JULY 20

10¢

Fast-Moving Novelet by F. R. Pierce

# ARGOSY

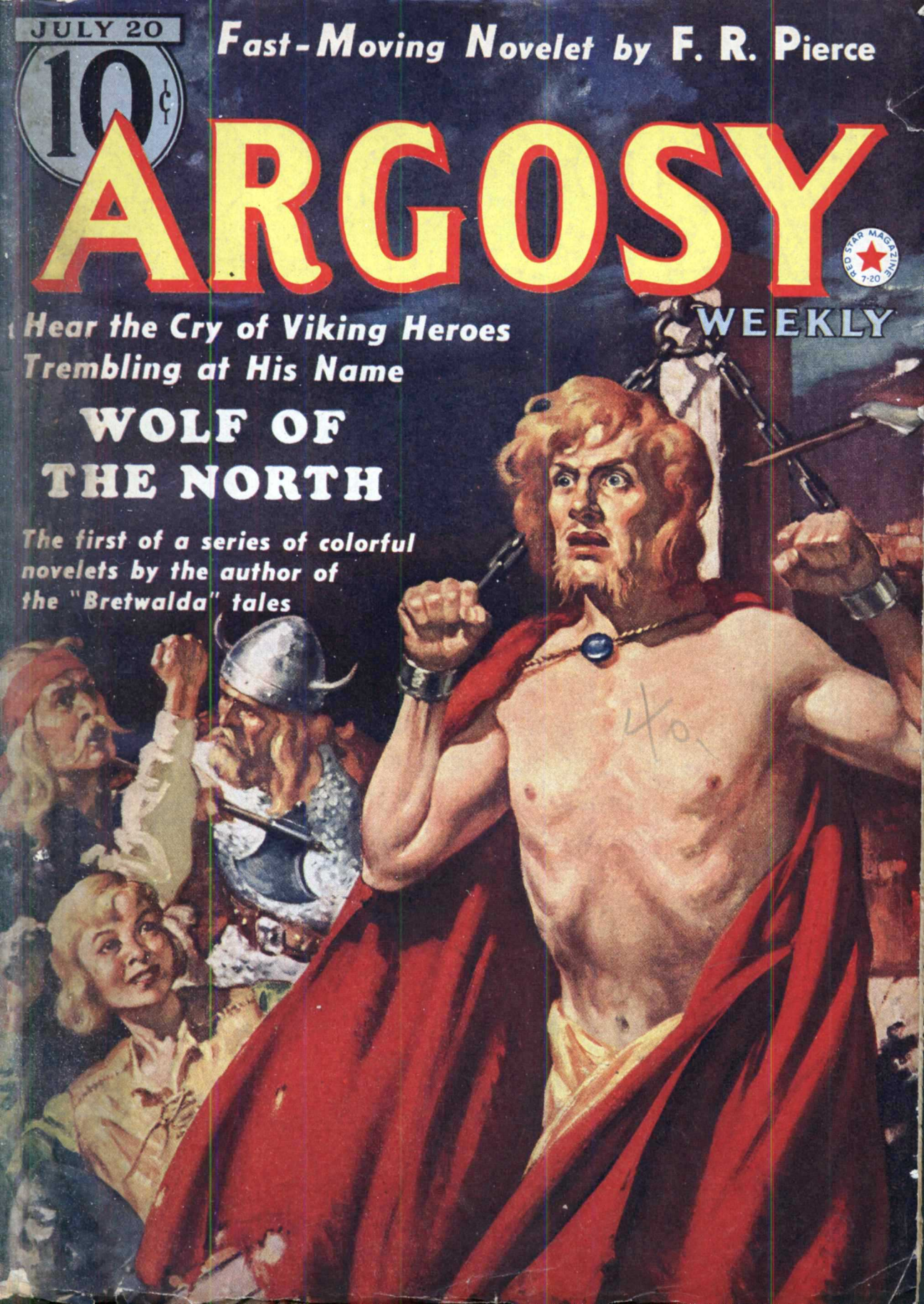
RED STAR MAGAZINE 7-20

WEEKLY

Hear the Cry of Viking Heroes Trembling at His Name

## WOLF OF THE NORTH

The first of a series of colorful novelets by the author of the "Bretwalda" tales




# Important Notice

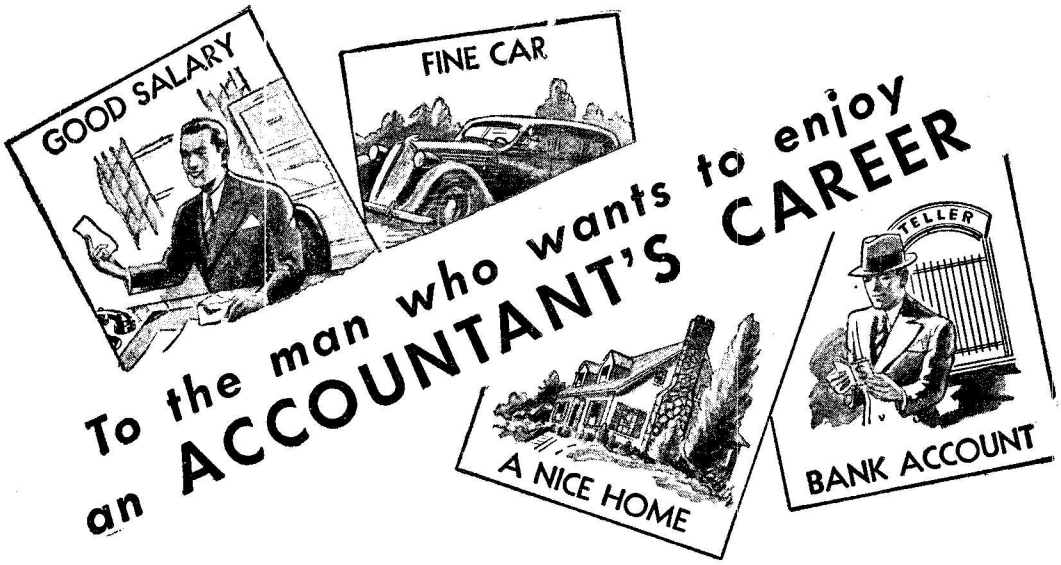
**New standard front-cover design for ARGOSY**

This is a reproduction of the *new cover design* which becomes a *permanent feature* of this famous weekly of *quality fiction*, effective with the

**AUGUST 3rd ISSUE**
**on sale July 23rd**

Watch for it in beautiful full color at all news stands

**Ten cents per copy**




IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $2,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

As you go along, you absorb the principles of Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Statistical Control, Organization, Management and Finance.

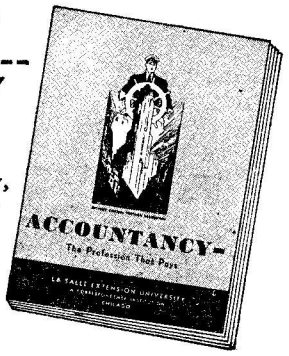
Your progress is as speedy as you care to make it—depending on your own eagerness to learn and the time you spend in study.

Will recognition come? The only answer, as you know, is that success *does* come to the man who is really *trained.* It's possible your employers will notice your improvement in a very few weeks or months. Indeed, many LaSalle graduates have paid for their training—with increased earnings—before they have completed it! For accountants, who are trained in organization and management, are the executives of the future.

## Write For This Free Book

For your own good, don't put off investigation of *all* the facts. Write for our free 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays." It'll prove that accountancy offers brilliant futures to those who aren't afraid of serious home study. Send us the coupon *now.*

**Over 1850 Certified Public Accountants among LaSalle alumni**




# LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

## A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

4101 S. Michigan Ave., Dept. 758-HR, Chicago, Ill.

I want to be an accountant. Send me, without cost or obligation, the 48-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays," and full information about your accountancy training program.

*Name*.....

*Address*..... *City*.....

*Position*..... *Age*.....

# ARGOSY

## America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 300 CONTENTS FOR JULY 20, 1940 Number 5



Cover by Marshall Frantz
*Illustrating Wolf of the North*

*This magazine is on sale every Wednesday*

*A* **RED STAR** *Magazine*

**THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.**
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President & Treasurer WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., Secretary
PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE, 111 Rue Réaumur
LONDON: THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD., 3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4


Don Diavolo

# DON DIAVOLO

*[THE SCARLET WIZARD]*

## *and the baffling case of*

# "DEATH OUT OF THIN AIR"

**Don Diavolo** can make an elephant disappear with the greatest of ease—***and when a super-crimester learns the trick of invisibility—using it to commit murder—only the magician's mind of Don Diavolo can cope with the killer.***

Again the **Scarlet Wizard** summons all his knowledge of magic as he attempts to solve a series of daring crimes that puzzle the police.

***"Death Out of Thin Air" is a Diavolo mystery you just must read!***

A complete novel in the

***AUGUST ISSUE OF***

# RED ★ STAR MYSTERY

***NOW AT THE STANDS*** . . . . . ***10¢***

*If your dealer can't supply you send 10¢ to 280 Broadway, N. Y. C., and a copy will be mailed to you.*

# Flush Poisons From Kidneys and Stop Getting Up Nights

**Be Healthier, Happier — Live Longer**

When you can get for 35 cents a safe, efficient and harmless stimulant and diuretic that should flush from your kidneys the waste matter, poisons and acid that are now doing you harm, why continue to break your restful sleep by getting up through the night?

**Don't be an EASY MARK and accept a substitute—Ask for Gold Medal Haarlem Oil Capsules — right from Haarlem in Holland. GET GOLD MEDAL—the original—the genuine. Look for the Gold Medal on the box—35 cents.**

Other symptoms of weak kidneys and irritated bladder may be backache, puffy eyes, shifting pains, burning or scanty passage. Don't accept a substitute.

---

JUST OUT!


**PROFESSIONAL CARTOONING**

Earn while you learn with our amazing easy way. 35 lesson course on this very enjoyable and profitable art. Text and step-by-step illustrations tell everything. Send $1.00 ( DEPT. W. S. )

$1 COMPLETE COURSE

PROFESSIONAL PUBLISHERS, Inc.
98 AVENUE L . NEWARK, N. J.

---

**TRAIN FOR Electricity**

**I'll Finance Your Tuition**

Learn by Doing, in 12 weeks, in big shops of Coyne—not home study or correspondence. Earn while learning. Free employment service after graduation. Write for details of my Pay after Graduation Plan and Free book.

**COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL, Dept. BO-52**
**500 South Paulina Street - - Chicago, Illinois**

---

**HAY-FEVER** *Quick Relief*

**Clarke's New Discovery Guaranteed.**
**Prevents and relieves Suffering without medicine or injections. Send 3¢ stamp for details. Prove it yourself!**

CLARKE RESEARCH LABORATORY
363-DN. E. 76th Street, Miami, Florida

---

**When you want *good* fiction look for the magazines with this hall mark of quality**

RED STAR MAGAZINE

**AT ALL FIRST-CLASS NEWSSTANDS!**

---

# GUARANTEED TIRES!

**FREE! LANTERN With Every 2 Tires ordered**

Complete with batteries and newest type reflector bulb. Ready for instant use. Strong, steady light. Useful everywhere. Order now.

**GOODYEAR · GOODRICH FIRESTONE · U.S. and Other Standard Makes**

**WORLD'S LOWEST TIRE PRICES**

$2.15 29x4.40-21

Thousands of American customers can vouch for the **long, hard service** given by our **Standard Brand** reconditioned tires, serviceably repaired with high-grade materials and rigidly inspected by tire experts before shipping. **24 years' Experience** enables us to quote **lowest prices** with **legal agreement** to replace at ½ price any tire that fails to give complete satisfaction. Tires returned must be prepaid; prices quoted and replacements fob Chicago

**EVERY TIRE GUARANTEED**

**BALLOON TIRES**

| Size Rim | Tires | Tubes |
|---|---|---|
| 29x4.40-21 | $2.15 | $1.05 |
| 29x4.50-20 | 2.35 | 1.05 |
| 30x4.50-21 | 2.40 | 1.15 |
| 28x4.75-19 | 2.45 | 1.25 |
| 29x4.75-20 | 2.50 | 1.25 |
| 29x5.00-19 | 2.85 | 1.25 |
| 30x5.00-20 | 2.85 | 1.25 |
| 5.25-17 | 2.90 | 1.35 |
| 28x5.25-18 | 2.90 | 1.35 |
| 29x5.25-19 | 2.95 | 1.35 |
| 30x5.25-20 | 2.95 | 1.35 |
| 31x5.25-21 | 3.25 | 1.35 |
| 5.50-17 | 3.35 | 1.40 |
| 28x5.50-18 | 3.35 | 1.40 |
| 29x5.50-19 | 3.35 | 1.45 |
| 6.00-17 | 3.40 | 1.40 |
| 30x6.00-18 | 3.40 | 1.40 |
| 31x6.00-19 | 3.40 | 1.45 |
| 32x6.00-20 | 3.45 | 1.55 |
| 33x6.00-21 | 3.65 | 1.55 |
| 32x6.50-20 | 3.75 | 1.75 |
| 6.00-16 | 3.75 | 1.40 |

**REGULAR CORD TIRES**

| Size | Tires | Tubes | Size | Tires | Tubes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 30x3½ | $2.35 | $0.95 | 33x4½ | $3.45 | $1.45 |
| 31x4 | 2.95 | 1.25 | 34x4½ | 3.45 | 1.45 |
| 32x4 | 2.95 | 1.25 | 30x5 | 3.65 | 1.65 |
| 33x4 | 2.95 | 1.25 | 33x5 | 3.75 | 1.75 |
| 34x4 | 3.25 | 1.35 | 35x5 | 3.95 | 1.75 |
| 32x4½ | 3.35 | 1.45 | | | |

**HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES**
(High Pressure)

| Size | Tires | Tubes | Size | Tires | Tubes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 30x5 | $4.25 | $1.95 | 34x7 | $10.95 | $4.65 |
| 33x5 | 3.95 | 1.75 | 38x7 | 10.95 | 4.65 |
| 34x5 | 4.25 | 2.25 | 36x8 | 11.45 | 4.95 |
| 32x6 | 7.95 | 2.95 | 40x8 | 13.25 | 4.95 |
| 36x6 | 9.95 | 4.45 | | | |

**TRUCK BALLOON TIRES**

| Size | Tires | Tubes | Size | Tires | Tubes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6.00-20 | $3.75 | $1.65 | 7.50-20 | $6.95 | $3.75 |
| 6.50-20 | 4.45 | 1.95 | 8.25-20 | 8.95 | 4.95 |
| 7.00-20 | 5.95 | 2.95 | 9.00-20 | 10.95 | 5.65 |
| | | | 9.75-20 | 13.95 | 6.45 |

**ALL OTHER SIZES** **DEALERS WANTED**

**SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT** on each tire ordered. ($3.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct **5 per cent** if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW — GUARANTEED —

**PERRY-FIELD TIRE & RUBBER CO.**
**2328-30 S. Michigan Av., Dept. 4601-A, Chicago, Ill.**

---

# FREE TRIAL OFFER

**NEW REMINGTON NOISELESS PORTABLE**

**10-Day Free Trial Offer**

AS LOW AS **10¢ A DAY**

AT LAST! The famous Remington NOISELESS Portable plus Carrying Case is yours for only a small deposit and terms as little as ten cents a day. Brand new. Not rebuilt. Standard keyboard and every modern feature. Free typing instruction book. 10-Day free trial. You don't risk a penny. WE PAY ALL SHIPPING CHARGES. Act now! Write Remington Rand Inc., Dept. 145-7 465 Washington St., Buffalo, N.Y.

---


# $1260 to $2100 Year

**TO START**

**Men—Women**

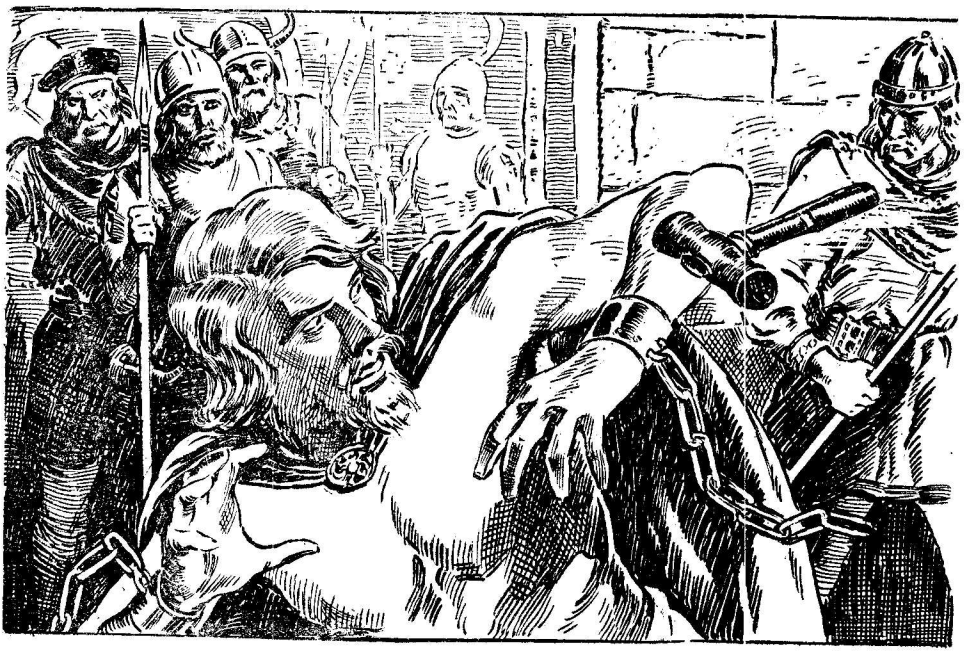
**Get ready immediately**

**Full particulars FREE**
**Mail coupon**

**See the N. Y. World's Fair**

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. F251, Rochester, N. Y.
Rush FREE list of U. S. Government big pay dependable JOBS, 32-page book describing salaries, hours, work. Tell me how to qualify for one of these jobs.
Name .....
Address .....



# Wolf of the North

**Vandal, drink deep from Odin's cup. Thus you steal the strength and wisdom of the gods; you brave their curse. Thus you are assured of battle and suffering —and a certain glory. . . . Beginning an exciting new series of novelets**

By PHILIP KETCHUM

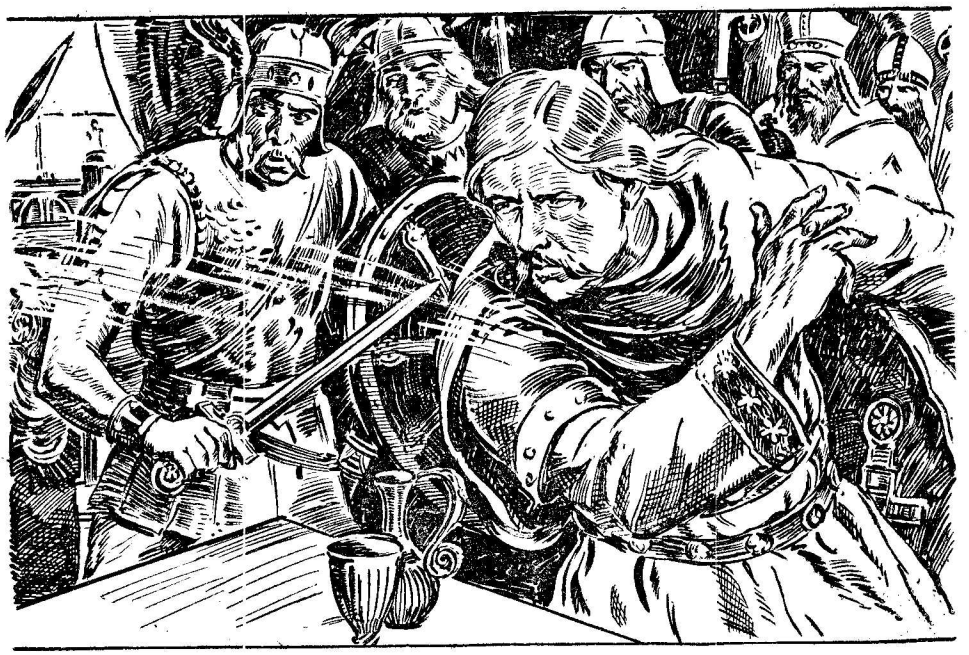
Author of "The Course of Empire," "England, Farewell," etc.

I

TOR GUTHRUM, the Vandal, sagged in his chains in the market place at Skiringssalr on the Vic. He hung there as one who was dead. The taunts of the village boys and the stones they hurled at him brought no response. His *sark* had been torn away and a score of wounds showed on his once broad chest. Some were still bleeding, though it was a marvel that there was any blood left in his body.

For thirty days and nights he had been bound to the stake there in the village. He had had no food or water since he had been brought here, a captive.

In mid-afternoon a group of warriors left the great hall of Jarl Uugi and walked down toward the market place. King Harald Haarfagre, who in 872, ten years before, had made himself master of all Norway, led them, and at his side strode Rolv Haarek, leader of the expedition to Orkneyjar which had captured Tor Guthrum. A tall, broad-shouldered man was Rolv Haarek, coarse and heavy of feature. A coat of ring mail covered him from chest to knee and over it he wore a purple



Straight at the Vandal, King Harald cast Thor's hammer

cloak. A bull-horned helmet was on his head.

"He cannot last much longer," Haarek muttered.

The king shrugged. Fair-haired and sharp of eye, he was fully as large a man as Haarek.

"What matters it how long he lives if he serves our purpose?" he growled in answer.

As the group from the great hall reached the market place guards cleared the taunting crowd of boys away from the prisoner and the king and Haarek, followed by their companions, drew close to the stake which held him erect.

"Tor," called the king. "Think ye that Bran Dougal will still come? Believe ye still in the Wolf of the North?"

Tor Guthrum lifted his head. His matted red hair and long, tangled beard framed colorless cheeks and lips which were cracked and dry. Only in the Vandal's eyes was there any spark of life, but the look there was as bold and as defiant as on the day he had been taken captive.

"Aye," said Tor Guthrum, and his voice was hardly more than a croak. "He will come. Beware, Harald Haarfagre, for Bran Dougal will strike as a storm from the north, nor can all your men stand against him."

The king laughed. "He will look well on yonder stake, next to you."

"Ye will never bind Bran Dougal to a stake," the Vandal answered. "Can ye catch and harnass the wind? Ye may call yourself master of all Norway, but ye will never be the ruler of men who prize their freedom."

Haarek stepped forward and slapped the Vandal across the face. Tor Guthrum's head dropped to his chest and a shudder passed over his body.

The king scowled. He stared out to the harbor. Far away on the horizon he could make out the speck of a sail. Near at hand were but a few light fishing craft. The *langskips* of his battle fleet had been beached and were housed in the boat sheds out of sight.

"The guards at the harbor have been warned what to do should Bran Dougal come?" he asked Haarek.

Haarek nodded. "They know what to do. Bran Dougal will have no trouble in reaching Skiringssalr. But to leave again may not be so simple."

"He commands five thousand men."

"We have twice that number here to greet them."

"No more daring sea rover has lived since the days of Ragnor Lodbrok. He must be slain, Haarek, or Norway will never be free."

"Ye mean," said Haarek quietly, "that he must be slain or your domination is threatened."

The king stiffened. He glanced sharply at Haarek.

"I meant no offense." Haarek laughed. "Have I not always done your bidding?"

The speck of sail on the horizon had grown larger. Harald Haarfagre watched it for a while but it soon became apparent that the approaching ship was only a small one and could not have held more than thirty men. Probably, the king decided, it was bringing some *jarl* from a neighboring coastal town who had heard that he was in Skiringssalr and who wanted to pay his respects to the ruler of all Norway.

THE light *skuta* moved swiftly over the glassy waters of the harbor, drawing ever closer to the thatch-roofed village of Skiringssalr. On the *lypting,* an elevated steering platform, stood a tall young man with sun-bronzed hair. Over his knee-length coat of mail he wore a cloak of crimson *baldakin,* fastened at the throat by a jeweled pin. A two-edged sword was sheathed at his waist. The young man's beard was reddish in color and was neatly trimmed. Above it was a tight-lipped mouth and eyes as coldly blue as a morning sky.

Near the young man stood the short, heavy-set figure of one who was older, who was scarred of face and keen of eye and whose forehead wore a deep frown. He reached out, now, and touching the younger man on the arm, said slowly, "Yon harbor is not the peaceful place it would seem, Bran. Ten thousand men could be hidden in and around the village."

Bran Dougal nodded. "Aye, Hallad. Could be hidden and probably are. Rolv Haarek knows that we will come. But even Haarek could not guess how."

Hallad's frown deepened. " 'Tis a wild plan ye have devised, Bran. Like as not, only death awaits us here."

A quick smile came to Bran Dougal's lips, breaking momentarily the stern look in his face. "Then, old friend," he said quietly, "we will meet again in Valhalla, the city of the Gods, where all men, surely, are free."

Hallad chuckled, pointed ahead to the shoreline. "Look. Already they make preparations to greet us."

There was a sudden and feverish anxiety in the harbor. Groups of armored men were crowding down to the waterfont. Swords and spears flashed in the sunlight, and from several of the boat sheds armored men were making ready to launch their boats.

"Perhaps they have already guessed who has come," said Bran slowly. "That there may be no mistake, bring me my shield, my helmet and ax from the chest."

Hallad turned away, and from his platform Bran Dougal looked down at the men in the rowing benches. Their faces showed no fear. Some were scowling, others were fingering their swords or axes with itching fingers.

A sudden pride in them swept over Bran Dougal. Some men, there were, who wondered at his daring exploits, but the full explanation lay here in the twenty who had volunteered to come with him into the harbor of Skiringssalr. Anything was possible with men who were unafraid.

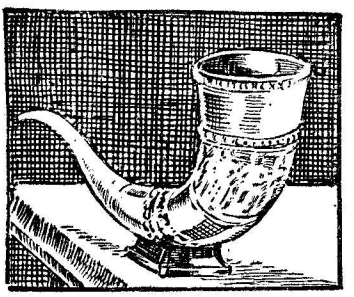
A small landing boat was made ready and Hallad brought him his helmet, ax and shield. Bran Dougal stepped down from the steering platform. He said to Hallad, "Ye will do as we planned." Then he swung lightly over the side of the ship and into the landing boat. Two of his men started poling it toward the shore.

A GUARD from the harbor carried the news to the great hall of Jarl Ungi. "He has come!" the man shouted. "He and twenty of his men in a light *skuta*. Even now he is making ready to land."

"Who has come?" Haarek growled, striding up to the guard.

"Bran Dougal!"

"In a *skuta?*" Haarek cried. "And with only twenty men? Impossible. He wouldn't dare."



The harbor guard backed away from Haarek, moistened his lips. "But—but it is Bran Dougal. I saw him once, in Bohnslan. I—"

The king joined Haarek and Jarl Ungi, old and deformed, but long a powerful figure in this part of the country, touched Haarek on the arm.

"'Tis some trick," Ungi muttered. "He is a sly one, that Bran Dougal."

"A dead one, now," Haarek said harshly, reaching a hand to his sword.

The king shook his head. "Nay, Haarek. Take him alive."

"And chain him to the stake beside Tor?"

"Bring him here first. I would learn his plans. He has become almost a god to those who resist me. I would not only break him but his followers as well. I have heard enough talk of freedom."

Rolv Haarek pushed his way to the door of the great hall and hurried to the harbor. The *skuta* had anchored close to shore and a small boat had put out from it. In that boat stood a crimson-cloaked figure. Sunlight glistened from his golden helmet, marked with the raven's wings and on his left arm the man wore a blood-red shield. He carried an ax, long-handled and wide of blade.

Haarek shoved his way through the crowd of warriors on the shore. "Leave him to me," he ordered grimly. "It is the king's order that he be taken alive so that he may be left at the stake with Tor."

"And his men?" someone asked.

"Make them captive also. Bind them and bring them to the great hall."

Several warriors slipped away to carry that command to those who were launching ships to ride out to the *skuta*. Others kept their eyes on the small boat which was bringing Bran Dougal slowly to the shore.

As the keel of the boat touched the sand, Bran Dougal stepped over the side. His bold glance passed over the faces of those who had crowded forward, stopped as it came to rest on Haarek.

He moved out of the ankle deep water, let a faint smile touch his lips and said quietly, "So we meet again, Haarek. I regret that I was away from Orkneyjar when ye went there."

Haarek laughed. "And what of your men, Bran Dougal. Have they left ye?"

"Nay. They are in the ship, as many as I thought it necessary to bring."

There was insolence in Bran Dougal's tone as he made that remark. Haarek's hand went to his sword, then fell away.

"I have come for Tor Guthrum," Bran Dougal added bluntly.

There were those in the crowd who laughed at those words and some man, growing suddenly bold, shouted: "Aye, Vandal! And we have a stake ready for you, too."

Bran's gaze didn't leave Haarek's face. "Where is Tor?" he demanded.

Haarek's lips cracked in a sneer. "Come," he invited. "I will show ye."

Bran Dougal moved forward and the crowd of warriors parted to let him through, then formed around him as he moved away from the beach. Most of the men had bared their swords and all of them seemed amused at what was happening. Bran glanced neither to the right or left. He seemed unconcerned at the cordon

which surrounded him. His ax rested lightly on his shoulder and his step was firm.

In the market place the men stopped and those standing near the chained Vandal drew aside so that Bran could see him. Save for the hair and beard, Bran Dougal would never have recognized the man who hung there as Tor Guthrum. A spasm of anger crossed his face.

He sucked in his breath, stepped forward and said slowly: "I have come for you, Tor. It is I, Bran Dougal, who is speaking."

There was no sign from the Vandal, no indication that he had heard.

"King Harald is at the great hall of Jarl Ungi," said Haarek. "Perhaps ye would like to see him."

"Aye," said Bran. "Lead me to this man who tramples on the rights of others, who would rule the whole world."

The procession moved on up the hill away from the market place. Back on the shore, the men who had come with Bran Dougal were being securely bound. It seemed a little strange that these Vandals had submitted without any struggle, but then, they had fallen into a trap and could have done nothing.

King Harald's warriors were jubilant. The greatly feared Bran Dougal had been taken. Tomorrow, surely, he would join Tor in the market place, and the strain they had been living under during the past thirty days would be relaxed.

## II

THE great hall of Jarl Ungi was wide and long and down the center space on an open hearth were blazing faggots. On spits above the fire, huge chunks of meat were being roasted for the evening meal. Down the two long sides of the room were tables and behind them benches for those of the court who had accompanied King Harald to Skiringssalr or who were the invited guests of Jarl Ungi.

At the far end of the room was a table on which were set casks of mead and near it another table was loaded with bowls of curds, platters of butter and hard-crusted bread. Slaves were huddled near those two tables, awaiting an order to serve the food.

Rich tapestries hid the bare log walls from view in all excepting a few places. Back of the high seat, midway down the hall, and back of the second high seat across from it, was a space for weapons. Axes, swords, spears, bows and sheaths of arrows. And circling the hall at close intervals, were blazing torches.

Bran Dougal followed Haarek into the great hall and down it to the high seat where King Harald awaited him. He walked not as a captive, but as a free man, still ignoring those who watched his every move, whose blades were ready to slash at him should he try to escape. And as he faced King Harald there was no change in his manner. His bearing was proud and he looked boldly, almost contemptuously, into the eyes of the man who had mastered all of Norway and who sought now to extend his rule to the islands of Orkneyjar.

Haarek moved up to the king's side and whispered into his ear. Bran caught his words. "His men have been taken," Haarek reported. "Even now they are being made to talk. I had thought that ye might have sport with this Vandal ere ye stake him with Tor Guthrum."

The king frowned. He leaned forward and said, "Ye are Bran Dougal of Orkneyjar?"

"Aye. So am I called," Bran answered.

"And ye would lead a revolt against me."

"Against any man who would rob others of the freedom to choose their own ruler."

"Why have ye come here?"

"To free Tor Guthrum."

"And think ye that we will let him go?"

Bran took a step forward. "Ye will let him go, Harald Haarfagre, or every town in all Norway shall feel of my sword. Ye name me Vandal and a vandal shall I be, such a vandal as the world has never known."

There was so much of bitterness in that threat, so much of passion, that some of the men standing close to Bran Dougal drew

away. Bran's lips twisted contemptuously. His eyes turned from side to side.

Harald Haarfagre came to his feet. "Ye would give orders to me?" he shouted. "Ye would tell the King of Norway what he must do?"

Bran Dougal laughed harshly. "Aye, and why not?" he cried. 'For in my right I am as much a king as you."

Harald Haarfagre's face grew purple with rage. "Seize him!" he shouted. "Bind his arms and legs with thongs."

A DOZEN hands laid hold of Bran Dougal. His ax was torn from his grasp and his shield from his arm. Despite his struggles he was borne to the floor. Heavy leather thongs were twisted around his body and were firmly tied and when his captors stepped away he could not move.

Harald Haarfagre, then, looked down at him and spat in his face. "Dog of a Vandal!" he roared. "By what manner did ye think to trick me? Where are your men? Answer, or by the cup of Odin my wolves will drink your blood."

Bran Dougal made no reply. The king drew a sword, lowered the point of it to his throat. "Speak, Vandal!" he ordered again. "What trick would ye try?"

Some one of the warriors, pushing his way through the crowd, caught Haarek by the arm and whispered into his ear. Haarek drew the king aside and for a moment the three men spoke together. Then a laugh burst from the king's throat and he swung back to look down at Bran Dougal.

"Not for nothing have they called ye the Wolf of the North," he said. "The scheme ye planned was worthy even of me but one of those who came with ye has betrayed it."

Bran frowned. "A lie."

"Was it a lie?" asked the king, "that your men have come another way and are hidden in the hills around Skiringssalr? Was it a lie that one who came with you on the *skuta* left the ship at the harbor entrance and swam to the shore; that it is his part to signal your men when ours are feasting your capture?

"Was it a lie that ye planned to be taken and brought here, just as has happened, and that ye thought we would grow drunk and careless in our celebration? Nay, Bran Dougal. Those are not lies."

There was a deep scowl on Bran's face. He tugged at his bonds. Harald Haarfagre turned to Haarek. "Ye say one of his men will lead ye to where the Vandals lie hidden?"

"Aye." Haarek nodded.

"Then begone!" barked the king. "Trap them in the hills. Let them feel the weight of honest swords."

Haarek shouted his orders and most of the men in the great hall followed him outside. A few remained, some to guard the Vandals who had been taken from Bran's ship and who were now lined up against the far wall of the hall.

Bran turned his head and looked that way. He noted that it was Hallad who was missing, Hallad who must have broken under torture and told the plan. He closed his eyes, drew a long, shuddering breath and did not again look toward his men.

Jarl Ungi ordered that the dinner be served and the score remaining in the great hall took places at the tables. A few women, wives or daughters of the members of the king's court, came in and joined the men. Slaves scurried back and forth with platters of food and flagons of mead or ale.

A tall, slender girl seated at the right hand of the king, drew Bran's attention. Her hair was long and had the sheen of silver. She was fair-skinned, deep of bosom and there was a quiet assurance about her which set her apart from the others.

It came to Bran suddenly that this must be Iduna, the Fair, Iduna, favorite daughter of Harald Haarfagre. He had heard many tales of her beauty and now he could believe them.

Over and over, Harald Haarfagre told the story of Bran's plan, laughing as he repeated it and glancing contemptuously at the bound figure which lay before the high seat.

A *hirdscald,* called in to sing a story, improvised a tale of the capture and death

of Bran Dougal, Wolf of the North. Bran noticed that Iduna the Fair did not like the *hirdscald's* story. Several times he caught her looking at him, but he couldn't read the expression in her glance.

QUITE abruptly, then, a cry of alarm sounded from the doorway to the great hall, followed by the clashing of arms and hoarse shouts. The noise swelled in volume, heightened by screams of pain, by cries of terror and by the wild wolf-yell of the Vandals.

Harald Haarfagre jerked to his feet, his startled glance turning to the end of the hall. Men from the outside had forced their way through the doors, were racing forward. From here and there in the hall guards charged to meet them. Jarl Ungi began shouting orders in a high, thin voice. The king drew his sword, clambered over the table, waded into the battle. He was shouting for Haarek, for others of his men.

Bran Dougal rolled over so that he could watch the battle. He strained at his bonds, but they held him fast.

"Is not this the way ye planned it?" asked a quiet voice in his ear. "Did ye not hope to send the warriors from the village and then to bring your wolves down on it?"

It was Iduna the Fair. She was kneeling at his side and in her hand was a long-bladed knife.

Bran Dougal laughed. "Aye, and the plan has succeeded. Not only are my wolves here at the great hall. They are in the market place. And by now Tor Guthrum has been released from his bonds and carried aboard a ship in the harbor.

"Strike, Iduna. It is not Bran Dougal who keeps alive the revolt against your father. I am but a warrior. It is Tor Guthrum whom men follow."

The knife in the girl's hand slashed out at Bran's body. But its blade did not touch his flesh. Instead, the severed thongs fell from his arms and Iduna's hand thrust the knife into his grasp.

"Ye are clever, Wolf of the North," Iduna said swiftly. "But others are clever, too. Not all of the men my father had here followed Haarek into the hills. Ye had best not delay too long if ye would escape."

Bran leaped to his feet. More of the king's men were coming into the hall through the rear door, re-enforcing the guards who still did battle at the entrance, slowly driving the Vandals back.

The sound of a horn came from the direction of the harbor. Bran gave a triumphant shout. That first horn blast meant that Tor Guthrum was safely on board a ship and that the ship was leaving the harbor. A second blast, from the leader of the attacking party here, would signal that he and the others who had come on the *skuta* had been released and that the Vandals could flee to the hidden cove where they had left their boats.

HE RACED across the great hall to where his companions stood, cut the bonds of one man and handed him the knife. "Free the others," he ordered. "Then out by the back way. Find Bjarne and order him to blow the second blast."

One of the warriors coming in through the back door caught sight of him and with a shout charged his way. Bran leaped aside from a slashing sword stroke. He grasped the man's wrist, jerked him off balance, tore the sword from his hand. It was a heavy blade and long and the feel of it was good.

Bran Dougal hurried to that door through which new warriors had been streaming. His broad body filled it and the slashing sword kept others back. His men gathered behind him, having taken arms from the walls of the great hall.

They now fought their way outside, through the private quarters of Jarl Ungi and to the street. A dozen fires blazed in the village and the night was hideous with sound. Soldiers who had followed Haarek into the hills came racing back to the battle.

"Find Bjarne!" Bran cried. "Tell him to blow the second blast."

Several of his men turned toward the

front of the great hall and a moment later a second horn blast rose above the screams of the wounded and the hoarse yells of the Vandals.

Bran Dougal laughed then. "To the hills, my wolves," his voice roared. "To the hills and to the open sea and to a life of freedom wherever ye will."

The wolf-cries were suddenly hushed and from all parts of the village the Vandals turned to flee. The victory they had sought had been won. This was no expedition for loot or pillage. Such raids would come later as they struck again and again at the man who would be king.

Bran Dougal turned to run with the rest. He didn't see the shadowy figure which hurried after him. He hardly felt the blow which hurled him to the earth. In one moment he was racing after his companions seeking the safety of the hills. In another, the scene before him dissolved into nothingness and all consciousness left him.

## III

THE chains cut cruelly into his wrists. Short, and fastened above his head to the iron stake in the market place, they held his hands shoulder high and gave him little chance to move his arms. An agonizing stiffness had settled into his muscles and spread throughout his body.

He kept telling himself that this was only the third day that he had stood here and that Tor Guthrum had undergone this torture for thirty days and had lived, but such assurance brought him little relief.

The first night that he had spent here there had been a bitterly cold storm and snow and rain had lashed at his body. The cold still continued. By day, the sun was warm, but the days were short.

A stone hurled by one of the crowd of boys which continually taunted him struck him in the chest and another grazed his cheek. Bran's head dropped to his chest. The boys had devised some sort of a game which they played around the stake. At times they would stand back and throw rocks at him, cheering at each hit, then at other times they would charge at the stake, howling as their sires might have howled in battle and prodding him with sticks.

The sound of a marching column of men came to Bran's ears, but he didn't look up. The men came closer and a sudden outburst of cheering rang across the market place. The chains rattled at the stake next to the one where Bran stood.

He lifted his head, startled. A gaunt, sagging body was being fastened to that stake. Bran caught his breath. He stared at the red hair and red beard of the new captive and couldn't believe what his eyes told him, couldn't believe that Tor Guthrum had been caught and brought back.

The soldiers finished their work of chaining the gaunt body to the stake, then moved back. They stood about hurling taunts at the sagging figure but Bran Dougal was unconscious of their remarks. He couldn't tear his eyes from the man. He called, "Tor! Tor! Tor!"

Tor Guthrum lifted his head. "Aye, Bran. We were caught in the storm, driven to shore. Haarek's men found us before we could hide. The others were slain."

Never in all his life had Bran Dougal known a more bitter moment. His strength ebbed away; his body sagged against the chains which held it; his head dropped forward.

After a while the soldiers went away and the village boys came back to their games of torment with renewed enthusiasm. Bran Dougal wasn't even aware of them. The sun went down and darkness crept in from the hills. The boys left and a night guard set up its watch in the market place. It grew colder and low hanging clouds blanketed the stars, making it very dark.

Then sometime during the night, Bran heard Tor's voice, "Ye must not blame yourself for the storm, Bran. 'Twas sent by the gods. 'Twas nothing ye could reckon with."

Bran stirred, but did not look up.

"Thirty days did I stand here," Tor continued, "knowing always that ye would come. And ye did, Bran."

"And now," said Bran bitterly, "we are both here."

Tor laughed. "Haarek and the king had ten thousand warriors in this village and in the hills around it. Every road was guarded, every approach by the sea. There were guards in the market place. It seemed impossible that anyone could ever reach me, yet I said to the king that you would come."

Bran scowled. He straightened, stared out to the harbor.

" 'Though ye had twice as many men,' I said to the king, 'still Bran would come. Though he were dead, still would he reach me, nor could all the gods in Asgard turn him back. His kind will never know defeat.' "

Bran Dougal turned to look at Tor. The man's body still sagged in the chains and the red thatched head was lowered.

"Tor," Bran whispered. "Tor."

There was no answer from the other figure. Bran shivered and then was aware of a deep stirring of anger.

IN THE morning, Tor Guthrum's figure still sagged in its chains and there was no sign of life in the man. The boys returned to their games, the merchants opened their shops and the warm rays of the sun reached down into the square.

Quite early, the stooped and foully dirty figure of a beggar appeared in the market place. He made a round of the shops, noticed the two captives, and as though to create a good impression on prospective donors, he edged close to the captive Vandals and berated them profanely. Between his curses he said swiftly, and looked straight at Bran, *"Be ready! Tomorrow night!"*

One of the guards ordered the beggar away and he crawled over to a stone not far from the captives. Bran stared at him. "Hallad," he muttered under his breath. "Hallad."

He had feared that Hallad must have lost his life when he had led Haarek's men into the hills on the night of their arrival, yet the man still lived and in the guise of a beggar was here in the market place. A sudden wild hope surged in Bran Dougal's breast but it was short-lived.

There were no fewer warriors here now than there had been before and many of his own men must have sailed away or lost their lives in the storm which had wrecked Tor's boat. He shouted, "No. I order you to keep out of Skiringssalr!"

Several of the guards looked at him curiously and the boys, at this sign of life, gathered around him and Tor and began prodding them with sticks. The beggar gave no sign that he heard.

It was just after noon that Iduna the Fair came to the market place. Her arrival created quite a stir. The guards drew themselves up stiffly and the boys stopped their game to stare at her. Merchants got out their finest wares.

Iduna, however, had an eye for none of this. She came directly over to the place where the two captives were bound, stopped in front of Bran. From under her light blue cloak she drew a flagon of wine.

"I brought this for ye," she said quietly.

One of the guards tried to interpose but Iduna turned on him sharply. "I am the daughter of the king. I do as I wish. Stand back."

The guard stepped back.

"Give the wine to Tor," Bran suggested. "He needs it more than I."

Iduna turned to the other captive. She held the flagon to his lips and Tor drank. When he thanked her his voice was scarcely louder than a whisper and he never once opened his eyes.

The girl moved back to Bran and held the flagon for him. "Ye must think much of Tor," she suggested.

Bran nodded. "He is our councilor, our guide. It is his spirit that has always led us. I am but a fighter."

A CROWD had gathered around the captives and Iduna, but the girl seemed unaware of the audience. She looked steadily at Bran Dougal. "Men call ye the Wolf of the North," she said slowly, "and I have heard many a tale of your cruelty,

of the great loot ye have taken from towns ye have burned and destroyed. Yet the other day when ye faced my father ye talked of freedom and ye spoke of him as a tyrant. Is he a tyrant because he would sweep the Vandals from the sea?"

"Nay," said Bran, "but because he would make free men his slaves."

"Do ye call it freedom to loot and destroy as ye wish?"

Bran Dougal frowned. "Ten years ago," he answered, "my father was the King of Vosland. His people were fishermen, merchants, farmers. One day men came to him from your father demanding that we pay a tribute, that we furnish warriors for your father's army, that we acknowledge him as our ruler. Our people did not want to wage his battles and we had no money for tribute.

"We refused and when your father grew more demanding we joined other peoples in the revolt against him. We lost that revolt in the battle of Hafrsfjord, where my own father was killed. And those of us who still would not bow to King Harald were driven to the sea. We found a refuge in Orkneyjar but your father would extend his rule even there. And so we have fought back, and for that ye call us vandals."

"Believe ye not," said Iduna, "that my father has been guided by Odin and that it is Odin's will that he rule all Norway?"

Bran shook his head. "I have heard the story. I have heard that your father was carried by Odin's ravens to Asgard, the city of the gods, and that there he was given Odin's cup and Thor's hammer as emblems of authority. But I do not believe it."

"He has the hammer and the cup."

Bran Dougal laughed. "Have ye ever seen him throw the hammer and have it return to him as Thor's hammer would? Have ye ever seen him drink from Odin's cup?"

"Nay, but—"

"They are false."

Iduna frowned. Her lips formed the words, *"Be ready! Tomorrow night!"* But aloud she said, "Nay, Bran Dougal. Neither the cup nor the hammer is false. My father drinks not from the cup because to drink from it is forbidden by the gods. He carries it as an emblem of his authority."

Bran hardly heard the last part of Iduna's statement. That whispered message seemed to have stopped his mind from working. He stared at the girl. Under her blue cloak she wore a white gown and her hair hung straight, a silver sheen crowning the beauty of her face and figure. Her eyes, as blue as his own, looked at him steadily and seemed to carry a message of courage.

Quite abruptly the girl turned to face the guards. "See that these men are fed," she ordered.

There was nothing the guards could do but obey, yet it was clear that they liked it not at all. After Iduna had gone the market place hummed with the story of her visit. Bran felt a strange excitement. He looked for the beggar, but Hallad had gone.

"The king will be back tomorrow," said one of the guards who had brought him food. "This is your last night, Vandal."

THE afternoon waned and night came and with it a bitter coldness. All day long Tor had hardly moved, nor had he answered when Bran had called to him. Bran had a feeling that Tor was close to death.

Yet sometime during that night, Bran heard his voice saying, "Freedom will never be stamped out, Bran, by such a man as Harald Haarfagre. Never so long as there are those with the courage to oppose him."

Bran straightened, turned his head swiftly to look at Tor. The man hung at his stake as one who was dead. Yet again his voice came and it was clear and strong. "I cannot think that I have been wrong in ye, Bran. The friend I loved was a man whose spirit none could ever kill."

"Tor!" Bran cried. "Tor! Ye live?"

There was no sign that Tor had heard. . . .

It was just at dusk on the following

day that King Harald returned to Skiringssalr. With him had come many *jarls* and a great retinue and word flew through the town that the morrow was to be a feast day in all Norway, marking the end of vandalism on the seas. Shortly after dark a file of warriors marched into the market place.

"We have come for the Vandals," said Rolv Haarek. "The king would have them at the great hall to entertain his court."

The chains binding the two men were freed from the stakes but not removed from their arms or legs. Tor sprawled to the ground and didn't move, even when prodded.

"The red-headed one is dead," announced one of the soldiers, bending over him.

Haarek laughed, scratched at his beard. "Drag him to the hall then," he ordered. "The king wants both of them."

Two of the soldiers started dragging Tor away but Bran Dougal, stooping over, caught the man's legs. "I will carry him," he said.

He lifted Tor's thin figure in his arms. There seemed no weight to it at all and his flesh was like ice. Yet he wasn't dead, for a faint breath whispered between his lips. The procession started up the hill toward the great hall of Jarl Ungi. A beggar trailed after them, but no one took any notice of him.

## IV

MORE than a thousand warriors and many of their ladies were crowded into the great hall of Jarl Ungi, and a riotous feast was in progress. Huge chunks of meat were roasting over the open fires and already half a score of wine and mead casks had been emptied. Every seat at the tables was taken; groups of warriors crowded the open space around the roasting pits and at each end of the hall.

Before the high seat where King Harald sat *hirdscalds* were strumming at their harps and singing of the king's great victory over the Vandals. But no one, excepting perhaps the king, was listening to them. The room was a tumult of a hundred sounds. Smoke from the fires and from the torches around the tapestry-covered walls hung over the room like a cloud.

Three of the warriors, under Haarek's direction, forced a way though the cowd, and still carrying the body of Tor Guthrum in his arms, Bran Dougal followed them. As the presence of the two Vandals was noted, derisive cries were hurled at them, even by the women. A horn of wine was thrown into Bran's face but he kept his eyes straight ahead.

Before the high seat he stopped. The *hirdscalds* were cleared away and the king rose to his feet. There was a mocking and triumphant smile on Harald Haarfagre's face and he was flushed with wine.

"I have brought them, lord," Haarek shouted, "though I fear that one is dead."

The king laughed and others echoed him, then he raised his hands for silence; as the hall grew quiet, he demanded: "What have ye to say now, Bran Dougal?"

Bran glanced from side to side. "In a drunken orgy," he answered, "ye would celebrate the end of freedom. But the end is not yet. This kingdom ye have created, Harald Haarfagre, will again crumble and the day will come when men again can call their lives their own."

Angry shouts followed that statement. The king's face darkened with anger. "Ye shall pay for that, Bran Dougal," he thundered. "I swear it by the cup of Odin."

"What cup of Odin's," Bran mocked. "Ye have not Odin's cup."

The king reached to the table before him and lifted a drinking horn into the air so that all might see it. The horn was fashioned of a strangely pale metal and attached to it was a wooden base. Those around Bran stared at it in awe, but Bran laughed.

" 'Tis no cup of Odin's," he declared.

"Would ye dare drink from it?" the king demanded.

"Aye," Bran answered. He lowered Tor's body to the floor, stepped forward, stretched out his hand and took the cup. It was

heavier than he had expected it would be. Curious runic figures were engraven on it, and though he had thought the cup empty when he had picked it up, now it seemed filled almost to the brim with some liquid.

A deep silence had fallen over the hall. Bran scowled. He lifted the cup toward his lips, then hesitated as some voice spoke in his ear. It was a curiously quiet voice. Where it came from he did not know.

*"Bran Dougal,"* said the voice, *"do not drink from Odin's cup unless ye would brave the curse of the gods, not only upon yourself but upon those of your line."*

THAT voice, though quiet, seemed to fill the hall and the words were startlingly clear. Bran Dougal looked around as though to see who had spoken. Every man and woman in the room stood rigid. Some were a little pale of face, breathless.

Bran's hand tightened on the cup. "And what is this curse of the gods?" he demanded.

Again that voice sounded in his ear and this time the words were strangely ominous.

*Accursed is he who drinks from Odin's cup,*
*Who steals the strength and wisdom of the gods,*
*For by fair Asgard, this shall be his lot,*
*To cherish freedom, but to know it not,*
*To search for peace, yet ever live in strife,*
*Companion to sorrow and to death, through life.*

As the voice ceased speaking Bran Dougal was aware of a deep silence in the room. The notion came to him that he was being tricked, that some *hirdscald* had whispered those words at the king's order; but he couldn't throw off the inexplicable feeling which held him.

A twisted smile had come to the king's face. He leaned forward and said bluntly, "Drink, Bran Dougal, or do ye fear the curse of the gods?"

Bran Dougal straightened. "It is no curse to cherish freedom and peace," he answered, "nor is it a curse to fail to find them. Sorrow and death are companions to all men Aye, Harald Haarfagre. I will drink from this cup."

As he spoke he lifted the cup to his lips and tilted back his head. The liquor was like nothing he had ever tasted. It was warm and sweet and it sent a glow to every part of his body. A new strength seemed to pour into his veins. He stretched out his hands, jerked at the chains which bound them together, and the chains broke as easily as though they had been made of cloth.

Such was his new strength.

A gasp of surprise ran over the crowd; the men nearest backed away. Bran Dougal laughed. He had thought the day before that one of the links in the chain seemed very weak, but he hadn't thought this possible.

"Seize him!" cried the King. "Haarek! Ungi!"

Both of those men were standing near

Bran Dougal, but neither of them heeded the king's command. Harald Haarfagre reached out for the hammer which lay on the table before him, the hammer which he had said was Tor's. It was short-handled, heavy. He drew back his arm and hurled it at the Vandal; and Bran, reaching into the air, caught it as easily as he might have caught a ball. A feverish excitement had gripped him.

"Thor's hammer!" he cried. "And as always it returns to the hand that threw it."

As he spoke he cast the hammer back at the king. His aim was true. It caught Harald Haarfagre a glancing blow in the temple and the man went down. Quick, then, to take advantage of the stunned surprise which gripped the crowd, Bran Dougal swung around and caught up the body of Tor Guthrum. He raced toward the rear of the hall, toward the door through which he had escaped a few nights before. But before he reached it, an angry shout rose from the warriors on every hand. Swords rasped from their scabbards and men surged forward to block his way.

A man dressed as one of the slaves stepped suddenly to Bran's side and drew a sword. He held it out, bringing a second blade from under his cloak.

Bran lowered Tor's body to the floor. This slave beside him he had recognized; he was Bjarne Syr, one of his men. The beggar, who was Hallad, stepped up on the other side, lifted Tor's body. And now two more men, dressed as slaves, joined the four of them.

From Bran's throat burst the wolf-cry of the Vandals. "The door!" he cried. "On to the door!"

HE SPRANG that way and Bjarne Syr was at his side, the other men following. Bran's sword slashed swiftly and with savage efficiency. Never before had he felt such grim joy in a battle. Never before had the work of his sword been truer.

The men between them and that rear door thinned out. They shoved at each other in an effort to escape. Behind them was an ocean of sound: the hoarse screaming of orders, the angry shouts of the men who milled and stumbled in their fury to reach the Vandals.

Then Bran and Bjarne were through the door. Hallad came after them, still with Tor's body in his arms, and one of the other men followed close. The second man had stopped.

"I will hold them here!" he shouted. " 'Tis as good a place to die as any."

Bran's eyes turned to the outside door, for this hallway was a part of the private quarters of Jarl Ungi and led not only to an exit but to the *jarl's* sleeping rooms. Men were crowding through that door from the outside, were racing forward. Across the hallway another door opened and in it he caught a glimpse of Iduna the Fair.

"In here," she called. "Quickly!"

Bran stepped to the room's entrance. "There is a passageway through the floor and underground," Iduna whispered swiftly. "But few know of it. I—"

The others rushed into the room, save for one who stood outside the door and held Haarek's men back. Bran caught hold of the great stone in the floor where Iduna showed him. He lifted it out. A dark, stone stairway descended there and the musty smell of the earth came up to him.

"Into it, Hallad," he cried. "And you, Bjarne."

Hallad, still cradling Tor in his arms, moved down into the passageway, and with no word of explanation Iduna followed him. Bjarne shook his head, looked to the door.

"I will stay here with Eirik, who is even now holding them back. Someone must replace that stone and it would not be well for this room to be found empty before ye have had time to get away."

"Nay, Bjarne," Bran answered. "It is I who—"

Bjarne leaned suddenly forward and shoved Bran. The opening to the passageway was just at his feet. Bran tried to jump across it as he lost balance but the distance was too great. His body struck

the other side, slid back to the stone stairs, rolled down them.

From up above, Bjarne called down, "Farewell, Bran. I will watch for ye in Valhalla." Then the stone slid over the opening, blotting out all light.

Iduna caught him by the arm, helped him to his feet. "We must hurry," she whispered. "The passageway is not long and men could quickly reach the other end."

Bran felt around for his sword and found it. His fingers touched another object—by the feel of it, Odin's cup. All throughout the fight, he suddenly realized, he must have clung to it with his left hand. He thrust the cup into his belt and with Iduna still holding his arm, blundered up the damp passage.

Its opening was in a grove of trees, almost within the shadow of the great hall. From that direction Bran could still hear a great shouting and the clashing of arms. Then quite abruptly the sound of battle ceased.

"They are dead," he muttered. "Bjarne Syr, Eirik Ulvson, and Tanner."

"As a warrior loves to die," Hallad answered.

Bran handed his sword to Iduna. He took Tor from Hallad's arms.

"A ship awaits us in the harbor," said Iduna. "I will show ye the way."

Bran stared at her and Iduna bit her lips. She straightened. "Even a king's daughter," she said, 'can love the liberty ye cherish so well. It was Hallad's pledge that did I help him I might go with ye to Orkneyjar."

Bran Dougal hesitated but a moment, glancing first at the girl, then at Hallad, his eyes questioning.

"Aye, Bran," said Hallad. "It is true. But for her help—"

"Lead us to the ship," Bran ordered.

Iduna turned from the grove of trees toward the hills and soon found a path which followed the curving line of the harbor. Hallad followed her and Bran came last, now and then smiling as he looked down into Tor's face.

## V

IN THE shadows of some heavy shrubbery on the crest of a hill overlooking the harbor, Iduna stopped. Below her, drawn in close to the shore, was a light *skuta,* very similar in design to the one in which Bran and his companions had come to Skiringssalr several days before. A group of warriors were on the beach near it and two of them carried torches.

Iduna frowned. "Those cannot be your men," she whispered to Hallad, "for why would your men seek to attract attention with lighted torches?"

Hallad shook his head. "Nay, they are not our men. They are from the village."

"And those who came with the boat?"

Perhaps the sea could tell," Hallad answered quietly.

Tor stirred in Bran Dougal's arms. "Put me down, Bran," he whispered. "I go no farther and I would talk with ye."

Bran laughed. "Ye go over the sea with us, Tor. We will meet no storm this time."

"Your arms hurt me, Bran," Tor answered. "They are like bands of steel. Put me down."

Bran lowered the man to the ground. He glanced up at Hallad and said, "Watch along the beach. If ye see more men coming, let me know. I will let Tor rest for a while."

"Aye, for a long while," Tor breathed.

Bran shook his head. "Are ye the one who spoke to me of courage the other night?"

"Nay, Bran. I did not speak to ye. It was your own heart that spoke. I could hear what it said."

Bran scowled. He said, "Tor, there are a few men on the beach who would keep us from the boat. I will draw them away and Hallad will get ye aboard. Then I will join ye. A few days at sea and we will be once more in the Orkneyjar. It will be then as it has always been. Do ye hear me?"

Tor's eyes were closed but he reached up a hand to Bran's arm and nodded his head. "I hear ye, Bran. And this I know. Ye will reach the Orkneyjar, but ye will

not be safe there. Harald Haarfagre's men will follow ye.

"He is powerful and ye have cut his pride deeply. He will not leave our people in peace. Ye must assemble them, Bran, and lead them to the land to the south, the fair land dotted with lakes and studded with green hills.

"There ye will not at first be welcomed, but it is there that your children will make their homes. This is what I wanted to say to ye. This is what I would have ye tell our people."

"Ye will tell them yourself, Tor."

"Nay, Bran," and Tor's voice sounded quite weak. It was hardly above a whisper. "Náy, Bran. I can go no farther. But I do not fear for our people. Ye must take my place. Ye have been only a warrior but now ye must be a councilor, too.

"Ye must live close to their homes, close to their hearts. Ye must lead them, no more on raids against Norway but to a new land where they can find peace."

"None can ever take your place, Tor. Nay, I cannot do it."

"Ye must, Bran. And ye can."

Tor's voice had dropped so low that Bran could hardly hear it. He bent over the man, rested a hand on each of his shoulders and called him by name. Tor made no answer.

The sound of bodies pushing through the brush and of shouting voices drifted down to Bran from the trail; the pursuit was not far behind. But Bran was hardly aware of the noise. He couldn't lift his eyes from Tor's face. A peaceful expression had come over it. The lips were smiling.

Hallad came up and caught him by the shoulder, whispered that more men were coming up the beach, that others were closing in from the hills.

Bran didn't lift his head.

"Tor," he whispered. "Tor, speak to me." And his hands tightened on the older man's shoulders as though to hold him back from the shadows of death.

The voices coming down the trail sounded nearer and the lights of the torches could be seen through the foliage. Hallad called sharply and Bran got slowly to his feet. He looked blankly at Hallad and then glanced over at the girl. There were tears in Iduna's eyes.

"More are coming up the beach—running," said Hallad. "And behind us—"

"My sword, Iduna," Bran ordered gruffly.

The girl held out his sword and Bran took it. "Bring Tor with ye," he said to Hallad. "Keep in the darkness behind me. When ye have a chance, get to the boat and raise the sail. There is a good wind and we three can handle it, you, I and the girl."

Hallad lifted Tor's body in his arms, turned and stared after Bran who had started down the hill.

"He has no chance against so many—no chance at all," Iduna whispered.

THOSE on the beach had no warning of Bran Dougal's attack. A few of them may have seen him striding toward them through the heavy shadows, but they must have mistaken him for one of their own number.

Then suddenly he was upon them, his sword lashing out like a tongue of flame. A man to the right of him went down, a man to the left. Another reeled away screaming and clutching at his wounded side. A fourth dropped to his knees, then fell over on his face.

From Bran Dougal's throat there came then the wild, screaming yell of the Vandals and it bore the full measure of his bitterness and anger. Men had called him the Wolf of the North, and tonight, if never before, he earned that name.

He cut his way through that group of warriors on the beach, turning now to one side and now to another, laughing crazily as the swords of Haarek's men pricked him, shouting in triumph each time one of the enemy fell.

He turned once as though to flee, raced a score or more paces up the beach. Then as Haarek's men took out after him, he suddenly stopped, turned and was among them once more, both hands now clutching the sword and whipping it from side to

side as he fought. He had this advantage. Every man was his enemy and it mattered not where he struck.

Out in the harbor the sail of the *skuta* crawled up its mast and Bran, watching for that sight, gave another triumphant cry. For a moment longer he held his ground; then he drew back, flung his sword from him into the face of the enemy and turning, raced for the sea and hurled himself under its waters.

It was deep at that point and the warriors who ventured after him came back empty-handed. The *skuta* was moving out to the open sea. "He could not have made it to the boat," some of the men argued. "He was wounded in a score of places."

Others, however, weren't so sure and hurried back along the beach to launch other boats and take up the pursuit.

The light *skuta,* whipped along by a stiffening wind, left the dark line of Norway's coast far behind and the heavier loaded ships which had put out after it were soon lost. On the deck, Hallad and Iduna sat close together and near them lay the body of Tor Guthrum, wrapped in Hallad's cloak.

"He must have been a strange man," whispered Iduna. "Like all others in Skiringssalr, I thought of him as a Vandal. And he had the appearance, red hair and beard and sharp features. Yet I was told that not once while he was bound to the stake did he rage over his treatment as most expected he would do. And when I heard him speaking to Bran, just before he died, his voice seemed as gentle as a woman's."

"Aye," said Hallad. "He was a strange man. In battle a warrior such as any might fear, but really a farmer, a man who loved the quiet of his home, a man to go to for council. He had a long view, a way of looking ahead, beyond the problems of today. And more and more it has seemed to me that Bran is like him."

Iduna glanced up at the figure on the steering platform. Bran Dougal was staring ahead. His figure was motionless, and something in its attitude gave Iduna a deep feeling of security. She made her way to the platform and stood silently at Bran's side.

After a moment he looked around at her and smiled. Then he pointed ahead and said quietly, "There lies the freedom ye sought."

Thor's cup was still fastened in Bran's belt. The girl looked at it and frowned. From far back in the great hall in Skiringssalr she had heard the curse of the gods and she recalled now the things Tor had said. He had not promised them peace.

A heavy gust of wind whipped at the boat and Bran Dougal's arm went around Iduna's waist to steady her. She could feel the iron strength in it and suddenly she was not afraid of what might lie ahead. This man, she knew, would be equal to anything they had to face. A soft laugh rose to her lips and left them smiling.


A True Story in Pictures Every Week


Coming soon: Capt. Joseph Gainard—Sea Hawk

# The Pearls of Madame Podaire

Madame lifted her bandaged wrists, so that the string of colored pearls came with them, gleaming faintly

**A strange tale of strange pearls is it not, *M'sieu?* And a strange woman, madame, so strong that she would not die until after her hands themselves had died . . . and taken another with them into the dark valley**

By ROBERT ARTHUR

Author of "Miracle on Main Street," "If You But Wish," etc.

YOU ask me for a tale of witchcraft, *m'sieu*. I shall tell you a tale, but what should I, a simple jeweler, know of witchcraft?

It is true I have lived many years of my life here in Haiti. It is true many gems have passed through my hands, and that I have seen the aura of lust which clings to a great jewel like a palpable mist.

And examining beneath my glass a bit of colored rock from Nature's bowels, I have read on its glittering surface its violent history. Have viewed the ghosts that hover about it—

But that is not witchcraft. And this is

not a story of what I have read through my old eyepiece. Though it is true it concerns gems—pearls they were, great loops of pearls that shimmered and shone in a hundred iridescent colors as they wound themselves about the scrawny neck of Madame Podaire.

There were those who said, upon seeing them clustered about her withered and shrunken throat, that they looked like a multitude of slender snakes coiling.

As to that, I do not know. To me they always looked like pearls. But of course, I am a jeweler.

This, then, is the tale of Madame Podaire and her pearls. . . .

MADAME PODAIRE, *m'sieu,* was ancient. The woman who coveted her pearls was young. And beautiful, like a rose, dew-wet in the dawn. To gain the gems, even murder was not beyond her.

And— But, *tiens!* I am beginning my tale in the middle. Let us return to the beginning. To Madame Podaire herself.

Madame Podaire, you understand, is dead. Twenty years ago she died. Her pearls? Where are they now? *M'sieu,* you must not hurry me. That will come in due time. As will Nanine North, and the fate that befell her. Let me walk my own path, and you shall be enlightened.

*Eh bien!*

Madame Podaire, you must know, was a woman of importance. For she ruled the house of Podaire, and the Podaires have been powerful in Haiti since just after the time of Christophe.

French, yes. The first Jacques Podaire, of noble blood, came to Haiti as a youth. His parents—they died in the French Revolution, *m'sieu.* The name—he chose it for himself, and let his old name die. In Haiti, blood-drenched and torn by savagery, he set out to make his fortune.

Jacques Podaire was a strong man, *m'sieu.* He was large, and dark, and his eyes flashed. He knew how to make a friend, and how to crush an enemy. Through uprising and rebellion and death he flourished, and at the age of fifty he felt secure enough to take a wife, that his name might be propagated.

To France he returned to find her, and brought back with him Madame Podaire, of whom I speak.

Now this is curious, *m'sieu,* that Madame Podaire was the grandchild of a family wiped out by the blacks in the uprising of Toussaint l'Ouverture, save for the infant son who was safely carried to France by one who survived. Thus she was of Haiti also, and was but returning to her own land, as she herself said.

It was whispered that in her veins ran some of the blood of Africa, which all of us now bear, *m'sieu;* and though of that I can not know, it is true that she was accepted by all as one who belonged and was of Haiti.

She was a young woman when she came. Twenty, perhaps. It is hard to know. When I was a youth, there were those living who had seen her the day she stepped off the Podaire schooner with her husband. And they said she was a creature radiant with vitality, until to be in her presence was to drink from a sparkling spring of youth.

But she was not beautiful. No. Almost was she plain, in fact. Except for her hands.

That a hand can be beautiful, *m'sieu,* you know. That it can possess a life, almost I said an individuality of its own, is a thing you may doubt. Yet it is so.

And such were the hands of Madame Podaire. Long and slender the fingers were, tapering to the tips, and the palms were firm and narrow, the whole so in proportion that the great Cellini himself might have modeled them and made no change to achieve perfection.

And in them there was power.

Yes, *m'sieu.* One had but to hear Madame Podaire at the piano to glimpse the strength that hid itself beneath the mask of beauty. And—well . . .

There was a gallant who, during the absence of her husband on business during the early days of her marriage, become emboldened. He sought to trap her into a

false position in which, rather than let the world know and misjudge her, she would yield to his wishes. You comprehend?

His body was discovered with the dawn, lying within a grove many miles away. A sacred grove of the natives. He had been choked to death. The bruises on his throat were long and narrow. As if to fit slender fingers in which lay the strength of steel.

At least, such is the story that was told in whispers, lest it reach the ears of M'sieu Podaire on his return.

BUT let me skim briefly through the years. Ninety years since that was, when Jacques Podaire brought back from France his bride. Within the year their son was born. Him they named after his father.

And within the next year, the boy's father was dead.

It was a crushing blow to a young woman, married but two years, to be left alone in a land where the gods whispered along the trails at night, and bloodshed and death were the normal order of life.

But she was a woman, was Madame Podaire, with a strength of will to equal that of her strange hands. She took charge herself of the plantation her husband had built up, and for her son she made it increase and multiply.

Coffee beans, sugar, mahogany, redwood, lignum vitae—all these her lands produced, and all these she saw harvested and shipped off to France to swell the Podaire coffers.

And though many would have married her, she did not again take a husband. The only man in her life was her son, a tall, straight, dark-haired, laughing boy who grew to manhood knowing every tree and every yard of ground upon his plantations, and then at his maturity was sent back to France to complete his education.

And to bring back with him a bride.

In due course he returned, with a wife—a fair girl, of good family, whom Madame Podaire received to her bosom and prepared to train to take her place.

But alas, *m'sieu!* The whims of fortune take small acount of human plans. Scarcely had the grandson been born when fever from the jungle struck down both the young husband and his bride. They were buried on a headland overlooking the sea, where the first Jacques Podaire already lay.

And Madame Podaire began again to rear a child to whom some day she might relinquish the great estate that now stretched across the hills behind Port-au-Prince.

As his father had, Jacques Podaire grew to manhood. He took more after his mother, this one did, being slight and fair. But the iron of his forefather's blood was in him. The wife he took in France and brought back was a woman calm and quiet, but with depths of strength within her that won an old woman's heart.

For Madame Podaire was old even then, *m'sieu.* In '50 she had come. And now the century was about to turn. For fifty years she had guided the house of Podaire unerringly through revolution, uprising, dictatorship, and death.

So that when her great-grandson was born, in the big house to which fifty years before she had come as a bride, Madame Podaire gave a little sigh of thanksgiving. Soon now she would be able to lay down her burdens.

It was not to be. The great-grandson, Jacques, a boy already lithe and stalwart, dark-eyed and dark-haired, was but five when his parents died. Of the cholera, which killed many. They too were buried above the sea, and once again Madame Podaire took up the task it seemed fated she might not lay down.

Under her guardianship, the boy Jacques grew to manhood as his father and grandfather had done before him, dark and handsome. Upon him she lavished a love that was fiercely protecting and determined. Of all that life had to offer, only the best was to be for him.

Steward she had been to the Podaire fortune, and still it was a thing to command respect. It was to be his. And to share it, to rear a son in turn to continue

it, the wife he chose must be among women what a great pearl, shimmering pure white with the finest orient, is among gems.

When he had married, when his son was born—then, said Madame Podaire, she would resign herself into the arms of her fathers, and join her husband's dust above the darkling waters of the sea. For she was ancient now, withered as parchment, her large head on its pipestem neck almost grotesque in its ugliness.

Only her eyes still had in them the fire of life—her eyes and her hands. For this is the truth. Though Madame Podaire had grown old, her hands had not.

NOW, *m'sieu,* I am not trying to tell you that the hands of Madame Podaire were white and strong and slender as they had been when she was but a bride. They were not. The knuckles had enlarged, the skin grown wrinkled.

But still they were white, still long and slender, still alive with restless strength. It was as if in them resided all the vital force left within Madame Podaire.

Madame Podaire now seldom left her great wicker chair, in which she spent her waking hours.

On rare occasions her majordomo, a black giant named Christophe after the king said to have been his ancestor, helped her into a pony cart and she was driven with the boy Jacques slowly about the plantation.

But for the most part she sat, her strong hands dealing with papers and documents, casting up accounts, or perhaps just sewing, in their activity seeming to be almost independent of her shrunken, motionless body.

And *m'sieu,* as she was at that time, Madame Podaire stayed. The granddaughters of women who had been her friends were dead now, but not she. There were whispers that she would live forever, changing no iota. That death, denied her, had long since gone his way and would not return.

There was another story also, *m'sieu.* More widely told. And believed, as well. That Madame Podaire would die when her hands died. And until then, she would live.

Eh, *m'sieu,* this is a superstitious land! One must remember that. But such was the story. That Madame Podaire would not die until her hands died.

And that, *m'sieu,* is Madame Podaire . . . The pearls? But yes, I am coming to them now. I beg you to let me march at my own speed. I will become confused otherwise. So as to the pearls—

PEARLS, you comprehend, were madame's bridal gift from the first Jacques Podaire. A great matched rope of them, true spheres every one, perfect in size and shape, perfect in sheen and orient, culminating in a single globe of iridescent beauty as large, beyond exaggeration, as the glass marbles which *les petits* play with in the streets of your own country.

I have never seen a finer string. It was hopeless to better it. And Madame Podaire, who permitted herelf only one indulgence through all those years—that, the collecting of pearls for her adornment —did not try to better it.

Instead, from the begining she sought to acquire pearls that were obviously imperfect. Let me explain.

You have never studied the science of precious stones, *m'sieu?* Then perhaps you do not know a misshapen pearl is called a baroque. These baroques, due to the fact they have been formed about odd-shaped fragments of wood or stone or other matter, lack either of the two shapes required of the finest pearls: the spherical, or the pear shape.

They may be long and thin, almost square, skull-shaped—ah, *m'sieu,* madame had one just that shape, as large as the nail of your middle finger—or otherwise formed. You follow.

Also, they may be of any color.

The true pearl, the queen of gems, is of a delicate white translucence. But her less favored sisters may be yellow, black—though the true black, perfect in shape, is very rare and valuable—greenish,

reddish, rusty, streaked. And it was madame's fancy to collect colored baroques.

These, you understand, are far less expensive than the perfect pearls, and one might acquire several goodly strings without too great an expenditure of the world's goods.

Knowing of madame's passion, skippers of trading ships brought specimens for her. From Paris merchants who dealt with the house of Podaire sent others, sometimes as goodwill gifts. Over the years they grew in number and variety until, at the end of madame's days, she had a necklace of three great strings of pearls curiously shaped and colored as no other necklace ever assembled.

Madame was not a vain woman. But as the years stole away her youth, she used her pearls to adorn herself and hide from the eye her shrunken neck and scrawny bosom and wasted flesh, the degradations of the body that time imposes.

String by string she wound her pearls about her throat, letting them lie over her bosom, twining them one about the other, until all of her throat was hidden beneath the layers of gems.

As I said—you remember, *m'sieu?*—there were those who whispered that the strange, grotesque baroques madame had collected were like long skinny snakes winding and twisting about her throat, their varied colors glittering with the strange sheen of a serpent's scales. But to me they were merely pearls.

When attired in state for great occasions, such as her great-grandson Jacques' birthday, when the house of Podaire was thrown open to the elite of Port-au-Prince—who crowded, you may be sure, to be present—madame would sit, all her pearls wound about her neck, her bright eyes surveying everything from beneath half closed lids, her strong hands touching, lifting, or stroking the gems that were to her like living companions.

And there were those who insisted that madame's pearls *did* live. That each one knew her touch and understood her voice. That in them was a tiny spark of life which made them lustrous beyond ordinary pearls.

*M'sieu,* it is true that on madame pearls thrived. Pearls are curiously close to life, it can not be denied. For some they will sicken and die, lose luster, become but spherical bits of matter without beauty or value. For others they will bloom like the rose, taking on new sheen, new loveliness.

And madame was one of these last. It is beyond disputing that about her neck pearls shone as pearls rarely do. It was thus easy for the superstitious to believe that in them was a spark of life which knew her, and responded to her.

The last public occasion upon which Madame Podaire wore her gems was her great-grandson's twentieth birthday. Jacques was then a man, tall, dark, handsome with a strength and fire that caused all women's heads to turn as he passed, their eyes to follow as he departed. In a short time he was to sail for Paris, to complete his education and to find a wife.

Which brings me to—

Yes, *m'sieu,* to Nanine North.

YOU will forgive an old man's refusal to be hurried. But it was important that you should understand all: about Madame Podaire, about her pearls, her great love and great ambitions for her son's son's son, Jacques, and finally about the girl, Nanine North.

Nanine North was a guest at that twentieth birthday party of Jacques Podaire's.

She was a girl from the States, you will understand. A small pink-and-white girl with golden hair, an oval face of a beauty the angels might envy, red lips, eyes blue as heaven's azure, teeth tiny and almost of a color to match the white pearls of madame's great string.

From the South of your country she came. Her voice was low and warm. Her eyes said things her words disclaimed. There were few men who could refuse her any request when she smiled.

But within, she was rotten.

That Madame Podaire saw with one searching glance when Jacques brought her over to introduce her. And the heart of Madame Podaire was sick within her, for already she could see the light of infatuation in the boy's eyes.

For a brief moment Nanine North's gaze rested on the ancient woman, as her lips automatically spoke soft words. Then she was swept away onto the dance floor in the boy's eager arms. But in that moment her eyes had seen, her soul drunken in, Madame Podaire's pearls, wound string upon string about her withered neck.

It was while they danced that Jacques told Nanine North that the pearls of his great-grandmother were to be his bride's. The baroques, the colored pearls, were to come to her bridal eve. The white string when the old one died. And the soul of Nanine North burned hot with greed.

Jacques Podaire was young and handsome. His estate was large. And the strings of pearls that the great-grandmother wore were to be his bride's. Many a woman has sold her soul for less. In that ten minutes after meeting Jacques Podaire, Nanine North had decided that he was to marry her.

As Madame Podaire had discerned in a single glance, Nanine North was bad inside. In her soul was nothing but an appetite for the expensive luxuries of the world. And though she looked soft and lovely, in truth she was hard and determined and clever.

She had come to Haiti on a cruise ship, to spend a few weeks with a former friend whose husband was of the Marines then stationed in our country to keep order. But the weeks stretched into months, and Nanine North did not leave.

Daily did Jacques Podaire call to see her. To every ball, party, or concert she went in his company. His escort enabled her to enter the society of Port-au-Prince as no outsider otherwise could have.

And though there were those who guessed she looked upon us with contempt —for in truth, as I have said, most of us bear the blood of Africa in our veins —there was naught she did to reveal it.

Through the months Madame Podaire, sitting in her great wicker chair, her hands moving restlessly in her lap, kept her silence.

There was naught she could do to interfere, though well she knew that if the fire in young Jacques' veins for the soft, white, golden beauty of Nanine North did not burn itself out, as such things sometimes do, all her fierce hopes for his happiness would fail, and all her long years of effort be undone.

For there are women who, once they have a man within their grasp, suck him dry of all that is in his mind and soul, until he is but a twisted, bitter husk. Unless he is wise and kills in time the woman who holds him enmeshed in her skein of infatuation. And of these women Nanine North was one.

But this is something that a woman may know, but a man can only learn. Madame Podaire kept her silence, though at times her strong white hands in her lap closed curiously, as if squeezing between them something round and soft.

And then the day came when Jacques approached her and announced that he would marry Nanine.

MADAME PODAIRE uttered no word of censure, no word of discouragement, no word of forbiddance. For a moment her hands clenched, as they had done before, then she spoke.

"You are a man, my son, and you must make your own decisions," she said, in a voice made harsh by time. "I ask only that you wait until your twenty-first birthday."

To this Jacques agreed gladly; and though Nanine North was vexed that six months more must elapse before she would safely be Mrs. Jacques Podaire, she knew that she had won, and her soul sang with greedy triumph. Tinged only by a little fear. Fear of Madame Podaire.

For the ancient one was a woman, and Nanine North knew that to her, the

motives of Nanine North were not secret. But what could an old one, who must die soon in the natural course of events, do to one as young and lovely and clever as Nanine North? Nothing. Veritably, nothing.

Still, there was always the possibility—

Did not the whispered tales tell that in Madame Podaire's blood ran a strain linking her to the dark and savage ones who practiced the dread and secret rites of voodoo? And was it not said that the strange, shriveled woman with the curious, powerful hands would live forever, as long as her hands retained their strength? That she would not die until her hands did?

So Nanine North must have thought. And thinking, made certain cautious inquiries. . . .

While Madame Podaire in turn was thinking too—the mind of an old woman pitted against the mind of a young one, with a man the stake of the contest. A man whom the one would have done murder to snare, and the other with equal readiness would have dealt death to save.

But Madame Podaire could not kill Nanine North. Though there were ways . . . But she could not use them, for had aught happened to the girl while Jacques' eyes were blinded by her beauty, he would rightly have put the blame upon his ancestor. And forever after been haunted by the spectre of hatred for the one who had loved him, as well as by the unreal and beautiful memory of one who would always come between him and happiness.

There must be some way, though, to free him from the spell the girl had wrought upon him. Some way—

But before she had found it, Madame Podaire's hands began to die!

I SEE you are startled, *m'sieu*. Yet I said only what I mean. Madame Podaire's hands began to die.

You will recall the tale that was whispered of those hands—a tale that of a surety had come to the ears of Nanine North. Now no one knows the truth, but it is certain that the girl would have been glad for the old one to die, that the last possible obstacle between her and the goal she had set herself should be removed.

And it is well known that the uncle of a servant of the friend with whom Nanine North stayed was a powerful *papaloi,* a renegade man of voodoo wanted by the constabulary for the poison murder of certain enemies. A man of wide and unholy knowledge. It is possible that through him she might have obtained—

Well, that is but guesswork, *m'sieu*. All that is known, however, is that one morning as Madame Podaire sat sewing, the needle flashing in her fingers, a pin that had no business being in the material at all, scratched her finger.

A few moments before Nanine North had bent above her, about to depart with Jacques for a ride on horseback. Had smiled and greeted her as Jacques' affianced wife should. And might at the same time, perhaps, have slipped the pin—

Again, conjecture, *m'sieu*. Let me state the facts baldly. Madame thought nothing of the scratch, her mind being busily engaged upon other things. She withdrew the pin and cast it aside.

Her finger gave her no pain for three days. On the third day it was slightly swollen, and purplish in color. The swelling spread to her whole hand and wrist; and strangely, as if in sympathy, her other hand likewise became swollen and discolored.

A doctor was called, and diagnosed blood-poison. Treatment was given, and the swelling began to go down.

But, *m'sieu,* when the swelling had vanished, madame's hands continued to shrivel!

Within a fortnight they were the claws of an ancient crone. Then they became numb, as if the blood were not flowing. The physician was puzzled.

Another man of medicine was called. He found the strength gone from both hands, that had been so strong. Dark and twisted, like the roots of a mighty tree,

fallen now, they lay in madame's lap, and she could barely move them.

Those hands that once, it may be, had choked to death a strong and passionate man!

And then, *m'sieu,* the tips of the fingers turned quite black, and the flesh began to rot, to drop away.

Gangrene . . .

Nothing then would save Madame Podaire's life except the removal of her diseased, dead hands. It was too late for other help from medicine or from magic, though Christophe had gone into the hills to return with a shriveled one who was a witch doctor known and feared throughout Haiti.

Jacques had expected his great-grandmother to cry out when the decision of the doctors was made known to her. But she did not. In silence she bowed her head.

"Tomorrow, my son," she said at last. her voice but a faint, dry whisper. "Tomorrow it shall be done. Tonight I shall tend to something that must be done now, lest I not return alive to this house again."

And with that Jacques and the doctors were forced to be content. That night Madame Podaire lay closeted in her bedroom, and with her there was only the curious one who had come down from the hills to help her.

What went on there can not be guessed. Only this is known. That that night for the last time Madame Podaire wore her necklace of baroque pearls; and in the morning, when the light of dawn came down across the hills, the *papaloi* whom Christophe had fetched was gone.

THAT day, in the Marine hospital, Madame Podaire's hands were removed at the wrist. Before the deed was done Madame Podaire had made a curious

request. This was acceded to. Afterwards the old one was returned to her home in an ambulance, and a curious package went with her.

She should have remained in the hospital, the physicians told her, but she would not.

She was dying, said Madame Podaire, and she must die in her home.

It was obvious that what she said was true. All Haiti knew it. The drums beat in the hills that night, and each night thereafter until she died, making powerful magic for her soul. A queer, hushed atmosphere hung about the house of Podaire, and in empty rooms shadows seemed to move and gather.

While in her bed Madame Podaire lay dying, slowly, with dignity, as a great pine on the verge of falling totters for a moment but holds itself still poised erect until it goes down with a great crash.

Her first action was to send for me. Yes, *m'sieu,* for Pierre, the jeweler who had supplied so many of her precious pearls. Who had restrung them often through the years.

And to me she gave the necklace of baroques. I must restring them for their next owner, and she was quite explicit in her instructions. I was startled at what she wished me to do; but because it was she who asked it, I agreed.

It was a queer request, but one I could fulfill, and, having promised, would.

"You shall take from the necklace a pearl, Pierre," madame said then. "Any one you desire. It is not a fee. It is a gift. Something by which one who has been a friend may remember me."

As if one needed a gift to remember Madame Podaire! But I took the pearl of my choice, as she directed. I have it still. Presently I shall show it to you.

And I left, taking with me the necklace and a curious package which I did not open until safely locked within my shop. Then I did as she had instructed, though it was not an easy task, and one which, had I not sworn so solemnly, I would gladly have relinquished uncompleted.

My work took me some days, and during these days madame clung to life with a will that would not let it go. Verily, it was the strength of her mind that compelled Death to cool his heels while he waited for her to be ready. And she was not ready until I had returned her pearls.

Then she called to her great-grandson, Jacques, and Nanine North, and I was a witness to what followed.

Lying in her bed like a withered seed pod almost lost in the white counterpane, madame's bandaged wrists were exposed upon the coverlet. Over them lay the great necklace of baroques, and beside it the string of white pearls glowed.

"My child," Madame Podaire said to Nanine North then, and lifted her arms a few inches, so that the string of colored pearls came with them, "as I long ago promised, these are to be my gift to Jacques' bride. I shall not live to see him wed, so these gems that have been mine I am giving to you now. They are yours."

With a little cry, for a moment forgetting herself, Nanine North snatched up the necklace and exultantly felt the weight of it, letting the strings of precious beads drape down over her arms and onto her bosom. For an instant Madame Podaire watched her. Then she nodded toward the second necklace.

"Jacques," she said, in a firmer voice, "these pearls that were my bridal gift I bequeath to you, that you in turn may make a gift of them to your bride. When you are wed, my son, you shall present them to your wife. Until then, you must guard them and let no other touch them."

Disappointment crossed Nanine North's features like a cloud, for she had perhaps imagined that both necklaces were to be given to her then. But she smiled and dissembled, and said, in her soft warm voice, that Madame Podaire must stop jesting with them that she was to die.

Madame Podaire shook her head.

"I do not jest," she replied. "And there is one thing more I must say. You must not wear your gift until your wedding

eve. Evil will befall you if you disregard me. And you must never place them about your neck if within your heart or mind there is anything of deception. Only you can judge yourself.

"But take care! For if, unworthy, you array yourself in these gems, you shall never remove them from your throat."

For a moment Nanine North paled and licked her lips. She was aware of Jacques looking at her, and she summoned a smile.

"I have no fear, *grandmère,*" she answered. "I shall be very careful to obey you, and to keep my gift safe until—"

But she did not finish. For Madame Podaire had closed her eyes, and gone with death in that moment.

AND now, *m'sieu,* my story approaches its conclusion. There is only a little more to tell. On that day of mourning, Jacques Podaire's place was at the side of his great-grandmother.

Nanine North returned to her friend's home, and to her room. It was not fitting that she appear in public. But she did not mind that on this day of her triumph. For the pearls of Madame Podaire were hers, and the knowledge was like wine.

In her room she weighed them in her fingers, and exulted. She caressed them, and laid her cheek against them, and felt the smooth warmth of their surfaces against her skin.

And at last could not resist placing them about her throat, just for a moment, just to see how she would look.

Suiting action to thought, Nanine North lifted the pearls and placed them about her neck, closed the clasp, and took away her hands to view her image in the glass.

What followed, *m'sieu,* I tell as it was told by the mulatto girl who was her maid.

For a moment, the pearls lay quiet on her bosom, glowing with an almost eerie brilliance in a dozen lights and colors. Nanine North turned this way and that, admiring herself. Then a strange thing happened.

Each pearl on the three strands seemed to move, to twist a little, like a thing alive. Nanine North felt the motion, like countless tiny fingers on her throat, and was startled into motionlessness.

And then the loops of pearls began to move visibly. They began to twist and writhe like slender serpents. To constrict and to tighten.

Nanine screamed. Horribly. She dug her fingers into the hard mass of gems that were knotting themselves into a great, garroting collar.

She could not loose them. The pearls she touched twisted out of her fingers. She could not force her hands into them, to pull them away. Her very efforts to free herself seemed to pull them tighter.

She screamed again, a choked gasping cry of animal terror. She tried to run. She stumbled down the hall and gained the threshold of her friend's room. There she fell, face convulsed, eyes bulging.

For a moment she threshed about, still clawing at the pearls about her throat. Then she lay still.

When the Marine doctor reached there, summoned hastily, the pearls lay around her throat in a loosely knotted mass, much tangled and intertwined, but not at all tight enough to harm. Yet she was dead.

And on her white throat were deep purple marks. As if made by choking fingers, *m'sieu.*

And this is a strange thing. All the lustre had gone from those pearls. They were as dull and lifeless.

*EH, BEIN!* There's something more to tell you, *m'sieu.* The Marine doctor, upon hearing of Madame Podaire's warning, shook his head as if with wisdom.

Fear had choked Nanine North, he stated. As she remembered the old one's warning, the sense of guilt had caused her throat to constrict. The choking sensation had frightened her more. In her panic she had twisted the necklace tight about her neck. The more she twisted it, the more frightened she became, until in very terror she died.

And Jacques Podaire, staring down into her contorted face, so unlovely now, but nodded and said nothing.

She was buried, after Madame Podaire had been laid to rest beside her husband's dust, in a churchyard, decently but without emotion. The pearls remained around her neck. To her they had been given, and hers they were to be for all eternity.

Shortly thereafter Jacques Podaire sailed for Paris, where presently he married, quite happily, making to his wife a gift of the perfect pearls.

That is the tale, *m'sieu.* And here is the pearl that I have to remind me of it. It is oddly shaped, is it not? Long, like a slender white hand.

Eh, what have I omitted to tell you? Not much, *m'sieu.* But a simple thing. The instructions that madame gave me, when she gave me the baroque necklace to restring.

You see, in the package she brought back from the hospital that day were her hands, placed in a preservative. The package that I carried with me when I left was that package.

Her instructions were that I should take her hands, and do certain things to the strong tendons of the fingers. Prepare them, *m'sieu,* according to a secret formula she gave to me.

And then, *m'sieu,* when I had prepared those cords in which had lain the strength of her lovely hands, I was to knot them together and on them string the pearls.

Yes, *m'sieu,* it is quite true. Those were her instructions, and they were faithfully carried out. So that night, when Nanine North in wilful disobedience of her promise, and against Madame Podaire's warning, placed the pearls about her neck she was also, one might say, placing there the dead hands of Madame Podaire.

It is not a thought one cares to dwell upon, is it, *m'sieu?*

Hyer took three groggy steps and knew he wasn't going to make it

By KURT STEEL

# Dead of Night

IF THE one and only HANK HYER had had any idea, when MARCIA THAYER came to persuade him to investigate the disappearance of her father that the stars were going way out of their courses just to get in his way, he would probably have told the lady, "No." But from the very first, the planets took an active part in the Thayer case. Only slightly less active, in fact, than Hank himself.

Both the missing NAT THAYER and his second wife, BERYL, had become involved with an eminent racketeer of the heavens, CLEARSE OWEN. This annoyed Marcia, who disliked and feared Owens; it annoyed Thayer's partner, PIERRE DAWSON, who felt that a planet's place was definitely not in the office; and most of all it annoyed Beryl's nephew, RICH LANNING, who was engaged to Marcia and whose money, left in trust, was administered by Thayer.

Fed up with Rich's irresponsibility, Nat had fired Rich, forbidden him the house and threatened, on Owen's malicious advice, to withhold Rich's inheritance. Marcia had intervened and sent Rich up to the Thayer camp on Lake Manitou, then learned with horror that Nat Thayer intended to take

**This story began in the Argosy for June 29**

Owen to the camp for their conference on Rich's finances. That was Monday. By Thursday Thayer had not been heard from, and Marcia had appealed to Hyer.

PATIENT fact-finding enables Hyer to piece together a rather peculiar time-table of Thayer's activities. Ostensibly he had left the camp Tuesday morning, in spite of an appointment he had made with Rich, who had decided to spend Monday night in town after all. Thayer had neglected to keep an engagement for Tuesday noon with Dawson in Albany. And a process-server, mysteriously informed that Thayer would be on the night train from Albany, had failed to spot him at Grand Central that night.

On Wednesday, a voice purporting to be Thayer's had instructed Dawson via telephone to cash two checks and mail the money to Washington. A similar call to Rich had made an appointment in Washington for the next day. Hyer decides that both these calls were phonies, and that Thayer had dropped out of sight as of Tuesday morning.

HYER proceeds to investigate Owen, who he decides immediately is cop-shy. Then he arranges that his freckle-faced, red-headed assistant, young ORSON QUICK go to work as Owen's bodyguard. Quick, eager to get to work, is resentful only of the fact that so far the case is completely corpseless.

This minor defect is remedied when the body of KARL SANDLUND, caretaker of the camp, discharged on the fateful Monday night at Owen's insistence, is planted on Hyer's doorstep. Hank gloomily discovers that no one has an alibi for the approximate time of the killing—and that Rich Lanning, the one suspect he was certain could not be involved—has inexplicably come to town that night. Nor has Hyer much idea who took a pot-shot at Dawson through the windows of his home, while Sandlund was present, about three hours earlier. A second interview with Owen is not enlightening, but Hank is mysteriously grateful when the agitated Marcia blurts out all that they have surmised about the case. "Couldn't have done it better myself," he says smugly.

He also manages to let Owen know that Dawson and Marcia and he are planning to go up to the camp the next morning, and is certain that Owen will follow.

Returning to town, he finds a car parked a short distance from the Thayer house. In it are Orson Quick and Beryl Thayer, busily engaged in reading the embarrassed Quick's horoscope. After Beryl's departure, Hyer is talking to Quick when suddenly something solid is brought sharply down on Hank's skull and the stars from Quick's horoscope go wheeling around in instant blackness. . . .

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE CROOKED STAR

HYER had a buzzing in his head. It was not an obnoxious buzzing. It was a pleasant, drowsy buzzing that lulled and soothed. No, it was decidedly not the buzzing that disturbed his dream. Perhaps it was the dream that disturbed the buzzing, the ragged, relentless dream in which he was walking along a Rhineland road whose cobblestones behaved precisely like Mexican jumping beans. They bounded, leaped, gamboled, bobbed, bounced, and caracoled, those stones, until his very shoe-soles smarted in tune with his buzzing head.

But gradually the buffeting stones forsook their anarchy and settled into a blithe, bright rhythm, and Hyer shuddered and groaned and opened his eyes to see a policeman beating the soles of his feet with a night stick.

"Whaddaya say, Mac?" the law inquired without rancor.

Hyer groaned again, struggled to sit up, and leaned heavily on the horn button, whereat the paling night quivered to a long and strident blast.

"Hey!" the policeman said sharply.

Hyer swore, inched himself painfully up from where he had been slumped behind the wheel, lowered his feet from their indelicate elevation on the opposite window ledge, said thickly, "Thanks, I'm all right."

By the time he reached the low square carriage-way, his step was steadier, and the buzzing, blooming confusion in his head had resolved itself into a species of anguished alarm shot with contrition.

The doorman, who had seen him arrive with Marcia and Dawson, touched his cap and nodded. The elevator operator, at mention of Marcia's name, took him aloft without demur.

Marcia opened the door to him, said, "You were gone a long— Why, what's the matter?"

Hyer's face smoothed at once into bland, ingenuous lines. He said, "Matter? By the way, did Beryl get home?"

Marcia looked at him sharply. "You're covering something up."

"Something." Hyer's fingers strayed toward the back of his head. "So Beryl is home?"

"Yes. She came in a few minutes after we did. What?"

"Nothing you need to worry about. Where is she now?"

Marcia's face went white, and her lips tightened convulsively. She whispered, "Has Rich—?"

"No."

The strain in her blue eyes changed its key. "Then, Dad—?"

"No. It's not about him, and it's not about Rich." When she stood, irresolute, doubting him, Hyer said testily, "It's about me. Take a look at this."

SHE gasped when she saw the welt behind his ear, but sensibly refrained from further questions. "Beryl's upstairs. Do you want to talk to her?"

Hyer's "I do" bore somewhat the relation to a simple declarative sentence that a leveled blowgun might bear to a pointing finger.

She ran lightly up the stairs beside him, at the top whispered, "Beryl said she wasn't to be disturbed," and guided him to a door midway down the hall. Here she looked at him closely again, a question in her eyes, then at Hyer's grim nod she rapped.

There was an appreciable pause before a voice from within the room said, "Yes?" querulously.

"May we come in, Beryl?"

"Not *we*," Hyer corrected harshly.

From beyond the door, Beryl said, "Oh, I'm so sorry, dear, but—"

"Mr. Hyer wants to talk to you."

There was another pause, and then Beryl's voice again, touched with incredulity. "What did you say, Marcia?"

"Mr. Hyer wants to talk to you."

"Oh, that's awfully sweet of him, dear, but you know it *is* awfully late—why it's nearly four o'clock. Just tell him to go away quietly, dear, won't you please?"

Marcia looked at the haggard man beside her.

Hyer's eyes were bloodshot, his mouth compressed. He said, loudly enough to carry within the room, "I can talk through a door. All I want to know is—"

The door opened and Beryl's frightened face appeared. Her restless hazel eyes leaped from her stepdaughter to Hyer. She was fully dressed, even to the smart sable jacket she had worn when Hyer had surprised her and Quick in the car.

Beryl said, "Oh—oh, it's you."

"Me."

"Well, I'm sure that—"

"Thanks. Now that you mention it, I will come in." To Marcia, "Thank you. I'll see you later."

"Your place," Marcia said, "is the second door on the left. Regan laid out shaving things for you in the bathroom."

When he had closed the door behind him and was facing the wiry nervous woman, Hyer said harshly, "Kidnaping is a charge I wouldn't want to have against me, Mrs. Thayer. Even an accessory charge."

Beryl's mouth twitched and color rose in her face. "I don't understand you."

"You do," Hyer contradicted, "or you'd have made more of a scene when I started to walk in. Where's that boy?"

She gasped, but on the instant the strain in her nervous, eager face eased. "The boy? Oh, you mean the lad who was with me in the car when you— *Why* are you looking at me like that?"

"I mean the boy who was with you. Who did you think I meant?"

She gave a short, unsteady laugh. "I'm sure I hadn't the least idea. You came in so mysteriously and made that dreadfully ominous statement. I was simply petrified. You've really no idea, Mr. Hyer, how dominant and masterful you are when you look like that. No wonder you've had such marvelous success in your—profession. I'm

sure that if I were one of the criminal classes and you looked at me like that, I'd simply melt."

"You did pretty well," Hyer agreed. "Where's the boy?"

THE flick of alarm that showed in her eyes vanished in a roguish smile. "You're a perfectly dreadful person, Mr. Hyer. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Giving a helpless frightened woman the thirty-third degree like this?"

"I'm ashamed of myself," Hyer said, "for wasting so much time." He strode across the room and took up the telephone.

Beryl ran to him, seized his arm. "What are you going to do?"

"Call the police. They do this sort of thing better than I do."

"No. Oh no. No, please." She tried to wrest the telephone from him.

With his finger, Hyer stopped the switch in the phone's cradle. "All right. Where is he?"

"But I've told you. I don't know," desperately.

"Oh yes you do. On the way in from Owen's, you stopped in a drugstore and called up somebody to put the finger on him."

Beryl threw her hand to her mouth. "You're insufferable."

"You flatter me. Who did you call from that drugstore?"

"I tell you I—"

Hyer jerked the telephone from her imploring hand, dialed rapidly, and then picked up the cradle to back out of Beryl's reach. Into the phone he said, "What? . . . Oh, Spring 7-3100."

Beryl collapsed on a mauve chaise-longue. "But—but that *is* the police," she said weakly. Then, her face twisting, "Wait. Oh wait, Mr. Hyer. I'll tell you. I'll tell you all I know."

Hyer swiveled the phone on his ear so that he could look at her from under the mouthpiece. "Begin," he said grimly. "I don't want to waste this connection."

Beryl swallowed. She said slowly, "I called a man who wanted to know—"

"I want to talk to Schultz," Hyer said, bringing the transmitter down into place. "Yeah, homicide."

"I told him," Beryl went on, speaking rapidly, breathlessly, "that I had one of Owen's boys with me and if he would—"

"Hello, Schultz? . . . Please. Hank Hyer calling."

"—if he would arrange to have this boy questioned," Beryl rushed on, her words tripping over each other, crimson pulsing and fading in her drawn face, "that he might be able to—"

"Hello, Schultz," Hyer said, his sardonic eyes not leaving the now thoroughly frightened woman, "maybe I've fixed up a job for you."

"His name," Beryl cried hoarsely, "is Mar-Yolo and he lives at 20 East Sixtieth street and his phone number is Rhinelander 9-1287 and that's where the boy is, Mr. Hyer. That's where he is. Now, I've told you, haven't I? I've told you everything I know."

She leaped up, caught again at the telephone.

Hyer, fending her off with his elbow, said, "Well, now look, Schultz, all I know about it is that I found him there in my hall with a bullet through him. . ." His eyes narrowed, grew wary as he listened. "Sure I'll come down and talk—when I've got time. I'm busy right now."

Beryl sank back to the chaise longue, breathing fast, her mouth working, eyes bitter.

"For two or three days," Hyer said into the phone. "Exactly. *Too* busy . . . No, you people know just as much about it as I do. I couldn't do you much good, and you couldn't do me *any* good. When you've got something to talk about, I'll talk to you . . . How would I know what Mr. Thayer fired him for? . . . Oh, you haven't been able to get in touch with Thayer?" he asked. Listening, he looked down at Beryl who stared at him an instant furiously and then averted her glance. "That's too bad. Maybe he's out of town . . . Yes, I'll be around—when I've got time."

He hung up, walked to Beryl, laid the

phone in her lap, said pleasantly, "All right. Rhinelander 9-1287."

She glared at him

"You're going to call this Mar-Yolo," Hyer predicted, "and you're going to tell him a nice clean fib."

Beryl blanched. "I don't know—"

"No, because I haven't told you yet. You're going to tell him that the police are on to what happened after you left your car, that they're here to take you in for questioning. They've given you time to dress and you're using it to warn him that if he doesn't have that boy turned loose—have the boy telephone here himself to prove that he's been turned loose—in the next five minutes, you're going to have to tell the cops everything you know."

"Please," Beryl quavered. "Please, Mr. Hyer. I couldn't do—"

"All right." Hyer reached for the phone. "Then it won't *be* a fib."

Her trembling hands came to life and she began dialing frantically.

HYER strolled across the room and sat down in a chair by the bed. On the bed within arm's reach was a purse. Beryl, fury now high in her restless eyes, flounced about suddenly on the chaise longue with her back to him.

Hyer, with the expression of a man to whom a small and unexpected favor has come, picked up the purse and opened it. While Beryl spoke in a low voice into the phone, his fingers expertly violated its every nook. The only item which afforded him any satisfaction was a short-barreled, bone-handled .32 revolver—a peculiar enough trinket to find in a feminine pocketbook, but one which bore out Quick's statement that she had threatened him with a gun. He memorized the serial number, slipped the revolver back, replaced the purse, and was lazily taking a cigarette from his case when she completed her message and turned to meet his mordant eye.

"Now," Hyer said affably, "since we've got ten minutes or so, maybe there are some things you'd like to ask me."

Suddenly her fury vanished. She leaned forward impulsively, her lips parted. "Oh, that's good of you. Yes, there is a question I *must* ask you, Mr. Hyer." One clenched hand at her breast, her eyes burning, she said intensely, "When *were* you born, Mr. Hyer. The truth now."

"May fifteenth, nineteen hundred."

"Then you *are* Taurus, really! But—" She looked startled. "At a quarter to seven yesterday morning, Mars completed the square of Saturn— What time *did* Marcia come to you, Mr. Hyer?"

Hyer looked innocent. "Just as I was having breakfast." (Any man may be allowed a tactical error of seven hours.)

Beryl screamed and clutched the chaise longue. "No. *No!* It mustn't be—" She controlled herself, drew a long quivering breath and smiled wistfully. "Oh dear, I allow things to upset me so. How often I've wished *I* were Taurus, I were like you—"

Hyer, blinking, said, "What—?"

"Gemini." Then with a light nervous laugh, "That's always made for a very special bond between Rich and me."

"About that Mars and Saturn business," Hyer said, interested, "they couldn't have collided about fifteen minutes ago, could they?"

Beryl frowned. Then she laughed gaily. "Planets don't collide, Mr. Hyer. At least," pursing her lips, "they—never—*have.*"

A change appeared abruptly in her face, as if her scattered defenses had instantaneously fused into a new fierce protective spirit. She said in a constricted voice, "You mustn't think for a minute, Mr. Hyer, that Rich had anything to do with it."

"With what?"

"With—with Karl."

Hyer blinked. He said, "That's one for you. Why not?"

"Because Rich had left before Karl *got* to your house."

Hyer, for the moment completely bewildered, said, "How do you know?"

"Because I saw Rich leave."

Hyer said, "Wait a minute. Did all you people have a convention down there in Bank Street tonight?"

The deadly earnestness of her manner was not to be shaken. "I'm going to trust you, Mr. Hyer. Even Marcia doesn't know this yet, but— Well, a little after twelve last night—" She sat utterly still, staring at him, the fingers of one hand beating a tattoo on the cushion beside her.

Hyer absently snuffed out his cigarette, selected a fresh one and tapped it on the back of his case. "Go on."

"I had gone down to see you," she said, speaking barely above a whisper. "I felt I *had* to talk to you. I rang your bell. There was no response. I waited a minute. The hall was dark."

"Which hall?"

"The first floor. Inside the door." She stopped, swallowed.

"Yes?" Hyer's tapping cigarette was still.

"As I turned away," Beryl whispered, "I thought I saw—I thought I saw a man —a man's figure just inside the door in the shadows."

Hyer put the cigarette between his lips, lighted it. He said, "A man?"

"I think so."

"It couldn't have been a woman?"

She hesitated, started to speak, made a gesture with her hand weakly. "It was dark," she whispered.

Hyer waited. "And what about Rich?"

She drew herself together again. Speaking softly, but not whispering now, she said, "I went back to my car. I thought I would stay there a little while—until you might come. I was sitting there quietly when a car started up a little distance ahead of me. It was muddy. I saw the license number for an instant when its lights went on. At first it didn't register with me. Then, with a shock I saw the letter in the license—saw that it was from the region around Manitou—and I thought I recognized the car."

"Whose car?"

SHE said, "Augusta Warren's," her voice strengthening. "She was my husband's housekeeper once, Mr. Hyer. A thoroughly dislikable woman with a shrewish temper and hateful manners. She lives at Manitou Lake, though why Nat ever built that cottage for her and— But you're not interested in that, Mr. Hyer, are you?" She smiled stiffly. "By the time I recognized the car, it was some distance away. I set out after it, but lost it." She stopped, and fear touched her restless eyes again. "When I found out it had been Rich—when Rich came to me out there at—at that place—"

Again Hyer waited. "So that's why you told him to get out of town and back to Manitou Lake as fast as he could?"

"Isn't it reason enough?"

"Isn't what reason enough?"

"Why—what happened to Karl."

Hyer said, "Oh, they told you, did they —Marcia and Dawson?"

She nodded eagerly, "The moment I came in, they—" She stopped short, as if what she were about to add hung teetering over an abyss.

The corner of Hyer's mouth drew down. "The minute you came in, yes. And about *twenty* minutes after you had advised Rich to skeddadle out of town. Suggestive, isn't it, Mrs. Thayer?"

"I was afraid Rich had been seen down there in Bank Street," she said calmly. "I remembered that shadowy person inside the door as I rang. I didn't know *what* might have happened I had an ominous foreboding. Psychic. And Clearse Owen had told me over the phone at dinner time that—"

"That before morning something might happen to Sandlund?" Hyer nodded. "Marcia let me in on that." Then he paused and studied her, regret in his glance. "With all the practice you've had, you don't do it as well as you should." He waved his hand.

She stared at him, gave a bitter laugh. "If you *knew* what that man had *done* to me, Mr. Hyer!"

Hyer lifted his eyebrows.

Beryl flushed and the tapping fingers clenched. "He's a cheap philanderer," she said through stiff lips. "He's a—a *goat!*" her voice shaking with suddenly released passion. She choked.

Hyer took Thayer's wallet from his

pocket and said, "Did he ask you to bring him this tonight, or was that your own idea?"

Beryl gasped, clutched the cushions. Her eyes widened. "How did you know about that?"

"Never mind. Why did you take it?"

She struggled. "He—told—me—to," she whispered.

"Told you it would help him find your husband if he had something—Mr. Thayer had on when he disappeared?"

"But Nat *didn't* have it when he went away that night," Beryl cried, her eyes suddenly fearful. "He had left it on the dresser. That's the *truth,* the *truth,* Mr. Hyer. The absolute truth. I found it on the dresser in the Lodge the next morning. I took it to him because—" She broke off, one hand fumbling at her throat. "I was desperate," she said, and her tone was genuinely anguished. "I swallowed my pride and went to *that man.* He said if he had something of Nat's—something Nat had had at the very last—" Her cheeks blazed. "Mr. Hyer, if you can unmask *that man,*" she cried hoarsely, "I'll pay you—I'll pay you anything you say."

Hyer studied the end of his cigarette. "I'd say—about ten thousand dollars."

She ran to him. "You can put him behind bars?" she panted. "In the electric chair?"

Hyer looked up, startled. "That's a pretty fancy definition for 'unmask.'"

"But I mean it. You can—?" She paused to quell the turbulence of her fury. "If you can establish a criminal charge against Clearse Owen, I'll pay you ten thousand dollars."

Hyer turned the coal of his cigarette thoughtfully in an ash tray. He looked up, said, "That's fair enough. What can you give me to start on?"

*"He's a fraud!"*

Hyer said, "Tut, tut."

"But I mean it. He's not using his own name—or—or—" She struggled again to control herself in the face of this heinous charge—"or *even—his—own—birthdate,"* she said hoarsely.

"How do you know that?"

"He told me. He told me himself once. We were— Well, never mind. But he told me. I think he's regretted it ever since." She shivered. "It makes me horribly afraid. I'm probably the only living human who knows—that side of him, and if I were done away with, well there wouldn't be anybody."

Hyer said, "What side of him?"

She leaned closer. "Owen tells his clients—especially his women clients—that he's Taurus with Venus trine Mars," she said, her tone dropping to a stiff near-whisper, "but he's not." Convulsively she gripped Hyer's sleeve. "He's *Scorpio."*

Hyer said, "Dear me."

"But he *is!* He told me all. *All.* I wrote it down. Later—not long ago, I cast his natal horoscope." Her shoulders jerked. "It *appalled* me, Mr. Hyer. Wait," she cried, springing up. "You don't believe me, do you? Well, I can prove it. I can prove it to you. Everything I say."

SHE fled to a desk across the room and with shaking hands unlocked a drawer. Papers fluttered to the floor as she rummaged through the drawer. Not finding what she sought she took the key to unlock another drawer and in her eagerness dropped it twice. At last she gave a cry of triumph and came running back to Hyer just as the telephone rang.

Hyer's hand leaped for it before she could pick the instrument up. He said, "Hello," glanced at the number in the face of the dial, "yes, that's right . . . Oh, you're the chap that works for Owen? Let you go, did they? . . . Well, get on back there and be more careful of the company you keep after this . . ." The smile struggling at the corners of his mouth broke through suddenly. He said, "That goes for you, too," and hung up.

Turning, he crushed out his seventh, half-smoked cigarette, and dropped the case into his pocket with a hand gone surprisingly nerveless. He had to fight down an impulse to touch his dewed forehead. "Who is this Mar-Yolo?" he asked.

Beryl's eyes glistened. "A marvelous man, Mr. Hyer, perfectly marvelous. Why, he's even read my *Pluto*. He reads *all* his clients' Pluto. Why Pluto was only *discovered* ten years ago, Mr. Hyer. Think what that means! Think what it means to *all* of us. Five thousand years of mystery," her voice dropped reverently, "and now—*we know*." She paused an instant, her lips parted, her restless eyes glowing. "That is the kind of a man Mar-Yolo is, Mr. Hyer. A strong, admirable force. So intolerant of charlatans and quacks that bring disrepute—" Her eyes darkened, and mouth compressed.

"Charlatans and quacks," Hyer helped her politely.

"He is being intimidated, Mr. Hyer," she said rapidly. "He and every other honest practitioner — intimidated by this — this *ghoul* that calls himself Clearse Owen. Owen sets himself up as a czar, a—a Capone—a racketeer. He demands tribute, and those who refuse to pay—great loyal souls like Mar-Yolo—are brutally intimidated. If Owen is not stopped," she cried, and there was desperation in her voice, "soon the very science itself—the oldest science in the history of the human race —will be reduced to charlatanry."

Hyer said, "Dear me. We ought to do something."

"And we *will*. Here, Mr. Hyer," triumphantly holding the paper out to him. "Take this. Do what you will with it. Even though it cost my life. This—*this* is the man behind that mask!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE PLANETS DON'T LIE

DAY had come when Hyer stepped out of a cab in Bank Street and ran up a flight of stone steps several doors west of and on the opposite side of the street from his own house. He pushed a button and waited. The door-latch buzzed with little delay and Hyer walked into the hall.

Just to his right a door opened, and a youth in horn-rimmed spectacles peered out. His sleeves were rolled back, and over his vest a necktie dangled free from his loosened collar. He said, "Did you wish to see Professor Remsen?"

"That's right."

The youth said, "He's awfully busy."

Hyer said, "Thanks, son," and walked into a large book-filled room untidy with papers. The curtains were closely drawn. Tobacco smoke hung heavy in the air, made soft yellow cones of the radiance cast by a desklight and a bridge lamp a few feet from the desk. Another youth, oblivious to Hyer's entrance, was hunched over the desk clicking a slide rule.

In a morris chair under the bridge lamp, sat a man with a high narrow forehead and thin knife-edged features. He glanced up, his deepset eyes lively, brilliant, penetrating. He said, "Hank," and though his thin precise lips scarcely moved and his sharp features were immobile there was an overtone of warmth in his manner. To the lad at the desk and the one by the door he said, "All right, boys. Enough for one evening."

Hyer blinked. *"Evening?"*

A clock on the mantel piece, half hidden by books and a leaning pipe rack, said ten minutes past five.

When the boys had gone, Hyer asked curiously, "Don't you get enough of that sort of thing over at the university in classrooms?"

"Asked to go a little deeper into complex variables. Glad to help them. Well?"

Embarrassment suddenly clouded Hyer's candor. He said, "You remember that Sunday night you and Al Jocelyn and I stopped in at the St. Julian bar?"

Remsen nodded.

"Well, I've got—" Hyer stopped, looked with sharp suspicious eyes at the mathematician. "You haven't talked to Al Jocelyn since then?"

"No."

RELIEF smoothed Hyer's brow. "I'm just as glad of that. I'd rather eat my own words myself than have 'em fed to me." He sat on the edge of the desk and looked down at Remsen, the sheerest edge

of truculence in his manner. "You remember I said that if I got mixed up in fortune-telling I'd appreciate it if you'd remind me I was ready for Bellevue? All right," sharply, "never mind the wisecracks, but I'm mixed up in it."

Not a muscle in Remsen's sharp face twitched.

Hyer hunched himself farther up on the desk and drew a breath. He said, "Thanks. I'm mixed up in it, all right," he added, and the corner of his mouth rose. "Up to here." He touched the lump on the side of his head and winced. "What do you know about it?"

"Not a thing."

"I mean about astrology."

"Historical, topical, descriptive, judicial, or prognostic?"

"Exactly."

"Well?"

"Know how to cast a horoscope, do you?" Hyer asked hopefully.

"Why?"

"Good. Now," Hyer said, "what I want to know is this. If they can be worked forward, can they be worked backward, too?"

"Why not? Simple functions."

Hyer looked relieved. He drew from his pocket the paper Beryl had given him. He smoothed it on his knee. "All right. Want to copy this?" He waited while the mathematician took a pad and pencil. Squinting at the paper, Hyer said, "What does a circle with a dot in it mean?"

"Sun."

"Fine. Sun ten degrees five minutes—um, what's an M with a pointed tail?"

"Scorpio. Sun ten degrees five minutes Scorpio. Go on."

Hyer squinted again. "What's a circle with a tail?"

"Venus."

Hyer looked up, pleased. "No kidding? Well, Venus two degrees twenty-nine minutes that same thing, Scorpio." He frowned at the paper, stumbled over something he was about to say, shrugged, and handed it to Remsen. "Here. You copy 'em. You can read these curlicues. But I want the original back." As the mathematician's long fingers closed on the sheet, Hyer said, "By the way, what does Neptune in Aquarius mean? Anything special?"

Remsen's lively eyes narrowed. After a moment he said, "Hasn't been in Aquarius for eighty years."

Honest satisfaction glowed in Hyer's round face. "Then anybody who would be mumbling about that today is likely to be a fake astrologer?"

"Can't say. Be a fake astronomer certainly."

Hyer took out his cigarettes and sat back. "In this case," he said comfortably, "it comes to the same thing."

AN HOUR later, he met Marcia and Dawson at the entrance to Gracie Square. As they had ham and eggs in a Broadway cafeteria, he gave an account (complete and unexpurgated, save for a prudent withholding of Quick's true identity and his own visit to the mathematician in Bank Street) of what had happened.

"You were attacked?". Marcia said aghast. "And Beryl admits she arranged it?"

"Don't be too hard on her. She thought she was doing her personal Merlin a good turn. His name's Mar-Yolo, and he reads your Pluto. Whatever that means."

Marcia grimaced. "It sounds indecent. Go on."

"Clearse Owen has apparently been trying to organize the profession and making things hard for this Mar-Yolo and a lot of other small-time talent that wouldn't throw in with him and pay for protection. So Beryl thought that if she could turn over one of Owen's men to them that might help them get something on Owen. Don't ask me," he added quickly. "It's her story."

Marcia frowned. "It sounds like something out of a gangster serial. It doesn't sound real. Hired thugs!"

"Why," Dawson said thoughtfully, "was she so anxious for Rich to go back to the Lake right away?"

"And what," Marcia added, "was she doing at Owen's last night? You might at least have asked her that."

Hyer nodded. "Yes. And have gotten a fourteen-carat lie that might have been some good to a psychiatrist."

They ate for a time in silence.

Dawson said, "I wonder what she's planning to do today."

"Maybe we should stay here and watch her," Marcia suggested.

Hyer's no was emphatic. "I'm too anxious to see this place in the mountains."

Marcia leaned toward him. "Do you think that up there—?"

"I don't think until I get there. By the way, how about this chauffeur, Eller? Why wasn't he driving for Beryl last night?"

"She had taken a cab. And then since we had Eller and the big car—" Marcia stopped and frowned. "But you said she had come from Owen's in the Chrysler, her own car. She must have come home and got it. When did she do that?"

Hyer said, "I can probably guess within five minutes. But never mind. Right now, I'm curious about Eller. Something was gnawing on him when he drove us out to Owen's. What was it?"

No one spoke immediately.

Hyer saw his two companions look at each other. He said, "Well?" testily, and winced as the lump behind his ear throbbed with fresh abandon.

"I noticed that, too," Marcia said slowly. "I found myself thinking of Lawrence. You remember, do you, Pierre?"

Dawson nodded. "He committed suicide."

"Who?" Hyer asked.

"Lawrence, Eller's son."

"When?"

"Last fall." Dawson crushed a crumb of toast with his knife. "He was a queer, moody lad. He'd fallen hard for Owen's guff."

Hyer looked at Marcia.

THE girl nodded. "Lawrence was up at camp last summer during his vacation. He was crazy about mathematics, and Owen's observatory fascinated him. When Eller found out that Lawrence had gone for the rest of it, too, he was furious."

"At your father?"

Dawson said, "No. At Owen."

The corners of Marcia's mouth drew down. "Yes," she said candidly, "at Dad, too. But he'd been Dad's chauffeur for twelve years, and he was too fond of Dad to blame him. Well, about two weeks after school opened last fall Lawrence committed suicide. He was a freshman at Columbia. Afterward they found a lot of poetry and scribblings among his things. I saw some of it." Marcia shuddered. "Weird uncanny kind of stuff—about death mostly, and transmigration. That kind of thing. It pointed right at Owen's mumbo-jumbo. He had told the boy," she added bitterly, "that people of his type were likely to commit suicide. That should have made it murder."

"Then Eller shares Beryl's opinion of Owen?"

"Eller hates him, yes." In a moment Marcia added softly, "He almost went crazy when Lawrence died. Dad sent him on a cruise. When he came back, he seemed to be all right again, only—well, I haven't seen him smile since it happened."

"By Jove," Dawson said abruptly.

Marcia looked at him. "What?"

"I suppose this has already occurred to you, Hyer. The fact," he went on slowly, "that it wasn't until *I* called *her* Thursday noon that Beryl said anything to me about Nat's disappearing."

Hyer nodded. "It had occurred to me."

"One of us," Marcia said determinedly, "has got to stay here today and watch Beryl. Shall I do it, Mr. Hyer, or Pierre?"

Hyer looked doubtful. "It probably won't do any good."

"It can't do any harm," the girl retorted.

Hyer said, "Well— You might be working on those checks, Dawson."

So it was arranged that Dawson would stay in New York and make what excuses he could to maintain a close vigil on Beryl's movements, telephoning a report to them at nine o'clock that night.

They were on the point of leaving the table when Dawson said suddenly, "Wait a minute. I had meant to try to figure this

out myself," he went on, "but you ought to know about it, Hyer."

Marcia said quickly, "Know about what?"

Dawson looked from one to the other of his two companions. "Has it occurred to you that there is something peculiarly consistent about these occurrences?" he asked.

"Consistent?" Marcia echoed.

Hyer nodded. "Somebody is awfully anxious to throw evidence everybody's way but his own."

Dawson's lips tightened. "You've seen it, too, then? The telephone call to my garage, and theft of my car—to point suspicion at Rich. Sandlund's murder at your door—to make the police doubtful about you. The telephone calls to Marcia last night—which she might have difficulty explaining too clearly if she had to." He paused. "There are probably other things we haven't turned up yet. That shot at me last night and Sandlund's showing up almost immediately, for example. Who put him up to coming in just then when he was bound to look suspicious?"

Hyer nodded again. "It's too late to ask him now."

"Somebody saw to that." The corner of Dawson's mouth tightened. "Well, I've another exhibit for you." He took out his wallet. "*This* one was evidently meant for me." He opened the wallet and took from it a sheet of notepaper. Smoothed out on the table, the notepaper proved to have several lines of typescript on it.

Marcia leaned over, looking at the typing, intently curious. She said, "What in the world?"

The notesheet was worn from much folding. Across the top was typed, "Notified Wednesday, May 3." And below this were five names with addresses in Washington, Chevy Chase, and Alexandria. Three of the names were checked lightly in pencil.

"Those are friends of Dad's," Marcia said, frowning.

"They're friends of mine, too," Dawson added. He looked at Hyer. "You get it, do you?"

"Those were men who were supposed to see Rich in the Mayflower lobby Thursday afternoon," Marcia said breathlessly. "'Notified'— But where did you find this, Pierre?"

"Right here," Dawson answered. "Right here in my wallet—where—it—was—meant—to—be—found."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

"Last night," Dawson said slowly, "when we came back from Owen's, I missed my wallet. It had been taken. I didn't discover that, though, until I was going to bed, and since there had only been twelve dollars in it, I decided not to make a fuss." He paused, and the corner of his mouth drooped. "This morning it was in my pocket. It was the sheerest accident that I noticed it was gone when I undressed. Otherwise I wouldn't have examined it this morning."

He opened the wallet and slipped up a flap cunningly concealed. "This pocket," he explained, "is a gadget. Secret compartment, you know. I'd never used it in my life. But I looked in it this morning, out of curiosity—and found this note. Nestling there as sweetly as you please."

"And those men—?" Marcia began.

"Those men," Dawson said evenly, his eyes hard, "had each received a telegram—*from me*—last Wednesday afternoon asking them to meet me in the Mayflower lobby Thursday afternoon." He paused again. "Thirty minutes apart."

"To identify Rich," Marcia cried. Then, "But how do you know?"

"I phoned Ted Rawl just before we left the house. He told me. He said they were all sore as the devil at me."

Hyer looked at Dawson and whistled softly.

"And that," Dawson added, "isn't all."

Hyer said, "What else?"

"You know the police found the gun that fired through my window last night. It was down a manhole at the corner," he explained to Marcia. "A Savage .250. They checked the bullet. The serial number had been filed off."

Hyer said, "Well?"

"I can't be certain, of course," Dawson

said softly, "until they reconstruct the serial number, but—"

"But what?" Marcia demanded.

"If that is not my own rifle, stolen from a locker up at Manitou, then it's my rifle's twin."

There was a moment of silence.

Hyer whistled again. He said, "Not losing any time, are they?"

"Apparently not. My God," Dawson burst out. "Suppose I hadn't found this list in my wallet, and I'd been searched, say." He drew a breath, said, "Whew."

"Maybe we can find the machine it was done on," Hyer said hopefully. He folded the paper and put it in his own notebook. "Well, maybe it *will* be a good idea for one of us to keep an eye on Beryl today."

Dawson said, "Don't worry," grimly.

## CHAPTER XX

### CLUES AT NOON

WHEN Hyer was silent as Marcia and he sped along Henry Hudson Parkway, she said, "Well, what do you know about what happened to Karl?"

The discomfort in Hyer's head, together with a dull mustard-colored taste at the back of his mouth and a certain skewed unease in his normally sanguine conscience, made his outlook on life at that moment a little on the decadent side.

"Only," he said with fine irony, "that it was done by a one-legged man with a yellow necktie, a red wig, a cast in his left eye, and a yen for grapes on alternate Fridays." He looked at the girl, and before the amusement in her blue eyes his own rancor dissolved.

For a time they rode in silence, then Marcia said reluctantly, "I promised I wouldn't ask any more questions, but—Pierre says you told him something last night which made him terribly curious."

"What?"

"Did you tell him that second telephone call from—Dad had come because you tricked someone into making it?"

"You could call it that, yes."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we were luckier than we had any right to be. Luckier than we're likely to be again. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I'm all wrong."

"Then you do know," she challenged. "You do know who— That is, what happened to Dad."

Hyer said, "Don't you?"

She shook her head.

Hyer was on the point of adding something else, but when he saw the stricken look that had appeared in her eyes, he caught himself.

Shortly after noon they left the smug neat farms of the Mohawk Valley behind, and for the next hour climbed steadily, imperceptibly, at first through ragged stretches of scrub oak and popple that covered burnt-over hillsides, then along miles of reforested plantations of young spruce, silver-sheathed in their new shoots. As they gained altitude, snow patches showed here and there among the thickening trees and under bramble thickets.

Here on the high, lake-dotted plateau from which the Adirondacks proper rise, the air was cold, light, bracing. Hyer despite the allergy which always oppressed him when he forsook his accustomed urban haunts, found himself responding almost with enthusiasm as they wound deeper and deeper into the woods.

But just before one a strident complaint in the motor halted them at the roadside and when they finally limped into the next settlement, examination showed a faulty bushing and seized shaft in the generator. Replacement, ordered by telephone from Utica, arrived within two hours, but it was sunset when they were ready to go on.

At last, in fading daylight, they rounded a curve and, without leaving the forest behind, were squarely in the midst of the village of Manitou Lake. A dozen houses, a general store, a small brick bank, and several closed souvenir and gift shops were clustered about the head of a side road which struck off sharply to the left and ran down to where the sheen of water showed faintly a quarter of a mile away.

Marcia said, "That's MacKinnon's," and pointed to an official car standing before a house that bore a small illuminated sign, *State Police* "There's Mac," she added as a trooper came from the house.

Hyer said, "Let's talk to him."

She drew up behind the car and they waited.

Hyer saw that she had paled, saw her hand tighten on the wheel as MacKinnon approached them.

THE trooper was a young man with a brown face and the longest jaw Hyer had ever seen. As he recognized Marcia he jerked off his hat.

The girl leaned across Hyer, said, "Hello, Mac," then, "Mr. Hyer, Mr. MacKinnon."

The two men shook hands.

There was a moment of awkward embarrassment which Hyer resolved with delicate tact.

"Sure," MacKinnon said hospitably in answer to the detective's question, "go right through the office and the bedroom behind it. The door's open. You can't miss."

When he came out of the house a few minutes later, Hyer saw that the tall trooper was standing, one foot on Marcia's runningboard, leaning down, talking to her earnestly through the window. As he came up to them, Hyer saw further that Marcia was white, that she was controlling herself with an effort. To MacKinnon he said, "You had pretty slim material to arrest a man on."

"I guess it was," MacKinnon agreed. He looked at Marcia.

For an instant her blue eyes were frantic, then she said hoarsely, "Go on, tell him."

"We found the car Saturday," MacKinnon said. "The plates were gone but the serial number checked with one that had come over the teletype last Wednesday. It was down off the road in a swamp."

"When Mac saw it was Pierre's," Marcia broke in, "and saw all that about somebody's countermanding the wash order in Forest Hills Monday night, he remembered what I said about Rich's being with Pierre when Dad phoned." She bit her lip and the distress in her eyes quickened.

"So you went out to talk to Lanning?" Hyer asked.

MacKinnon nodded. "He says he came up on the train Tuesday morning, but he admits he didn't get out to Mr. Thayer's camp until after noon. Says he walked out from Big Moose, but we can't find anybody to verify that."

"What about the train crew?" Hyer asked.

"We tried that. We took him to the station when the train went through yesterday morning. Neither the conductor nor the brakeman could place him for sure. Of course, it's been more than a week."

"Go over the car for fingerprints?" Hyer asked.

MacKinnon, apparently on the point of a caustic reply, checked himself. He said, "Yes, sir," politely.

Hyer grinned. "I have to impress my client." He got in.

"There is something else, Miss Thayer," MacKinnon said. "Will you wait here a minute?" He turned, went back into the house.

Hyer got in beside Marcia.

She refused to look at him, staring down the deserted village road in the dusk. Her gloved fingers moved spasmodically on the wheel.

Hyer murmured, "Take it easy."

MacKinnon returned, ducked down to talk through the window. "Miss Thayer says you're working on— That is, you're helping her locate her father."

Hyer said, "That may be stretching it a little bit."

"I've got something here that—well, it looks funny, Miss Thayer."

He had a small packet, which, as he unfolded it, proved to be a sealed envelope containing a flat round object. Across the lip of the flap in the empty half of the envelope, a time seal was stamped. "I had that done at the railroad station," MacKinnon explained, shining a flashlight on the time-stamp. It showed eleven-thirty

the morning before. "You're witnesses to the time this was sealed up, anyway." He slit the flap. "I didn't know what to do with this, Miss Thayer, when I found it on him. By rights I ought to've turned it in, but you said you didn't want anything to get out about your father yet, so—Well, I locked it up myself. This."

He took a watch from the envelope.

In the reflected glow from MacKinnon's torch, Marcia's pallor was suddenly shot with a flush. She held her hand out for the watch. The hand trembled.

"You know whose it is, Miss Thayer?" MacKinnon asked.

She nodded, whispered, "Dad's."

Her fingers closed about the watch and she looked desperately at Hyer. She said, "It's got his name engraved in the front."

The watch had a hunting case, scroll work on both front and back.

THE trembling of her fingers now uncontrolled, Marcia pressed the stem, opened the cover. She held the watch so Hyer could see.

Engraved on the inner face of the cover was, *Nathan Thayer, August seventh, nineteen-hundred and thirty-seven.*

"The date," MacKinnon said "stumped me. It's an old watch. You remember his carrying it, do you?"

Marcia nodded.

"How recently?" Hyer asked.

She looked from one man to the other and hesitated. "Where did you find it, Mac?" Her voice had a flat, hopeless quality.

MacKinnon, responding to the mood that had seized her, looked from Marcia to Hyer. The gravity of his long face was touched with embarrassment. To Hyer he said, "It was in his pocket."

"Rich's pocket?" Marcia whispered.

"At first," MacKinnon said to Hyer, "he wasn't going to let me have it. He wouldn't say where he got it. I had to kind of argue with him before he'd give it to me." He waited, without looking at her, for Marcia to speak.

There was a silence.

"When was the last time you saw your father with this watch?" Hyer asked.

She said, "Monday morning. Just before he started up here." She tried to smile at MacKinnon. "Thanks a lot, Mac," huskily. "Now that I've identified it, you can leave it with me, can't you?"

MacKinnon pushed back his campaign hat, scratched the side of his head. He said, "Do you know an Elizabeth Hawtrey, Miss Thayer?"

Marcia frowned. "Elizabeth Hawtrey? Why yes. She was Rich's mother. Beryl's sister," she added to Hyer.

MacKinnon said, "Let me show you something," softly, and reached for the watch. He took out his knife, inserted the blade under the back of the watch, snapped it open. There was a wafer of thin paper bearing the maker's name and pertinent information. MacKinnon snicked the paper out with the point of his knife blade. He stared at the inside of the back cover for a moment, then looked up and handed Marcia the watch.

Marcia's eyes widened with incredulity. Color ebbed again from her face. At Hyer's movement, she made a quick defensive gesture, immediately controlled. She laid the watch in his hand.

Words engraved in the slightly concave surface said, "For Elizabeth Hawtrey on her nineteenth birthday. April 25, 1914."

"Look here, Miss Thayer," MacKinnon said quietly, "you'd better let me send out a missing persons alarm for—"

"No." The command was peremptory, sharp. "I mean, Mac," she added, her voice stiff from the effort to be calm. "There's no proof yet that Dad didn't just go away for a little while, for his own reasons. Look, Mac, as long as the State hasn't any interest in Dad, you've got to let me do this my own way."

MacKinnon shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," she answered, her brisk tone just failing to be genuine. "But until we've more to go on, this is just between you and me. Off the record."

MacKinnon saluted, said, "O.K., Miss

Thayer," shortly. "Glad to have met you, Hyer." He walked forward to get in his car. A moment later it swung in a wide arc and sped past them without a sign from its driver.

Hyer closed the watch and put it in his pocket.

Marcia started the motor, swerved them into the highway and on out of the little settlement.

## CHAPTER XXI

### UNWILLING SLUMBER

SUDDENLY Marcia said, "There isn't a place in the world to compare with this, you know. Dad was terribly fond of it," she went on, speaking rapidly, jerkily. "He'd taken his buck out of here every fall since he was a boy. He used to tell me about it. They had to pack in then. The road wasn't built this far. He'd fished every lake and flow within a hundred miles. He used to say there isn't better sport to be had anywhere. Lake trout, brook trout, whitefish, bull bass, landlocked salmon—there's a fish. Landlocked salmon. Best game fish in the world. Scrappy. They'll take a hook, come out of the water five or six feet and head straight for the bottom. The biggest one Dad ever took, he pulled right out of Manitou Lake. Last summer. I was with him that day. It's mounted in the hall at the Lodge. You'll see it tonight."

As abruptly as she had begun speaking, she fell silent.

A moment afterward they turned off the asphalt into a narrower road scarcely wide enough for two cars to pass. Here the way grew steadily wilder. The road twisted and turned in its narrow sinuous channel through undergrowth that walled them in darkly on both sides. Now and again as they rounded a curve—so sharply that it was an appreciable instant before the headlights picked up the road ahead—bushes hissed along the side of the car.

Hyer, on whom wheeled speed was having its invariable effect, clutched the seat and fought his eyes from the speedometer. Marcia was driving fast, taking them over rises with a swooping ascent and breathless drop, letting them skid briefly on a turn now and then, but with never a false move. Apparently familiar with every rod of the way, she sat, leaning a little forward, staring intensely down the brilliant wash of the headlights, her hands high on the wheel, elbows braced against the spokes, swaying lightly like a horseman as she wove them through the rushing dark.

After a time Hyer sat back, his reflexes disarmed by the careless confidence of the girl beside him. After that brief monologue she had not spoken again, and Hyer, appalled at thought of deflecting her attention even momentarily, was quite content to ride in silence.

They skidded around a curve and brought up in flying gravel before a massive rustic gate that barricaded the road. On each side, stretching away from the stone pillars that supported the gate, a cleared firestrip some twenty feet wide struck off, straight as a surveyor's line into the forest.

Marcia said, "Never mind," as Hyer started to get out. "I've a key."

She ran forward toward a heavy padlock hanging in a hasp where the gates came together in the center.

ONLY the rustling of the motor broke the forest-bound stillness. The air was cold, fragrant with balsam and the soft brackish odor of leaf mould. Then a clink of metal sounded and the heavy halves of the gate swung open like the doors of a well disciplined vault.

"That's funny," Marcia said, getting in, "the lock was open."

"What's the point of locking it anyway?" Hyer asked. "There's no fence."

"We're in the state park. Fences are against the law."

Hyer said, "Sure," as if the discovery were of great moment. "Game."

She nodded.

"But there's a fence around the observatory?" he asked.

"You can close off gardens, small spaces. Not an estate."

Just as they passed the pillars, Hyer noted a narrow dirt road that went off to their left down the firestrip. It was scarcely more than a track.

"Where does that go?" he asked.

"Over the mountain. Nowhere in particular. It comes out on the main road after while."

She drew up and Hyer got out to close the gates.

When this was done, he stood a moment in the darkness, nostrils twitching, ears strained to the vast alien silence, every nerve alert. As he returned to the car he found himself unconsciously walking on the balls of his feet to soften the crunch of gravel, and annoyance smote him.

The character of the road had not changed now that they were within the bounds of the camp. If anything, the way was even wilder. Save for the gate, there was no sign they had entered private grounds. In three-quarters of a mile, they passed a fork.

Hyer said, "Where does that go?"

"To Augusta Warren's cottage."

"Oh yes. The ex-housekeeper. Where Rich has been staying?"

"Yes."

A clearing opened out and Hyer could see that the gravel drive looped in an oval before a massive, two-story log lodge. A deep veranda ran along the front of the building. At the veranda steps stood a black limousine.

Marcia said, "Oh oh."

"Beryl?"

"Beryl. Pierre," Marcia said irritably, "must have let her find out we were coming up."

"You called somebody up here this morning," Hyer reminded her. "To get ready for us."

"That's right. Beryl must have phoned for some reason and found out they expected us. Well, it can't be helped. Let's go in and get warm."

They crossed the veranda and entered a great square hall which occupied the center of the lodge and served as focus for rooms in the wings off to right and left.

IF THE entrance to the estate had given little evidence of display, that oversight was extravagantly atoned for by the interior of the lodge. The hall itself, rising two full stories, was sharply vaulted overhead, its tilted ceiling ribbed at intervals with walnut beams.

On each side, at the height of the second story, ran a balcony, off which doors opened. Five Oriental prayer rugs hung over the carved railing of the balcony to the right; their lustrous gray-blues and saffrons and tawny reds glowed in the light of leaping flames that at each end of the room filled a fireplace where a man could have stood erect.

On the floor was a vast Chinese rug, sand white, its sinuous pattern picked out in bronze and cobalt. The chairs and several couches were upholstered in leather, russet and green. By the nearer fireplace stood a table with ivory chessmen arrayed on mother-of-pearl and ebony squares. Against the fieldstone chimney at the far end hung a glistening salmon, and midway down the room two ten-pointed stag heads faced each other from the balcony rails.

"The little homestead," Marcia said brightly as Hyer blinked about him in amazement. "A poor thing but our own. This room was Beryl's idea. Br-r-r. I'm congealed."

She dropped into a couch in front of the nearer fire, pulled off her hat and leaned forward to spread her hands to the heat. In the pulsing light, the deft triangular lines of her face were softened.

The door burst open and Beryl rushed in. "Well, where *have* you been all the time?" she cried. "I've been worried sick. Pierre told me you were leaving the city early this morning. When you didn't get here I was frantic, positively frantic." She stopped, looked from Hyer to Marcia. "Rich," she said hoarsely.

Marcia, without turning her head, said, "Rich is all right, Beryl."

"But *where* is he?"

Marcia looked around sharply. "What?"

"He isn't *here*," Beryl wailed.

"He's at Augusta's."

"He's not. He—he didn't come back from New York. Perhaps he's been— Perhaps they've—"

"No," Hyer said, "he's not in jail."

"Thank God!" Beryl's nervous eager face relaxed. "Do you know—do you know I couldn't *bring* myself to go into the village and see. I simply couldn't face him—in jail. I couldn't *do* it. I hadn't realized until I got here— It would humiliate him so. When I think how young and sensitive he is—" She broke off and her restless eyes tensed again. "That *man* is here."

Marcia said, "What man?"

Beryl formed a name with her lips. Then she glanced at Hyer accusingly. "And he brought that evil young ruffian with him." She shuddered. "He's filling the grounds with his henchmen, don't you see? He's going to murder us all. He's got some ghastly scheme and—"

"I'm famished," Marcia broke in. "How about you, Mr. Hyer?"

"Oh, Arch has the grandest meal for you," Beryl broke in eagerly. "You never saw such trout, Mr. Hyer."

Marcia frowned. "Arch?"

"Oh yes." Beryl laughed gaily. "You hadn't heard, had you, dear?" She turned to Hyer and said eagerly, "You see Arch is one of our guides, Mr. Hyer. But he's really the most marvelous cook, and when Jean, our regular cook is gone, why Arch—"

"Where," Marcia asked, "is Jean?"

"He left last night, dear."

"Left?"

"Yes. Quite suddenly it seems. Isn't that odd, Mr. Hyer? I simply can't understand why Jean would want to leave. He's never seemed the least dissatisfied. I'm sure we paid him far more than he could have made in the city, and the French are naturally a rural people, aren't they? Why, we had a short wave radio installed for him here, so—"

"All right," Marcia said. She rose. "Come on, Mr. Hyer. I'll show you your cubbyhole."

"We're going to eat in fifteen minutes," Beryl warned them.

AS HE and Marcia left the hall, Hyer looked back, saw that Beryl was gazing after them with one finger pressed to her lower lip. She caught his eye, brightened with an almost audible click, smiled.

Marcia showed Hyer to his room, a large comfortable chamber on the ground floor.

"Where does our friend Owen stay when he's here?" the detective asked.

"He has a couple of rooms at the other end of the house. Why? Want to be near him?"

"Thanks. I'm all right here."

"It took nerve for him to come up today, the louse. Well, see you in twenty minutes. You've got time to shave if you want. The bathroom's there beyond the beds." She hesitated. "You won't say anything to Rich about the watch."

"Only to him."

"And not unless I'm there," quickly.

Hyer said, "That's fair enough."

When she had gone, he looked about the room, and interest lighted in his bland face.

The walls were papered, above their pine wainscoting, with old scenic paper bearing hunting scenes, red and green against an intense blue background. Antique hooked hugs covered the floor, and the curtains at the three windows were of old blue chintz. The twin beds were inviting and colorful with their yellow candlewick spreads. A low wing chair stood at one side of the fireplace, whose birch logs were already alight. On a table by the chair was a bottle of whiskey, a siphon, and a chromium bowl of ice cubes.

Drink in hand, Hyer opened the bathroom door and snapped on the light. He said, "Ah," with the intonation of a man whom Fate has used surprisingly well.

Twice as he was shaving, his hand jerked from weariness and left a gash in his cheek. Patting the second with a cold towel, he yawned extravagantly, squinting one eye at himself in the mirror. He put down the towel, rubbed his tired eyes, inhaled deeply, and stretched.

But as he reached for his razor, he was seized of another shuddering yawn. Peering

at his caverned face in the mirror, he winced and attempted vainly to work the distended hinges of his jaw. The next instant it was something else that locked his face in that rigid grimace, something that showed wildly in his starting eyes.

Raising an unsteady hand to his now ashen face, he miscalculated grandly, struck the glass shelf, and sent its freight of toiletries crashing to the tile floor. Knowledge can be a chill and daggered asset. It was not the first time Hyer had experienced drugged liquor.

As he stumbled out of the bathroom, a rap sounded at the door and almost immediately it opened. Beryl came in.

THROUGH the fog that was already stealing in from the corners of the room, Hyer could see that her usual impulsive manner was oddly subdued, as she turned and locked the door.

As through a muffling curtain, he heard her, "Why Mr. Hyer, are you ill?" lurched to avoid her helping hand, and clawed at the tentacles of mist that were closing about him.

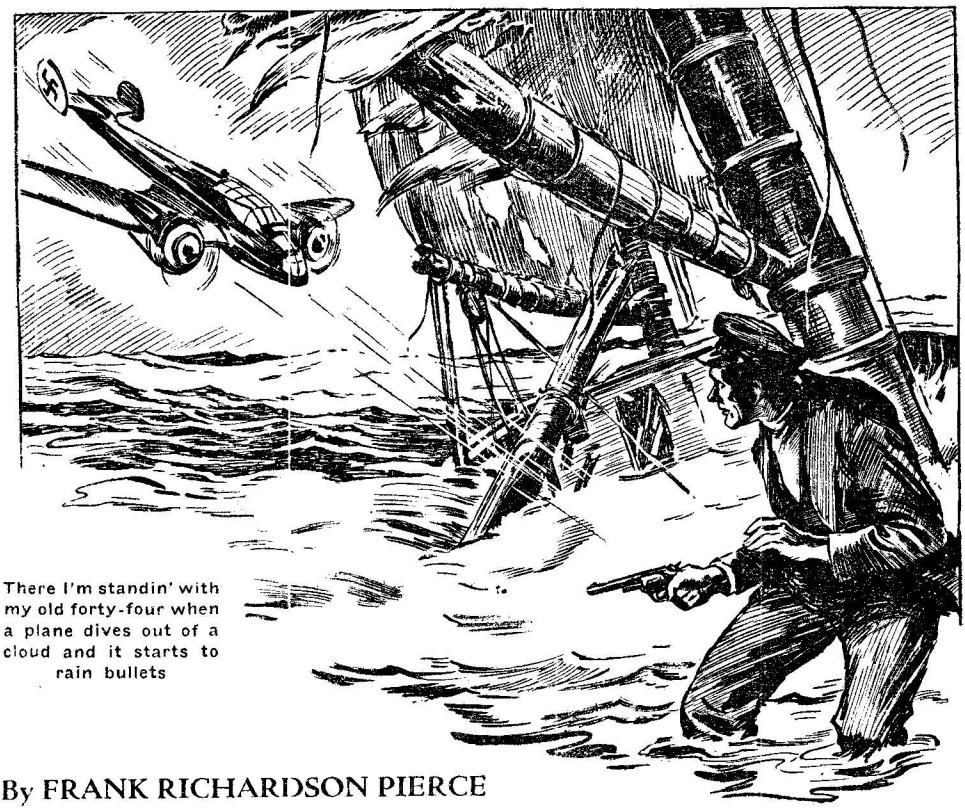
But on the instant, a tiny cleanly wind of suspicion breathed in the darkening cave of his mind, and it was as if a spark awoke to flicker and illumine with naked brilliance what he must do.

There in plain sight, but miles, aeons, light-years, galaxies away, were his coat and vest, hanging on the back of a chair. With a wrench that was like dragging the sea from its bed, he launched himself across that incredible reach.

There was a shock of collision.

Then he was floating toward the door, one palsied hand outstretched to seize the knob. For a time the mechanism of the lock baffled him, but at length his wooden fingers turned the key, and he was in the corridor with one last gram of hoarded strength to bellow, *"Marcia!"*

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



There I'm standin' with my old forty-four when a plane dives out of a cloud and it starts to rain bullets

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The White Oomailik," "Two-Time Loser," etc.

# No-Shirt Rules the Waves

**Admirals come, admirals go; but if the British Empire wants to know how to float a schooner or salvage a cargo, let it sit at the feet of the one and only Warhorse (formerly No-Shirt) McGee**

## I

I'M SETTIN' in my hotel room in Cold Deck, Alaska, with my head in my hands, scowlin' between my fingers at the floor, when Bulldozer Craig comes in.

"What's the trouble, No-Shirt?" he asks. "Are you tryin' to think, or have you got a headache from drinkin' that dynamite you call moose milk?"

"That's a respectable drink," I tell him; "all you do is put a little canned cream into a shaker, pour in a stiff jolt of whisky, then you—"

"I know," he breaks in, "I've seen you make it enough times. You seem to be sober, now, so you must've been tryin' to think."

"I was," I admit. "And gettin' nowhere fast, as usual."

"What's the trouble?"

"Once upon a time there was a sour-

dough named Tim Purdy who thought I was honest," I explain. "One night when he's in his cups he gets to thinkin' he might die sometime and it scares hell out of him. So right then and there he makes out his will.

"One part of the will says, 'And I hereby appoint Michael J. (No-Shirt) McGee the sole executor of this instrument to serve without bond until my youngest child is twenty-one years of age, at which time said McGee shall cause my estate to be divided equally among my heirs, to-wit—' "

"How many to-wits was there?" Bulldozer asks.

"Nine," I tell him. "Us both bein' in our cups at the time we didn't think much about it, but it turns out Tim signs the will, along with witnesses, and the bartender put it in the saloon safe. Nobody thought anything about it until Tim kicks the bucket. Then the will was declared legal and the estate was dumped into my lap, along with nine children, the oldest of which was eleven."

"Nine kids in eleven years," Bulldozer mutters.

"There was two winters when he stayed in Alaska," I explain, "or there'd been eleven kids. The oldest is now twenty-one."

"Which leaves the others at the most expensive age to raise 'em," Bulldozer observes. "What does the estate amount to?"

"The mines petered out three years ago," I answer, "That left the tradin' schooner, the *Helen Staley*. I'd chartered the *Helen* to an Arctic trader. The *Helen Staley* is a four-master, well built, with fine lines and a good bottom—made for ice work.

"The trader died and the schooner was turned back to the estate. That left me without charter money to support the kids. I couldn't find another trader, and I was too busy to operate the schooner myself. Now things are in a bad way."

"Why don't you sell the schooner," he says, "put the money where it'll be safe and solve the problem that way?"

I give him the look a father gives a child who's asked a silly question. "And who's rushin' 'round buyin' wind ships?" I sneer. "There're several in Lake Union, in Seattle, and—"

"Did you know there was a war in Europe?" he asks softly. "And did you know when a war starts, England blockades Germany and says, 'No eats!' and Germany comes right back and says, 'No eats!' and sinks ships bound for England?"

"Don't try tellin' me nothin' about war," I snap. "I was in the last one; took a bunch of malemute and husky dogs to work behind the lines where the snow was deep. Got a kiss and a medal from a he Frenchman."

"What for?" he asks.

"I never found out. I didn't savvy French," I explain.

"Gettin' back to the schooner," he says, "why don't you go down to Vancouver and see if you can't sell it to the Canadians? Or better still, let's load her up, sail her through the mines and submarines to England, sell ship and cargo, make a barrel of money for the kids and some for ourselves. Say! Now there'd be some action."

"We can't do it," I tell him. "There's some kind of a law that says American ships can't operate in them waters. No, the thing to do is to sell the schooner outright. I think I'll take the next boat south and see if I can't put the deal through."

A WEEK later me and Bulldozer are standin' in the office of Captain Jarrett-Page who is picking up likely bottoms for Mother England.

We both like the captain as soon as he shakes hands. He's one of those lads who's always calm. You can imagine him standin' on a battleship's deck while the enemy salvos fall all around, and stifling a yawn.

I start to tell him all about the *Helen Staley*, but he knows the details. It seems a survey has been made of all American bottoms just in case they want to buy a few.

He explains they don't think it hardly worth while to buy a schooner. The long trip to England would be expensive and there was a very good chance she would

be sent to the bottom by a mine or submarine, anyway.

I had a hunch he thought there might come a time when they'd be interested, but not yet.

Then I had another hunch. I scratched my head and he looks me square in the eye and says, "Getting it, eh? Wot, Mr. McGee?"

"I think maybe I am," I tell him. "I suppose it would be against some kind of an international law if you told me I'd get a swell price for schooner and cargo delivered in England?"

"No doubt," he answers.

"But *if* I loaded the schooner with something England needed, say, barrels of fish, cases of salmon, copper and so on, and dropped anchor in some English port, it would prove a profitable voyage, and I'd be paid in cash?" I suggests.

"No doubt," he answers. And again he don't bat an eye.

"But I'd get tangled up with Uncle Sam," I tell him. "I might be sent to jail or something. The schooner would have to be registered as a Canadian ship."

"That could be done," he answers, "for a consideration of one dollar."

"She'd sail as a Canadian schooner, with a Canadian crew," I suggest, "and if she wasn't sunk, then I'd get the rest of the sale price on delivery. If the subs got her I'd be stuck."

"No doubt!" he says. "You'd have to go along as supercargo, Mr. McGee."

"By golly!" Bulldozer yells. "This sounds like somethin'. I ain't had no excitement in a long time. This looks like old man Opportunity knockin' at the door for a fact. Either we make a big clean-up, or we lose our shirts."

"If I lose my shirt," I tell him, "it means the schooner's gone, too, and the kids are left stranded."

"They can't eat a schooner anchored in some Alaskan bay and rottin' her planks out," Bulldozer argues. "The thing for us to do, No-Shirt, is to do this right. Isn't that true, Captain Jarrett-Page?"

"Quite! Er—ah—just to keep the record clear," the captain says, "I know nothing of your plans, have offered you no encouragement or promises. At most you made a few observations in my presence, I made several casual comments, and that's all there was to it."

"If that's your story, Captain," Bulldozer says, "stick to it."

"Quite!" Captain Jarrett-Page answers.

WE LEAVE the captain's office, saunter down the street to a place called the Horse and Hound, and quaff a little ale. Bulldozer follows the ale with whisky chasers and it gives him idears.

"Now, No-Shirt," he says, "suppose we buy salmon, copper and what not, stuff it into the *Helen Staley,* sail her into Vancouver harbor, then talk business. Between us, we've got enough dough from our minin, loggin' operations and what not to buy the cargo ourselves."

"Hold on," I warn, "we can swing the cargo deal, and all that. It seems to me we'd better figger on some way to land that cargo safe in England. The problem is to outsmart the submarines, mines and what not."

"How you goin' to outsmart a mine?" he asks. Then he waves his hand in a way that says he'll forget all worries.

"I'll leave that part of it up to you, No-Shirt. You're the warhorse in this pardnership. You've had military experience. Good old Warhorse McGee."

I can tell by the tone of his voice he's had more'n enough to drink. If he takes any more, he'll want to fight a couple of Englishmen, then we'll be in a mess.

"Come on, Bulldozer," I order, "we're goin' to Seattle and catch a boat for Glacier Inlet. The *Helen Staley* is tied up there."

## II

ON A bleak winter afternoon the steamer puts into Glacier Inlet and stays just long enough to unload Bulldozer Craig. No-Shirt McGee, and our gear.

The cannery watchmen and their

families come down to find out who's crazy enough to land that time of the year. Half the native population is right behind 'em.

"You've been here before, No-Shirt," Bulldozer says; "them middle-aged squaws seem to know you. Musta hit here in your younger days."

"That'll be enough out of you," I tell him. "Let's get our gear aboard the schooner."

It's rainin' and everything's wet. The schooner's cabin is cold and damp, but we get a fire goin', then we go out on deck and man the pumps. There ain't much water in the bilges. Her bottom's in good shape, still.

"But a torpedo will raise hell with it," Bulldozer reminds me.

Except for stores, the schooner's ready to go. Amidships are a couple of boats fitted with heavy duty gasoline engines; and there're plenty of small boats stowed in place. Her bow is sheathed with iron bark, for bucking the ice, and her rudder is equipped with heavy fittin's so it can stand wear and tear.

By the time inspection is finished we go back to the cabin and find it warm and dry. The stove's red hot, and the pot's boilin'.

Late that night the head winter man at the cannery comes aboard. "Thinking of taking her out?" he asks.

"Some," I answer. "May sell her to a British Columbia outfit."

"For the sum of one dollar," Bulldozer says under his breath.

"No reason why you can't pick up a little money carrying freight down to Puget Sound," he says. "Them drums should go." He pointed to great piles of empty drums.

"They were filled with fuel oil and gasoline, but there's been delay in shipping them out again. Got room for 'em?"

"Yep," I answer. "What else can be found around here?" I had hopes of making enough hauling freight to keep the Purdy kids going a few more months. "How about the saltery at Lolly Bay? A few hundred barrels of salted fish will help out."

"Didn't you hear?" he asks. "They went broke. All they've got there's tons of salt. The receiver is tryin' to sell it to some sucker."

"It should be a good buy," I argue; "if it could be bought cheap enough."

"Whoever buys it, better move it," he advises. "Roof leaks, water gets into the salt, it dissolves and runs through the floor into the bay."

I'm smokin' my pipe and a idear hits me so hard I almost bite the stem in two. "Hah!" Bulldozer yells. "Somethin' just clicked. I can tell by the expression on your face. And I'll bet it'll cost us some money."

"Or make us some," I answer. "In a day or two we're goin' to take one of those motorboats and go to the nearest telegraph office. I'd like to leave this country with a full cargo."

"You can communicate with anyone from here by short wave radio," the winter man tells me.

I thank him, still in a daze, wonderin' if my idear is the real thing, or just further proof my branch of the McGee family is mostly screwballs.

A COUPLE of days later I get busy on the short wave radio. And this is what I accomplish. I buy quite a few tons of salt; several thousand barrels of fish; several thousand cases of canned salmon; and I draw down a nice piece of freight money carrying the empty drums to Seattle.

As a final piece of good luck, I agree to pick up two hundred tons of scrap iron and rails at Cordova and land 'em in Vancouver where a Japanese ship can pick it up.

My last act is to pick up a captain, two mates, and enough sailors to man the *Helen Staley*.

When it's all over with Bulldozer beards me in the cabin where I'm up to my ears figgerin' out how much the schooner weighs and how much freight she can carry, and what iron, salt, salmon and barreled fish weigh.

"You must have some Scotch in you," Bulldozer says. He's got Scotch in him,

and it ain't the kind that comes from bottles either. "You're always tryin' to figger out how you'll get the most for your money."

"You don't have to be Scotch to do that," I remind him.

"What is it this time? What kind of cargo will bring the most freight money?" he inquires.

"That's it," I admit. "And unless my figgers are wrong, I've got things figgered down to the pound."

"When you're all through buying stuff here and in Seattle, how much will we have left in the poke?"

"Very little," I admit. "All our eggs will be in one basket and the basket will be the *Helen Staley* owned by the nine Purdy kids."

"Say," he suddenly asks, "have you figgered in wartime insurance?"

"Can't afford it," I answer. "Either we're goin' to be on top of the heap when this is over, or else me and you are goin' to settle down to pick and shovel work supportin' the Purdy kids If you want to back out, I'll try and find somebody to take over your share—to take your profits, or accept your loss."

"Who said I wanted to back out," Bulldozer growls. "I wouldn't miss this for a million dollars. It's bound to be exciting because you're sure to make a lot of mistakes."

NOTHIN' much happened from the time the crew arrives until we unload the drums at Seattle and the scrap in Vancouver. It was the usual hard work that goes on when you're in a ship.

The American crew leaves us at Vancouver, we pay their fare home, then sell everything to a Canadian outfit for the sum of one dollar—Canadian money, too.

"Of course, Mr. McGee you are still in charge of this adventure," Captain Jarrett-Page says. "We have recruited a crew for you, and will attend to other details. You have a full cargo."

"Not quite," I answer. "We thought we might stow lumber in the empty space below, and piling on deck. They need lumber, you know."

Captain Jarrett-Page knew, because there was plenty of it going from Puget Sound and British Columbia ports to England. But the captain couldn't figger out why so much chain went around the deckload, nor why me and Bulldozer had special fittin's made to hold the chain in place. He figgered we was preparin' for a typhoon.

"I can't imagine a sea or wind strong enough to carry away any of your piling, Mr. McGee," he said. "By the way, your crew will be aboard in the morning."

Bright and early the next morning Bulldozer shakes my shoulder and says, "Wake up, No-Shirt; Resurrection Day is here, and the sailors are the first to come from their graves. Some of 'em are comin' over the side right now."

I go on deck, and the first man to greet me is Neptune hisself. He ain't got his fork, and he's wearin' a derby hat, such as the old-time skippers wore when they went ashore to talk to the owner. But he's older'n time, and he's so stiff in the joints he moves like a wooden man.

"I'm Captain Horne, sir," he says, "master of the *Helen Staley*. You are Mr. McGee, who represents the owners."

"Yes sir," I answer. "And this is Bulldozer Craig, the other supercargo."

He gives Bulldozer a scarred hand that's plenty hard, even if it is old. Behind him come the mates and the crew. They're younger, but the kid of the bunch was over sixty.

Bulldozer takes me aside. "You know why they sent them old guys aboard?" he asks.

"Why?"

"Because the higher-ups are pretty sure the schooner will never reach port," he explains. "So if men must be sacrificed why not toss off old guys who have almost reached the end of the trail? The young ones can be used in spots where they have a chance. And that makes me feel just fine and dandy."

"Shucks," I say, "a man mixed up in

a war is never a good insurance risk. I dog-mushed in the World War and I know."

"You got to tell me about your dog-mushin' amid shot and shell sometime," he says. "I'll bet it'll suffer none from the tellin' after all these years.

"But gettin' back to me. If I was drivin' a tank I'd like it. I'd have somethin' to hit back with. But I ain't even got a bean shooter on this voyage. What'll I do if planes or subs move in on us?"

"Cross your fingers," I answer, "and say, 'King's X!'"

WE LASH piling for English wharves on the deck. And what I mean, we lash it, usin' plenty of chain. "You'd think them piles was goin' to get wet the way you're lashin' 'em," Bulldozer observes.

"They're liable to," I answer. "If this schooner and cargo don't get to England by hook or crook the Purdy kids won't have a thin dime, and the firm of McGee and Craig will be flat on their sterns. I ain't overlookin' any bets to turn the trick. Not any."

Just when I think we're settin' pretty up pops international complications. Uncle Sam ain't lettin' his nephews go into the danger zone without good reason and me and Bulldozer can't get passports.

I go down to the *Alaska Weekly* office and see my old friend Frank Cotter. He's an Irishman with idears.

"No trouble at all," he says. "You'll go as correspondents representing the *Alaska Weekly*. And if you think we won't expect some copy from you, No-Shirt, you're crazy."

When the *Helen Staley* fin'ly sticks her bows into the Pacific and commences the long voyage to the canal, me and Bulldozer ain't only supercargoes, but we're war correspondents as well.

Nothin' much happened on the run south except we saw our old men of the sea knowed their business. They might be old and a little slow, but they sure was deep-water sailors.

We got towed through the canal and headed for England. It was a long, slow voyage. A couple of American planes flew over us several times—the neutrality patrol, I guess.

Later we got in the steamer lanes and saw a camouflaged ship or two and later on a flock of steamers under convoy.

As we got into the submarine zone Bulldozer got in the habit of rollin' out of his bunk, goin' on deck, lookin' around at the deserted sea and sayin', "So this is war? I'll take bread and milk for my excitement."

Then old Captain Horne would snort, "You'd better knock on wood, my fine feathered cock. When it comes, it may come with a roar. The enemy knows we're on our way and he is well aware we have tinned food below deck and piling on deck. Food and piling are vital.

"Besides he would sink us if we were empty. Every ton of shipping sunk is just that much less to carry food to England. Don't think our shabby clothing will protect us." Which was a good way of describin' our old schooner.

### III

ME AND Bulldozer slept late one mornin' because there'd been a submarine scare the night before. A sailor had sighted a periscope in the moonlight and Captain Horne had tried to ram it.

He did, too. It turned out to be a pile, held upright by the barnacles on the bottom.

We're still pryin' our eyes open when there's a lot of excitement on deck. We can hear the oldest sailors shufflin' around, and the younger ones steppin' stiffly. Me and Bulldozer get on the topside quicker'n hell can skin a liver.

"Planes," Bulldozer says. "Three of 'em. Bombers!"

"Where?" I yell. "I can't see 'em."

"If they was young squaws in a blueberry patch you'd see 'em," he snaps. "Look! Right where I'm pointin' my finger."

Then I see 'em. "Enemy planes," Captain Horne says. "No doubt of it. I wish

we were equipped with an anti-aircraft gun. We'd dust his feathers for him."

They come along as nice as you please and suddenly one of 'em dives. It comes roarin' down with the motors turnin' over in a power dive.

Bulldozer, whose eyes are better'n mine, sees the bombs drop.

The plane straightens out, thunders overhead; and I'm tryin' to look two ways at once. I want to see them bombs hit and I also want to see what's makin' jets of water leap up in a steady line, like a white finger stabbin' at us.

Yep; they're machine gun bullets and they reach the schooner a split second after the bombs hit the water. They go *currrump-mp-mp,* the explosions sorta blendin' together.

Columns of water shoot high in the air and tumble back. Sheets of spray drench the schooner. The bomber banks and come back again.

Captain Horne takes the wheel and sends the rest of us below.

We can hear the roar of the motors and the steady thud of bullets in the wood above us. "Say, ain't this somethin'?" Bulldozer asks. "Wouldn't I like to be in a tank about now." He presses his face again' a port light glass and yells, "Here comes another bomber!"

I run to the next spot and look out. It's just gone into a power dive, but suddenly it comes out and drops its bombs. They hit so close on the starboard side we can feel the shock as they explode.

Half the ocean heaves into the air and settles back in a froth. The third bomber is turnin' and I spot a couple of small planes.

They come down, tracer bullets streakin' through the air and gettin' nearer and nearer the bomber, which is shootin' back on its own account. The other two bombers are too busy tryin' to get elevation to be of any help.

"Let's go on deck," Bulldozer says. "They're too busy to pay much attention to us."

We go on deck and there's old Captain Horne bleedin' slightly but steerin' a course as calm as you please. "Picked up a scratch in the last war, too," he says.

The deck's full of gouges where the machine gun bullets hit and there're a few holes in the sails, too.

A third plane is after the bomber which is spurtin' bullets from three sides. Somehow they remind me of a bunch of crows annoyin' an eagle. They dart in and out again, worryin' the big fellow and keepin' him movin'.

But there's this difference. The crows' idear is to scare the eagle out of the country. They ain't got the nerve to peck him. These crows are after their eagle.

One closes in, then suddenly slips off as it's hit. But it comes back again, wings vibratin' and a thin trail of smoke comin' from the body. It takes more lead, but it's reached the spot it's after and I see the bomber commence to smoke.

Tongues of red commence to creep along. Bombs the crew had been savin' for us drop and send up columns of water, then it goes into a ponderous spin, with smoke twistin' behind it.

Little bundles come out of the bomber and attackin' plane, shoot downward and parachutes blossom out. The captain starts to change his course to pick 'em up, then he sees a troller, or may be it's a mine sweeper, headin' that way.

We can hear the bomber roarin' as it comes down. Flames shoot through the air, and minor explosions blow bits clear from the main mass. It shoots a mass of water as big as the schooner upward when it hits, then the foam settles as the water is covered with burnin' gasoline.

CAPTAIN HORNE puts the schooner back onto her course and I mop my brow and mutter, "That's escape number one. We still ain't lost our shirts, Bulldozer."

"You figger there'll be more escapes?" he asks hopefully.

"Many of them," Captain Horne said. "If you were a partridge you'd know that just because the first hunter missed you

that was no sign the next man would hold his fire. We're fair game until we're in port. And even then they'll bomb us if they can."

"All I want," I say piously, "is to get in port. My job's done then and I can collect."

The next mornin' a small plane comes over and drops a note. It hits a sail and tumbles to the deck. It's a warnin' that there's a magnetic mine field ahead. They've got sweepers workin' on it.

"That means we head for deep water, eh?" Bulldozer asks.

"Nope," I answer. "As long as we're in danger I want to stay in shallow water. A wooden ship can't explode magnetic mines."

"You've been insisting I sail in shallow water ever since we came near land," Captain Horne says in an annoyed voice. "Who's master of this schooner anyway?"

"You are, sir," I answers, "but it was in the agreement I made with Captain Jarrett-Page that the schooner was to stay in shallow water unless there was danger of wreckin' it."

"Very well! Very well! Fool Yankee idea," he snaps.

"You got somethin' up your sleeve, No-Shirt," Bulldozer says. "What is it?"

I don't answer. The schooner is headin' through the mine field and I'm wonderin' if our steel water tanks will make the compass needle tip upward and set off the mine.

We're just gettin' out of the field when the lookout sights a submarine, so we go back into 'em again. That stops the submarine. She evidently knows where the mines are, because she lays off the field, and starts openin' up with a gun. The shells splash ahead, astern and abeam of us.

Captain Horne puts the schooner through shoal water in an effort to get beyond range. "This should satisfy you, mister," he says to me as the lead shows five fathoms of water.

The mine field is between us and the submarine now. She moves along, parallel, tryin' to get in a shot. One finally hits the deckload and the air fills with splinters. Only the skipper, me and Bulldozer are on deck when it happens.

"Them shells sure pack a wallop," Bulldozer says. "Better let me take the wheel, Captain. You're a little weak from loss of blood."

"I'm doing all right," the captain says. "You're young, Bulldozer. No sense in your needlessly sacrificing yourself."

"If my number's up," Bulldozer says, "they'll tag me. If not, they won't."

The skipper's gettin' a bit weak and Bulldozer takes over the wheel while he goes below and finds hisself a drink. He comes up a few minutes later, feelin' better.

It's gettin' dusk now and the sub stops firin'. The mate takes over. We head for deep water and the skipper turns in.

The wind's against us, which is tough. If we had good winds we might make it to port durin' the night. I light a cigar, pace the deck, and figger how much difference a little darkness can make to a man's fortunes at a time like this.

WE SAIL without lights, but what do you suppose we see as soon as it's daybreak? You're right. It's a submarine.

Now we ain't thrown nothin' overboard to mark our course, and we ain't got spies with us to flash lights. It's a mystery to me how the submarine traced us.

We don't have a chance. The first and second shot straddle us, and the third hits the foremast. We've got all sails set and she's heelin' over under a stiff breeze. The mast splits and goes overboard, carryin' the topmast of the next mast with it.

Canvas, broken spars and shrouds come alongside in a tangle.

"Don't quit yet," I bellow at the skipper. "I'll take the wheel. Head for shallow water."

The skipper's already shouted orders to clear away the wreckage and Bulldozer is in the center of it, swingin' an axe. I look at the skipper, but he's lookin' at the submarine.

As the wreckage drifts clear he changes

the course. We limp along for a half hour before the next shell hits. It's at the waterline and makes quite a hole. But not more'n the pumps can handle.

There's a gasoline engine amidships to keep the pumps goin'. Bulldozer gets it started. The skipper checks on the chart and shakes his head.

"No shallow water within ten miles, mister," he says. "We can't strand your schooner."

He looks up, hopin' to spot a plane. There ain't one in sight. It looks as if we're caught with our pants down. And you can't run fast with your pants down.

I look at the chart awhile, pick out a spot and say, "Do you think you can sail her there?"

"Yes," Captain Horne answers, "but I fail to catch the point."

There's just enough sea rollin' to make the sub's gun platform a poor one. Satisfied we ain't got any guns hid aboard she holds her fire and slowly closes in. We've reached the spot I pointed out on the chart when she starts firin' again.

"Okay, Captain," I said, "heave to if you feel like it."

"I don't feel like it, mister," he answers, "but we haven't a chance to either fight or escape, so why waste lives that may be of use later on?"

WE HEAVE to and gather on deck, clear away small boats and wait. The submarine comes up cautiously. They've got a machine gun trained on us, along with the deck gun.

The skipper is a youngish cuss who looks plenty capable. The next in command is older. He's the one who comes aboard in a small boat they launch.

He's followed by several well-armed lads who look tired and greasy. He says he's Lieutenant Shultz, and he says so in American-accent English. He acts like he's been on a schooner before.

"Sorry, Captain," he says, "but I must sink your vessel. Fortunes of war, you know."

"If I ain't speakin' out of turn," I say, "I'd like to know how you followed us last night."

"Easy," he answers. "I used to be a mate on a schooner carrying lumber from Puget Sound to Los Angeles. I knew about the course you would take, considering the wind."

"Ever been to Alaska?" I ask him.

"Sure," he answers. "And I've seen No-Shirt McGee before. I'm surprised to find you here."

"I'm a newspaper man," I tell him.

He winks, seein' through the trick. "You'll have a story," he says. "And what's more, I won't tell it to you. You'd like to delay me until a British patrol boat or plane comes along."

"Can't blame a man for tryin'," I tell him. "See you again some time."

"Let's see," he says to the skipper, "you arrived in Seattle in ballast, plus canned salmon brought down from the north. You added more canned goods, then shipped a deck load of piling. Right?"

"Right," I tell him before the skipper can answer. "You know too damned much."

He sends a couple of men below with bombs, then tells us to quit the schooner. We're standin' by when the job's finished and his boat rows alongside.

"You played into our hands," he says, "when you lashed that deck load so securely. Otherwise it might have broken off—and drifted ashore to become available."

He rows on to the submarine, boards it and pretty soon everything's stowed below and she's movin' off under slow bell.

They give them bombs plenty of time and it's twenty minutes since we left the schooner and nothin's happened.

"For two cents I'd go back," Bulldozer says, "grab them bombs and dump 'em over the side. When that schooner goes down, me and No-Shirt are charity cases."

"They'd bomb her again," the skipper says, "if you attempted anything so foolish."

There's a sudden shock in the water, some of the pilin' heaves up and settles back, and pieces of hatch coverin' fly into

the air. It's several minutes before we can see any sign of her sinkin', then she commences to settle in the bow.

"If that was a lumber cargo," Bulldozer says, "she wouldn't sink. But it's canned goods."

"They're heavy," the skipper says. "If she had carried nothing but lumber, they would have used more bombs and blown her to bits. They're savin' of their bombs. And well they should be. When they're gone they have to go home for more."

"You dropped anchors like I told you to, didn't you, Bulldozer?" I ask. "In the excitement I figgered you might've forgot."

"They're down," he says. "Can't you see the chains?"

Then I saw the chain. The bow was goin' down now as the water worked forward. The stern commences to lift. But it's a slow business. Finally the stern clears and she slides slowly from view, with sails set, like a schooner goin' down hill.

The stern goes under in a flurry of bubbles and foam and the tips of the masts disappear in the boilin' sea.

"And that," Bulldozer says, "is that. All we have to do now is get ashore, find a ship that'll take us home, get a grubstake from somebody, hit the trail for Alaska and find a gold mine. That's all."

## IV

LATE that afternoon a destroyer comes over the horizon. Her bows are slicin' the water beautifully and just when it looks as if she hadn't seen us, she changes her course.

We're bobbin' around in small boats and yellin' back and forth when she heaves to. One look is enough and all hands from the commander down commences to grin at our old men.

But pretty soon they quit grinning and as they help the old boys over the side they're mighty respectful.

The commander shakes Captain Horne's hand and says, "You're one of the reasons why the sun never sets on the British flag, Captain."

"You'll recall what Nelson said about every man doing his duty," the captain answers. "We took the place they found for us and almost brought our schooner and food to port. Meet Mr. No-Shirt McGee and Mr. Bulldozer Craig, American journalists." He winks. "Who, just between us, own the schooner and her cargo."

"I'm guardian of the owners of the schooner," I explain, "but me and Bulldozer own the cargo."

We get plenty of sympathy and that night are landed in a British port. The next day we write a story for the *Alaska Weekly* and mail it. The *Helen Staley* is listed as another loss. They speak of her as a "Canadian-owned schooner."

Me and Bulldozer still have a little money left. We spend it carefully and while I look over the town he spends his time tryin' to line up passage for Canada or the United States.

There not bein' much in the way of space he gets a new bee in his bonnet—sellin' a special kind of tractors to the British. He meets up with one of them American super-salesman who has everything figgered out.

"The tractor," Bulldozer tells me, "can be used for bulldozin', mine work, Buildin' streets and roads and all that. But by a few changes it can be turned into a tank.

"The idear is to convince the British this tank is practical. This agent thinks they'll be a pushover if somebody will make a demonstration on the field of battle."

"And just who might the demonstrator be?" I ask him.

"A man named Bulldozer Craig," he answers. "The trouble is we lack the money to put it over. To really swing it, we should have fifteen or twenty thousand dollars."

"And you're hintin' the reason we ain't got it," I suggest, "is because the *Helen Staley* was sunk."

"Well, you got to admit sellin' tractors ain't as crazy as tryin' to run the submarine blockade with a sailin' schooner."

"You may have somethin' there, and again you may not," I tell him.

THE next few days I do a lot of thinkin', then I see the local port people and explain I'd like to borrow a tugboat for a few days.

"What do you want it for?" a brass hat inquires.

"Want to go out where my schooner was sunk," I tell him, "and sorta look around. May be some of the deckload busted loose and come to the surface."

"Impossible," he answers. "There's a strong tide there at certain times and the piling would be carried away as fast as it broke loose. From what Captain Horne tells me, you lashed that deckload to stay."

"Didn't want it leavin in a breeze," I tell him. "I haven't much money, but I'll pay for a tug."

"Impossible," he says in a tone that tells me he means it.

It looks for a minute as if I'm licked, but no true McGee admits he's licked until he has hell beat out of him. Even then he'll have some doubt. I finally spot a little sloop nobody seems to want. It's so old it's held together by its paint and there ain't much paint.

I buy it and I see the owner tappin' his head to indicate I'm crazy. I shop around a couple of days findin' second-hand sails, then I buy some grub, load a few water breakers aboard and I'm ready to go.

Bulldozer is still workin' on his tank deal and I leave him a note sayin' I'm takin' the sea air a few days.

It ain't hard findin' the spot where the *Helen Staley* went down. In fact it's a wonder to me I can't spot her mast heads when the water's clear. There's no sign of wreckage—just a few blobs of oil from the gasoline engine near the pumps.

I anchor and start fishin'. Nothin' happens for three days; then a British patrol boat comes along and asks questions. It figgers maybe I'm givin' the enemy aid and comfort. They search my sloop from top to bottom and don't even find a flare, let alone a radio transmission set.

They take me aboard the boat and ask a lot of questions. I explain I'm tryin' to figger ways of salvagin' schooner and cargo.

"It isn't worth it, my good fellow," the captain tells me in a kindly voice. "It will take pontoons, divers and gear to bring your schooner to the surface."

"I thought she might take a notion to come up of her own accord," I said, "and that's why I'm stickin' around."

They go into another huddle and I hear the patrol boat's executive officer say, "Clearly McGee is a mental case, made so by the loss of his vessel. I understand he had his all tied up in the cargo. Poor fellow. But we can't let him stay out here."

They come back and explain gently they can't take a chance on me hanging around. The enemy might use me as a bearing in flights, mine-layin' or submarine operations.

Even a McGee can't lick the British navy, though the Irish have— But we won't go into that.

I SAIL meekly back to port, but a few mornin's later I make a patrol along the shore. I'm in close enough so I won't be noticed and anyway it's too shallow for submarine operation.

In fact I get stuck on the beach a couple of times. I find me a cove where I can watch the schooner's grave from a bluff.

Nobody bothers me and early one mornin' I wake up and sure enough there's the *Helen Staley's* mast heads stickin' above the surface. I pile into my sloop, sail out and make fast.

By noon the masts are pretty well out of the water, but the canvas is soaked and heavy and that helps keep her down.

Wind and sun dry the sails and by evenin' her deckhouses are visible. I see a tug boat steamin' along the horizon and pretty soon it changes its course and stands in. It's then I go overboard and plant my feet on the *Helen's* aft deckhouse. I'm in about two feet of water.

The tug comes in, and all hands that ain't on watch are standin' in the bow. "Stand by to take a line," the skipper yells.

"Not so fast," I argue. "First, what'll you charge to tow me to port?"

"Oh, you're the daft Yankee that insisted hangin 'around his sunken schooner," he says.

"Why shouldn't I?" I ask. "I figgered it would come up if I was patient." The cuss didn't need to know I'd spent several days wonderin' if my figures was right and she would come up again.

"What, you *knew* she would refloat herself?" he barks. "Most strawdnary. But a clear case of salvage, nevertheless. She'll drift and—well—er—become a menace to navigation and all that sort of thing."

"No," I answered, "she won't. We dropped anchor before the Germans bombed her."

"Now I say," he says, gettin' firmer. "The proper thing is to get this wreck into port and let an Admiralty court determine a just salvage fee."

"Oh, no, it isn't," I yell back. "That might take months, and I need the money."

The tug edges in and a sailor makes a pass with a line. Now I happen to know if they put a line aboard without an understandin' they can make out a salvage claim. It is then I drag out my old forty-four. The gun has talked for me in the West, Alaska and even on the Western front durin' the World War. It may be old, but it ain't tongue-tied.

"If you try to put a line aboard this schooner," I tell him, "I'll let you have it. And if you don't think I know I'm dead right in this, you'd better read up on the law. Now let's talk towage fees."

They go into a huddle and I wish I had Bulldozer along to keep 'em off'n my back when the fuss starts. They ain't goin' to pass up a nice hunk of salvage money if they can help it. Besides, the water's gettin' cold.

They launch a boat, row in a big circle and approach from the opposite side. I can't see 'em, but I do see a plane comin' out of a cloud.

It comes down in a nice, smooth dive and the way them limey tars bend the oars to get back aboard was heart-warmin'. They tumble below deck and the tub commences to move while the familiar jets of water mark where the machine gun bullets are hittin'.

"And McGee stood on the burnin' deck," I mutter, "wher all but him had fled." Then I add, "Like hell!" and splash to my sloop.

THE tug disappears around a headland, with the plane still tryin' to put bullets through the wheelhouse. That was a German plane all right and sure as hell the pilots will know a schooner sunk there by a sub has popped up. They'll be back.

Things must've been goin' on that I didn't know about. It ain't long until a couple of British fighters are chasin' the enemy out of there and soon afterwards the blasted tug shows up again. He's startin' the argument all over again and I've got my gun on him when a Navy seaplane lands.

The pilot taxies to within speakin' distance and a brass hat pops his head out.

"What the trouble here?" he asks.

"He's claimin this is a salvage job," I yelp, "and I claim it's a towin' job." I explain my interest and it seems he knows all about the crazy Yankee waitin' for his schooner to come up. He's astonished, but he's full of business, too.

He turns to the towboat captain and says, "Get a line aboard that schooner. Tow her into port with all possible speed. We need that piling. There may be some salvage in the canned goods, too." I shudder when he mentions salvage.

I'm about to threaten him with Joe Kennedy and all of the American consuls when I remember I'd transferred the *Helen Staley* to the Canadian flag. I ain't got a leg to stand on.

"Hold on," I yell, "this is my ship as long as she's under me. What is it, salvage or towage?"

"This is war, sir," the brass hat says. And his voice leaves no room for argument. I get into my sloop and go back to port.

Bulldozer ain't in our rooms, but he's left a note. He's tryin' to raise money on his tank project.

The next day I see the *Helen Staley*

comin' into port. They've got two tugs on her now and she's givin' 'em some trouble yawin' back and forth.

I go down to the ship yards and they won't let me in. While I'm wonderin' how far I'd get takin' on the sentry, the brass hat comes along. "I see you've dried out your feet," he says. "You were an interesting sight, standing on a submerged vessel arguing over salvage. Shall we go in and have a look?"

I'm about to give the sentry a dirty look as I pass, but I hand him a cigar instead.

Somebody says somethin' about removin' the deckload before they put the schooner in dry dock, but I howl, "Do you want her to sink and obstruct navigation?"

That sounds reasonable. They sorta nurse her into a floatin' drydock, shore her up, then start liftin' her. It's a long job and the worst mess you ever saw. Thousands of cans was packed in pulp cases and the pulp is water-soaked and comin' apart. Labels have soaked off'n the cans, too, which don't help none.

We go down, splash around and peek into the hole the bombs made. I pick up a half dozen cans, afraid the water pressure might've torn 'em open. Some of 'em have depressions on the sides, like a heavy thumb had beared down, but they're all tight.

The journalists, which is English for newspaper reporters, show up. The brass hat figgers no military secret will be revealed by lettin' 'em have the story. The idear of a schooner duckin' under water until the submarine had gone, then poppin' up again would give the public a laugh.

"But, I say," one persisted, "isn't it against all laws of buoyancy for a schooner or any other vessel to sink, then float itself unaided by pontoons or something?"

"It is," the brass hat admits.

"Then what is the answer?" he asks.

"Frankly, I don't know. I thought an inspection of the schooner would reveal the answer, but it hasn't. Perhaps Mr. McGee, who I believe is an American journalist, can tell you."

"There's an answer," I admit. "It's a trick. It worked once and it might work again."

"Then Mr. McGee doesn't have to answer?" one of them asked, looking at the brass hat. "In the interests of the empire?"

"Quite!" the brass hat replies.

But I'm thinkin' silence don't butter no parsnips for me. And still thinkin' it when they start puttin' a patch on the hole. It's a temporary thing and late the next afternoon the blasted tug comes up again, acts like she owned the schooner and tows her away.

I'M settin' in my room, readin' about the Yankee who has invented a self-raisin' schooner when Bulldozer comes in.

"Well," he says, "I see you made the headlines, but have you collected?"

"Nope. Everybody seems too busy to talk about that angle," I answer. "How you comin 'along?"

"Fine," he says. "All I need is fifteen thousand dollars and a demonstration on the front, and I'll be settin' pretty if the demonstration is a success."

He's pretty gloomy, and hardly looks up when somebody knocks on the door. It's the brass hat and several others, includin' a solicitor—which is English for lawyer.

"I have here," the solicitor says, "a schedule of prices agreed on between Captain Jarrett-Page and yourself. You have carried out your agreement after a rather amazing fashion."

"It was the only way it could be carried out," I answer. Inside I'm sayin', "What'll the salvage bill be?"

"The piling, of course, was undamaged. We are unloading it," he continues. "That takes care of that. We have agreed to deduct ten percent from the agreed price of the tinned goods. To cover handling. They are in a sorry condition, Mr. McGee."

I agree on that point.

"We will pay the agreed price on the schooner, less cost of repairs," he continues. Unless salvage charges eat up everything the schooner price will take care of the Purdy kids.

"And now we come to the amount to

be deducted for bringing schooner and cargo into port," the solicitor says.

"Yeah," I answer weakly. "It's worth a little somethin'."

He takes off his glasses and looks at me severely. This is no time for the McGee brand of sarcasm or levity. "The charge," he says, "is four hundred pounds."

I almost swoon with joy, and when the spots quit floatin' before my eyes I invite him and Bulldozer out for a feed.

"You can't blame a towboat captain for trying," he says, "but he had no business using force to make you deal on a salvage basis. I had the authority to confiscate his tug and he knew it. He listened to reason."

"That was fine of you," I tell him.

"Your standing knee-deep in water fighting for your rights," he says, "struck my admiration. Worthy of the best traditions of the sea and all that sort of thing."

"That's No-Shirt all over," Bulldozer says. "Like as not he'll go to the front with me to demonstrate a tank. But say, No-Shirt, how come that schooner floated again?"

"Well, as brother Elks, Moose, Eagles or somethin' and strictly on the square," I answer, "do you remember that salt I loaded on in Alaska? Stowed it below for ballast and I never took it out. Salt's heavier'n water, so I figgered out how much pilin' it would take to lift the schooner after the salt had dissolved. Then I loaded on enough to lift her.

"Besides, she had water-tight compartments for'd and aft to keep her afloat in case she was crushed in the ice. And they helped out."

"That sir," the brass hat says, "calls for another drink—on the British Empire."

I get kinda red in the face durin' the ceremony. I ain't used to bein' toasted. And besides, I'm wonderin' what the McGees in Ireland will think about it, when they read the papers.

# The Harp and the Blade

By JOHN MYERS MYERS

FINNIAN the Irish bard, equipped with his harp and his good sword, has been wandering through desolate, chaotic Medieval France, minding his own business. But one night he meets up with an ancient Pictish priest who places a strange judgment on him. "While you are in my land," the old man says, "you will aid any man or woman in need."

Very soon those words are borne out. Finnian becomes involved in the turbulent affairs of that Loire region. By rescuing Conan the Breton from a band of pursuers Finnian makes a strong friend of one of the three important men of the district; the bard and the Breton swear blood-brotherhood—allied against Chilbert, the powerful robber baron. Also, Finnian comes to know and admire Father Walter, abbot of a large monastery, who has not yet decided whether he will take arms against the ravaging of Chilbert.

FOR a time Finnian throws in his lot with the Danes who are plundering along the river. But again the potent spell of the old Pict interferes with his plan to keep out of other people's troubles. He feels constrained to rescue a Frankish girl from the Danes, and later he discovers that the lovely Marie is a relative by marriage of Conan's.

Arriving at Conan's home, Finnian learns that his blood-brother is being held a prisoner by one Gregory. The probability is that Gregory will turn Conan over to the ruthless Chilbert. So Finnian takes it on himself to work his way into Gregory's fortress. Abbot Walter agrees to send Father Clovis, a sturdy monk, on ahead to Gregory's place, in order that Finnian will have one ally within the walls. Fulke, a Conan man, is hidden nearby, to give what aid he can.

It's easy enough for a strolling minstrel to get into the fortress, and Finnian man-

Conan and I went madly through the flame-bright night, with Gregory's men noisily at our heels

This story began in the June 22 Argosy

ages to acquaint the captive Conan with his presence. But the job of rescue is a difficult one because of the vigilant guards. That night Finnian decides on his method to distract their attention, and he acts quickly; he sets fire to the barn where he is supposed to be sleeping. . . .

## CHAPTER XXIV

### FLIGHT BY FIRE

As I ran from it I could hear a man coughing between drowsy curses. I spun when I had gone a few paces and made sure the glow was apparent from the outside. "Fire!" I yelled, running again.

"Where?"

"Look! It's the great barn!"

"Oh my God!"

"Fire!"

The watchmen shouted the dread word repeatedly as they came down from the walls. I hid in the shadow of the woodshed and watched them finish the rousing. There were frantic shouts from the barn itself now, and a frightened horse screamed horribly. The fire had eaten through the boards at its original starting point and was climbing up the outside.

As I glanced toward the hall again, men began scrambling out, each pausing an instant for a look, then dashing either for the barn or for the well. Gregory was one of the first, for I heard his angry voice yelling commands. I had little fear that any of the men who sped by would look my way. They had serious business on hand.

That barn housed horses as well as winter food for stock. The loss of either, let alone both, would be a crippling one. Then there was the chance that the fire would spread to the rest of the buildings, maybe all of them. There were none so far away as to be out of imminent danger.

Prompt work should save the horses and, conceivably, part of the hay and other fodder, but I didn't wait to watch. When no more men came out of the hall I skirted all around it and approached the door from the side away from the barn. Already the radiance reached half across the court.

"Everybody out! Fire!" I shouted as I stepped inside.

"Is it very bad?" a man called nervously.

The voice came from a corner of the east side of the great room. I start to fumble my way toward it in the dark. "Everybody out!" I repeated. "Gregory says every man's needed!"

I bumped into a long table and guided myself by it. A streak of light, I could now see, showed under the door. Carefully I drew both swords, leaving the scabbards and the cloak for whoever would find them.

"Get moving!" I commanded angrily. "You can't skulk there and let us do all the work!"

"Gregory's orders to stay here," one of the men inside told me sharply.

I was by then in front of the door, and I pounded it imperiously. "That was before the fire, you fools! Two other buildings have caught now! The whole place is likely to go, the hall included!"

I could sense their hesitation and I was about to shout at them again when I heard scuffling sounds.

"In, brother!" Conan grunted, and I hit the door with my shoulder. It shook but didn't yield, so I stood back and leaped, smashing it with all my weight. There was a slight opening now, I shoved the spare sword through it half to the hilt, and pulled savagely. The sword broke; but its work was done, and I whirled into the room.

Conan had one man under him and a grip on the other's neck. The close quarters had forced the guards to drop their swords, but the man on top was working his knife loose. I killed him with a cut across his back. Taking the dirk, Conan finished the other and rose, panting.

"They forgot and turned their backs," he explained as he bent to help himself to a sword.

Gregory's men had done some shouting before they died, but there was far more noise out in the court. I handed Conan

a torch when he straightened up. "Fulke's in the woods' edge off the corner nearest home," I said. "You know how you want to go."

He nodded, and I could see his eyes gleam with the energy of fighting hope. "It'll take several to stop us."

UP TO that point my plan had worked, with some luck to help, as well as could be wished, but just ahead were the dangers I had foreseen. By the time we had reached the court the flames were so high and bright that a book could have been read almost anywhere within the fort. Moreover, the heat—for the barn was past the point where there was any chance of saving it—was such that it had driven people back toward the hall.

Having saved the still excitedly snorting horses, all of the garrison except for a group engaged in wetting down the thatch of other buildings was waiting idly, if alertly, for the moment when a threat of more damage should call them into action. Indeed, some, seeking a cool vantage point from which to enjoy the terrible fascination of a destructive fire at night, had joined the women and children on the walls. A few were weaponless, but most had instinctively caught up their arms when roused from sleep.

Conan had chosen the north wall for escape, and I had observed that the steps leading up to it were the nearest to the door from which we now burst. Tossing away his torch, he led me full tilt around a knot of gabbling men, and we were halfway to the wall before anyone was struck by our haste.

Then someone shrieked: "It's Conan!"

After that plenty of things happened. A bunch tried to cut us off, still tugging to get their swords out as they rushed us. With our advantage of momentum, we blasted through them without bothering to strike. Just before we reached the stairs one man with more hardihood than brains got in our way. Conan parried his outstretched sword and mowed him down by the force of his charge. I ran over him, feeling one foot sink in his belly, and then we were at the wall.

The steps were short logs imbedded in the packed dirt, and we took them by threes. But men were concentrating to wait for us at the top, so that was where our real difficulties began.

They were coming up behind us, too, naturally, and I turned to hold them back while my friend cleared the way as best he could. Men in the fort had stopped their fire-prevention activities to watch; others were mounting the walls at different points and running toward us, and Gregory was bawling orders to both groups. All this I noticed in one flash, and then I had no time to notice anything except who was trying to kill me.

There were some few so minded; but only two could be effective at a time, and I was in a strong position steeply above them. Conan had much the harder task. After a moment I nicked one of my opponents, drove his mate back, and stole a peek over my shoulder. Two men, incapacitated or dead, lay at Conan's feet. He had seized footing on top, and I backed up to stand just below him.

"Shall we shove and jump?" I barked.

"Whip 'em down, then come fast, and we'll try," he gasped.

BY TREMENDOUS exertion I backed them down four steps. The sounds told me that Conan still kept his place on the wall, so I yelled to let him know and came leaping. The weight of my drive carried me past him into the melée, and a man in the rear rank toppled over the waist-high palisade with a cry.

I gutted one but wasn't fast enough in drawing back my blade to ward a stroke from another. I shifted but not far enough, and his sword sliced across my ribs. It wasn't a bad wound, but avoiding a worse one had made me break my rush. Still I held my ground, and Conan surged along the little swath I had left.

"Don't stop!" he cried.

They gave a little before the sweep of his weapon, and I piled after, stabbing

one and kneeing another in the stomach. The trick was to make it across the wall before they could take us full in the back. But I don't think we ever would have succeeded if Gregory hadn't spoiled his own game.

Not that it was stupidity on his part. He was keenly aware that Conan dead in advance was an asset that Chilbert would appreciate but one for which he wouldn't pay.

"Take Conan alive!" Gregory was howling. "Kill the other, but capture Conan! I'll hang you all if he's killed!"

Their chief's threat left them undecided, and Conan grasped the moment. Knocking two more men off the wall as he charged, he beat through the wavering swords, spun, and braced. I was after him on the instant, but I hesitated beside him, and he snarled at me. "Over!" he ordered, so over I went.

Ducking beneath his swinging blade, I flung my own sword where I wouldn't land on it—there was plenty of light in which to see where it fell—vaulted over the palisade, and dropped where God put me.

Unlike the stone walls Conan was building, earthworks, though steep, cannot be perpendicular. I hit with a jolt and tumbled swiftly to the bottom, but my descent didn't have the absolute force of a fall. I was well bruised, but neither my wind nor my sense of direction was knocked out of me. I rolled completely over before I could bring myself erect; then I lunged for my sword.

The men who had been shoved over before me, not being prepared for the fall, had not fared so well. One was nursing an arm, and another was holding his head dazedly. The third, however, was seemingly uninjured, and he had preserved the presence of mind to mark my weapon. He had just stooped to pick it up when I landed on his back, my knife in my hand.

I pulled my brand from under him and turned to look up at Conan. His sword was flashing to the ground, while he himself was on the outside of the palisade. One of the men that gripped him he pulled clean over.

Catching up Conan's blade I ran to meet the two bodies skidding groundward, ready to stab one of them if necessary. But my friend had ridden the other man like a stone-boat, and he lay inert after rolling. I pulled Conan to his feet, noting that he was bleeding in a couple of places. Then I handed him his sword, and we sprinted.

The men who were dropping down the wall after us were danger enough, but inside I could hear Gregory yelling for horses. It wouldn't take them long to cut down our lead, and there was light enough for them to keep us spotted as long as we stayed near the fort.

Escape would take us longer, and we wouldn't find it easy to pierce the dragnet it would give them a chance to throw out; but our only hope was to try to reach darkness. I didn't have to waste time or breath explaining this to Conan. Having got off in the lead, I dove downhill, and he followed a half a pace behind.

"Down the hill north! Straight down from where I stand," somebody on the wall was directing.

Foot runners were pounding along right behind us, and, further away but more ominous, I heard the rumble of a cavalcade. The sky-searing flames were roaring and crackling; there were shouts and squeals from all ages and sexes; and dogs yapped. But above all the din I could hear Gregory promising to hang everybody if we got away.

## CHAPTER XXV

### HORSES, PLEASE

I WAS beginning to feel the pace more with each stride. After all, the hot work of the past few minutes had been prefaced on my part by a long day of riding and walking. I felt generally used up, my wind was going, and my side ached where the sword had slashed it.

Conan was running easily, seemingly in no great distress, and as I could still manage considerable speed we were giving them a good race. Two men, however, had the legs of us; and the horses had rounded

the corner of the fort to thunder down the slope.

I was no good to help, but Conan sidestepped to let the leading pursuer pitch over his leg, then jammed a foot on his back to wind him. The second man tried to stop without slowing. He found out his mistake when he landed hard on his knees and my friend booted him in the solar plexus.

I watched that over my shoulder. Tiring as rapidly as I was, I couldn't spare anything from my lead. We were well downhill and out of the light then, but though we were keeping ahead of the other runners, they were near enough to keep us in sight and point us out to the oncoming horsemen. I peered ahead, and it was then that I saw at least one point in favor of that particular side. We were descending on a field full of cut and drying grain.

I knew it must be that, though in the confusion of darkness the stacks could just as well be taken for swine or sheep—or men on their hands and knees. Gazing at such a mass by night, a man will see it change size and shape, yes, and move, too. I've seen a bush masquerade as a lurking man and brazen it out until I was all but near enough to touch it.

"Taking cover," I panted.

Well into the field I cut my pace, dropped, as Conan passed me, rolled over swiftly into a group of several stacks, and simply crouched beside one. Our pursuers passed by ones and twos but halted a little beyond, where the tangent the riders had taken led to a meeting. I didn't want to risk showing the white of my face for a look, but I gathered that they were in a satisfactory state of puzzlement.

"I don't know where they went," I heard a man admitting. "I saw 'em one minute, and then they were gone."

"Gone, hell!" Gregory said angrily. "They couldn't run that much faster than you. They're hiding here somewhere. Now you men on foot get back to the fort and try to see that that damned fire doesn't burn anything else."

He next harangued the horsemen. "On the off chance they're still legging it, spread out and ride hard till I give the word. If we don't locate 'em by then, we'll turn and work back slowly. It'll be easier to spot 'em going toward the fire.

"Look behind and under anything big enough to hide a runt flea. Now get going, all but Henri, Louis, and Charles. This is where we lost 'em, so I want you men to stay here and ride 'em down if they try to break cover."

Keeping my hand out of sight, I used my sleeve to brush my hair over my eyes and twisted my head to glimpse the men walking back to the fort. As tired men will, they straggled along separately, most of them silent while waiting to get their wind back. The last one, however, was humming a certain song between reaches for breath. That man was Conan, and I rose to fall in behind him.

"Hey! Who's that?" one of the watching riders called.

THE entire band of us halted, men without faces in the dark. I didn't dare speak because of my accent, but my friend gasped out an oath. "My name's Conan," he said sarcastically.

Several laughed, the mounted man cursed the night, and we all plodded on again. Luckily there was too much general tiredness as we progressed uphill into more and more light for anyone to pay attention to anyone else. Moreover, the excitement over the manhunt was nicely balanced by the excitement over the fire. Men approaching it, inevitably looked at it and at little else.

Nevertheless, we had to continue straight toward the fort or draw suspicion. Fatigue seconding my anxiety to escape attention, I walked with my head bowed, reckoning the odds. With the riders decoyed to the north side we might be able to make a successful break for it. Or there were even grounds for hoping, what with everyone concentrating on the fire, that we could slip past unnoticed.

Suddenly I groaned as well as I could with what breath I had. A rider was com-

ing downhill. That he would discover our identity seemed sure, but on the long chance he wouldn't I continued to eye the earth. In another second he was right on us, and I hardened my muscles for action.

"I never thought I'd see a good horse thief like you out for a stroll," the fellow said conversationally.

As my head snapped up I saw Conan's doing the same. Father Clovis was grinning down at us. "I was just going to see how the hunt was prospering and maybe offer my ecclesiastical services to Finnian here when they hanged him—if they waited to. But it looks as if the Devil's at his old tricks, mothering his own."

His face sobered. "I wish I could give you this horse, but Gregory would hang me instead, and I wouldn't like that. Anything else I can do?"

"You might ride around to the southwest woods fringe and whoop for Fulke to come running," Conan said. "Thanks, father."

"Welcome as wine." He grinned again. "Nice fire you started, Finnian. Hated to leave it."

He changed his course, riding briskly now, and we dawdled upward. Opposing the urge to hurry was the necessity of regaining a little wind before we should be called upon for more violence. That would probably come when we reached the gates.

No doubt we were observed by men on the wall, but we weren't recognized simply because our presence was so improbable. Those ahead of us, who had stretched the distance between us while we were talking to Clovis, had already entered the fort by the time we were in the shadow of its walls.

Our luck had been good, and we couldn't expect it to hold. A man glancing down was impressed by our bloody and battered condition. "Looks like you boys made the mistake of catching up with Conan," he gibed.

"Go to hell!" Conan growled.

Only then apparently did it strike the fellow that he couldn't identify us as colleagues. "Say, who are you?" he demanded. We quickened our pace, but before we could goad our tired legs into running again he had discovered the truth. "It's them!" he yelled. "It's Conan and the bard! Hey! you in the court, out and get 'em! It's Conan and the bard! Right here, I tell you!"

I COULDN'T be sure how much strength was left in me, but I didn't try to hoard it. The one man who succeeded in clearing the gate before we reached it had seen too much of us to want to tackle us unsupported. Taking one look at us bearing down on him, he sprang back so hastily he fell.

As we sped past I saw at least three on whom we wouldn't have much of a lead, and others were swarming after them. Still I knew some of them had already taken more exercise than they wanted; also there was no longer the imminent threat of horse pursuit.

They were trying to arrange for that, however, for men and women were hallooing the news to Gregory. He and his dragnet might be out of hearing, but the men he'd stationed by the grain stacks were assuredly not. And they would be all that was needed.

We were plunging down the south slope, and that fact alone allowed me to maintain any speed. Suddenly I knew that I would be finished when we reached the bottom. "Fulke!" I cried desperately, but my voice had no strength.

Glancing back, Conan saw my plight, for the leading pursuers were almost on me. "Fulke!" he boomed. "Here!"

My ears were ringing, and I couldn't be sure whether there was an answer or not. But even if he was on his way the minstrel would have to come fast to do us any good.

A second later, indeed, I stumbled for weariness and fell. "Fulke!" Conan bellowed again as he turned to pull me to my feet. Then we stood back to back while they swept around us, trying to beat us down by their weight of numbers so that Conan could be taken alive. In the heat

of action none of us heard the running horses.

My legs played me false as I swung at a man, and I was on the ground again when Fulke larruped into them with the two led mounts. Those of them who were not knocked down scattered to get their bearings. Conan himself had been tripped in the course of their rush for safety, but he rose promptly, hauling me to my feet once more as he did so.

"Fulke!" he cried for the last time.

Locating us, Fulke wheeled to gallop back through them. Conan heaved me into a saddle and scrambled up on a horse himself just as they closed in on us again. We rode down one or two of them, and I realized with what little perception remained to me that we were free.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### AGONY ROAD

ALL my mental and physical faculties were being used to keep me in the saddle, but Fulke, who was leading the way, kept looking back over his shoulder. "Three horsemen by the gates," he announced, "but they're just sitting there."

"I guess you were something of a surprise to them, Fulke." Conan, beside me, was apparently also watching. "So-ho. There goes one back to break the news to Gregory. Well, we've got a handy lead."

"We'll need every inch of it," the youngster commented. "Their horses haven't been all over France today, the way ours have."

Nevertheless, we weren't crowded, though our horses would never have guessed it from the way we hustled them. A modicum of strength had returned to me, and I was breathing normally by the time we reached the trail. Fulke had left some branches across the road to mark the turning. He scooped them up, and, single file and on foot, we entered the forest.

Our mounts had no breath to lavish on whinnying, but we took them quite a ways in lest their stamping around betray our whereabouts. Naturally they knew about the trail, but since it was unmarked now it would take a lucky man to find it without careful search; and we could use all the time procurable for rest.

They overshot, possibly working on the theory that they might overtake us while *we* were searching for the path. At any rate we heard the whole gang clattering by at a good clip just as we were tethering our steeds. That done, we felt our way back toward the road so as to be in a position to keep track of developments.

Worn though Conan and I were, the sickness of exhaustion was over, and we could now begin to savor our triumph. It had been a whirlpool of a night, and the fact that we had won through to more life was heady knowledge. It was as if we were both a little drunk, and we giggled like schoolboys on a nocturnal pilfering raid while we whispered questions and discussed lively moments.

"That was smart work, using ogham," Conan complimented me. "Lord! I hadn't thought of that for years."

"What gets me," I said, "is how the devil you managed to be one of the parade when Gregory ordered all the runners back to the fort."

He chuckled. "Oh, that was easy. I took a dive just after you did, but I jumped up to run right behind them. They'd just met the horsemen, so they didn't notice. I figured they hadn't bothered to count themselves when they slithered down the wall, and naturally nobody could see to identify anybody else. They were looking for someone who was hiding, not a man in plain sight."

"Good old Clovis certainly played his hand well," I observed. "I hope he gets to be pope."

"He'd make a good one," Conan agreed. "That grace of his was a masterpiece."

"He told me where to look for you," Fulke put in, "so I was halfway to you when I heard you call."

"He's all right," Conan reaffirmed the general opinion. Then he thought of something. "By the way, Finnian, where the

devil did you come from? Not that I wasn't glad to see you." He reached out to grip my arm, and I felt good.

"Well, that's something of a story, too." I proceeded to give the gist of my recent experiences. We had shifted to reminiscence of our first meeting when we heard the enemy returning. They were moving slowly, looking for the trail, and we rose in case flight should be necessary.

"Here it is!" one of them exclaimed excitedly.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Gregory asked sourly, "cut it up and eat it? Now look. If they've found it already we're licked, but they may not have. We may have chased them past it, or they may have ducked into the woods to keep from being chased past it. But this is the way they've got to come if they're going to do any more traveling tonight.

"Ten of you will stay here in ambush with me, and the rest will go back to the fort. If there's anything left of it to go back to, that is."

GREGORY had had a bad evening. His prize had escaped, a good deal of his property had been destroyed, and several of his people had been killed, not to mention all that were wounded or badly knocked about. Chilbert, moreover, might not be at all nice about Conan's loss. My shoulders shook. The more bile traitors had to drink the better I liked it.

The only thing that detracted from an otherwise thorough triumph was the knowledge that Chilbert, in spite of all we had done, was pre-ordained to profit. He would be disappointed at finding that Conan had given him the slip for yet a second time, but Gregory had attempted his last political horse-trading as an independent agent. He, his troops, and his strategically situated land would be ruled by the count from now on. The alternative was facing Conan's wrath unaided.

Our pursuers crashed into the woods on the other side of the road, murmuring sullenly. Then at Gregory's word they were silent. We, too, refrained from further speech and movement. It got cold there as the night wore on, but we who had been so near the colder realm of death, had no complaints.

Nor was the day far off, as Gregory had pointed out. In an hour or so we felt the breeze that often ushers in the dawn, and the rustling of the leaves it stirred covered the slight noises of our retreat.

It was while we were still only part way to our mounts that we heard horses from southward on the road. "Chilbert!" Conan whispered. "It's too bad we can't wait to see them meet and hear what they have to say."

But instead we stole along the path more rapidly still and reached our animals just as the fading of night was perceptible in tiny patches through the trees above us. Behind we could hear Gregory's men talking again as they got ready to greet the newcomers. Under cover of that we got under way, afoot until the trail could be followed with the eye. Then we mounted and increased our pace in proportion to the visibility until we were riding as fast as conditions would permit.

The horses were in somewhat the same condition as ourselves, sufficiently recuperated to go on but stiff and sore. Conan and I had bruises and cuts to boot, which were painfully lashed now and again by branches, but we were too delighted with ourselves to let such things worry us much.

We talked, joked and sang until the mid-day warmth worked on our sleeplessness. Mine soon became the source of a dull agony, and the rest of the day was a recurrent succession of wakings barely in time to save myself from falling out of the saddle.

As a matter of fact, I was all for resting during the afternoon, but Conan, aside from his natural longing to get home, took the sensible position that an hour's respite would only serve as a teaser. So on we went somehow, the others in not much better shape than I myself, and caught sight of the fortress just after sun-down.

And a very, very pleasant sight it was, that fortress.

PEOPLE rushed out to meet us as soon as we were near enough to be identified, but I don't know much what was said except that everybody was glad. I just grinned at them vaguely.

"Don't ask them any questions now," Ann told the insistently curious. "We've got the answer to the only important one, and now they're going to rest."

Jean was there to steady me as I slid from my horse, finally at home, and right behind him I saw Marie. Maybe I'd spoken to her before, but I thought she looked as if she expected me to say something.

I blinked at her. "Hello, Marie. I'm thirsty."

It was a simple statement of fact, but they suddenly howled with laughter. "Glory be to God! he's ready for a drunk again!" Jean shouted. "Get the man wine before he kills somebody!"

But I wasn't ready for a drunk—what I had really had in mind was water—and I couldn't have killed a butterfly. A half cup of the wine they brought vanquished me. I hardly recollect being helped to bed.

It was late the next morning when, after looking out at a wet, chilly day, I washed and slouched stiffly into the hall. There seemed to be quite a few things the matter with me, but the one of which I was most conscious was lack of nourishment.

The rain had stopped the harvest, and the household was assembled around the fireplace. Conan and Fulke were already breakfasting, and the rest were impatiently waiting for them to finish and give out the details of our exploit.

My advent elicited boisterous greetings. "Here comes another man to eat us out of house and home," Rainault said.

"I suspect it's been done already, judging from the way those two gobblers are going at it." I looked at Ann anxiously. "Is there anything left?"

Conan grinned as she kissed me good morning. "Nice but not sustaining," he remarked. "But you don't have to worry, brother. She's so afraid there won't be enough for you that she's practically starving me to death."

"I cooked one goose for only three men," Ann said, "but Conan's idea of sharing it is to give you and Fulke the feet and the feathers."

I smiled at Marie as I sat down and abruptly recalled that I hadn't expected to return when I set out. Well, it had happened that I had, and I was glad that it had so happened. I was even gladder when I saw the portion of goose I was receiving. Ann had certainly seen to it that I wasn't scanted.

I ate hugely and drank plenty of wine, a thing I seldom do in the morning. But they were in the mood to indulge me, and I was in no mood to stop them. My veins glowed pleasantly soon, and I was drowsily happy, liking myself and everybody else.

"Now let's hear about it, and don't leave out anything," Ann commanded when we were through.

Personally I had no intention of exerting myself to construct a coherent narrative. I stretched out on the floor before the fire. The bear rug was otherwise satisfactory, but I kept shifting my head to find just the proper spot. Then suddenly to my intense surprise Marie matter of factly seated herself on the floor and took my head on her lap. It was very comfortable, and I sighed contentedly as I looked up at her.

"You're extremely beautiful, but I'll probably go to sleep," I murmured. "Do you mind?"

Her hand felt fine upon my brow. "No, sleep will do you good."

Somehow I had never thought of her as being kind. I half closed my eyes, putting in comments as they occurred to me, while Conan and Fulke carried the burden of the story.

Well fed, well wined, well liked, happy with achievement, and cherished by a pretty girl, I have never experienced such complete, though passive, satisfaction. The tale and its attendant ejaculations of excitement and approval grew farther away. As I had prophesied, I slept again.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE CODDLED WARRIOR

WHEN I waked everybody but the two of us had gone. The fire had died out, and, though a glance told me it was now sunny outside, it was damply cool indoors. I sat up and looked at Marie.

"How long did I sleep?" I asked guiltily.

"Only a couple of hours." She smiled and held out her hands. "Help me up."

I grew more contrite, seeing how stiffly she rose. "I'm sorry! You should have roused me." I was touched by her consideration and kept hold of her hands.

"Oh, I remember a time when you did something for me," she replied. "And you've earned a little coddling today." Her smile changed to a grin. "You took to it like a kitten." She was feeling very friendly and wondering if I was going to kiss her.

"I enjoyed it," I assured her; and then I resolved her doubts. She had a warm, generous mouth.

One good kiss deserved another as far as I was concerned, but she shook her head. "It's only recently that as something to kiss you've ranked above spiders. I've got to get used to the idea."

"Well, if we can't make love let's at least be comfortable," I said. "Let's go out in the sun and bake the chill out of us."

People hailed me as we walked across the court in amiable silence, but all were too busy to do more than proffer a word of congratulation. As a matter of course, we sought the low place in the wall where we had sat a couple of nights before. It was warm but not hot, and the slight breeze was fresh from a washed world.

"I thought you weren't coming back," she said after a moment or so.

"So did I," I chuckled, "but with a couple of dozen sword swingers herding me I forgot to be choosy about places. As a matter of fact, I forgot I had intended to go anywhere else until this morning."

"I suppose we should be grateful for your absent-mindedness."

"Why not?" I asked. "I am myself. I like being with everybody here." I looked at her. "How about you? Are you going to get along all right?"

"All right," she echoed the words flatly. "I like the people, too, and Ann's been most kind. She says she's glad of my company." Marie set her lips. "She'd better be. I don't see how she's ever going to get rid of me."

An orphaned and landless girl has a tough row to hoe; and I was particularly concerned to think anybody was depressed on this day when I was feeling so triumphantly pleased with life. Noticing my look of commiseration, she instantly smiled and took my arm.

"I'm sorry, Finnian. You're worrying about me, and I shouldn't have said anything to make you do so today. You've earned carefreedom and rest; and the rest, at least, you'll certainly need. There's going to be high feasting tonight, and everybody will want you to drink with them."

"I'll try to accommodate them," I said mildly.

"I bet you will. And once you have been so obliging what will you do?"

"I don't know any more." I laughed ruefully. "Sometimes I think I'll never get out of this country. Certainly no plans I make to that end come to any account."

I was more serious than I seemed, for I was thinking once more of the Pictish priest and wondering if I was doomed to remain there while my life lasted. And suppose I was?

I MULLED that over, and my mind, always apt to go rabbit chasing when not disciplined to bear on a specific problem, hunted out the possibilities of such a situation. There could be far worse dooms than living where I was, providing Chilbert didn't win the anticipated war.

I would be among friends, with a record of service to ensure my welcome. More than that, I'd be the chosen peer of the man in power, and as such a recognized leader. Therefore, if Conan won I could

have holdings and followers of my own.

The vision grew, awing me. Since school days I had had no companion for long, and I had accepted that as inevitable. I had never owned more than I could carry with me, though often considerably less. Now the odds were one in two that chieftainship would be all but thrust upon me. And one of the responsibilities of a chief as well as the ordained procedure for a man with a hall of his own was to get married.

I thought that out and shook my head dazedly. If the logic of events was as implacable as it seemed, I would marry the girl beside me. As a woman she was looking for a place of her own with a man she could like. With my newly won land I would not need or ask for a dowry, and Conan and Ann would give their approval. So much for her side of the bargain.

As for me, I admired and trusted her, having seen her bearing in hard circumstances. She was a girl, too, that a man could make love to with conviction.

My glance, which had been wandering, returned to give her a veiled scrutiny. "Still drowsy?" she asked.

I came out of it. "No, just mooning," I confessed. Aware that all the foregoing had been built on the shadowy base of hypothesis, I felt silly. But the train of thought had left its mark. I closed one eye slowly. Suppose the hypotheses became reality. And after the logic of events had married a man off, did it stay around to help him out in the pinches?

Conan had been inspecting the walls with Ann, and now they were drawing near the part where we were sitting.

"How do things look?" I called, knowing almost as well as he did but eager to start a conversation that might free me from further disturbing speculation.

They picked their way across the unevenness of the uncompleted stretch to join us. "Apparently nobody was loafing while I was Gregory's guest. If it wasn't for the harvest it'd be finished now." He patted a stone as he and his wife seated themselves. "In a few weeks I'm going to have a place Ann can hold without looking up from her sewing. Then if certain polecats stay alive it won't be because nobody tried to kill them."

"Gregory wouldn't happen to be the first by any chance?"

He sighed. "Gregory would happen to be a polecat, but not one that I'll kill. I led three men into that trap of his, and to pay their way out I'll guarantee not to follow the matter up." He chuckled. "After all we fined him pretty heavily, what with one thing and another. I think he wished God had made him a good boy before the night was over."

"How are you going to negotiate with him?" Ann asked. "Sending a man or a few men would just give him additional hostages."

"Right as usual, girl," he nodded. "No, I'm going to visit the abbot in a couple of days to offer personal thanks for the help he gave. I'll ask him then to act as go-between, and I have no doubt he'll be willing to send a man on this simpler, less dangerous mission."

"There's excitement by the gate," Marie remarked. "Maybe Gregory decided to make his offer beforehand."

WE LOOKED up with interest to see a horseman enter and dismount, to be hidden from us in a swiftly growing group. At about the point where impatience was driving us to call out to them we saw Fulke hurrying toward us.

"It's a stranger, Conan," he announced. "He claims he's just come from the other side of the Loire, he isn't sure whether or not he knows anybody here, and he wasn't sent by anybody."

"Well, feed him and keep an eye on him," my friend directed.

"Yes, but he says he must speak to you personally, and that doesn't jibe with the rest of his talk. I think he's a spy."

"A lot of men are these days," Conan said. "Make sure he hasn't got any knives hidden on him and bring him over."

The young man Fulke and Rainault

escorted between them looked tired and not too well. His features were handsome for all their drawn appearance, and he carried his compact, slender figure as if he knew he was a man. He halted to look up at us, gazing enquiringly first at Conan and then at me. As our eyes met his face lit up with genuine pleasure.

"Hello, Finnian!" he said enthusiastically. "I told you I'd remember."

Everybody was staring at me expectantly, but nothing registered in that first astonished searching of my past. "Maybe you remember, but it's obvious that Finnian doesn't," Conan remarked. "Where did you meet him?"

"You're Conan, I take it?"

"Yes. I was told you wanted to speak to me. But let's get this point straightened out first."

"Surely." The newcomer turned his eyes to me again. "You fished me out of the river and made the monks look after me."

I knew who he was then, of course. Still, considering that I had never seen him erect and in full control of his faculties before, it wasn't strange that I hadn't recognized him. "That's right. Glad to see you up and about. The Danes had put an arrow in him," I explained to the others.

"You certainly get around and meet the people, brother. Can you vouch for him, now that you place him?"

"Yes, I think so," I said. "He comes from too far west to know Chilbert."

"The name is Raymond, in case anyone's interested," the fellow said.

"There remains to be explained," I pointed out, "how it happens that you elected to come here."

"Well, I had to go somewhere. The monks had their hands full of trouble without an unwanted guest, and I was able to walk by the time the Dane scare was over. The scum turned back when they saw what strength Chilbert had against them."

Having warned Thorgrim that such would probably be the case, I nodded. "Well?"

He gestured with both hands. "My chief and my people were killed and the hall burnt. I had no wish to go back and see the charred carrion, so I decided to look for a place in the vicinity. From what I could gather there was no leader worth tying to on the south side of the Loire, but I learned that across the river there were men who were doing things. I didn't like what I heard about Chilbert, and I'm not a priest."

HE HAD looked at Conan while making the last remark, but now he turned to me again. "The Danes had left some horses without owners. I wasn't up to it, but Gaimar caught one and got it across the river for me. He told me to tell you he was sorry for being a louse."

"He's one no longer." Though puzzled, I was pleased, for I hate to think sourly of a man with whom I'd shared pleasant times. "But see here. What the devil made Gaimar think you'd meet me in these parts?"

His eyes gleamed. "It seems that Gaimar had a lot of non-monastic acquaintances."

"He did," I chuckled.

"It seems, too, that although you never said where you came from he'd heard a story of a bard who'd stood by Conan in a walloping good fight. He couldn't figure out what you were doing at the abbey, but he always thought you were the one."

"I owe him something for keeping his mouth shut," I said.

"Well," he concluded, "that decided me that the trip up here would be worth it. I knew if you were for Conan he must be all right."

My helpless glance brought a grin from Conan who, I could see, had already made his judgment. "I'll take him on if you say so, brother. How do you want him counted?"

It was not only because I was partly responsible for his presence or because of a man's obscure urge to continue being helpful to anyone he has once assisted that I was moved to say what I did. I had been favorably impressed by his directness and his general air of competence as he told

his story. "Until he's well, as my guest. Thanks, Conan."

Raymond's face lighted, then composed itself as he voiced his appreciation. My words had granted him the most favorable position he could have wished for. Under other circumstances he might have had a long pull proving his right to membership in the inner circle of the household.

"Glad to have you." Conan said and turned to Marie. "Would you see to it that Finnian's friend has the meal I think he could do with?"

She jumped to the ground and smiled up at me. "As one of your waifs and strays I'll be glad to help another."

We looked after them briefly as they walked from us. "Nice looking pair of youngsters," Conan commented, yawning.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### LIFT THE FLAGON HIGH

"SPEAKING of Marie," my friend went on after a moment, "Ann informs me of another nice piece of business you've done for us. Who was the chief you snatched her from?"

He didn't know Thorgrim, but having done Viking work himself, he could see exactly what I had been up against. He whistled as I started to sketch the scene, but I didn't have to take the matter seriously now.

I proceeded to fabricate a grotesque picture of my own fright, the manner in which Thorgrim had been carried away by his sense of drama, as well as his later realization of having been sold, and Marie's valiant struggles to keep from being rescued. Conan roared at the comedy of it, but Ann laughed only a little.

"It seems that everyone here is in your debt, Finnian. I wish there was something we could do for you."

"We could give him a drink," her husband said hopefully.

Ann gave up. This was our day, with our big celebration imminent, and from now on nobody could make either of us serious about anything. "And I suppose," she said, smiling, "that at least one of us could give himself a drink, too. I'm going in now to see about the final preparations for the banquet. I'll have the wine sent out."

When we saw the decanter we sauntered over to the table and seated ourselves with the deliberation of men who approach a great task with full respect for what has to be accomplished.

We sat slowly, backs leaned against the wall, legs stretched out to the exact and carefully found point of comfort, and brooded, solemn-eyed, on the cups my friend was gently filling. Then we eyed one another, seeking inspiration for the toast.

"Wine and whisky for our friends," he intoned.

"Amen," I said. "Whey and water for our enemies!"

"Mixed!" he said.

We held it on the palate, swallowed and sighed. It was from the bottom of the cellar. I closed my eyes, then opened one. "There are only two people I can think of right now who deserve a wine like that."

He nodded. "This is one of the times when I'm profoundly impressed by the exquisite rightness of things."

The feast began early, for Conan wanted the men to get their celebrating over with in time to rest up for a full day's labor the next day, a necessity in view of the pressing tasks on hand. Nevertheless, when we were called to eat we had a craftsmanlike foundation, neither so large that food might make us feel sodden nor so small that food might make us feel sober.

By design we entered last and paused with genial self-consciousness to hear the shouts of greeting. Hell, it was our party. "Shall we give it to 'em now?" Conan asked.

"I was never one to keep a good song from anybody," I assented, and we promptly boomed out some lines hatched between by the aid of the uncritical heat of wine.

*Who looks like a toad that a snake's half swallowed?*
*Who stinks like a corpse that a wolf's half hollowed?*

*Whose plans were a traitor's? Whose plans weren't followed?*
*Gregory's! Drink his soul to Hell!*

*Who harried this kite and mangled his pinions?*
*Who burned up his crops and slaughtered his minions?*
*Who and with what swords? Conan's and Finnian's!*
*Wine for the brands, and drink it well!*

*Who bellowed for kegs of wine by the wagon?*
*Who poured it in cups the size of a flagon?*
*Who then walked off with no trace of a jag on?*
*We know—wahoo!—*
*but*
*we*
*won't*
*tell.*

EVERYBODY was already in a good humor, and our own very ripe humor only served to heighten the general tendency. They whooped, and we saluted them while taking stock of the seating arrangements.

They were like this:

Our two empty seats were in the middle of one side of the family table, of course; and Ann had thoughtfully arranged for Fulke to sit next to us in his earned place as one of the honored. Beyond him were Jean and his wife, while Rainault and his were next to where I would sit. Ann and Marie were beyond them again at one end of the board. Raymond was not there, having evidently elected to sleep.

It was customary to keep the side toward the hall open, but there were unusual and unbalanced features of the placing. "You are not sitting next to me, my little dove," Conan called out deeply.

"I am not, my hero," Ann called back with serene firmness. "I have no intention of having my ears deafened and my ribs bruised when you start showing how you and Finnian massacred armies."

Conan laughed. "My wise woman!" he praised her as we finally advanced to seat ourselves. "You know, I think we've come to the right place, brother. They have wine here."

"Providential," I pronounced. "Shall we have a toast?"

"Naturally. I suppose you have sense enough to know whom we're going to toast first?"

I caught Marie's amused eye on us and winked. "Fill the cups," I challenged, "and I'll prove that I know."

Conan handed mine to me, and we rose. "We'll drink now," he began loudly, and as he spoke everybody in the hall started to lift a cup. Fulke was imitating the others, but I reached over and spilled his to the floor.

"To the man who brought the horses to the men who needed them!" my friend went on. "Were it not for him we'd be feeding crows instead of drinking with you all tonight. To Fulke!" And we two, at least, drained our cups to him.

Others might not give him justice, but we appreciated to the full the special courage and coolness required for waiting, inactive, for the right moment. When every sort of devilment is breaking loose within sight and hearing it's harder to stay still than to act.

Fulke was stunned and embarrassed, which was as it should have been. A cocky youngster is as unpleasantly hard to overlook as a neighboring goat on a damp night. Conan took up the lad's cup, filled it and thrust it before him.

"You can drink this next one." He smiled.

Still red, Fulke looked up. "Father Clovis?"

"None other," I assured him, "and we'll throw the abbot into the cup for good measure."

After Jean, his good-natured face laughing with wine, had toasted the chief and Rainault had called for a drink to me, we sat down to eat. I understand it was a particularly good meal and that I ate like a starving bear, but I have no recollection of that.

All I can remember is that Conan or I would stop every now and then and loudly propose to the other some new thing to drink to.

WHILE we were getting our second wind after the feast, Fulke sang for us. He had a pleasant voice and played well, though the viol has but flimsy tones if a man is used to the power and sweep of the harp. As I listened dreamily, I looked around, liking what I saw and counting it my own. No idea could have startled me just then, but actually a startling thing had taken place in my life. I was thinking of this place as my home and of these people as my clansmen.

And why not? It was a fine thing to see them, young people and old, hearty and happy at the feast, snug in their fortress. And each of them would always have a smile or a good word for me. They already looked on me as a leader; only my acceptance of the status was needed to make it official. As for those at the table with me, it was not likely that I would ever again find so many I liked as well.

I looked them over, finishing with Marie. The insidious thing about conceiving the idea of marrying a particularly pretty girl is that the more a man thinks about it the more reasonable it seems.

A little pulse of passion stirred in me as she caught my glance, smiled, and resumed talking to Ann. No, there didn't seem to be any sense in going anywhere else, now that I rationally considered. The Lord could attest that I'd done all the traveling, and more, that I'd ever benefit by.

A bard didn't have to keep moving except in pursuit of new audiences, and as a landed man I wouldn't have to scratch for such a catch-as-catch-can living. That would be a fine thing, too, for instead of using good effort to turn out a lot of popular nonsense I could give my time to writing something I could be proud of, maybe.

And the matter of a livelihood aside, I could get more done if I didn't have to be always on the go. Take Virgil and Horace: they stayed on the premises and got things accomplished. I nodded a head full of vague plans for master works.

Fulke had finished another piece and was being called on for more. I looked at his instrument enviously, wondering where and how I was going to obtain another harp. I could make the frame and string one myself, but where I'd get the proper stringing was something else again. Possibly, I thought hopefully, Fulke himself had the craft of preparing the gut.

When he begged off to rest a while, the women cleared away the dishes and left us with the wine. In token that we were resuming our obligations I filled Conan's cup and my own. "You know," I said, my face aglow with the sudden inspiration, "there's someone to whom we owe attention that we haven't fixed up this evening."

He eyed me with interest. "Who could that be?"

"The lad we both love—Chilbert!"

"Right, by Heaven!" Conan brought his big fist down on the table with a bang. I caught up my cup in time, but he slopped the others and flipped Rainault's neatly into his lap. Everybody but the latter was delighted, and he was appeased as soon as his cup was filled again.

"Now about Chilbert," Conan said in a businesslike voice.

After a weighty discussion of forms and styles we decided on something approximating the Irish satire. With this to go on we set to work, gravely weighing the abusive values of words and metaphors until we'd hit upon our theme. Finally, after mumbling it over together a couple of times, we shouted for attention and gave it to the world at the top of our voices.

It was an immense success. The men were riotous with laughter and demanded repetitions we were nothing loth to give. After each they would toast Chilbert with solemn ceremony. He should have been there.

THEN the good talk began. And here, too, one language was not enough for the largeness of our minds. We exchanged Viking experiences in Danish, talked of school life in Gaelic, and mooted points of scholarship in Latin.

We told jokes, both those of the flesh

and those of the spirit; we reconstructed philosophies and smashed them with a quip; we drank to heroes, retold the lives of saints in a way that seemed unbelievably funny at the time, wrangled over poets, and wondered at the terrific intellect of the man who'd invented wine.

We were having a marvelous time, but the others must have got tired of us. Most of them, mindful of the day of drudgery to follow, had left in a body fairly early. At what time we were deserted by Jean and Rainault I can't say. I remember that we were ultimately alone, and that the fact wasn't of sufficient interest to make us comment.

Yet at a certain point, a few cupfuls left in the last flagon notwithstanding, we looked at each other thoughtfully. "We have had about enough," Conan spoke for both of us. "There's no use in overindulging ourselves."

I was shocked at the idea. "Certainly not!"

He rose with immense dignity and nearly tripped over something. Looking down to see what his foot had caught on, we saw Fulke, prone and sleeping with quiet soundness. The lad must have felt it was his duty to try to keep up with us.

Conan stroked his chin broodingly. "What do you think can be the matter with him?"

"I don't know," I answered worriedly. "He must be sick or something."

"You'd better take a look at him."

I rolled Fulke over, which was a mistake, for he immediately began to snore. Rolling him quickly back on to his stomach, I stood up, shaking my head. "Why, he's been drinking, Conan!"

"No!"

"You don't think I'd say a thing like that about anybody unless it was so, do you?"

"That's true. What do you think the world's coming to, anyhow?"

"No good, I'll bet," I said darkly.

"That's my own suspicion. And to think such things can happen in my house—*my* house!"

"He's only a youngster, too."

"Hardly more than a boy." Conan's face was now stern. "Well, let's put him away now. We can lecture him in the morning."

That was the end of that great night. Grinning at him affectionately, we picked Fulke up and went happily to bed.

WE WERE a little subdued the next morning but had no regrets, realizing that a man cannot always walk the world as a giant. Conan spent the morning surveying the progress of the harvest, while I looked around for a suitable piece of seasoned timber to use for a harp frame.

Finding one that would serve, although not of the best wood, I set to work. Though not an expert, I could fashion one that would do until I could secure one made by a master.

Later Raymond, still wan but looking much better for the good rest he'd had, found me and conversed a while. He proved to be an intelligent, likable youth, and I made up my mind that I had done Conan a good turn by taking him into the household. He on his side was well pleased with everything.

"This is a fine place," he stated, and I could see that he was already considering it possessively.

I was rough hewing my timber down to workable dimensions and didn't look up. "You won't find a better one," I said with conviction.

"I know that," he said confidently, "because you brought me here."

My head jerked up at that and I stared at him, speechless.

"You're my luck," he informed me with cool assurance. "I had bad luck before I met you. I had a chief I couldn't like much and who ran things ill. Matters kept on getting worse, and the Dane raid just killed the place before it died.

"I nearly died myself, but I didn't because of you. Then I didn't have any particular place to go until I heard that Conan was a friend of yours. He turns out to be a real chief and a friend to follow—I've found out how his men feel—and his

place is strong and living, with good people in it.

"And because of you I have a chance to show I deserve a place with the leaders. I'll keep that place because I'll work and fight well, and good service in a friend of yours will be rewarded."

I was a little non-plussed, and he noticed that. He smiled a little. "You see, I'm really your man; maybe your first follower."

This was true but none of anybody's business in view of my new aspirations. "What makes you say that?" I growled.

"Marie told me about you. She says you don't want either to follow or lead."

Only a woman would know that about a man on the basis of no evidence at all. Still it was pleasant to know I was one of her topics of conversation.

"H-m-m," I said noncommittally, mentally promising myself that she would see that I could run a house and rule those in it as well as the next man. I returned to my hacking, making a good resolution with every chip.

"Conan's chief over everybody but you," he pursued, "but I'll follow him only if you have no present need of me yourself."

He was not without humor, but he had a dominant and direct purposefulness that, seeing myself one of its stepping stones, I found embarrassing. I straightened up again and looked him in the eye.

"I may want you later," I said, dimly envisioning a fort and hall of my own where this young fellow might have an honored post, "but you came here looking for a niche for yourself, and the place isn't mine.

"If Conan accepted you as my guest, that only holds good while you are convalescent. Once you are well enough to hold up your end, there's only one man you can work for here. That's Conan. If ever I have an establishment of my own and positions to offer, it will be because I ask, and he grants, a favor."

He nodded cheerfully when I'd finished. "It doesn't matter from which of you I take orders. For once I know that I'm in a place where I have a chance to get somewhere. You're my luck, and whatever you advise will be good for me."

With that he left.

With some moodiness I looked after him. Every canon I had for judging character told me he was the sort of man you'd want around when the going got rough. But though I had an instinctive admiration for him I could not feel the warmth I'd experienced toward many another man.

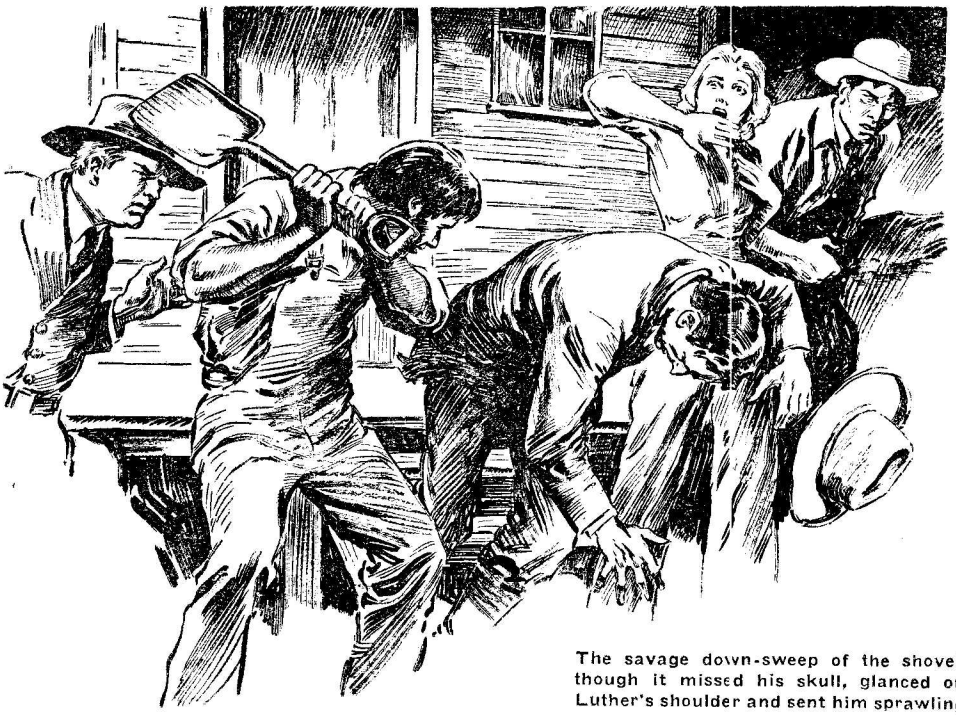
There was nothing wrong with his avowed desire for getting on in the world, yet I couldn't see why he had to talk about it. If it happened, well and good, but if it didn't, why there are plenty of men, no less grand for being landless, to split a bottle with.

Conan would be a power because his natural efficiency set him to coping with conditions that angered him. He, however, took his abilities for granted and never palavered about them or the success they achieved. But I wasn't being fair to the youngster in holding him up against Conan. Not many had the latter's faculty for living.

There was a clattering on the bridge, and I looked across the court to see the man himself enter the gates. He had dismounted and was walking toward me when a guard on the wall halted him.

"There's a rider coming," the fellow called down. "He's in a hurry, too."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



The savage down-sweep of the shovel, though it missed his skull, glanced on Luther's shoulder and sent him sprawling

# The Mistaken Finch

**Triple feature for this week: adventure in murder and coming of age of a bumptious youth, combined with relevant and instructive remarks about the kind of a red-bellied bird not to use in tracking**

By MARTIN McCALL

THE desert sun, declining, stretched out the shadow of the bit of greasewood twenty paces distant at the corner of the horse corral. Cowered beneath it the big half-shepherd bitch shook and shook at the slaver that whitened her muzzle and wouldn't shake off.

"It's nothing, Jesse, just the heat," the white girl pleaded sharply with her Hopi Indian husband. She called: "Pattie! Good dog!"

"Not a chance, Ann. I couldn't go away and leave you with—"

The rancher broke off as another and more violent shivering possessed the dog's limbs and she tried to rear up. He lifted the rifle he held, a slender weapon fit for a woman to play with, yet deadly enough here.

"You give me that gun!" The girl wrenched it violently, clear away from him. "It's mine! And she's my dog!"

Her red-penciled mouth was drawn out of shape and ugly. Turning, she raised the rifle, sighted deliberately, fired; the dog heaved once and lay quiet under the greasewood.

Ann Waters looked down at the brand new gun, across her palms. Her words sounded thin and dry. "Thank you for my

anniversary present, Jesse. Now that I've shot it once, it will never be shot again."

The Indian's face remained stolid. "I didn't mean for *you* to—"

"You can't help it. It's just one of those things you can't know. With us, if your dog's to be killed, you're the one that does it."

Jesse Waters walked back to his car, ready in the drive-out near the ranch-house porch, picked up from the bordering lawn his suitcase, packed for the three-day stockmen's congress at Santa Fé, put on his Panama, got in and drove away.

Ann stood and watched his dust, her lips still back against her teeth. She wasn't aware anyone was near till she heard a mocking tenor titter and wheeled to find a horseman nearly above her, slouched in his saddle with a studied grace as he too watched the dust go.

Handsome in his dark way, a way darker than half the Indians, Bo Runyon was the only white hand hired at present on the Waters ranch.

"Well," he mused, and tittered—"you made your bed."

Ann looked him up and down. "Why, you—"

She shut her mouth tightly. Spying the Apache house-boy loitering within earshot beyond a shed corner, she called: "Joe, get a spade."

She walked toward the house, a tallish figure, blond, thin as a rail in her blue jeans. Hoofs followed behind her. She said to herself: "I'd better put this rifle down somewhere."

She did so, at the steps. Still facing the porch she got a case from a pocket, took a cigarette, lighted it. After a jerky puff she got out a gunmetal compact, flipped up the mirror, felt for the pigment.

Then she could no longer help it, but turned on Bo Runyon, halted there, watching her from his saddle, his full lips curved up at the corners.

"What's the matter with you, Runyon?"

"Matter?" With a playful air of wonder he tipped further back on his wet black hair his enormous white fiesta sombrero.

"Where do you think you're going like that on a work-day night?"

"Me? Oh, over the hills, see some life around Santanna's maybe. . . . Unless, of course—"

His eyes shifted to Ann's right. She looked and saw Joe Wheel, the house-boy, wooden there, eyes carefully on the ground.

It was lucky she hadn't the rifle. "Apache! Padding up on people!"

"You tell me, get a spade." He had the tool in his hand.

"Go on out to the corral with it. I'll follow."

When Joe had gone, soft-footed, Runyon recommenced. "Unless, of course, you'd rather I *wouldn't* go tonight. Tomorrow would do me."

Ann looked him over slowly; again her words sounded thin and dry.

"Tomorrow would be far better. Tomorrow is your pay-day."

She turned then and went into the house, taking the rifle.

AT THE Gila River post of the state constabulary it was hot forenoon. Sergeant Pinkham, big-girthed, iron-haired, sat at his desk and glumly eyed his Problem, or at least as much of the young trooper's ill-knit length as was visible to eye, in the depths of the office easy-chair, behind a huge book about birds.

Why, he asked himself, should he, Pinkham, have to be the goat? Why, just because a lot of romantic voters and their politicians had gone on an emotional bender to perpetuate a legend and a name, had he to be dry-nurse to the big mistake?

Well enough he knew why. Veteran of the rough-and-tumble days when the constabulary force was being dreamed and battled into existence, Sergeant Pinkham was one of the very few left who had stood with the man who had had the dream and led the fighting: Luther Calvin, "Old Lute."

And here in the lazy chair now, one of those biological unpredictables, small sea-green eyes, mouth of a studied weariness, freckled neck a mile out of his collar and

ears that waved in the wind, was "Young Lute," Luther Calvin II. . . .

As he turned the leaves of the bird-book full of colored prints, the youth was saying:

"The trouble with this Force is, no trained observation. I haven't found a cop in the station able to spot an Arizona oriole."

Sergeant Pinkham spoke at last. "The trouble with *you,* son—"

"Trouble! With me?" The green eyes blinked. "Oh, now, Pink!"

Still the sergeant kept his voice level. "My name is *Sir.*"

"Oh, now listen!"

Pinkham got up. He would have asked nothing better than to be able to like, and be liked by, this only living son of his dead leader and old friend. But trying to get inside the defenses of a self-willed, self-mistrustful porcupine is too painful to be worth it. Having risen now, he walked around the desk and knotted a fist in Luther's hair.

"On your feet, when you talk to me!"

"Ow!" But there was nothing for it; up came the human beanpole.

"Heels together, and what shoulders you've got there, square 'em! . . . When do you aim to get into uniform?"

"Me, never! Uniforms are built for the common kind of men that have to pass physicals. I'd look swell, wouldn't I! Besides, I'm too special."

"You mean the name you happen to bear is too special. That it?"

"No, but look at my brain, all the thousands of dollars the state's got invested in it. Look the police schools I've been chased through; Wichita, Washington, *Paris* by gum! Head just teeming. Yet so much room more, I have to take up bird-loving for something to fill in; and look, after only three months, I doubt there's an ornithologist living—"

"I say, the trouble with you is, you misbegotten son of a—"

"—of a great man, and your personal idol, Pink; that's the rub."

"An inferiority hump the size of a mountain, that's your rub, son. You hate your guts; your liver is white with terror you'll turn too quick and catch somebody with a grin on."

"You mean, 'Look what the cat dragged in for a cop'?"

"A cop is the last thing you're fitted for, or would want to be. If the Force had the nerve to kick you out before ever you get started, you'd be tickled to death, Luther."

"And if I'd let 'em pass me the buck, and kick myself out—"

"But you won't. You've got some ornery cross-grained pride of name that'll let you make a pest of yourself; but quit? Never!"

The small eyes shifted; the weary mouth cracked wisely to dissemble misery. "Harking back: if you don't believe I'm a wonder, ask me some questions. Ask me about the winter coloring of the adult male Lapland Longspur, or how many—"

"See here, son! You weren't born Luther, you were born William L. It was your big brother was young Lute. He had his father's shoulders, his father's head, his father's hopes—or would have had."

Now came the eyes back whipping. "And how did he die? Saving a kid's life. The kid was me." For an awful instant the mask was down, the boy face white and naked.

"So I'm Luther. And you're too soft to stand up and say, *'Luther, in a pig's eye!'* and I'm too all-crossed-up to dare holler the same thing in my own misbuilt face. That's the bind you're in, I'm in, we're all in."

Happily there came a rap at the door, and a trooper entering.

"There's an Indian here wants to see you, sir. Rancher from out Blind Wash way, Jesse Waters. Graduate of U.S.C., I believe . . ."

"Married a Bakely girl from Phoenix. I know. So what?"

"He's on his way back from the stock meet at Santa Fé, happened to call up his home from here, and it seems there's some trouble about some man lost or something."

"Have him in."

WATERS' story was full of blanks, even to himself. It seemed that two days since, the day after he had left for Santa Fé, his wife had paid off one of the hands, a Bo Runyon, white . . .

His wife had? Was Mrs. Waters in the habit of—

It was her business what she did. The ranch was hers. He, Waters, was practically speaking the—her—acting manager.

"Foreman, in short."

Foreman, yes. . . . So Runyon had taken his money, the bulk of two months' pay, and ridden off on his own horse, "north across the Blind Wash country, he seemed to think, though he couldn't be sure."

"Who seemed to think?"

The house-boy. With whom Waters had done his talking on the phone.

He hadn't talked with Mrs. Waters?

No. Mrs. Waters had been, probably, busy; or—as a matter of fact, why not say it out; Waters and his wife had had words as he was leaving for Santa Fé, and he didn't know how she felt toward—

"Words over what? The man Runyon? About letting him go?"

No-no! Briefly, with rancor, Waters told of the dog-shooting. . . .

So—Runyon had started out, presumably across the Blind Wash? For where?

Well, it would be for Santanna's on the Little Gila, or the highway at Hammerhead. He had called both of these—

Who had?

Joe Wheel, the Apache house-boy. Or maybe it had been Mrs. Waters. This morning, after the horse had come back in. Runyon's horse.

Oh? This was something else again! Back to the ranch?

Saddle empty, one stirrup-leather broken, the stirrup gone.

Sergeant Pinkham got up. "Two days, you say. We'd better get a move on. First off, if the man's in the Blind Wash, we'll want a tracker."

That had been seen to. Joe Wheel, the house-boy, had sent word in right away to Salt Springs Agency for John Red Horse to come out.

"Red Horse! He still around? Must be seven times a grandfather."

"He is," said Waters. "Joe Wheel is one of them."

"Well, let's go. Come on, Luther. let's go."

Luther Calvin II looked up from his chair and bird book. "This hot day?"

"Okay, Waters. I'll catch up with you." When the door had closed behind the Hopi, Pinkham stood above the youth. "Luther, you're not officially attached here yet; I can't order you—except in one thing. What I was kindly aiming to do was give your swollen ignorance a shot at some real education. Have you ever seen an old-time Indian tracker following sign?"

"Yep, in the movies. I've seen the Hindu rope trick too. I'm way past the covered-wagon-fairy-story age, Pink. . . . It says here, the Arizona oriole—"

"Okay. That's the end. Up with you!" Again a hand in hair. "One thing I *can* order, and that is, get your poison hide off this station and keep it off."

Disheveled beanpole, the son of Old Lute glowered back from the doorway where the bums-rush had carried him. His Adam's apple went up and down his long neck as he swallowed.

"No, I be dogged, Pink! You can't do this to me!"

He turned and fled like an ambling giraffe. When the sergeant came out he saw a motorcycle diminishing, and ears waving in the wind. The next place he was to see those ears was flat in a hammock on the Waters lawn.

NOT once had Ann Waters glanced toward the hammock; nor for minutes —beyond lighting a cigarette—had she stirred, where she sat on the porch step and watched the double dust-cloud coming.

Luther babbled right on. "Nice place. I can't see why a guy would get fed up, call his time like that and beat it. Unless —come to think—maybe you fired him. Though it beats me—"

Ann flipped the lip-stained cigarette away and rose. By turning his head over, Luther could see the cattle-guard gate in the home fence out there, a knot of Indians, including the house-boy and a little ancient man in long soiled shirt-tails, half a dozen horses, and two cars, momentarily stopped: Waters' and the sergeant's.

And now when he looked back at her he saw the girl busy with a gun-metal compact, swiftly, carefully, repairing the redness of her lips.

"Though it beats me, if you were bent on firing somebody, why on earth, out of eight or ten hands, you'd pick on the white one."

Ann came down past the hammock, walking toward the gate. The youth lay back on his ears, sighed, "Oh, all right," and gloomed at the leaves of the pampered maples overhead. He felt Sergeant Pinkham coming.

* * *

The trail of the riderless horse was evidently easy to follow, once the house-boy, who had seen the animal come in, put old John Red Horse on it. Head cocked slightly forward under its battered hat, that incredible assemblage of wrinkles, bones and senile shirt-tails went forward at a pace the more extraordinary for the heat of noon.

The house-boy tailed him by a few steps, slightly to one side. Ten yards behind the two Apaches came the riders, the sergeant, Luther and a couple of Hopi hands, these with lead-horses.

Waters, the ranchman, had not come. There'd been a moment when he seemed about to. But then his wife, standing beside him on the lawn, had put a hand around one of his, a movement so slight as hardly to be noticed, yet saying as plain as words: "You've been away; please stay."

After a mile or so, where the land rose northward to the rock-strewn ridges that make a maze and torment of the Blind Wash, the pace slowed down. Now and again, where a ribbon of basaltic debris intervened, Red Horse was forced to halt and study the terrain ahead, with an inch-by-inch patience that made at least one of the riders behind him want to yell.

Studying it, for what? Some fragment of rock overturned to show an unweathered side? Some trodden grass-stem in one of the rare wiry bunches from which the meadowlarks scuttled in sudden gray-and-mauve flurries, only to resettle as the quiet held and the heat pressed and the old Apache stood? Luther boiled, and at last boiled over.

"Hold this horse," he muttered to one of the Hopis, and got down.

From Pinkham: "Where you going? You leave the old man be!"

"I want to look, that's all." The youth moved up behind the ancient.

From the outstart for some reason inherent in his tangled character, he had been mad, and getting madder.

"What's the bellyache?" the sergeant had protested, weary of hearing him bumbling in his throat.

"I don't like him; let's go home. I don't like his hat, I don't like his shirt, and most of all I don't like the bridge of his nose. Did you notice—"

"Bosh! It's something that old Apache has got and you haven't got and never will have; that's what you hate, son."

"What I hate like poison is having my leg pulled by a lot of heap big Injun razzle-dazzle. I'm too intelligent and too scientific. Look up ahead there. I don't see a sign of one darn thing. And if I can't see with my young eyes he sure can't with his, and the whole thing is hooey. That old geek no more knows what he's doing than a kite."

"Kite is right." Pinkham had himself a good dry chuckle.

The fact that Luther had subsided after that, riding in humpy silence for a while, made his action at this stop now the more surprising.

Evidently having spotted what he wanted, Red Horse was about to start forward again with a grunted word to his grandson, Joe, when he found himself outflanked and confronted.

"You wait a second! What do you see out there ahead? Tell me!"

A sudden start of hoofs nearby was as suddenly stopped, reined in. On second thought, the sergeant held his peace and watched, a glint of hopeful malice in his eye.

The old Apache, gravely mystified, was looking from Luther to Joe.

"He don't talk only Indian," the house-boy explained.

"You put it to him then. He's to tell me what he sees out there to make him think there's been a horse."

A colloquy in the Yuman tongue. Then: "He says, can a young white man learn an old Apache this thing: put ink on a guy's fingers, print off a paper, tell him, 'You ain't Lame Crow, felluh, your name is Charlie Pipe, jumped jail at Flagstaff—' "

"Yeah? Does he read the detective magazines too, or are *you* making it up?"

"So Red Horse says, can an old Apache learn a young cop to follow sign on hard ground like the Blind Wash? In one lifetime?"

Sergeant Pinkham was content. "You asked for it, son. You got it. You can keep it. Come on, let's go."

BETWEEN the first and second waves of the Blind Wash there's an arroyo (really a shallow canyon with its rock walls) known as Webber's Crossing. The body lay fair out on the stony bottom.

Two days' sun had done their work, nor had the coyotes been idle. But the nature of the wreckage of skull and upper torso would have told a range man the story, even without the stirrup with its broken leather not far away.

Sergeant Pinkham, Red Horse and the house-boy stood ringed about the disaster, regarding it for a long time in silence. The sergeant glanced over his shoulder at Luther, ten feet back.

"What's the matter, son?" Sight of the pea-green pallor, and of the glowering self-rage of the boy who couldn't keep his inwards from turning over, made the grizzled fellow temper sarcasm. "Come see what you make of this."

"Don't need to. Thrown and dragged. That's el-ele-elementary."

The Apache pair in guttural conference, Pinkham asked: "What, Joe?"

"Red Horse ask me, was this felluh a good rider, and was the horse his horse? I tell him yep."

"Mmmm." It wasn't something the sergeant wanted to do, but it had to be done. Bent over the body he made his study, straightened up.

"Through the neck, above the epiglottis, soft part. The bullet went clean." And then: "All right, let's get the story. Tell him, Joe."

Red Horse was already about it, in motion along the shallow canyon's floor, walking steadily, reading easily—Heaven knew, for the seventy or eighty yards of it, from ending to beginning the tale was plain.

At its beginning, deep hoof-gouges of a sudden shying leap, the old Apache halted and looked around. He went on a few steps turned and came back.

Joe interpreted. "There, Bo was fine, horse fine. Right here, bang!"

Again the old man was looking around him. On one side, the west, the rock wall was nearly sheer, the lip of the plain above nearly coverless. That didn't take long.

Nor did the other wall, but for an opposite reason. Less precipitous, rising in broken steps that gave lodgement to nubbins of sacaton grass, near its foot a creosote bush spread a ragged screen. An ambush made to order.

Red Horse spoke to Joe, and Joe to Pinkham. "He wants a horse."

The sergeant turned to call back to the Hopi hands, who had gotten the animals down to the canyon bed. So he became aware that Luther had not followed directly from where the body lay. Less green and for once almost humanly hesitant, the boy was stowing away a tiny camera as he approached now.

"I got six shots, six angles. I did something else, if you don't mind. He was

supposed to be carrying nearly eighty dollars. Not a cent on him now. So it was robbery. Or would look like robbery, anyway."

The house-boy was pointing toward the creosote bush. "Red Horse, he wants one to get in behind there."

"What for? I'll go." Luther was already going. "What do?" he called, looking back through the brush from the pocket of ambush, to see Pinkham climbing aboard the horse one of the hands had brought.

"Aim your arm across a branch, Luther; shoot me in the Adam's apple."

"Okay, you're dead."

And now, beyond, at the far wall, Luther beheld Red Horse sighting back along the hypothetical trajectory and noting where it met the rock. Next thing, down he hunkered on the ground below, head between his knees, beginning, like an ambulatory microscope, his canvas of a wide neighborhood of weed and stone and sand.

The cheek of it! Senility setting itself to find less than a needle in more than a haystack. Luther saw red. "He can't do this to me!"

Another moment and he was to see another kind of red. For as he bent to get his head out of the bush of ambush, his eyes stopped in sudden focus. He bent lower and picked up from the ground under the creosote a cigarette butt. A most extraordinary butt to be lying cast away here in a desert canyon, its one end rimmed with fading lipstick.

LUTHER opened his mouth to shout to Pinkham. But then he closed it, without shouting. The longer he stared at the thing in his hand, the tighter his mouth grew, and the hotter his cheeks. He had the butt in an envelope put away in a pocket when he went out to join the rest.

The sun was not what it had been at two but it was still a punishment in the sunken place. Even Pinkham was fed up with the old Apache and anxious to get on, when the incredible persistence of that amubulatory human microscope was rewarded, and the tracker came bearing a tiny steel-jacketed slug, carefully shielded from touch in a fold of his front shirt-tail.

"A little learning!" Pinkham grinned. "He thinks bullets are identified by finger-prints. . . . Let's see, Luther, it would be about what?"

"About a .25."

"Here's luck. The abrasion where it struck the rock has done hardly any damage to the rifling pattern. It must have been nearly spent."

"It must have been," Luther echoed, his eyes not there but up the slope above the creosote, in whose lee Red Horse was already studying.

"He says," Joe told them, "whoever it was, they come down here from up there on foot. Horse left somewhere back away, not to whicker."

"Well, let's go. Or first, though, that body; one of the hands will have to take it in to the ranch. Go tell 'em, Joe. You may have to help load it on the lead-horse. Go on, I say! We'll wait."

Red Horse had not altogether waited. Two-thirds up the steep slope he stood halted, for more study. Luther had edged up to stand just behind and below him, plainly fascinated in some study of his own.

"Leave him alone," Pinkham growled from further down. It brought the youth's face around with a fiercely cautious, *"Shhhh!"* A new Luther.

"Wait!" he warned the Indian now. "Don't stir!"

But Red Horse had stirred, and he gave a slight back-start as something whirred in a grass-bunch just before him, darted out, dived sidewise, rose and vanished over the rim.

And there went Luther on his long legs, shouting with excitement, deaf to the sergeant's thunder. He was no more gone, above, than he was back again, down, swarming about the bewildered old tracker, appealing, demanding.

"The bird—the red bird—where was it reddest— Oh you dumbhead, why can't

you understand?" . . . I know, Pink, but this is *important*. If that wasn't a purple finch I'm crazy. And if it *was* a purple, here in Arizona, then every last ornithological big-wig—"

"Ornithological *pfut!* If you can't quit butting in, messing up sign—"

But now this wild-eyed Luther was grabbing at Joe Wheel, who had come back on the run. "Ask him, Joe: the bird—was it reddest on crown and coverts —here—and here and here?"

Luther slapped his own crown, then wrist and elbow. "Go on *ask* him! . . . Because look, Pink, listen, this *is* important! . . . What's that, Joe, what's he say?"

"Not red here," hand on hair. "Red here and here, he says," belly and backside. "They're plenty. Indians call them blow-the-fire bird."

"But that's the *common* finch—common *house finch!*" Now Luther turned on the disgusted sergeant. "House finch my foot! I was raised here. If you think I'd mistake an eastern purple for one of those dime-a-dozen birds—"

"Get out of the way! . . . All right, Joe, tell him let's go."

Luther stood there with the funniest expression, one hand tentative in an inner pocket. "Wait, Pink—just a second, will you?"

There was excitement under it, a hidden appeal, if the other could have heard. But the sergeant was in no hearing mood.

"Go home! You're through! I mean it! We're getting on with this trail."

The new Luther was gone, and here was the old one, pixy bitter.

"Which trail? . . . Oh, *that* one! . . . I'll be seeing you."

IT WAS just the sergeant, the two Apaches and the spare Hopi, now. About an eighth of a mile out across the level they came on evidence of a horse having been tethered

From there on the party moved at a steady pace. Hard riding makes easy trail-reading; and the killer had ridden hard. By the same token, first north, then looping east and southeast, the killer had ridden far.

It was full dusk when the trail led back to a ranch-house and a hammock slung under maples and Luther in it, flat on his ears.

He was up in a wink, though, as Pinkham approached; up, and for amazement, clicking his heels. If he figured that an attack of eager deference was his best defense, Luther was not wrong. Done in by eight hours under the sun, the sergeant allowed his jaw to sag for an instant.

It was enough. Stepping closer, Luther spoke in a lowered tone.

"On the porch. They know I'm with the police, and they're being quiet. I have everything well in hand."

"You *what?*" Pinkham sank heavily into the hammock. From beneath it Luther dragged a pillowcase, and from the pillowcase a rifle.

"See? A .25."

"I thought I told you to go home."

"It's in the bag. This is the gun."

"Yeah? I suppose you've set up a laboratory, fired a check-bullet—"

"It won't shoot. Look."

"Well, well! The firing pin's been removed. That's a funny one."

"And thrown away, she says, and that's another funny one. Here's our break, though; we won't need to shoot a check. We know where one is, already shot."

Confidential as his voice had been, here Luther lowered it still further, no more than a murmur in the sergeant's ear.

Pinkham studied the youth, in a new way. "Son, you may have something there." As he rose, eyes toward the gloom of the porch, Luther spoke back to where the two Apaches waited, yards away.

"You, Joe, stick around; we may have work for you in a minute." He turned then and caught the sergeant's arm. "Give me a break, will you? Let me do this? Do it my own way? Oh, please!"

Ann Waters and her husband sat in chairs drawn back out of the lamp-light that fell from a window across the porch-end at the steps—wordless, motionless,

evidently sullen-dull with bewilderment, both of them. . . . (Both? Or only one?)

Luther, who had sat himself on the top step, spoke quietly.

"I'M SORRY to bother you any more, Mrs. Waters, especially after your being so patient with my pestering around the place, but Sergeant Pinkham is anxious to get one or two points—"

"Cut it!" came angrily from the ranchman. "And tell us what it's all about!"

"That's what we'd like to know, ourselves. Firstly, this" (indicating the rifle lying on the white of the pillowcase in the fan of lamplight):

"You tell me, Mrs. Waters, you removed the firing pin and threw it away out somewhere the night of the day your husband left for Santa Fé. Not the *following* night, by any chance. That selfsame night."

Ann Waters lighted a cigarette, watched the flame burn down the match held between steady fingers, threw it away. "How many times must I say?"

"It would seem a strange thing to do, ruin a new gun, a gift too—"

Again the Hopi husband, savage: "I can explain—"

And Sergeant Pinkham: "Keep out of this, Waters."

And Luther, right on, smoothly: "—seem a strange thing, if Mr. Waters hadn't already explained, this morning, about the dog, and your feelings. By the way, a good-sized dog, was he?"

"She." Ann Waters snapped her cigarette away to the lawn. "And while we're at it, getting to the bottom of things, let me tell you that it was not entirely because of the dog's death I removed and threw away the firing pin on the evening of the day Mr. Waters left. Partly it was because I was afraid, if I didn't, I might shoot another one."

"Runyon?"

"Runyon. Which doesn't mean to say—"

Jesse Waters banged to his feet. "There's something crazy here I don't understand, and the reason I don't understand it is, it's crazy!"

"We'll come to that later, Mr. Waters, if you'll sit down. Getting back to the dog—a good-sized dog, you say. And shot in the thick of the chest?"

"Yes. May I ask why on earth you—"

"And admittedly with this rifle. So that we have preserved there an authenticated bullet with which to check the bullet Sergeant Pinkham has in his pocket now—the .25 slug picked up this afternoon at the scene of Runyon's murder, in line with a cover-bush under which—"

Of a sudden, on the white of the pillowcase, out of an envelope, tumbled a cigarette butt stained with lipstick. "—*under which this was found lying.*"

The heavy, angry intake of breath was Sergeant Pinkham's. "Why, you young—!"

"Please! *Please*, Pink! Later! . . . Mrs. Waters, tell me, were there other cartridges in the magazine when you shot the dog?"

"There were, yes."

"Did you then remove them?"

Ann Waters lit a new cigarette. "I did, and put them back in the box."

"A new box, given you with the rifle. Where is that box now?"

"I don't know, exactly." Ann rose. "If you'd like me to go and look—"

"Thanks, no need. I have it here." From the pillowcase Luther withdrew a carton and held its legend to the light. "Fifty rounds. If one only has been used there should be forty-nine, right?"

Opening it, he dumped the contents on the floor. "Will one of you—" Joe Wheel, the house-boy, was nearest, just by the steps. "Count 'em, Joe."

Impassive, the young Apache began, dropping them one by one into the box. Incurious beyond his shoulder the old Apache watched like a wrinkled bird of wisdom. But before a dozen were told Luther stopped the count by a gesture, as Waters, the ranchman, reared to his feet with an oath.

"What's going on that you have to talk like a silly fool? My wife would no more think of killing anyone than—"

"You heard her say herself, her reason for removing the firing pin—"

"Bunk! And she knows it's bunk. Temper, maybe, disgust. She's told me about Bo, that evening, buzzing around, the slimy bum. But it wants more than just disgust of being insulted by a hired hand to make a woman like Ann Waters wait and plan and murder a man from ambush, now doesn't it?"

"Mmmm. That bothered me too, Mr. Waters, until, messing about a wastebasket in there—" A wad of crumpled paper was in Luther's palm.

Ann Waters was on her feet. "It's a lie! That wastebasket was empty. I know, because I emptied them all, myself, this afternoon."

"Did I say, *in* the wastebasket?"

And now Waters: "And still it's a lie, whatever it is!"

"Maybe. I hope. It's a funny sounding one. . . . Get on with your counting," he told the house-boy, as, uncrumpling the paper, he spread it flat.

"It's in pencil. Want to look it over, anybody? Or I'll read: *Meet me same old place tonight, or else. You wouldn't want some little bird to whisper in your hubby's ear about you know who and who.* . . . Not signed."

LUTHER looked into the dark end of the porch, his eyes blinking, as if to hide by so much something that was in them. He saw that Waters, without so much as a glance around at the white girl, his wife, had groped and got hold of her hand.

And now the Indian said slowly: "There's something very phoney somewhere. One thing I know as surely as I'm standing here: it wasn't to my wife Bo Runyon wrote that note—if Bo wrote it."

Luther's mouth twitched at the corners. "Good man! He didn't."

Scratching an astonishing match with one hand, with the other he recrumpled the paper, set it afire, cast it on the grass. "*I* did."

And turning quickly on Pinkham, who fooled him, however, by making neither move nor sound: "No, Pink, this isn't just pranks. There's something I wanted to show up; and that is, how easy following sign can be made by taking your pains beforehand.

"Oh, and there's that." He picked up the butt from the pillowcase. "The darn thing actually *was* out there." Flipping it away into the dark, "Okay, Joe, how many do you make?" he demanded as he took up the box, re-heaped with loose cartridges.

The young Apache didn't seem to want to answer.

"As the lady says, Joe? Forty-nine?"

Joe shook his head. "Forty-eight."

"Are you sure?" And with a sudden savage change: "How can you be sure, when you haven't even counted them?"

"Not counted? Me? Why, I—I have. I did."

Luther dumped the box. "Count 'em again. Out loud."

Slowly, aloud, it seemed to take an age in the midst of encircling silence. ". . . forty, forty-one . . ." till it came to "forty-seven" and the end.

"I guess I made a mistake," said Joe.

"I guess you did." Taking from his own pocket a cartridge, Luther threw it in the box with the rest. "I'd substracted one too." He slid off the step, erect on the lawn. "Well—next job is to dig up that dog and get that bullet. . . . Where you going, Joe?"

The house-boy hesitated, looking back. "Why, to get a shovel."

"Needn't bother, here's one." Bending, Luther withdrew a spade from under the open steps, offered it by its handle to the house-boy—and dodged, not quite in time, for the savage down-sweep of the tool, though it failed of his skull, glanced on a shoulder and sent him sprawling.

"GET 'im!" he yelled. The sergeant, to whom simple, comprehensible action came like a breath of new life, was already after the running shadow and pawing for his gun. He was to be denied, though; it was not to him Luther had hollered.

And now from the dark beyond the house-corner came a burst of yells and tackling capture, where the Hopi hands had been waiting, without knowing, till now, just what for.

As for Luther, his legs got him up for pursuit in another direction. Not far. The old tracker knew it was no use, stopped and stood. Luther got him by the rags and bones of his shoulders.

"Come on, Red Horse, Blue Cow, whoever you are—talk! Eighty dollars isn't much swag for murder-and-compounding, split two ways. What was your drag out of this? *Talk,* before I wring your neck!"

The ancient man said simply: "He is the son of my son."

"Take care of him, Waters." Luther turned to find Pinkham there agape.

"Well I be a son of a gun! When did *you* guess he knew English, Lute?"

"He was bound to. There isn't enough Indian reading matter to have to wear specs for, and the first thing you'll notice about the bridge of the old geek's nose is the familiar crease. You'll notice, that is, if you're the ornery kind that hates like pestilence to have a leg pulled.

"Though I couldn't be certain sure he was half blind till I got him to describe where the red was reddest on that bird; remember?"

"The one you thought was a *purple* finch?"

"The one I knew damn well was a gray-and-yellow meadowlark, same as dozens he'd been wading through all day. . . . You needn't look at me that way. It's your own fault. I'd have told you if you'd let me. Because I knew square there they had to be plants, the cigarette butt and the slug."

Pinkham took the bullet from his pocket, studied it. "Do you suppose it's really the pattern, suppose it'll check with the one in the dog?"

"*Check* with it!" Now it was Luther that gaped. "Good Lord, it *is* it. Why else did you think Joe Wheel got set to beat it when I proposed having a look at the carcass—if the carcass is even there still?"

The sergeant swallowed. In silence he returned the slug to its pocket. Unobtrusively, cornerwise, he appraised the homely ladder of a lad, and his heart warmed with a hope that had been all but dead—and warmed further and did something funnier when he perceived that the knees were wobbly and the eyes winking queer.

And here Pinkham made his mistake.

"Son," he said, putting a hand on a high thin shoulder, "you're almost good."

Luther went back two yards in one jump, stopped the wobble of his legs and got his mask back on, wise-guy.

"Good, my foot! I'm perfect!"

Inside himself the sergeant beamed: I've got him on the run. Aloud, gravely blowing on a set of knuckles: "Oh, no, not perfect yet. You've too many things to learn—that I'm going to teach you."

"Yeah?"

"And the first one is—put up your mitts while I tell you—when you say 'Yeah' to me or the likes of me, tack a *sir* on it."

Luther gulped and gangled. "Look, you can't do this to me "

*Bang!*

The young man got up from the grass, nearly right away.

The older man preened his knuckles. "Say 'Sir', and step on it!"

"You—you c-c-can't do—"

*Bang!*

Again, by and by, Luther Calvin II pushed up the teetery tower of his legs. In the ray of the rising moon he looked all blue and green and black and blue, his eyes bogged out and his ears wilted about him.

"I'm waiting, my boy. Say 'Sir'."

Up and down a long neck went an Adam's apple, while, character versus virtue, the fight was fought. And when Luther's ragged mouth opened at last, character had won.

*"You can't do it to me, sir," he said,* and turned and ran like hell.

By JACK BYRNE

The double roar of the shotgun was a giant echo to the crack of Vern's .38

# Guns On Fire

VERN COLTON, gun-hand and ex-lawman, has been plunged into the midst of Blue Rock County's brewing war between cattlemen and nesters. MATTHEW COLTON, his uncle, has turned over the Triangle-C spread to Vern and gone away, leaving him to deal as best he can with old Matt's many enemies in and about Rapid City.

On his first day in town Vern kills BUCKY LANDREAU, who has tried to shoot him in the back in revenge for once turning Landreau's brother over to the law. Just after that he is saved from a shotgun ambush with the killing of CLAY UNGER, the marshal.

But that evens a score. JARNELL, the man who shot Unger, had owed his life to Vern after a saloon fight with one JOHN MURRAY, at Hathaways. And now there is no friendship between them; for Jarnell is top gun-hand of the nesters' Protective Association; and the Coltons have no use for nesters.

They are to clash sooner than Vern expects.

THAT night, back at the Triangle-C, word comes that a party of vigilantes has invaded the spread and killed one of the men, FRANK EAKINS. They have destroyed markers and left bags of stakes which point

**The first installment of this three-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for July 6**

to the nesters—the Protective Association—as the raiders.

With TOM BARNABY, Triangle-C foreman, Vern leads his men into town—for battle, if need be. At his side, despite Vern's protests, rides OSCAR, Uncle Matt's huge Norse bodyguard.

At the land office they find Jarnell, who has ridden back into town with his men shortly before them; they demand an accounting of his actions while the Triangle-C was being raided. Jarnell defies them; tells Vern that when he returns at five next afternoon for an answer, he'd better come shooting.

VERN isn't too unhappy about any of this. Fact is, the activity is good for him; that and other things have been bringing about a change in him.

There's MYRA WADDELL for instance, who keeps books for Vern's Uncle Matt. And FAITH LENNOX, daughter of the publisher of the Rapid City Clarion.

And Uncle Matt himself, who before leaving accused Vern of being drunk on his own bitterness, but told him that he will inherit all the Colton possessions. For the first time Vern sees himself in a new light, and is able to dispense with his old bracer—whisky.

And tonight, as he sits in KENO MCKEE'S Barrelhouse saloon, talking to McKee's girl STELLA, he is able to shed the last vestige of his unhappy past. For the ruddy-faced man who accosts Stella (and who runs in terror before Vern's blows) is DALLAS GARDWELL, the man who ran away years ago with Vern's wife JENNY.

Laughing now, Vern plunges into the ensuing pitched battle between his own men and men from the ELCO mines, whom Gardwell called on for help. McKee appears, stops the fight, and challenges Colton to a battle of fists.

But Oscar the faithful leaps in, claiming that it's his fight; takes terrific punishment from McKee, but in the end nearly strangles him to death. Vern, congratulating Oscar later, finds that he has won a new friend.

But tomorrow, at five—Jarnell has said to come shooting. . . .

## CHAPTER XI

### APPOINTMENT FOR SLAUGHTER

THE inquest was held at ten next morning—a hurried formality that was soon completed. A meek and perspiring coroner summoned three witnesses, raced through a routine of questions; and the jury dutifully decided that Bucky Landreau and Clay Unger had come to their deaths in the wilful pursuit of attempted homicide.

In the course of the hearing Vern had glanced across the room toward Jarnell, and found that the fat gun-boss of the Land Association had chosen the same instant to peer covertly at him. Their steady stares clashed for a breath's duration, confirming the conflict that was to come.

A queer business, Vern thought. They sat here now as partners, so to speak, in yesterday's duel when their guns had joined to save Vern Colton from certain death. In a little while, a few swift hours, they would be turning those same guns against each other.

Such was the shape of things.

Faith Lennox was one of the witnesses, and he had a chance to study her as she faced the room. Again he had the feeling of fellowship with this girl.

The way she talked there, her certain attitude, told a lot about her. She had brains and character and ability. She had ambition, too, and that's what a man needed if he aimed to get ahead.

A man who wasn't content to roll along in the rut—yes, he'd be mighty lucky to get a wife like her. She'd work beside you, keep you stepping, make you want to grow.

She gestured to him over the heads of others, when the brief proceeding ended, and he waited for her on the walk outside. They spoke together in the midst of a slowly eddying throng.

She came straight to the point: "I think you're making a mistake, Mr. Colton. If you force a fight with the Land Association—and I understand that's what you plan—you will be responsible for very serious consequences. You'll find that you've started a blaze which won't be easy to stop.

"Innocent men will die, and worthy families will suffer, before it is ended. You can disregard your own safety if you want, but I ask you—please—won't you think of the others?"

He glanced at the move of figures behind them. "You want to debate the subject right here?"

"I'd shout it from the housetops if that would make you hear," she said earnestly. "Won't you talk to my father, just for a few minutes? He's not at the office now but he'll be back soon."

Vern shrugged.

"Come over to the *Clarion* office," she pleaded. "It may save a life for every step it takes you to cross the street. Will you come—please?"

"I could drop in around an hour from now," he said. "Sure, I'll listen to what anyone's got to say."

"I'll go find Dad," she said quickly. "The office—in an hour." She lifted her skirts, stepping daintily to avoid the drying muck-spots as she crossed the road.

"Mort Lennox is head of the law-and-order crowd in town," Tom Barnaby said dryly when Vern approached. "He'll talk your ear off."

He chuckled. "You see McKee go past? Here's Oscar here, who won the fight, lookin' like they run him through the meat-grinder, and the loser goes waltzin' by as fresh as a daisy."

They went to the shade of the hotel porch, and watched the flow of the street. A few wagons plodded along, horsemen drifted past, but yesterday's stir was lacking now. Rapid City was holding its breath, waiting for the fall of the long-expected blow. The hours of the afternoon would tick off solemn and slow.

Five o'clock—and showdown!

The affairs of last night were on every tongue, and a hundred wild rumors were spreading. It was stated that the Land Association was rushing a horde of gunmen in from nearby towns, that cowpunchers were gathering in the nearby hills, mounted and armed, prepared to put the torch to every nester's cabin as soon as Jarnell's crew was accounted for.

An appeal had been made to the governor, it was said, to send in a force of law before Rapid City was turned into a bloody battleground.

"Any news?" Vern asked.

Barnaby shook his head. "All quiet. We got friends watchin' every road an' nothin's happened."

"They doin' anything down below?"

"The same as us: just sittin'."

But they were sitting on dynamite, Vern thought. All of them were. Faith Lennox had it right there: no telling where this business would stop.

It was happening, he thought grimly, according to the pattern that sly Matthew Colton had arranged. Mr. Matthew's Private War, you might call it.

He himself, he realized now, was the flame that his uncle had applied to the fuse. While bullets flew and men died, Mr. Matthew would be sitting safe and easy somewhere, cooking up some other devil's schemes.

He set his teeth together. Why should Vern Colton start worrying now about the fact that other men might die?

HE ROSE up, stretching, when time had passed. He could still feel the bruises and muscle-strains of last night's brawl, but his small aches vanished as he grinned down at Oscar.

The flesh around the big Norwegian's eyes had turned a purplish brown, giving him the look of a queerly masked gargoyle.

"I'm steppin' over to the *Clarion* office," Vern said, "to listen to a lecture. You trust me that far by myself, or don't you?"

Oscar, half-risen, sat down again with a grunt. But the blue slits of his puffed eyes surveyed the street up and down, and they followed after Vern as he crossed the roadway.

The *Clarion* office was a short walk distant, and Vern went slowly. The cat-like precaution that guarded him was at work now, moving his eyes restlessly and keying his muscles for any needed move.

But the cold preoccupation that walked with him in other days was absent, he found. Instead he was aware of the sun that warmed his cheek, and the spring

softness of the breeze that blew from the river.

A small boy stood at the edge of the walk, staring. He swallowed hard, and his thin voice faltered, "Hello, Mr. Colton."

"Hello, son," Vern said, and his lips returned the boy's sudden grin. He drew a long breath, walking on.

The window-shades of the *Clarion* office were half-drawn against the sun. Vern pushed a door that gave inward with a tinkle of bell, and entered a cool, dark room that smelled of printer's ink.

A railing fenced off a working space that was cluttered with small tables, paper-piled, and lined with slanted cases of type along the far wall.

A shirtsleeved man turned from these type racks. He wore an apron and an eyeshade; ink smudged his chin.

"I'm lookin' for Miss Lennox."

"She's back yonder," the man said. He jerked a thumb. "Back there in the press room."

Vern went along to the indicated door. His hand was on the knob when some hesitation held him momentarily. Eyeshade, eyeshade, he thought, but the word had no meaning in his mind. He twisted the knob—

His warning was a metallic clatter from within, a heavy thump.

He leaped back, and in the same split second he was jerking around with his gun in hand. What kind of printer, in this half-dark, would wear an eyeshade?

The aproned man was leveling his shotgun as Vern's bullet blasted, and the double roar of it was a giant echo to the crack of the .38.

But it was a dying man's finger that jerked the trigger, and the scattering buckshot charges spattered wide and high. They lashed at the press-room door that was jerking open, and perhaps they slowed the two men who came lunging forth for the necessary tick of time.

It was the fraction of an instant Vern needed to spin and crouch and turn his gun.

He shot the bigger man in the throat, a ranging bullet that lifted him taller and drove him back to slide down the edge of the door. He squeezed his trigger again at the same moment that gaunt John Murray's gun exploded. They fired together, both in the same wink, but the bullet of the man from Hathaways merely gouged the wall above Vern's crouched head.

Vern Colton's slug bit through the bandage that strapped Murray's left arm to his chest, and the saloonman staggered forward. He collapsed upon his face.

Vern had warned him, the other day, that it wasn't hard to pull a bullet three inches lower.

VERN COLTON crouched against the wall, his jutted gun challenging the open doorway beyond, and the sudden sweat on his face had an icy tingle. Three shots and three men downed: a combination of luck and skill that comes to few men in a lifetime.

"Come out!" he shouted.

There was a faint thump of sound from beyond, nothing more, and he risked a look from the door's projection. He stepped in, his muzzle covering the sprawled body of a gray-haired man, and a repetition of the noise jerked his glance to a corner of the room, and Faith Lennox.

A gag choked her mouth and ropes bound her fast to a toppled chair. Vern crossed to the rear door to peer into an empty yard beyond, and he still held the .38 ready as he knelt to slash the ropes. He lifted her up, and she clung to him. He loosened the gag.

"Dad!" she gasped. "They struck him down! They came through the back door—"

"He's stunned," Vern said. "He'll be all right."

"Hold me," she breathed. "Don't let me go. Oh, the look of their faces waiting here! I heard the bell and knew it was you. I heard your voice, and the rattle of the knob. And their guns were trained to shoot as the door came open."

"Steady," Vern said. "It's all right." His arm held her shoulders, and he watched her fear-strained face, her wild eyes.

"I toppled my chair into that case of type," she whispered. "It was all I could do to warn you back." There were tears in her eyes and her mouth trembled. "It would have been my fault for bringing you here. They heard us speaking on the street. The fourth man said—"

"What's that? What fourth man? What do you mean?"

"The man who planned it. He came to the door and whispered. He warned them when you left the hotel. I could not see him, but I won't forget his strange muffled voice."

There were sounds from the front. The door-bell jangled and voices shouted. The outer room echoed the shuffle and pound of feet.

"Brace up," Vern said softly. "It's finished, done; you're safe now."

But her arms gripped him tighter, and the aftermath of her tension was flooding tears. She sobbed like a child, clinging to him, and he held her as men surged in.

Big Oscar first, with a rifle, and Tom Barnaby and ten more. They stared at the bodies on the floor and they looked at Vern Colton with breathless unbelief.

"Lift Mr. Lennox there," he said, "and get him to a doctor. Take the girl, Tom. She's had a bad shock." He unloosed her fingers gently, and Barnaby caught her up as her eyes closed and her body slumped in a faint.

"Hold the door here, Oscar," Vern ordered. "I want a look outside."

He bent to pick up a half-smoked cigar that a heel had crushed. Outside, near a rear corner of the building where an alleyway gave a view of Center Street, he found a second discarded cigar.

Both had been clamped by strong teeth, but it was plain to see that the end of each had been neatly trimmed by some sharp instrument.

Vern knew one man in town who used a cigar clipper. Keno McKee. . . .

Vern Colton entered the Barrelhouse Saloon a half hour later. The place had been tidied, cracked mirrors removed, but from the rear still came a hammer-pound of chairs and tables repaired. Vern rapped on the bar and made his voice sharp and clear.

"Where's McKee—Keno McKee?"

A barman shook his head. "I—I dunno. He ain't been around since morning."

There were thirty or forty customers in the room, and Vern let them all hear his harsh pronouncement:

"Well, when he comes just tell him Vern Colton wants to see him. Tell him that every road from town is watched, and he has two choices.

"He can deliver himself at the jail, admitting attempted murder, or settle it personally with me. If he's not in jail by five o'clock I'll shoot him down when and where I see him."

## CHAPTER XII

### JOKER IN A COLD DECK

NOON in Rapid City. One o'clock, and two. . . . A warm sun dried the rutted drag of Center Street, but brooding silence deepened in the crawl of inching shadows. Men sensed the thin-air vacuum that precedes a tornado.

By three o'clock the last of the wagons rumbled away. The afternoon stage pulled out on the south haul, and merchants closed and barred their doors, fastened shutters at the windows. A few stragglers moved along the walks; but otherwise the stretch of street might have been a ghost-town thoroughfare.

"A delegation just went in to call on Jarnell," Tom Barnaby reported. "The preacher from the Central Church, with Adam Harkness, and Jake Ambler from the Elcon Mines, and two-three wimmenfolks. I reckon they'll trail along up here."

"You *habla* with 'em," Vern said. "If Jarnell's got nothin' to hide about last night, just let him spit out where he was and we'll look elsewhere for Frank Eakins' murderers."

But his frown tightened as he spoke. The cards in this deal had fallen too pat, he felt. He could sense the presence of some cold-deck joker. Yet the chips were in the pot now and the showdown due. The quick way out was to shoot it out; and that was the way it would be.

"Everything set?" he asked.

"A rifle in every saddle-boot," said Barnaby, "and shells enough to shoot all night. We're ready as we will be."

They sat in the public room of the Blue Rock Hotel. On the porch outside and at the feed corral across the way the Triangle hands were lounging.

Oscar was busy in an upstairs room at a secret and delicate task: fitting detonation fuses to slender gray-black tubes of dynamite. This was their one special preparation for the warfare; Oscar's slitted blue eye had gleamed when Vern advanced the notion.

"I fix it," he muttered. "Yah, dat is good. Dey don't come out an' fight, we bump 'em out."

Tom Barnaby glanced over at Vern. "You figgered out yet how that deadfall at the *Clarion* happened?"

"Mostly," Vern said. "Somebody heard me agree to be there at a certain time, and McKee figured I'd walk in with my guard down—which is what I did. That's all there was to it, as far as I can see."

He spoke casually, dismissing it, but his instinct knew that the plot ran deeper. It was more than coincidence that gaunt John Murray, who had attempted Jarnell's murder in Hathaways, should be handily waiting when opportunity came to ambush Vern Colton. To mark it down as swift retaliation by Keno McKee—no, that was not enough. There was a greater deviltry afoot here.

A puncher came from the porch. "Lady out there wants to see yuh, boss."

"Take care of it, will you, Tom?"

"She wants to see you special," the puncher said. He motioned his thumb, grinning. "It's the one from the Barrelhouse."

Vern went to the door. Twenty feet below the hotel a two-horse rig was drawn up beside the walk. A gray Negro held the reins, and in the rear seat he saw Stella. He crossed the porch, shrugging.

The high-necked dress and hat she wore gave her an unfamiliar look. No rouge today, no red-slashed lips; but she still had her cameo beauty. He touched his hat, stood beside the tassel-topped conveyance.

She sat at the far edge of the seat, a fancy handbag in her lap. "Can you spare a few minutes?" she asked. "I've got to talk to you."

He glanced toward the driver.

"Mose is deaf," she said. "You kick the seat to steer him. Will you take a ride with me?"

"Sorry," he said. "It's close to four, and I got things to attend. What was it you wanted?"

"I'll whisper it." She leaned in the seat, and Vern came closer. He rested one foot on the iron mount, gripping the top-support. He stared at her, uncertain of the quality he read in her face.

"What is it?"

"Look what I have in my lap, Mr. Colton," she said softly. "My finger's on the trigger, and I can hardly miss. If you try to move, I'll kill you."

She spoke without emotion, almost gently, but Vern Colton knew that he never would face a death more certain than the death of this calm instant.

SHE would kill him. She would shoot at his move and she would not miss. The fatalistic knowledge of these facts was a blind truth his instinct accepted.

"What do you want?"

"Get in beside me," she breathed. "You'll be safely back by five, Mr. Colton, and you'll be a wiser man."

He saw the round snout of the gun beneath the edge of her handbag, and in her face he read the iron steadiness of her purpose. He lifted himself slowly into the seat, sat with hands cupped on his knees.

Stella's toe thumped the forward seat,

and the old Negro grinned back, nodding. Reins slapped, the carriage moved.

"You could have talked to me without all this," Vern said.

"Maybe so. But I couldn't take chances. I had to see you now, while there still was time, and this was the certain way. It's a life I'm fighting for—the most important thing in the world to me."

"McKee?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Keno McKee."

The rig swayed and bumped down a lifeless street. The creak of gear and the clop of hoofs were loud in the silence. Vern turned his eyes slowly toward her and saw a vigilance that would not ease.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Anywhere," she said. "I gave Mose orders to drive from the hotel to my place, but it doesn't matter. I only want time enough to tell you some facts—to save a life, and maybe more than one. Perhaps I may even save your own."

"That sounds kindly," he said. "Talk on; I'm listening."

"I've got a reason for telling this," she said. "If you should be killed in your brawl with Jarnell, there would be friends of yours, your Triangle men, who would pick up your quarrel with Keno. They'd follow him, murder him in the end. The only way I can save him, you see, is to keep you alive.

"You will listen to reason. You'll know the truth when you hear it."

"For instance what?"

"For instance, that Jarnell's men did not kill Frank Eakins. That neither the ranchers nor the nesters are responsible for the majority of the raids and the horsewhippings that have happened here. That Keno McKee had nothing to do with the attempt to murder you today. Is that enough?"

Vern stared at her. "Can you prove those things?"

"I've proved them to myself. I can show you what might be happening, and you can judge for yourself."

The rig had turned off Center Street, and the team had come cantering down one of the blocks of small, mean houses that angled toward the river. Now the driver was slowing them.

"Is this where you live?"

"The next place, yes."

"You can put your cannon away," Vern said. "I'll listen, Stella, and that's my promise."

HER two-room house was plain and comfortable, neatly kept. She unpinned her flowery hat, and as she faced him there he saw how great had been the strain of her ordeal. There was a twitch that tugged the corner of her mouth, and her clasped hands trembled in the letdown.

"I want you to know," she said, "that Keno McKee would tear my tongue out before he'd have me tell this. He's not a coward, a squealer. He knew he couldn't match your draw, but he was on his way to town to find you when I—"

She drew her hand across her mouth.

"They framed him," she said. "They thought he knew too much and might get troublesome. Those clipped cigar stubs were planted, just as the boundary stakes were planted when Frank Eakins was killed, just as all the other deviltry has been designed to breed hate and enmity and start a bloody war."

"Who?" Vern blurted. "Why?"

"Listen," she said. "Suppose you wanted to control this Blue Hills range? Suppose you wanted to grab the land, the bulk of it, for as little as you might pay? What better system could you use than making it become a trouble range?"

Vern nodded. "I've heard of that little scheme."

"You'd buy some properties here and there, and you'd start a land development company. You'd move grangers in—ignorant, land-starved hoeman—and the very arrival of them would rouse the ranchers up.

"But you couldn't wait for the natural rivalry to kindle. You'd help it along by sending out night-riders to attack both sides, knowing that each would blame it

on the other. Does that sound like something that might be happening here?"

Vern breathed shallowly, watching her. Muscle bulged beneath his dark stubble of beard. "What do you know?" he said. "Can you give a shred of proof?"

"I know what Keno found out," she answered. "He saw the log Wink Beecher brought into town, the one that night-prowlers used to batter down Jim Venable's door. He saw the boundary stakes you left on Jarnell's desk last night. This morning he tried to blackmail a man for five thousand on the strength of an idea they gave him."

"Go on," Vern said.

"He went to Mr. Jacob Ambler at the Elcon Mines," she said, "and pointed out how queer it was that exactly the same kind of wood was being used in the Elcon's new timbering."

He shook his head slowly. "Elcon—no, no sense to that. Why Elcon?"

"I don't know. You figure it out. At the same time figure out why Adam Harkness brought Keno here from Kaycee to run the Barrelhouse joint. I found that out last night when Keno was raving. I learned some more of it from Dallas Gardwell, who thinks he's in love with me. He sat on that rug there this morning, weeping and blatting his head off."

His right hand clenched slowly into a fist. The new pattern of this puzzle-picture was shaping in his mind, and he saw the swift events of his days here in a parade of sharper meaning.

Was this the truth which Mr. Matthew's hints had suggested? Was this the bloody joker in the deal?

"Wait," he said. "Jarnell—how does he fit in?"

Her lips curved. "He's another like you, Mr. Colton—a fall guy for cleverer men. They've tricked and blinded him all along.

"They planned to have him ambushed at Hathaways, Gardwell hinted, because they were afraid he might be getting wise. They would have blamed his death on the Cattlemen's Committee, and added more fuel to the fire.

"He and his men were decoyed on a goose-chase into the hills last night when your puncher was killed. Naturally he couldn't prove—"

VERN nodded grimly. In the circumstances Jarnell had no choice. With Tom Barnaby's challenge thrust in his teeth the Association gun-boss had answered with defiance instead of the flimsy truth.

He picked up his hat. "I got to go."

"There's two more things," she said. "I want to get Keno safe out of town. He's in double danger now. Two hours after he tried to blackmail Ambler they were planting those half-smoked cigars in a murder-trap they arranged for you.

"Do you see how clever they were? If you had been killed, you can be sure your friends would have learned about the cigars. Keno was in the middle, no matter what happened."

"He can leave for all of me," Vern said. "I'll pass the word. Where is he now?"

"He wouldn't leave willingly," she said with pride. "Keno McKee's not the kind to run from a fight. He was here when they brought him news of the challenge you delivered. He was strapping on a gun to shoot it out with you, right or wrong, and he kissed me when I gave him a farewell drink."

"How long have you loved him?" Vern asked.

Her hand gestured vaguely. "There's never been another man. I followed him here." Her eyes were shining, her voice softened. "He told me he loved me, as he drank. He said we'd be married if he came back alive. That's why I would have killed you back there—"

She looked toward the bottle and glasses on a small table. "In dance-hall business we learn our little tricks. It was knockout drops I fed him, to keep him safe. He's been passed out inside for the past two hours."

She pushed a door and Vern saw Keno McKee stretched on a bed. The dark

gambler breathed heavily through gaping mouth, drugged into deep insensibility.

"It will hold him another five hours," Stella said. "I've packed our things, and the rig's outside. I could drive across to the Junction, and we'd be aboard the evening train when he wakes again—"

"Get your grips," Vern said. "I'll carry him."

HE CAME along the narrow walk from the house with his limp-legged burden, and saw that two additional horses were standing near the livery rig.

"Help the lady with her things, Oscar," he ordered. "Is it time?"

"Yust about," said Oscar, shambling forward. "I bring your horse along." He looked at Keno McKee, shrugging.

Stella thrust crumpled bills into the old Negro's hand. "Climb down, Uncle Mose. I'll take the reins. You get back there and hold him."

She touched Vern's arm as he stowed the last valise into the rear where McKee's slumped form was propped, speaking breathlessly:

"I'm not sure—Cardwell was mumbling so many things—but I think they've set another trap for you today. He was cursing you, and boasting that all your Triangle bunch would be wiped out.

"That's where Keno was last night, scouting the Elcon buildings, and they've got an arsenal there. That's the headquarters, I guess, for your mysterious night-riders."

He held her fingers in a tight grip, staring at her.

"There are plenty of drifters in town," she said. "Wink Beecher could deputize them, thirty or fifty strong. He's working with the Elcon crowd.

"I've heard he plans to call on you to halt as you lead your men toward Jarnell's place. He'll warn you to let the law handle this affair, knowing you'll refuse. And then—"

He was moving away. "Oscar!" he shouted. "Get goin'!"

"Wait!" she cried. "They'll have men spotted all along, blocking the street at both ends. Their plans have gone too far to be stopped. If you try to make a break from town you'll have to shoot your way out. Watch every building, the rooftops—"

He ran. He was swinging aboard the hard-mouthed roan as she touched whip to the livery team, reining them past. The rig jounced, and she lifted a hand—salute and farewell. Ahead was the winding river road that led to the Junction.

But ahead of Vern Colton—

He fought the stubborn roan with bit and spur, turning him. "Tom and the boys—where are they?"

Oscar turned in the saddle, pointing. "Dey go down the street to show dem fallers we're coming!" He panted the words. "Tom says dey wait for you by the bank dere."

In the center of the trap, Vern thought. And it was his blindness that had led them there.

"Come on!" he yelled, and even as he kneed the roan ahead there was a thunder that groaned through the fog of fear in his brain.

From Center Street came the sharp rattle of explosions, the stuttering blurts of gun-sound.

## CHAPTER XIII

### WITH BOOTS ON

BUT no other shots followed this first fusillade, and Vern pulled the roan to a stiff-legged walk as he turned into the tense-held thoroughfare where men would die before the sun went down.

A staggering drunk, it seemed, had charged into the street from one of the saloons to empty his pistol at the sky. Other men had hold of him now, leading him to safety.

"Slow and easy, Oscar," Vern whispered. "Tell them to wait for my lead."

The utter silence of Center Street was a faint humming in his ears. The only motion he could see was a casual stir in the loom of shadow that fronted the Cen-

tral Bank. In the street, along the hitch-rack, the Triangle punchers sat their horses. Faces turned to watch them approach.

"Five minutes of five," Tom Barnaby said gruffly.

Vern nodded, his glance traveling among the twelve who slouched and smoked, twelve weathered, self-contained men who returned his gaze with steady looks or careless grins that said, "Okay, boss, let's get goin'!"

And they were trapped, he thought. In a little while there would be empty saddles and grins of death. He had searched his brain for some way of escape, some loophole that would ride them free to fight another day, and there was none his hard-bitten judgment could see.

Let them try to withdraw now, and hidden guns would be quick to cry halt. The men who had planned this ambush wanted bloodly war, and they would not stop this side of it.

It was a fight they wanted, and fight it had to be. No matter the odds, the Triangle had to face them. At least they could go down shooting. They would die with their boots on, if that was consolation.

"Who's got a cigar?" he asked.

He stared up and down the street as he lighted the proffered cheroot. Was it the glint of a rifle barrel he saw from the flat roof of the storehouse next to the stage station? Had the faint wind moved that shutter across the way?

No telling. He could not even warn his Triangle men for fear some anxious look might notify the enemy.

He signaled Oscar apart from the others and spoke briefly. From the distance it appeared that the battered gaint passed an extra revolver to him. Vern bent down and seemed to be fumbling with his stirrup cinch.

"Five o'clock," Tom Barnaby called.

"Oscar's got the orders," Vern said. He eyed them, then headed the roan at a slow walk toward the Land Association building. The door of the office opened and Jarnell stepped forth. He moved unhurriedly, arms swinging, toward a mid-street meeting.

Both men halted, turning, as a thin hail came from the Mercantile Store. Wink Beecher appeared on the porch there, and his lifted arm upheld the law's dignity.

Three other men followed him forward to attend this deadline conference. One was the hatless preacher, his long white hair flowing almost to his shoulders. Adam Harkness strode beside a man as tall as himself; and Vern had his first sight of Mr. Jacob Ambler, boss of the Elcon.

He flexed the fingers of his gun hand, puffing the unaccustomed cigar.

THERE were still blank spaces in the pattern of things, and many questions unanswered; but now he was beginning to see the true picture of the ills and trouble that beset Rapid City and all the Blue Hills country. He saw it with eyes that Stella had opened.

Here were the two—Harkness and Jake Ambler—who had schemed and directed all this mess of fire and floggings, of raids and murder.

And he saw how cleverly they had planned. They were the sly hands who pulled the puppet strings. McKee and Jarnell, Wink Beecher and dead John Murray and perhaps a hundred more were the tools they used, just as Matthew Colton had used his nephew against them.

Had Mr. Matthew suspected the truth? Most likely, Vern thought; but his suspicions had no proof behind them. He had stepped aside, that clever little man, to let Vern engineer the turmoil in which proof might be brought to light.

"I call upon you, Colton, and you, Jarnell," piped Wink Beecher's reedy voice, "to disarm your men. If you attempt any violence in Rapid City you will answer to the law. This is plain warning that if a single shot is fired here, you both will suffer the consequence."

How many times, Vern wondered, had Wink practiced that brave speech over?

Beneath the low-pulled brim of his hat his eyes had been searching the buildings left and right. The ambush crew would be gathered in force somewhere nearby, he

knew, with snipers scattered along the line, and each end of the street well guarded. When the battle began the forces would converge, and that would be the wipe-out.

He looked back toward the Central Bank, tall and solid, and saw a flick of movement on the bulwarked roof. Yes, that was where they would be, the biggest lot of them. It was a perfect location, giving them a vantage to rake the street, a wall of protection.

His elbow loosened the .38 in its holster.

"I BEG you, gentlemen," Jake Ambler said smoothly, "to let your differences be settled in the way that the law provides. Any other course is stupid savagery, a return to the days that the West has put behind.

"I speak as a man who holds no brief for either side. Violence and bloodshed will gain you nothing."

He was big and dark, with a pleasant, laugh-creased face and grave eyes that mirrored only deep concern. Yes, he was a smooth one.

"I add my voice to that," said Adam Harkness. "The troubles of Blue Rock County will never be settled by the gun."

Oh, they were smooth, the pair of them, as crafty as they were ruthless. Vern could picture them, sitting with heads together, scheming that murder trap at the *Clarion* office. He could see them organizing the raid on the north strip that would embroil the Triangle with Jarnell and lead to this showdown here. He could hear them plotting the deaths of their own catspaws when their purpose had been served.

And now they were lifting their hands in holy horror, proclaiming their righteousness, absolving themselves of what might happen today. They were cunning, far-seeing men.

The white-haired preacher spoke, lifting his arms, and Vern found no meaning in the sonorous roll of his voice. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw that the Triangle hands were obeying his whispered orders to Oscar.

They were dismounting, scattering out into the street, and he could see the jut of their rifles from the saddle sheaths.

In a minute now, or maybe two . . .

He blew the ash from his cigar, and spoke quickly when the preacher was done. His eyes were intent upon Jarnell.

"The point is," he said "that a Triangle man was murdered and another wounded mighty bad. That's hard medicine to swallow. All I want from Jarnell is to know where he and his men were riding at the time Frank Eakins was shot.

"Suppose I ask him that question now, and he says he was off in the hills somewhere—some place he'd been warned the night-riders might appear. What would you gentlemen say to that?"

"All right," growled Jarnell. "We'll let it stand that way. That's exactly what I do say, Colton. Take it or leave it."

Vern leaned slightly in the saddle, which was the signal the Triangle men were waiting. He turned the roan sidewise, and his fingers felt along the top of his boot, lifted again to his lap. He removed the glowing cigar from his lips, holding it idly.

"I take it," he said. "I believe you, Jarnell. I don't think your men had any more to do with Frank Eakins' death than I had. I think the raid on the strip was made by men who were hired to harass the ranchers and nesters alike—by killers who deliberately set out to breed war in this country."

"And I believe that some of those killers are watching us now, waiting the signal to blast us down."

There was some quality in his voice that held the listening men motionless, that froze them silent there. They stared at him, incredulous.

"We're in the same boat again, Jarnell," he said. "We're both marked to die." His voice lifted as a spout of flame leaped up in his lap.

"Shoot the first man who moves, Jarnell!" he cried, and in the same instant he twisted in the saddle. His arm swept in a long arc, and the spluttering stick of dynamite was looped toward the roof of the Central Bank.

In the same instant big Oscar had hurled another, and the Triangle punchers had snatched their rifles, crouching with tilted muzzles that swept the buildings around.

In a double blast of shattering sound the famous battle of Rapid City was begun.

FROM the start it was a brutal, ugly, bloody business. It was spawned in evil, spurred by greed, and fought by desperate men who had no qualms of mercy, no thought of quit or quarter.

The first bullet splatted from the porch of the Land Association office. One of the gunhands gathered there loosed a panic shot toward the Triangle group while the explosions at the bank were thundering; and in the echoes of that double roar a fusillade sprayed from twenty places along the street.

From rooftops and alleys, from suddenly opened windows and doors, the ragged blurts of gunfire lashed. They were answered by shots from crouched Triangle hands in the street, and by a scattering fire from bewildered Association men who suddenly found themselves beset by hidden and unexpected enemies.

Three of this bunched group were hit in the first wild volley. A Triangle rider clutched his stomach, rolling frantically. A horse went kicking down, and another bolted.

A man staggered out from an ambush alley, dropping his rifle and collapsing upon it, and a second spilled limply from a second-floor window in the Elk Hotel, a dead man dangling there.

In an instant, in the bat of an eye, the grim warfare spread. It was a flame and a thunder that filled the street, a spontaneous burst that exploded into the action of a hundred smaller skirmishes.

Men shot at whatever targets they spied as others unseen poured lead at them. The shuttering action moved too swift for any eye to encompass, and the deadly drama mounted too fast for comprehension.

There were those sixteen on the roof of the bank, the picked assassins, who suffered the opening blasts. Two of them there were the first to die, killed instantly, and five more were so deeply hurt that the battle was ended for them within ten seconds.

They had been carefully placed, these sharpshooters, with orders to shoot at signal among the Triangle men and the granger guards, and all the odds of war were with them. It was easy victory, a scattering of helpless quail they expected; but instead they bore the brunt of destruction from the start.

They were crouched at the rampart, gripping their weapons, when a shattering hell was rained on them. One dynamite missile fell among four in a corner and blasted as it touched the roof. The other struck the brick ledge, bounding, and scattered ten feet of wall upon the walk below with its explosion.

In the fuming panic of disaster, in the stumbling rush of maimed and brain-shocked men, they stood erect—fair targets for the Triangle weapons spanging from the road.

No wonder those who still were able forgot their guns, piling for the exit to safety below. No wonder others huddled in the shelter of the waist-high wall, while the wounded moaned.

They watched one of their fellows who pawed his blinded eyes, sobbing curses, and staggered out to empty his pistol into the melee of the unseen street below. It was a mercy bullet that knocked him back, ending his agony.

Yes, the sixteen on that roof earned their gunhand pay.

There was an Association rider, name unknown, who sprawled on the sidewalk with a bullet-shattered hip. His pain was so deep that he supported his pistol with both hands, aiming it toward two men who had taken a stand behind a barricade of barrels near the Congress Bar.

He lay exposed to a raking fire that splintered the boards around him, but he seemed unaware of all else but the gun he held. He squeezed the trigger, squeezed again, and if bullets bit his flesh he showed no pain of them.

There were seven lead slugs in the body

they buried later; but he did not let his revolver drop until he had emptied it against his enemies.

There was Tom Barnaby, who downed five snipers and escaped the slaughter unscathed, and many another Triangle hand who fought a man's good fight.

There was big, blob-faced Oscar, too, who squatted in the middle of the road and calmly lighted fuse after spluttering fuse, hurling his dynamite blasts into gunfire nests left and right. Of all of those who fought that day, the giant Norwegian's was the greatest destruction.

Also there was Vern Colton.

## CHAPTER XIV

### DEAD HAND SHOT

VERN COLTON who had shut himself in exile, who had lived for a dollar, who had chosen the gamble of life and death as a drug for his forgetfulness.

But no more. All that was yesterday.

At Owl Pass and Cottonwoods, in Butte and 'Paso and Tarragon Town, the first slap of action had enclosed him in a vacuum space of unreality. He had moved in a haze of instinct, a mechanical doll who crouched and shot, who spun and shot, who loaded and shot again at other puppet figures in a world without dimension.

There was then a fatalism which blanked his brain, which held his mind remote from fear of passion, from any human sensibility.

But not here. Not that today. Now he saw all things in a widespead clarity that enlarged the street, the buildings, and himself among the others there. He saw the faces of men, and he shared the emotions in them.

As the dynamite fuse flared in his hand he knew the torture-ecstasy of fear.

Fear for those Triangle men who had followed him to this destiny. Fear for himself, for the new life Vern Colton had found. He had seen the shape of tomorrow, and he could not die.

And flooding with the fear came hate of the men who had brought it upon him: Ambler and Harkness and craven Wink Beecher and all the buzzard band who were hovering for slaughter today . . . .

While the dynamite fuse spat sparks in his hand. While his arm swooped to hurl that flickering death upon the roof of the Central Bank and loose the flood-gates of destruction.

As it left his fingers he jabbed spurs to the roan, driving the rearing beast straight at Jake Ambler. This was the paralyzed instant before the twin explosions jarred, and the happenings of that mid-street scene were revealed to him with a queer, dream-like slowness.

There was the little preacher-man who stood petrified, his hand pressed to gaping mouth. Wink Beecher staggered back a step, and as if his legs were suddenly robbed of strength he ludicrously sat down.

Adam Harkness was twisting his lips to shout—fat Ben Jarnell was snaking out his gun—and Jake Ambler had thrust out his hands, dodging, trying to dart away from the thrash of hoofs that charged upon him. His black hat flew off and his coat-tails fluttered.

The roan was on top of him, a jump too sudden for shooting, and Vern slashed his revolver barrel in a bloody thud upon the black-fringed bald spot.

Then it was that giant sounds boomed behind, and Center Street was rocked with hell's convulsions. Dynamite.

Vern sawed on the reins, and on the heels of the first sporadic gunblasts he slammed two hasty shots from his pitching seat at startled targets. The lurking ambushers were jumping from concealment now—too many furtive figures to count them all—but surprise and indecision locked their triggers for the moment.

Their orders had been to wait the break-up of the conference, Vern thought, to hold their volley until the doves of peace withdrew; and he planned his strategy on this. He shot a third time, and a man sagged at the corner of a building.

The Triangle men had been firing in ragged bursts, but now came the rumble-crash of retaliation that mowed down three

Association hands and sprayed the street with a lethal leaden hail.

In a swift glance Vern saw the wreckage of the bank roof, and dangers that still remained. There were moving figures on the warehouse roof a hundred feet away, and another group was nested in the Mercantile.

He was pulling the roan down, ready to spring from the saddle, when a thwack of sound struck the animal. He felt the slump of muscles beneath him, and he tried to leap free as the heavy beast lurched.

Not quite in time.

He was down in the dust, and a flame of agony was stabbing along his leg. It hacked again with each frantic jerk he gave, attempting to kick loose from the dead weight that pinned him there.

He could feel the thuds of bullets plumping into the belly of the roan. A slug spouted dirt six inches from his face as he twisted around.

There were sharpshooters in those windows along the street, and Vern Colton was a marked man.

They had him now.

THE desperation of his plight flooded him with a strange breathless calm. He lay on his side and planted his elbow firmly, tilting the revolver muzzle toward the window of the Mercantile loft.

He waited while the rifle barrel poked out from there, then drew a bull's-eye on the forehead that appeared.

He squeezed the trigger, grunted.

He was aware of the shuddering blasts of dynamite that Oscar hurled, a deeper thunder booming through the drum-roll of lesser sounds. He pulled shells from his belt, turning for a snap shot as a crouched man retreated from an alley mouth.

Some of the Triangle hands were down, he could see, sprawled motionless, and Wink Beecher lay with bloody face upturned, victim of a random bullet.

Near him Jake Ambler still stretched, and Adam Harkness and the white haired gospel-man hugged the dirt together not far away.

"Pull your leg out when I heave," said Ben Jarnell. "Quick now!"

Suddenly he was there, his bulky body squatted, one side of his face a crimson smear. A bullet whined between them as he scooped his hands beneath the roan's rump.

"It's broken," Vern said. "I could feel the bone crack. Save your hide, Jarnell."

"Pull," the fat man grunted. "Now—now!"

The pain was a fiery surge that hammered red-hot sledges in his brain. His teeth could not choke back the groan, and the last wrench that loosed his heel from the stirrup was a blinding agony.

He sprawled free, gasping, and with bleared eyes watched Jarnell snatch his pistol from the dust and blaze at the warehouse roof.

"They're slacking up," he rumbled. "We've mostly smoked 'em out from this end. Can you still shoot, Colton?"

Vern dragged the leg that had no strength in it, supported himself on hand and knee. Suddenly the attacking barrage had dwindled. A Triangle man loosed his rifle down the street, and the cracking whine was an angry sound in the ear-ringing hush that lingered.

Vern shook his head grimly. They had won the first brief skirmish, yes; but the battle wasn't done. The surprise of the opening attack, the crushing blow that wiped out the spearhead force atop the bank, had disorganized the ambush crew. This pause was a breathing spell, a time to rally them and plan anew.

"They'll come closing in." He was loading his cylinder as he spoke. "They still number five to our one, and they'll rush us now. They've got to make the wipe-out clean."

Jarnell nodded. "That's how I figured. Could we run for it?"

"We might make it to your office yonder. We could hole up there till they burned us out."

Jarnell shook his head slightly. "I'd rather face it—"

A rifle boomed. A giant steel hand with

searing fingers cuffed Vern Colton's right shoulder with a force that staggered him sidewise and slammed him down. A wave of blackness rolled over him.

He thought he had wandered a long time, groping along a pitch-dark corridor; but when sight returned he knew there had been but a split second of unconsciousness.

Jarnell was shooting a second time toward the sniper in the Mercantile Store. A clattering rifle was proof of his marksmanship.

"Stay back!" Vern shouted hoarsely. "Keep scattered!"

For the others had started toward him —Oscar and Tom Barraby, and the seven more who could stand. They halted there, waiting his orders, and he did not know what to tell them. He looked at Ben Jarnell.

"The bank," he said. "We might be able to stand 'em off—"

But the odds were too great. He sat in the dust of the death-strewn street and saw no escape for them. His left hand propped him there, and he let his dull eyes stray to the revolver still clenched in a blood-daubed fist beside him

It was his own hand he saw, but there was no life in it now, no slightest sensation.

Was that the way death was, he wondered. An emptiness, a nothing?

"You handle things here, Jarnell," he said, breathing deep. "They must have twenty or thirty men left. If we could stand 'em off till dark—"

HIS voice trailed off. He blinked his eyes, drew in a painful breath. He could hear Jarnell and Tom Barnaby speaking together, but their words were a mumble. He must be going to pass out again, for now he was seeing things.

Like a dead man moving.

He stared with bleared, half-lidded eyes at the limp form of Wink Beecher some twenty feet away. Wink Beecher was dead, and yet—

He saw it again, and now he knew what it was. A white hand had tugged the pistol from Wink Beecher's holster, but the fingers were not Wink's. He saw the slow lift of a head beyond Wink's shoulder, and Jake Ambler's face came into view.

The lips wore a twisted grimace that might have been a queer smile or a snarl. The eyes stared straight at Vern Colton, and a big white hand pushed forth Wink's gun and leveled it.

And Vern Colton could not move. He could not fall flat, nor shout, for all his muscles seemed frozen in a strange, strengthless lassitude.

He sat and stared, and he saw Jake Ambler's face contort in a spasm of hate; his fingers tightened on the trigger . . . .

The gun blasted beside him, not inches from his face. He saw the hole that spotted Ambler's forehead, and the lifeless crumple of the man's collapse. With unbelieving eyes he looked down at the bloody hand, that lifeless hand of his own, and saw how rock-like steady it held the .38 revolver that wisped smoke from its barrel.

And suddenly they were all shouting. Jarnell and all the Triangle men. Their guns exploded in a chorus and they shouted a wild, shrill farrago. Vern looked between their shifting legs and saw the doom that was sweeping down from the head of the street.

A wave of horsemen coming in a charge. Thirty—fifty—maybe more of those pell-mell riders swooping and their guns pounding as they came. Half a hundred strong —and ten men waiting there to stop them.

"Run!" he shouted. "Scatter!"

But the Triangle men did not hear his voice. He was trying to struggle up when he noticed that their guns were not fighting the charge.

They were shooting into the air. Their shouts were not of desperation but thin yips of triumph. Big Oscar was waving his hands on high, lumbering in a bearlike dance of victory.

Vern's arm sagged, skidding in the dust, and there was a dry, choking lump in his throat he could not swallow. For now he could see the wide-brimmed hats these pounding riders wore, and the way their bodies lifted to the saddle.

And in the forefront of them, bestriding a galloping buckskin, was a scrawny little man who rode with flapping elbows, hatless, shouting his challenge and defiance from a wide mouth.

Vern recognized the white hair and the grim battle-snarl of Matthew Colton, as his propping arm collapsed and lowered him again into deep, slow swirls of black oblivion.

## CHAPTER XV

### TO THE VICTOR

WHEN Vern Colton saw daylight again there was a ceiling above and walls around him. A bright shaft of sunbeam fell across the white cover of his bed.

"Drink this," a voice said. "It's all right. Go back to sleep."

He closed his eyes and slept.

It was dark the second time he wakened. He heard a rustle of stiff cloth, and a woman's figure opened the door that led into the lighted hall. "He's awake now, doctor," she said softly.

They lighted a lamp and a bearded man grinned down at him. "You had enough rest, boy? Forty hours is quite a snooze."

"I feel fine, doc. I mean—how am I?"

"Well, you won't dance any jigs for a little while, but otherwise you're a lucky young man. You feel strong enough to talk to a few anxious folks? I'm tired of 'em hanging around downstairs."

Vern smiled faintly. "Sure, doc."

The doctor returned shortly with Mr. Matthew and Tom Barnaby. "Five minutes," he said, and closed the door.

"Hah!" his uncle snorted. "I told that old fool you were strong as a horse. Looks fine, doesn't he, Tom? We'll have him out at the Triangle before the week's over."

"What happened?" Vern said. "Along toward the end there, I kind of passed out of the picture."

"Hmmmmm," said Matthew, "Yes, I guess you did. Well, you didn't miss much. There was a few who sneaked away—just a few—but we rounded up eighteen or twenty when the shooting was over.

"We had quite a time with the boys there—they had ideas about stringin' 'em up—but in the end we turned 'em over to the U. S. deputy marshal who happened to be along."

Vern looked at him.

"Well, I brought him along, as a matter of fact," Matthew said. "You see, I—"

"He never went near Jefferson at all," Tom Barnaby interrupted. "He hid out over at Dan Weaver's place, collectin' him a army. He said he figgered you'd scare him up a war right sudden, and he had things all set for it."

Matthew cleared his throat and looked down his nose. "Look, boy. I want to tell you—well, I didn't think you'd make things move so fast. I—we—that is, the cattlemen decided to clean up this thing once and for all. I expected you to stir things up for us, and that's a fact, but I never thought you'd bring 'em to a head so fast."

"You got there," Vern said. "That's the big thing, Uncle Matthew."

The little man glanced at him quickly, and a shine came into his faded eyes. Those two words—Uncle Matthew—were Vern's statement of how things stood between them. "By God, boy," he said harshly, "if anything worse had happened—"

"Tell him about Adam Harkness," Tom Barnaby chuckled. "Now there was one scared man. Ben Jarnell grabbed 'im, and when the crowd heard some of the questions Ben asked—well, it was quite a skirmish. They stripped the old buzzard plum naked, Vern, tore every stitch of his clothes off before Ben could drag him to the jail-house."

"I could have strangled him myself," Matthew growled. "He talked, Vern. He spilled out everything he knew. The whole point is, boy, that the Elcon hit rich ore. Ambler made the discovery a long time back, and his experts poked around and found there was plenty more promising mineral sections around this neighborhood. It was then Jake Ambler and Harkness stepped in."

Vern nodded. "Didn't you have some

such idea in the back of your mind all along?"

"WELL, I—" Matthew frowned. "I did think of it. But those fellows were mighty clever, you see. Ambler hid the facts of the discoveries from the people who own the Elcon, and Harkness supplied the money that backed their clean-up scheme.

"They worked things slow and easy—well, you know how it went. No tellin' how many millions they might have cleared if their luck hadn't stumbled.

"They planned to bring the railroad in, of course—that's why they took a whack at me—and in the long run they figured—"

The doctor looked in from the door. "Don't wear him out," he called. "You can tell him the rest in the morning."

Matthew waved a hand. "Now wait, doc, just a minute. There's a couple young ladies downstairs who are mighty anxious about this boy. You know how they been waitin' around, and at least he's able to say hello or something."

"Oh, all right, all right. But just for a minute, mind you."

Mr. Matthew glanced at his nephew slyly. "You know," he said, "I don't think they'd like it to come up both at once. Be better, wouldn't it, to kind of make it private."

Vern's free hand straightened the covers. He stared at Matthew narrowly.

"A mighty fine pair of young ladies," the old man said blandly. "Myra's been mighty anxious about you, Vern, and Faith Lennox—"

He shook his head. "She's smart as a whip, yes sir, and you'll ride a long road before you find one prettier. A man could be mighty proud of a wife like her, couldn't he?"

Vern looked down at his fingers. Mr. Matthew Colton—Mr. Fix-It. The man who knew all the answers.

From the very beginning Mr. Matthew had schemed the way of things. He had brought Vern back here for a double purpose. He had revealed just enough of what he knew or suspected, embroiled Vern with the men whose antagonisms would cause the blow-up he wanted, made his own arrangements to handle any happening.

From start to finish the sly finger of Mr. Matthew had steered every move in this grim game where greed and treachery and death had been chessmen.

But there were a few things wise Mr. Matthew did not know. He might read the way men's minds worked, but he could not see into their hearts. He could not know the secret things that loneliness and misery and blank despair taught to the men of the Lone Wolf Trail. No crabbed and stubborn and wifeless old man could understand the truth Stella had spoken:

"Love is a steadiness you have, a comfort that's with you night and day. . . "

He eyed Matthew without expression. "All right," he said, "Ask her to come up."

"You go tell her, Tom," said Matthew. "I just got another word I want to say here."

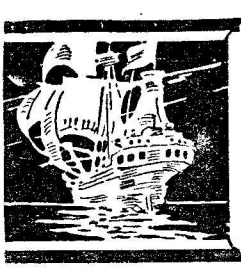
"Hey!" Tom Barnaby grunted. "You fellows crazy? You never said which girl you meant. Who you talkin' about?"

"Don't be a fool, Tom," Matthew said sharply. "The Coltons may make one mistake, but one's enough. You send her up here—Myra."

A devil's grin spread across his face as Vern jerked his head to stare at him. He touched the end of his mustache, straightened his shoulders.

"Well, I'll be damned," Vern said to the wall. "He *does* think of everything!"

THE END



# Argonotes.

## The Readers' Viewpoint

OUR correspondent below is pretty wrought up, and out of deference to the libel laws we've had to censor his letter a bit. We don't like censoring things, but in this case it was a necessity. At any rate, you'll have no trouble in catching the point made so vehemently by

**S. T. DAWSON**

I have been a steady reader of ARGOSY for some twenty years, and this is only about the second time I have bothered you with a letter. Although you will doubtless get thousands of letters denouncing Clinton Coffin, let me add my blast to the storm.

I commend your courage in publishing Mr. Coffin's propaganda. He speaks as an American, but . . . it is quite apparent that he is a disciple of Soviet Russia; only he is a bit behind the times. It is plain now that Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism are just different labels for the same brand of goods, and we want none of them here.

At the moment, it appears that, sooner or later, America will be fighting for her life. Everybody, from the President on down, knows now we need to prepare. We Americans have had our share of wars, but we have never been ready for one.

And, believe it or not, we never whipped anybody but Mexico, without a lot of help. Let's be ready to help ourselves this time. As the first step for preparedness, let's weed out such (censored) as Coffin. We must, or share the fate of Norway, Poland, Holland, Belgium and Czecho-Slovakia.

MIAMI, FLA.

# LOOKING AHEAD

## ALL SURVIVORS REPORT

**Attack and retreat; taste your own blood in your mouth and die without water—it is all one to a Legionnaire. But this young lieutenant found, the bitter way, that valor is not enough. And that to those in the Legion, an outsider counts for nothing. A fine complete short novel of hot battles by**

**GEORGES SURDEZ**

## YAQUI GOLD

**This is no tropic paradise, this dark corner of Mexico; its proud people have set themselves grimly against the world. So the American who dares to come here in search of secret wealth must be willing to accept the ominous welcome of war drums. Beginning an exciting new novel by**

**E. HOFFMANN PRICE**

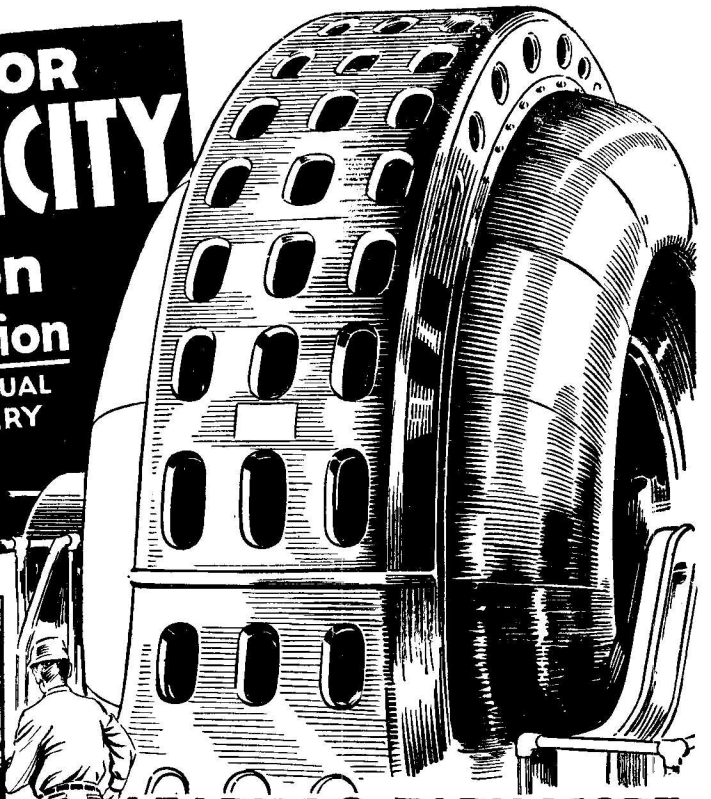
*COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JULY 27*

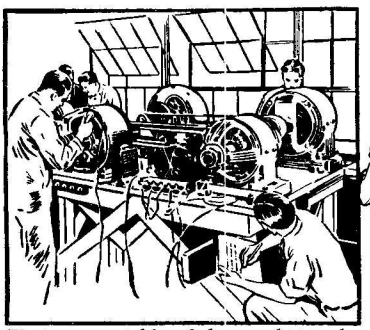
# TRAIN FOR ELECTRICITY

## Pay Tuition After Graduation

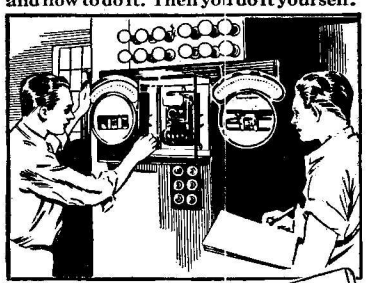
ACTUAL WORK ON ACTUAL ELECTRICAL MACHINERY

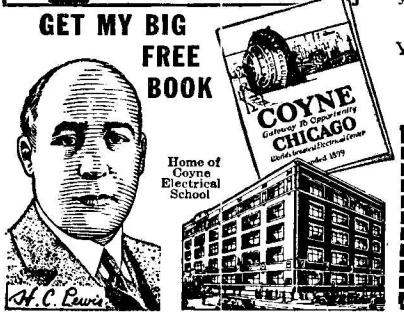
**12 WEEKS SHOP TRAINING**





First you are told and shown what to do and how to do it. Then you do it yourself.






GET MY BIG FREE BOOK

## LEARN TO EARN MORE

My big **free book** tells you how **we train you in 12 weeks** for your start in the growing field of Electricity.

**Learn by Doing**

You get your training **not by book or lessons** but **on actual electrical machinery and equipment.**

**Get Training First—Pay Tuition Later**

You can **get your training first** and then **pay for most of it in 10 monthly payments starting 5 months after you start school or 60 days after your 12 weeks training period is over.** Mail coupon for all the details of this plan.

**Low Board and Room Plan**

I have a plan where you can get board and room as low as $5.00 per week. I want to tell you about this plan as well as other facts regarding your stay at Coyne.

**Previous Experience or Advanced Education Not Necessary**

You don't need any previous electrical experience or advanced education to get my training.

**Graduate Employment Service**

After graduation every graduate is given employment help, consultation help and many other services to help him make a success of his training.

**4-Weeks Extra Radio Course Included**

Right now I am including an extra **4 weeks course in Radio.** This training is given you **at no extra tuition cost.**

**Get My Complete Story**

**Fill in and clip the coupon below.** Then mail it to me. When I receive it **I'll send you my big free book** and **all the details of the features I have outlined here.**

This will not obligate you in any way and **no salesman will call on you** as I do not employ salesmen.

You owe it to yourself and your future to get these facts now.

So don't put it off—**mail the coupon now.**

**COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL** 500 S. PAULINA ST. Dept. BO-13, CHICAGO

**MAIL THE COUPON NOW**

**H. C. LEWIS, President, COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL,**
**500 S. Paulina Street, Dept. BO-13, Chicago, Ill.**

I'm really in earnest. I **do** want to get ahead. Send me your big free catalog with full particulars about Coyne training.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

# NEW REFLEX CAMERA "TUNES IN" PERFECT PICTURES *Every Time!*

## Only Popular-Priced Reflex that Focuses on Viewer. "TUNES IN" Close-Ups or Distant Shots!

There's *no* "trial-and-error" with your TWINFLEX! *No* squinting through small view-finders! No complicated gadgets! Every shot's a 'honey' because you *see every one before* you take it!

*Only* $4.95


Insist on a TwinFlex, the reflex that focuses on the viewer. Don't be misled by "Reflex Shaped" Cameras with "glorified" viewfinders. This focusing control *insures* sharp pictures—close-ups at 3 ft. or distant shots! Simply turn the control until you see the picture sharply on the screen.

**Here is the brand-new camera** that gives a *true* preview of your pictures! . . . a real professional-type reflex camera that practically eliminates 'dud' shots! For the sensational new TWINFLEX—with its matched focusing lenses—shows you your pictures on the viewing screen *before* you take them! And what pictures! Prize-winners—as clear and as sharp as any you've ever seen taken with cameras costing 4 and 5 times as much! The TWINFLEX is easy to operate too! Just *aim . . . focus . . .* and *shoot!* At only $4.95, the TWINFLEX is truly America's #1 Reflex Camera value! See it at your dealer's today! Universal Camera Corp., New York City.

The New UniveX

# TWINFLEX

*"See what you get—Get what you see!"*