there's only Mr. Blake and me."

"Or a man by the name of Charles Macready?"

"No. No, I never heard of anybody by that name." He was a cheerful little fellow, nervous, beaming. "Shall we go up and join Mr. Blake? He's probably seen your boat and is anxious to meet you, but I don't think he wants to leave the natives just now. They are troubled about something. I'm not sure just what. I haven't been here as long as Mr. Blake and I don't understand them the way he does."

"How long has Mr. Blake been here?"

"Six years. This way, please."

They filed out after him, rounded the copra shed and the drying kiln and continued up the hill. The path above the house was less well marked but just as tortuous. Jonas Whitby went first, digging the ferrule of his umbrella into the ground at every step. Dawson was second.

"Now here's the lake. But dear me! Mr. Blake doesn't seem to be around!"

FOR that matter, nobody else seemed to be around. The lake, apparently the exact center of the island and its highest point, was a lugubrious body of water. It looked a great basin rather than a lake, fed not by springs below but only by the rains.

It was perhaps a mile across, and clearly it was in the crater of that volcano which had given this island birth. The sides of the crater were a solid wall around the lake, a sheer steep reddish wall rising about twenty feet from the surface, so that you gazed down into the lake rather than across it.

At one place in this wall, near where they stood, Dawson observed what seemed to be a footpath leading down to the water. At the bottom of the path a couple of dugouts were paintered. He pointed to these.

"Funny to see canoes with no outriggers."

"They don't use those for every day," Jonas Whitby explained. He seemed a shade embarrassed. "Mr. Blake says they're for some ceremonial use. This lake is considered sacred. We're not allowed to drink the water that spills out of it sometimes when the rains are extra heavy. The natives would kill us if we did that."

"Ugly customers, eh?"

Whitby smiled gently.

"Ah, poor things! Not ugly, no. Simply unenlightened. Mr. Blake says that this lake has been known to get hot and break out all over with bubbles, and when the bubbles burst there's steam.

"Volcanic activity, of course. But the natives think the gods are angry and demand a sacrifice. So they tie men in those canoes and push the canoes out to where they overturn. The victims of course are scalded to death."

He shuddered, and shook his head. "So Mr. Blake says. He says he's known they were doing it up here sometimes, but he didn't dare to interfere."

"Do you believe it?"

"I don't know. I can't think that they would do such a horrible thing." He peered anxiously around, pushing his glasses back on his nose.

"Oh, I do so wish Mr. Blake was here! What *can* have happened to him? The natives were making some kind of demonstration here, you see, and Mr. Blake was trying to quiet them. *I* said that the best way would be to preach the Word to them—the Word of Universal Peace."

"Is that," asked Dawson Wild, "why you brought along your Colt automatic?"

CHAPTER V

CALDRON

THE question caught the man off guard. Snarling, he stepped away from Dawson. He dropped the umbrella and his right hand went to his hip pocket. Dawson however had anticipated this.

"No, don't," said Dawson, revolver leveled.

The man blinked. He giggled apologetically. He swallowed.

"Ah, yes. Yes. You—uh—know that I have a pistol here."

"I lifted your coattail on the way up the hill."

"Yes. Yes. Clever of you. It's—uh—it's Mr. Blake's, of course. He asked me to fetch it for him. He thought he might need it up here. I'll—uh—I'll show it to you."

"Never mind. I'll get it myself. Take your hand away—empty. And turn around."

The man obeyed. Dawson slipped the big automatic out of its holster and dropped it into one of his own pockets. He could tell from its weight that it was loaded.

"See here, don't you think that this is—"

"Shut up," said Dawson. With a finger of his left hand he unhooked the gold-rimmed spectacles and passed them to Eduard. "Take a look at these, will you?"

Eduard held the spectacles close, then far away.

"Common ordinary window glass," he reported.

"That's what I thought. He didn't look as if he were used to glasses—didn't have that little red mark on the bridge of his nose. You see, I've got a memory for voices the way some people have for faces. And I've heard this man's voice once before. It was in my hotel room in Noumea."

The man did not in fact look like a missionary now. The cheery expression was gone. Without the glasses and the umbrella, the change was astounding. He looked like what he was: a hard customer.

But as they watched him, his eyes grew very big. His mouth fell open in amazement. He ceased to playact.

"Gawd," he muttered, "look at the lake!"

He had been the only one directly facing it. At his words, Eduard turned and the girl turned. Dawson was more cautious. He stepped back to a safe distance, the revolver leveled, watching for tricks. But he did, when he was sure of himself, cast a glance at the lake—and like the others he gasped at what he saw.

The lake—a moment before dead-seeming, almost stagnant in appearance, like a lost forgotten pool, tucked low in the crater as if to hide from the world—had suddenly come to life.

Bubbles began to show: small ones at first, then bigger ones, though the smaller ones too kept increasing. A tremor seemed to run over the surface, as if it had been disturbed underneath by a mighty stick moving back and forth.

The bubbles swelled, and broke. The big ones made a *sissing* sound as they broke, and steam rushed out of them. The whole body of water seemed to jog up and down slowly, ominously.

There was a stink of sulphur.

"Gawd," the man whispered, "it really *is* acting up! Listen: what I told you about the way the natives think of this lake, that's true! I heard it from—from Mr. Blake himself. But I didn't know it was really going to happen—now, of all times!"

"Why 'of all times'?" whispered Dawson over the man's shoulder.

The lake had become a live malevolent thing. It was lashing itself into a fury. No breath of wind touched it; all the disturbance came from below. The bubbles grew bigger, and spat angrily when they burst. Steam swirled.

The water had been fairly clear when it was still, but now it was thick and greenish brown, and when the bubbles burst thin yellow foam slithered hissing away from them. The odor of sulphur became stronger every moment.

Not far from where they stood a couple of naked natives came running out of the bush to the edge of the crater. When they saw the lake they were overcome by frenzy. They writhed, raising their arms. One threw himself on his face and beat the ground. The other ran back into the bush, howling.

"Let's get out of this," muttered Margaret.

"Right," said Dawson. The lake fascinated; but what he really wanted to know was why this "missionary" had been to such pains to get them away from the house.

"We're going back down the hill," he announced. "And *you*," he added, digging the muzzle of the revolver into the man's back, "are going to go first."

THEY descended very slowly. Dawson, taking no chances, kept close behind the false missionary.

"How did you get here?" he asked once.

The man answered over his shoulder. He had given up all pretense of being anything but what he was.

"Schooner's over the other side. I chartered it in Noumea, after I'd got a wireless from a friend in Sydney who'd learned the name of this place."

"So all the trouble you took searching my room was wasted? And you had to pay that local Javanese thug for nothing? He didn't even succeed in setting fire to our boat."

"We came straight," Whitby said. "Didn't stop at Vila. So we're not really here, legally."

He slowed, stopped, and very cautiously turned, always aware of the revolver Dawson held.

"Listen," he said. "We're all likely to get sent out on one of those canoe-boiling jaunts, if we stay here long. There really is something up, among the niggers. I don't know what it is, but they're going wild back there in the bush."

High lantanas crowded them on every side, and there was no sound, but they had the same feeling they'd had while ascending this hill—the feeling that they were being watched.

"Now we got here first," Whitby pointed out, "but let's not quarrel about that. You're here for the same reason we are. If we fight it out, we might all cook.

"I'll be reasonable. Let's get that cash and split it, and then clear out. If anything happens afterward we can all deny we ever saw one another."

"On your way," said Dawson.

"Now why don't you—"

Margaret cried, "Where's my brother?" and when Whitby looked genuinely puzzled, she added: "Charles Warren Macready."

"Oh." Whitby shook his head. "Lady, I give you my word, I don't know where he is. Except that I'd be ready to bet he's not on this island. We went over it pretty thoroughly before you came."

"Where's Ash then?" asked Dawson.

The blue eyes became shifty again.

"Well, I don't just know—right now—but maybe I could—"

"I think you do know! Turn around! Walk!"

They reached and encircled the drying kiln. They reached the copra shed.

From the house, slicing the silence like lightning slicing a black sky, came a high and terrible scream of pain.

Whitby cupped his hands to his mouth, yelling: *"They're coming back, Jacques! They're coming—"*

Dawson pushed him between the shoulderblades and sent him sprawling. Dawson cried, "Watch him, Eduard!" and dashed around the end of the copra shed toward the house.

The Frenchman paused, his rifle raised. He hated to see his friend go into that house alone.

Margaret Macready understood. She drew her revolver.

"I'll cover this man," she promised. "Go ahead."

Eduard ran after Dawson. The man on the ground, motionless, apparently stunned, suddenly came to life. He kicked backward with both feet, and one of those feet caught Margaret in the left knee. She tripped over a root, sat down.

She fired the revolver, but the shot was lost in a roar of gunfire from the house. And by the time she had risen, Whitby was gone.

DAWSON WILDE raced across the living room of the house, threw open the door of the bedroom.

There was a scarecrow on the bed. He was very tall. A sailor kept him down by sitting on his chest and holding his arms. Another man, a huge dark fellow in a yachting cap, was doing something with a knife to the fingernails of the scarecrow's left hand.

He dropped the knife as the door was opened, and drew a long-barreled automatic, a Luger.

They were not prepared. Whitby had not yelled soon enough, or else his yell had been drowned in the screams of the scarecrow. For the scarecrow was still screaming.

The sailor bounded off the bed, snicked out a knife, and ran toward Dawson.

Dawson fired twice, and the effect was as if he had poked the sailor in the chest with a stick. The sailor stopped, looking dumbfounded; his feet went right out from under him, and he fell backward with a thump that shook the house. Great gouts of blood came out of his mouth.

The Luger spoke. Dawson heard it, but after that his ears were crammed with a mighty muffled *rat-a-tat-tat* out of which no one sound was distinct.

He was conscious of walking backward, though he knew he did not want to walk backward; and then he was not conscious of anything at all.

MARGARET was washing his face with a wet towel, while Eduard Pontalis clucked around like a mother hen. The *rat-a-tat-tat* remained in his ears, but it was fading. "You are all right, *mon ami*. That pig Dubois, he shot you but it only tap' your head. Click! like that! Dubois, the *cochon*, he jump' right through the window, screen and all."

"He's the husky one with the yachting cap?"

"Yes. Captain Jacques Dubois. From Noumea. He has a small schooner but he can get no trade because nobody trusts him. He has kill' men. He has wreck' ships for the insurance. He has been in jail twice, three times.

"I see him when I come into the room. I would have kill' him with the

rifle, but as I enter you come falling back against me. He got away."

"I'm sorry . . ."

"The missionary got away too," Margaret confessed. "I—I'm afraid I'm not much of a guard. He kicked me and ran into the bush."

Dawson found that he was in the living room. He managed to get to his feet, though he had to grip Margaret's extended arm for a moment until the dizziness passed.

"You'll be all right," she said, looking up at him anxiously. "You'll have a frightful headache, that's all."

He grinned.

"I have it already. Let's go into the bedroom."

"Yes."

"But you must wait a little moment, *mademoiselle!* I will arrange the room. Just a little moment"

Eduard went into the bedroom, closing the door behind him, and they heard him dragging something heavy across the floor. Dawson could guess what it was. Then the door was opened.

"I think we had better keep back from the windows."

There was a straw mat on the floor and something dark red was soaking up through it, but there was no other sign of the man Dawson had shot. Dawson later learned that Eduard had hauled the corpse into a closet.

The scarecrow, except for his eyes, might have been lifeless. But his eyes were open. His mutilated hand had been covered by a bedsheet. Eduard again. Eduard was always gallant.

Margaret went up to him, up to the bed. He turned his eyes toward her, and then turned them away.

"Henry Ash."

He muttered "Margaret . . ."

"Where is Charley?"

He couldn't look at her. He drew in his breath, hesitantly, as if the air scorched his lungs.

"Charley," he whispered, "is—dead."

She cried then, though she was quiet about it. She made no attempt to apologize. She covered her face with her hands, and her body sagged.

Dawson led her to a chair, and seated her, and then while she cried he pretended to pay no further attention, as did Eduard. They stood by the bed.

"Tell us about it," Dawson commanded.

Henry Ash was thirty years old, but he might have been sixty. His hands shook. His face gleamed with sweat. The hair of his head and of his matted unkempt beard was splashed with gray. His eyes were hollows of agony.

"CHARLEY never touched any of that money," he started, in a voice loud enough for the girl to hear. "I stole it all. I knew he was going on vacation in the cutter, and I had a mad plan for getting him to take me along, for us both to go to some faraway island for a while. So I deliberately tampered with his books, to make it look as if he were in on the business. Charley never knew about that."

He had joined Macready at the last minute with the announcement that he had got a leave for his health and would go along to the Great Barrier Reef if his friend would have him. Charley was delighted. No clearance papers were needed, for as far as Charley knew they were not going to leave the Commonwealth.

"I know something about navigation myself. I'd sailed with Charley before. The third night out we had a wonderful wind for my purposes, and when I prepared supper I put a huge dose of sleeping powder into

Charley's coffee. He was like a dead man for fourteen hours, and I changed the course. We were making almost ten knots.

"When Charley came to, I convinced him that we'd been blown out of our course and that it would be dangerous to try to beat back against such a wind—that the only thing to do was make for Port Vila. It was more or less true, too, thanks to the course I'd set. Anyway he was too sick and dopey to question me.

"When we got near Vila I confessed that I'd stolen the money. I didn't tell him I'd involved him too. I begged him to let me off at some little island. Nobody would ever know, I told him.

"But he wouldn't do it. He said I'd be caught sooner or later, and that my best chance for leniency lay in giving myself up. He kept me hidden in the boat at Port Vila only in order to spare me the embarrassment of arrest in a hole like that—extradition and so-forth.

"We started for Sydney. And then I was going to tell Charley about how I'd tampered with his books, hoping to make him scared, so that he'd do as I wanted him to. But I never had to tell him that. Three hours out of Vila he came down with fever."

The man on the bed sighed.

"I should have put back with him, but I didn't. I couldn't face it. I nursed him as best I could, and steered a course north. For four days and nights I didn't get a wink of sleep, and when we stumbled upon this island—simply stumbled upon it—I was in almost as bad condition as he was.

"I had to stop here. I couldn't have gone any further. The Englishman who owned this house and shed and kiln was in Vila. I was beaten. I would have sailed back, if I could.

"But our luck was against us. Just after we landed, that lake up there began to bubble and simmer. Whenever this happens the natives think that the gods have to be appeased with a human sacrifice.

"They usually pick one of themselves. But when we landed, and the lake started to boil immediately afterward, they decided that the gods were demanding one of us."

He hid his face in his hands, this old man of thirty.

"Charley was lucky. He was too ill to know what was going on. But I went almost mad trying to plead with them in sign language. I think they understood me, but it didn't do any good. The gods wanted one of us. The blacks threw some kind of sticks—and decided it was Charley.

"I fought. I begged them to try me first instead. Maybe it was *me* the gods wanted, I said. But they paid no attention to me except to hold me down while they put poor Charley into one of those canoes without outriggers.

"I saw them shove him off. I saw the canoe tip this way and that while the water boiled all around it, joggling it back and forth. They're made for outriggers, of course, those canoes, and without one they're unmanageable.

"I honestly think that Charley was not conscious. He did not scream, didn't make any sound at all. Before I fainted I saw the thing tip over . . ."

HIS voice trailed away momentarily. He closed his eyes, and made an effort to speak again.

"I must have been unconscious or delirious for a couple of days. It was the man who owned this house, an Englishman named Styles, who brought me around. He'd just come back from Vila. He didn't seem at all shocked

when I told him what had happened to Charley.

"'Best thing for it is to keep your mouth shut, old man' he said 'A report would only mean a lot of fuss and explanations. It wouldn't bring back your friend. And the natives'd be worse than ever if they had to put up with a few cops for a while, and what little business there is would go up the flue. Things like this,' he said, 'aren't as rare as you'd think, out here.'

"He'd been here two years. He wanted to get away, but he had no money. When I got well I bought him out, partly from gratitude, partly because I saw what a wonderful place this would be to hide in.

"I didn't buy any land—just the buildings and the business, such as it is. I paid him with my own money, and he was delighted to get away. I told him my name was Blake, but I'm sure he knew who I really was. He promised not to say anything to anybody outside.

"I only have to leave the island about once a year. I don't make anything. I get trade goods for their copra, but they demand a lot and I don't dare refuse them. They never get cash, of course. They wouldn't know what that was.

"I've been through three bouts of fever since then, and how I survived I don't know. I've never had a nurse, or a servant. The natives won't come into the house.

"The first time the lake boiled after Charley had—had gone—they were going to throw me in. I told them they could sacrifice my boat. I told them that would placate the gods of the lake.

"So they rollered and carried the thing all the way up the mountain—the whole population—took 'em three days and two nights—and launched it in the lake after setting fire to it. My luck was in, now that I no longer cared. The lake subsided.

"Three times since then it's begin to bubble and boil. And each time I was the one selected for a sacrifice. I talked my way out, I don't know how. I'd learned their language by then, and I learned that if I could only show them something new, something they'd never seen before, I could make them think that the gods didn't want me yet.

"Three times, after I'd sidetracked them, they picked one of their own number. Each time, each night, I sat here in this room and listened to the poor beggar yell while they tied him and put him into a canoe and pushed him out.

"I could sit and imagine how he was feeling, lying there bound so tight he couldn't move, with the canoe rocking back and forth and the water hissing and sizzling just outside—

"One lasted only a little while, one about half an hour, but the third"—he closed his eyes—"God! he screamed all night long, that poor devil! It must have lasted nine hours, and he never left off for a second!"

DAWSON was looking out of the window again, not at the *Jabberwock* now but nearer, at the clearing before the house. He had just seen a pot-bellied savage step out of the bush.

"I don't know why I haven't killed myself. Yes, I do know! It's because I simply haven't got the strength. If you've ever had blackwater fever you'll understand. I've got a conscience, too, which is still worse. You might not believe it, after what I've just told you, but I have.

"I'm glad you came. I'm glad it's

going to be all over at last. There had to be an end some time and I never could have forced it myself.

"Those other men—I don't know who they are. They came this morning, a little before you did. They called me by my right name and demanded half the money I'd stolen. Otherwise they were going to report me. I laughed and told them to go ahead. It wasn't heroism. I just didn't care.

"So they started to search the place. And when they couldn't find the money they came back to me, and one of them struck me with the butt of a pistol. It bled a lot."

Dawson nodded. This explained the pool he had found in the living room. He was still gazing out the window, over the clearing. There were three natives standing out there now, all staring toward the house. Presently another joined them.

"While I was stunned they dragged me in here. I would have told them where the money was, but they didn't give me a chance. They were going to start torturing me right away. They did start. And I fainted.

"Then they must have heard you coming. I'm not clear about this part. I was in half a swoon. But I remember one of them taking my umbrella and putting on a pair of spectacles and saying to the others, 'Keep him quiet, and I'll lead them off somewhere where they can't hear it when you go to work on him.'

"Then he went into the next room. But I couldn't yell to warn you. They'd stuffed a pillowcase into my mouth.

"After a while they took that out and started to—started— Well, you've seen it. I couldn't stop them. I think they enjoyed it."

Margaret had risen. Sniffling, she sought her blue leather purse; but she'd left it in the boat. Eduard went over to her and touched her arm for a moment. Then Eduard turned to Henry Ash.

"We will sail at once for Vila. You will come with us?"

One end of Ash's mouth was twisted down. But he nodded.

"Yes, I'll go. It's got to end sometime. And jail couldn't possibly be as bad as this—or even the gallows. It will take me an hour or so to get my things together."

"I think you should move faster than that," Eduard said. "You see, we have not yet told you, but *the lake is boiling!*"

It brought Henry Ash off the bed. Margaret, seeing for the first time what had been done to his hand, gave a little scream and looked sick; but she kept control of herself.

"Then we must go right away!" cried Ash.

"I'm afraid it's too late," said Dawson Wilde. He nodded toward the window. "Look."

CHAPTER VI

THE SKIPPER SLEEPS

THE clearing was jammed with savages. At points along the winding path, too, others could be seen; and the beach itself, far below, was black with them.

It might have been at least a spur to action if they had waved their clubs and spears, or shouted, or moved around. They did not. They only stood there scowling up toward the house; stood motionless but expectant, as if waiting for a signal.

"If you've got anything you haven't shown them yet," Dawson said quietly, "it might be a good idea to get it out now."

Ash's dark blue eyes were fear-bright.

His hands were jittery. His mouth worked in silence.

Eduard shook the rifle.

"No, no," cried Ash. "They've seen guns before! After all, patrol parties *have* been here a few times." He ran back and forth. "You don't understand. There must be four hundred warriors altogether, and when they're in a religious frenzy like this they don't know what fear is. A machine gun wouldn't keep them back! No, I must find something new . . ."

Margaret Macready said in a flat voice: "They've never seen money before, have they?"

"That's it! That might do it!"

Wildly excited, he threw himself on his knees before one of the walls and started to claw at a baseboard. He could of course use only his right hand. But the board came.

"Here it is!" He drew out three thick packets. Rubber bands held them. "It might do the trick!"

He quieted; then began to giggle slyly. "You think I want the stuff? I hate it! This paper—these miserable slips of paper"—he held out the packets—"they're what caused everything! They're what drove me here! They're what killed poor Charley Macready!"

He ran toward the door. His mouth was slobbery now, his eyes bugged out. He snickered with impatience.

Eduard cried, "Don't you think we ought to go with you?"

"No, no, no! If I can't do it alone, then we're all ruined! But maybe I can. It's a good sacrifice. If they only knew, those black animals—if they knew how much agony and misery these pieces of paper represent! A good sacrifice, yes."

They followed him into the living room, watched him cross the veranda and descend to the ground.

The sun was low now, and the darkening shadows were long.

He waved the money over his head. He even managed to hold one packet in his left hand. He must have been beyond pain. He was shrieking something those in the house could not understand.

The natives in the clearing closed in. They did not touch him, only surrounded him. Pauselessly he waved the money; he harangued them in their outlandish tongue. They listened, expressionless, while shadows crept across the clearing like fingers of evil edging close.

Perhaps somehow he slipped off the rubber bands; or perhaps they burst. As he waved his arms, money began to cascade around him. Commonwealth of Australia notes, most of small denominations, bright blue five-pounders, bright red tens, they swished and floated

to the earth, their surfaces now catching, now losing what light remained. Henry Ash stood ankle-deep in the paper he professed to abhor, and still it fluttered from his skeleton-thin hands.

Suddenly he was silent. His hands were empty. He dropped his arms. Only his head moved, as he looked from one fantastically tattooed face to another. The savages moved closer. He nodded a little, shrugged, turned.

They accompanied him, never touching him, around the house, around the shed and the kiln, until they passed out of sight up the path, leaving unnoticed, in the middle of the clearing, twelve thousand five hundred pounds

The other natives, on the path down to the beach and on the beach itself, had vanished.

Margaret straightened, shivering.

"We can't let him go off like that," she whispered. "Not even after what he did to Charley. We can't let him—"

"No," said Dawson.

"Come on," said Eduard.

IT WAS unexpectedly dark under the trees. They had not until now realized how late it was. Ahead, faintly at first, increasingly as they climbed, they could hear a babble of voices and the hiss and roar of the lake; but immediately around them the silence was tomblike.

At no command but as if by instinct they went in their old marching order: Dawson, Margaret, Eduard.

So it was Dawson who first saw the scene at the edge of the crater, though the others crowded behind him promptly. They stopped. Perhaps nobody saw them; certainly nobody paid them any attention, though they were clear of cover now and within fifty feet of the lake.

The lake was much higher. It had risen to a point within a few feet of the lip. It seethed and jounced, spitting, hissing in rage, the bubbles fairly leaping up as if trying to jump out of the crater.

The water was mostly vivid yellow, the foam a duller and more brownish yellow; though when a great bubble rose stretchingly, and before it burst, emitting steam, all the colors of the rainbow swam erratically through its rounded taut surface.

The stink of sulphur was almost overwhelming. Clouds, yellow and yellowish green, hung like a pall over the lake that had gone mad.

Against this background stood Henry Ash, his beard flying, his skinny arms raised as if he were defying the waters to rise and engulf him. Now he was utterly insane. The savages around him —there were savages all around the crater, for that matter—did not touch him. They only watched.

The party from the *Jabberwock*, unnoticed, also watched. They could scarcely hear Ash above the fury of the boiling lake.

"You don't want my money? I don't blame you!"

He dropped his arms. He had fallen back on the English language. He didn't care whether they understood him or not. He didn't care about anything. He was stark staring mad. Snarling, he faced them.

"But don't think I'm going to bounce up and down in your hellish canoe until— Here! You want me? All right, take me!"

Dawson started forward. He was too late. Henry Ash had jumped over the edge of the crater and into the lake.

No human being could stay alive in that water.

A howl rose from the savages. It

was a long howl of rage and disappointment. They had been cheated. The rites had not been observed. The gods of the lake would never be satisfied by such a sacrifice.

Somebody saw Dawson and Margaret and Eduard, and pointed to them, yowling. The savages turned. Tattooed nightmare faces twitching, weapons raised, they approached.

"Down the hill!"

It was Eduard Pontalis who started to shoot.

A bounding, shrieking savage threw up his arms and fell flat on his face. Another dropped his club, turned around and around, slipped to his knees.

A thrown club grazed Dawson's shoulder as he started down the path. He turned, revolver raised, and fired twice.

"Don't fight—*run!*"

The path was narrow but somehow he and Margaret descended side by side. Gasping, panting, they stumbled over roots, they caromed off trees, but they kept going.

They heard the crack of the rifle behind them.

"*Run,*" they heard Eduard shout.

There was some light left in the clearing and it shone somberly upon the carpet of red and blue currency. Over that currency and through it they slid and scrambled.

Dawson glanced back once and saw that Eduard was only a short distance behind. The Frenchman, the smoking rifle in his hands, was half turned, looking back up the path as he ran.

THEN they were under trees again, and it was dark. Twice Margaret fell, and twice he yanked her to her feet. "I—I've dropped my revolver somewhere," she gasped. It didn't matter.

You would have thought that nobody could descend that hill faster than they did. They almost fell down it, almost rolled down. But the savages must have known a shorter path. When Dawson and Margaret staggered out on the white beach at last, just opposite the tender, it was to see a group of fully thirty running along that beach toward them.

"Get in the boat! Lie flat!"

He dropped to one knee and started to shoot. He had to make each shot count. He had only four left, and it was not likely that he would be given time to reload. Where the devil was Eduard?

The revolver bucked; the muzzle sprang high, and then seemed to lower itself into position again as if eager for more. A savage had stopped, and he swayed; but presently he came on again, though slower, dragging his feet. The others swept past him.

Twice more. He saw one man half turn, as if the impact of a bullet had swerved him from his course, and collide with another man so that they both fell.

There was one shot left.

The last. He would have to use it soon. Margaret, behind him, had disobeyed orders. Instead of springing into the tender and lying flat, she was pushing that tender out, getting it ready for escape when Eduard came.

A club struck Dawson's left elbow. It was only a glancing blow, but it stung. A spear slished past his head. Another spear plowed the beach near his foot, showering him with sand.

They came on in a great black rush.

Dawson fired the last shot. He dropped the revolver but stayed on one knee. He had remembered something: the Colt automatic he'd taken from Whitby.

One savage was well ahead of the others, a comparatively tall fellow, bounding like a kangaroo, shrieking all the while. He was not going to throw his club. He was going to get in close and swing it.

Was there a cartridge in the firing compartment of the Colt? If there wasn't, if he had to yank back the jacket and pump one in, he was lost. He'd never make it in time. These thoughts did not stream through his head: they were simply there, instantaneously, all at once, a flash.

He squeezed the trigger. The gun roared, kicking in his hand. The kangaroo savage was thrown right over backward, as if, running, he had collided with an invisible chest-high wire.

Again and again the Colt roared. But they came on. An enemy with any common sense would have respected that weapon. But these fiends were not afraid to die. They didn't even know what it was to die. They had no imagination. They were in an ecstasy.

"Voila! I am shot out! Into the boat, *mon ami!"*

The tender was off the sand, thanks to Margaret. Eduard, who had appeared at last from the foot of the path—though it probably was a matter of seconds, it had seemed hours—lifted her into the stern, jumped in after her, grabbed the oars she had already fitted into the rowlocks, and bellowed for Dawson.

Dawson fired wildly as he backed toward the boat. He fired until the automatic clicked in his hand—empty. He threw it away.

A spear clunked into the side of the boat. Another whistled over the bows.

"Good thing they got no arrows . . ."

Makama warriors waded into water up to their waists and stood there yelling, brandishing clubs and spears. But by that time the tender was out of range.

They made the tender fast and almost fell aboard the ketch. Eduard puffed out his cheeks, O-ed his mouth, and exhaled with feeling.

"Poo-oof! I think that we need coffee now, eh? Ma Sing! Where is that yellow sluggard?"

"He's taking a little nap," said Jonas Whitby, stepping out of the shadow of the mainmast. "We conked him on the knob."

CAPTAIN JACQUES DUBOIS at the same moment came out of the cabin. He was holding the Luger. A vast man, hard-eyed, most marvelously well pleased with himself, he grinned.

"We thought you'd be back," said Whitby. He too was pleased with himself. "Now let's have that money—and no joking about it!"

There spun through Dawson's memory the remark of Ash's predecessor: "Things like this aren't as rare as you'd think, out here." Yes, it was an ideal country for murder. Even if the money could be handed over, these men could not afford to let him and Eduard and the girl get back to civilization. They would hang, if that happened.

Dawson measured the distance to Margaret, wondering whether he could possibly spring in front of her when the shooting started. She seemed cool. She sauntered to the canvas deck chair in which she had left her purse.

They didn't know her face well enough to recognize the tension that now tightened her features.

"I hope," she said flippantly, "that you don't object to a lady powdering her nose? I must look a fright."

Whitby, grinning, threw her a glance of admiration.

"Go right ahead, dearie. Don't mind us."

She deliberately turned her back on them, opened the bag, and started to examine the reflection of her face in the mirror on the inside of its flap.

"We don't plan to spend much time with you here," said Whitby. "Where's that money?"

Eduard said, "The money? Why, yes. I'll give you the money."

He reached slowly for an inside coat pocket. The men watched him.

A bluff, Dawson thought. A stall for time. Eduard hasn't got any sort of weapon on him now. He wants me to do something. What does he want?

"Come along! We can't wait all night!"

"All right," said Margaret Macready, and spun around, firing the tiny bright automatic she had taken from her purse. *Pip-pip-pip-pip!* She held it at arm's length, pointing it in the general direction of Jacques Dubois. *Pip-pip-pip!*

Dubois, taken utterly by surprise, dropped his Luger. Blood appeared on his right hand, nerveless for the instant. He stooped to pick the pistol up with his left hand—but by that time Dawson was upon him.

As he jumped, Dawson heard Eduard bellow in rage, charging Whitby.

Dubois got his left hand over the pistol, and even lifted it from the deck. But Dawson had the barrel by that time. He swung the barrel around, swung it up, forcing it back, pushing it against the huge French seaman all the while.

Sweat was wrung from him.

Dubois could not have been badly hurt by Margaret's shots. After the first jolt of amazement his strength came back; and he was an enormous man. He tried to tear loose Dawson's grip on the Luger.

But he was not accustomed to holding a pistol in his left hand. He squeezed it a trifle too hard, and in the wrong place. The Luger went off.

The muzzle had been pointed directly up, and the barrel became warm in Dawson's hands, while hot gases choked and blinded him, searing his chin.

Then he alone was holding the gun. Dubois had let go of everything. The front of Dubois' neck and the bottom of his chin looked as if they were suddenly smeared with pitch, and his head went back so violently that it seemed as if his spine must have been snapped.

Upright, but goggling grotesquely at a sky he couldn't see, he stepped backward. He sat on the taffrail (his head was still straight back). Very gently he toppled over.

There was only the one splash; but there was a flurried muffled churning of water afterward. The sharks had followed them this far. Those sharks must have been very hungry indeed.

"Is that one finish'?" asked Eduard.

He was sitting on Jonas Whitby, whose face was a pulp.

"That one is finished," Dawson said grimly. He went to Margaret and took her hand. "Good girl," he said. "I'll never laugh at you again, that way."

He suddenly bent over her, his eyes alive and very warm.

She looked up at him and smiled. Her eyes were not altogether dry. He squeezed her hand, getting closer . . . .

"Avast there! Set the foresails! Up with that anchor!" Eduard rose, brushing himself and bellowing. "What a crew!"

"Aye, aye, sir," said Dawson. He knew that Eduard was clowning only in order to relieve the nervous tension.

"Aye, aye, sir," said Margaret, touching an imaginary forelock.

"And as for *you,*" Eduard roared, picking up the limp Whitby as if he were a sack of potatoes, "we're going to take you to Vila, and we've got a nice place for you in the meanwhile. It's a closet we always keep our ghosts in."

MARGARET'S watch was from eight to midnight, when Dawson's started. Ma Sing, his head bandaged, was in the galley, and also in heaven, in a dreamy dopey daze, for Eduard had permitted him two extra pipes this night because of the headache.

"You are not going to turn in, *mon ami?* You must be tired."

"I think I'll stay up a while. It's such a lovely night."

"Ah." Eduard cocked his head. "*Mademoiselle* does look charming there at the wheel like that, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"It's because I'm thinking such sweet thoughts," she told him. "I'm thinking of what a wonderful old bluffer you are."

"Yes," said Dawson. "That business of stalling, pretending you really had the money, that was masterful."

The Frenchman's chin went in and his eyes popped out.

"*Pretending* I had it? *Mon Dieu!* Do you think I would leave twelve thousand five hundred pounds to those animals? I did not know you had met trouble at the beach, or of course I would not have pause' to--"

Out of his pockets he began to haul great masses of Australian money. "*Pretending* I had it? You forget I am not a common adventurer. I am a business man. And when we get back, we claim the reward. What do you think I came here for?"

He disappeared, counting. They heard him moving around down there for a while, but they did not pay much attention, being occupied with something else. The seas were not running high tonight, the wind was steady, and the *Jabberwock* did not need much attention.

Which perhaps was just as well.

"And mind you"— Eduard's head appeared above the deck, and he was just in time to witness a swift separation. He shook his forefinger. "Mind you, I wish to sleep tonight, and not be thrown out of my bunk by any jibe! Attend the wheel well, both of you!"

"Good night," called Dawson. "Pleasant dreams."

"Fine crew!" He went below again, grumbling. "I will give them all the sack when we get home! Such sailors —poof!"

Two minutes later he was snoring. As only Eduard Pontalis could snore.

THE END

The Tokiba Buddha

By ALFRED BATSON

Author of "When No Dogs Bark," "Glory Hill," etc.

This author say: Oriental very unwise to play games with American smuggler's word of horor. Practice permanently unhealthful

"SCUZ, pliss, but you still real passport American and am register at Consulate? You most famous smuggler on China coast, and that opium investigate––"

Val Vickers flicked a hand. "Nothing to it. Nothing proved. I'm still an American."

There was a hissing intake of breath. "Ah, this good. My country nootral against America."

"I beg pardon," the white man said as he toyed with the thousand-dollar bill. "Neutral *against?*"

Igo grinned toothily. "Begs pardons. We so efficient maybe we learns English

too fast. I means we nootral *toward*."

Val Vickers' disarming smile matched the one directed across the table at him. But what lay hidden in his eyes did not match the chilled gleam that glared out of the doughy mass of yellow flesh now wrinkled in the friendliest of understandings.

He was too good an actor to tip his hand. Though he smiled outwardly, inwardly he was reading contempt in the Japanese face, the familiar Nipponese contempt for anyone Occidental, more specifically American.

Instead of slapping and disrobing Britishers of late, the Japanese had made Americans the butts of their displeasure in a growing number of incidents that had begun with brazen street searches before gaping crowds of Chinese, and the punching of American women by guards they had failed to salute.

The Japanese did not appear to realize that the British fleet was held in the North Sea but that the American was based on Hawaii. For a nation usually careful before it started anything the anomaly was beyond Val's understanding.

Suddenly the squat, muscled figure before him slithered sideways in his seat as a snake slithers and from a pocket produced nine more thousand-dollar bills.

"Here. You take. Mebbe you come out of retire, eh? Money talks to Val Vickers now like before, eh?"

Val made no protest to the accusation that his voluntary retirement from smuggling during the war was subordinate to his love of money. He was too attracted by what crouched behind Igo's constantly shifting eyes and warm friendliness.

Nor did he object when the Jap abruptly leaped up and thrust the wad of bills in his pocket. He'd never had a man force ten thousand dollars on him and he enjoyed the sensation.

"I give you for take small idol to Japan on American ship so we can keep safe until war over and return to Chinese cousins. Just before now we have capture in North. We Japanese are protectors of greater Cathay that will emerge when stupid coolies see errors of hurting neighbors who have their interests most dear."

VAL VICKERS glanced out the window of his Palace Hotel suite to the ruins of the once thriving Pootung waterfront and thought of the thousands of defenseless coolie men, women and children who had been slaughtered by Japanese bombs. Yet he said nothing. He wanted to find the joker before giving his answer, for an intuitive sixth sense told him there was a joker.

When he looked across the table again the scar that ran along Igo's chin and vanished behind an ear was lost in molds of yellow flesh from which snaggle teeth stuck out in a grin of angelic love.

"What are the conditions?" he asked eventually.

"Simple. The money yours on agreement you will not keep unless you land this idol on Japanese soil from an American ship. I assept your famous word of honor for this. Your word of honor ver' famous through Far East, even for adventurer who lives by wits."

"But why an American ship?"

Igo looked carefully around before answering. "Because most of our ships have Korean traitors in crews. They hate Japan; they find out about this and destroy."

"Why not an army transport?"

"Army and navy pipple not understan' I am curator of Tokyo Museum

and want for save this as rare art piece. They search eve't'ing in transport. If they find this they sell quick for anything for war funds This great sacrilege to lovers of ancient things like you and me."

Igo wasn't Val's conception of an antiquarian who spent his life over musty tomes in ancient archives. Rather, he resembled any one of thousands of alert, narrow-eyed young officers in the forces he expressed himself as fearing.

Yet the master smuggler bided his time and racked his brains. He couldn't make head or tail of it.

Then he looked again at the idol: a Buddha of the cheapest green jade. It wasn't even watermelon pink, the color beloved of connoisseurs; not even the green-white beloved of foreign tourist suckers who thought they were connoisseurs. It was about fifteen inches tall and amateurish in its carving. He estimated its worth to be around ten dollars.

Yet Igo would pay a thousand times that to have it smuggled ashore in Japan.

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

The Japanese was exasperated. "It simple job," he fumed. "You pose as great smuggler but now you hesitates." Then his manner changed; his voice cooed. "Why not show love for Chinese antiques by help all art lovers of future? You agree, yes."

"But I haven't agreed."

Igo snorted. "This easiest money you ever can earns. I assept your word of honors." He leaped to his feet and started for the hall.

"Here," Val put in. "Here! Wait!"

There was no reply as the door closed noiselessly behind the hulking figure. In the few moments it took Val Vickers to jump from his chair in pursuit, he heard nothing. Nor did he see anything along the carpeted hall.

For a big man the curator of the Tokyo Museum moved fast.

VAL VICKERS sought solace for his puzzled brain in a double whisky. And in his pocket nestled ten one-thousand-dollar U. S. bills. They told him he had been pushed into something.

"It's that confounded high sense of honor," he groused to nobody in particular. "He knows my word is inviolate. So he gave me the money and the Buddha. I can't back out if I want to, for I'll never see him again to return it. He'll take care of that."

Meanwhile he had become interested in a brief newspaper account of a Reverend Mr. Wallington who had miraculously appeared in Shanghai after a thousand-mile flight from his mission station in far Kansu. For a man whose roof had been blasted from over his head by Jap bombers, he had little rancor in his talk with reporters.

To anyone else that might have been proof of his Chrisitan tenets; but when Val Vickers read a description of him he had a hunch it was something else.

I'll call on the reverend gentleman, he thought behind a slow smile and a quickening pulse. Living in the interior so long he may have a knowledge of ancient Chinese ceramics.

Then his smile was replaced by a puzzled frown:

There's one thing I know about this Buddha already. The carving isn't Chinese; it's Japanese! Then how was it in North China for the Japs to capture?

. . . The Reverend Edgar Wallington occupied a secluded office in the old American Mission Building on the lower Bund. That was, the coolie explained, to hide him from people who

would not allow him the rest he needed.

The explanation came only after the Chinese had accepted the chit of the Reverend George Saltus, and had looked carefully over his six-foot figure lost in the black folds of correct attire for a minister.

Val had taken considerable pains with his disguise and was pleased to have the coolie acknowledge him as what he professed to be. So, also, had the several similarly black-garbed gentlemen Val passed in the lobby of the building.

That nobody accosted him was not odd, because bearers of the Word of God in China are so numerous as to be strangers to each other; and it would not be unusual if, as the newspaper said, that Reverend Wallington's zeal for his outland station was so great he had not been in Shanghai in a decade.

Thus he would not be known to the constantly-changing administrators handling the local affairs of a thousand sky pilots, their wives and families.

The coolie had taken Val's card and vanished with it, frowning. The frown was gone when he returned. Val felt a warm concern for all the world when he followed along the hall.

When he stepped over the threshold into the Reverend Mr. Wallington's cubicle his concern encompassed every planet in the skies. His hunch was right. He was met with a wry smile and a firm handclasp.

STRANGELY enough, for one who had been through a terrible ordeal the man in the swivel chair appeared to be in excellent physical shape. He was perhaps thirty-five, erect and strong-chinned. More strangely, the clean cut of the sea was in his every gesture.

But it was his eyes that held Val Vickers. They were blue-gray, as if they had long looked over heaving waters—and they missed nothing.

While the coolie lingered, Val and the eminent divine talked generalities. But when he had gone Val drew closer and the Reverend Mr. Wallington's voice lowered to a whisper.

"You don't miss a trick, do you?"

He went on in a slang oddly out of keeping with his surroundings. "Now don't get me wrong. I'm a churchgoer and I like preachers. But it was a Japanese priest who discovered a new head of Intelligence was coming up from Manila. With their usual conceited efficiency they watched the river.

"I went ashore at Ningpo down the coast and came the rest overland. By the time I got here I was the Reverend Mr. Wallington from Kansu.

"The real Wallington is in a Baguio hospital with typhus. He'll be there months. When he gets out my work will be done and I'll be gone. Meanwhile I won't take his name in vain. These good people think I'm so done in they accept without question my reluctance to talk."

"It's a perfect cover," Val said.

"It was," Wallington corrected him. The he smiled grimly. "It takes a crook to catch a crook. What's on your mind, Val?"

The Reverend Mr. Saltus handed over the Buddha Igo had given him. The Reverend Mr. Wallington studied it a long moment. "I'll let you have two bucks," he said finally. "I heard you'd retired, but I never thought you'd be selling this junk."

"Ah, but it isn't junk. I've been offered ten thousand to bring it into Japan."

Wallington's eyes narrowed. "By whom?"

"One Sisugetsu Igo, curator of the Tokyo Museum."

"What's the story?"

Val told it, beginning at the place where a Cathay bellboy had brought him an envelope on wh ch his name was scrawled. Inside was a single thousand-dollar United States bill.

"I thought it such a sensible innovation in calling cards," he said, "I had the chap brought up. The first thing he said was, 'I know cash money attract great Val Vickers like honey for bees. I clever, eh?' And he roared with laughter. That had me miffed. He thought my sole interest in life was money. I was insulted—"

"But you kept the bill?" Wallington suggested with a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Naturally. And the nine more that came after it." Val went into the details of the whole transaction as the man opposite him listened avidly.

"He stressed my being an American. And I've got to smuggle this off an American ship. I don't get what it's all about. This thing isn't worth anything. Then why . . ."

The Reverend Mr. Wallington's lips pursed. "They're losing out in China," he said eventually. "But the high command isn't letting the people know it. They're desperate and they may be up to something far bigger than the mere smuggling of an idol. Don't get involved. Toss this away . . ."

Val bristled. "That would be going against my principles. I've got the money and I'm committed to sail on the first U. S. ship."

Wallington's mouth stretched taut in a smile. "Beat them at their own game, eh? You have guts." He interrupted himself to reach for the telephone and ask the name of the curator of the Tokyo Museum, and of the next American vessel stopping in Japan.

The answer came back after several minutes. The curator of the Tokyo Museum was Mr. Sisugetsu Igo; and the first American ship stopping at a Japanese port would be the *Great Lakes.*

WALLINGTON'S breath caught when he put the receiver down. "I'm not Wallington and he might not be Igo," he whispered from behind an impassive face. "As for the *Great Lakes,* she sails tomorrow for Frisco with a drop-in at Yokohama. That's usual."

"But here's something that isn't. She's carrying the cremated bones of ten thousand Jap warriors killed in North China. They're to be interred at Tokiba, the famous shrine of Nipponese soldiers. So if you take her you'll have plenty of company. Ghostly company."

"I'm bound to take her," Val put in.

Wallington nodded. "I wonder if your going on her is a coincidence, or that efficiency they like to boast about?"

Val Vickers was asking himself the same question. He was also asking why the Japanese should send the cremated bones of ten thousand heroes back to their resting place on an American ship.

"All Japanese ships are busy," Wallington offered.

"That doesn't satisfy me," Val said. "It only builds up the mystery of the whole affair. By George, a word of honor is a hard taskmaker."

"You're going through with it?"

Val nodded. "If for no other reason than that it has me stuck." Then his eyebrows arched. "I'll be on a Yankee deck and I won't step off until I'm satisfied this is on the level."

. . . So absorbed was Vickers in the dilemma confronting him that as he took his leave he failed to see his trail being picked up by a Chinese waterchestnut seller lounging at the door of the building.

The peddler tailed him to the office of the Transpacific Steamship Co. (U.S.) where Val bought his ticket on the *Great Lakes*. By the time he had finished (so well regulated was the Japanese secret service) the peddler had passed on his information to a small Japanese shoemaker.

The shoemaker left his shop on the instant for the steamship office; and by the payment of a small cash bribe to a Chinese clerk learned everything concerning the transaction.

That news was relayed by devious routes to Mr. Sisugetsu Igo who smiled in high glee on receipt of it. But more than that: within a half hour he was climbing into the cockpit of a Japanese navy plane which shortly thereafter roared out across the Yellow Sea.

His thoughts: The stupid fool fell for my talk about his fame as a smuggler. Like all foreign pigs he will give my race credit for nothing. But when he discovers he *cannot* land an idol in Japan he will be at the beginning of a lesson that will amaze the entire Western world. I and I alone will yet save the face of my nation.

IT SEEMED to Val Vickers the following morning that never had he embarked on a ship which was attracting such attention as the *Great Lakes*.

For a dozen blocks approaching her boarding jetty on the lower Bund, Japanese sailors from the fleet in the river stood on immoble guard with rifles reversed. Past them slowly tramped an endless procession of Nipponese soldiers, each bearing in front of him a small white box in which lay the earthly remains of a dead warrior. Shanghai had never seen such a spectacle.

The long line had started at daybreak and showed no signs of stopping. Meanwhile, at frequent intervals, military bands played funeral dirges as a concession to the foreigners who lined the steeets looking on, while groups of Japanese priests spotted the procession and blew dolefully on *gintogas*, the ancient reed instrument played only in honor of the departed.

And with what Val Vickers could think of only as "efficiency," the Japanese authorities had seen to it that native and foreign newspapermen and cameramen were everywhere.

Overhead the *Great Lakes'* flag was at half mast. As the soldiers filed aboard with their grisly burdens they were relieved of them by other priests in ceremonial robes. The boxes were taken below and placed in long rows in the hold.

The few Occidental passengers aboard seemed lost in the maze of uniforms.

As Val bent over the rail looking down he saw a huge sign bearing the crossed flags of Japan and the United States. Underneath was a single line: *Peace on Pacific for All Time Between Great Brothers of Word.*

Val wondered. Everybody breath-sucking and bellowing brotherly love—and forgetting the Americans killed by the Japanese bombardment of the Settlement, and the boys on the *Panay*.

Then he felt of the Buddha strapped on his leg and instinctively crossed his fingers.

Meanwhile the Settlement dignitaries were guests of the Japanese high command at a brief ceremony for the departed on the poop.

Within a half hour of his going aboard the procession ended. The cameramen and others went ashore, the lines were cast off, and the Brotherly Love Ship, as the yellow-skinned Number Ones called her, turned her prow down the Yangtze and into the thick fog of the Yellow Sea.

Val had not seen the Reverend Mr. Wallington among the other divines; but then he hadn't expected to. Nor had he seen anyone who resembled Sisugetsu Igo. That bother him for a moment, for he'd thought that if Igo were up to anything he'd be on board to watch over his two-dollar Buddha.

Yet it was in the moment the *Great Lakes* engines were eased up to "full" that Igo stepped down on Japanese soil and went into an immediate and whispered conference with his superiors.

VAL'S doubts began to subside when the *Great Lakes* nosed out of the thick mist and the harbor of Yoko lay revealed in its half-moon semicircle of beauty.

The pier, as she approached, was black with people standing bareheaded in solemn respect; military and naval officials, newspapermen and publicans, women and children.

On the end of the wharf was a small group of foreign press representatives, many with cameras slung from their shoulders, and overhead was another huge banner: *Japan Thanks American Brothers for Great Kindness to Honored Heroes.*

Val read it with a wry grimace. They certainly want the world to know they love Uncle Sam, he thought. Then his attention was drawn to several trucks with drawn blinds which pushed through the crowd of people and parked.

As he watched he suddenly saw something that quickened his pulses. A foreign newspaperman thrust an arm under the side curtain of one of the trucks and drew out a Japanese language paper. The driver discovered him and began yelling in protest. But as the ship's nose touched the crowd surged forward and the foreigner ducked away.

Val sauntered along and glanced again over the rail. Then he heard his name. He peered closer, and his breath caught when he saw that the man giving it was the reporter, now feverishly being sought by the truck driver and a crowd of bulging-waisted men in mufti.

"Save me first exclusive interview," he said from between cupped hands. "It's very important you talk to me first. I'll be aboard, quick." He motioned to the stern gangplank.

A large box camera was hanging from his right shoulder and a card marked *Press* was in his hatband. But it was something else that held Val Vickers riveted: the look of smoldering, haunting menace in his blue-gray eyes over a strong chin. He was in a black suit beneath a greatcoat whose collar was turned up.

He was the erstwhile Reverend Mr. Wallington.

As Val watched, the men in mufti discovered him and closed in. Wallington saw them and shot up the gangplank. Simultaneously the forward gangplank was ashore and made fast.

Val had small interest there. He knew Wallington was in trouble.

He was starting aft to help him when suddenly the first man up the forward gangplank drew his interest, held it with an impending fear that chilled his blood. He was Sisugetsu Igo; and behind him, waiting on his orders, was a squad of grim-lipped men in civilians.

Val knew their breed by instinct. They were plainclothesmen, *ronins,* and Igo was their leader.

But more obviously, he sensed the denouement of the puzzle in which he was chief actor: for since the *Great Lakes* was the last ship to leave Shanghai, Igo must have been flown across by one of the Japanese services.

That meant that the deal was bigger

than the mere smuggling of an idol for the Tokyo Museum and the art lovers of the future.

MEANWHILE there was Wallington. The better to get to him without being seen from on shore, Val dove down a companionway and scurried through the milling crowd of greeters in the saloon; then suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Ah. My dear friend. I was abouts to look for you."

Igo's eyes were gimlet hard, but a smile wreathed his doughy face and the scar on his chin seemed to leap vividly alive. Menace was there and a strong cruelty.

He broke off in his ironical welcome to glance over his shoulder and out the saloon door, then down the gangplank where a mufti-dressed underling was waiting every few feet in a line that ran back to the parked trucks.

Val took it all in in a sweeping survey, but still he could not draw the ends together.

"Have you the idol?"

"Naturally. You had my word."

"Ah, yiss. Scuz, pliss, for doubts. You efficient too, eh."

There was a diabolical leer over his fat lips as he nodded to the nearest man in the line down the gangplank. That man nodded to a second. The signal progressed until it reached back to the truck drivers. They plunged under the canvas covers of their trucks, brought out huge bundles of newspapers; and in a twinkling a hundred strident voices of newsboys were raised in a din that drowned out the murmuring of the crowd.

"What is it?" Val asked. "What's the sudden news?"

"You will sees," Igo replied. "Let me have idol." Then he drew himself up pompously and sucked in his breath. "I seize great Japanese treasure being smuggled to America. Give me."

Val didn't like that, though he couldn't yet fathom it. Nor did he like what had gone before. He had an abrupt suspicion that he was not supposed to land that idol on Japanese soil; that Igo had never intended he should. Yet he had agreed to, and a perversity in his nature shouted at him to teach Igo a lesson.

"Gladly," he said with a wide smile. "It's in my cabin. Naturally I wouldn't carry it. Wait here."

Igo took the bait and laughed outright at the absurd ease with which he had tricked the greatest smuggler on the China Coast. "This fool stupid," he said in Japanese to an underling. "Wait here." Val knew enough of the language to catch the gist.

And he took it as a good omen, as the devil protecting his own, that as he started for his cabin with Igo close behind, the ship was crowded with dignitaries from on shore. They milled everywhere and he could hear their footsteps on the steel decks above as the hatches were opened. Simultaneously a band began to play a dirge and the shrill wailing of *gintogas* set up a deafening cacophony.

As Val opened the door to his cabin he saw that the dock outside his windows was seaward from the dock. He crossed to the closet and beckoned Igo.

"It's locked in my kit bag," he said, smiling. "Naturally I wouldn't have it on my person."

Igo's grin widened. It had been easier than he'd expected. He stepped in behind Val Vickers; and in that moment the smuggler's fingers closed around the neck of a champagne bottle on the shelf. The bottle descended with crushing force and a low, gurgling moan

broke through Igo's thick lips as he slumped to the floor.

VAL dodged out, closed the door behind him and locked it. In a half dozen strides he was through the French windows of his cabin onto the deck.

The excitement and crowds were around on the opposite side, and as he strode quickly aft to round the housing he was thankful for their presence. They offered the best cover he could have.

To save time in making his way to Wallington he hurried up a companionway to the boat deck. Midway along he heard a voice in English. He stopped short, listened. Then his brain pounded.

He found him behind the shelter of a windbreak on the aft flying bridge. Earphones were clapped over his head and he was kneeling before what had been his camera box. But now it was open and a trio of dials into which he was speaking said it was a short wave radio. A cable plugged into a deck outlet provided power.

"Five two two," he was repeating. "*Great Lakes* seized on pretense of typhoid. Five two two This is bigger than I figured. I'll wait your action . . ."

He listened a moment, nodded nervously; then snatched off the earphones, jerked the radio from the fake camera box and crawled along behind the windbreak to the seaward wing.

Val watched him, fascinated. He saw an arm go up in a brief half circle, and a split second later the evidence of his duplicity was lost beyond finding in the soft ooze of Yokohama harbor.

Then he crawled back, slammed the cover on the box and passed it to Val. Simultaneously he slid out of his greatcoat, ripped off his necktie, pocketed it and reversed his collar. Somewhere in the flash of action he grabbed the press card from his hatband.

"Get rid of that lousy idol," he snapped, low voiced. "Throw it overboard. It's the most wanted thing aboard and you're the hottest man in Japan. Take this stuff and get ashore fast. And get rid of that hunk of lousy jade."

Val Vickers knew better than to ask questions. He dropped to his knees behind the canvas, donned the greatcoat, stuck the card in his hatband and thrust the camera strap over a shoulder.

But scarcely had he gotten to his feet than he heard a step along the deck at his elbow. He swung around, his fists clenched.

It was a scowling, beady-eyed Japanese soldier. He was holding a pistol and the blue-black snout was not a foot from Wallington's middle. "Who you?" he snarled.

Val's tongue stuck in his throat. He was readying himself to leap on the intruder when Wallington brushed him aside.

The ministerial fingertips were together before him in the most sacred of gestures. A beaming smile of innocence lighted his face.

"My dear brother of the Pacific," he said warmly, "I am the chaplain of this noble craft. This man has been interviewing me."

Val swallowed hard. The soldier hesitated. Then suddenly he recovered himself. He began prodding Wallington along the deck ahead of him. "You answer question."

"Delighted, my misguided child of violence. Delighted and honored." From the benign look on Wallington's face Val would not have been surprised if any moment he had broken into a hymn.

As they started away, Val brought

the Buddha from where it had been strapped around his leg, and lodged it in his pocket. Suddenly he was of a mind to throw it overboard and be done with the whole mess—until he recalled his word.

Yet equal with that in restraining him was the realization that he had been fooled all along the line by Igo. Therein lay a challenge he could not ignore. He kept the idol in his pocket and sauntered along the deck.

Reaching a companionway, he looked down, hesitated before descending. A mixed crowd of foreigners and Japanese were standing at the foot staring into the dark depths of the hold, wherein lay row after row of white boxes lighted by flickering candles and bringing into ghastly relief the solemnity of the occasion. The hold was as crowded as the deck above it.

Val started down the companionway. His heel caught in the third step and he plunged headlong, crashed into the throng by the open hatch and carried a half dozen of them into the gloomy depths with him.

HE HAD little trouble in getting out of the confusion that followed his precipitous arrival. In the mixup of bruised and tangled forms, overturned boxes and screams of hysterical surprise, he slipped through the crowd, regained the deck and hastened aft. Igo wasn't one to stay in that closet for long.

An indication of the card in his hat and a beaming smile for the guards at the gangplank, and Val Vickers went jauntily ashore.

He lost himself in the narrow, crowded streets around the waterfront. A half hour later he had disposed of the card and camera case and was two miles up the beach sitting disconsolately under a ginko tree and staring seaward.

He hadn't liked to run out on Wallington; but the pseudo divine had shown such adaptability to his surroundings that Val thought he could have squirmed his way out of Hell. And if called upon he could doubtless have preached a benediction that would have done credit to any missionary aboard.

Val sat on the beach throughout the bleak night. Morning arrived in a thick haze and he had found no answer to the thousand questions that had plagued them. He knew that getting off the island in war time would have been as impossible as passing unnoticed among the natives. Disguises were out; his height prevented them.

But the answer came within an hour of the sun's appearance: a towering structure of battleship gray that loomed up boldly out of the nowhere. She had triple-gunned turrets fore and aft, and from her truck floated a starred and barred flag. His heart leaped at sight of her.

By the time the fog had dispersed he was standing knee-deep in water, clad only in his shorts. Then he heard a deep-throated whistle and saw the *Great Lakes* swing from her mooring and head out.

He began swimming at that; swimming and yelling.

A gob on the cruiser discovered him. Someone gave him warm clothing and a shot of whisky and within a quarter hour he was standing before the captain as he followed the "Brotherly Love" ship to safety.

"Did you pick up five two two?" Val asked in a half whisper.

His answer was a grizzled glare. "Mister, I don't know what you're talking about." The captain jerked a Japanese paper from a pocket. "Ever hear of the Tokiba Buddha?"

Vickers said, "What about it?"

"Here's the story. I bought the paper on the dock. It seems this Buddha is to the Japanese about what the Liberty Bell is to Americans. Only years ago it was captured by a crowd of Chinese who raided Tokiba, and it's been in Pekin ever since. Lately the Japanese found it.

"But here's the yarn—and with typical Jap efficiency they've included it in English. Now off my bridge, mister."

He paused abruptly. "What was this five two two—a lottery number?"

"Exactly," Val said from behind a smile. "I'd like to know how it came out."

The captain shrugged. "I wouldn't worry. It's a safe bet he's in the money."

Val went to the wardroom and read the story. The part about the Buddha was as he had been told. But what attracted him most was one heavily played-up angle:

The sacred idol had been found by the resourceful Japanese secret service when the most notorious smuggler west of Honolulu was attempting to get it into the United States on a ship containing the bones of ten thousand Nipponese warriors being returned to their eternal rest.

The writer almost wept over the duplicity of a nation which boasted of its brotherly love for Nippon, yet would go to such insulting ends to use that friendship as a shield.

An editorial said that the people of Japan should not, could not stand such an affront to their national honor and dignity among the Western powers. It almost called for war. Meanwhile another page contained pictures of the sailing at Shanghai and showed American officials bowing to the Japanese Number Ones.

Lies in their Foul Mouths, the caption read. *We Trusted Them and They Stabbed Us,* another said.

Val Vickers laughed as he put the paper down. Efficiency, he thought. They had that yarn printed and ready for sale before we landed. It looks as if they got ahead of themselves.

THREE days later Val Vickers was reclining with a detective mystery in his Palace Hotel suite. He liked detective yarns because the wanted man seemed always in command of the situation.

A bottle of champagne was beside him, and through the window he saw the rising sun flag floating over the ruins of Pootung. His mind was at ease as he sipped the bubble water. He'd made ten thousand dollars and enjoyed himself.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he was not alone. He picked up his glass, took a deep draught and caught the reflection of a man behind him, a big man who moved stealthily.

"Hello, Igo," he said, rising, smiling. "How are you?"

The reply was a *click* as his door was locked. Then he saw the Japanese cross the room and snip the telephone wires. Val got up at that and looked at a glinting knife.

"Scuz, pliss," Igo snarled. "I want idol."

"I agreed to deliver it in Japan," Val parried.

"Ah, but you have here." Abruptly his grim face relaxed. "I kill you and find. But first I tell you how I have done my great duty."

"Yes," Val managed to say as he poured himself a glass of champagne. "There's a lot to be told."

Igo plunged ahead with the conceited assurance of his race, though a

brotherly-love smile wreathed his features.

"World think my country is win in China. High command know we lose. Chinese never stop fight. My country ver' proud. We do not like for lose to tenth-rate power like China, so to save honor he plan for lose to first-rate power like United States. But we must make Japanese pipple have good reason for fight American dogs."

"Go on," Val said when he hesitated. "I'm beginning to get it."

"Only thing of great value my country ever lose in war is Tokiba Buddha. This found recent in North China. Pipple all know about Buddha and feel ver' insult it never return. So Army gain great face by capture. Then to involve United States we get crook like you—"

He broke off and spread his hands in a gesture of explanation.

"I savvy," Val said. "But perhaps you've announced the score before the game is finished. Your country is neutral against America."

Igo's fingers tightened over the knife. Whatever smile might be on his face, Val knew that blood lust was in his heart. His laugh had the hollowness of death.

"Yes"—he grimaced slyly—"we nootral against America. Same way we nootral against world. Now you give me Buddha." He took a menacing step forward.

"I agreed to land it in Japan."

"Hokay. You play trick again. Now, I kill and search room until I find—"

IGO leaped with a snarling oath. Val saw the oncoming wave of emotional fury and tossed his champagne into the yellow, grimacing mask of imminent death.

As Igo closed and the knife flashed into Val's shoulder, he struck out with a right cross that landed in the grinning, toothy smile. At the same moment he stepped aside.

He never could recall what happened in the split seconds that followed. He remembered the muscle-tensed body swarming over him and downing him.

Somewhere in the maelstrom of action he got to his feet. Again he was backed into a corner and again he sent Igo reeling against the wall. The Japanese came out of it with the momentum of a juggernaut.

As Val sidestepped, the snarling charge he had a fleeing glimpse of Igo being borne past him by the fury of his onslaught. There was a crash of glass. A scream.

Simultaneously the noise of traffic in the street seemed to fill the room.

Val Vickers swallowed hard. He was bringing himself back to reality when he heard a key in his door. A moment later it opened and the Reverend Mr. Wallington stepped forward.

"Ah, Vickers," he said, his calm unruffled, "there appears to have been a difference of opinion." Then his lips pursed. "Do you know where the Tokiba Buddha is?"

"Interred at Tokiba in one of the white boxes that were carried out of the *Great Lakes*' hold," Val managed to say.

Wallington could not restrain the smile that broke over his face. "Well, then you're a man of your word. I always suspected you were."

He crossed to the window and looked out. Val followed him. A crowd had gathered around a prone, blood-spattered figure on the sidewalk below. A policeman was trying to shake some semblance of life into it. There was none.

"I seem to remember the face," Wall-

ington said. "How did it happen?"

"Hari kiri," Val replied. "Japs are always jumping out windows these days when they lose battles."

"Of course," Wallington said with a smile. He interrupted himself when there was a commotion in the hall and the manager rushed in with police.

"I was here all the time and can explain everything," Wallington said to Val. "I saw the whole thing. You tried to restrain him and got mussed up a bit. Nobody would doubt the word of the Reverend Mr. Wallington of Kansu. Leave it to me."

Val did.

Add: Things to Worry About

IN LESS than a hundred billion years, says Dr. Henry Norris Russell (professor of astronomy at Princeton University), "the radio-active atoms will have run down; all but the fainter stars will be going out; and the universe will be thoroughly uninteresting."

And practically everybody will be bored stiff.

Dr. Russell also says that there are a few little difficulties not yet cleared out of the way for the time-scale-plotters and the prophets of things to come:

The toughest problems, says he, "are to explain why the giant stars still shine and why the white dwarfs are already present."

. . . Quick, Henry—a large noggin of *spiritus frumenti.* Those white dwarfs are here again.

—Victoria Crosby

The Blue Ribbon Mystery of the Year, starring the one and only Hank Hyer

Dead of Night

By KURT STEEL

Author of "Judas, Inc.," "The Crooked Shadow," etc.

Here's the tale of a big, fat spider who sat in his web and spun fantastic threads of greed and hatred and violence. His name was Clearse Owen and his specialty was hitching the stars to his wagon and mulcting the rich—and sometimes sudden death stirred in his path. Only Hank Hyer could have come to grips with him and solved the riddle that beset the star-struck Thayers. The first installment of a fine mystery that is destined for the best-seller lists

CHAPTER I

PREDICTION AT TWILIGHT

HENRY HYER was bored. His round, bland, normally good-natured face wore the accents of weariness, and doldrums draped his solid compact form (shapely as that of any training welterweight) as fronds of seaweed drape a boulder from which the quick and restless tide has withdrawn.

And because the evening was young and the St. Julian bar but thinly populated, Hyer's boredom became the object of sympathetic interest on the part of his three companions.

Chase Remsen turned a glass in his long, nervous, mathematician's fingers. He said precisely, "Age, Henry. Looming forties." His lively brilliant eyes were amused.

At Hyer's left, Albert Jocelyn chuckled. "Age, my eye. What Henry needs, Chase, is another problem in the theory and practice of espionage."

Mike the barkeep, leaned on his elbows and considered this while Hyer eyed his Scotch moodily. Presently Mike said, "Beg pardon, Mr. Jocelyn?"

"Spy-catching."

"Now, that's right, Mr. Jocelyn. Now, I never did exactly get the straight of that."

"No," Hyer put in testily, "and you're not likely to, either."

Jocelyn chuckled again. "Our deductive friend is a mite touchy on the subject of spies, Mike."

The bartender started to speak, looked doubtfully at Hyer. Hyer was scowling. To Jocelyn the bartender said, "Now, that's this Nazi bunch Mr. Hyer helped round up? Now, that's what you mean?"

"Go on," Hyer said morosely. "*Make* it a dime novel."

There was a moment of silence, and then the bartender said, mildly reproving, "Now, it kind of seems to me, Mr. Jocelyn, that if *I* was the man had run

The stars wheeled and had faces, but the danger that threatened Hank and Quick came from a more earthly source

a gang of them unamerican so-and-so's into the can, I wouldn't be ashamed to talk about it." He stopped, said, "Make it what, Mr. Hyer?"

"I talked about it," Hyer said angrily. "I *talked* about it, all right. Only I talked to the wrong guy, it turned out."

"You see, Mike," the lawyer explained, "Henry let a romantic-minded friend—"

"Friend!" Hyer broke in.

"—go with him on this spy hunt, and then write it up in deathless prose. The result, Henry feels, was a little on the unfortunate side."

"Unfortunate?" Hyer's gloom deepened. "I'll never live that book down." He glowered from Jocelyn to the bartender and turned quickly to catch the glint of amusement in Remsen's lively sunken eyes. "The three of you," he added bitterly, "can—"

Jocelyn, who had glanced toward the door, said, "Excuse me a moment." He walked across the room toward a tall, broad-shouldered young man in a topcoat and a collegian hat, who had appeared and beckoned. A young man with a purposeful jaw, humorous gray eyes, and something of the air of a St. George who has had his fill of dragon talk and finally made up his mind.

Hyer, Remsen, and the bartender watched Jocelyn approach the young man, greet him warmly, take his arm, and walk out into the St. Julian lobby.

"How is Quick, Mr. Hyer?" the bartender asked.

"Quick's getting over it."

"Appendicitis, wasn't it, Mr. Hyer? Can be bad. So the boy's all right, is he?"

Hyer set down his glass and interest

flickered through a rift in his boredom, like the faintest star through an overcast. "Quick's up at McGovern's Health Farm. He'll be out in another week. What good would a case do me right now without Quick to work with me?"

THE bartender fixed Hyer with a disapproving eye. "Now, Orson Quick was the best bell-captain the St. Julian ever had, Mr. Hyer. You didn't do *us* no favor when you stole him off'n us."

"I did *him* one. You people keeping that boy a bell captain! You'd have Charlie Chan running ice water," scornfully.

"Now, maybe the management don't exactly recognize some of the help's talents," Mike agreed. He looked thoughtfully at a microscopic smudge, rubbed it with his cloth. "Myself, if they'd give me a chance to do *Mother Machree* for a supper crowd in the Gold Room some night—" He sighed. "So Quick's pretty good at your work is he, Mr. Hyer?"

"Better than I am," Hyer said proudly. He shrugged. "And Quick'll be up at the health farm recuperating for eight more days."

By the time Jocelyn rejoined them, something of Henry Hyer's native good humor had begun to steal through his fraying gloom. "If I'm any judge of legal matters," he said to the lawyer, "a twenty-five minute chat in a barroom door has just cost that youngster five hundred dollars."

Jocelyn shook his head. His thin mouth and frosty eyes failed to echo Hyer's levity. "It wasn't a consultation. He's a friend. Richard Lanning. Maybe you've heard of him."

Hyer shook his head.

"When Rich was at Dartmouth," Jocelyn said reminiscently, "he formed a corporation, printed a superb prospectus, came to New York during the winter holidays, and sold the advertising counsel of a drug company a complete campaign—proving to the public that a certain mouth wash was ultimate protection against miosis."

Hyer said, "Miosis. Oh, of course."

"As I remember," Jocelyn went on, "some twenty thousand car-cards had been printed before a vice-president thought of looking the word up. It means 'understatement'." He pushed his glass across the bar. "Rich is Mr. Thayer's nephew, Mike."

The bartender said, "Now, I thought I'd seen him. With Mr. Thayer, that's right. The young man don't come in here often, though."

Hyer said, "Thayer?"

"Thayer-Dawson, publishers."

"Now, the last time Mr. Thayer was in here," Mike said eagerly as he filled Jocelyn's glass, "he promised me he'd find out if my wife's wisdom tooth ought to come out in July or September."

Hyer blinked. "Publishers? If Mike's wife's wisdom tooth—?"

Remsen said, "Astrology."

"Then you know him, Chase?" Jocelyn asked.

"Met his wife. *She's* something."

Hyer said, "Whose wife?"

"Thayer's." Jocelyn sipped his whiskey and looked uncomfortable. "Nat Thayer's a client of mine. He's one of the world's finest, but Beryl—" he sighed.

"What about astrology?" Hyer asked. He set his glass down and looked with unabashed hope at the bartender.

"Beryl," Jocelyn said slowly, "is—well, to put it mildly, an enthusiast. She converted Nat about five years ago, got him into the hands of one of the biggest necromancers in the country." He stopped, tightening his lips.

Mike looked disapproving. "Now,

Mr. Jocelyn, I wonder if that's any way to talk about—"

"They're mostly harmless," Hyer broke in. "Maybe they even do some good."

Mike beamed on him.

"Not this one," Jocelyn said grimly. "He's a racketeer, or my name isn't—"

"Be careful," Hyer warned him. "I once knew a chap started a libel action that way. When he came to the end of the sentence he couldn't *think* of his name."

"This star-gazer," Jocelyn said hotly, "persuaded Nat to sink half a million dollars in a private observatory for him. Nat's always been an amateur astronomer, and he fell for it."

Hyer's expression had altered. He set his glass down. "Did you say half a mil—"

"Can't you ever get your mind on anything but cash?" Jocelyn demanded.

Hyer nodded brightly. "Certified checks."

THE bartender, with a last disapproving glance at Jocelyn, moved down the bar to serve another customer. Jocelyn was eyeing his glass thoughtfully. He looked at Hyer. "This astrologer is crooked. Rich Lanning knows it; that's what he wanted to see me about just now. Dawson, Thayer's partner, knows it. We can't get anything on him. How would you like to do a favor for me, Hank? There's a field for your talents in this business."

"What business?"

"Astrology."

Hyer's nose wrinkled.

"Twenty-five million dollars a year in New York. Five times that in the country as a whole."

Hyer choked on his drink. He coughed, swallowed, said, "My God," reverently.

"Plenty of it—this shaman of Nat's for example—is pure racket," Jocelyn added.

Hyer's glance had kindled with a native and specific glow. He said softly. "Twenty-five million. What was that about doing you a favor, Al?" When the lawyer did not speak, Hyer took another meditative swallow, coughed again, blinked his watering eyes, and then squinted at the mirror. "But—astrology," he said huskily. He shrugged. "That in your business, Chase?"

Remsen shook his head. "Not quite."

Hyer sighed. "Well, if you ask me, your University's making a big mistake not putting in an Astrology Department, with a field like that to draw from. One hundred and twenty-five million." He frowned suddenly. "And if I touched a case like that, wouldn't *you* ghouls have a Roman holiday!" He shook his head. "No thanks, Al. You can keep it." Staring at the mirror, he caught the smile on Remsen's sharp narrow face. "I mean it. If either of you ever sees me mixing up in fortune-telling, I'll be ready for Bellevue—and thank you for reminding me of it!"

Of such stuff are woven the prophecies of this world. . . .

CHAPTER II

STARS OF BATTLE

NINE hours later—a few minutes before two on May Day morning—Richard Lanning stepped out of his car, slammed the door, and strode toward the lighted entrance of the Organdy Club. His mien was that of a young man on battle bent and this was not without effect on the round-bellied doorman who greeted him with a shade of anxiety.

"Looking for someone, Mr. Lanning?"

Rich said, "I am." Then his jaw relaxed slightly and a grin struggled with the set of his mouth. "I'm looking for one of your cash customers, Harry, to discuss an item of business."

"Oh, sure, Mr. Lanning. But—uh—maybe he ain't here."

"And when I've made him my proposition," Rich continued cheerfully, "do you know what I'll do, Harry?"

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Lanning. Maybe," anxiously, "if you'd tell me who you want, I can—"

"I'm going to give him thirty-one seconds to accept it, and then I'm going to take him apart." Rich lifted his hand quickly at the alarm that flooded Harry's round pink face. "Oh, gently and decorously, my lad, but," the grimness returned, "thoroughly."

"Listen, Mr. Lanning, I wouldn't—"

"Of course you wouldn't, Harry." Rich patted an epaulette. "But the baser passions run turbulently in the young."

He entered the door, strode along a scarlet-and-chromium corridor, softened his rebuff to the hat-check girl with a smile, grinned at the majordomo who would have delayed him in chat, and presently stood at the bar.

A red-haired girl who had been singing an off-color song in a confidential whiskey-alto came to the end of her recitative. There was the clapping of hands and the resumption of social intercourse as she left the yellow circle of spotlight, threaded her way between crowded tables, and returned to where she had been sitting before her number.

This proved to be a large round table set in a corner bay of the red leather bench that ran along the walls. There was room for six at the round table. The party occupying it was distinguished not alone for being the red-haired chanteuse's retreat, but by two other circumstances as well.

For one, the group had been, from the moment of his entrance, the object of Rich Lanning's keen attention.

For another, four of the five people seated at the table were startlingly blond girls of a single unimpeachable hue. The fifth—the man who rose to reach across the table and clasp the hand of the returned singer—would have deserved attention in his own right even without his eye-compelling companions.

He was a large man, tall, solid, muscular, giving an almost billboard effect of virility. This last was accented by a shock of glistening black hair so thick and luxuriant that from a distance it looked like an interrupted but neatly finished-off képi. The robust vigor of his voice, followed at once by a burly gust of laughter, made the rest of the hubbub in the room suddenly thin and tinny by contrast.

AS RICH approached, the big man, who had dropped back in his corner, looked up, and his swarthy face broke into a smile. "Hello, Lanning. Join us?" It was a hearty invitation, sliced neatly by a thin bright edge of malice.

Rich, aware of the amused glances which the man's tone had brought their way from nearby tables, flushed. He said, "Thanks." The red-haired singer twisted in her chair to look up at him, blinked, and gasped.

Rich saw the fixed and frantic focus of her gaze and smiled suddenly. "I liked it, too," he said. "I was fourteen, then."

Eight years had left the necktie somewhat frayed. But as the girl's fingers drew it up from under Rich's vest and held it out for common inspection, its orange, purple and green flowers were still sufficiently incandes-

cent to bring a glaze to the eyes of at least two of the blondes.

Rich said, smiling down at the red-haired girl, "I've been expelled from six schools in this tie, and fired from three jobs. "Two," quickly. "Mustn't tempt fate." He smiled at her again, and then looked across the table. "I'd like to talk to you a moment, Mr. Owen. Alone."

Clearse Owen laughed. "Certainly." He rose, bowed to his guests, slipped past the girl on his right, and with a gesture whose mockery was not too subtle motioned Rich to precede him.

Not until they had walked out into the frosty quiet of the street did Rich turn and face Owen. "I want you," he said evenly, "to keep your hocus-pocus out of my affairs."

Clearse Owen's teeth showed in a tolerant grin. "My hocus—? By the way, you've been fired for that little shindy tonight, have you?"

"You can go on swindling my aunt and her husband," Rich said, "and I won't do anything. I haven't done anything, have I? That's their business. But the minute you let that mumbo-jumbo of yours splash over on Marcia and me—"

"Lanning, I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"You have, all right. But I'll verify it for you," Rich stepped closer to the big man. "My aunt was trustee for the money my father left me. When she married Nathan Thayer, she made him trustee. I need that money, Owen. Mr. Thayer is willing to let me have it. You've been advising him against it."

Clearse Owen's grin went out. He grew serious. "Oh. My boy, I've had your best interest at heart. Believe me. You're Libra, Lanning, and being Libra you're passing through an extremely dangerous period right now. The transit of Saturn in your seventh house is drawing to a close, and from now until September you'll be under a great emotional strain. It wouldn't be fair, either to yourself or Mr. Thayer for you to take on the added responsibility of the money just now."

"Mr. Thayer," Rich broke in, "is going to have a talk with you today. I don't know whether he's fired me or not, but—"

"Damned amusing show, Lanning, damned amusing. How our lady novelist must hate your—"

"—but he told me," grimly, "that he was willing to turn the money over to me—that it depends on what you say." Rich spoke the last words slowly, and one fist closed as he stared at the astrologer.

Harry, the rotund doorman, watching from the curb, took a step toward the pair, his little eyes dismayed.

Clearse Owen laughed and turned to go back into the Organdy Club.

But Rich caught his arm and despite Owen's bulk whirled the astrologer to face him again. He said, "I've told you."

Owen reddened, struck at the hand holding his lapel. "Let go, you fool, or you'll never see a cent of that—"

Rich's fist landed on the hinge of the astrologer's jaw. Owen's head snapped to his shoulder and he stumbled back as Rich released him.

Harry ran forward and steadied the astrologer.

Rich slipped off his topcoat and dropped it on the sidewalk. He said, "Now," happily. Waiting, he gauged the distance between them, breathed fast. "Come on," he added. "I've been waiting for this for a long time."

Owen shook off Harry's hand, turned, and went back into the Organdy Club.

Rich picked up his coat. His genial good nature reasserting itself, he grinned at the short doorman. "Disgraceful display, wasn't it, Harry? Next time I'll know better than to let go of him."

Harry shook his head sadly. "And I was going to ask him if I'd ought to let my boy join the Navy tomorrow like he wants to. Sometimes when Mr. Owen's feeling good as he leaves, he gives it out free."

"Harry," Rich said feelingly, "it does a man's heart good to feel that he's been of some use in the world. Good night, Harry." And with a warm easy smile, for which any confidence man in the world would have cheerfully given his right arm, Rich Lanning went back to his car.

THREE hours later he drove slowly into Gracie Square and drew up at the iron-picketed street end. The May Day dawn was cool and brisk, the sky overhead an opalescent blue against the coming of the sun. For a time Rich sat quietly.

The first bright sunrise streamers flashed up over Astoria's housetops beyond the river, and in Carl Schurz Park robins chirruped.

At last Rich opened the door. But on the point of stepping to the pavement he hesitated. He looked up at the apartment house towering at the river's edge, and his gray eyes were thoughtful, their humorous warmth all but obscured behind a set determination that showed also in the tightening of his jaw, the firm line of his mouth from which the smile had vanished as if for good.

As he craned his neck, his hat fell off to the seat, and breeze scudding up from the East River ruffled his light curly hair.

Decisively he sat back under the wheel, ignoring the crushed hat. The starter whirred.

Five minutes later, he entered an all-night drug store on First Avenue, gave the drowsy clerk a cheerful good morning, and entered a telephone booth.

CHAPTER III

MORNING IN MAY

MARCIA THAYER sat up in bed and yawned. She hunched the powder blue pajama coat up about her throat, lifted her arms and ran her fingers through her short fair hair. The telephone rang again.

Marcia frowned at her watch, which showed five-fourteen, murmured, "Daylight saving at that," rolled over on her elbow and reached for the phone.

She said, "Hello," and then quickly, "Rich!" She listened a moment, said, "Right, darling. . . . I'll let you in in ten minutes. . . . Yes, Dad's asleep. Your Aunty Beryl, too."

She put down the phone, drew her knees up, and leaned forward to rest her chin on her crossed forearms. At a swift rap, the smile tilting her lips vanished, and she looked toward the door, her blue eyes cool and resigned.

She said, "Come," and there was in her expression a triangular deftness of line that was inflexible without being hard, crisp and self-contained without tension.

Beryl Hawtrey Harnett Thayer opened the door, slipped through, closed it behind her, and sped across the room toward her stepdaughter. Midway she stopped, pink chiffon negligee swirling about her small wiry figure like a startled eddy.

"Marcia," Beryl said rapidly, "forgive me, dear, but I *had* to run in and tell you. Something dreadful's going to happen today."

Marcia frowned. "Why today?" Her mouth twisted. "Oh."

"Yes, Marcia. The Moon in Libra—Rich's sign, you know—will be square Mars at nine-thirty tonight. I simply can't *tell* you, Marcia, what that means." Beryl sighed. "And with Rich's Mars already unfavorable to—Oh dear."

Marcia slipped out of bed and picked up a quilted blue bathrobe. She put it on, drew the belt tight, fastened the wide ivory buttons with impatient fingers. Bending over she fished a pair of blue slippers from beneath the bed and thrust her small shapely feet into them. Then, one eyebrow cocked, she scratched her head and stared down at her stepmother.

Beryl caught the girl's hand, said said plaintively, "Why will you be so difficult, Marcia?"

"Sorry, dear, it's the infidel in me." Marcia withdrew her hand, smiled, patted her stepmother's cheek lightly, and turned away.

FOR a time Beryl sat and gazed at the bathroom door through which Marcia had gone. At last she sighed, rose, hesitated, and sped to the window where she opened the blind and looked out across the sleeping city toward the sunrise flush.

The anxiety in her eyes relaxed as she stared trustingly at the far eastern horizon where an invisible Aries was following an invisible Pisces up the vaulted blue.

She sighed.

At forty, Beryl Thayer was small, angular, still youthful. The few lines in her nervous eager face were those not so much of middle age but of a certain relentless tension as native to her as the husky rasping timbre of her voice. Beryl's hazel eyes were forever summing up the world about her as if the people and objects and events in it were an endless series of puzzles contrived for the express purpose of challenging her.

Gazing at the sunrise, Beryl murmured anxiously, "Mars twelve Capricorn. Oh—*Twelve* . . . Could I have made a mistake?"

She turned and fled to the door, a comet of pink chiffon.

When Marcia emerged from her room a few moments later, the quilted blue bathrobe had given place to a blue housecoat, whose simple fitted lines might have graced a Florentine prioress. A young and slender prioress with hoydenish hair.

Closing her door noiselessly, she stood for a moment in the corridor listening. At the front, a hurricane lamp in a simple wrought-iron wall fixture still burned. At the far end, a half-open door diffused daylight, and as Marcia looked toward it, the first ruddy beams of the rising sun struck levelly across and tinted the sails of a galleon cruising along the wall paper.

SHE went on tiptoe to the curving staircase, listened again, and ran down to the floor below. The hallway here was spacious, chaste, paneled in rosewood. Three aquatints hung along the unbroken wall to her left, and opposite them were several doors, all closed.

As she left the staircase, a rap sounded and Marcia hastened.

She opened the front door, said, "Come in and be shriven."

Rich Lanning's smile would have cozened the keys from St. Peter's hand. "Fine, thanks. And all your folks?"

Marcia put out her hand and flicked the tie from under his vest. She said, "Oh."

Rich imprisoned the hand. "You picked it out," he reminded her. "Even as a thirteen-year-old, you had infallible taste." He chuckled, kissed her quickly. "Bad, is it?"

Marcia nodded. "And Beryl sees disaster on us all come nightfall."

Rich chuckled again. "I know. My Venus in Taurus."

"Your Mars this time, darling."

As they entered the drawing room, Marcia left him and went to open a Venetian blind. Then, turning, she said, "Wait!"

Rich halted in the middle of a ladder of sunlight sifting in through the tilted shutters of the blind. "What?"

"Stripes. I used to wonder how they'd become you."

Rich winced, stepped quickly out of the latticed yellow. "I never did like that joke." He sat on the arm of a chair. Looking up he saw that Marcia's blue eyes were serious, a pucker between her lifted brows. "So I'm right, am I?"

She nodded. "Right. He *is* going to talk to Owen today."

"The house of Thayer-Dawson will regretfully dispense with the services of its brilliant young promotion manager?"

"Has dispensed. Why did you do it, Rich? After all," she added, puzzled, "what have you got against Angela Thule?"

"Miss Thule," Rich answered, "is a first class fourflusher and a heel in calico and I do not like fourflushers or heels. Or calico. Look," he went on persuasively, "for three solid months I've spent my working hours dreaming up nice bright rhapsodies about Miss Thule's precious *Love But Once*. And I got sick of it and Miss Thule and the whole blessed thing."

Marcia pulled a tabloid clipping from her pocket. "Are you sure," she demanded, "that you didn't write this yourself?"

Rich looked hurt, murmured, "Oh ye of little faith."

Marcia said, "Listen." She dropped into a chair and Rich came to sit on its arm, the fingers of his left hand playing in her hair.

He looked down at the clipping and chuckled. "The wages of fame."

The clipping was part of a wide gossip column, headed "Range Reveals." The text of the column read in part:

Miss Angela Thule rates this department's hibuscus wreath. Authoress Thule's *Love But Once* was published yesterday, and by a coincidence, Authoress Thule, foremost champion of the till-death-do-us-part school of American letters, was married yesterday to childhood sweetheart Henry Gaul of Keokuk, Iowa, thus heart-throbbing her wide and faithful public. A wedding reception, arranged by her publishers, was attended last night by leading literartists, the press—and Miss Thule's four ex's. The latter quartet, which made the reception something of a surprise package, had been summoned anonymously last week from Atlanta, Memphis, Flint, and Peoria.

The column contained the pictures of five men. Each cut was captioned, "Love But Once."

THERE was swirl at the door, and Beryl Thayer sped across the room crying, "Rich! Richy darling. What *are* you doing here? Before breakfast."

Rich rose, smiling, and allowed his aunt to kiss him.

Beryl held him away from her, gazed at him brightly a moment, threw Marcia a quick smile. Seeing Rich look toward the door, she turned, gasped. Then, collecting herself, she said brightly, "Oh, Nat dear, Rich is here."

Nathan Thayer regarded them from the doorway. Small, dapper, in tweeds,

white-haired, Nathan Thayer could, even in fury, preserve a well-bred gentleness. His blue eyes were calm, his smooth cheeks only a shade pinker than usual. Ignoring Rich, he said courteously, "Good morning, Beryl. Good morning, Marcia dear."

Beryl, hastening toward him as he entered the room, was saying excitedly, "Nat, Rich came in for breakfast. Isn't that too lovely! And I know that if you want to talk to him about the money, he'll be only too glad to. Please talk to him, Nat."

"By all means. Well, Richard?"

As she met her father's eyes she felt a pang of sympathy. The incident of the night before, she saw, had really hurt him. "Dad," she said, and because of the feeling her voice was sharper than she had meant it to be, "if Angela Thule was making fools out of all of us, that certainly wasn't Rich's fault."

"I'd rather not discuss Miss Thule, Marcia. I prefer to hear what Richard has to say." He paused and his mouth trembled suddenly. "This is the last straw, Richard."

"Nat!" Beryl wailed.

"I've had all of your irresponsibility I can stomach. This disgusting business last night is the finish, Richard, as far as you and I are concerned. You are not to come here again. You are not to see Marcia again. Do you hear me, Marcia?"

Marcia said quietly, "I hear you, Dad."

"You are not to see Richard after this. Will you promise me?"

"No, Dad."

"Marcia!" Her father checked himself and the distress that had showed briefly in his eyes gave way to resurgent anger as he turned again to Rich. "You understand me, do you, Richard?"

Rich's mouth grew stubborn. "I came here this morning, sir, to ask you for my money. I have a right," he added in a quiet deliberate tone, "to my money."

"And I have a right," Thayer answered hotly, "to decide that matter, Richard."

"Dad," Marcia said, "Rich is right. The money *is* his. He deserves a chance to show what he can do with it."

Her father turned to her slowly. For a moment they faced each other. The stiffness went out of Thayer's face. He said gently, "Forgive me, dear. Perhaps I spoke too hastily." Then to Rich, "As a matter of fact, Richard, I am planning to consider the matter seriously today. I believe you know that."

It was Rich's turn to redden angrily.

Marcia said "Rich!" sharply.

"I should not have turned over the estate to you in any event," Thayer went on, "without consulting Owen. Now, that seems imperative. I have an appointment with him today for the purpose."

Rich's face flamed. "If you let that—"

"Rich!" Marcia rose, went toward him.

"It's been bad enough," Rich was saying rapidly, furiously to Thayer, "to watch Owen make fools out of Beryl and you. But that's been none of my business and I've kept out. If you want to let that *ersatz* Merlin give you advice, I can't help it. But, by the Lord, before I let that kind of fraud mix into *my* life and Marcia's, I'll—"

Marcia caught his arm as he took a threatening step toward her father. She said, "Rich. Come outside. No, Beryl," as her stepmother, twittering in anguish, started to follow, "I want to talk to Rich."

When they reached the hall, his anger cooled as quickly as it had flared.

He said, "I'm sorry, Marcia. I'm upset. Things hit me like that this morning." He groaned. "I see red every time I think of Owen."

"Rich," Marcia said, "things hit you like that too often."

He nodded, contrite. "I know. But, my God," angrily, "it's like a plague. You see it everywhere. I know a dozen chaps, intelligent guys, that won't even buy a pair of shoes without running to some star-gazer first." His mouth drooped. "You didn't grow up with it, the way I did, Marcia."

"I've seen enough. But you can't argue with Beryl or Dad about it."

"No, and I don't intend to argue," Rich said loudly. "I'll go back in there and—"

"Shut up and let me think." She was silent a moment, frowning. Then she said, "I've got an idea. You can go up to the Lake. There's a train at eight-fifty. It gets to Big Moose at four. I'll call Karl and have him drive over and meet you."

"I don't like that idea."

"You're going to like it," she said grimly, "today. You're going up to Manitou Lake, darling, where that hair-trigger temper can blow high and wide without hitting anything but pine trees. You're going to stay there until I've had a chance to smooth Dad down."

"Fighting my battles," bitterly.

"Fighting our battles. Please, Rich."

Rich's grin was suddenly boyish. "Fine. We'll go up together. Whip a trout stream."

"No. I've got to stay here."

"And fence with the Omniscient Owen?" Rich stared at her, scowled. "If your father puts it up to Owen, you know what that guy's verdict'll be. He'll juggle every sign in the Zodiac to wash me up. He knows what I think of him."

"He knows what I think of him, too. But my technique with Dad is a little better than yours, Rich. Please go up to the camp, and stay out from under foot until I've straightened things with Dad."

Rich drew a long breath. "All right."

CHAPTER IV

MISTS OVER THE SUN

WHEN Marcia returned to Gracie Square after having taken Rich downtown, chaperoned him through breakfast and into Grand Central, it was well after eight-thirty. She would have preferred to wait and see him actually on the train for the Adirondacks, but a twisting sense of unease drew her back to the vicinity of her father and her stepmother.

Beryl had twice been on the verge of hysteria, pacing Marcia's room as the girl dressed hastily, wailing of omens.

Marcia was not unused to scenes of this emotional level, but the morning's episode had left her with a feeling she could not easily define, a feeling of annoyance, of exasperation even, but through it all a fear that was like wisps of fog.

Stepping out of her car a short distance from the iron-picketed street-end, she walked into the low square carriageway that tunneled through the building, skirted two pillars, and entered the lobby of the house. She murmured, "So I'm getting 'em, too, am I?" and irritation quickened her step.

In the apartment she discovered that her father had retired once more to his library on the second floor, and that Beryl had returned to bed. Marcia murmured, "Thank God," and Regan, the butler, eyed her.

She found herself famished (she had had but a cup of coffee sitting with Rich

at a counter) and, relieved that she had thus far weathered the morning, she went directly to the dining room and had a long solitary breakfast.

She was debating whether to have a second cup of coffee, when Beryl's voice came to her, rapid, high, anxious, approaching as her stepmother descended the stairs. The few quick gaps between Beryl's questions were filled by Nathan Thayer's courteous murmur.

Marcia turned from the window to set her cup on the table and leave the dining room. She was midway to the hall when she heard her stepmother wail, "But Nat, I don't see *why* you have to go up to the camp today." Marcia paused, frowned, alarm showing suddenly in her eyes. She hastened to the open hall door.

For a moment as she stood in the doorway, her father and her stepmother were oblivious of her.

Beryl was saying rapidly, "But Nat, it's absurd for you to go today. There'll be ice in the lake. There may even be snow. You know how much snow they had up there this spring. And after all the predictions had been for an open winter, too. I'm sure I don't understand what they base those predictions on, though I know they say squirrels and rabbits' coats and—"

"My dear," Thayer broke in gently, "Owen and I are going up to Manitou today. Please." He saw Marcia and his eyes lighted. "Hello."

"Oh, Marcia," Beryl cried whirling, "there you are. I didn't know you were back yet from taking—"

"I've been having breakfast," Marcia broke in hastily.

BERYL flushed, caught her lips with urgent fingers, and smiled guiltily. She turned to her husband with an eager, "Breakfast. Of course. Nat you must have breakfast before you go. Come, you can tell me more about it while we eat."

"The coffee," Marcia said, "is foul."

"Oh dear. I suppose Norah let it get cold and then warmed it up. I've told her I don't know how many times coffee's only fit to be thrown out when it stops steaming. As if I didn't have enough on my mind. You two wait right here and I'll go talk to Norah." She patted her husband's arm, threw a conspirator's look at Marcia, and sped through the door.

"Had your breakfast?" Marcia asked.

Her father said, "Yes, dear."

"Dad, you've got to see this business about Rich in a sane light." She watched her father's lips compress.

Regan appeared in the door, said, "Mr. Owen is downstairs, sir."

Thayer nodded. "Have him come up."

Marcia bit her lip. "Why must you go up to the camp today, Dad?"

Her father smiled. "Such a curious little girl."

"Can't you talk to Owen here—if you *must* talk to him?"

"Far too many distractions, my dear."

"Dad," she said desperately, "this sort of mumbo-jumbo is only for failures, for people who've lost their grip. You're not a failure. You haven't lost your grip."

Her father colored. He said, "You've been listening to Rich." Then, controlling himself, he smiled and patted her shoulder. "If it amuses me, Marcia?"

"But it's more than amusement," she protested. "It's like a drug."

A chime sounded faintly within the apartment.

Thayer said, "Ah, there he is now," as if relieved to break the dialogue.

"Please, Dad."

"Open the door, won't you, dear? Mustn't keep him waiting."

Seeing the butler approach, she said, "Never mind, Regan, I'll go," and felt a furtive distaste.

As she opened the door a hearty robust, "Good morning, Miss Marcia, good morning," met her like the wash of a gunned propeller.

Clearse Owen strode into the apartment on the blast of his greeting, erect, powerful, exuding animal spirits like a nebulized spray. He fairly whirred.

Marcia had a physical sense of being thrust from the man the while he seized her hand in both of his, patted it with fingers whose touch was inventive but unmistakable.

Beaming, he said:

"What a delightful surprise, Marcia dear, to find you awake and about. I had been picturing you in bed." He smiled, his teeth flashing at her, black eyes glittering. Tiny highlights winked over the mass of his thick black hair. "In bed, dreamlessly asleep, the flush of innocence pulsing—"

"Thanks. I was up with the lark." Marcia pulled her hand away.

"Ah, and Mr. Thayer," Owen boomed. "Glorious day for our little jaunt, what?"

Marcia, closing the door, said, and she strove to sound casual, "I think you'd be much wiser not to go up to Manitou Lake, Dad."

Owen's ready laugh filled the hall. "Come now, my dear."

Marcia stifled a flash of fury. She said, "Mind if I go along, Dad?"

"Splendid," Owen said eagerly. His eyes and hands sought her, though he made no move.

Nathan Thayer looked at his daughter with regret. "I'm sorry, Marcia. Some other time."

FROM the corner of her eye Marcia saw the flicker of disappointment in Clearse Owen's swarthy face. "Flying up?" she asked the astrologer.

This time the disappointment was unconcealed. "No. The one concession I had to make to your father, Miss Marcia."

"Eller is taking us," Thayer explained. "Here he is now," as the chime sounded again.

Marcia, still standing at the door, opened it, said, "Good morning, Eller," to the chauffeur who stood there.

Eller said, "Good morning, Miss Thayer," and the strained gravity of his narrow face softened for an instant. But he did not smile.

In an irrelevant flash, Marcia realized that she had not seen him smile now for more than a year, and she felt the familiar lift of sympathy that often came to her as she looked at his quiet shadowed eyes where grief lay like a blight.

Eller stared over her shoulder at Clearse Owen and his thin ascetic mouth twitched. A light came into his sunken eyes.

Marcia turned. Owen was coming toward her. Suddenly it was a matter of desperate urgency that she prevent this man and her father from going to Manitou Lake. But when she encountered the fixity of Clearse Owen's pawing black eyes, wrath and frustration seized her, left her tongue-tied.

Steeling herself against the man, she barred the way. "You've been ill," she said thickly to her father. "You've had the flu, Dad. It will be cold and damp up there."

"We'll take care of him, my dear," Owen reassured her. He grappled swiftly for her hand again, failed. "Such an unexpected favor, seeing you like this."

His vigorous voice had a numbing effect on her—an effect with which she was familiar, which she understood and for that reason loathed. Or *did* she understand it?

For an instant an icy sliver of fear struck through the hot paralysis that gripped her. Her rational, forthright defenses quivered and a film of primitive terror misted the scene so that the massive man seemed coming toward her, bearing down upon her out of a fog that was none of nature's.

She gasped. With a convulsive effort she fought off this sense of leering evil. It passed, leaving what was only human and female—and intelligible.

She tore herself from the man's reaching black eyes and turned to her father. "When will you be back, Dad?" she asked huskily.

Her father kissed her. "Tomorrow, Marcia. With good news for you and Rich, perhaps."

Owen had paused at the elevator door. He was on the point of replacing his black Homburg, but as Marcia's eyes rested on him, he swept it from his glistening mane with a flourish. "*Au 'voir, ma p'tite.*"

Eller, standing stiffly in the foyer, looked at no one. His sunken eyes were quenched once more.

For a moment, her arm about his shoulders, she held her father, desperately, defensively, conscious with a quick tragic sense of foreboding, how frail he was. An inexplicable longing seized her as she breathed the scent that was part of her earliest—part of her every memory of him, a scent recalling peatsmoke, bracken, the thin cold fragrance of fog over clover.

Then he had touched her cheek and was moving away.

She saw that Fred Eller had carefully avoided looking at Owen.

The next instant Eller drew the door shut. Marcia heard the rustle of the elevator closing.

CHAPTER V

THE UNRULY PLANETS

AT NEWS that her husband and Owen had actually gone, Beryl turned white and clutched the back of a chair. "We must stop *Rich,* Marcia."

Marcia, familiar with every nuance of her stepmother's several voices, was suddenly aware of the depth of Beryl's fright. She said, "His train left half an hour ago. I'll send a wire to Albany."

When she came back to the drawing room, Beryl was walking up and down with swift steps.

"I sent the telegram," Marcia said.

"Marcia," Beryl whispered, her lips drawn, "if Rich should get there—and meet Owen at the Camp—it would be just Rich's frightful luck to lose that temper of his and— Marcia, phone Pierre, ask him to come over."

"It's too early."

"That doesn't make any difference. Tell him how serious it is. It *is* serious, Marcia," she wailed.

Marcia sighed. "Well, come upstairs where we won't broadcast it."

When they were in her room, she dialed a number, held the phone out to her stepmother.

Beryl shook her head.

"It was your idea," Marcia said grimly, and dropped the phone in Beryl's lap. Then, as she stood at the window biting her lip and considering the merits of laudanum, she heard Beryl say in a confidential voice:

"Pierre, this is Beryl. You must come over. I've had the most hideous presentiment. I've been half crazy all night. Nathan and—Nathan and That

Man have gone up to the Camp . . . Pierre you *must* come. I *know* that man Owen is an impostor, a cheat . . . Oh, I know I *used* to, Pierre," petulantly, "but— . . . Pierre, this is far too serious to joke about. We must *do* something. Wait. Wait! I know. Bring a detective with you, a *private* detective . . . Yes," excitedly, "yes, that's what I said. Someone who can watch this man Owen for us . . . Pierre, it is *not* fantastic. It's sound common sense. It's the *only* way."

MARCIA herself opened the door at Pierre Dawson's ring. She knew a sense of relief to see him standing there, big, ruddy, dependable. She said, "Come in. Perhaps you can do something with Beryl at any rate."

"I'll not guarantee that, Marcia." Dawson laughed. He had a crisp, comfortable laugh.

In the drawing room, Beryl ran toward him, her hands outstretched. Midway to him, she stopped, let her hands drop. "Pierre," she said plaintively, "why, oh *why* couldn't you have come earlier—before Nat left? Why were you so long?" Then she brightened. "Pierre, *did* you arrange for a detective?"

"One of the best." Dawson winked at Marcia and chuckled. "And one of the most expensive."

"That doesn't matter. That doesn't matter at all. This is no time to be thinking of money, Pierre. And anyway, since the Government took those ghastly liberties with the dollar, money only goes half as far as it—"

"Albert Jocelyn arranged it for me," Dawson said. "He's a friend of Jocelyn's. His name is Hyer."

"How do you spell it?" Beryl asked quickly.

"H-y-e-r."

Beryl looked thoughtful. She spelled the name to herself, the fingers of her right hand working swiftly as if she were computing. Her eyes lighted. "Seven! Oh, splendid!"

Marcia said, "Good Lord," and dropped into a chair.

"I can see him now," Beryl went on, her rapt gaze lifted a little over Dawson's head. "Tall, dark, mysterious. Seven governs hermits and mystics, you know, artists. Did I ever tell you about the artist I met in Taos that winter who—" Suddenly misgiving showed in her face. "But—seven. One with seven for his number usually wins at the expense of others. But," throwing a quick smile at Marcia, "we can make sacrifices, can't we, dear?"

"Jocelyn said Hyer would meet me here," Dawson broke in. "But what do you expect him to do, Beryl?"

"Follow that Man. I couldn't do it. You couldn't do it. He'd be suspicious at once. Marcia couldn't do it."

Marcia said, "Right."

Regan appeared, said, "Madame, someone is calling Mr. Dawson from downstairs."

"Yes, yes, Regan. Tell him to come up. Tell him to come up at once. Tell him there's no time to waste. Hurry!" As Regan went out, she whispered to Marcia, "You go to the door, dear. I don't want the servants to know. They sense things like that. I'm *sure* Regan would know at once that he's a detective."

Marcia was leaning in the foyer door when the elevator opened. The corners of her mouth rose, and amusement lighted in her eyes. She murmured, "Tall—dark—mysterious. Sure."

THE man stepping from the car was solid, compact, of medium height, in his late thirties. He had a round

bland goodhumored face, an athletic build, and approximately the air of mystery that might shroud Times Square at high noon of a sunny day.

Henry Hyer grinned at the girl. He said, "Sorry, I didn't hear that."

"I was thinking of my stepmother. She's in for a shock. Your name is Hyer, is it?"

"It is."

"That's an alias," Marcia said, "or else there's something screwy with Beryl's numerology." She answered his grin, put out her hand. "My name's Marcia Thayer."

As they entered the drawing room she said, in the voice one might use to beguile a child on the verge of a frantic disappointment, "Beryl, this is Mr. Hyer. Mrs. Thayer, Mr. Hyer. Mr. Dawson, Mr. Hyer."

Beryl frowned at Hyer. She sat. "You—*are* a detective?"

"That," Hyer agreed, "is one of the politer ways of putting it."

"Oh—oh, of course." Beryl laughed nervously. "And I'm sure anyone Mr. Jocelyn recommends must be thoroughly reliable."

Hyer said, "Thanks."

Marcia sat down. She studied the detective, her mouth still amused.

"My husband," Beryl began impulsively, "is in the hands of an imprupulous unscoster. I mean an unscropulous im— The man's a charlatan, Mr. Hyer, a perfect charlatan. Nothing but a wolf in sheepskin. I'm morally certain of it."

Dawson said, "Naturally Mrs. Thayer is anxious to prevent his doing any—"

"You *will* help us, Mr. Hyer?"

Hyer said, "Well, I haven't had much experience—"

"But Mr. Jocelyn told Mr. Dawson—"

"Nipping charlatans in the bud. I mean."

"But surely," Beryl protested, "you know all about crime and—and killings and things like that."

Hyer blinked. "Killings and things like that?"

"You're making fun of me, Mr. Hyer. You *must* believe me," she rushed on. "I *know* my husband is in serious danger. You see my nephew's Mars and Saturn are— Pierre, do be quiet. You *will* take the case, Mr. Hyer?"

Hyer said, "Case?"

Beryl made an impatient gesture. "Please don't be obtuse. I want you to follow this man, this—this mountebank. I'm willing to pay you, of course."

Hyer said, "Good."

"Then you will do it?"

Hyer said, "No."

Dawson chuckled.

"Pierre," Beryl said angrily, "you know as well as I do that—" She reddened. "Then I'm going to do something about it myself. I'm going up to the camp myself." She leaped up and ran out of the room.

Dawson's eyebrows rose. He looked from Hyer to Marcia.

THE girl got up. She said, "All right," resignedly. "I'll go with her. Nice to have known you, Mr. Hyer." To Dawson she added, "I'll give you a ring from the Lake tonight."

There was a short silence when the two men were left alone.

At length Hyer said, "I guess I missed the rehearsal. I didn't quite follow the lines."

"I don't blame you."

"Is he?" Hyer asked.

"Is who? What?"

"Her husband. In danger?"

Dawson hesitated, frowned. "Not immediately, no. Of course not."

"She mentioned killings."

Dawson shook his head. "It's hardly that serious."

"Maybe," Hyer said, "he carries a lot of insurance."

"What? Oh. Oh no. No, that's quite absurd."

They could hear Beryl's voice raised querulously, hear her swift steps approaching the outer door.

Marcia looked into the room. She wore a tan camel's hair coat, the collar high about her trim head. She carried a green felt hat and a pair of driving gloves. "Wish me luck," she said. "Cheerio."

Dawson, his eyes suddenly concerned, started toward her, but at that instant Marcia said, "There's the elevator. 'Bye." She ran out. The door slammed.

As he and Hyer rode away from the house a few minutes later, Dawson said, "Sorry you had a wild-goose chase."

"That's all right."

"I'd be glad enough to get something on this fellow myself, though. He's a faker, all right."

"Crystal-gazer?"

"Astrology."

Hyer said, "Oh." After a time, he asked curiously, "What's this 'camp'?"

"A place up in the Adirondacks on Manitou Lake. Nat bought a thousand acres some years back and fixed it up. An ordinary preserve—from the front. But tacked on in back there's some kind of mystical flubdubbery in a fenced-off section where Nat set up an observatory and God-knows-what for this fellow, Owen. The man has the damnedest hold on him.

"Look," he went on seriously. "Now that we're back on the subject, what *would* you take to go to work on Owen, Hyer? For me, I mean? As a business proposition. I've managed to keep him out of the firm's affairs so far, but Lord knows when he'll put some crazy idea in Nat's head and sink us."

Hyer shook his head. "Thanks. Blackmail isn't entirely in my line."

"Not blackmail. Racketbusting."

Hyer said, "Sometimes you can tell the difference."

CHAPTER VI

AFTER SEVEN DAYS

EARLY Monday afternoon, just a week later, Henry Hyer answered his doorbell to find Marcia Thayer standing in the hall. He said, "Hello. Right on the dot, aren't you?"

"Thought you'd seen the last of us, didn't you?" the girl said. "It must have been a shock to you when I called up last night. Life's full of surprises like that."

She smiled, but her bantering tone found no echo in her blue eyes. Instantly her mouth was grave again.

Hyer said, "Come in."

"Thanks."

As the detective closed the door, she turned to face him, slender, youthful, taut, a spray of violets pinned high on her trim checked jacket. Her hands were nervous as she slipped off one gray glove. But her voice was calm when she said, "I guess we need you after all, Mr. Hyer."

"Sit down." Hyer grinned. "Your mother—that is, Mrs. Thayer having the willies again?"

Marcia remained standing. "No, I'm the one this time."

"You look normal enough." Hyer was immediately conscious of his understatement.

"Thanks. Actually I'm about two

jumps ahead of the man with the net." Again her humor was forced.

"What's the matter?"

She sat down, and then, looking at him calmly, said, "Do you remember what happened last Monday morning when you were at the house?"

"You lit out for the mountains. With Mrs. Thayer. After your father and Clearse Owen."

Marcia nodded. Her eyes were suddenly haggard. "Since then," she said, my father has been missing."

"Since *then?*"

"As far as we can tell, about midnight Monday night. He seems to have left the camp about that time. Alone. No one has seen him since. He was to have met Mr. Dawson in Albany the next afternoon. Tuesday. He didn't." She leaned toward Hyer. "Will you help me find my father, Mr. Hyer?"

Hyer said, "That's a little more solid proposition than Beryl made me last week."

"But it still sounds balmy, doesn't it?"

"A little, yes." He squinted at her. "Why haven't I seen anything about this in the papers? Usually when an important publisher drops out of sight, it's a reporters' field day."

"That's exactly *why* you haven't seen anything about it. We've let people believe he's just gone away for a vacation. Will you help me, Mr. Hyer? I'll pay you anything you ask."

"That," Hyer said, "isn't exactly beside the point." He looked at her closely. "Is Rich Lanning in a jam over this?"

SHE said, "Oh no. No, Rich couldn't have had—that is, Rich wasn't even at the Camp. He had told me Monday morning that he would go up, but at the last minute he changed his mind and stayed in New York. No, if Rich were likely to be—" Her mouth twisted. "I shouldn't come to you, Mr. Hyer. I've heard too much about your reputation. I'd not like to have you working on this if Rich—" She caught herself. "But it's quite absurd to talk like this. Rich is entirely out of it."

Hyer nodded. "Rich called on Al Jocelyn Monday afternoon for some legal advice. Yes, he was in New York."

"How did you know that?"

"I had dinner with Albert Jocelyn Monday night." Hyer said, "You can't blame me for a normal curiosity."

"No. I don't blame you."

"Jocelyn made you out to be pretty level-headed."

"Rich didn't get to the camp until Tuesday afternoon."

Hyer took out his cigarette case and opened it to her. Marcia shook her head.

"What happened Monday night?" Hyer asked.

"Several things. Clearse Owen—I suppose Mr. Jocelyn told you about Owen?"

Hyer nodded. "So did Dawson."

"You got an unbiased opinion of Owen, then. Last Monday night, as soon as they got to the Camp, he made my father fire the caretaker, Karl Sandlund."

"Why?"

"There's a section of woods down near the Lake closed off with a high wire fence. There's an—observatory there."

Hyer nodded. "Dawson told me about it."

The girl seemed relieved not to have to go into detail. "When Dad and Owen got there Monday evening and Sandlund went to get his key to this

place, it was missing. Sandlund swore it had been hanging on its hook at four o'clock. Owen gave him a good lacing out and— Well, he managed to get Dad to fire him on the spot."

"Anybody in the observatory?"

"Yes. Two or three of Owen's men. The key that was lost was to the lock on the fence, not the building itself."

"Haven't hired a new caretaker, have they?" Hyer asked.

She looked at him sharply. "Yes. That night."

"Who else was around, besides these cronies of Owen's?"

"The cook, a couple of guides. Augusta Warren. She's our old housekeeper. Dad built her a cottage up there. She doesn't get along with Beryl."

Hyer stared at his cigarette. "When did the new caretaker show up?"

"Wednesday. Yes," she said, "I'm sure that he's an Owen man. So is Beryl. She wants to dismiss him, but— Well, I think she's afraid to."

"Where is Lanning?"

"Up at the camp. He said he wanted to stay there. Rich is a little allergic to his Aunty Beryl."

"She doesn't know he's there?"

"No."

"You and she haven't been back since then?"

"Yes. We were up Friday. I think Rich bribed the servants not to tell her he was staying there."

"How's she bearing up?"

"She's pretty well shot. Worrying about Rich mostly, I think."

"And he won't let you tell her he's there?"

She said, "If you knew Beryl better, you might understand that, Mr. Hyer. I had a long talk with Rich over the phone last night. I told him I was going to come to you."

"How'd he take that?"

"He thought it a good idea, of course."

Hyer said slowly, "Suppose you're right and we end up by getting him *into* a jam if we start poking around." He looked at her. "What then?"

"That's absurd." She bit her lip. "But I'll pay you just the same."

Hyer looked uncomfortable. "I didn't mean that."

"Mr. Hyer," she said intensely, leaning forward, "I'm willing to pay you five thousand dollars to prove what happened to Dad Monday night."

HYER'S urban soul squirmed at prospect of a trek to the mountains. But there was something about the tense worried girl facing him that roused his admiration. He said, "All right."

Marcia rose quickly, held out her hand. She said, "Good. It's a bargain."

They shook hands, and her grin, as she answered the detective's, had a new lift in it.

"Now," Hyer said, when they had resumed their seats, "if you'll begin a little farther back and—"

The telephone interrupted him. To his surprise the call, long distance, was for Marcia.

She talked for a moment in low monosyllables while Hyer stood at the window, his back to the room, staring down into Bank Street. He turned as she hung up.

She came toward him, a new nervousness in her manner. She said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Hyer, but I'm afraid I've troubled you for nothing."

"Why?"

She said, "If you don't mind, I'd rather put off our arrangement—that is, until I've had time to think it over a little more." Her voice was unsteady.

"Rich Lanning was the only one who knew you were coming here at two o'clock this afternoon?" Hyer asked.

She turned to gather up her gloves and purse without answering.

"Who had he told?" Hyer asked.

Marcia faced him defensively. "That was Augusta Warren, our old housekeeper, at the camp."

"Have some news, did she?"

Marcia hesitated. Then in a wretched voice, she said, "They've arrested Rich."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

This Cosmic Puzzle

AS IF the chaos humans are now making of their world were not enough, scientists are ruefully confessing bafflement over the fundamental illogic of the universe itself.

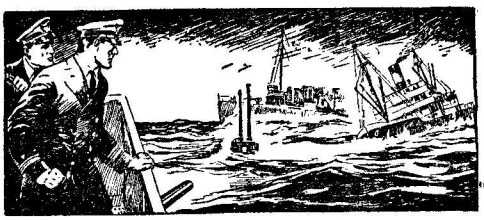
For here is the thorny dichotomy of cosmos: the microcosm and the macrocosm do not match; the material universe as a whole refuses to be explained by the concept which fits the complex universe of the atom.

Professor Albert Einstein himself, recently addressing the American Scientific Congress in Washington, said that he has failed to find a principle that will reconcile these two opposing worlds. For the present, at least, he finds it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the universe is run—as a game of chance.

Scientists shake their heads doubtfully—and continue to strive.

Meanwhile it is necessary to fall back on the discovery of Werner Heisenberg, Nobel Prize-winning German physicist; the discovery named, with strangely fitting irony—The Principle of Uncertainty.

—*Wycliffe Harding*



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The Harp and the Blade

By JOHN MYERS MYERS

Reaching for a belt she wore, I pulled myself to my knees

Start now this magnificent tale of an Irish bard in Medieval France—the Argosy discovery for 1940

FINNIAN, who tells the story, is an Irish bard, able to employ the harp and the blade with equal dexterity. Wandering aimlessly through France, he discovers that since the fall of Charlemagne's empire all Europe has crumbled into chaos. This green and pleasant land is ridden with robber barons, and the only oases of safety are the monasteries.

At a tavern Finnian comes into sudden and unpleasant contact with the chief baron of the district, one Chilbert. It is not until after he has knocked the man senseless that Finnian learns who Chilbert is; then the bard departs with alacrity, riding Chilbert's horse.

Later at the monastery of St. Charles, Finnian is told by Father Walter, the abbot, that Chilbert has ambitious and savage dreams of conquest. Father Walter, a warrior as well as a priest, has not yet decided whether the monastery will take up arms against Chilbert, but he hints that he is in sympathy with Conan the Breton, Chilbert's strongest enemy.

FINNIAN is a man who attends strictly to his own affairs. But one midnight he has a curious meeting with an eerie little man who claims to be an ancient Pict, and this gnome places a strange judgment on Finnian. "While you are in my land," the Pict says, "you will aid any man or woman in need." The bard laughs at this, if a bit uneasily.

Yet the Pict's words seems to bear some potency. For it is only a short time afterward that Finnian rescues an exhausted stranger from the dogs and men who are

This story began in last week's Argosy

pursuing him. Riding Chilbert's horse, the two men find refuge in a ruined vault and prepare to fight off the men hard at their heels. Then Finnian learns that his companion is that Conan of whom the abbot spoke; that his pursuers are Chilbert's minions. But their talk is necessarily brief, for now Chilbert's men are upon them. . . .

CHAPTER VII

FIND ME A SHIELD

I FELT very quiet. Nothing seemed quite real, and things happened with preternatural slowness. I was not bitter at being irretrievably trapped in a quarrel that did not concern me. Causes were no longer important in face of the actuality that was soon to be.

They halted in a cluster, the men in front and the dogs behind this time. "We're going to take you, Conan," Oliver announced.

"You may," the man with me said, "but first we'll take some of you."

The riders were looking the situation over and were not as cheerful as they might have been. Their horses would be useless, and not more than four or five could come at us without getting in each other's way.

The red man looked at me. "We'll let you go free," he offered.

I spat. "Naturally. And you'll give me back Chilbert's horse, too." Conan laughed, and Oliver cursed me as grace before getting down to business.

At his order they all dismounted. Then five put their shields together and came at us. They had steel caps but no mail, and muttered to each other, working themselves up to it. And suddenly anger rushed through me. My hour was near, but if it had to be I would kill meanwhile and like it.

"What's the matter with the red dog?" I jeered. "He's got his tail between his legs before he's even been hit."

Oliver ran forward at that and shouldered into the line just as it reached us. "That's better!" Conan approved and sliced off part of his shield.

The wall protected our legs, but they had bucklers for the upper half of their bodies. I caught two swords with mine, dodged under an ax, and swept my counter-stroke at their shanks to make them step back. One of the others had his foot on the wall, and Conan took it off at the ankle. They all withdrew a minute to carry the maimed man away.

"Good work!" I applauded.

Conan picked up the foot and hit Oliver in the back of the neck. "You left something," he reminded them.

They were angry men when they came again, more swiftly. Holding shields together is sound defense; but it limits swordplay, and they could only hack at me with overhead strokes which signaled themselves.

The ax-man, however, was bothering me, for he kept trying to hit my blade and break it. But as ax work requires both hands he lifted his shield with every full stroke. With my left hand I drew my heavy-bladed knife and threw it underhand just as he was getting set for a blow. It stuck in his stomach, and he folded up, out of any fighting for some days to come.

I had a couple of cuts but nothing worse, I saw, when they withdrew to get him out of the way; and Conan was only scratched. We had worked that time, though, and we were both panting a little.

"That's what I call giving a man his stomach full," Conan said to me.

"Did you nick any of them?"

He grinned. "Oliver hasn't as much of one ear as he used to have. The only trouble with whittling away that man is you improve his appearance."

He was enjoying himself, and I, too, was in a fine mood. We were no longer impersonal but good friends, and spontaneously we shook hands and laughed. They would wear us down, but meanwhile it was good to be giving them a rough time.

But they were in no hurry to come back, and it was easy to see why. The cloudy sky was bringing an early night, and the fact that we were in the vault looking out gave us a marked advantage of light which they naturally begrudged. They'd wait for morning, and I heard Oliver giving instructions anent preparations for the night. But they had scarcely unsaddled their horses when rain started falling.

"That means my own dogs will be of no help in locating me now," Conan said. "Still they probably wouldn't have found me in time anyhow." He raised his voice. "Hey, Oliver! Why don't you come in here out of the rain?"

Save myself, no one present liked that joke. They had to stay right before us in the open or lose us. So they huddled wretchedly in the rain, which soon became hard and steady. Their sorry plight was a constant source of joy to us in the shelter of the vault, and we commented frequently.

OUR last sign of them as a black night fell showed that they and the dogs had formed a close ring around us. We were satisfied, however, that none of them would risk attacking us when he could not see to strike.

"Sleep if you can," I told Conan. "You've had a hard day."

He did sleep, and I, too, until the night cold awoke me. Then I sat up stiffly.

It was queer to sit blending with the night, conscious of a waiting peril that was yet rendered improbable by its silent invisibility. Those men out there were not quite real to me now.

Conan, on the other hand, though equally concealed from me, had a credible existence. It was pleasant to know that he was stretched out a few feet away, a man I already thought of with a degree of warmth that surprised me. As long as I had allowed myself to be trapped I was glad to know that I had done so for no ordinary man.

He yawned again. "Giving up sleep?" I asked, hoping that he might feel in the mood to talk.

He grunted, and when he finally replied I could tell that he, too, was sitting up. "It gave me up. Next time you rescue me bring along a couple of blankets."

"It's a good thing you knew about this place."

"I used to come here as a boy. This is my land, though I've been much away. I'm glad I'm dying on it."

"I never had any place," I said after considering his remark. "I made the mistake of being born to a third son of a chief, so all that they could think to do with me was to farm me out to the Church. But the only thing that caught hold was the poetry I found in the monastery library. So I left when I was ready and I've been wandering ever since."

"I was in school in Ireland myself," he said. "My mother sent me there when my father was killed so that his local rivals wouldn't have me done away with also. I returned about a year and a half ago."

"What did the family enemies do about that?"

"Oh they were all dead or elsewhere, and this immediate district was in such a disorganized state that nobody had any power worth mentioning. There were no enemies for me to hunt down,

but I didn't really care about vengeance. All I wanted was my land and my people. After my father there was no one capable of looking after them."

"Any man who can look after himself is doing well these days," I said.

"Yes, but because I saw what had to be done, knew how it could be done, and because men will follow me, I could accomplish things for my people which they couldn't for themselves." He was citing a fact, not boasting.

"Chilbert was no help to you," I suggested.

"No. He used to pillage this locality; and now, because of his new ambition to be a count, he wants to own it. I've beaten off his raiding parties, but this fall, I hear, he's going to start a concerted drive for conquest. Originally my scheme called only for retrieving my own land, but because Chilbert would not be content with bullying his private domain I have tried to gather strength to break him. Well, I've lost out to him—lost other things, too."

I ROSE to see my last day, looking through the rain at the dim figures of water-logged enemies. "Did you have a nice night, Oliver?" I called solicitously.

"A pretty seedy bunch, if you ask me," Conan said, clicking his tongue. "What do you figure they're doing out there anyhow?"

"They claim as how they're going to fight us."

"What with just those few, scrougey, little warts?" Conan raised his voice in protest. "Look here, Oliver; you'd better get Chilbert to send you some help."

We ostentatiously ate our breakfast before those hungry men; then we stretched and flexed to work the kinks out of us. Shortly the rain slacked off, stopped soon after; and the sky began clearing. "The sun won't bother us till late," Conan remarked, "but then it'll shine right in our eyes and be the death of us—if we last that long."

Oliver had the patience of a good leader. He waited until his sodden men had some of the stiffness and dankness worked out of them, while we watched blue spread over a shiny green corner of the earth. "They're going to rush us this time," I said, watching them line up three deep.

In a minute they charged at us, four abreast. "Up on the wall!" Conan roared, and we leaped on it to strike down.

The men in front promptly became more interested in warding our blows than in going forward, but the rear ranks had no such deterrent. They knocked the slowing leaders off balance, and we swooped on the confusion. My blade bit almost through a man's neck, and I heard another death cry as Conan struck.

The falling men increased the troubles of our attackers by tumbling back against the on-surging men behind. The force of the rush was broken, and while they jostled each other in an effort to close ranks, we hewed at them to wreak havoc. I was wounded in the calf, but once they were no longer charging there were too many of them for their own good, a condition aggravated by the anxiety of all of them to do their share. I drew blood three times, and as the last of my victims stumbled I sliced him to his death.

Oliver, who had taken no part in the charge, was quick to see the futility of their broken attack. "Back out of there!" he howled. And then a moment later: "The shields, you fools, the shields!"

It was too late. They had drawn off without the corpses, not risking to stoop

for them, and Conan was over the wall. Before they could do anything about it he had chopped the shield arms from two of the dead men and tossed them into the vault. I have never seen a readier man.

Oliver was shrieking enraged commands, but I had loosed the shields from the severed arms by the time he had achieved any reorganization. It was certainly good to have a shield snuggling at my shoulder. I'd felt pretty naked before.

"This is more like it," Conan grinned. "Now we'll let them know they're in a fight."

"I don't think they'll rush us again anyhow," I said cheerfully.

CHAPTER VIII

RANK RED RAT

AS A matter of fact they left us entirely alone for a short time while Oliver took stock of the new situation. I tied up my wound, while my friend looked after a gash in his thigh.

"Oliver's a sub-louse, but not an especially stupid sub-louse," he said in a low voice. "It won't take him long to see that the way to finish us is to keep hammering at us, never give us a chance to rest. Do you think you could give them a song while he's making up his mind?"

"Why not?"

Pleased at the idea, I took up my harp. It would perhaps be the last time a song of mine was ever heard, for who can know that his work will live after him?

I strummed, trying to decide which verses would be most fitting, then determined to improvise. My mind was quick with excitement, and line after line fell in place. The Frankish tirade, excellent for the purpose, was the form I chose. I didn't have time to polish it, of course, but it served well enough.

The king of the rats once set his seal
Pompously under this decree:
Whereas cats use rats for a meal
And whereas rats don't like it, we
Order our subjects mercilessly
To hunt down cats, vile each by each,
Leaving none to prolong the breed;
When the last one yowls its final screech
Rats can—but will no more be—feed.
Chilbert, Rex, his cross. All heed!

Some of the foe were trying to shout me down, but Oliver made them shut up. Not that he enjoyed my song, but he wanted all the quiet he could get while he thought things out. The fact that we now had shields as well as a wall to protect us was disconcerting him. I therefore directed the next strophe at him.

A rat whose hide was a dirty red
Squeaked that the king had ordered well.
"A cat's most winsome when most dead,
Nine times dead and deep in Hell!
Come on," he bragged, "my wrath is fell!"
But when they'd tracked down two of the pests,
He and his army stopped, perplexed.
"The king's decree," he coughed, "suggests
That we corner cats, but now what next?
There were no directions in the text."

Conan furnished my only applause. Oliver had turned his back and was beginning to give orders, so I raised my voice above his.

There were forty rats and only a brace
Of cats, but these with great disdain
Yawned in the flea-scarred red rat's face
And entered a cave to dodge the rain;
While all the rats endured the pain
Of being washed, which is not their way.
And they were foodless—the cats both ate,
Then snugly slept till a dryer day,
Making the bold avengers wait
Shivering under a sky in spate.

I didn't blame them—there wasn't anything else they could have done—but I knew that none of the survivors would ever think of that night of

drenched discomfort without painful twinges of shame.

Oliver had found that more than four at our wall crowded each other. He was telling them off into groups of that number, and I gave them all a final boastful warning.

I will not say that the rats went mad,
(One needs a mind for a brain attack)
But they lost what minor sense they had
And rushed the cats, who cuffed them back—
But kept a few for the morning snack.
And so it went till the day was past,
When one they couldn't stomach—that's
The rank red rat—limped home at last.
"Where are the rest?" asked the king of the rats.
"All traitors, sire. They've changed to cats!"

I HAD no more than time to put my harp down when they were on us, but we were not worried yet. We hunched behind our shields and took things as easily as possible, wounding two whose excitement allowed us good openings. After ten minutes Oliver called them back, and four others faced us at once.

Defensive fighting is not so tiring, but by the time we had engaged all of the squads we were working hard. We'd been nicked in several more places, too, and sweat made the cuts sting. "We won't last another full round," Conan muttered. "Let's get rough."

They had become so used to having us conserve our strength that we took them entirely by surprise. "Over!" Conan yelled; and we cleared the wall before they were set and hacked at their legs.

The two we slashed went down, and we turned on the others before help could race to them. Comfortably hedged a second before by a comrade on each side, they were not steeled to meet us on even terms. They were more anxious to leave than to fight, and so did neither. One we killed when his shield was riven by Conan's blow; the other we slew as he turned to bolt.

Then they were around us in numbers and all but cut us off from the wall. It was several desperate minutes before we saw an opportunity to jump back into our haven, and by that time we were bleeding from more places.

Still we stood them off, and eventually—I was losing even approximate track of time—Oliver ordered them to make way for replacements. He had taken no part in the fighting since the night before, but he included himself in this new squad. Doubtless he calculated that the kill was at hand, and he didn't want to miss it.

"Take this," Conan whispered, thrusting the hilt of his sword toward me. Then he tore a block from the barricade, lifted it above his head, and heaved it. Oliver threw up his shield; but it was beaten in, and he went down. For the moment then his men were more interested in their leader than in us. They crowded to bend over him, and we had our first respite in perhaps two hours.

I sat down, glancing at my wounds with detached curiosity. It seemed hardly worth while to do anything about them. "You never can tell what you're liable to find under a stone these days," I panted.

Conan laughed. "He certainly crawled under it in a hurry. Shy, probably." He lifted his voice to address the foe. "Don't take any stones off that carrion; pile more on!"

But Oliver apparently wasn't carrion yet. In a few minutes they picked him up and carried him to the shade of a tree, where he lay motionless.

SEEING them all so interested in their injured chief, Conan took a dead man's steel cap and went back to the spring. The water he brought revived me to a degree and helped to quiet my

breathing. As I looked up from drinking I saw that his eyes were on me intently.

"Finnian," he said after a moment, "it may seem foolish to say this now when we have no more time belonging to us; but you've paid a friend's part even though you didn't know me, and—"

"I wasn't keen for it," I interrupted to confess.

"Who would be? Nevertheless, you did it, and because you did it there are good things between us."

I merely nodded at these accepted facts. It was too bad we'd never had a chance to put our legs under a table with wine on it. Oh well.

"Finnian," he used my name again, "if you don't want it, say so, but I should like to swear blood-brotherhood with you." He smiled. "We won't have to go to any bother about opening veins."

I was more than willing. "You're a good man to stand with," I said, with something of the formality the situation called for, "and I'll take pride in mixing your blood with mine."

So we did that and took oath. "I see they're through fussing with Oliver, brother," Conan said.

"We're for it now," I answered, seeing a group making toward us. "Good luck in whatever happens."

"Goodbye, brother."

We knew how near done we were, but they weren't sure and approached warily. They were not happy about being leaderless, but they knew that if they went away without finishing us they would never forget it. Oliver would have been enraged at the way they crowded each other, but we could no longer take advantage of it. Loss of blood was abetting my general weariness. After a few minutes I felt dizzy and could not see too well.

How long we held them I don't know. I only remember that a song I'd once made started running through my head, and I sang it over and over again as best I could with the little breath I had. After a while I was down with Conan standing over me. Then as I tried to rise he fell to squash me down painfully, and when I pushed out from under him everybody was gone.

It was puzzling, and I was annoyed at being puzzled. With some dim notion of finding out what had happened I tried to climb over the wall, but when I'd got as far as straddling it I bogged down from weakness. I was bleeding badly high up on my chest, and I sat in a sullen stupor watching the gore well and spread.

SOMEWHAT later, however, men were standing around, staring at me. I spat at them, making the only attacking gesture of which I was capable. "Well, come on and get it over with!"

"Who are you?" one wanted to know.

This infuriated me. "Does a man have to have a formal introduction to get killed around here?"

"He's got a leg on each side of the wall, but I'm damned if I know which side he belongs on," another said. "Any of you fellow ever see him before?"

"Of course not!" I raged. "You never saw me before, and I didn't kill any of you and carve up a lot more. Next thing you'll be saying you never heard of Conan, and it was all a mistake. Get it over with, I say!"

"Somebody helped Conan," a voice said, "and as he's the only one alive we'll give him the benefit of the doubt—for the time being. Better look at that wound."

A young fellow started fussing with my chest. I was too feeble to push him away, but I glowered. "What are you doing that for?"

"To save your life."

"You mean to say you're not going to kill me?"

"No," he said patiently, "I'm trying to help you."

I had been keyed for mortal enmity, and now that I was on the way to delirium I wasn't going to be placated by anybody on any account. I curesd him. "Go to hell and drink toad sweat! Here I've been killed all day, and now you say I can't die. I'll show you whether I can die or not, because I wouldn't stay alive for any of you snake-fangs!"

After pronouncing that dictum I don't recall any ensuing events until I was being lifted off a horse. My head cleared enough to let me know I was in great pain and that I was being carried into a small house. "We're leaving you here," a man said. "It'd be bad for you to go any farther with that wound."

"What did you bring me this far for?" I asked testily. "It was bad for me to go anywhere with this wound."

"Conan shouldn't travel any more today either," a voice remarked.

"Yes, but there'll be trouble if he isn't brought home," another said.

"What for?" I butted in. "Conan's dead."

"Oh no. He's still alive."

"I suppose some Conan is still alive," I conceded, "but the one I know is dead." I looked up sourly at the one who seemed to be in charge. "Are you ever going away so I can sleep?"

"I don't know who you are," he said thoughtfully, "or how you got mixed up in that business, but Fulke says he heard you — or somebody — singing when he located Conan."

"Damned good singing," I said complacently, less annoyed with him then.

"Well, anyhow," he concluded, "you won't be in a state to make a getaway for a while to come, so I'll let Conan decide what to do with you when he gets around to knowing what's what again."

He left, and I slept.

CHAPTER IX

O PROUD LADY

IT WAS a few days before I knew anything much, but when clarity and recollection returned I was in bed in a tiny wooden shack. I hurt in quite a few places, I was weak, and the wound in my chest stabbed me as I pulled myself up to look outside.

There was nothing in sight except trees and nobody came when I yelled, so I lay back, trying to reconstruct what had happened and calculate what was liable to happen to me.

In an hour or so and after I had dozed off once or twice a man, a woodsman by the look of him, came in. He was a compact, quick fellow, quiet but pleasant.

"Are you my host?" I demanded when we'd exchanged greetings.

He scratched his head and chuckled as if I'd said something funny. "Well, I guess I am at that. I live here."

"Could you get me some food, please? I'm hungry as a werewolf with pups. What's more I've got the money to pay you with—or I did have."

"They left you everything they found in the vault," he assured me, "but you won't need any money: They're figuring you may be the fellow that stood by Conan." A shadow crossed his face. "He got a bad cut on the head and still sleeps."

"How did they happen to rescue us?" I inquired.

"Oh, we had every man and boy out looking for signs of Conan when he didn't show up after the wolf hunt. Fulke the minstrel was sent to scout

around the Old Farms. He saw that armed men had somebody treed and guessed Conan was there, too, though all he could hear was somebody singing about cats and rats." My host grinned at me. "Maybe you were the one, though nobody will be sure until Conan comes to."

The head of the rescue party, I recalled, had said almost the same thing. "And if Conan doesn t come out of it?" I asked.

The woodsman's face sobered. "I don't know what wil happen," he said quietly, giving me something to think over with great care.

"Well, anyhow," I said by way of shelving unpleasant subjects until my meal was ready, "Fulke wandered into the neighborhood; Oliver's men were too entranced with my song to spot him; and he rallied Conan's men?"

"Leaving out a couple of words I ain't so sure of, why I guess the answer's yes. Our men were scattered, and it was a while before we could get word to a reasonable number; but Rainault led twenty horses there. They'd had enough fighting by then and were glad to reach their mounts in time to get clear."

"What about Oliver?"

"Oh, they all got away except the corpses. But Oliver and his crew won't forget that fight in a hurry, and Fulke has seen to it that the song is sweeping the countryside. He's a real minstrel, that boy; he memorized your whole song. Everybody's laughing at it, and Chilbert will hear about it.

"Of course," he added solemnly, "he'll have the last laugh if Conan dies."

THE stew he heated for me was tasty and contained plenty of good venison such as I needed to restore my drained blood supply. By the following morning I was able to hobble outdoors to lie with comatose gratitude in the warm summer shade. Every time I thought of anything, which wasn't often, I fell asleep.

It is strange what things can satisfy a man when his cosmos is thus reduced, with emotion and action all but deducted from life. The small dramas of birds and insects could suffice to absorb and amuse me while I soaked up strength from earth, sun, and air, waiting for the rents in me to mend.

The woodsman was named Thomas; he had lived thereabouts always, and, unlike many another, he knew his country. From him I learned that I had strayed west and south toward the Loire after having got lost; that Thomas' house stood not a hundred yards from a stream that ran into the Loire, and that it was possible to follow the creek all the way down to the river in a small boat. I heard that possibly useful bit of information without comment.

When I was capable of a little more exercise, Thomas took the trouble to show me an old stone bridge where I had the choice of lounging or spearing fish. In view of my condition I was not often quick enough to stab anything, but clear, shadowed water is soothing to watch.

The old bridge had in fact been nothing but a couple of stone pillars for a long time, maybe since Rome. There was a ford near it where a horse could wade across, though, and a small barge which could be yanked to either shore by leather ropes for the convenience of walkers or horsemen who didn't want to be splashed. Sometimes I'd sit in the barge and try to spear the fish that would pause to mark time in its shade.

I was so engaged in the afternoon of the second day's fishing when I heard horses chop-chopping along toward the

opposite bank. As there was still truce between me and Conan's men I was not alarmed. Nevertheless, they might want to use the barge, so I got out and sat on the bank to wait till they'd passed.

FIRST two men came, then a girl, and behind her four other men. In spite of the fact that she looked hot and tired, she was lovely. She dismounted, stepped to the fore, and then looked across to where I sat.

No doubt my comfortable coolness annoyed her as much as my staring. At any rate she snapped an order to me with obvious assurance that I would obey and like it. "Hurry up and bring the boat over."

I picked out a tasty-looking bit of grass and stuck it in one corner of my mouth. "If one were observant," I said out of the other corner, "one would see that it could be pulled across by a rope, wouldn't one?"

She looked startled at my snub but didn't apologize for the manner that called it forth. She turned away from me to watch one of her followers haul the barge into position, but she hadn't forgotten me.

Just as she was preparing to step in she threw me a queenly glance plainly designed to show me the infinity of my unimportance. In doing so, however, she misjudged her footing, and the man helping her in could not save her from plunging knee deep in mud and water.

It was a perfect anticlimax, and the laughter I could not restrain—not that I tried—made her forcibly aware that it was. Furiously she stepped to the other end of the barge and was therefore the first one ashore. Without waiting for the others she strode over to glare down at me, beautiful with anger and elf locks. I understood what a gorgon was like then.

"What were you laughing at?" she demanded.

There was going to be trouble, and I was too busy wondering what I could do to get out of it to waste breath answering her.

"Come here!" she called to her men who were busy getting the horses out of the water. "Come here and make this fellow say what he was laughing about."

It would make no difference whether I attempted to resist man-handling or not. In either case my wounds would open, and though I might not die, I'd have the long travail of convalescence to start all over again. Four of her followers were moving toward me briskly, and I acted with swiftness. Reaching for a belt she wore, I pulled myself to my knees, at the same time thrusting the prongs of my fish spear against her stomach.

"Call them off," I said, "or I'll jam this in you and turn it."

The men, at least, were convinced I meant it and stopped abruptly. She merely stared at me with shocked disbelief, too astonished even to be scared. "You wouldn't!" she challenged.

"Maybe I oughtn't to," I admitted, "but it so happens that between my life and yours I'll choose the former every time. What makes you think I'd be willing to die just because you're in a bad humor?"

"Nobody said anything about dying," she protested.

"No," I snarled, indulging my anger a trifle now that the situation was somewhat under control. "You only wanted your bravos to bully me into apologizing for your rudeness. It so happens I wouldn't have stood for it. I'd try to finish one with this," here I exerted a little pressure on the spear, "and then they'd end me."

She saw I was right, and I knew she merely hadn't been thinking. Still she did not like to be menaced and scolded any more than I did She maintained a sullen silence, and I went on, more plaintively this time. "I've never seen such a country. Every second person I meet tries to kill me."

"I don't blame them!" she declared hotly.

"But I do," I pointed out. "I blame them a lot, especially as all I've ever asked here is to be let alone while I go on through fast as possible. Now shall we call the whole thing quits? I don't want to hurt anybody, but I don't want to be hurt, either."

There was an uncomfortable moment of waiting while her men fidgeted in the background. I found myself noting abstractedly that her blue eyes and clean features rimmed with dark brown hair could make a very sweet picture were she less enraged. In the end she again looked through me.

"I was at fault for noticing a serf's laugh. There will be no more of this scene." Taking hold of my hand as if it were something slimy she removed my relaxed fingers from her belt and turned away, a tall, graceful girl. Not once had she shown any nervousness, and considering how nervous I had myself felt, I admired her.

She rode away without looking back, but one of her escort lingered behind. "We'll be around to look for you," he said, and I knew that was what they would do. The rights and wrongs of the case were of no interest to them. They had not liked to see their charge threatened, which was natural enough.

WHEN they were out of sight, therefore, I sighed and headed for Thomas' house, seeing clearly that it was time to be pushing on.

Even if the girl's bodyguards didn't find me there were other considerations. If Conan died without exonerating me there was no telling what the attitude of his grieving friends would be. As likely as not I'd be not only suspect but convicted and hanged.

Thinking mournfully of the loss of the bay, I took my harp, sword and personal accessories down to the barge, together with a slab of venison and a bearskin. Then I cut both tethers and pushed off downstream.

I hadn't the energy for sculling, but the current was stiff; and unless there were other boats around of which I knew nothing they would have a hard time catching me.

As there were no rocks to worry about, I soon sat back, exerting myself only when the barge caught on a jutting bank or a low bough. At that I was making several miles an hour, and the mode of travel was perfect for an invalid.

It wasn't till the soft dusk had all but passed that I tied up and snuggled into the bear rug to watch the sky deepen richly. Not long after the stars had taken on their full luster I dropped off, soothed by the faint motion of the boat and by the faint swirling of water around it.

Some animal, attracted, I judged, by the salt savor of human sweat, chewed through the rope, which I'd carelessly looped at too accessible a spot. I awoke during the night to find myself adrift, but I was much too sleepy to be willing to do anything about it.

And when I opened my eyes on the day I saw that no obstacle, contrary to expectations, had acted as more than a temporary check. Now broadside to the current, now one end or the other first, downstream the barge went, and I went contentedly with it, making no effort to

move until I thought the morning chill must have been thoroughly routed.

The creek was quite a bit wider, I discovered when I sat up; otherwise the general outlook hadn't altered. The banks were still thickly wooded. Nevertheless, I knew because of the slowed current that the Loire could not be far away. Before the morning was half gone, indeed, I was swept around a bend to behold the bridge that yet carried the old Roman road over the stream.

Not much beyond the bridge the creek joined the Loire, and directly across from where it did so there stood a monastery. Though some of it was in ruins, it was obviously inhabited, and I nodded to myself. Here was where I would finish recuperating.

CHAPTER X

MEN OF TALENT MADE WELCOME

I WAS a good half-mile below it before I managed to work myself across. Leaving the barge for who would have it, I hobbled along a narrow road back to the abbey and knocked with the hilt of my sword. I had to repeat the summons, but eventually I heard somebody fumbling with the shot window.

Mean little eyes set in a flabby face peered out at me. "What do you want?" the porter asked with an abruptness that annoyed me.

"Entry first of all," I answered.

He continued surveying me, and I was conscious that my clothes, though clean, had had to be liberally patched after the stand with Conan. "Why should I let you in?" he wanted to know.

This was not a man to talk to as I had to Father Clovis. Reaching into my wallet, I extracted a couple of coins and waved them before his widening eyes. "Because I'm a distinguished scholar," I told him with an abruptness to match his own.

"Oh," he said. "Come in." He opened the door and held out his hand; but I brushed past him, closing my own fist on the money

"This goes to the hospice," I declared, determined to get credit for my donation where it would do me some good. "I shall give it with the stipulation that some later and less learned guest," and there I chinked the money under his nose, "shall be entertained for the asking."

He was both disappointed and miffed, but there was nothing that he could do then. Turning without a word, he led me across the grass-grown court. In transit we passed a stout monk with a fringe of gray around his freckled dome. Noticing that he stopped to stare after me, I looked back.

"Aren't you an Irishman?" he asked in Gaelic.

He was a benevolent looking old man. I smiled at him. "Yes, father: like yourself truly ex-isle.'

He wasn't interested in my sword or war-torn raiment. His eyes went to my harp. "You are a bard, my son?"

He was hoping, I could see, that I was not just a minstrel. "I like to think so, father," I answered.

He came toward me eagerly. "Have you been trained in the schools? Are you a scholar?"

"No, father, just a lover."

"That's all any of us are." He was almost afraid to ask the next question. The hand he pointed at my scrip trembled a little. "Have you any books with you?"

"A few," I replied, pleased to be able to make his eyes light up.

"Could I see them?" he cried, but before I could oblige him he put his hand on my arm. "I am sorry, my son.

I see that Father Paul was about to conduct you to the hospice. You're probably tired and hungry."

"Having recently slept and eaten well, I am neither, father."

His face grew eager again. "Could you spare me a few minutes to show me what you have?"

Considering my plans concerning the monastery that was a trifling request. "Gladly, father."

TAKING me by the arm, he bustled back whence he had come, asking questions about schools and scholars in Ireland which I answered as best I could. His study, a small room on the second floor, was cluttered with scrolls and sheaves of parchment and vellum.

"Nobody else here cares to read," he confided to me, "so I just moved into the library."

"I'll take pleasure in looking over your collection," I told him. I meant it, too.

"Splendid!" He beamed. "Does that mean you're going to remain with us for a while?"

"If I may, father?"

"Of course, you may. You see, the abbot's gone to Rome to try to get money for us to rebuild; and I'm prior, so if I say you can stay it's all right." He looked at me anxiously as if he wasn't sure I'd believe he held a position of such importance.

"That's fine," I told him.

Opening my scrip, I drew forth the tiny collection I carried with me: the *Georgics*, a miscellany of Latin poems and songs, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, two tales of Finn, a lay of Walter, a ballad of Roland, and assorted pieces of my own. With the exception of the last he was familiar with almost all that I had to offer, but just to be able to handle them and to talk them over with someone who was interested was ecstasy for him.

Only in the miscellany did he find a couple of items that were new to him, and those he promptly scooped into his mind. As to my own compositions, though I warned him with an unwonted humility that he might find nothing in them to interest so informed a person, he protested his anxiety to read them also.

"Virgil was not born with the *Aeneid* in his hands," he told me. "Nor was it famous till men had read it." He put my poems in a compartment of his cabinet. "I'll read these when I have the time to give them a considered perusal."

To see that devotee handling my work with the same loving carefulness with which he touched the books of the masters moved me a great deal. "Father," I said, "as a token of my appreciation of your courtesy in permitting me to stay here, I hope you'll accept the Latin anthology for your library."

"Oh, thank you very much, my son, but—" I saw him resolve to refuse my gift and saw the resolution break down. A new book didn't come his way every day, and the thought of one swelled his heart.

From then on we talked in the knowledge that a friendship we would both enjoy was growing while we spoke. Then a bell sounded, and he rose regretfully. "I have other duties to attend to, but you can stay here and read if you like." He paused at the door. "I hope you'll eat with us at the refectory, though perhaps you'd really prefer the hospice where you can have silent meditation during the meal."

"Oh no," I assured him. "I think it would be sinful pride to feed on my own thoughts when I could be sharing those of one so much wiser."

He blushed. "You are kind, my son."

He left, and I stretched contentedly before picking up a scroll. I was home.

CHAPTER XI

EVER MEET A DEVIL?

THE Monastery of St. Lucien was very different from the last one I had visited. It had been looted and burned by the Danes twice within the past thirty years, and since the last attack it had never been fully rebuilt. Nor had it regained more than half its original complement of monks, and this remnant was an ill-organized body without impulse toward either religious or social achievement.

Most of these monks had been frightened out of the world into a life which called for a mysticism they had not. A few took to the life, but the rest remained in a state of relieved puzzlement. They had a way of living that in general was less harried than that of other men, but they didn't know quite what they were supposed to be doing.

There was one in particular, on the other hand, who made himself an exception by the hardy practicality with which he viewed the monastery and ascetic vows. Not bad company when it was too hot to want to think, he was an ardent fisherman, and I often joined him. The heavy heat of midsummer made me disgruntled when fish caused me the effort necessary to haul them up, but to do them general justice accidents of that kind were rare.

Father Gaimar, however, was a highly successful angler, although he never allowed even fishing to interrupt for long his inexhaustible flow of salty reminiscence. Quite probably he was a liar, but he was an entertaining one. He had joined the monastery, he said, to keep out of trouble.

If the food at St. Lucien was nothing special it was sound and plentiful. I thrived, healing and taking on weight again, but I didn't push on. My mind was still set on faring east, but the attendant difficulties were great. I had neither a horse nor sufficient money to buy one and have anything left over for traveling expenses.

As for going afoot, it was too perilous even to consider. To get anywhere I wanted to go I'd have to cross the Loire and use Charlemagne's highway. That would take me directly through Chilbert's territory, and I was a marked man, known personally or by description to the count and his followers.

Chilbert himself, I heard, was moving everywhere trying to procure strengthening alliances. His power already extended north a considerable ways and west along the river to the stream down which I'd drifted in the barge.

That meant, I mused, that he had St. Charles Abbey in the crook of his elbow and that his domain reached along the southern border of Conan's holdings. My friend was mentioned a few times, but they didn't seem to know that he was or had been in mortal danger. I didn't dare to ask any direct questions, for as the monastery stood near the sphere of Chilbert's influence he might have a man or so there in his pay.

I WOULD have given much to see Conan again before leaving that section of the country, but the risk of seeking him out, granted he would be alive to make me welcome, was only one drawback. War was imminent, and if it broke out in the course of my visit I couldn't gracefully avoid doing my part against our common enemy. But there was no gain for me in that, and it struck me that I had already lost enough blood

in his behalf to satisfy all reasonable demands of friendship.

All in all the river appeared to be the best means of getting out of the corner I was in. I saw none but local boats, yet I learned that sea fishers came in the fall to sell salt stock, working their way upstream as far as Tours. As that exactly fitted into my plans I determined to wait and buy passage on one of their ships.

I enjoyed the first month I was there, alternately loafing with Father Gaimar and working with Father Michael. The latter was articulate as well as knowledgeable, and he inspired me to refurbish some of the worn patches in my education. In turn I was able to do a few things for him.

I early found that he blamed himself for not being able to fire his fellow monks with his zest for reading.

Sitting in one of his classes I observed how he was openly flouted. They yawned, fidgeted, and talked to each other; and his pathetic eagerness to teach was met with a stolid determination not to learn.

It angered me to see him helpless and pitiable before such oafs. "Father," I said when he had forlornly dismissed them, "why don't you let me take the class tomorrow?"

His very desire to get out of it made him refuse. "No, thank you, my son. It's one of my duties."

I feigned great disappointment. "I suppose you don't think I'm learned enough to instruct others in even the rudiments of knowledge."

"Oh, I didn't meant that!" He was distressed, as I had known he would be, at the thought he had hurt my feelings.

"Then why don't you let me take the class?" I wheedled. "There's much more valuable work you could be doing in the library, and I really think I might be able to teach them something."

"It would not be hard to do better than I," he said humbly; and because of this alone he surrendered to his own wish.

The next day I marched before the students and laid my sheathed sword on the desk. "Father Michael has asked me to help you to read," I announced, gazing from one to another with a challenge they instantly recognized and resented. "I expect your attention."

That wasn't true, and I didn't get it at first. They started gabbing as usual, their eyes everywhere but on me or their wax copy plates. "Shut up, damn you!" I shouted.

For an instant they were startled into silence. "Fathers of the Church are supposed to have two things you midges lack," I said belligerently. "They are grammar and courtesy, and I propose to teach you both." I fixed my eyes on a young man who looked more intelligent as well as more insolent than the rest. "Can you decline *mensa?*"

He smirked. "No, but I can decline to answer."

I rose when his mates had finished laughing. "This," I stated, picking up my sword for him to see, "is a thing. It's name is a noun, which can be declined but not conjugated."

He pursed his lips mockingly. "Oh?"

"The act of moving a thing," I pursued, "is a verb, which can be conjugated but *not* declined." I hit him over the head with the sheathed blade, and he sagged in his seat, almost out. "To confuse one with the other," I concluded as I resumed my seat, "is a shocking fundamental mistake."

AFTER a few more such incidents, interest in literacy waxed. All were attentive, and the better minds began

to take hold. Not that I could claim to be popular with my class.

Some resented my methods, but more were displeased because I, a non-cleric, was presuming to instruct monks. The fact that instruction was needed only aggravated the sting of the point. Even though they might not want to take the trouble of knowing more, by rights I should have known less.

Father Michael would have been dismayed at some phases of my technique, but he was overjoyed at the results. "You are a real teacher, my son," he said happily, and I could see that he already had visions of the abbey swarming with eager students.

Perhaps in other days it had been, like many another house; but the great age of learning had passed. A saint of scholarship himself, he could not believe this, and it would have pained him, had I pointed out how wonderfully alone he stood.

At the end of five weeks our association was interrupted when some species of fever to which he was apparently subject sent him to the infirmary.

While waiting for him to recover, I spent more time with Gaimar than ever. By then I had all but regained my full strength and felt so good about it that I usually took the oars for the returning upstream pull. One scorching day I was hard at rowing, with Father Gaimar and a boon companion of his seated in the stern; and suddenly Gaimar broke off in the middle of an exotic anecdote.

He said in a startled voice: "What's that?"

I gazed where he was pointing, then stood up the better to see. The head and shoulders of what appeared to be a man lay on the north bank just downriver from us. The lower part of his body trailed in the water. "It's a basking nicor!" Father Gaimar said in an awed voice.

"Let's get away quick!" the third member of our party whispered.

Ignoring them, I let the boat drift until we were directly parallel with the figure. It didn't move. "It's a nicor, all right," Gaimar said authoritatively. "Make for the other bank!"

Notwithstanding the heat, I felt gooseflesh, but I wasn't entirely convinced. "Nicors hang out in the sea," I objected. "I never heard of one in a river."

"It's come up to catch fish," he opined. "Row like the devil!"

"It'll put a spell on us!" the other monk cried.

"Let me take an oar!" Gaimar urged, but I pushed him away. Their panic had had a steadying effect upon me.

"Why don't you two holy men exorcise it?" I asked, half-ironically and half-wishing they could.

"I never got the hang of it," Gaimar said, "but I'm going to learn if we ever get back safely."

I had been studying the thing carefully. The hair was fair, which is true of nicors, and what of the torso could be seen was naked. Still there was nothing in his appearance to disprove he was human, either. "I think it's a man," I announced.

"It's not!" the odd brother said angrily. "If you don't want to row, give us the oars."

I sat down and put the sculls between the thole pins once more. "I can't and won't leave without finding out whether that's a man or not. If it's a man, why we can't just go off without seeing what's the matter with him."

THEY didn't agree and jumped me, trying to wrest the oars away. I stopped Gaimar by putting my foot in

his stomach. His fellow struck me, and my reciprocating shove landed him on his back.

I caught up my sword and drew it. "This can put a spell on you as quickly as a nicor," I warned them. After a moment I laid the weapon on the thwart beside me and so began pulling toward the creature.

Had I not been myself somewhat nervous I would have derived more amusement from the sight of those godless monks kneeling and stumbling through the Latin of their prayers.

About ten yards from the thing I stopped. The river was too roiled from recent rains to let me see whether the lower extremities took the form of legs or not. The face was that of a man right enough, but it was so colorless that it might well have been something kept from the sun by deep water.

I almost weakened and consented to leave without pushing the investigation further, when to my excited fancy the face suddenly looked like that of the Saxon youth I had let Chilbert kill. "I'm going to find out exactly what's what," I told my wildly babbling companions. "You can come with me or you can jump ashore."

They preferred the latter course, so I rowed them to the south shore and let them scramble up the bank and away. They had no intention of waiting to see what happened, either; they bee-lined home to the sanctuary of holy ground. Gaimar, it occurred to me as I pushed off, had at last found a spiritual use for the monastery.

Rowing backward so that I could see better and be in a better position for flight, I approached the figure slowly. Reassured by closer inspection, I grounded the skiff near him and sprang ashore. His body was chill but not death cold, so I rolled him over to get his face out of the mud. It was then that I saw his trouble, a deep gash in the shoulder. I examined it and whistled.

Unless I was much mistaken that wound had been made by an arrow, since pulled out. Bows aren't used much for war purposes, although an occasional Dane is dangerous with the weapon. Leaving the man for a minute, I climbed the bank to look around.

He had come from the west, the road up there showed me, and had turned off to the river, no doubt desperate with thirst. Apparently the steep bank had been too much for him to negotiate; he had fallen in the water, and had fainted in the course of his struggle to get out.

His wound had stopped bleeding but recommenced a little when I put him in the boat, so I bound a press of leaves over it to keep the flies off. On the way back I devised gibes for Father Gaimar and planned to entertain my fellow diners with an epic account of his prayers and panicky retreat.

But when I walked up to the monastery to get help in carrying my foundling, the door was not opened at my word. Instead, as on the morning of my first arrival, Father Paul peered at me through the shot window. He closed it a second later but the door stayed shut.

"Open up!" I said irritably.

"You can't come in," he retorted, and I could tell that he was enjoying himself.

"Quit playing jokes," I told him sternly. "I've brought in a wounded man that needs looking after."

"Father Gaimar told us how you picked up a nicor. You can't come in."

WITH the hilt of my sword I knocked the shot window loose from its grooves to glare at him through the small opening. "I tell you it's a man. I've been with him an hour, and he's done no harm to me."

He swung the key on his finger and smiled. "Well, my distinguished scholar," and by those words he as much as announced that he was avenging the snub I'd given him at our first meeting, "nobody knows anything about you except that you suddenly appeared. You may be a fiend yourself."

He would not call any of the others when I asked him to, so I began shouting. When they appeared they did not come singly but in a group. They had been talking about me.

"Father Raoul," I addressed the sacristan, "I have a man in need of attention here who should not be made to wait while this gnat-brained fool plays bad jokes."

He was a well intentioned old nincompoop, but he was of the kind to be thoroughly taken in by Gaimar's story. "You can't defile a house of God by bringing in Devil's spawn," he said uneasily.

"Gaimar," I said to my former friend, "tell them you lost your nerve and ran away before you could find out whether it was a man or not."

"Father Gaimar saw he had a fish's tail when you took him out of the water," another monk volunteered.

"Tell them you lied, Gaimar," I said ominously, but he just looked at me sullenly. By now he had probably convinced himself that he actually had witnessed what he so vividly imagined.

I was losing my temper, but I was still making an effort to be reasonable. "Come out and see for yourselves that he's just a harmless lad who's had a bad time of it. Look, I've lived here over six weeks. You all know me and can see that being near this fellow has wrought no change in me."

"I've always thought you were a devil anyhow," one of my students spoke up.

Some of them were smiling behind their hands, and then I knew. They had more or less believed Father Gaimar's story until I had returned with evidence to refute it; but now they had an excuse for satisfying the enmity aroused by jealousy of me. With Father Michael ill they could turn on me with impunity.

"All right, you ticks," I said angrily, "I'll find another place for him—one with no monks around to make his wound fester. Now send out my things, and make it fast!"

"We're keeping them to pay for your board and lodging," Father Paul informed me impudently, and at that I lost my self-control.

"Bring out my things!" I yelled, "or I'll wait around and kill the first polecat of a holy father that tries to leave. Bring out my harp carefully and every coin of my money or I'll kill two! Bring them right away or I'll kill three!"

They ceased smiling then. They weren't fighters and didn't have the gumption to organize against me, so unless they stopped all outside pursuits, I could lurk in the neighborhood and easily waylay enough monks to make my threats good.

"Will you leave us in peace if we return your property?" the sacristan asked.

"If you hurry," I snapped. "But you'd better keep a certain fat slug inside while I'm around or I might forget my agreement."

Once I'd held his unwilling eyes, Father Paul had had all the jesting he wanted for one day. He scuttled away, and it was another monk who undertook the task of gathering and surrendering my gear. Still burning with rage, I went in search for a peasant's shack where my charge could be housed.

That took a little time.

CHAPTER XII

ENTER, DANES, WITHOUT KNOCKING

HIS eyes were partly open when I returned with a fellow whose hospitality I had bought. I had succeeded in finding a fairly clean shanty, and beyond cleaning his wound there was not much more I could do for him. Though he had lost quite a lot of blood I judged his condition not serious, and I sat by his bed on the chance he'd revive enough to talk. I had plenty to think about while waiting.

I would no longer have any of the pleasant things—companionship, a library, decent quarters, or good food and wine—which the abbey had offered, so it seemed foolish to remain in the vicinity. Moreover, I didn't have much money, and there was no way of acquiring any more where I was, and no reasonable means of traveling anywhere but west, whence I had come.

An hour's consideration was sterile of good answers. Finally the man stirred and looked at me. "Water?" I asked.

His eyes were feverish, but he was clear-headed enough to understand. He nodded, and I held his head so he could drink. "What happened to you?"

"Danes."

That was interesting. "It looked like their work," I said. "How far away are they?"

"I don't know now. I broke through their attack and escaped. I was going to try to find help and have another crack at them, but I got fever. Lost track of what I was doing, though, so I guess I just kept right on going nowhere in particular."

"Yes, of course." I knew how it was with fever. "I found you in the water."

"I don't remember that." He closed his eyes tiredly, and I went outside.

The fellow had given me something new to consider. Downriver were Vikings who might solve my transportation problem. Once or twice in the past they had gone all the way up to sack Tours, but only a very strong force of them would dare that. They might not proceed any farther than they had—some ten or fifteen miles below us.

At the moment, with the chores of piracy finished for the day, they should be gathering for drink and talk. As I visualized their bustling camp my own lot seemed a drab one. I thought about that a minute and made up my mind.

I'd join the Danes and go whichever way they'd take me. If they wanted to thrust on east, well and good. I'd leave them at Tours. If they were returning west, I would accept it as Fate that I was not to make my trip to the Ile de France.

Pleased at having an actual course to pursue, I retired early to the haystack that provided me with bedding, and was up at dawn. Leaving the remainder of my money with the peasant to reward him for harboring the invalid, I started walking toward Nantes. I had thought of taking the skiff; but Gaimar had suspected that I might think of that, so it wasn't there.

IN SO FAR as my impendimenta would allow, I walked fast. I wanted to make sure of arriving at the Danes' camp before they turned back to sea.

Around a sweeping bend four or five miles downstream I first saw the smoke rising. It was not from a cooking fire either, and I nodded to myself. Arson was the national pastime of the Danes. If they couldn't carry off a thing they had to see whether it would burn.

Not much past sunrise I met the first wayfarer, a worn man on a disinterested mule. "Don't go any further," he warned me. "There are Danes downriver."

"How many ships?" I asked.

"Seven," he said, but I wasn't impressed. They'd never reach Tours with just those few.

"Anybody making a stand against them?" I enquired next.

"No," he said disgustedly. "There's no leader, and all anybody thought of was getting out of the way. I'm just riding to warn people."

He went on, and after a moment I followed him. He'd warn them at the monastery, and they'd escape all right; but there was something I had to do for Father Michael. But when I got back I went first to see if my waif had been taken care of. As I had half-suspected, he had been deserted.

He was awake and knew me. "What's all the excitement? The Danes coming here, too?"

"Yes," I told him. "I'm sorry, but I've got to move you."

When I picked him up he gasped, but he made no other sound while I struggled the short distance to the abbey with him. The monks were all busy loading wains in preparation for flight to the forest. I put my burden down and looked at them grimly, but they weren't inimical any longer. Calamity had temporarily cured them of pettiness, and they met my eyes sheepishly.

"Father Raoul," I addressed the sacristan, "this man has already been wounded by the Danes. If they find him here they will finish what they started. You will take him with you?"

Though a fumbler, he was a good-hearted old man, and I knew that he was one of the few that had not been actuated by malice the day before. "Certainly we'll take him," he said hastily. "Are you coming with us, too, my son? You're welcome."

"No, thanks. Where is Father Michael?"

My friend was in a horse litter, shrunken and pale. It looked to me as if he might not survive the rigors of an overland journey, but I could help him a little. "I'll see that the books aren't burned, father."

His drawn face lighted with pleasure "That's splendid," he whispered.

"I'll hide them and leave word where they are." I hesitated while I thought of a safe place. "The message will be in a box under the northwest corner of the wheat field. Good luck, father."

He had no more strength for words, but his hand squeezed mine slightly. As I left him to enter the abbey they were placing the wounded man on a pile of bedding in one of the wains. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Finnian, an Irish bard."

"I'll remember," he said.

A few more of them took the trouble to say goodbye to me, and then they were gone.

I hadn't told Father Michael where I was going to put the books, for the idea would have worried him. An old burial vault was the place I had in mind as being at once weather-proof and safe. The Danes would never look there because they had long ago learned that Christian priests, at any rate, didn't bury valuables with their dead. It took me well over an hour to accomplish my task; then I returned to await the Vikings.

And to make ready.

The monks had taken things of practical worth and the more portable valuables, but there was still some loot. The Danes wouldn't be too pleased, but at the same time they wouldn't be put out of humor by complete disappointment. I filled a couple of demijohns with wine, gathered a bunch of cups, then put them all on a table I'd dragged out into the court.

Then I established myself on the monastery wall from where I had a fine view of the river. It was a pleasant day and I sat there running over songs in my mind.

After a while a dragon came into sight, swiftly driving upriver, and I climbed down from my perch on the wall. No Dane could resist a monastery, so I knew there wasn't any danger of them passing me by.

The situation might be a trifle ticklish at first, but I was fairly sure I could handle it. I was depending on my own obvious non-belligerence—and on the wine.

When I heard them beaching a ship, I filled a mug with wine and walked over to open the shot window just enough to peek through with one eye.

A powerful, squat black Dane led. He had horns on his helmet, carried a huge ax and walked with a bow-legged swagger. About twenty warriors streamed after him, and I heard other ships landing. Marshaling his followers, the chief roared for the door to be opened. He himself apparently expected no results from this order, because he called out for those just arriving to bring a ram. I unlocked the door, slipped a chip of wood between it and the jamb to hold it closed, and went back to my wine.

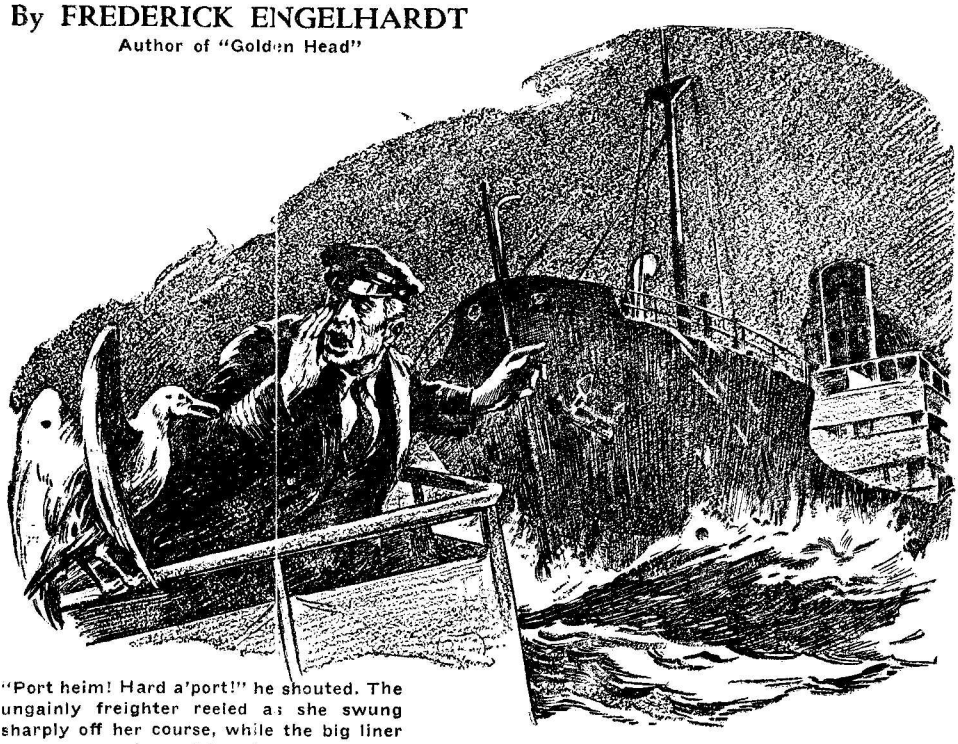
After all, those Danes were used to entering wherever they went by means of a battering ram, and I didn't want to disappoint them. You've got to be careful how you treat unimaginative people.

"Get your weight behind it," the leader was urging. "Hard now!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Bird of Jeopardy

By FREDERICK ENGELHARDT
Author of "Golden Head"



"Port heim! Hard a'port!" he shouted. The ungainly freighter reeled as she swung sharply off her course, while the big liner loomed hugely

There was a story told, long ago, by an Ancient Mariner. But that was before the days of man-made fish, loaded with death, when a captain may not always live to tell of vengeance

IT WAS a nasty day when the crew of the *Benjamin P. Tweed* gathered in the after welldeck to bury the bosun, but Captain Abner Logan felt it incumbent to wear his new peaked cap and a clean shirt. The bosun had been his brother.

Her engines stopped out of respect for the obsequies and to keep the corpse from becoming fouled in the propeller, the rusty old Hog Islander had fallen off and now wallowed in a trough of the sea, while the rising wind skimmed spindrift from the long North Atlantic rollers and flung it at the huddled sailors.

Noting that the dead man's fo'c'sle mates had sewed him up in trim, sailorman fashion, that a heavy shackle was firmly secured to his feet, and that the plank on which the canvas-shrouded corpse lay was well greased, Captain Logan tucked his new cap carefully under his left arm, thumbed through the Book of Common Prayer, and got down to business.

"*Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God, in His wise providence,*"

he read in a nasal, unhurried, New England tone, *"to take out of this world the soul of our departed brother"*—here the jarring voice jumped a full note, the first indication the captain had given since they cleared port that there was any relationship between himself and the dead man other than that of master and hand —*"we therefore commit his body to the deep—"*

He paused and nodded to the mate, who transmitted the nod to the four men lining the rude bier. They seized the plank and with a concerted heave tilted it outboard.

The corpse slid half its length, then an unsuspected nail fouled it, and the shrouded body clung there, the feet dangling over the rearing seas. A low mutter arose from the few graybeards in the crew. A forbidding omen this: a corpse refusing to leave its ship.

"Jiggle it!" advised the mate, in a hoarse whisper.

Embarrassed by the unwelcome attention they had brought upon themselves, the men forgot to act together. Their struggle with the plank ended with the corpse slewing sideways, and the sudden shifting of weight tore the plank out of their hands. Plank and corpse crashed into the sea together.

The three graybeards wagged their bared heads solemnly.

"—to the deep," repeated Captain Logan, *"looking forward for the general Resurrection in the last day, and the life of the world to come, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose second coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the sea shall give up her dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in Him shall be changed, and made like unto His glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby He is able to subdue all things unto Himself."*

Snapping the book shut, the captain jammed his cap back onto his head and stamped forward.

"All right," growled the mate. "Watch below, go below. The rest of you turn to."

The distant jangle of the engineroom telegraph came from the bridge and the *Benjamin P. Tweed* stirred with life.

"Mark my words," pronounced one of the graybeards, back again in the reeking fo'c'sle, "nuthin' good'll come o' this."

The others, rough, hard men all, listened. They went hand in hand with death, and had respect for it, and the fumbled burial had not left them unmoved. Nor had the lonely seas lost their power to engender superstition.

"Aye," agreed another grizzled shellback, "right you are, Anderson. Old Caleb didn't want to leave the ship. For a fact."

"He'll be back," said Anderson solemnly. "The sea'll give up her dead, right enough, far's Caleb's concerned, without waitin' fur the Resurrection Day."

"How?" asked a young A. B.

This was all the invitation the old shellback, steeped in the supernatural lore of the windships, needed. He talked until a half-frozen lookout summoned him to his turn at the wheel.

IN THE comfortable solitude of his cabin, Captain Logan warmed his vitals with a hot buttered rum and gazed sullenly at a dirt-streaked seabag that drooped rakishly in a corner. On the canvas the late bosun had worked his name with hundreds of tiny copper rivet heads.

"I'm sorry, Caleb," he muttered after a while. "Truly I am. I wish now I had done different. Maybe you would have had a ship of your own, too. But"—and the note of contriteness vanished—"it

was your own fault, too, Caleb. You know it was."

For a few minutes longer the captain sat, twisting the glass in his hand and nursing his anger until his thin face flushed red against the snow white hair and mustache.

"And why did you have to pick *my* ship?" he blurted. "*Why?* With hundreds of ships to choose from, you had to pick *mine* to die on. You did it a'purpose, Caleb. You knew that then *I'd* have to break the news to Mary. You always were a devil, Caleb, but thank God you've gone out of my life at last. I hope you're frying now where you belong."

There was silence in the warm cabin, broken only by the howling wind and the straining of the ship. At last the captain spoke again.

"Why should this happen to me?"

In the bright light, the hundreds of red gold rivets spelled out the letters, CALEB LOGAN.

The captain muttered again, "Devil!" and turned to his desk.

That night the gull came.

THE second mate, communing with himself on the lee wing of the bridge in the quiet of the middle watch, was the first to notice the ungainly bird perched precariously on the starboard pelorus stand.

At first he paid it little attention, except to marvel that such a ship-wise bird as a seagull should choose such an uncomfortable roost for its webbed feet. But when, at four bells, he saw it was still there, standing its watch with all the aplomb of the captain whose place it had usurped, he crossed the bridge to examine it more closely.

The gull watched him with its beady eyes, but did not move.

" 'Ere, 'ere," the second chided, "wot are yer doin', now, on the weather wing? That's the old man's place. Besides, yer'll be for makin' a bloody mess on the gratin's."

The bird closed one glittering eye in a solemn, portentous wink, stretched its left leg back and went through the motions of spitting. The little expatriate Cockney retreated to the door of the wheelhouse.

"Did yer see that, now, Anderson?" he inquired of the wheelsman in a suddenly awed tone.

"Aye," answered the other. "It's old Caleb to the life. That was his way always. He'd wink, an' place his left foot so, an' spit. I've seen him do it hundreds of times."

"Yer really think that old sot 'as come back?"

"Aye," responded Anderson, "that I do. I said as much yesterday after we buried him. An' he means no good to the ship, does Caleb, else why did he not go his way like a good Christian soul? I'm afraid, sir. That I am."

"Well," said the second, recovering somewhat, "yer may be right. Yon bird 'as a crummy 'nough look about 'im, with 'is feathers all this way an' that, to be old Caleb. Hif 'e's got a breath on 'im, now, that'll clinch it. We'll leave it up to the mate. 'E's a schoolship man."

At eight bells, when the mate, rubbing sleepy eyes, appeared on the bridge to relieve him, the second immediately acquainted him with their passngeer.

"Anderson 'ere claims it's old Caleb's ghost," he said. "It's been ridin' out there all my watch."

The mate snorted once with the sure knowledge of youth and book learning and cast a quick glance at the newly varnished gratings.

"Nonsense," he snapped. "There's not a feather on the deck. And you can

be sure that if it were the bosun, the whole bridge would be littered. But I'll drive it off before it does do something."

Anderson shook his grizzled head as the mate stepped out on the weather wing.

"Here, get along with you," barked the mate. "We're not carrying passengers this trip."

"Caleb won't like that," Anderson muttered under his breath. "It pays to be polite to ghosts. An' he didn't like the mate nohow, anyway, what with his spic an' span liner ways."

Outside there was a sudden outbreak of subdued but none the less full-souled cursing. The second screwed his round little monkey's face into a grimace to keep from laughing aloud as the dapper mate re-entered the wheelhouse digging at his right eye with a handkerchief.

AT EIGHT o'clock Captain Logan joined his officers on the bridge for the formal taking of the morning observation. His thin, weather-beaten face was calm and there was no hint of the fruitless anger of the night before.

"Bit of a fog coming up, sir," remarked the mate.

"So there is," said the captain. "Well, it's welcome. It'll help us dodge the English cruisers. Frankly, gentlemen, I don't know which is worse for neutral shipping. If we're sunk by a torpedo, why then the owners collect insurance and build us another ship.

"But if we're held in the roadstead off Deal for four or five months, while a crew of Admiralty lawyers decide whether corset stays are contraband, why then the voyage is a total loss, the owners go bankrupt and we go on the beach. One way we're in danger of drowning; the other, we face starvation."

"Then there's always mines," put in the third mate, a dour New Yorker who, at fifty-five, had not yet summoned enough optimism to risk an examination for promotion.

"We needn't worry about *those,*" the captain said. "I'm setting a course around the Faroes. We'll come down on Bergen from the north. There'll be no mines where we're going. But what," he interjected suddenly, "is old Anderson doing with that bird?"

The others followed his pointing finger to the forward hatch, where the gray-haired sailor was squatting opposite a large, bedraggled gull.

"Seems to be feeding it," observed the third.

"That's wot 'e's doin', for a fact," said the little Cockney. "Well, 'e was Anderson's pal, so 'e was. An' I guess now 'e's a bloomin' ghost, Anderson wants to stand in with 'im."

"Who was who's pal?" demanded the captain.

"Why, Caleb, the bosun, o' course," the Cockney rattled on. "Old Caleb an' Anderson 'ave been shipmytes for years. When Caleb turned into a bleedin' seagulls an' came back last night an' took command o' the ruddy ship, so to speak, why Anderson, 'e recognized 'im. Or so 'e says. It's my belief Anderson is feedin' 'im so 'e won't 'ave to fight with the hother gulls for the garbage. *Ouch!*"

The last exclamation was induced by a swift kick in the shins from the mate.

"I . . . I think I'll go below," the captain muttered.

"You *are* a thick-skulled ass," the mate told the second. "Don't you know the old man and the bosun were brothers?"

"Blimey!" exclaimed the second, slapping his forehead, "but I forgot. But still," he added, "it 'adn't hought to myde the old man so bloomin' white.

Did you see 'is fyce, now? All white it was, like a fish belly."

"Well, don't be spinning *that* yarn," the mate warned. "It's bad enough having Anderson coddle that damned bird. But"—the mate's finger rose unconsciously to his eye as he scowled at the gull—"he won't be, for long."

About an hour later the gloomy third, who had been ruminating on the bridge, eased through the door of the chartroom where the second, as navigating officer, was racking his brains over a North Atlantic chart.

"About this ghost of the bosun's," he began, "it don't stand to reason, Hoskins."

"No?"

"No. In all the yarns I've heard, and I've heard plenty, man and boy, a ghost on a ship spells bad luck. Now the bosun was the old man's brother. It don't stand to reason he'd want to hurt *him,* or his ship. The old man is a white old guy."

The second scratched the three-day beard on his chin.

"Yus," he agreed at length, "there's somethin' in that, Burk. But this Caleb, now, 'e was a vengeful sort, that 'e was. Yer mind that barkeep in Galveston three trips back? Caleb kept a'buyin' 'im drinks till 'e was properly befuddled, then when the poor lad scarcely knew 'is harm from 'is helbow, Caleb picks an argyment with 'im an' sticks 'im with 'is knife."

"Yes," Burk said. "I was there. Caleb told the cops it was self-defense, and so it was. The barkeep pulled a knife first."

"Yus," the second went on. "So 'e did. But wot I want to point out is, 'e was too drunk to know wot 'e was doin' or why 'e was doin' it. An' Caleb got 'im that way. An' why? Why, becuz five years before that, this syme barkeep took a girl awye from Caleb."

"So?" inquired the third.

"So if this Caleb died a'nursin' a bit o' grudge 'gainst the old man, why then, Mister Burk, there's trouble in the hoffin'. For 'e's the sort o' lad as will bide 'is time to do a henemy dirt."

Burk uttered a cackling laugh.

"Well," he said, "it's a good thing there ain't any such things as ghosts."

"Yus," agreed the second. "It's a deal o' pother over nuthin' but a hignorant sylor's superstition."

And he smiled, but in his smile, as in Burk's laugh, there was something missing.

ALL that morning the strange gull circled the lumbering freighter, and all eyes were turned upward. Anderson's yarn had gone the rounds; and while many scoffed, none ventured to mock his theory.

In these times of war, search and seizure, and sudden sinkings, the tumbling green waste through which the *Tweed* now ploughed was rendered doubly menacing by the machinations of man; and, in the same proportion, though subconsciously, was it made more awful to the men whose lives were bound to it.

"There's nuthin' to that yarn," observed a young A. B., watching the gull wheel overhead, "but what with subs an' mines an' cruisers as thick as bedbugs in a wooden bunk, it won't do no harm to be at least polite to that bird."

But there was one man on board who gave no credence at all to the old sailor's belief. This was the mate, who had not forgotten the gull's scurvy treatment of him in the morning watch. Thus it was not surprising when he emerged from his room that afternoon with a shotgun.

The gull earlier had tired of swooping over the vessel and had returned to the weather wing of the bridge, where, like

an overfed and somewhat pompous shipmaster, it had paced monotonously back and forth along the wide rail. From where the mate stood, at the corner of the wheelhouse, it presented an unmissable target. Smirking, the mate leveled his gun.

"Belay that!"

The roaring voice of Captain Logan was drowned in the roar of the shotgun, but it served its purpose. Startled, the mate had jerked back and the murderous charge of shot whistled harmlessly over the gull's head.

"Do you want to lose us the ship, man?" demanded the captain, his sharp face flushed with rage. "Don't you know it's bad luck to kill a gull? It might have the s—" He paused, and flushed even more. "Give me that gun."

Seizing the weapon, he turned and clumped down the companionway to his own quarters, while, behind him, the gull screamed with hellish glee at the younger officer's discomfiture. Nor did the captain appear on deck again until late in the mate's watch that evening.

"I'm sorry, mister," he muttered, forcing the words out. "I was a little upset this afternoon."

"Oh, that's all right, sir," replied the younger man, a little mollified. "I understand, sir."

There was silence for a while, then the captain spoke again.

"Have you thought much of sin, mister?"

"Well, now," stammered the other, removing his cap and digging at his scalp, "can't say that I have."

"Do you think a man can sin against another by not doing something he should, as well as by doing something he shouldn't?"

"I haven't given it much thought, but the way you put it, I daresay he could."

"Yes," said the captain slowly, "that's what I'm beginning to think. A sin of omission it's called. I looked it up in my Bible."

Sensing that the conversation was over, the mate withdrew his head into the upturned collar of his peacoat and stared straight ahead, as if trying to pierce the fog with his naked eye.

By the captain's order no whistle was sounded; and the eerieness of this silent voyage through the white, enveloping mist was beginning to tell on him. With an involuntary shudder, he turned to seek the companionship of the captain. But the captain was gone.

Then the mate heard his voice, low but carrying clearly in the fog, from the other wing.

"WHY are you haunting me, Caleb?" There was a note of pleading in the captain's muted voice. "Why don't you go where you belong?"

"I'll be damned," the mate muttered to himself. "He's talking to that bird."

"I've never hurt you, Caleb," the captain went on, in the same low voice. "I've even tried to help you. It's not my fault that you wouldn't be helped. That you took to drink. That you wrecked your life from the start."

The low voice ceased; and strain his ears as he might, the mate could distinguish only a faint grating sound. For a moment he puzzled over this, then he swore again to himself.

The bird's laughing at him! he thought. *Laughing! There must be something in that crazy Anderson's story. Or I'm going mad.*

An icy finger, not born of the fog, traced his backbone and he twitched convulsively.

"Maybe *I* should have taken the blame the night the *Four Sisters* was cut in two on the Banks," the captain resumed in that strange forced tone.

"But the fault was yours, Caleb, though you were overly young for the responsibility of the schooner. You'd been drinking, and there were witnesses to your blunder."

Again there was silence, while the mate, ill at ease, clutched the cold edge of the windbreaker and leaned far forward, both ears straining to catch the least word.

"And Mary," the captain went on. "I know she liked you at first, but all's fair in love and war, Caleb. You *can't* blame me for taking her. You *can't*. Besides, you cut yourself out, Caleb, when you called on her reeling, and filled the house with the fumes of that cheap rum you favored. No, Caleb, you've been your own worst enemy. But—"

A LOUD, frightened hail from the lookout on the fo'c'sle head cut short this uncanny conversation and snapped the mate back into reality.

"Ship dead ahead!" came the long, carrying wail. "Ship dead ahead! Port your helm, for God's sake!"

"Port helm! Hard a'port!" repeated the mate in a roar.

"Hard a'port she goes," answered the helmsman, spinning the spoked wheel.

The ungainly freighter reeled as she swung sharply off her course, and there were cries of alarm as the crewmen, tumbled from their bunks by the sudden list, streamed from the fo'c'sle. Then the mate saw the other ship, gigantic in the magnifying fog, looming over them.

"Straighten her out!" he ordered, as the jangle of a telegraph sounded on the bridge of the other vessel.

"Aye, aye, sir," repeated the helmsman, reversing the big wheel.

The mate, the captain again by his side, hung far out in the red loom of the port running light, switched on at the last minute by the latter as he raced through the wheelhouse. Framed in a round porthole, a white face gazed into theirs as the towering hull of the liner slid past.

"What ship is that?" The hail came from the bridge of the liner, invisible in the fog.

The mate opened his mouth to reply, but was checked by a tug at his sleeve. The high, overhanging stern of the liner swept past, so close they could have touched it.

As the *Tweed* struggled on, the spin induced by her rudder brought her 'midships housing directly under that vast, steel fantail. There was a momentary crackling of wood and the piercing scream of tearing iron plates.

Then all was silent again, save for the threshing of the stranger's screws.

"Could you make her out, mister?" asked the captain.

"There was a gun on her quarter," the other answered. "But it might have been for subs."

"And again she might have been an auxiliary cruiser," commented the captain. "Best to play safe. Douse our lights and check up on the damage. I doubt if it was as bad as it sounded."

The mate left and a moment later the red and green running lights winked out, as did the glowing white masthead light overhead. At the same time some sensible soul forward closed the fo'c'sle door and the deck was again dark.

"Well?" inquired the captain when the mate returned some ten minutes later.

"Bad," said the younger man, shaking his head. "That fantail swept us clean abaft the stack. Both portside boats are gone, davits and all. The deck looks like an opened sardine can. And that ain't all. The radio shack went by the

board, and so did the hand wheel and gear on the poop."

"Sparks?" asked the captain.

"Oh, he's safe. He was below in the saloon, playing poker with the engineers."

"It could have been worse," muttered the captain. "Much worse. I wonder . . ."

"It was luck, sir. Nothing but luck. Half a second more, and she'd have split us like a mackerel."

"Luck!" The captain seemed to be turning the word over, examining it from all angles. "Well, maybe, mister."

But from that night on, every member of the crew treated the smoky white gull with added respect. Anderson continued to feed the bird three times a day, and hold long one-sided conversations with it. But most of the time the bird rode on the weather wing, and when Captain Logan occupied his time-hallowed post, he did so in an apologetic manner.

"It's addle-pated foolishness," the mate stormed to the other officers one night. "I admit that gull is an extraordinary bird, but so would any gull be if it was petted and pampered like a vice-president chiseling a trip to save passage money."

"These are hard times," grumbled the third, a little shame-faced. "It don't hurt not to take chances with fate."

"Fate!" snorted the mate.

Then, two days later, the gull gave a clinching demonstration of its ghostly powers.

THE fog had lifted and the *Tweed* was rather pompously waddling through the billows, imitating, to the life, the pursy chairman of the board for whom she was named. There were lookouts both on the fo'c'sle head and in the lofty crow's nest.

The mate and the captain were deep in talk on the bridge, while the gull, perched behind them, spread its wings and yawned. In the wheelhouse, the third, whose watch it was, exchanged views on sex with the helmsman, the ship's expert in that field.

Neither the captain nor the mate took notice when the gull suddenly left its perch and, half flying, half walking, entered the wheelhouse, hopped up onto the wheel standard and seized the king-spoke in its powerful beak.

"Here!" expostulated the helmsman. "Get away, there."

"What is it?" demanded the mate.

"This bird is trying to put the wheel over," the helmsman explained. "Here," he said again to the bird. "I'm doin' the steering."

"Let him have his way, helmsman," ordered the captain, quietly.

Obediently the sailor loosened his grip on the spokes and, aiding the bird's patent efforts, put the wheel over hard a'starboard. The others clustered around him.

"Torpedo!" howled the masthead lookout. "Sub on our port beam!"

Led by the captain, the officers rushed to the port wing. Streaking through the green water was the white wake of a torpedo. Several hundred yards off they distinguished the pipe-like periscope of the submarine that fired it.

But the *Tweed's* head was swinging fast now, and when the sleek messenger of death was still fifty yards off, had cleared its course. A moment later the torpedo churned past the five-hundred-foot hull as harmlessly as a porpoise racing aft for a choice bit of garbage.

Dead ahead now, the periscope started cutting the water, then disappeared under the surface as the U-boat dived to escape the onrushing freighter.

"Whew!" whistled the mate, mopping

the cold sweat from his face. "That was a close call."

"Maybe," said the third softly, "you won't be so damn smart now."

The mate turned and watched the captain re-enter the wheelhouse. Logan held out his arm as he passed the wheel and the gull, after a moment's hesitation, jumped onto it. The captain continued on out the starboard door and went down the ladder to his quarters on the deck below.

"I hate to admit it, Burk," the mate muttered. "It goes against reason. But if that bird hasn't got the bosun's soul, what has it got?"

Then, being a curious man, he found occasion to pause under a porthole of the captain's cabin.

"I thank you, Caleb," the captain was saying. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart. If I did not do all I should have done for you in life, as is likely, why you have returned good for evil. You *were* a better man than me, Caleb, after all."

Once again the mate heard that peculiar jarring grating, which he had identified as the gull's laugh. Once again it made him shiver.

There was much talk, as was natural, in the fo'c'sle, in the engineroom, and on the bridge, concerning their narrow escape. Most of the men paid unqualified tribute to the bird, which was now unblushingly referred to as "Caleb," or "the bosun."

But there was another school of thought, headed by the wireless operator, who was of a scientific and therefore hardheaded turn of mind, which, more through human contrariness than anything else, was inclined to deprecate the bird's action.

"Say now that torpedo did hit us," Sparks pointed out. "Why, even if we've no more radio, we would have gotten away in the two boats left and would have been picked up inside twenty-four hours. We're right in the ship lanes."

"*One* boat," interrupted the third. "The starboard quarter boat has a hole in it you could crawl through."

"Well, what if it has," demanded the operator. "We've got two life rafts, haven't we? What I want to point out is, if anything is going to happen to us, it had better happen along here, where we can expect some help."

"Aw, what's the difference," growled an engineer. "Now we've got Caleb watching out for us, nothing is going to happen. The old man is satisfied, and so'm I."

CAPTAIN LOGAN now decided to leave the plotted lanes and strike north by east. For eight days the *Tweed* lumbered over the green water alone, with not even a wisp of smoke on the horizon to alleviate her lonely state.

Determined to give even the Faroes a wild berth, the captain took his ship close to the Arctic Circle before turning east again to come down on Bergen.

It was cold in those regions, and lonely, and not without reason did the crew grumble.

"There hain't even a North Sea trawler within a 'undred miles of us," pointed out Hoskins, the second. "Now wot would a sub or a cruiser be doin' this far north, I hask yer, hunless they cyme for the ride, belike?"

"The old man is playing safe," the mate answered. "Though I don't mind telling you, I'd feel a lot better if we had a radio, just in case."

"He's only doin' what Caleb tells him," offered the third. "He wanted to turn east yesterday, but Caleb, he shook his head 'no'."

"I still sye hit's too damn cold,"

grumbled Hoskins. "Hit's below zero, an' with a wind comin' hup."

Darkness came early and turned the cold sea black. In his high perch the lookout shivered, and ducked his head below the rim of the iron barrel.

The mate, induced by the biting wind to trust to the lookout's eyes, withdrew to the comparative warmth of the wheelhouse, where he contented himself with peering through the rapidly frosting windows.

Below, the crew had withdrawn to their heated quarters, satisfied to leave the welfare of the ship to "good ol' Caleb."

Unseen, the gull, clacking his hooked beak in a gesture of satisfaction, rose from the bridge and drove rapidly and silently ahead of the ship on his powerful wings.

In his comfortable cabin, Captain Logan bent over his desk, writing with a steady hand. The indecision, the fright, the worry that had marked his thin face since the advent of the gull had given way to an expression of peaceful calm. He wrote confidently:

And so, my dear Mary, Caleb came back to us after death: not the wretched, drink-soaked, vindictive Caleb that we knew and mourned, but a forgiving and understanding Caleb.

I see now, my darling, that we failed him in those years when we all three were young. We were strong: he was weak. Instead of offering him our own strength, and the safe harbor of our hearts, when he was led adrift by his youthful carelessness and bad companions, we spurned him.

I blush with shame when I think that I did not offer him even a word when I took this ship three weeks ago and found him aboard, and when I think that I allowed him, my own brother, to die alone in his bunk, with only a messboy as a nurse.

It would have been only just had Caleb returned to curse me. But he returned to forgive, and to save me and the ship from destruction, as I told you.

Oh, Mary, it makes me writhe when I think how smug and self-satisfied we have been with our humble successes, while Caleb stumbled alone through the world. We did much to help him, I know, but we should have done more.

As it is said in James 4:17: "To him therefore that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." But we need reproach ourselves no longer. We have been forgiven.

THROUGH the black Arctic night sped the gull, its beady eyes fixed on the heaving sea below. One hour passed, then another, before it found what it knew must be there, unless the age-old North Atlantic Eddy and the West Wind Drift had gone as madly adrift as the countries they skirted.

Marking the spot in its unearthly mind, the bird screamed once joyfully, then turned and beat its way back to the *Tweed*.

"Nuthin' hin sight, sir," remarked Hoskins as the captain entered the wheelhouse shortly after midnight. "But hit's a bitter cold night, sir, that hit is."

The captain nodded an acknowledgment and peered out the starboard window. For a minute or two all was indistinct, then he saw the gull, perched boldly in the teeth of the rising wind. His Puritan's face set in a small, smug smile.

The three men in the wheelhouse fell silent. The *Tweed* rose and fell, and the wind howled through her rigging, but she drove steadily on before the steady beat of her powerful screw.

"'Ark! Wot's that?" exclaimed Hoskins suddenly.

"What?" asked the captain.

"That rappin'. Sounds like someone rappin' hat the door."

The captain flung open the wheelhouse door and the gull, wet and bedraggled, waddled boldly in.

"'E's cold," offered the second.

But the bird gave no indication of

suffering from the elements. With a beady, unreadable glance at the two officers, it hopped to the binnacle cover and, stretching its neck to the limit, gave two sharp raps with its beak on the right side of the brass globe.

"Ha'port two degrees," ordered Hoskins, anticipating the captain.

The bird screeched and shook its round head.

"Two points, he means. Two points," said the captain "Port two points, helmsman."

"Aye, aye, sir," repeated the sailor mechanically, as he turned the wheel.

Satisfied, the bird hopped down from the binnacle and waddled back to the door. Smiling, the captain opened it and the bird, with a glance around, left.

"I don't like him, not by 'arf I don't," muttered the second to himself, as an involuntary shudder shook him. "That look 'e give us. I--"

There was a terrific roar and the big freighter was lifted bodily almost out of the sea. The dim light in the wheelhouse went out. Screams echoed from fore and aft almost before the thunderous echo of the explosion rolled away.

Inside the shattered wheelhouse, the three men struggled to their feet.

"A mine!" howled the second. "That bloody bird 'as led us honto a mine!"

Boots rang on the iron deck and voices, hoarse and confused, came out of the dark. A dark shape appeared beside the wheelhouse.

"Are you there, captain?" came the voice of the mate.

"'E's 'ere," Hoskins replied. "But maybe 'e's 'urt. Show a light."

A bright beam leaped from a flashlight in the mate's hand and searched the wrecked cabin. It came to rest on the figure of the captain, sitting huddled in a corner. Blood flowed from a long gash under the white hair.

"So you didn't forgive, after all," the captain muttered, staring blindly into the light. "And I thought you had changed. But you couldn't change your nature, could you, Caleb, alive or dead?"

"Come on, sir," urged the mate. "The ship is lost, half her side torn out."

The captain waved them out.

"Leave 'im be, hif 'e wants hit that wye," snapped Hoskins. "An' I, for one, don't blyme 'im. Trustin' to a bloody 'aunt. We'll do well to syve ourselves."

DRAWN by the second, who had clutched his sleeve, the mate backed out of the wheelhouse. Number One boat, the only one to survive the collision ten days back, was only a few feet away. The davits were already swung out, and the boat, by reason of the ship's list, was scarcely five feet above the water.

Hoskins pushed the still unwilling mate into the boat and clambered in himself. The sailors at the falls let the overloaded shell down at the run, then slid down the falls into her themselves. Oars were broken out and the men, working without command, hastily pulled away from the doomed freighter.

A hundred yards off they rested and watched the *Tweed* turn slowly over, then slide, bow foremost, beneath the waves. Above the dying ship, screeching with a hellish joy, circled the smoky white gull.

"What happened?" someone inquired at last.

"That damned bird," exploded Hoskins. "'E cyme in the wheelhouse an' wanted the course chynged two points. The old man, 'e humored 'im. Then, *boom!* Hup we went."

"I'll settle this," snarled the mate. "Break out the shotgun. It's in the port locker."

Several sailors shifted their positions

and the gun, a requisite item of the boat's equipment, was passed forward.

"Well, where are the shells?" demanded the mate. "Do you expect me to knock him on the head with this?"

"They ain't here, sir," one of the men replied, after another search.

"Oh, hell!" groaned the mate. "I took them out myself for my own gun. To shoot that damned bird when it first appeared."

Angrily he cast the useless gun into the sea and sat down.

"Well," he muttered at last, "let's get some sail set. It's only two hundred and fifty miles to the Faroes, and twice that to the mainland. But if we go south, we'll have to beat against the wind. This boat should make the coast of Norway in four or five days."

"Yeah," came a weak voice from the bow, "but will *we?*"

•

A week later a party of Norwegian bird hunters, clinging to the steep sides of a northern fjord, were surprised to see a loaded lifeboat heeling under a torn trysail, round a promontory that jutted out into the open sea and skim lightly across the blue water, without a soul at the tiller.

When, after the boat grated on a pebbly beach, none of her crew got out, they investigated. They found twenty-seven men in her, and not one alive. They had frozen to death where they sat, with every eye open and fixed on the sternsheets.

Nor was the tiller entirely unattended. Clinging to it with webbed feet, and frozen as stiff as the unfortunate sailors, was the body of a large, smoky white seagull.

From Misty Swamp

Wayne McCloud

By JIM KJELGAARD
Author of "Fish For a Dollar," "Where Wild Goats Drink," etc.

How to sit through a crisis, as demonstrated by that king of poachers Wayne McCloud. Or: meet me down where the ginseng grows

WAYNE McCLOUD got back to his house at dark. He ate supper, and spread the fifteen ginseng roots he had found that day on the window sill to dry. Tomorrow he'd hunt more ginseng on Tongue Mountain. He'd—

The door opened. A man came in and stood against the wall. Wayne looked at him incredulously. Then he bounded from the chair to throw his arms about the man's neck.

"Joey!" he yelled ecstatically. "Joey Oaks!"

Wayne had left the windows open because of the heat, but he drew the shades down. There was a reward of five hundred dollars on Joey Oaks' head, and at least one man in Dabbit Run would not be at all averse to collecting it. That man was Mike DeVere, Dabbit Run deputy of Lem Knowles, the Patten County game warden.

Joey Oaks, a tall young man with

very long legs and a face creased and burned by winds, storms, and sun, regarded the shade-pulling whimsically.

"I guess mebbe they'd still like to lay their hands on me?"

Wayne grinned. "Guess they would, Joey. They was mad as wet bees because you lit out without leavin' a forwardin' address."

Last year Wayne and Joey had been partners in a still. Joey had been surprised at the still by three revenue men, but had escaped because he was fast on his feet. He had hung around Misty Swamp until Wayne had raised three hundred dollars by selling two of Joey's hounds. Then Joey had struck north and Wayne hadn't heard of him since.

A week after Joey had gone, one of the revenue men had been found on a lonely trail with a bullet through his head and Joey was blamed for the murder.

WAYNE cooked sourdough biscuits, three trout he had been saving for his own breakfast, a great platter of bacon, a pot of coffee, pulled onions and radishes from his garden, and set it all in front of Joey.

There was enough food for two men, but there was none left when Joey finished. He sighed, sitting contentedly back in his chair.

"Ain't had such grub in a long time. I left the train in Morelands, and been bushin' it through the woods since. How's Dabbit Run been treatin' you, Wayne?"

Joey Oaks' eyes were the eager ones of a man anxious for news of home.

Far into the night Wayne told of all the countless big and little things that had made life in Dabbit Run since Joey had left. Joey interrupted only with nods or short questions, and at last Wayne was out of news.

"Now let's hear about you, Joey," he said. "How'd you get out of Dabbit Run?"

"Easy. I hung in the woods to Morelands and took the train north."

"What kind of country did you find?"

Joey told of great wildernesses, nameless rivers and creeks, lost lakes, fierce blizzards, trapping, and the hunting of deer, bear, moose, and caribou. Wayne's eyes shone. He had often dreamed of some day visiting such places himself.

"Gee," he sighed, "I'd like to hunt some of them moose an' caribou. How much does it cost to go there, Joey?"

"Nothin' except your fare. I could meet you at Point Binton and take you into the woods. They got good game wardens up there, but they ain't no smarter'n they ever were here. Mebbe you'd like to spend a winter with me, Wayne?"

Mebbe I would. Mebbe next winter."

"That'll be good," Joey's eyes roved the room and found the roots. "Shangin' huh? How goes shangin' this year?"

"So-so. I got that on Broad Mountain an' the point of land in Misty Swamp. There was ten ginseng plants on the point an' I got every one."

"That's good." Joey hesitated a bit and said finally," Wayne, I ain't come fifteen hundred miles for nothin'. I managed to get a mailin' address through to my sister, and when I left the trap lines there was a letter for me at Point Binton. She told me about the murder charge.

"But she says also that Bill needs an operation, and young Billy ain't able to go to school on account he's got to do the farm work because his dad can't. That right?"

"Yeh, that's right," Wayne said slowly.

Joey nodded. "That's bad, and Sue's about all the family I got. I didn't want

to send her any money because I didn't want anything comin' down here that might be traced back.

"But I brought six hundred dollars with me. It's cached back in Misty Swamp; I left it there in case of trouble. Will you meet me at the chestnut stub by the swamp tomorrow, get it, and take it to her?

"I don't want to go near Bill's farm myself. Somebody might see me, and it would bring Bill and Sue extra trouble."

"Sure I'll do it," Wayne agreed.

"Okay," Joey said, rising. "I'll lay out in the hills the rest of the night and tomorrow. I'll see you at the stub tomorrow afternoon, four o'clock sharp."

"So long an' good luck," Wayne called. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Wayne slept until daylight. He went out on the porch, washed at the pump, and his glance roved casually about the house. It stopped by the open window, almost left it, then shot back to fasten on the ground beneath the window.

Wayne gasped. Then he went over to examine the ground carefully. The earth beneath the window was soft, had plainly marked footprints in it.

Somebody had crouched there while Wayne and Joey talked last night!

Wayne sat down on the edge of the porch. There couldn't be much doubt about who the prowler was. Mike De Vere, seeing the light in Wayne's house late at night, had come over to find what it was all about. Mike lacked the nerve to try and take Joey himself.

But it meant that, when Wayne went to the chestnut stub at four o'clock, there would be men hidden in the brush around it. He could not warn Joey: Dabbit Run was a big country and Joey might be anywhere in it.

But Joey was too good a man to let rot in jail. He and Wayne had poached together, run the hills together, had a still together, trapped together . . .

Wayne's eyes lit on a pile of twenty steel fox traps. Joey always had a nice knack for trapping foxes.

AT QUARTER past two, carrying a short-bladed, short-handled pick and a gunny sack, Wayne started over Duck Mountain. The weather was as hot as it was yesterday, but it was not that alone which made Wayne sweat.

Wayne came to the top of the hill, and looked down on the swamp at the foot of it. Joey Oaks was probably in the swamp now watching the chestnut stub and waiting for four o'clock.

Wayne came to where the trail branched, one branch continuing down the top of the mountain and one going to Misty Swamp. He paused a second. A bad case of nerves was riding him, and he'd better shake that. Lem Knowles, who beyond a doubt would be one of the men around the stub, could tell a lot by a man's face.

Lem Knowles—Wayne straightened. Lem had run him down a dozen times, had put him in holes almost impossible to wriggle out of; but Wayne always had wriggled out.

This was no different from any of those other times. Wayne felt differently about it because it involved somebody besides himself. Joey Oakes' freedom hinged on how Wayne acted now.

But he could do all right. He had bucked Lem Knowles too many times to be bluffed out of doing it again.

Wayne swung down the trail almost to the swamp and turned aside to crash through the brush to the stub. He climbed the mound on which the stub had grown, and stood directly in front of it peering across the swamp.

Wayne fumbled in the sack, and then about the stub. He moved out to sit

beside the stub, still peering across the swamp.

Then, from the rhododendron brush growing about the mound, a cold voice said slowly;

"Just sit right there. Any sudden move you make is pretty likely to be your last."

That wasn't Lem Knowles' voice. But Wayne had expected Lem to have somebody with him. He spoke from the corner of his mouth.

"What you want to gunwhip me for? I didn't do nothin'."

"Don't try it and we'll get along fine," the voice assured him. "Just sit tight."

Bluff, Wayne decided. Nobody shot anybody else down in cold blood—he hoped. But he might as well let them think their bluff was working.

He stared at the narrow point of land jutting into the swamp. Joey would come across that instead of through the woods because, if there was any slip-up and he had to duck back suddenly, there were fifty ways he could leave the swamp and hide his trail.

The minute Wayne saw Joey on that part of the point that was visible through the stunted trees in the swamp, he'd yell. He'd see Joey before those lying in the rhododendrons did, and at least Joey would have a fighting chance.

Wayne sat perfectly still beside the stub and the day wore on. He drew his knees up, rested his elbows on them, and his chin on his hands. The sun sank lower. Little chills chased one another up and down Wayne's spine.

The minutes crawled by. Wayne's neck was rigid, his eyes big. Nothing moved in the swamp, not even a bird. The sun shone now only on the peaks of the hills.

Then a deer came up to the edge of the swamp and started feeding. It turned back to the swamp and bounded away as Wayne's breath was expelled in a long, heaving blast.

Joey Oaks wasn't coming.

LEM KNOWLES, Mike DeVere, and a cold-faced man Wayne had never seen before came up out of the rhododendrons a half-hour later. The sun had gone behind the hills now, the first faint shade of twilight began to enfold Dabbit Run. Wayne turned to Lem Knowles, surprised and angry.

"You! What's the idea keepin' a man sittin this way for three hours? I got a notion to take a poke at all three of you!"

Lem Knowles said, "Take it easy, Wayne. Where's Joey Oakes?"

"Joey Oakes? How should I know? I ain't seen him in a year!"

"You have too!" Mike DeVere protested. "He was in your house last night. I heard you talking.."

Wayne shook his head wearily. "Mike, some day you're goin' just a step too far with me."

"What are you doing here?" the cold-faced man asked.

"If it's any of your business," Wayne said sarcastically, "I'm huntin' ginseng. An' now, if you three are done playin' cowboy, I'll go about findin' some."

"Go ahead," Lem Knowles said. "We'll just walk along with you."

Wayne shrugged. "Suit yourself. But it ain't me that's needin' a nurse maid. It's you."

Wayne walked down to the swamp and out on the point of land. A hundred yards out, where the trees hid the point, he saw a ginseng plant. The leaves around it were a little mussed, but a deer could have mussed them. The plant was a little wilted, but the hot sun could have accounted for that.

Wayne knelt beside it, plucked the

stem and leaves, and threw them away. With his pick he exposed the root, scooped it up with both hands, and dropped it into the gunny sack.

Wayne stood up. "Well, you satisfied? Things is comin' to a nice pass when a man can't even do a little shangin' without havin' a passel of cops an' such on his tail!"

Lem Knowles scratched his head. The picture wasn't quite complete, but where the missing pieces were he didn't know and never would. Wayne had won again.

"I'm satisfied," he said.

Wayne looked once at the stub that the other had no eyes for now. The steel fox trap Wayne had hung on the stub was in plain sight if they had cared to look. Joey Oaks, coming through the swamp, had seen and known that here was a trap where none should be.

And, if Lem had cared to look in the gunny sack, besides the ginseng root he could have found six hundred dollar bills. Joey Oaks was not the man to come fifteen hundred miles to help anybody without doing it. Wayne had said last night that he had taken all the ginseng off the point of land.

You could depend on Joey Oaks, knowing this, to bury the money there and mark it with a ginseng plant.

GUNS ON FIRE

Terror by night and a drygulch by day—a little thing for Vern Colton, when he hit the Blue Hills country. Yet for this trigger-nerved Texan who lived by the snap of a gun-hammer, his new job for Triangle-C held enemies harder to face than a scatter-gun's mouth. Don't miss this roaring new serial of the roaring old West, by

JACK BYRNE

RAJAH BILL

Pleased to meet you, Maharajah; I'm Bill Miles—just call me Bill—and if there's any little thing I could do, like straightening out what you call the Hindu caste system, why I'd sure be glad to give you a hand. You got a nice place here, only knives make me mad. . . . A colorful and entertaining novelet by

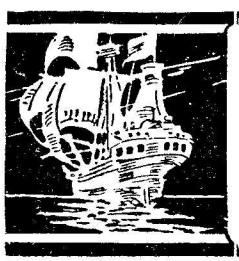
LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

MIRACLE ON MAIN STREET

People talked, a little child had a dream, and a whole town went crazy for one day. There was weeping and gnashing of teeth for the sinful; and virtue—for the first and only time—was immediately triumphant. The record is here in a unique short novelet by

ROBERT ARTHUR

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JULY 6



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ONE of the fascinating (and mildly disturbing) things about editing ARGOSY is the realization that we're constantly being read and checked by experts.

Do we but publish a story involving the collecting of pre-canceled stamps, the care and feeding of penguins, the proper incision for an appendectomy, or the best way to whip up a bouillabaisse—we know that in some corner of the world where English is read, an informed student of the subject will be looking sharply to see whether we (including us and the author) have got our facts right.

Which is all to the good. It keeps us alert and slightly nervous, but we like it. Makes for our education and the betterment of the magazine.

For some reason, Charles Marquis Warren has smoked out more connoisseur-critics in one fell swoop than any author we can remember. And on a variety of subjects, too. The matter of his handling of English was taken up here a few weeks ago; now it's military nomenclature and ethnography.

Thus a former ARGOSY salesman now identified with Co. 785, V. C. C. (and further to confess our lack of scholarship, we don't know what *that* means):

JESSE Y. COLLIVER

Shades of Johnny O'Shea and other yellow-legs of his ilk. Could they but have command of Chas. M. Warren he'd be on stable-police the rest of his hitch if he ever made reference to a *bugler* in a *company* of Cavalry.

Sir, I beg to report that a *troop* of *cavalry* is furnished with a *trumpeter*. And it is customary to refer to a private as a trooper.

I've been reading ARGOSY since I peddled it in 1910 or 11 and this is the worst bone-head I ever saw in ARGOSY.

May I suggest that "Bugles Are for Soldiers" be retitled, "Trumpets Are for Troopers."

N. B.—Even though Warren isn't up on his army language, ARGOSY is still tops with me. LAKE ITASCA, MINN.

Well—the best we can do now is to entitle this issue of Argonotes, "Blushes Are for Boners." And to murmur delighted thanks for that last nice pat on the head.

Now here's an even more complex problem; and we turn it over forthwith, lock, stock and barrel, to

CARL SCHMIDT

Congratulations upon your publishing Charles Warren's fine epic of Indian warfare, "Bugles Are for Soldiers". Truly, it is one of the finest I have ever read; and very well written except for its climax.

However, I am sorry the author selected the Apaches for the villains—especially because his handling of them in the latter part of his tale had much more story-formula in it than literary license should allow. What might have been a great historical romance became merely another fine adventure story. You get them almost a dime a dozen in ARGOSY.

My complaints? First, the name "Apache" is of Yuman origin—and means "enemy". It is rather doubtful if any Apache chieftain could or would gather Sioux, or any other tribes to him.

Secondly, the tortures hinted at, while horrible, are probably more Plains Indian than Apachean. *Their* divertissements had the civilized "polish" of three hundred years' contact with white men.

Thirdly, the time of the story is quite indefinite, but three great war chiefs ruled the Apache tribes during that period most probable (1865-86): Mangas Coloradas, Cochise, and Geronimo.

The first was assassinated in his jail-cell by U. S. soldiers, the second died of natural causes,

and the tired Geronimo finally surrendered and died in exile, far from the mountains of Arizona, Sonora and New Mexico.

It would have been much better to have had Deesohay escape, and so allow for the inference that he was later to become internationally known under the dread appellation of—Geronimo!

I look forward to seeing a sequel to the story however; the characters of Lt. Reardon and Jerry Kitchen are very well drawn and should be allowed to live again. But, please, Mr. Warren, if you must write about the Apache—a tribe that ravaged a territory the size of Europe—again, do yourself the favor of reading up on them. It will be well worth it.

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

If there are any further arguments about the facts in this case, we leave them up to the readers. Just one thing, though:

About the Apache divertissements. We just got through reading a lot of dispatches from Belgium and France; and it does seem to us that the "civilized polish" arising from three hundred years of contact with white men is purely academic. White men being the way they are, we think either Apaches or Plains Indians might be real nice and friendly.

And maybe that's what Mr. Schmidt had in mind.

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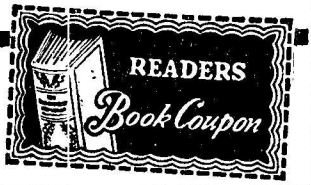

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