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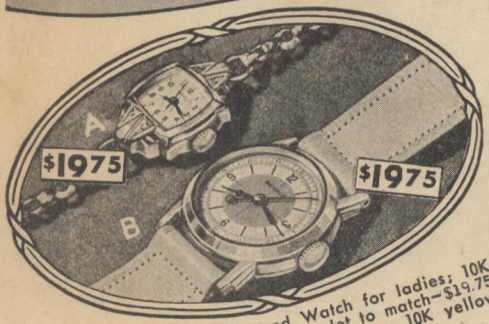

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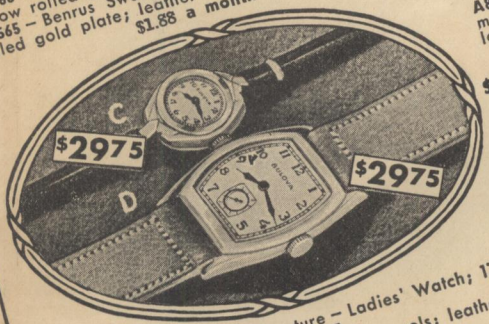

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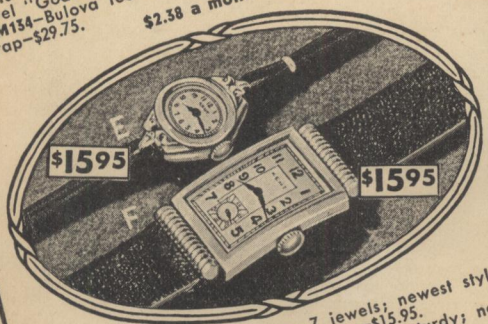

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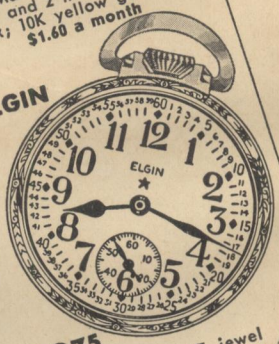

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Volume 303 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 9, 1940 Number 3

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

Present conditions in the paper market have made it expedient for the publishers of this magazine to reduce the number of its pages. However, by using a slightly smaller type, not one word of the fiction contents of the book has been sacrificed. In many issues we have found the wordage to be *higher* than formerly. ARGOSY still gives you more words and better stories for your dime.

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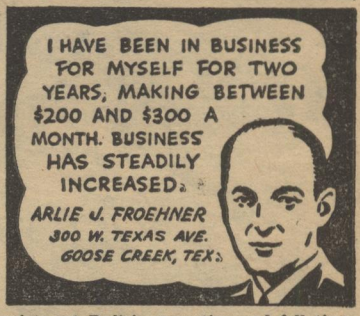

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THE EMSTIRE COMPANY, Dept. 64
1966 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Warrior Alone

It was all planned carefully ahead, and Spain was first, and then Poland, Holland and France. It is here in this story—the terrible diagram of our world; and here, also, are the two lives of a man born to untold power who finally learned how men find the thing they must fight for. A powerful novelet

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "Rebel Takes Arms," "Dark Thunder," etc.

I

THOSE were the days of the peace, and they couldn't last, and so were very precious. I knew that sitting there in April of 1936, watching the tennis at Monte Carlo. Each moment meant a lot to me.

I was on leave from my paper, as much as any foreign correspondent can ever be on leave. Up in Paris when I'd left, it had been raining steadily and my only idea in coming to the Riviera was to get a skinful of sun. But down in front of me on the main court in the white-glittering Mediterranean sunlight was the makings of a great big story. It was so big that to sit there and think about it frightened me a bit.

I'm Jack Kiley, and I work for the *Chicago Globe* and a couple of syndicates where I'm farmed out by my bosses. I'm a Chicago boy, from the South Side, and I used to play tackle for Hyde Park High School. When I was a cub and just breaking into the business, Al Capone was building himself up heavy in Cicero. I knew him, and I thought I was all through being frightened. But one night I was in his Cicero place when some of the opposition drove by and very thoroughly riddled the whole front wall and the bar. After that, I was smart enough to be scared. There at the club at Monte Carlo I had the same sensation.

The two men playing on the center court were from perhaps the most powerful and wealthy family in Europe, or the world. One was Raoul Hendel, who was French-born and whose side of the family had the major control in the Comité des Forges and the entire French steel cartel. His opponent was his German cousin, Gregor von Hendel, and Gregor's folks were the Metalgesellschaft and the Vulkan rifle works and the Rheinmetal trust.

They were both quite good players, and Raoul had a ranking high up in the first series in France. Gregor played for the Red-White Club in Berlin, and now he was putting up an excellent match against Raoul. But that wasn't the story. The story was that they were here, in Monaco, at the same time. There was something behind it that was a lot more than tennis, and what that was spelled the end of peace in Europe. I more sensed than understood that, and yet I was certain.

Raoul was winning the match. He covered court well and he hit with a lot of regularity against Gregor's speed. Gregor was big and blond, and very strong. His forehands were struck with everything he had. Unless you listened to the score closely, it seemed he'd win.

Raoul was slighter, faster, with a sort of angular, nervous grace. He was deeply tanned, and his thick black hair shone in the sun. When he came to the net and volleyed Gregor's drives off court, all the

Raoul and von Hendel struggled close to the cliff's edge

women in the stands sighed before they clapped. Raoul was a good-looking guy.

But there was a lot more to Raoul than just physical good looks. Every move he had made, each of his gestures, showed his sense of power. He was a ruler of a great and secret international empire, and he knew it. His family's wealth, their cunning and ruthlessness dominated Europe. Kings were hired hands to Raoul. His family managed their crew of dictators just about the way a trainer runs his racing stable.

Out on the court, dressed in simple white shorts and a cotton shirt, Raoul showed the one boyish, unrestrained side of his character. Otherwise, he was hard, cold, and tough. When I first came to Europe fifteen years ago, Raoul had just celebrated his twenty-first birthday. It was then that he took over his part of the family dynasty.

All of his life had made him ready for it. From the time he was a little kid, special tutors and instructors, the adult members of his family on both the French and German side had trained him. He was sent to the École Polytechnique, and to several other schools, but he spent more time in the family munitions plants at Chalons and St. Etienne and Dusseldorf and Essen and Prague.

Now, at thirty-six, he was a subtle master of political, financial and industrial intrigue. He looked healthy and handsome, and he looked like a dynast. So did his cousin Gregor, but there was a difference between them, and it went deeper than the superficial fact of nationality. Gregor openly liked violence; he swaggered after he'd made a good shot and cursed out the ball boys after he'd made a bad one. Raoul used violence only when it was necessary. Brains were his best weapon.

HE TOOK match point with a parallel half-volley, then a smash off Gregor's lob. The ball jounced over the backstop on the bounce and into the sea. He and Gregor grinned as they shook hands and came up the steps together from the court.

I met them in the bar. They knew me, of course, but I'd always liked Raoul better than Gregor. He was the more natural of the two, and anyhow Gregor was an avowed Nazi who bragged about his drinking bouts with Hermann Goering.

"Nice going," I told Raoul. "You've got a chance to take the tournament."

"No, I haven't," Raoul said. He paused and looked at his cousin. "I've just posted my default. Any one of the local top-flight players can beat me."

Gregor was drinking *fine à l'eau* and he called to the barman and ordered me a drink. That was his way. You took what he gave you, like it or not. "Will the American papers," he said, "be interested in Hendel beating Hendel?"

"For a couple of hundred words' worth," I said.

"I'm here for pleasure," he said. "Strictly pleasure." He laughed as he said it and he watched Raoul.

Raoul had finished his drink and he didn't want a new one. "Listen, Gregor," he said. "Kiley is a good man to be with us this evening. He can give us some idea of what the American response will be."

The bar was full of people, tennis players and hangers-on, all the tired, over-dressed English colonials and American expatriates. But those two talked as if they were alone and what they said had no meaning for anyone except themselves. It gave me a kick to be with them, and I admit it. They were the men who made the world.

"Nicht wahr," Gregor said. "Bring him along, then. You can trust him?"

Raoul lifted his glance to me. "What do you say, Jack?" he said.

"Nobody can trust me but my bosses," I said. "But I won't print until you tell me. I'd lose my job if I did."

We had dinner at the Casino d'Eté, out on the terrace and facing the sea. Gregor had half a dozen *fines* at dinner and did most of the talking. He sat low in his chair, his heavy body sprawled, his thick hands spread before him on the table.

A tall, long-legged blond girl danced by once, and Gregor liked her. He called over the headwaiter and said, "I want to dance

with her. Tell her I shall be at her table for the next dance."

The headwaiter was embarrassed. "She is the wife of a high-ranking army officer, M'sieur von Hendel," he said.

"Tell her," Gregor grunted. He picked up the silver peppermill from the table as he said it. I was certain that he'd throw that unless the headwaiter obeyed, and so was the headwaiter.

Gregor danced with the blonde for about an hour. They made a very handsome couple out there on the glass-tiled floor with the colored lights pouring softly up through it, and the orchestra leaders played all the numbers Gregor wanted.

RAOUL kept pretty quiet. It was my thought that for some reason he was unhappy, and that the beauty of the night and the setting added to his melancholy. So I didn't say much.

He was drinking vermouth and soda, and not a lot of that. His long, rather small-boned face had a tense expression. He used his hands when he talked, in quick, nervous gestures, but what he said was of no particular importance. Near midnight he got up from his chair and signed to Gregor. That signal was imperative, commanding. I wondered for an instant how Gregor would take it.

Gregor scowled, and yet he obeyed. He patted the blonde's bare back before he left her, came slowly over to us. "We must go?" he said.

"Right away," Raoul quietly said. "There are a number of things for us to discuss."

We left then.

Raoul's villa was out on Cap Ferrat, past Somerset Maugham's place, and Gregor was staying with him. It was nearly one o'clock when we got there. We sat on the terrace with the fireflies flickering around us and the sea iridescent through the pine trees below.

"There's going to be war," Raoul said. His face was haggard in the moonlight and he sat fully erect in his chair. "Gregor came here from a meeting in Berlin. The details are all arranged for a revolution in Spain."

My breath caught in my throat. For about half a minute I sat without speaking. Spain, I thought, poor, damn' Spain. Then I remembered who signed my paychecks. "Who was at that meeting in Berlin, Gregor?" I said.

"Hjalmar Schact," Gregor said. "Krupp Von Bohlen. Frederich Opel. And Juan March and another Spaniard, a noisy general named Sanjurjo. The Spanish generals and landlords are bored. They want to get back in open power. We will finance them."

"Who do you mean," I asked, "when you say we?"

"All the big German and French steel trusts," Gregor said. "My interests and Raoul's. Also Mussolini's gang of petty thieves. Several of them were at the meeting and they talked as though they were entering a real war."

"Maybe it will be," I said. "I was in Spain a couple of months back to cover the elections. The Spanish people will fight."

Raoul leaned forward, confronting me. He spoke with absolute finality, and I recognized that he measured each word. "They can't win," he said. "We can't afford to let them win."

His voice was hard, his body taut. As he continued talking, he used his hands in sharp and graphic gestures.

"It's time that Europe was changed. The people have become confused as to who their rulers really are. We shall show them —with steel and fire and blood. The ideas of the Popular Fronts are dangerous to us, the men who have and shall always rule Europe. Republican Spain will be destroyed if only for the fact that the wealthy class in Great Britain fears for its own interests there."

He stopped, and almost smiled, as though aware he had undertaken too forceful language to me, whom he liked and treated as at least his mental equal. "Tell me, Jack," he asked; "what do you think America will do in the period to come?"

I TRIED very hard to think. As much as I know and love my own country, I found that I wasn't sure. In my mind I drew a picture of the workers in Chicago and Pittsburgh, all over the country, reading the pieces I'd write about Spain.

Then I thought of the other folks, not the workers, but the school teachers and the professional people, and the wealthy boys who owned the steamship lines that ran to Spain and who had big investments on the Iberian Peninsula.

"That's difficult to answer," I said to Raoul and to Gregor. "Public sentiment in the States is almost always for the underdog, the guy who gets whipped but who still can take it. My best guess is they'll be on the side of the people, and not the landlords and the generals."

"But it won't matter," Gregor said flatly. He spoke as if he were reading off a bridge score. "Britain won't let the United States take any definite attitude. Your politicians have too much need for the British fleet."

I got up and walked around the terrace. I was frightened, and I was sick. Life doesn't get you ready for a thing like that, no matter how tough you think you are. Rage came over me after the revulsion passed and I half had the crazy idea I might kill those two and somehow stop it all.

"If the government of the Popular Front is wrecked in Spain," I said, "then it will go in France, too. Then Austria will fall apart at the seams and after it Czechoslovakia. Europe will tumble into war like a drunk off a step-ladder."

"You're right," Gregor said, and he smiled.

I could see the strong, browned face in the dark and my temptation still was to hit it.

"You'll make a very fine reputation for yourself as a war correspondent," Gregor said. "When you go back to America afterward, you'll be made an editor of your paper, perhaps a partner."

Raoul had got up from his chair and was standing near me. He stood poised, as if he knew my desire to strike his cousin. "Don't become too emotional, Jack," he said. "The Versailles Treaty started this, not anything that I or Gregor have done. Europe must go on; it can't stay stagnant as it is now."

"We'll own the world," Gregor said. "Remember that later, when you come to write of this." He spoke in German, and his voice was harshly strident. "We made that little paper-hanger Fuehrer and when we're ready we'll destroy him. He rules only as long as we give him the power."

I turned and stood looking square at Gregor. In that moment he embodied everything that was wrong and rotten in the world. Raoul was just about as bad, I thought, but a streak of humanity was somewhere in Raoul, and at least he wasn't strident.

"My job's essentially simple," I said. "You make events happen and I report them—as much of them as I can. Of course you two are a story in yourselves, and some day I'm going to write that. But now I can tell you that you're giving Hitler too much power, as much as your own. He knows that among yourselves you call him 'the paper-hanger.' He hates you for it, and he always will."

"Get out, fool," Gregor said. "Go! Your brain is like one of your American melons, all soft inside."

Raoul walked with me to the car. We shook hands. "Goodnight," he said. "If you're disturbed, just recall that there's nothing you can do to stop it. I'll let you know when it breaks in Spain."

"Maybe I'm wrong," I said. "But I think you're one guy who's not in the right business. Goodnight, and thanks. You played a nice match."

II

I WAS in Paris when it happened. Raoul's personal secretary called me up at my office in the Rue Danou. I had a bag ready and my ticket bought on the Air France plane to Madrid. But Raoul told me he was going down himself and to meet him at Le Bourget.

We went in his private plane. Raoul was dressed in Davis tweeds and a pullover sweater. He looked like a young office manager on his way to a weekend. "Have you filed your story?" he said.

"Just a bulletin," I said. "If I tried to tell my office half of what you and Gregor told me, my bosses would fire me for crazy. But I'll file plenty from Madrid."

"The Italians are using their planes to fly in the Moors and the Legion from Morocco," Raoul said. "This is supposed to be a holy war, to safeguard the Catholic Church, but you can use that." He gave me his strange, mocking half-smile, then turned away to the window.

"I certainly will," I said. Then I took the cover off my portable and started to write my piece.

There's been a lot written about the Spanish war. A lot will be. Even in the light of everything that's happened since, that struggle in Spain holds heroic proportion. A working newspaperman like me isn't given much to big words. But Spain's fight was magnificent. It was the death grapple of liberty in Europe. I know. I was there and saw it.

Raoul went to the Palace Hotel right after we landed in Madrid. He was going to see some of the big government officials, he told me, and place a few orders for some second-hand planes and tanks one of his firms had lying around. I said I'd meet him at the hotel for dinner, if I met him at all.

They were shooting in the streets then, from doorways and windows and subway kiosks. But I got to the *telegrafico* in the Telephone Building all right and gave my copy to some clerk with eyes as big as half-dollars. "If you want to see the fighting," he said, "go to the barracks."

Cars passed me on the street on the way to the barracks. They were filled with young kids of seventeen and eighteen, and some older men. I heard them shout that the government had given them permission to take arms. Then I saw them get killed.

They were running from the cars at the Montaña Barracks as though they were playing a soccer match. Most of them were empty-handed, and those who were armed had clubs or single-shot hunting rifles.

It was slaughter. The officers in the barracks were trained men and they had machine-guns. The kids in their blue overalls would go forward running and then pitch down on their faces, dead before they'd gone a dozen yards. But more kept coming up from behind all the time. They took shelter behind the heaps of their dead. They got closer, closer. One vaulted through a window, and others followed him.

I leaned against the wall and gasped. That was Spain. How could any force, no matter how great, defeat that?

Inside there were shots, yells. The main gate came open. A kid stood there staggering a little from side to side. He was wounded, but his arms were full of rifles. "Come and get them, *compañeros,*" he called. "They're ours."

Spain was my first real war, and my worst one. I went and took a look in through that doorway after the kids had got their rifles. The officers lay in a circle, all of them dead, the soles of their long English boots turned up in a kind of unintentional design. "You guys made a bum bet," I said, just because I had to say something.

BACK out in the street I ran into Sue Benham. She was with a bunch of Spanish women who were trying to help the wounded. For an instant I didn't recognize her. She wore a man's beret over her short blond hair and her face had gone absolutely white, even her lips.

"What are you doing here, Sue?" I said. Sue and I had been very much in love at one time, and I was still in love with her. But what can a wandering newspaperman do about being serious like that? So Sue had skipped it.

She looked at me blinking, and she made a little, vague motion with her hands. "My father's attached to the Embassy," she said.

"I know that," I said. "But what are

you doing here? This isn't a war for Americans."

"Yes, it is," she said. "Or it will be. Why must people like these be killed? They've done nothing except be brave."

"Come on along with me," I said, "and I'll have you meet a man who can tell you."

She walked stumbling beside me and I knew she kept seeing images of the dead in her brain. When I spoke to her, she answered, but what she said was about those kids back there at the barracks.

"You need a drink, Sue," I said, "and Raoul Hendel is going to buy it for you."

"How about you?" she said.

"I need a lot of drinks," I said. "But first I've got to file my copy. This thing's more than a story. This is history."

Raoul was in the lobby of the hotel with a couple of men in blue overalls guarding him. But they stood aside when I brought over Sue. I introduced them and then I told Raoul to buy her a drink. "Her father's one of the secretaries at the American Embassy," I said. "If she doesn't like you, see that she gets home."

"But she'll like me fine," Raoul said in his suavest, quietest manner. "I have in my pocket an order for a half-million *pesetas* for arms for the Republic. The people have a very good chance to win."

"I won't quote you," I said, but I wasn't smiling as I said it.

•

I talked to Raoul a week after that. I put the question to him. "What's your reason in arming these people?" I said. "You can't possibly want them to win."

"Of course they can't win," Raoul said. "But on the other hand the victory can't be too easy for the Fascists. These people are tough; a lot of them will have to be killed to make a Fascist victory secure. And enough wouldn't die unless they had arms of sorts. Any time, naturally, that it might seem they are going to win, we'll cut off the arms supply quick."

I sat staring at him. I didn't experience the same sensation of sick dismay that I'd felt at his villa at Cap Ferrat when I'd heard his conversation with his cousin Gregor. Now, I'd begun to realize that underneath his tremendous surface cynicism there was a doubt of his own ability for brutality. Raoul wasn't hard all the way through, and he was vaguely aware of it.

"Raoul," I said, "you're not that bad, not that rotten. In a very profound way, you're kidding yourself when you say you can stand by and see this fine, brave people slaughtered. Your desire to gain from it isn't great enough in you. Gregor has it, yes, but not you. You might want to have a share in ruling the world—as much as Gregor has—but you fell in love with Sue Benham a day or so ago. That in itself is a contradiction in your character. She just isn't your kind of girl."

It was Raoul's turn to stare at me. Of course I'd been there with them all week long while he and Sue dined together, then drank and talked. I'd seen the change in Raoul, and his approach to Sue, quiet and grave, far different from the flip, quick manner he used with the bright little numbers he chased around with in Paris and on the Riviera. He was impressed by Sue, and what she had to say about the cause of the Spanish people.

"I guess you're right," Raoul said. "Sue's quite a girl. I'm going out with her tomorrow to the Sierra de Guadarrama to see what the people's army is doing. Want to come?"

"It's the biggest story in the world today," I said. "But I'm giving you warning right now, Raoul. I'm no longer anywhere near on your side. I hate all you stand for and do."

He lifted his hands. They were hands made powerful by skilled exercise, and he knew how to use them. He brought back his right, advanced his left. Raoul Hendel was about to strike me. But, of course he didn't.

The flush of rage went out of his face. His eyes cooled, the rigidity left his hands. Here was the dynast, I thought, the man forever able to control himself. Still, Raoul

was changing, and his rage alone was evidence of it. What Sue had told him, what he'd seen here in Spain, had taken effect on him. He was dealing with new emotions, with elements hitherto unknown to him. And, for the first time in my acquaintance with him, he was on the defensive. Human courage—the courage of the Spanish people—had made him ashamed somewhere far down in his nature.

"A great number of you bright men," he said slowly, "hate us for what really is no more nor less than mental honesty. We're not ashamed to say we like power, and to work for it. Don't tempt my good nature too far. You're a bourgeois, a minor representative of the thought of a bourgeois nation. Any time you vex me or impede me in any serious way, I shall have you destroyed."

"What about Sue?" I said.

"Sue, also," he said.

THE Guadarrama is a desolate place. The wind drums across it winter and summer, and the rocky, sharp ridges take the sun and hold it, but they are awfully cold at night. Up there the people's army were dying by the thousands. They had no artillery and no machine-guns, and against them were Mola's and Franco's Moors and the tough rascals of the Legion.

We sat on ridge after ridge, Sue and Raoul and I, and watched the people fall back before the Moors. There wasn't anything else the people could do. But they made them pay, believe me. Those *miliciano* boys in their baggy overalls weren't afraid of the Moors. They waited, and fought them hand-to-hand, and they died.

Sue had developed a kind of calm. She didn't speak much, and when she did it was in an objective fashion. "The States must know about this," she said once. "You and the other typewriter boys will have to tell the folks at home, Jack. This was the same thing we had at Lexington, and Concord. If the President won't let arms be sent, the people themselves will send them."

"A nice idea," Raoul said. "But impractical. Jack already knows the answer to that one. There will be no arms allowed in Spain except those my lot agrees to sell."

Sue stood up from behind the boulder where she'd been crouching. Bullets were whipping past all the time, and some of the Fascist heavy artillery stuff was breaking close ahead. But Sue seemed completely uncaring.

"You're not a man," she said. "You're something that walks and talks like one. But when they made you, they left the heart out, and put in a cash register instead."

"That's very *chic*," Raoul said, his tanned face expressionless. "You turn a nice phrase, Sue. Now let's go back to Madrid and have a drink."

The Frenchmen were beginning to come in when we got back to Madrid. They were small, hard, middle-aged men, for the greater part veterans of the World War. It gave me a great kick to see them, and I bought them drinks with all the money I had. Then they got onto the trams and into the buses and went out to the University City to die. I mean that: to die.

They went out knowing it. Little barricades were built up there, along the Manzanares River, and along the Caso de Campo. Maybe one of the Frenchmen in five had a rifle. The others waited for that fifth one to be killed. Then his rifle was taken by the fourth one, and so on, until they were all dead.

You know what happened. They held Madrid.

I wrote that story and a lot of other stories, probably the best of my life. Back on the cable desk of my paper in Chicago they cut a number of them, and chose not to print some of the rest. So I began to get hot. I decided to go up to Paris where I could get a clear wire through to the States and find out why.

Raoul went up with me. Sue stayed in Madrid. She was working with the women by then, as a full-time nurse, and she had almost all her friends in the embassies making bandages. When Raoul tried to say goodbye to her, she wouldn't speak to him. Sue, as Raoul had said, was quite a girl.

III

PARIS was practically unbelievable after Spain. It made you kind of dizzy, all the beauty and the peace. I got on the wire to the States and my bosses told me to take it easy, that the country was divided in its sentiments about the Spanish war.

"It won't be for long," I snapped back, for whatever that was worth. Then I went around to Raoul's house in the Faubourg Saint Germain.

I'd got a tip from Raoul that there was a big meeting there. The tip was right.

Raoul sent word for the butler to let me enter. As I stood in the hall waiting a lot of very important people passed by going out. I counted three French generals and two German, and a lot of the biggest landowners in Spain, the manager of the British-owned Rio Tinto mines, then the publishers of most of the Rightest newspapers in Paris.

When I got to see Raoul, his cousin was alone with him. Gregor was in an elated mood. He shook hands with me, ordered me up a *fine à l'eau*. "Things are going fine," he said. "Never have been better."

I measured him as I would something found crawling under a stump. "You must be making a real profit," I said.

"We are," Gregor said flatly. "But more than that, we're getting a real fight. The Fuehrer has decided to equip and send to Spain special flying, technical and artillery corps. We've got all sorts of tanks and planes and cannon with which we wish to experiment. And our pilots badly lack actual combat experience."

"That should mean some business for Raoul's firms," I said. "Your boys can't get their experience without opposition."

"It means plenty," Raoul said. He was walking back and forth by the high-draped window, a glass in his hand. "I'm returning to Madrid tomorrow to place orders with the government for fighting planes."

"You'd better stay out of Madrid," I said. "Sue or somebody like her might shoot you."

"Not me," he said. "Aren't I doing the best I can, under the circumstances, for the Spanish Republic?"

I had a reply for him, but I couldn't say it. The words choked in my throat. Gregor had crossed the room with a swagger. He stood in front of me. "Austria," he said. "Then Czechoslovakia. Those are next. Write them down for future reference."

"I've already got them memorized," I told him. "But, seriously, isn't there a possibility that you might lose in Spain?"

"None," Gregor said. He pitched his empty glass into a corner of the divan. "We're the men who'll soon rule the entire world."

Raoul took a field ambulance to Madrid for Sue. I went with him, because that gesture interested me, and no matter what I thought about him personally, he was without doubt my best source of news.

Madrid was in a state of real siege. The Italian and German planes were over the place each day now, and they gave it hell. I went back to the hotel with the other correspondents and tried to make a habit out of war. I didn't want to see Raoul, and I hadn't the heart to see Sue.

But Sue came and sought me out. She'd organized a full field unit, she told me, and she was taking it to the Jaramá front. Raoul was going with her, and did I want to come?

"I can't understand," I said, "why you allow that guy within your sight. You realize what he and his bunch are doing to Spain."

"But he gave me the ambulance," Sue said. "And I'm working on Raoul. I'm going to make a real man out of him."

"Impossible," I said, "if not ridiculous."

"Come to the Jaramá," she said, "and see."

The International Brigades were up on the Jaramá. They held the Valencia-Madrid road and their job was to keep the Fascists from getting it. Every day, they were bombed by the Italian and German planes, and the artillery fire never stopped.

Raoul was interested by the Internationals. Those men were from all over the world, and each one of them knew why they were fighting. Raoul talked to several of them, some of the Yugoslavs and some of the Jewish boys from Tel-Aviv, the Americans and the Canadians. "Real fighters," he told me in a level, controlled voice. "They surprise me."

"Only," I said, "because your whole damn life is lop-sided. You've had contempt for people because you believe they're stupid in the mass, will fight for any master you give them. But these men know you and hate you, and know exactly why they're fighting. They form a great, new force in the world."

"They'll be killed," he said.

"Sure," I said. "They came here to die. But you can't kill their ideas."

"That's something you read in a book," he said.

"You should read the book," I said. "Sometimes, books make sense."

THERE was a lot of confused fighting along the road that night. Fascist patrols and combat groups were trying to cut through wherever they could, and we just missed a couple of them. We were on our way back to Madrid, and had started early, but we had to run without headlights through the masses of refugees on the road.

It was out on the open *mesa* that we witnessed the incident that had more, I believe, to do in the changing of Raoul Hendel's life than anything else. Along the stretch of road we followed there we found only a few refugees, the older, weaker and more weary folk who just didn't have the strength to move fast. One couple was an old peasant woman of close to eighty, and her grandson, a kid of about fourteen.

The grandmother was nearly out on her feet. She walked swaying, with the kid hanging onto her arm. He was a strong, nice-looking kid, and he kept her going, talking to her all the time in soft, low words.

He was talking to her when he got shot. He let go her arm and staggered around and put a hand to his chest where the bullet had hit. Then he fell, rolled over in the dusty white road. The grandmother stood looking at him, not quite understanding, her fingers caught in the edge of her shawl.

We were perhaps fifty yards away, and Raoul who was driving had stopped the car. There was a little starlight, enough to see the old woman's face. It was a very dark brown from her years in the sun, and the bones pressed hard against the skin made it tight, and hard. But the eyes were liquescent. They shone the way a fire shines on a windy night.

Then she saw the man who'd shot her grandson. He had been hiding in the ditch. He got up out of it and advanced to her. I have a very clear memory of him.

He was a young man, a peasant, who looked very much like the dead boy in the road. But he wore a Fascist uniform and he had the Falangist emblem on his chest. When he got beside the boy, he prodded the body with his rifle barrel. It was the act of a green soldier, one unaccustomed to killing. The contorted position of the body seemed to sicken him, or daze him, because in any event he did nothing to stop the old woman.

She had a big peasant knife somewhere in the folds of her dress and she took it out and started for him. She went slowly, and swaying, for she was very old, and very tired.

I looked from her to Raoul. Here in the road was the essence of all the tragedy that the forces under his control had created. He couldn't evade it, even look away from it. It was too real, too close. He sat trembling. His breath came short. His face was haggard; bones showed under the sudden pallor of his face. Where his hands gripped the steering wheel the knuckles were white.

The old woman was nearer to the soldier. She had the knife raised, poised. The soldier crouched under it, kept from motion by fear. She could strike the knife down-

ward into his back, right through the shoddy material of his khaki tunic. But she waited.

She said, "I know you. You're from my village, from Torre del Castillo. You're Porfirio Munaz."

The Fascist looked at her, and he nodded slightly. "That's right," he said mumbling. "I'm Forfirio Munaz."

She touched the body of the boy with her foot. "You've killed," she said, "and you don't know why."

The knife was loosened in her brown, veined hand. Then she dropped it, and I heard Raoul gasp with a harsh and swift sound.

"You're not to blame," the old woman said. "It's the man who gave you that gun, put the bullets in it for you. Go away. Leave me. Try to save your own life."

He went away, stumbling along the road. We heard him, his slurred footsteps, then the clang as he threw the rifle into the ditch. After that he ran, off into the wastes of the *mesa* and the night.

Sue got from the car and went to the old woman. She talked to her, did her best to comfort her. But it had no effect. The old woman had taken the body of the boy in her arms, held the dusty-haired head against her breast. She was motionless, speechless, didn't seem to hear or see Sue.

The knuckles of Raoul's hands showed sharp where they gripped the steering wheel. "I'm the man," he said, "that she meant. I sold the rifle, put the bullets in it. I caused that boy's death just about as literally as if I'd shot him myself."

"Yes," I whispered. "That's so, Raoul. I'd like to lie to you, but I can't."

"Why do you want to lie to me?" he said. "Don't you think I recognize that you and Sue will call me a murderer for this? You must hate me."

"No more," I said, "than you hate yourself."

Sue was back, climbed in the car. She didn't say anything; she was overcome by grief. All of us kept silent. Raoul drove on, past the old woman, and into Madrid. It was dawn as we came into the city. The Fascist planes were slender gray shadows of death high overhead.

IV

WE WENT to the Jaramá another time, about a week after that. Raoul asked Sue and me to go. We hadn't seen him in the meantime, but I'd heard that he was around army headquarters, talking with the Internationals back from the front.

"Do you think we should go?" Sue asked me when we'd got Raoul's invitation.

"Yes," I said. "I have an idea that there's a great emotional turn-over going on inside Raoul. What he saw out there on the road the other night got him very hard. If, as you told him, he has a cash register for a heart, it isn't working well. After all, a man can become tired of money, and up to now that's all Raoul's been getting out of this."

Raoul had special passes for us from headquarters and we took the Valencia road straight out to the front. Sue sat in front with Raoul and I sat in back. I was nervous, because I wasn't sure yet what Raoul was going to do, and I realized Sue was in love with him, despite all she'd told me to the contrary.

It was dark by the time we reached the front. The flashes of the cannon and the shell explosions were dim crimson. Raoul pulled the car in under a crest right past a little first aid station. The stretcher bearers came by us, patient and slow, the wounded softly moaning. An American doctor was operating behind a blanket across the road, and Sue went to help him, held a flashlight so he could see.

Raoul kept watching that, the flicker of the light past the blanket edge, the deft, half-seen movements of the doctor. "It's not a very good place," Raoul said. "Sue should get out of here."

"Go and tell her so," I said. "But I don't think she'll listen. Sue's here because she's unafraid."

Raoul was starting out of the car when the men ran down from the crest. They

were the Internationals and they were in retreat. "Get out," one of the Canadians told me. "The Fascists have broken through with their tanks and we can't hold the ridge any more. We're reforming on the other side of the road."

Raoul heard the Canadian. He put the car in gear and we went down the hill. But the road at the bottom was all filled with the stretcher cases. "The Moors kill wounded," I told Raoul. "I'm going to load in all of these I can."

He nodded at me and then he called Sue's name. Sue came to the car and gave us a hand. The car was a big Delage, but we could only get seven of the worst wounded into it. The rest still lay there in the road.

"I won't leave them," Sue said. "I'm going to stay here."

"You can't," Raoul said. "You have to go."

Then the tanks came over the crest. They rolled fast, with their machine-guns and one-pounders cracking at everything in sight. We went underneath the car and stayed flat and motionless in the dark.

We heard the tanks pass, cross the road, and the wounded in the road. I haven't got any words to describe that moment, and I never will. Words aren't made to describe such a thing.

But when the tanks were past and I crawled out and pulled out Sue, Raoul was already erect. He had fumbled around and found an automatic rifle on the ground.

"Can you use this?" he asked me.

"Yes, I think I can," I said.

"Then get in the car with Sue. She'll drive. Take her out of here, fast."

"You'd better get in yourself," I said. "Those are Moors up on the crest."

"I know they are," he said. "That's the exact reason I'm not getting in and why I'm staying."

I STOOD looking at him for a moment, not really grasping what his words meant. But now, thinking back on it, what he did and felt and said was all completely logical.

Sue had brought about part of the change in Raoul's character. Just being in Spain, on the Loyalist side and meeting the Internationals had helped, too. I suppose that also my influence might have had some small effect. But the main thing, the deep-reaching cause that really made him reverse every major concept of his life, was that incident of the old woman. That, the stark, outright and frightful tragedy of it, showed Raoul his life had been wrong and that he'd been the creator of mass misery beyond his previous remote imagining.

Then, for the first time, Raoul had experienced real fear. He'd been forced to get down and physically hide under his own automobile. There were witnesses to his fear, Sue, the girl he loved, and I, a man for whom he had at least some respect.

The Fascists were the men who'd frightened him, the Italians and the Germans in the tanks, and now the Moors on the crest. He was going to pay them back. We and the Internationals were his closest, most natural allies. He couldn't tell the Fascists to go away and kill no more. To stop them, he'd have to kill them.

There was a litter of stuff left on the slope by the wounded. He picked up a pistol from it, and a couple of grenades. He laughed as he handled the grenades; they must have been manufactured in one of his own factories. Anyhow, he threw the grenades into the Moors. He stood there and used the pistol.

The Moors ran yelling, with that high, wild, ululating yell they have. Their white turbans and their white canvas sandals marked them for me. I put the bullets of the automatic rifle in between the turbans and the sandals. It was, I imagine, much like shooting tin ducks in a shooting gallery with the lights out.

But the Moors stopped. They didn't come down the slope any farther. And the Internationals came back; they charged the Moors. Raoul went up with them, with the first of them.

I stayed by the car, holding onto Sue.

She was trembling so hard her teeth made a clicking sound. "I love that man," she whispered to me finally. "He shouldn't die."

"He won't," I said. "Shucks, he just got alive."

Raoul returned in an hour or so. There was blood on him and he had a rifle with a bayonet. He halted by the car, looked at Sue.

Sue expressed it for the three of us. "Now," she said, "you know that the finest thing anyone can own is courage."

Raoul took his bloody hand and grasped her hands. "I won't be a lot of good," he said. "I've always sold the stuff and never used it. But you're right, Sue. The rest doesn't count. This does. I'm joining the Internationals. I'm going to pay back what bit I can."

He brought his gaze around to me. He smiled at me. "It's the last story I'll give you, Jack," he said. "But it's a good one, isn't it?"

I matched his smile.

"Let's make it better," I said. "Why join the Internationals? The job for you is to go back to Paris and use your connections to stop the whole war. I admire what you want to do here, but if you went to Paris you could save hundreds of thousands of lives."

"No," he said. "You're wrong. Gregor would never stop it, or any of the rest of them. For what I've done tonight, I'm already a traitor to them. They wouldn't listen to me, and if I tried to talk to other people, they'd have me quietly killed."

He stared off for an instant into the flame-shaken night and his body drew erect and his hand took a tighter grip on the rifle barrel. "The best thing, the one right thing for me to do is to stay here and fight."

I left him and Sue alone for a while. I knew there was nothing more I could say to him or her. When I came back, Sue was alone beside the car. "Where is he?" I asked.

She pointed towards the ridge. "With his comrades," she said.

I TOOK Sue into Madrid that night, and out to Paris the next day. I was nearly as disturbed and shaken as she, I discovered, and what we both needed was a rest. Her mother came from Saint Jean de Luz to stay with her, and I was glad, for I wanted to be alone.

The idea was that I wanted to join the Internationals myself, and I couldn't. The government just wouldn't take me. They said I was doing a good enough job for the Republic as a reporter and to please keep at it. If I tried joining under a false name, I'd be thrown out of Spain for good.

And they meant it.

So I moped around by myself for days. Then I called up Sue's hotel and got her mother on the phone. She told me Sue was going back the next day, this time to a base hospital at Valencia. "Raoul is there," her mother said. "He was wounded at Teruel."

Sue and I had dinner together that night. We went to Foquet's and then to half a dozen other joints around the town. We were in some big, new, chrome-silver place when we met Gregor von Hendel.

He was very brown and fit and about four parts drunk. As soon as he saw us he came over to our table. "This must be the girl," he said, "who converted my foolish cousin."

"I'm the girl," Sue said, "who's going to marry him. But let us be, won't you? There's a graveyard smell about you, despite all that brandy you drink."

Gregor gave her a formal Prussian bow. "I've been in Spain," he said, "trying to find Raoul so I could have the fun of dropping a bomb on him. But I advise you not to marry him. Spain will fall before another week has passed. The Republican Army is in full retreat across the Ebro. I just got word an hour ago."

Sue was drinking wine. She threw the glass and all at Gregor. "You lie," she said.

Gregor bowed again, the wine dripping off his shirt front. "No, I don't," he said. "This is a night of triumph. Ask Kiley."

Sue's glance came very slowly around to me. I didn't have to speak. She knew

already, by Gregor's laughter, that he had told the truth.

"Go on, Gregor," I said. "You're a man who's lived a lot too long."

I WAS in the Spanish retreat from Barcelona and Figueras to the border. They let me stay, the men who made the march, and I saw them fight their way out into France. Go back and read the old books. See what you find there, about the other great retreats. I've read the books, too. But there were women and children along those roads to France, hundreds of thousands of them, and they died in the snow.

Lister's outfit and the Internationals who'd lost their homelands and had no place to go covered the retreat. Figures are supposed to have meaning; after Barcelona fell, Lister's outfit and the Internationals didn't have ten rounds apiece. But they came in closed marching formation over into France. They had their flags, and they had their courage and their pride. Men who stood there and watched them wept. I didn't. I was past weeping. I was thinking of Sue and Raoul, and what Gregor now could do to them.

Sue and Raoul got married in Perpignan as soon as Raoul got over the border. I arranged that, and found them a room in a little back-street hotel. I slept in the hall in front of their room during the night with a pistol in my hand, waiting for Gregor. But the people who took Raoul away were officers of the French *gendarmerie*. They arrived right at dawn and took him to the concentration camp at Gurs.

Life can be so terrible sometimes the mind just doesn't encompass it. What happened in the camp at Gurs was of such quality. The men there had to build their own barbwire around the camp. Most of them were wounded, and for months there was no doctor, and no medicine. An average of three of them a day went insane.

I visited Gurs several times. It was hard to do, because I went to see Raoul, and he was a most decidedly marked man. The last time I went I smuggled him in a letter from Sue. He stood against the wire and read it, standing very still, his face still, too, without any expression at all.

"Tell her I'm fine, Jack," he said. "Tell her I'll be out and in Paris soon."

"But you know you won't," I said. "I saw Gregor in Berlin last week. He says you'll stay here until you rot."

"Gregor's power can keep me here," Raoul said. "But war can't. Big things must have happened in the last week. We're being taken out and sent north, up to the Maginot Line as labor troops. That means war."

I looked deeply into Raoul's eyes. For a time I'd feared for his sanity. But he was sane, and he was right. Those words he whispered to me through the rusty barbwire were the final bit of proof I needed. If the men from the Spanish concentration camps were to be used at the Maginot Line, then there would be general war in Europe. Chamberlain and Daladier had been tricked by the man they had tried to trick; Hitler was about to march.

"Maybe I can do something for you in Paris," I told Raoul. "I can talk to a couple of generals I know and at least get you kept here."

"No," Raoul said. "I'd rather be out, even in front of the Maginot. Because once I'm out I know I can get to Sue."

We touched hands through the wire, then the guard came along and put his bayonet against my back. "On your way," he said, and shoved me with the bayonet.

I was driving back through Orleans that afternoon as the word came over the radio. Hitler had marched into Poland. It was expected momentarily that England and France would declare war. I drove faster and faster, thinking of Sue and what Raoul had said. But then I slowed down. Now I'd have to tell Sue about Raoul's being sent to the Maginot Line. Don't forget that I loved Sue myself, and that made telling her all the harder.

V

I WAS up at the front most of the time, or what we called the front in the first months of the war. I saw Sue every time

I got to Paris, but I had no word for her. If Raoul lived, I didn't know how, or where.

Then the attack broke on the Low Countries, and in five weeks all of Western Europe went to pieces. I can't describe it for you. My emotions are too disturbed, my powers of memory still too shocked by those events to give any sort of coherent picture. All I can do here is put down for you some few details of the great, awful, general chaos that came upon every one of us, and tell you the story of Raoul and Sue. And, yes, the story of Gregor von Hendel, too.

I was in Rotterdam the day the Nazi invaded there. I got out as the oil tanks exploded in roaring purple columns. The roads were bad in Holland, but worse in Belgium.

The Belgian Army was already in retreat. Soldiers under full pack and carrying their arms were in the streets of Antwerp. All the Belgian planes were down, a staff officer told me, and all the airfields bombed and destroyed. Leopold was talking of surrender.

On my way out through Flanders, just trying to find a place now where I could file my copy, I met the British. They were fine and strong lads, and they had fine artillery. They marched singing. But they were going to their deaths, and there was nothing I or any single man could do to save them. Here was murder such as the world had never before seen.

I got over into Rouen, and the Stukas were dive-bombing there. I was wearing my correspondent's uniform, which except for the cap and collar badges is like a British officer's. "Are the English going to save us?" the people asked me. "Will they stop the Boche?"

"Yes," I said, and was aware I was lying. But I had to lie to them, and to myself. What was happening was so terrific I was no longer normal. All I wanted to do was flee.

The civilians, the Belgians, the British and French troops were already doing that. Some troops tried to stay and fight. The Stukas got them, too. The Stukas came down over the roads in whistling, shrieking silver streaks of utter destruction. I wonder if those German pilots really had mothers. If they did, they must have forgotten them.

Every village square was a wreck. At each crossroads was carnage. So walk in the fields. We walked in the fields and the Stukas chased us until we could run no more. I spent a whole day behind a beech tree in a woods outside Chateau Thierry, just jibbering to myself.

After that I was saner. I didn't try to run, or hide. I found a little café on the main road to Paris where there was still some brandy, and I sat there and drank and made notes; waited for the Germans.

The Germans were across the Meuse. They were across the Aisne and the Marne. Troops kept coming into the café and they told me. Those men were from the French Ninth Army Corps. Corap, their general, they said over and over, had betrayed them. So Corap was dead; his men had shot him. A big story, I thought, if I could write it. But what I was going to do was ride into Paris with the Germans.

They came down the road in their big Czech tanks. A battery of French seventy-fives in a field did its best to stop them. One tank got struck square, knocked into the ditch the way you'd tumble a beetle. The others went right into the battery, and the gun crews stood up to be killed.

Some young German officer from a motorcycle detachment found me. I was just sitting there in the café, not trying to see or hear any more of what happened outside. The German talked French, and he was sick of death, too. He held me for his superiors. They came along that night and Gregor von Hendel was with them.

IT WAS the fulfillment of the whole nightmare to meet him. Gregor was in a black Elite Guard uniform and wearing the insignia of a division general.

"Not that I shall make Raoul's mistake and get too close to the actual fighting," he explained to me. "But the Fuehrer

wishes all of us high officials to be in uniform. There's reason for me to believe that I'll be *Gauleiter* of France after Paris falls."

He was looking for a rise from me, of course, when he said that, but there was none I could give him. I was all hollow inside, and just able to talk. Gregor recognized I wasn't fit game for him yet, so he let me be. But he took me along with him to Paris. He gave me excellent French food and wine and he told me about the French treachery.

"A considerable number of their military and political leaders wanted this," he said in his heavy and yet flat voice. "They knew their army wasn't ready, and they had no intention of making it ready."

Tired, numb and stupid as I was, I had sense enough to grasp I was being told tremendous historical fact. "How did you get across the rivers?" I asked him. "Especially the Meuse?"

"They left the bridges for us," he said.

"I hear Corap got shot," I said.

"Corap," Gregor said, "waited too long. He let his men find out too much."

We were on the way to Paris then, in Gregor's big black Mercedes. Other ranking German officers were ahead of us and behind us. All of them were wild to get to Paris. They told their chauffeurs to drive through anything. Women and children refugees, even German wounded, were killed before they could get out of the way of the cars.

It got to the stage with me where I had to confine all my thoughts inward to keep sane. I went back into my past life and my knowledge of Raoul and Gregor. What I tried to do was find out why Gregor was taking me with him to Paris.

Then the realization came to me. I was the link between the cousins, between Raoul and Gregor. This man beside me wished that I witness his triumph. He was a Nazi, sure enough, Gregor was, but also a man with enormous personal pride. The wine that Sue had flung at him was still on his shirt front. That was the image of himself he carried in his brain.

"Raoul," he said to me abruptly, "is still alive. He escaped from his labor battalion. The Gestapo has been able to check that far for me. And this girl—his wife—is with him."

"Where are they?" I said, sweat beads on the palms of my hands.

"Together somewhere around Paris," he said. "When did you last see them?"

"I saw Sue about three weeks ago," I said. "But I haven't seen Raoul since he was sent from Gurs to the Maginot Line."

"Raoul was saved at the Maginot through my orders," he said. "It's my intention to settle with him personally. Our world of the future won't be safe with such men as Raoul still unbroken."

"No, it won't," I said.

He gave me a strange sidewise glance. "Your country," he said, "is next after Britain."

"You'll have a real fight on your hands there," I said. "You won't be able to get a set of traitors to sell out."

He laughed. "Men," he said, "want one of two things, money or power."

"In the States," I said, "we've got kind of an old-fashioned thing called liberty. We don't and won't let anybody take that from us."

"Be still," he said, his mouth lines hard. "You're no longer funny."

WE WERE entering Paris. I sat stiff in the car and shut my teeth. Paris is a place any man should love. When I look at it I think of Benjamin Franklin and Tom Paine and Jefferson, and all the strength, the hope and help our own new, weak, clumsy country got from it. But now I was riding with a Nazi, and Paris had been sold like a beer across a bar.

Do it for yourself. Explore once more the emotions that the fall of Paris brought in your own heart. I just sat there and held myself quiet, and all my weeping was inside.

Gregor von Hendel took me to Raoul's house. German troops were all over Paris. They were on the Grands Boulevards and at the Arc de Triomphe and up in the Eiffel

Tower. A lot of them were taking snapshots like tourists on a weekend trip. That was how fantastic the capture was even to the Nazis. They hadn't been able to comprehend it yet.

But they were singing the Horst Wessel song. I remember seeing Wessel once in Berlin. He was a little rat; he lived off women. Here the Nazi sang the song that bore his name and two of the lines were:

Today Europe is ours.
Tomorrow we shall have the world!

The *concierge* out at Raoul's house was an old guy who'd fought in the last war. He was in his green baize smock, but he was wearing his war ribbons on the breast of it. He nodded to me and didn't say a word to Gregor.

"Let us in," Gregor said.

The *concierge* stood looking at him, didn't move or speak.

Gregor repeated it. Then he called the sergeant of the German patrol stationed in front of the house. "Get the keys from this man," he said. "Make him ready to talk to me."

It was weird, and terrible, to see Gregor go through Raoul's house. He broke vases and smashed pictures, and when he found some tennis rackets in a closet he pulled them out and put his boot heels through the stringing.

I stood shaking with the horrors. That patrol sergeant had a noisy way with prisoners. You could hear the *concierge* as far up as the top floor. That was in part the cause of Gregor's violence, I imagine. Killing an innocent man and breaking things didn't do any good. What alone would satisfy Gregor would be to get his hands on Raoul.

The sergeant came into the room where we were to tell Gregor the *concierge* was dead.

"Didn't he talk?" Gregor said.

"He told us we were the sons of swine," the sergeant said.

Gregor struck the sergeant in the face. Then he whirled on me. "You may know more than I thought," he said. "You've been keeping very quiet. Have you any idea where they are?"

"I've been with the armies for weeks, Gregor," I said. "I was for a day or so where you found me. You were the first to tell me that Raoul was still alive and that he and Sue are together. Put your Gestapo to work. I'm just a war-goofy newspaperman."

"They might be at his place at Courcelles," Gregor said. "That would be characteristic of Raoul. He loved that place more than any other he owned. If he isn't at Courcelles, he's gone to the villa at Cap Ferrat."

"I doubt if he's at either," I said, because I was almost certain then that Raoul was at Courcelles. Raoul was the kind to defend personally what he loved, and he'd always cherished that beautiful old house out there. Life, as I figured it, held little for Raoul now. All he'd be looking for was a crack at Gregor or as many Nazis as possible.

"You don't lie very well," Gregor said hoarsely. "You think he's at Courcelles. We're going there. When I've found and killed him, you can write a piece for your paper. The title of it will be 'Death of a Traitor.' "

"A nice title," I said, "but that would be the wrong piece to go with it."

Gregor stretched his heavy-fingered hands. "You'll write," he said, "what you're told. Understand me?"

"Yes," I said, because I knew there was no sense in having him kill me right there.

VI

WE GOT down through the suburbs of Paris and out past Palaiseau before dark. Gregor took along what amounted to almost half a mechanized brigade. There must be somebody a lot higher than Gregor who wanted Raoul killed, I figured, and maybe that was the Fuehrer himself. But we got stopped outside of the small town of Saint Remy.

A couple of thousand French colonial

troops stopped us. They were Moroccans and Senegalese and they were in retreat from Magny les Hameaux. For them, it was run and die or fight and die. They fought until almost the last of them was killed.

That delay brought on another of Gregor's moods of violent rage. He went out and personally directed the attack. He left me to be guarded by some over-lieutenant who was big but not bright.

I pulled the old shoelace trick on the over-lieutenant. For a couple of seconds, it was like the old football days at Hyde Park High. I bounced the over-lieutenant under the chin with my head as I bent down to fumble at the lace.

His chin put a two-inch cut in my skull, but I knocked him cold. Then I took his pistol and duty belt and ran.

A couple of guys yelled and shot at me. They missed, and it was dark and there was a lot of shooting and yelling up in the village. I kept away from the village, across the fields.

It's a few kilometers from Saint Remy to Courcelles. But I must have been pretty exhausted when I started. When I came down the lane toward Raoul's château and could see the towers over the trees, all I could do was a staggering trot.

That saved my life. The men in the ditches along the lane heard me. They were the Internationals, old, experienced soldiers, trained to be sure of their targets. One of them crept out and flipped me flat on my back. He was a Yugoslav and we talked French.

"Get Raoul Hendel out of that house," I said.

He said, "Come with me."

There were more Internationals around the house, several hundred of them. They dug trenches and machine-gun pits, and Raoul commanded the digging. He came and looked into my face. Then he kissed me. "Sue is in the house," he said.

Sue kissed me, too. "You've picked a bad time to come calling," she said. "But we're certainly glad to see you."

I sat on a chair and watched the room go around like a roulette ball. "Listen, you two," I said. "Gregor is right down the road. Hear the shooting? He's making it. He's trying to take Saint Remy. After he does, it's this place. He's got a big mechanized outfit with him."

Sue and Raoul stood on either side of the chair. They looked past me at each other. Their faces were very calm. "We were sure he'd be here in time," Raoul said. "We're just about ready."

"For what?" I said. "To die?"

"Yes," Sue said. "Why run? There's nowhere we or the men outside can go."

I got up out of the chair and I took them by the shoulders. In maybe what was the best speech of my life I described how Gregor had entered the house in Paris.

"Why do you think he's coming here?" I said. "Why do you think he was given a special mechanized outfit just to find you two? He told me this morning he'll probably have the job of *Gauleiter* and boss of all France under the Nazi regime.

"You've got immense importance in the Nazis' eyes, Raoul. You represent the opposition, the only kind of man and kind of force that can ever beat them. I'm all but positive that orders have come down from Hitler direct for your death. You count for plenty, guy. You have to live—to become the leader on our side."

Raoul shook his head and didn't answer me at once. But he went out the door and talked with the Internationals. Then he came back. "You're right," he said simply. "I'm sorry I was so slow in understanding. Now, I guess, we'll have to start south, try to cross over into Africa."

WE WERE ten days on the way to the Mediterranean. Gregor von Hendel with his tanks and trucks and armored cars followed us all the way. We had what we could find, what had been left in the ditches by the refugee millions who had gone before us. One day, for the more than four hundred of us, we had ten cars that would really run. But three of them broke down, and we were forced to leave them, and the men they carried

Those men covered our retreat. One here, half a dozen there, with the abandoned rifles and automatics they'd found among the junk, they fought what were supposed to be the best troops in the world. Sure, they were killed. And, sure, they killed the Nazis.

When we came down over the Alps Maritimes to the Riviera at Cap Ferrat a hundred and forty of us were left, but Gregor's outfit was at least six hours behind.

Raoul had the idea that we could defend his villa on the Cap. He was wrong. It was impossible, and he recognized it as soon as we'd looked over the place from the military angle.

"Then we'll have to keep going," he said; "over into Africa. But that means we've got to find some sort of vessel, and fast."

Sue was standing by the radio. She turned it on, brought in London. A sugar-toned lad at the B. B. C. station was talking unexcitedly of a sea battle being fought between the British and French fleets off Mers-el-Kebir, on the Algerian coast. Some French units, he said, were in French European ports such as Marseille and Toulon and Villefranche. The sentiments of those crews were not yet known to the British Admiralty.

Raoul got up and turned off the radio. He glanced at me. I knew he wanted to defend this place here just as much as he'd wanted to defend Courcelles. But he couldn't, and he was aware of it. We were going to Villefranche to find some craft that would take us to Africa. We were through in Europe; Africa would be the end of our retreat.

In the old days, I used to go to the beach at Pas Sable, across the harbor from Villefranche, and swim. It's a nice little beach, and one of the most lovely harbors in the world. But coming there that day with Raoul and Sue and what was left of our outfit I wasn't aware of the beauty. My body ached, my brain ached. I had the premonition right then that Raoul would never leave Europe.

A single French destroyer was out in the mouth of the harbor. Raoul swam to her from Pas Sable. We stayed on the beach and waited.

All the small boats were gone, and there was no real place for us to hide. We sat on the sand and rested our legs, took care of our wounded and our guns. One by one, I found the men turning around to watch the road up in back that led from the Route Nationale. That was the way Gregor's outfit would come.

WE BEGAN to hear them, around the upper town in Villefranche, just about the time Raoul got aboard the destroyer. We saw Raoul take the line some sailor tossed him, then scramble up over the rail. It was a long time before the launch was lowered down the destroyer's davits and started inshore. By then, Gregor had his units all through the upper town and down toward the waterfront. He began to shell the destroyer, because the destroyer's big pieces were already working on him.

Those French gunners were good, believe me. They caught the Nazi tanks and armored cars wherever they showed themselves in any open space. They held down the Nazi fire and allowed Raoul to get ashore in the destroyer's launch.

"You're to go out twenty at a time," Raoul told us. "The skipper is a good man. He loves France, and he loves liberty. But he insists that he can't risk more of his men than this one launch crew. He plans to fight later from Africa, or anywhere he can. Start getting into the launch."

Along about the middle of the fourth trip the launch made, Gregor knew from where we were coming. The launch zigzagged, and it was hard to hit, and the destroyer was still putting shell-bursts into the mechanized stuff in the town. But we who waited on the beach were easy for him. He came around the bay through the pine trees to us.

Our lads drew lots, and ten of us went out to meet the Nazis. I lost. That is, I was supposed to make the next trip to the destroyer. But I went out with the ten anyhow, and Raoul didn't say anything

He led the ten. We had our few worn-out automatic rifles and a lot of hand grenades. Back in Spain, those Internationals had learned what a hand-grenade can do to a tank when it's pitched right.

They blasted the first three of Gregor's tanks all across the road. The rest piled up behind, because the road was narrow there and big pine trees grew on each side, too close to let the other tanks past.

Raoul nodded. "Excellent," he said. He made a gesture that indicated all of us. "Go on back now and get out to the destroyer. The commander will take you to Africa. You'll be safe there, up in the high mountains."

I was waiting for that. "You're coming, too," I said. "You're not staying here for any foolish reason."

"It's not foolish," he said. "I'm not going to Africa, Jack. I can't. I'm going to find Gregor here, and then I shall kill him. It's necessary that he's killed. Gregor is a very great influence for evil; he's one of the biggest Nazis alive, and he's one of the Hendel family.

"When you judge me, you think of me since I joined the Internationals. You forget all that went before in my life. But you shouldn't. I'm almost as guilty as Gregor. I'm one of the men who are responsible for the collapse of Spain—and for everything that's happened since. Two years of my life were spent right, surely, but all the rest were wrong. Be a good lad and get along with the outfit."

"No," I said. "Not yet."

There was no time for him to answer me, or for either of us to speak again. Some of the Nazis had got out of their tanks and armored cars and started to come through the trees. We ducked down and grenaded them. Then Raoul slipped away from me, up toward the road. I followed him as fast as I could.

He met Gregor up on the high part of the road, where it runs along the cliff. Gregor was standing upright, staring out at the harbor to mark the Nazi fire on the destroyer. He was alone; his outfit was down below him, all jammed up behind the smashed tanks.

He turned around when he heard Raoul. Raoul had called his name. "We've got a score," Raoul said. "Let's settle it."

Gregor pulled loose his big Luger pistol and shot at him. Several of the shots hit Raoul, for he was up and running. I stayed behind an olive tree, because I knew that if I tried to stop Raoul he'd kill me. This was for Raoul and Gregor, and only for them.

Raoul got to him, crawling and flopping through the trees and rocks. He shot back at Gregor, but his shots missed.

It was finished with their hands.

They slugged each other, knocked each other down. Gregor was the stronger, and unwounded. He nearly killed Raoul with his first blows. But Raoul clung to him. Raoul got him by the tunic collar and struck him in the face with his other hand. He clung on and kept hitting him while Gregor tried to break loose.

Then they fell, went down locked. It was Gregor who got up, wheeled free. He aimed a kick at Raoul's face.

Raoul caught his foot, wouldn't let go. Gregor went backward, still kicking. They dragged to the cliff edge, and over the edge. Raoul got away at the last second, and Gregor fell spinning, arms wide, head jerking, down into the sea.

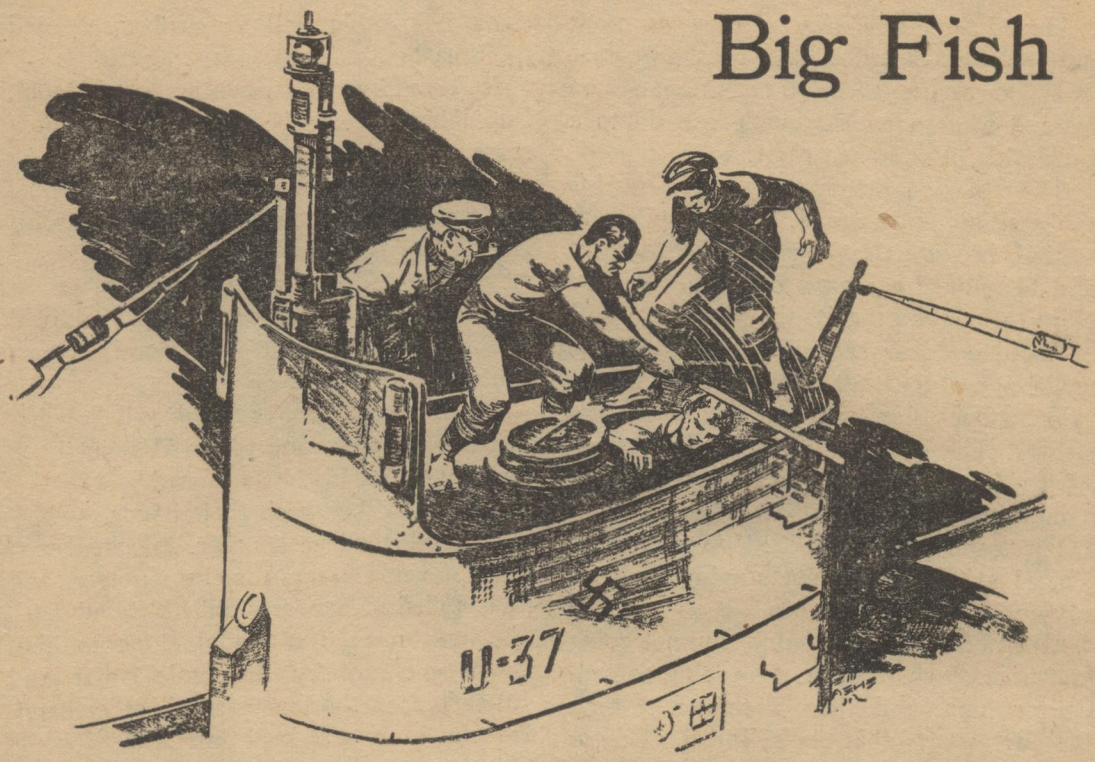
But when I reached Raoul he was dead.

He lay face-down, peering over the cliff, and it's my belief that the last thing he saw was his cousin's body plunging into the sea.

I knew what the Nazis would do if they found Raoul. So I sent his body over the cliff. Then I turned and went back to the beach.

Sue was there, Sue and a couple of French marines guarding the launch from the destroyer. What was in my eyes told Sue what had happened. She took my hand and held it after we were in the launch. We were shelled a lot on the way to the destroyer. But we got out of there, and from Africa, Sue and I came on home.

Big Fish



The conning tower hatch opened slowly, a man stuck his head out—and a whaler thumped it deftly

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "No-Shirt Rules the Waves," "The White Oomailik," etc.

How to be a war hero at seventy-five: remember that that pen is mightier than the sword, and that a little of the technique of honest whaling beats either one

IN A rash moment while filled with indignation and Scotch whisky, Captain Alf Crosby of the killer boat *Susan* criticized his king and country. This so filled him with remorse that he felt called upon to toast the king and then his country, three consecutive times.

Having washed away his sin, the captain relaxed and enjoyed to the full the reaction of the solemn rite of purification.

It is the contention of one school of two-handed drinking men that whisky not only kills germs lurking in the throat but sharpens the wits, rebuilds the courage or disrobes injustice as occasion demands. It wasn't long until injustice in all her ugliness stood naked before Captain Crosby.

And who caused this injustice? The answer, king and country. And when was it caused? In the year 1915 when Captain Alf was fifty years old. "And any king or country that'd strand a sailor in time of war ain't much . . ."

Captain Alf choked back the remainder. And it was well he did, because speaking his mind at a time when England was at war—and expected every man to do his duty—would have caused remorse and another purification rite. And Captain Alf was in no condition to complete another cycle of toasting king and country.

He slipped quietly into the bitterness of

reflection. Twenty-five years ago, this same *Susan,* fresh from the builders' ways, was at sea hunting down whales, killing and towing them to the mother ship. The fleet had been summoned home—a command greeted with rousing British cheers.

"True," Captain Alf had admitted to his first mate, "I'm fifty years old. But a man knows the waters around the British Isles as well as he knows the back of his hand will see active service hunting U-boats. Me and the *Susan* will make a fine combination."

The mate had said, "We're old, Cap'n. War's a young man's business. It's always been that way. Always will be."

"It's my theory the old blighters who've had their day should do the fightin' and give the nippers their chance at life," Captain Alf had argued.

"A crazy theory, sir," the mate had said.

"No crazier'n war itself," Captain Alf had contended.

As the killer boats neared the coast Captain Alf had kept a watchful eye for the enemy, but none was sighted. If he had been permitted to lurk a few days in the mists he was confident—

But he had obeyed orders and steamed into port. "On the whaling grounds," he had said, "I set my iron in two hundred-barrel whales, and hopes were high to bag a *thousand*-barrel whale—a whale with guns—on the way home; but luck was against me."

He had smiled and added, "As soon as I report to the brass hats me and the *Susan* will be off for a thousand-barrel whale and Fritz had jolly well better mind his manners."

The examining doctors had charted his heart as "irregular" and the brass hats had ignored his protests and beached him. A boy with a pink skin and down on his cheeks had been given the *Susan.* Captain Alf had gone to the shipyards to do his bit as rigger.

In a world of uniforms and medals Captain Alf had lived and moved in his soiled shipyard clothing. It had been tough on his school-age daughters whose companions boasted brothers and fathers in blue and gold.

He knew his girls loved him none the less. They had been such good sports about it all. He knew they sensed his own feelings and they overdid themselves to prove their devotion.

That was what had brought a lump to Captain Alf's throat and stirred bitterness. For himself he asked for no medals. He had wanted to do the things that won medals and call such deeds routine.

WELL, history was repeating itself, Captain Alf reflected. His country was at war again. His daughters had children of their own who would want to see him in blue and gold, with perhaps a medal pinned there by the king.

The *Susan* was twenty-five years older, but she had a new and better engine. Captain Alf was twenty-five years older and—he had the same heart. History would repeat itself in that, too, and a pink-skinned boy with down on his cheeks would take over unless . . .

It would require an ignoring, if not downright disobedience to possible orders, but good fortune might smile. "And at that," he mused, "logic might play a bigger part than good fortune. And they couldn't do more than hang me for it. Still . . ."

Discipline and the necessity for it, had been too much a part of his life to be lightly put aside. He groped for something to salve his conscience and found it. History was full of achievements based on quick thinking, initiative and a tongue-in-cheek compliance with the literal meaning of an order.

Captain Alf arrived at a decision, tested his legs, found he could walk, drank another toast to king and country, then stepped onto his bridge.

The quartermaster standing the wheel watch noted the old man was " 'arf seas over," and started to smirk, but a glare from Captain Alf's blue eyes wiped the smirk off in a hurry.

Captain Alf, with his gnarled hands on the bridge rail, his spotless blue uniform, and the fringe of snow-white hair curling

from beneath his gold-braided cap, was a striking figure. He made the quartermaster feel he stood for the best traditions of the British at sea. The quartermaster felt a surge of pride that he was a part of it, even if he merely kept a killer boat on her course.

Captain Alf's eyes roved the blue and enjoyed the picture: The four other killer boats rolling gently, and the mighty mother ship, with her eighty thousand barrels of whale oil smashing through the waves.

A prize, the captain reflected, the enemy wouldn't likely ignore—particularly as she would carry food from America to England for the duration of the war.

THEY were nearing home waters when the radio operator handed Captain Alf a folded sheet of paper. "Orders, sir."

Captain Alf grunted, and when no one was looking allowed the paper to flutter overboard. Some nonsense, of course, directing his movements as he neared the British Isles. He knew that from his experience of twenty-five years ago. That's why experience was important. It guided a man. No sense in beaching experienced sailors because they had irregular heart beats.

Near dusk the killer boats began to scatter. The mother ship changed her course slightly and slackened speed. They were obeying orders. Captain Alf wondered what course he had been instructed to follow.

As soon as it was dark he speeded up, driving the craft all night at forced draft. Two hours before daybreak he astonished his crew by ordering sail set and the engine shut off.

It had been months since they had used the sails, which were intended only to steady the boat in bad weather, or in case of engine failure, to keep the *Susan* moving.

Mr. Kennan, first officer, muttered something about the captain being slightly balmy, and carried out orders. He was a gaunt man with mobile Adam's apple, which registered his state of mind as mercury in a glass tube registers temperature.

"The enemy," Captain Alf explained as Mr. Kennan's Adam's apple hovered above normal, "are listening for the beat of our propellers."

"Right," Mr. Kennan agreed. "And we sail past him. Not bad, not 'arf."

"That's only part of it, mister," Captain Alf said. "He ain't hearin' us, nor knowin' how close we might be."

Mr. Kennan's Adam's apple mounted in a series of jerks. Then it threatened to blow the top off the tube when the master made his way forward, removed the cover from the harpoon gun and personally checked the weapon.

"Surely he ain't thinkin' of that," Mr. Kennan muttered. Almost immediately he banished the thought. On occasion Captain Alf had acted a trifle strange when in his cups, and he had expressed bitterness because brass hats and beached him; but there never had been signs of utter madness.

Mr. Kennan was inclined to credit the master's interest in the harpoon gun to sentiment. In his day he had been one of the greatest gunners, placing his iron with deftness in vital spots. And though he had tried to impart this knowledge to younger men—and with signal success—still no man in the fleet could approach his marksmanship, even today.

THE *Susan* sailed through the twisting mists of early morn at a fair speed, considering the drag of her propeller. All hands were on deck, partly on the chance of sighting a U-boat, but mostly because the prospect of arriving home had awakened them.

Captain Alf changed the course, and the *Susan* began to tack back and forth, as a setter quarters a field when the birds are remaining close to cover.

The man on watch in the crow's nest suddenly bellowed from force of habit, "Thar she blows!"

"I sye," a whaler said, "we go to the ends of the earth to 'unt for whyles, and 'ere one is sighted in our own back yard."

It was that moment, the lookout reversed

himself. "She didn't blow, sir, she—bubbled." His voice took on a high-pitched hysterical note. "Submarine."

"A thousand-barrel whale," Captain Alf exclaimed. He observed the lookout's pointing finger and turned to the quartermaster. "Steady as she goes," he ordered.

"Steady as she goes," the quartermaster repeated.

Captain Alf loaded the whale gun and checked on the warhead—one hundred and eighty grams of powder timed to explode three second after contact.

Mr. Kennan tried to clear his throat without much success. His Adam's apple appeared to have become fouled high up. "You bloomin' fool, you ain't thinkin' of harpoonin' a U-boat?" he managed to ask.

"Mr. Kennan," Captain Alf retorted, "you're speaking to the master of the *Susan*. One more lapse of your manners and I'll order you to arrest yourself for attempted mutiny."

The U-boat's periscope was a half mile dead ahead. It was moving slowly through the water, the crew no doubt at their stations, with at least one man listening to the beat of propellers in the immediate vicinity and classifying them.

"Unless he rams her," one of the men said uneasily, "we're liable to come out second best, which won't be comin' out at all."

"Hit's the only chance us old duffers'll have to get in this war," the old whaler said, "and the old man knows it, 'e does."

"But what can he do with a harpoon gun?" a younger man argued.

The old whaler shrugged his shoulders. "'E's got it figgered out. 'E always was one to figger things." His calmness almost quieted Mr. Kennan who was not only perspiring freely, but wondering what Captain Alf would do if the harpoon hit.

He had once been impressed by a story of a man who grabbed a tiger by the tail. As he recalled, he had never heard the ending of the story. The man was still hanging on when it was time for Mr. Kennan to take the bridge.

It was proving frightfully straining on the nerves, in Mr. Kennan's opinion, to drag all this out. The mists closed in, then lifted again. There were minutes when the *Susan* appeared to be gaining, other minutes when she seemed to lose ground.

The sub changed her course slightly, and Captain Alf ordered the quartermaster to follow the tiny wake left by the periscope, and close in.

Suddenly the U-boat's conning tower partially cleared. Captain Alf sighted the harpoon gun and fired. The harpoon, as high as a man's shoulder and weighing around a hundred pounds, was no mean weapon in itself. It arched slightly as it hurtled through the mists, dragging the line behind it. The head struck in the smother of water eddying around the conning tower.

Mr. Kennan counted three, then water heaved upward and settled back. Every

man aboard watched the line, wondering if one of the four barbs had fouled the conning tower, or something astern. The U-boat slid hastily from sight and the line fairly sizzled as fathom after fathom left the coil.

CAPTAIN ALF chuckled. "Got my iron into him," he said. "He's down on the bottom sulkin' like any whale."

"Do you suppose the bomb started his seams?" Mr. Kennan hopefully inquired.

"That's what I had in mind," Captain Alf answered.

"What do we do next?" Mr. Kennan inquired.

"We don't," the old whaler said. "Hit's 'im that does."

Captain Alf nodded.

Waves made by a passing vessel of considerable tonnage, moving at top speed, rocked them violently. They exchanged knowing glances. Their mother ship or even a cruiser had missed death by a narrow margin.

"Hadn't we better send for a destroyer?" Mr. Kennan doubtfully suggested.

"We 'andles our own whyles, we does," the old whaler said.

"We don't want gold-braided destroyer men getting credit for this," a younger man said.

Captain Alf's mind dwelt on the possibilities of the situation—a killer boat bringing a captured submarine into port. The brass hats would like that. They might learn the latest secrets of enemy U-boat construction. Gratitude might take the form of allowing the *Susan* and her crew to go on patrol duty without some snoopy doctor listening for irregular heart beats. Red tape can be cut if the desire is strong enough.

Captain Alf's three daughters would like it, too. And his grandchildren would be dizzy with pride. There might be a medal to pin to his coat for them to play with when he held them on his lap and related the incident of the thousand-barrel whale.

"I think he has a tiger by the tail," Mr. Kennan's voice broke in on his reflections. It was depressing. He would get rid of Mr. Kennan if this venture proved successful. Let him rig ships for the duration.

The hours passed. The *Susan,* sails down, engine silent, but steam up tugged lightly at her quarry. The cook prepared a meal, but they ate it on deck, watching the line. "A whale has to *sound,*" Mr. Kennan said. "Come up for air."

"A U-boat has to sound," Captain Alf reminded him. He looked thoughtfully at the line. It could handle a hundred-barrel whale. But a thousand-barrel might prove a different story.

He bent another line to a grapple and put a boat over the side. The men hauled gently on the harpoon line and were presently drawn over the U-boat. They lowered the grapple, then rowed slowly until it fouled. They carried the second line back to the *Susan.* The captain ordered a series of tests made. It held fast.

LATE that afternoon the U-boat began to move. Her motors turned over so slowly that slack in the lines was taken up with no jerk. The strain increased and slowly the *Susan's* bow responded, turning. Presently water began rippling along her hull.

"I'd hoped one of the lines might have fouled a propeller," Captain Alf said.

The lines began cutting water sharply to starboard. Then to port. This continued several minutes. The U-boat crew, aware that something had fouled their craft, was trying to shake it off.

"I can't understand how you expect to handle this sorry mess," Mr. Kennan said. "This suspense is enough to drive a man daft. I'm a man of action, myself."

"I ain't seen much sign of your being a man of action," Captain Alf snapped. "Answering your question about handling this particular whale, I'd say that all we have to do is to figure out what we'd do if we was a U-boat captain in his fix. Then when he starts doing it, we're prepared."

"But you said you hoped a line would foul his propeller," Mr. Kennan argued. "And it didn't."

"Aye," Captain Alf agreed. "He knows,

too, he's dragging something around with him. He don't know what."

"And you know what he will do next?"

"Yes, mister," Captain Alf replied, "I know what he's *got* to do next."

The U-boat executed another series of turnings and zig-zagging in an effort to extricate itself from the drag, then gave up. Wisely she didn't reverse her motors. The commander wasn't risking fouled propellers. Everything was working out as Captain Alf had expected. The U-boat settled to the bottom again.

"It's getting dark," Mr. Kennan complained.

"Good," Captain Alf answered, filling his pipe. "Darkness is the time for the dirty work. We won't turn on our riding or our running lights."

His thoughts turned to the mother ship and killer boats. They were safely in port by now. He would be reported missing—which would cause concern—but it couldn't be helped. Perhaps he *should* send for a destroyer.

He wrestled a moment with conscience again, and won. Captain Alf's idea was to capture the U-boat undamaged. The beat of a destroyer's propellers would put them on guard.

AS DARKNESS settled, Captain Alf lined up his crew and called for volunteers. Every man responded. He selected his biggest, toughest men, armed them with iron bars, ordered them to take off boots and shoes and follow him. The group filled a small boat nicely.

They picked up the harpoon line, hauled up to a point above the U-boat and bent a painter to the line. When the U-boat moved ahead very slowly, they moved with it. Being brawny lads, they hauled away on the harpoon line from time to time, gradually nearing the U-boat. One man stood by, ready to cut the painter should their quarry make a sudden dive.

When the periscope finally broke water they were riding almost over the U-boat's stern. The *Susan* was hardly visible against a night as black as the interior of a coal mine. Captain Alf clutched a megaphone, ready to bellow orders.

As the U-boat neared the surface, the harpoon line broke water. It had fouled the conning tower rigging. The grapple was caught in the cutting cable running from the conning tower to the stern.

The men heaved away again and when the U-boat cleared, their small boat was on deck, wallowing crazily in the water cascading over the deck. Captain Alf and his bare-footed sailors landed on deck, clutching any object that would support them.

The captain looked back, trusting that Mr. Kennan had dropped a stern anchor to prevent the *Susan* from running down the U-boat. Apparently he had.

Captain Alf, to be on the safe side, bent a lead line to a coil of rope and tossed the lead into the churning waters astern. Almost immediately the lead line fouled a propeller and drew in the heavier line. The motors stopped abruptly.

Captain Alf led the way to the conning tower and two of his strongest men climbed to positions near the hatch. It slowly lifted and a man's head and shoulders appeared. A whaler thumped the head deftly with an iron bar. His companion prevented the man from dropping back. They slowly lifted him clear and lowered him to the deck.

The next thing to come through the faint glow of light was a machine gun. The whaler accepted it, handing it down to a man who understood such things. The machine gun was followed by a second man, who was given the iron bar treatment. An officer followed. He was bopped lustily.

"I treats 'em all alike," the whaler whispered as he handed the officer to the waiting hands below.

Three men followed, then came tools for cutting away wreckage. Captain Alf's opinion the U-boat commander believed he had fouled wreckage was confirmed. The man had picked an ideal place to remedy matters—a sheltered cove—and a sand-bar dead ahead on which he could strand his craft and repair any damage.

When two officers and seven men were

on deck, there came a lull. Captain Alf detailed a man to rap skulls as the prisoners gave signs of regaining consciousness, then he called a whaler who had spent four years as a prisoner of war in Germany.

"Tell them, Bertie," he said, "we need more men on deck."

Bertie was no Prussian, but he had a flair for imitation, and he grunted phrases down the hatch so convincingly the whaler almost bopped him with the bar.

An officer was the first man to appear, followed by several others. The whaler's craftmanship was faulty, or perhaps repetition made him careless. He struck the last man a glancing blow and the fellow tumbled below. A cry of alarm rang through the submarine.

"BERTIE!" Captain Alf snapped. "Tell 'em to come on deck in a hurry. We're going to drop bombs inside if they try any funny business."

Bertie bellowed the command while Captain Alf turned his megaphone on the *Susan*. "Mr. Kennan!" he shouted. "Turn the searchlights on us!"

Twin fingers of light stabbed the darkness and flooded the U-boat deck. As the remaining members of the crew came from below, Bertie ordered them forward. Two whalers searched each man for weapons as he appeared.

When the entire crew was grouped forward Captain Alf sent his machine gunner to the conning tower. "Bertie," he said, "tell the gentlemen the machine gunner has orders to spray 'em at the first sign of nonsense. Also tell 'em they're going to ride on deck to port. If they done anything to make this U-boat sink or blow up to cheat us out of our prize they've also tumbled their temple on their own heads."

When Bertie had transmitted this information Captain Alf bellowed at the *Susan*. "Mr. Kennan, bring the boat alongside, please."

Mr. Kennan brought the *Susan* alongside so gently he wouldn't have crushed an egg. He sent a towline aboard; and as soon as it was made fast, Captain Alf sent his men back to their ship, with the exception of three tough lads to keep the machine gunner company and to steer the U-boat.

He followed and took over his bridge again. Slowly the *Susan* headed for port, towing the U-boat astern. Her searchlights, turned aft, flooded the enemy, effectively checking any ambitions he might develop.

Then, and only then, Captain Alf considered the final hurdle—the brass hats who could order him off his bridge and send a pink-cheeked youngster in his place. And this, to his way of viewing it, was the greatest hurdle of all.

It would take pressure to force the brass hats to leave the *Susan's* crew—yes, even including Mr. Kennan—aboard as a patrol unit. "The brass hats won't give way," he muttered, "unless it's authority that'll flatten 'em out. In time of war the sword is the most powerful . . .

"Wait! I've got the answer. I'd forgotten the pen is mightier."

He wrote a report. Not to the first lord of the Admiralty, nor to the second. Nor the hundredth if there be one. He addressed it to the press and filed it with the radio operator. It read:

> *Respectfully report whale-killing boat* Susan *harpooned and captured enemy U-boat and crew intact. The* Susan, *with prize in tow, will arrive in port late tomorrow afternoon.* *Alfred Crosby, Master.*

When the message had been transmitted Captain Alf read it to Mr. Kennan. "You should have been a journalist, sir," the first officer declared. "This is the sort of thing that catches the public eye, you know. Why it's in keeping with the best traditions . . ."

"My point exactly. Keep the experienced men at sea, and damn the doctors," Captain Alf said. "If an admiral can command a battle fleet, why can't another old man command a patrol boat? Am I right? You're damned right I'm right."

A DESTROYER came out of the mists, did a little plain and fancy waterknifing, and came alongside. "We'll take over, Captain," the commander offered.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Captain Alf answered defiantly. "And if you want trouble, just try it. I'll fight you with harpoons if I have to."

The destroyer slipped astern to keep a watchful eye on affairs. The brass hats, hoping to avoid drama that would catch the public eye, had ordered the destroyer to relieve the captain.

The destroyer commander was now informing his superiors that the *Susan* was commanded by a British Tartar who offered battle and meant it.

Captain Alf and Mr. Kennan each prepared for trouble, but the destroyer maintained a discreet convoy duty.

Captain Alf noticed the waterfront was black with people as he steamed into the harbor. Cheers rolled over the water again and again. He noticed, too, the mother ship and four killer boats were safely berthed.

As the *Susan* slipped smoothly—and with becoming modesty—into her dock, Captain Alf observed an area had been roped off. He leveled his glasses on the spot and chuckled. The area contained the families of his crew, a delegation of whacking big brass hats and—the gentlemen of the press.

He watched the U-boat make fast and a squad of marines take over the prisoners. Then a gangplank dropped aboard the *Susan* and Captain Alf was one of the last men down. He opened his arms and tried to hug his three daughters at once. "It was twenty-five years in coming," he sai and they understood.

"But it came, as we knew it would," one of them said. He waded into his grandchildren, lifting them and kissing them one by one. He saluted the brass hats and shook hands with the gentlemen of the press.

Someone brought up a microphone and said, "An interview on the air, Captain Crosby, with most of the empire listening in. Will you please tell us what happened, in your own words."

The captain hadn't thought about broadcasts. It beat the pen, which was already mightier than the sword. He stuttered a bit at first—talking to metal is confusing—but he got into his story and made it sound like a routine matter.

The interviewer said as much. "Why shouldn't a killer boat and her crew take over a patrol?" Captain Alf asked. "We're trained and ready."

"No reason at all, except perhaps red tape," the interviewer suggested.

"Which can be cut," Captain Alf said to millions of people.

"Your performance, Captain," the interviewer said, "is in keeping with our greatest traditions of the sea. Anything within the gift of the nation is yours for the asking, sir."

"Thank you sir," Captain Alf replied. "If the nation wishes to do something for my boys and me, it'll put us into uniform without fuss, feathers or doctors, and order the *Susan* on patrol."

And he looked at the brass hats when he said it.

My flying tackle knocked him crashing against the rocky wall of the quarry

Satans on Saturn

By OTIS A. KLINE and E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Start here this amazing story of high adventure among the distant planets—with the safety of our Earth at stake!

A FISH that breathes fire swooped down from the skies and gathered them up, whisked them through eons of light years to that amazing land beyond the rings of Saturn:

JOHN PARKER, professor of mathematics at an Eastern university—who, though warm-hearted and kindly, solves all of life's problems by application of a slide rule—and

KENT BRADLEY, frivolous rewrite man on a New York newspaper, who got through college on the basis of football and Parker's constant help.

It happens while they are on an expedition in Venezuela. A huge and fearful space ship, which they at first mistake for a zeppelin, drops a metal net which picks up Parker and Bradley, along with their servants and the natives of a nearby Maku village.

This story began in last week's Argosy

The interior of the space ship is terribly hot; for the Saturnian navigators—strange Satan-like creatures—cannot live except in extreme heat. THORGULU, Arch-Mogôk of the Saturnians and commander of the ship, converses pleasantly about their prospects, his language being translated automatically through a visi-screen with which the ship is equipped.

The Saturnians, he informs them, are now making regular raids on the Earth to replenish their food supply; for there is a shortage of meat on their cold planet. True, they have been eating the inhabitants of Titan; but inbreeding is gradually deteriorating the stock. And Saturnians do not enjoy a vegetarian diet.

The horror of this is a little softened for Bradley and Parker, by Thorgulu's announcement that they may be kept for breeding purposes rather than roasting. In addition, the scientists may be anxious to talk with Parker about technical developments on Earth.

SCARCELY have they landed on Titan when Bradley is upset by an exciting encounter. A lovely, copper-haired woman in a blue smock, being led away with her fellow-Titanians for grilling, stops and whispers in Bradley's ear, *"Find Valene—Valene—"*

Then, as she is pulled away, the two Terrestrians are taken before an official who orders that they divide their time between labor and the breeding pens. Parker will serve in the engine room of the *Karamânu,* one of the Saturnian space ships. Bradley is assigned to agricultural work, and told to pick out one of the Titanian women for himself.

And then it happens.

Bradley demands the red-haired one who had whispered in his ear; and when this is scornfully refused he goes berserk; grabs a frost-gun from the official and makes his escape.

Parker, more philosophical about the situation, remains with his captors. Assigned to QUMAN, commander of the space ship *Karamânu,* he makes a sensation by pretending that his spectacles give him particularly acute sight.

But the next sensation is for Parker. He meets SHADRA, a tall, capable Titanian maiden who is entrusted with navigation of the ship. From her he learn that the Saturnians would be vulnerable *if* they fell into a heap of something that robbed them of their oxygen-absorbing power, caused their temperature to drop.

There is food for speculation in this, coupled with his discovery of a greenish welding powder used on the ship—something like thermite. The stuff functions only because of its greediness for oxygen; if a load of it were dumped on a Saturnian, it might soak up every atom of oxygen in his organism, suffocate him.

If only Bradley had stayed around. . . .

CHAPTER VI

RUNAWAY SHIP

AFTER six hours of cruising, the *Karamânu* began decelerating. "We're approaching the crippled transport," said Shadra. "It'll be pitching from either drift. Their stabilizers can't keep it under control, now that the impulsion engines are out of action. Watch for sharp turns, or you'll be piled up against a bulkhead."

"What will they do?" asked Parker. "Repair the engines, or tow the ship back to Titan?"

But before Shadra could suggest the skipper's probable decision, the radio-visiphone interrupted: *"Karamânu,* ahoy! Prepare to trans-ship our crew. Starboard bulkheads disintegrating. Oxidation rapidly getting out of control. Skipper disabled. Nugarat, second in command, taking charge."

"Some of the radioactive fuel must have leaked out of the disintegrators," Shadra explained, "and the bulkheads are crumbling. And that means finish for the crew if a hull plate gives way under the pressure."

"How do they trans-ship?" said Parker.

Shadra wondered at the tensity of his voice. She had never heard the like among the Titanians. They had for unaccounted generations been resigned to slavery and the ovens.

"Maneuver the *Karamânu* alongside, put a gasket between their loading ports, then lash the two ships together and open the hatches. If the transport is in bad shape, they'll probably cut the cables and abandon it in space. It'll disintegrate."

Parker pressed a signal button of the visiphone that interconnected the compartments of the *Karamânu.* He saw Saturnians donning space suits, and heard the second in command rasping orders. He broke con-

nection and cut in on the artificer's compartment. Titanian slaves were breaking out space suits.

Parker's face hardened.

"I'm going to try it!" he muttered in English. Shadra did not understand, but she sensed his sudden resolve, and regarded him with narrowed eyes. They were now close to the disabled transport. The skipper was maneuvering the *Karamânu* by direct observation.

"What's eating you?" Shadra demanded. At this moment the ship, sharply responding to the helm, flung her against Parker; she straightened at once. "Well, what?"

"Capture this boat!" he whispered. "With all the crew diving for space suits, they're going to be busy outside. Can you drive it from this compartment?"

"No. Not as long as the skipper is at the bridge," replied Shadra. "And don't be an idiot."

"Stand by!" said Parker. "I'm starting a circus."

HE DASHED down the passageway toward the artificer's compartment, struggled into a space suit, and joined the squad of Titanians as they stood by to swarm through the hatch to lash the ships together.

They were sturdy, intelligent looking fellows; but Parker feared that too many generations of slavery had robbed them of the nerve to venture all on a single throw. He kept his counsel.

The space suits were something like a Terrestrial diver's outfit, except that there was a self-contained air supply, there were magnetic anchors to keep the wearer from slipping off the outside of the hull.

Once Parker donned the suit, he was not to be distinguished from his fellow slaves. The Saturnian second mate did not even count that section of the crew. The transport was slowly being gutted by the disintegration of the leaking radioactive compounds. Both crew and slaves were in peril.

Parker followed his fellows out the hatchway and into the absolute zero of space. Hanging by his magnetic anchors, he helped pay out the cables from the lockers, and stood by to leap to the deck of the transport when the *Karamânu* was maneuvered into position.

A Titanian stood by with a broad-bladed ax, ready to cut the cables when the crew and as much as possible of the cargo had been trans-shipped. Some of the plates of the transport glowed dull red, and from many of its portholes came the greenish glow that was spreading from one compartment to the next. Luminous fumes were leaking from seams sprung by the expansion of the plates.

Saturnian officers and men made gestured signals as they supervised the lashing. Elastic gaskets were dropped into position. A windlass took up the cables. And a cold sweat cropped from every pore of Parker's body. The odds were insane; but a surprise move might give him enough of a start.

Directly below him was the bridge. Through the portholes of the housing he saw Quman, the skipper, manipulate the controls as the winches took up the cable slack. A Saturnian armed with a flue cleaner was jamming the gasket into place about the hatchway flange.

Once the hatches were butted together and sealed against the vacuum and cold of outer space, Parker's chance would vanish.

Shadra was expecting something—but whatever Parker did would catch her off guard. For an instant longer he watched Quman. Direct navigation seemed simple as operating the throttle of a locomotive or the joystick of those archaic airplanes on earth.

Parker edged over to the Titanian who had the broad-bladed ax. The *Karamânu's* tail swung a foot closer.

Parker snatched the ax. Swinging it with both hands, he cut half through the flexible metallic cable. The Saturnian mate startled by the sharp impact, whirled from the crew that manned the cables. For an instant he stared, perplexed by the variation from the often-rehearsed drill.

Then he saw Parker's ax rise and drive home. Sparks showered as it sheared the cable and bounded back from the tempered

plates of the deck. He leaped forward, lashing out with the twelve-foot flue cleaner.

Parker ducked the blow, saw the sudden spurt of flame from the exhaust port of the Saturnian's space suit, and sank to one knee. The Saturnian mate, cursing a jet of fire, flashed past. Parker's ax licked out.

THE sharp blade sheared a long slash in the Saturnian's armor. Parker was enveloped in the backlash of white-hot gas expanding into the frosty vacuum. A blinding haze of flame enveloped him. He felt the contraction of his suit as it crinkled in the fiery blast.

Through the hell-mist he saw figures leaping about the deck. A pair of Saturnians, armed with grappling hooks, bounded toward him.

Others, panic-stricken at the unexpected surge of flame from the punctured space suit, were diving for the after hatch. They thought that the transport would at any instant explode.

Parker parried the grappling hook of the foremost Saturnian, swung with his ax, and dropped the second stumbling across the deck. Then, energizing his magnetic anchors, he leaned back as if from a trapeze and drove his ax against a porthole glass of the bridge housing.

The heavy plate spattered to shards. Another blow. The inner plate was knocked in fragments as the skipper, hearing the first impact, left his controls to leap to the port.

A jet of flame roared from his mouth and ears and nostrils as the air of the bridge house was sucked into the vacuum of space. For an age-long instant Parker clung to the plates of the bridge housing, wondering whether the rush of gas would drag him into the void or burn his insulated suit.

A grappling hook clutched his arm. He lashed out with his ax, sheared the rod, and plunged headlong into the bridge house. The commander, first distended by the sudden expansion of gas, had flattened into a fuming heap.

Parker snatched the throttle lever and jammed it to down. The *Karamânu* lurched from the blast of power, jerked clear of the severed cable, and plunged into space.

As he bore down on the helm, Parker glanced at the visiphone. He saw Shadra at her instrument panels, saw her lips move, but could not hear a word she said. Then he understood her gesture, and leaned down until his head touched the transmitter.

"Swing to the starboard, idiot," she screamed. "Full speed ahead, before the transport explodes! I've locked the after bulkhead; the whole crew is caged there—those that weren't jerked from the deck when you jammed home the throttle!"

SHE faded from the visiphone. Parker, tense and trembling, held his course. He cut in station after station of the visiphone, viewing the compartments of his stolen craft. In one, a handful of Saturnians dashed down a passageway toward the engineroom. A chill shot down his spine.

Then he saw the compartment door slide into place, blocking the rush to disable the power plant. Shadra had given him another moment of respite.

Presently she returned to the navigation compartment. She wore a space suit, and was dragging after her an insulated cable to which was attached a welding device. She flung open the door that separated the navigating compartment from the bridge, and handed Parker the electrode and a plate of metal.

He understood her gesture. As she held the controls, he sealed the porthole.

That task completed, Shadra opened the air valve. When full pressure was built up in both compartments, she stripped off her space suit and took the wheel. Then—and only then—she drew a long breath, let it out slowly, and turned on Parker with a tight little grin:

"Impulsive fellows, you Terrestrians. Want to get us blown out of the Cosmos?" She shrugged and went on before he had a chance to answer. "Well, it's ours—until they get organized and drill through the compartment locks."

"Think nothing of it," was Parker's grim retort as he slid aside the badly pitted port

of his helmet. "You hold the course while I give our Saturnian friends their chance to surrender."

Shadra, giving close attention to the wheel, favored him with a polite snicker. "My, but you make things simple! What if they don't *want* to surrender?"

"An experiment," Parker said imperturbably. "You wouldn't understand."

He made his voice sound bored, but patient: "I take a pocketful of this thermite powder, burn a hole through the hatchway of their compartment, and let them see whether they can break out of their prison before the air supply of their space suits gives out."

"Hmmm. Interesting, I'm sure. So then what?"

"Back to Terra," said Parker, "to warn the governments of the proposed Saturnian raids. To equip a counter-attack that will clear every Saturnian from the face of Titan. I wish to Heaven Bradley hadn't dashed off like a madman—"

"Listen, idiot!" Shadra's cry cut piercingly through Parker's remark.

And then he heard the broadcast from the radio-visiphone. The commander of the doomed transport, still at the bridge, was reporting the plight of the *Karamânu!* Space cruisers, patroling the satellite belt, were answering his frantic calls for help.

CHAPTER VII

BRADLEY RESUMES HIS STORY

AS I cleared the back door of the administration building and plunged into shadows which were broken only by the phosphorescent dome lights of the hothouse, I realized that there was no pursuit. This, however, convinced me that the Saturnians were so certain of my ultimate capture that they had not bothered to turn out the guard.

Parker was right in preferring strategy to crack-brained moves. Here I was an outlaw, without any chance of co-operating with Parker in a well organized escape. Not so good; but it was too late to go back and apologize

That eerie alternation of black shadows and wavering, greenish glow was oppressive. Tall fungoid growths lined the broad avenue that wound endlessly into the Titanian night. Being conspicuous in the roadway was preferable to plunging into that close-packed vegetation.

It reminded me of an insane cross between a tropical jungle and the Arizona deserts: the shapes were like monstrous *sahuraos,* lifting menacing arms not from clean sand, but out of spongy humus that exhaled pungent vapors. Among the taller fungi was a tangle of vines which bore gourd-like fruit. Some were shaped like serpents, others oddly resembled crustaceans; and all were of repulsively reptilian hues.

And then the avenue forked, each branch losing itself in darkness. For a moment there seemed no choice, until—just off the paving of the left fork—I saw the imprint of a human foot. Some Titanian had walked in the direction of headquarters.

Half a dozen yards further I noted another print, and on the paving were bits of fresh mud. Directly beneath the circle of illumination cast by a dome light I distinguished the trace of a Saturnian webbed foot. The convoy of slaves bound for the ovens had marched up this road.

That made my choice. The red-haired girl who had inspired my futile break had spoken of *Valene.* My best chance of finding this *Valene*—whether person, place, or substance—would be to backtrack on the trail of the Titanian slaves.

So I proceeded to do that, as rapidly as possible.

Far ahead, the phosphorescence became more intense. The fungoid growths no longer lined the path. After an hour's march, I saw signs of cultivated soil, neatly checked off by dikes, and partially submerged in water. Narrow dirt roads branched from the paved avenue.

In the quivering haze of light I saw clusters of low, dome-like objects that resembled overgrown beehives. Then came the smell of smoke from a wood fire, and the faint murmur of voices.

TO THE right was a towering hexagonal structure of bluish white metal. I ducked into the first dirt road in the opposite direction. That metallic bulk reminded me entirely too much of the headquarters building.

As I approached the nearest group of what resembled haycocks, I saw that they were surrounded by a palisade of dried fungus stalks lashed together with lianas, both of which probably came from the jungle that I had passed early in my flight.

I crept up to the stockade and peeped between the stakes. A group of Titanians were clustered about a fire in the center of the enclosure. Two of the group were men about my own age; the others were women and children.

Two kettles hung over a smouldering fire. The fumes were savory; and after that interminable diet of luke-warm water and bullet-hard spheres of bread, I realized that a square meal would be worth any risk.

"We'll be next," someone said.

"They took forty from *Annîlu*," another answered. "Don't be so gloomy about it, Hetro; we may not be next, after all . . . "

The kettles were removed from the crude wooden cranes. A man and six women gathered about each of the messes of stew. They were plump, well fed, and in a sombre way contented enough. They spoke of the fields they were tilling; they gossiped about the inhabitants of the neighboring compounds, complained about the overseers—arrogant fellows exempt from the ovens.

These were the noncommissioned officers of the Saturnian lords. Trusties, you might say, or straw bosses, who for personal exemption had become more severe than the man-eating Saturnians. Not much different, after all, from the setup that existed on Terra, some eight hundred million miles away.

And that was a warning hint; running into an overseer would be the height of bad luck. Those zealous fellows would turn me in in an instant.

This pause for stew, I gathered, was to break the day's work in the fields. Day, however, was on this gloomy satellite no more than an arbitrary time division: for the astronomical day of Titan was the equal of a terrestrial week.

The fungoid growths were stimulated by the dome lights. Shifts of Titanians were constantly at work, tilling the fields and working the factories which I inferred must lie further to the left. Day and night, moreover, would show little difference in temperature, since the radiation from the distant sun was trifling. The gigantic disc of Saturn was spectacular in its march across the sky, but it would have little effect on vegetable or animal life as we know them on earth.

This was no place to ask for food. These Titanians, debating as to the next draft for the Saturnian ovens, might not be such reliable hosts. Betraying me could gain them days of grace.

I marched on, skirting other compounds, hearing the "noonday" chatter of other two-family stockades. Men, it seemed, were in the minority—in the ratio of one to five or six women. That to a degree accounted for the marked similarity in physique and expression of the Titanians. Too late, the Saturnians saw the need of new blood. Saturnian efficiency in sending surplus males to the ovens was kicking back.

Monorail systems and overhead cable conveyors crisscrossed the hothouse. At times I had to duck to the shelter of dense vegetation to escape observation from the cars that shuttled back and forth in phorporescent twilight.

Saturnian guards were in charge of some of the intramural transport units, and Titanians in crimson smocks rode others. Crimson, I judged, marked the human overseers.

As I passed a quarry, I again caught the odor of food and fire. The pit, approached by a steeply inclined ramp, seemed deserted. A hundred yards beyond I heard the voices of laborers. A raid on the abandoned quarry might net me food.

I DUCKED among the partly squared blocks that littered the ramp, and worked my way into the pit. It was honey-

combed with drifts, and from the floor yawned a winze that led into the black depths of Titan.

As I approached, I failed to see signs of the fire I had smelled; nor was there any smoke to guide me. The Titanian cooking fires burned with a quiet, smouldering glow, emitting no visible fumes.

It was odd, that distinct trace of hidden cookery. The Titanians ate in family groups, as far as I had been able to observe. . . . Suddenly my observations were cut short. I flattened to the ramp, taking cover behind a block of the greenish mineral that had been cut from the pit.

A broad-shouldered Titanian overseer was prowling among the abandoned machinery at the bottom of the pit. He walked with the arrogance of authority. His features were grim and purposeful. While I liked his face less the more I saw of it, there was no denying that he was the manliest-seeming Titanian I had yet seen.

He was looking for something, peering here and there into drifts, pausing to sniff the humid air. He was armed with a copper mace which hung from a broad girdle. He wore a knee-length tunic, and his gloved hand gripped a scourge with many lashes. Altogether, this was a person of consequence.

He halted, chin thrust forward, eyes narrowing; then he bounded forward with a triumphant snort. There was a cry from the drift into which he plunged. He had discovered some fugitive female slave.

As I bounded from cover and dashed across the pit, I heard him saying, "Well! So you thought I wouldn't find you!"

There was a cry of feminine wrath. The overseer yelled with pain, cursed, and soundly slapped the fugitive. I heard the *chunk* of a body dropping to the floor of the drift, and a metallic tinkle.

The overseer emerged, carrying a slender, dark-haired girl of uncommon loveliness. She was partly conscious, but still helpless from the blow that had floored her.

She differed in face and stature from the Titanians I had thus far seen. Her features were more finely drawn, faintly aquiline; her hair was blue-black, and she wore a shimmering tunic that outlined her figure. She was shapely and high-breasted; her ankles and wrists were adorned with red-gold bracelets.

"Hold it!" I yelled. "You and I are going to take time out, right now!"

He started: My unceremonious address and outlandish costume had worried him for a moment. Then he dropped the girl, unlimbered his scourge, and growled, "Back on the job, or I'll skin you alive!"

THE lash crackled. I ducked, picked up a flinty rock the size of my fist and hurled it. He jerked aside. The jagged missile ploughed through his thick hair, shook him, but did not drop him.

He stared in sheer amazement as I closed the gap. My leap, tuned to Terrestrial gravity, caught him utterly off guard. He had never heard of anyone assaulting an overseer. Before he could again use his whip, or drop it and unhook his mace, it was hand to hand.

My flying tackle knocked him crashing against the rocky wall of the quarry. The shock should have hammered him senseless; but he was burly as an ox, and as hard-muscled. I wrenched clear of his crushing grip, ducked his blow, and cracked him one on the jaw. That shook him, but failed to lay him out.

As he recovered, he jerked the mace from his belt. Instead of retreating, I got inside his guard. The handle of the weapon crashed down on my shoulder with a numbing impact. Then I back-heeled him, dropping him like a sack of meal. The mace clattered to the rocks as his head smashed against the foot of the wall.

He was out. I stepped back, instinctively giving him a chance to regain his feet, now that he was disarmed. But that was not the custom on Titan. The dark-haired girl had recovered. She cried out and snatched the mace.

Chunk! The first blow crushed his head. I caught her wrist as she lifted the weapon for a second swing. She stared at me, her dark eyes wide with wonder. Then she

relaxed, flung her arms about me and burst into tears.

"Oh, I was so frightened. When you stood there, looking at him—I thought you were hurt, and he'd get up and kill you. What were you waiting for? And now you've killed him, and they'll take you to the simmering oven—oh!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I cut in. "First, *you* killed him. Second, let's duck into your cave and talk this over."

I shouldered the remains of the overseer and followed the girl, some fifty or sixty feet into the drift. There I saw a smouldering fire and a small kettle.

"I'm starving, lady. How's for a handout?"

She gave me a wooden ladle. "Okay, pal"—or words to that effect: Her Saturnian slave vernacular was as crude as my own. That set me thinking. I wondered if she might, like myself, be a recent captive from Terra. This matter of killing an overseer seemed to cause her undue terror on my account.

She was still in the grip of fear now. She tried feebly to hide it, but her body was trembling, and then she began to cry.

"Take it easy," I said. "I've pulled so many wrongies already that one more or less won't have any effect. After hosing a Saturnian official with concentrated frost, this last tangle is nothing at all.

"Anyway, this guy's clothes will come in handy. I'll put them on, you bandage my face as if I'd been injured, and I'll carry on in his place."

She eyed me, smiled through her tears, and said, "Oh, that'll be just *wonderful!* I know we'll get along splendidly."

We might as well begin calling each other by our first names. That always helps. To say that I just dropped in from Terra would be too much, so I introduced myself and made no reference to origins.

"Kent Bradley," she said. "How awfully nice. I'm Valene—from Japetus."

"And that," said I, "makes us old friends. I've been looking for Valene, and it's a real treat to learn you're not a chemical or a town."

CHAPTER VIII

MEETIN' WITH A JAPETAN

VALENE spent the next hour or so coaching me in the duties of the Titanian overseer, and giving me lots of handy advice about the local situation.

My first move after eating would be to dress the dead overseer in my clothes and drop his body into some other quarry. That should throw the Saturnians off the track by making them think that in my flight I had taken a fatal dive. Things looked much better than they had an hour ago.

A quiet evening with Valene was worth any reasonable risk, even though what she told me of the penalty for assaulting an overseer did make me draw a long face. As for my succession of crimes—

"Let's talk about something else," I suggested, as I worked my way to the bottom of the pot of stewed gourds and fungi. "About yourself. A lot more pleasant."

"Well, there's not much to tell," Valene began. "I'm the daughter of Guraz, chief of the cave dwellers of Japetus. According to our traditions, we all come from some far-off planet, captives of a Saturnian raid of ages ago. The Saturnians brought our ancestors to Titan, and penned us up in this combination of farm and breeding station.

"My father's remote ancestor stole a space ship loaded with a cargo of slaves bound for the ovens of Saturn. The details of how he did it have been lost in legends, but the fact that we populated Japetus proves the story.

"Japetus is honeycombed with caverns, some of them larger even than the space under this dome. With the machine ship, laboratory, and the supplies in the Saturnian space ship, we entrenched ourselves in the caves of Japetus.

"The Saturnians sent an expedition to recapture us, but with the crags that rise from the surface, their cruisers could not come close enough to the bottoms of the valleys to pick off our outposts. And when the Saturnians put on their space suits to

fight on foot, and of course without benefit of their wings, we dropped rocks on them. That tore their space armor, which let in cold air and put them out of action.

"And when the second expedition came to Japetus, several years later, we were ready for their preparations to invade our caverns. In the laboratory of the stranded space ship one of our leaders invented a chemical that dissolves the fireproof Saturnians and their armor. It's terrible stuff: it eats into rocks, glass, and metals. We can't keep it in anything but wax containers."

It must be, I concluded, some form of hydrofluoric acid. But this was no time to discuss chemistry.

"Why don't the Saturnians dope out the same kind of weapon to recapture the Japetans?" I wondered.

Valene explained, "We wear a wax-impregnated armor, so we're not injured by the fumes of our own weapons. The Saturnians can't wear anything of the kind because of their high temperature."

THAT was food for thought. Too bad Parker was not on hand. He could make use of such information. But what most interested me was why the Japetans did not leave their tiny satellite and fly back to Earth, or some other planet.

Valene, however, shook her head. "We have no fuel for the atomic disintegrators of the stolen ship. We can't produce it on Japetus. So we are stranded. We can not return to Titan to rescue any more of our distant relatives.

"Our entrenchment on Japetus is a standing insult to the Saturnians. Every once in a while they make raids, and capture Japetans. It served me right, I guess; but I was just starving for a glimpse of the outer air, and I took one chance too many.

"So here I am. I think they tried to use me as a hostage, but the Japetans figure that one more or less of the chief family is not enough to risk the enslavement of the entire satellite. The Saturnians treated me very nicely while the negotations were in progress, though I was heavily guarded.

"But I managed to make a break, and I ran to one of the slave compounds. Then that overseer began getting fresh. I criss-crossed his face with a lot of first class scratches. Then I left the compound and came to this deserted quarry. It reminded me of our Japetan caves.

"And he's been hunting me ever since. I couldn't eat raw fungi. I had to risk a fire, and that's what attracted his attention. Oh, I hate to think of what would have happened to me if you'd not interfered. He was going to drag me away to his compound, to take the place of one of the women they recently sent to the ovens . . . "

"Hmm. And that accounts for *find Valene?*"

"Yes. That girl," she explained, "thought you must be a Japetan; you looked too independent and pugnacious for a Titanian. She wanted you to find me. She thought that two of us might stir up some trouble here on Titan. The legend of the Japetan flight has been the one hope among the slaves of Titan. Though most of them have become docile, a few planned revolt."

THAT evening—I should say, "rest period," which comprises about sixteen Terrestrial days—Valene and I completed our preparations for my impersonating the dead overseer, Gul-Sharan. I objected to going to his compound; for despite our similarity in stature, and the bandages that would disguise my face as well as voice, there were too many chances for a slip.

"And furthermore," I concluded, "with his half dozen gal friends, someone is bound to get wise."

"Mmm, yes," admitted Valene, "and I'd hate to have those stupid Titanian females pawing you. But don't you see that if there is no one to take Gul-Sharan's place, the body of the supposed Kent Bradley will get a much closer look? Someone will discover the trick. But if you appear as Gul-Sharan, everything will seem quite regular."

That sounded reasonable. Furthermore, Valene's knowledge of the routine of the colony might enable us to make an early escape, while if we hid in the abandoned quarry we would at the best be merely

on the defensive, unable to make any moves toward liberty.

"And don't worry too much about Gul-Sharan's companions. He was a high-tempered, arrogant fellow and they all stood pretty much in awe of him. So crack the whip—literally as well as figuratively—and keep them in order."

I shouldered the body of Gul-Sharan and carried it up the ramp, skirted the lip of the quarry, and heaved it over the side. So much for the end of Kent Bradley's trail. And then Valene led the way to Gul-Sharan's compound: six thatched huts inclosed in a stockade.

Valene had nerve to spare, but I could plainly hear the pounding of my own heart as I stalked up to the entrance with what I hoped was the dead overseer's stride. Five young women were gathered about a copper kettle: all slender and shapely, and younger than the hapless victims I had met marching toward the gates of the colony. I ignored their greetings, brusquely repulsed the two who wondered at my bandaged head, and followed Valene to the hut furthest from the gate of the compound.

The hut was illuminated by a phosporescent globe, a concession accorded only to overseers. That had guided Valene to the right place. The furnishings were simple: reed mattings on the floor, two benches of wrought metal, several pots, and a low desk at which Gul-Sharan kept the accounts of the farms and quarry in his district.

I ruffled the thin metallic sheets on which he marked up his production reports, and Valene's low-voiced comments helped me form a sketchy picture of my duties.

"You'll be getting six carloads of *nari* ore ready for hauling to the Saturnian transport," Valene explained.

"And that's not all I'm going to prepare for loading," I said. "Among other things, you and I are going to try to stow away on the ship, and make a break for Japetus. I'm going to find out about those acid bombs, and there's going to be a house-cleaning on Titan."

We sat up late that "night," perfecting the plan which Gul-Sharan's reports had suggested. When Valene had finally cleared up complications against which we would have to guard, I saw that our chances were better than fair.

"I'll sleep for a week," I said, hitching the reed mat around in a futile effort to find a soft spot. "This everlasting artificial illumination won't wake me—"

"I'm used to it. I'll see that you don't oversleep," Valene assured me.

CHAPTER IX

WRONG BUCKET TO KICK

I ALMOST yelled when someone shook me by the shoulder. Valene was doing her best to wake me from an attempt to make up for weeks of restless sleep in a furnace-like space ship.

"I'll join the women working in the *gûri* field right next to the quarry," Valene whispered. "And do be careful."

Behind her smile I sensed the anxiety that she was trying to conceal. One slip, and we'd go straight to the kitchens of the Saturnian high command.

I began to doubt whether freedom was worth the risk. As I looked back toward my hut, I caught the look in Valene's dark eyes, and knew that she had been whistling to keep up my courage.

I strode past several compounds, mustered the laborers as they fell in, and marched them to the quarry. The women struggled in twos and threes toward the adjoining fields.

A Saturnian official was at the ramp that led into the pit. From the muttered comments of my crew I learned that this was Nurûk, the most critical and high tempered of the local officers. I saluted as we marched past; and under his fierce eye, there was no need of my supervision. The slaves filed into a drift, seized pickaxes and drills, and fell to hewing out blocks of the mineral.

"What happened to you, Gul-Sharan?" Nurûk demanded.

"I tripped and fell, Excellency," I explained, "while pursuing an odd-looking fugitive—he was wearing some strange disguise—"

Nurûk's wrathful cursing interrupted my remarks; then he demanded, "Where is he? What happened to him?"

"He ran over the edge of the abandoned quarry in section nine," I answered. "I'm pretty sure the fall killed him."

Nurûk stalked up the ramp. He was going to investigate. I ordered my crew into an adjoining drift to get sharper tools to replace those blunted by the glass-hard ore. During their absence, I dragged an ore bucket from a cross-cut, heaved it to the bottom of the car, and laid it on its side. Then I rolled fragments of the mineral over it. I had just completed my task when the miners returned with fresh implements.

I eyed the ore heaped high in the far end of the car.

"Roll it out!" I ordered. "And couple it up to the other four. Then get to work on the last one."

When leveled off, the load would be equal to the contents of the other cars. But before the tall heap at the front was distributed, Valene would be stowed away in the ore bucket. I, as overseer, would be riding the string of cars which the sweating slaves would push toward the Saturnian transport.

Women from the adjoining fields brought us pots of stew, and joined us at the mid-shift lunch period. They were all chattering and babbling about the discovery of the body of the rebellious prisoner. The story of my escape from the administration building had traveled from one end of the colony to the other by something akin to the Terrestrial grapevine telegraph.

I sat somewhat apart, perched on number five car. When I saw Valene descending the ramp with my pot of lunch, I brusquely hailed her. She drew herself to the coupling bar.

"Bring it over!" I snapped. "Do you expect me to come and get it?"

She clambered over the jagged chunks of ore. For good measure, I growled at her awkwardness in spilling some of the gravy.

Then, as I took the pot of stew, I whispered, "Watch your chance, and duck into the ore bucket. When I go back to work, I'll start the heap of *nari* rolling back to cover it. And you'll know how to carry on when the car is emptied into the hold of the transport."

SHE ducked below the edge of the car, and slipped into the ore bucket. While I was certain that the move had not been observed, sweat cropped out of my forehead. If anyone missed Valene, if any miner wondered at that ore bucket, it would be awkward to explain.

I started a miniature landslide, and half covered Valene's shelter. Then I seized my spoon and resumed eating my lunch. Some of the women were already gathering up the empty pots. I'd have to conceal mine before the end of the rest period.

Easy enough. Then I saw that Nurûk was eyeing me. He was frowning, and his brow was furrowed with deep wrinkles. The work, as far as I could determine, had progressed well enough. Gul-Sharan's detachment of slaves had an unchallenged record for high output.

Nurûk rose from the boulder on which he had been squatting and stalked toward me. "How much of this *nari* ore does the order call for?"

I told him. With little hesitation I answered the next half dozen questions. But for Valene's coaching, I would have been tripped up then and there. His narrowed eyes covered me from head to foot.

The situation was becoming more dangerous every moment. Despite my successful imposture, I sensed ever-increasing peril. Once, as I groped for an answer, Valene prompted me from her place of concealment. I was certain that Nurûk could not have heard her whisper.

He bounded to the coupling bar and stood at the far end of the load. "What do you mean by taking Gul-Sharan's place?"

I managed to answer, "I am Gul-Sharan, your Excellency!"

"Rot!" growled Nurûk. "You do seem to know his business, but you're not Gul-Sharan. Among other things, he is left-handed. You've been eating right-handed, and the sling chains of your mace are suspended for a right-handed person"

In the heat of my battle with Gul-Sharan, I had not noticed with which hand he used his weapons. Neither had Valene noted his left-handedness. It was worse than bad—it was fatal. But I made one desperate play.

"Excellency," I explained, "Gul-Sharan was tracking down a fugitive prisoner. He asked me to bandage my face and take his place, saying that his crew would carry on perfectly as long as they did not know the difference."

Nurûk eyed me, nodded, and muttered. Flames jetted from his nostrils as he scowled and pondered on my answer. It was a serious breach of discipline; but unless punishment was immediate, there was still a chance. Valene and I might even carry on with our scheme.

"Not so bad," he grumbled, scrutinizing the heap of ore we had mined and loaded.

I WAS prepared for his demanding my true name, and was ready to give him one that would ring true. His next move caught me entirely off guard. He snatched at the knot that secured my bandages. His sharp nails sheared the cloth. It smouldered from the heat of his finger tips, but he unwound it before it charred in his grip. In an instant I was barefaced.

My coloring betrayed me; that I knew before his wrath could find words. The Titanians have either black or copper-blonde hair. None had close-cropped, sandy hair, nor were any of them deeply suntanned. My coloring was neither olive-pallor, nor paper-whiteness.

"So—you're the Terrestrian who turned the administration building inside out, eh?" he howled. "By Nagarreth, you've got some explaining to do!"

He stepped forward as if to grip me by the shoulder. Then he checked his stride, recollecting that his smoking hot fingers would be dangerous. His lunge shifted the crest of the heaped-up mineral. Half a dozen lumps rolled from under his feet and clattered toward the empty end. Nurûk, feet slipping from beneath him, pitched headlong with the sliding ore.

Though half buried in lumps of *nari*, he noted the almost buried ore bucket. He snatched the rim and jerked it loose.

"Now what?" he demanded, wrathful at his undignified nose dive.

Then he saw the stowaway, and recognized the captive from Japetus. Valene's distinctive features and coloring betrayed her. The published descriptions of that prized prisoner had put all the Saturnians on guard.

Nurûk bawled an order. A Titanian sprang to a switch panel. Presently a conveyor came whirring along the overhead cable and halted at the head of the mine ramp. Half a dozen of our fellow slaves hustled us to the car.

Resistance was useless. Nurûk followed us. The door slammed. The engineer shifted the controller, and we set out for headquarters.

"This," said Valene as we picked up speed, "is so final that there is no sense in moaning about it. Absolutely nothing we can say will do a bit of good. Nurûk just files a report, has it stamped by the personnel manager, and we are locked up in the refrigerating compartment of the next ship bound for Saturn.

"And no one has ever escaped?"

I could not dig up enough bravado to convince her that we could upset old precedents.

CHAPTER X

BACK TO PARKER

PARKER'S face lengthened as he heard the commander of the disintegrating transport whip the ether into whirlpools.

"Can we outrun the patrol boats?"

Shadra shrugged.

"Either that, or we will become a Saturnian delicacy," she replied with a wry gesture. Her eyes, however, were level and unafraid. She glanced into the televisiphone mirror, brushed a stray wisp of gold bronze hair into place, and wiped a smudge from her cheek. "Take the controls, playboy, and no funny business this time. I've got an idea."

She stepped to the radio-visiphone, shifted several rheostat levers, closed a switch, and watched the indicator on an ammeter jump to the needle. The entire bridge house began vibrating and humming as if it would at any instant disintegrate.

"What on earth—" Parker began, bearing down on the helm, ducking a satelloid by a sudden upward swoop.

"Wave vortex," said Shadra. "Blotting out the transport message with power gone crazy. They'll know something is wrong, but they won't be able to track us down as quickly as they might otherwise. All right—you take the integrator and give me the wheel."

Shadra nosed the ship sharply up from the plane of the ecliptic and fed it full power. Far to the rear, Parker detected signs of rapidly converging pursuit. In response to Shadra's instructions from the bridge, he cut off the power vortex.

Strategy would no longer help. It had settled to a matter of speed and deftness of maneuvering. And there Shadra justified the high esteem with which the Saturnian overlords had regarded her as a pilot.

The pursuing cruisers had more powerful engines than the *Karamûnu;* but the transport, hurrying to the rescue of a vessel in distress, had carried not even ballast. The cruisers had greater top speeds, but their acceleration was not as sharp.

The course Shadra set was erratic, zigzagging, a nightmare that kept Parker's hair standing on end. Zooming dizzily in a perpendicular rise from the ecliptic, she tricked the pursuers into taking up full speed. Before they reached effective artillery range, she had picked the next ether "hole," or the next gap in the dangerous shoals of sateloids that reached out far from Saturn.

Then, a dive that sent Parker's stomach lurching up to his collarbone. In the televisiphone he saw the pursuit carried several thousand lengths beyond their mark before they could wheel.

When they did wheel, they had overshot the clear areas in the shoals, and had to pick their way, wasting ruinous amounts of energy in putting out repulsion screens to deflect satelloids and meteor swarms.

As long as the pursuit was kept roughly in the ecliptic, the velocity of the ship made the relative speed of the obstructions to navigation comparatively negligible.

Shadra was gaining. Then, having pulled the Saturnian cruisers through the ecliptic, she picked the next channel, again zoomed upward, and reversed the direction of flight. This forced the pursuit to slacken speed to neutralize the dangerous *relative* increase in meteoroid speeds, whose orbital rotation now opposed the flight of the ship.

HOURS later, they reached the outer zones, where the satellites of Saturn have a retrograde motion. There a final shift of direction hopelessly delayed the Saturnian cruisers.

They were out in clear space, beyond the dangerous Saturnian ether-ocean.

"Holy jumping cats!" Parker said fervently, as he stepped at last from the integrator. "Like driving ninety miles an hour through a Manhattan traffic jam—and getting away with it."

"And now," Shadra suggested, "take the wheel while I open the loading ports. They work from master controls. That'll dispose of our Saturian passengers, in such a way that we'll be *sure* they won't try to recapture us. It's a bit more practical than fussing around with any of your experiments."

Parker grinned and let it go at that; and presently they settled down to top speed flights.

"We'll have to work in watches," said Shadra. "Get some sleep while I hold the course. Don't need the integrators any more."

It was hard, grueling work, Parker discovered, long before the *Karamânu* nosed inside the Martian orbit. They were both worn and haggard, and Shadra's eyes seemed as large as saucers in her drawn, weary face. Parker assured her that she was becoming lovelier every day.

"Liar!" Her tone was tart, but the lines of her face relaxed when she said it.

Later, when observations revealed clear

stretches, Parker locked the controls, threw out a repulsion screen, and let the *Karamânu* go flashing on its course. He and Shadra won a few hours of rest from the strain of navigation.

The inductor-bearings were hammering, and the exhaust tubes were clogging with atomic ash—but they'd make it. Saturnian pursuit was so far behind that finding the *Karamânu* in that vast gulf of space was beyond the finest instruments.

IT WAS shortly after sunrise, a month after Parker's break for freedom, that he landed the *Karamânu* at an airport near Washington, D. C.

The guard turned out, and so did the officer of the day. His first impression was that a new model army blimp had made an emergency landing. Then he looked a good look at Parker and said, "You do not look like an officer to me, and if you are a civilian test pilot, I'll have to have your credentials."

"Sorry, Captain; we've just returned from Saturn, and I have only these." He reached into his pocket to get something of identification value out of the tangle of memoranda. "I am John Parker, formerly—"

"You returned from where?"

"From Saturn." Just then Shadra stepped from the hatchway. "To be exact, from the satellite, Titan. This lady—"

The captain's annoyed and puzzled look changed, and a little too abruptly to please Parker. "Oh, to be sure! I'm afraid the commanding officer didn't tell us about you. Very glad to meet you, Mr. Parker. And you too, Miss . . . um . . . "

"Shadra, and I'm not crazy!" she flared. "Neither is he. Well, anyway," she added with sly malice, "not *very*." Parker nudged her, viciously.

"Why, of course you're not," the too-affable captain continued. "This way, please. The colonel will be very happy to welcome you."

This distracted Parker just enough for the voice and hands behind him to come as a surprise. Two men caught his arms from the rear, and someone said, "Don't move, or I'll conk you! So it's from Saturn you've come, is it? Don't worry, lady, we won't let him hurt you."

"Nice work, Sergeant," the captain said in his natural military voice. "Always gives the service a black eye, roughing up civilians. March them to headquarters. Corporal Smith, report to the adjutant that we have arrested two suspected spies—though possibly this fellow is a maniac who's stolen a dirigible from some experimental station."

"Very well, sir." The corporal saluted and left at the double time.

"I'm not crazy," Parker protested. "You're the weak-minded one. Look at the marks of meteors on that hull. You blockhead, does that really look like a dirigible to you?"

"Shut up, or I'll bust a gun butt over your head," the sergeant grumbled. "Watch him, men. These maniacs sometimes have more beef than a whole squad of sane guys."

The captain stalked grandly on to report to the adjutant, and then to the commanding officer.

COLONEL WATSON was gray and red-faced and stocky. He had a double row of campaign badges on his tunic, and his shrewd eyes looked from under shaggy brows. His interest was evenly divided between Parker and the tall woman at his side. He shook his head and said to the adjutant, "This man may be a little upset, but he does look like the John Parker who disappeared—"

"Right! I am the one who was last heard of on the Orinoco. If you'll listen to us, Colonel, perhaps I can convince you we are not spies, and are not mad."

His earnestness impressed the commanding officer, who said to the adjutant, "Please get the newspaper files at the post library and compare the details with whatever identification this gentleman can give us."

Parker went on, "Here are notes and my wallet. And if you'll be so good as to listen, I'll tell you what happened to me and Kent Bradley. It was in the jungle, and

little wonder no one ever gave a straight account, for there were few survivors, and those were Indians. But first of all, you must get that space ship under cover. Into a dirigible hangar."

Colonel Watson picked up his cigar. "Ah . . . *must*, Mr. Parker? Please relax now, I am intensely interested. Do sit down."

"You may suit yourself, Colonel Watson. Saturnian patrols may be following us. If they see the familiar shape and color of a stolen ship, be assured that they will try to recapture it. And that ship is the one thing this country needs. As a model, I mean, for others like it, to drive the Saturnians out."

Parker's level glance as well as his words made the officer frown perplexedly, then rise and say, "Very well, Mr. Parker. Please come with me, and we shall move your ship under cover. I fancy your ship would be useful against—ah—Terrestrial enemies."

The adjutant, who had returned with the file, broke in. As the papers rustled, Parker heard the adjutant whisper, "This undoubtedly is the man, sir. But you mustn't board that crazy thing with him, sir. It's a trap! You'll be kidnapped."

"Nonsense, Captain!" Then, to Parker, "Let us go at once. And tell me what happened in the Orinoco."

The officer of the day and the adjutant, Parker saw when he glanced over his shoulder, were in a huddle at the guardhouse. They were worried about the colonel. Parker went into his story, touching only the highlights as he crossed the parade ground, and went toward the hangar.

"They scooped us up with monstrous nets," Parker concluded. "Bullets did not harm these winged devils. Luckily, Shadra and I were able to escape from captivity. I've had to skip details, simply because I must show you this vessel before I tell you anything else."

"Bullets would not hurt them, eh? Very well, Parker, we'll go into that later. Let me see the inside of your ship."

He gestured for Parker and Shadra to precede him. The guard came forward with fixed bayonets, and the officer of the day had a drawn pistol. They still could not believe that their weapons would be quite useless against the Saturnian ship.

"Well, well," Colonel Watson said, as he stepped in through the hatch. "This is remarkably thick armor. Captain! Get a look at these plates, and see for yourself."

With that, he hurried after Parker and Shadra. At the end of the passageway, Parker turned to gesture and say, "Here is the control room. Do you wish to inspect the propulsion mechanism, or do you wish to see me move her into the hangar?"

The instrument panel was bewildering, for in addition to the unintelligibility of the markings on the dials, there were many whose indicators, shape and fluorescent glow made them utterly unlike anything on earth.

The plotting room was even more confusing. The colonel stood there, making inarticulate sounds and shaking his head as Parker explained, "These are much like your conventional coast artillery plotting devices, except that they are tridimensional, and much more complete. And, of course, suited for the complexities of radio-beam sounding for meteor shoals and satelloids. If there are no questions, suppose I set her into the hangar? And tell your guard to keep clear of the hull, front and rear."

Colonel Watson was frank about it: "Questions? Young man, I'd not know what to ask you." He leaned out of the port: "Captain, get the guard away, we are taking off."

Parker pressed a button, and the hatch slid ponderously into place. He moved a control lever. The deck shivered from the poundings of the worn inductor bearings, and a great cloud of dust surged over the parade ground when the exhaust blast hit into the ground.

She needed a thorough overhauling, but there was enough mileage left in the captured *Karamânu* to give Colonel Watson an eye-opening demonstration.

She took off, and none too smoothly; but

no Terrestrian would notice that. Parker cut the power down to a minimum, and circled lazily toward the gleaming tip of Washington Monument.

"Get back to the post. I'm quite convinced, and I'll accept the responsibility for giving you temporary hangar space. It is quite possible that the War Department will be interested in your invention, Mr. Parker."

"Shadra, show the colonel around the ship, while I swing her back."

Shadra flashed him a knowing look over her shoulder. Parker, for all his slide-rule principles, seemed every once in a while to stumble across sound bits of human psychology.

CHAPTER XI

INVASION!

BEFORE Parker swung back to the dirigible hangar, the adjutant's inquiries had started a dozen newspaper men for the post. They came with the idea of getting an interview with the unexpectedly returned survivor of the Parker-Bradley expedition in South America; but when the fish-shaped and bronze-colored space ship leveled off and settled to the floor of the hangar, they did not know what to say.

The guard told them that Parker claimed to have returned from Saturn with a personable young woman in an outlandish dress. "And if you don't believe it, buddy, just have a look when she comes out. Sure, he's crazy, every inventor goes whacky, but a gal like that—aw right, *I'm* crazy, then; and he didn't say that!"

Guards posted by the zealous officer of the day kept the charging journalists out of the hangar; but no one cared what happened to Parker and Shadra. The colonel shouted above the uproar, "This new type of ship is not sponsored by the Government, but you may quote me as saying that it seems to work."

"How about Saturn?"

"We did not go to Saturn, and I am unable to discuss that."

Parker and Shadra had to face camera men at the steps of headquarters. The colonel said, "Don't release all the details. A panic might start; people might believe what the press considers and offers as a hoax."

Parker did not mention the motive that led Saturnians to seek human prey. That Shadra had given the colonel a hint—as she must have—without reviving his queries as to her sanity, testified to her command of English. Parker had given her instructions on their long trip; and she learned rapidly.

When the newspapermen had gone, most of them were bewildered from trying to figure where fact stopped and fake began. But they were certain of one thing: that the strangely shaped ship did have a theretofore unheard-of propulsion device; and that was something to tie to.

For the next few days, feature writers and cartoonists and columnists had their turn. Alienists and anthropologists and scientists were interviewed: since Parker and Shadra, now accepted by Government officials as sane refugees from an outlying planet, were in conference with War Department and State Department heads. Fashion designers had the show windows of the capital blossoming with Titanian motifs; photographs of Shadra were all that they needed.

From time to time, some foreign scientist damned Parker as a fraud, and declared that the atomic propulsion devices were a hoax, a mere buildup for a stock promotion swindle. Others were just as convinced that Parker's experiences were authentic; and some persisted in considering him a mad inventor.

Bit by bit, he had released further details. The Government was watching every news item; and investigators were working over the entire country, ready to report the first sign of panic.

There was a buzz of coast-to-coast interest, but no terror. The story, even toned down, was simply incredible. Parker in the meanwhile had little time to catch up sleep, as Colonel Watson, making a second flight in the *Karamânu*, submitted a re-

port advising that ordnance experts and other specialists make a detailed study of the propulsion devices.

As a result, Parker blistered his tongue from caffeine tablets; and finally, in spite of all stimulants, fell asleep over his slide rule.

He had barely awakened from a forty-eight hour sleep when the renewed conference with officers from technical branches of the army and navy was broken up by a radio-visiphone message from Vera Cruz.

THREE ichthyform ships, described as substantially identical with the one Parker had brought to Washington, had raided the city, scooped up hundreds of natives, and soared away quite unharmed by anti-aircraft shells and machine gun bullets.

This message had scarcely reached the conference room when the President's secretary arrived to demand strictest secrecy, with no more newspaper interviews by anyone taking part in the investigation of the ship and Parker's data.

Then came a conclave of ambassadors from the Associated Governments of the world; this meeting was at a private estate outside of Washington. Strict censorship suppressed the alarming dispatches from Vera Cruz, for the initial incredulity was shaken by code messages from the home governments. The reports, in code, of depredations in Eastern Europe, Malaya, and parts of South America left no doubters.

In spite of these messages, a few of the more conservative delegates suspected that some government was using a newly discovered scientific principle to terrorize the world and win a redistribution of power.

"Gentlemen," Parker said when he took the floor, "if the majority of you, who are convinced, will vote me an appropriation for experimental purposes, I will develop arms that can to a degree cope with these invaders. In making my escape from Titan, I was unable to bring a captive Saturnian to convince you.

"However, an expedition under your supervision might result in at least a few prisoners to convince you that these alarming reports are made by people who have actually witnessed the like of what Kent Bradley and I saw. That these invading ships, like the one I brought to Terra, actually do come from Saturn. I am sure—"

His appeal was interrupted by a low-pitched whirring and a humming that quickly became shrill and greater in volume. There was a scraping of chairs, a confusion of voices. "That's the sound he described!" one shouted and others clamored, "I heard him demonstrate that ship; it's the same note!"

Then all spoke at once. There was no more order, and the chairman stopped pounding with his gavel. He joined the rush to the door, and the meeting poured out into the grounds of the estate.

A long, ichthyform craft was hovering over the city, slowly circling at a level appreciably lower than the peak of the Washington Monument. The voice of the city soon was loud enough to reach into the suburb where the conference had met. Sirens tore into the shouting; and traffic, for a moment paralyzed, now insanely dashed toward the outskirts of the city capital.

THEN came the ear-splitting *whack* of three-inch field pieces, the heavy boom of larger artillery, the scream of shells that missed the mark, and the concussion of those that burst against the armor of the low flying space cruiser. Every piece of ordnance in the artillery park out toward Alexandria was bombarding the invader.

The heavier projectiles, moving with muzzle velocities low enough to permit direct visual observation of their trajectories, swerved erratically from their courses. They flew off into space, along the branches of insane hyperbolas.

The anti-metoric repulsion screen was deflecting the bombardment. Some of the assembled diplomats stood calmly by, regarding the bewildering display with the unruffled calm of veterans under fire. They realized that no amount of haste could evade the attack. They watched the mon-

ster circling, settling down, lowering a grappling net.

Others made a concerted rush for their cars. The parking space became a tangle of locked fenders, rammed vehicles, and engines frantically spun by drivers who had forgotten their ignition switches.

Dense fumes poured from the lower ports of the space ship. The net was dropping—dropping. The monster hovered, deliberately spreading terror. Then the net flashed home, vanished below the cornice level of the taller buildings.

The whirl became a whining, and the delegates of the Associated Governments saw the web raising, bit by bit, packed to bulging, like an uncommonly successful cast of a shrimp net. Field glasses directed toward the ichthyform monster dropped from shaking fingers.

"My God!" muttered a silk-hatted dignitary at Parker's right. "Like Satan—in person—breathing fire—"

Another, paper-white, said in a low, hoarse voice: "They're eating them—raw—I thought you said—they cooked them—"

"They do," said Parker, "when they're at home. Under campaign conditions, they are not so fussy."

The hatch cover rose into place behind the net. The space cruiser rose, nosed toward Yucatan, and slipped through the air like a stream-lined silver bullet.

Visual proof again made Parker the man of the hour. Every War Department scoffer who had survived with his sanity fairly intact assured Parker that no one had ever doubted him.

Parker was put in charge of the ordnance proving ground at Aberdeen, with a full corps of scientists and commissioned specialists to work along half a dozen separate lines of attacks and defense. The research departments of each of the Continental Scientific Unions began independent experiments, with a radio network to keep each other posted.

Industries were pooled; tailings dumps of mines and slag heaps of smelters were combed for substances thus far considered as commercially useless.

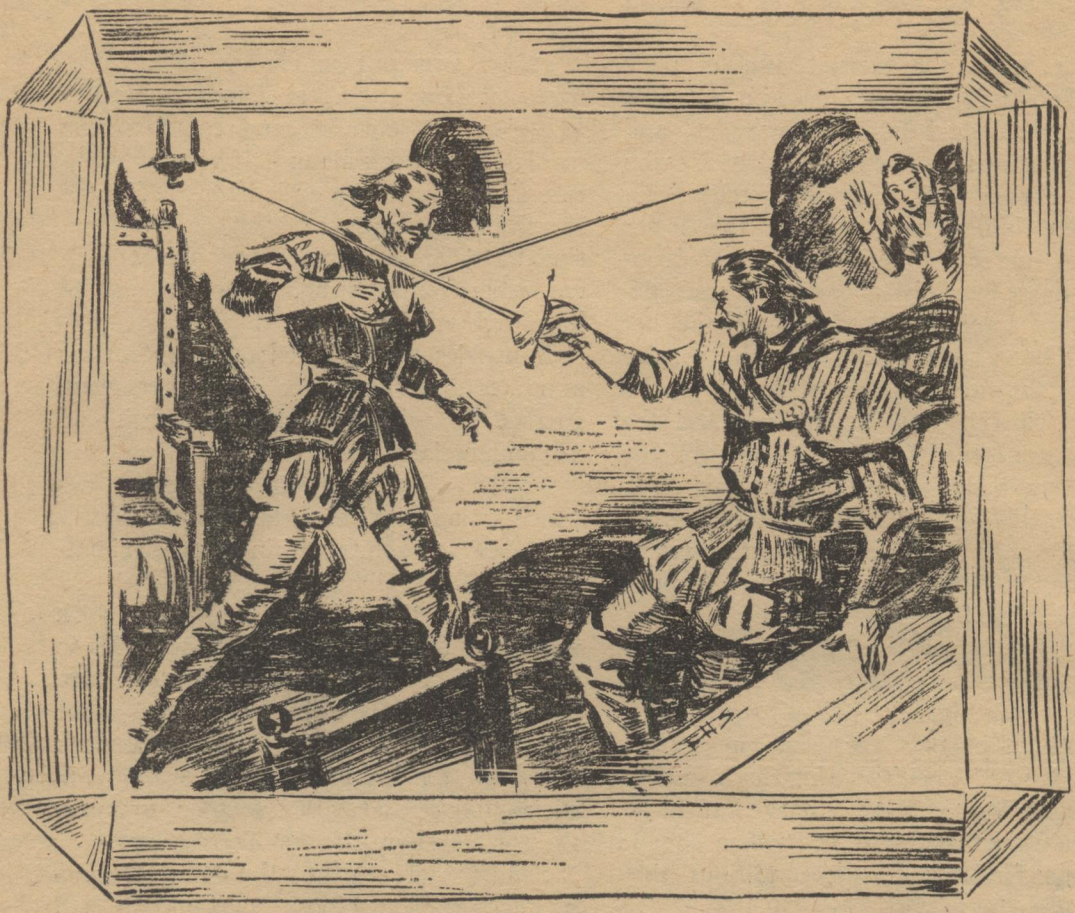
Refrigeration engineers developed gases which combined extreme combustibility with freezing points within a few decimals of absolute zero.

To amuse the public while all this work was going on in a thousand laboratories in unrevealed centers, rallying songs were composed, and headline platitudes about Terrestrial unity. Propaganda experts took charge of the drive to muster every man, every dollar, and every weapon to make the solar system safe for Terrestrians.

Shadra found the three-minute pep speakers the most novel persons she had met on earth, next to the cheering audiences. She canceled her radio contracts in order to miss none of them.

But after a few days of it, she donned an asbestos smock and a gas mask and joined Parker in his underground laboratory.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Ruby of France

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Emerald of Isis", "Cleopatra's Amulet", etc.

This is the second visit; the second beautifully haunting mystery at the heart of a jewel. Continuing, in old Provence, a remarkable new series of stories

WHEN she came for the second time, Shipman had been out. He returned to find her sitting in the outer office, waiting. He could not help one instant's startled pause.

Her first visit was fresh in his memory, yet the memory had died down in its more incredible phases. He believed now that it had been some hallucination, some trick of self hypnosis or sheer imagination.

Shipman's business was not one for dreamers. This laboratory served jewelers all over the world with new ways of testing gems, new ways of treating them, changing them, cutting them, setting them. And yet now, when she entered, Shipman remembered that fantastic first visit—with the emerald . . .

"Miss Crews!" he exclaimed, coming

forward. "Delighted to see you again!"

Miriam Crews smiled as their hands met, and her gaze touched with appreciation upon his lean, hawk-like features. She was dark, and slimly lovely as an arrow in flight.

"I didn't come by accident this time," she said, laughingly. "Can you spare me a few moments? I've an appointment for tea in forty minutes, so I'll not stop too long."

"All the time you want!" said Shipman, trying not to show his excitement.

"It's another stone," she said, and reached into her handbag. "This is supposed to be a ruby, but I don't know. I have a curious reaction to some stones and not to others, Mr. Shipman. It's just once in a while. I see some jewel—not necessarily a valuable one—and the most curious feeling comes over me! I just can't rest till I get my hands on that stone, whatever it may be."

Shipman smiled. "True; people do react in various ways to precious stones. The effect is sometimes terrible. In your case, to judge from our first meeting, you have the queer ability to reach back and evoke the past, as if gaining a memory of some former incarnation. Ah, so this is the stone!"

He wondered at his own eagerness. It was not awareness of her slim beauty, of her intent force of character, that so moved him and stirred his pulses. It was remembrance of what she had brought him; a strange drifting into another world, so eerie that he himself could not understand it.

Shipman was not given to mysticism. This girl had told him who she was: the daughter of the broker Crews. There was nothing fantastic or queer about her. Yet, when he had sat with her before the polyandroscope, both of them had gone drifting through space and time. It was some quality she had brought to the meeting. It was real. . . .

She put a round red gem into his hand. It was girded by a thin ring of gold from some old setting.

"One jeweler said it was a ruby," she said. "Another called it a fine garnet. A third claimed it was a rare jewel called hyacinth."

Shipman smiled. "Jewelers aren't gem experts. To one who knows, the stone might be very simply tested with sunlight and a white card, the reflections telling the whole story. Your fine ruby might even be a thin slice of garnet.

"Well, come along into the laboratory and see what happens. This is a glorious stone; seven carats, I'd say at a guess."

Shipman did not voice his own opinion. He almost knew, from its dark color, that the stone was an exceptional Siamese ruby.

"WILL it light up as the emerald did when I came before?" she asked, as Shipman ushered her into the windowless little examination room, with its three chairs and the complicated mechanism of the polyandroscope on its stand.

"We'll soon learn," he replied. "Yes, it'll light up; any transparent stone will do that, but not a solid or opaque mass. We have other tests for such gems as jade."

She settled herself comfortably and lit a cigarette. The action reassured him, oddly enough. It brought him down to earth. There would be no magic or hypnosis with a girl who smoked a cigarette, he reflected.

"Where did this stone come from?" he asked idly.

"I'd rather not say," she rejoined coolly. Afterward, he remembered her complete poise, her lack of any embarrassment. At the moment, it meant nothing.

With great care he placed the ruby in the central clasp. He had previously shown her the workings of this curious machine, this scientific eye which made use of everything from polarized light to ultra-violet rays.

"We're experimenting with a new enlarging apparatus here," he observed. "It seems successful, so far. Think of examining a jewel swollen to a thousand times its actual size. I'm curious to see what it'll do with this stone of yours. I'll give it the polarized light test first of all, to make sure whether it's a ruby or a spinel."

He turned the light-switch. The little room became dark, except for the almost imperceptible light-needle in the heart of the machine. As he seated himself beside her, Shipman steeled every nerve and muscle against possible hypnosis, against any influence she might exert.

The thin sliver of light grew more sharp. The curved silver reflector up above the machine took on a glow of light; immediately, Shipman knew this for a ruby, as he noted the purplish and yellow-red dispersions. Then the radiance slowly deepened in color, and across it shot deeper flashes of light, the final test.

"There's one thing settled; it's a ruby," Shipman said. "You see those flashes? As the stone is turned, it creates them. A spinel would produce none."

He checked himself abruptly, listening, conscious of a startled sensation. Music? Impossible, rankly impossible! The room was sound-proofed.

More and more rapidly the light increased. The glorious rich pure red of the stone, so incredibly enlarged, filled the ball of glass beneath the reflector and spread through the entire room.

Shipman stole a glance at Miriam Crews. She was sitting comfortably, easily, her eyes dilated and luminous, her chiseled equiline features radiant in that scarlet glow. Lord, what a woman! Shipman's pulses leaped—then leaped again in freshly startled surmise.

For he heard music. No doubt of it now. A tinkle of strings, and a voice singing—so far, so faint, as to be unreal.

"Oh! It is Provence, Provence!" murmurmured Miriam Crews. "The south of France—Provence, the land of ancient spells!"

Her low voice was tense.

What the devil did she mean? Shipman looked into the red glow of light. He had seen it a hundred times, but never like this. Never with a ring of music. Never to see something grow and take shape, there in the light. A face, a girl's face!

"Why, it's you," he blurted out. "It's your face!"

"Yes," she replied. "Yes. Melanie the peasant girl."

Shipman gripped his chair-arms hard. Incredulous, he stared, disbelieving his own senses. For something was moving there before his eyes. Not the silk, the striata, the hairlines of the corundum itself, but something that came larger and clearer and dissolved into many colors.

He saw green where there should be no green, where it was utterly impossible. He saw things moving; a goat, a white goat, and others. The voice and the tinkle of music grew clearer. The face became the figure of a girl, graceful in some kind of a ragged, flower-decked robe. . . .

SHE held a lute that was tricked out with ribbons. The tinkle of the strings was louder, as she plucked them. At one side stood a man, laughing, holding the reins of his horse. A man in queer costume, a handsome man with a sword at hip, a man gay and merry beyond belief.

"Why not?" spoke the girl, smiling. "You may be a minstrel without peer, my famous Robert of Provence, a troubador who sits among the stars and sings to the gods; but I can borrow your lute and strike a tune, and make my own words to it. The song of Melanie the goat girl."

She sang, with a lilting voice of thin silver:

Shut the door,
Draw the fire
A wind is up. . . .
'Tis my desire!

A burst of laughter, and she handed back the lute to the minstrel.

"Melanie—so that's your name!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Melanie the goat girl! Faith, you make a verse that shames my own, fair Melanie. I'll remember it. In fact, I'll sing your verse this very night before Count Rainier at the castle. Shall you be there?"

"I? A goat girl, at the castle?" She broke into ridicule. "You and your absurd talk—me, among the noble ladies and the great gentlemen!"

The troubador leaned forward, reached out to her hand, and brought it to his lips.

"You would grace any noble's hall in Provence, Melanie," he said gravely. "Look. I am alone. A minstrel of my reputation should have a boy, an apprentice, a faithful friend and servant."

His eye ran over her cropped hair, her slim boyish figure, and he nodded. "You'll do; why not? I'll be at the castle two days or so before going on to Marseilles. Come there with me. I have clothes in my pack that will fit you. Come, be my apprentice, my audiart, that Robert of Provence may not be ashamed before the lords and ladies."

Melanie eyed him narrowly. She was a wild free thing, a lissom creature of the sunshine and the hills, but she knew the ways of men. There was no guile in his frank and gay features, and her heart swelled toward him piteously.

"How could I dare?" she murmured. "If they found me out, they would hang me."

Robert of Provence laughed. "Oh, I'll put a spell on you," he said lightly. "Is not Provence the land of sleeping spells? I'll make up a sirvente about the glorious lost city of Gard that lies under the sea, while you change into these clothes; and singing, I'll place a spell on you."

"Very well," she said. "But tell me one thing. Why do you want me to go to the castle with you, as your audiart and esquire? You need none."

"No," he admitted, looking her in the eyes. "I want you, Melanie, because you're radiant and good and lovely, and that castle is a place of evil. Because I can trust you, and no one else there. And because we may go up and down the world together, and in token of my respect and love, you shall wear the flower that I won at the last tournament of troubadors in Toulouse."

He took from his neck a gold chain on which was hung a flower, made of a red ruby and many small stones, and put it over her head. Then he gave her certain garments from his pack, and sat down strumming at his lute, composing a sirvente as he sang, while she changed her clothes amid the rocks nearby.

Melanie was a practical person, being a goat-girl. She knew very well that beneath this jongleur's gay talk lay something grim and dark; under the half mystic poesy was some hard and trenchant reality. Robert of Provence, in other words, had something afoot; yet she trusted him, and felt she could trust him always. He was that kind of man.

"If you have need of me, I'm ready," she said.

He slung the lute over his shoulder and swore joyously at sight of her. The green furred surcoat cloaked her slight figure. With her cropped hair, the rosy jewel at her throat, the slim green legs and healthy feet, she looked the boy all over. Her dark beauty, the calm gravity of her eyes, aided in this.

"By Saint Dalmatz, you're perfect!" he cried. "Eh? What makes you think I have need of you?"

"I'm no fool," she said, smiling a little. He took her hand and kissed it again.

"Right. Tonight, I'll tell you the reason, after you've looked at certain people and have told me what's in their hearts. Your eyes have the gift of clear vision, Melanie. Have you any family to miss you?"

"None," she said. "I've drifted, since my mother died, with the goats."

"Drift now with me," said he, and aided her to a seat astride the pack-horse, and then scrambled into his own saddle.

TO MELANIE, it was all a dream, as the castle rose ahead of them in the afternoon warmth. A dream, an escape into the great world; she, the goat-girl, the despised peasant, suddenly transformed into the apprentice of a minstrel. And he, indeed, one of the greatest of all minstrels, acclaimed on every side, welcomed at every hearth, a famous man and known throughout Provence.

And he had need of her. Small wonder that her heart flowed to him as they rode on, and that the dream endured.

Never in her life had she been within the castle walls; yet she had a natural poise and self-assurance which would suffice. On the ride, Robert of Provence talked with her, quietly telling her this and that; how one would address Count Rainier or the ladies, how food was served, a thousand trifling niceties of life among the great.

And, as he talked, she realized from little things that tonight or the next day came some crisis, that he was not here by chance, that life or death for more than one would hang somehow upon what her eyes told him.

As they rode up to the castle, he was humming the refrain of her song.

Shut the door,
Draw the fire!
A wind is up . . .
'Tis my desire!

"Wonderful!" he said. "Simple words, simple things are ever the most wonderful. Look! Between those two hills in the south —you see? The towers of Perpignan, miles and miles away: Perpignan, of ancient magic, oldest city in Provence—some say in all the world."

She thrilled to the distant view. Perpignan, whose story went back beyond man's memory to the distant time when what was now beneath the sea rose fair and glorious, even the vanished city of Gard. She had heard vaguely of these things, in the chimney-corner mutterings of old folk. Provence was truly a land of spells.

Thus they came up to the castle gate. Soldiers greeted them with joyful voices, and as the name of Robert of Provence resounded, the troubador was welcomed as a great lord. Ladies tossed roses from the battlements, and purple thyme, and the sparkling yellow flowers of acacias.

Robert saluted one and all very gayly. He struck hands with Count Rainier and the others, and they greeted him as *monsenhir,* respectfully, as an equal. If there was a gnawing anxiety beneath his ringing laughter and glowing words, none guessed it.

To Melanie, everything was a dazzling blur. She could only gape around and try to keep herself unremarked. And a prince, a real prince!

True enough; here was young Alfonso of Castile, who knew Robert and embraced him warmly. He insisted upon exchanging garments on the spot, here in the courtyard—both of them stripping to the buff amid great hilarity and applause. This was an honor frequently paid a prince of troubadors by a prince of the blood, the honor indeed being considered quite mutual. It must be said that in this instance Robert was the gainer, his garments being more ennobled by age and poesy than by their condition.

Melanie was still in a daze, that evening, as she stood behind the chair of Robert and served him at meat in the great hall. She was dazed by the knights and lords, the heady wine, the lofty vaulted roof, the glorious ladies. But she took good note of the people who sat here above the salt.

There was a challenge to music. A wandering Spanish minstrel and Almeric of Orange competed; then Robert took up his lute and began a *tenson,* a lengthy piece. His voice was like a bell; the words told of Roland and the horn, and the slaughter of those princely men in the mountain pass. It was not, however, as other songs told of the matter. When the shouting and applause were finished, the Prince of Castile beckoned the minstrel.

"Why," he asked, "did you sing that Roland was not betrayed? Why did you sing that he was cut down by a Goth named Timala? All the world knows he was betrayed by the false Gamelin, and was killed by the Saracens."

"No, lord prince!" replied Robert, smiling. "Those were lies put out to fool the world. He was followed and cut off by the Goths, because he and the Franks had threatened their liberties. The spirits of the dead have whispered to me of this and other matters; it is well known that Provence is a land of ancient wizardry. And there's a saying about royalty which should interest you."

"What is it?" demanded the prince.

"That princes from another land cannot sleep safe in Provence unless they possess the horn of Roland and the sword of Charlemagne."

Melanie understood that Robert had discovered some plot and was trying to warn the prince; but Alfonso was not the man to comprehend any such warning. And, at this instant, the troubador Almeric of Orange struck into a resounding lay in regard to the greatness of Castile and its wars against the Moors.

This pleased the prince. He was a slender young man, beardless, very pleasant and kindly, gentle of speech. But Count Rainier's brows drew down above his sharp eyes; and the Lord of Beziers, who was also a guest here, fingered the dagger at his girdle angrily.

NOW there was hard drinking, whereat Robert of Provence did his part. Only his audiart noted that the floor under his chair, thick with bones and husks and rushes, became wet with spilled wine. And later, when they were alone in the chamber assigned them, the troubador loosened the collar of his royal velvet jerkin, and laughed softly.

"Ho, Melanie; Not so drunk as seemed, eh? Look out of the window at the moon. Take my lute and sing me a verse to clear my head."

She uncovered the lute obediently and went to the casement, and pricked the strings. Her thin voice lifted sweetly to the starry night.

A bird at dawn,
A cloud at noon,
A song at dusk . . .
Are Melanie's.

A flower that fades,
A star that falls,
A day that dies . . .
Are Melanie's!

Robert came close and plucked away the lute from her hands.

"What, you sing of sadness?"

"No, of fear," she said, her eyes wide in the rushlight. "Fear of them all, and fear for you. Fear of eyes, of evil mouths, of harsh hands. And your warning quite missed Alfonso."

"I know it," said he, and sat down heavily. "What think you of Beziers?"

"Weak and treacherous. He eyes Prince Alfonso as an owl eyes a mouse that is caught far from shelter at dusk."

"So! Yet he is a great lord and a knight of honor. And the count?"

"Count Rainier? Greedy; his loose mouth twitches when he eyes a jewel or a woman. When he shook hands with you, Robert, his eyes lied."

"I feared so," he said, and sighed. "I promised to meet the Prince of Castile here, and came; I did not know he would bring only two knights. You noted them?"

"Proud men, yes; but they looked more at Rainier than at their master."

Robert put out his hand and extinguished the light.

"That settles it. Sleep; take the bed, I'll take the couch. Tomorrow death is close upon us. Saint Trophine defend us, and give me courage!"

Melanie was too utterly weary to ask why.

SHE slept late; the sun was half-morning high when she wakened, to find herself alone in the room. She dressed, and hung the jewel about her neck, looking long at the red stone in its heart. The play of sunlight on the gem delighted her.

A servant brought food and wine. Presently came Robert, closing the door and looking hard at her, with lines graven in his strong, fine face.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked, afraid at his air.

"Yes; you did not say how the Prince of Castile looked to your eyes."

"Master, you did not ask."

"I ask now."

"He looked to me like a man who thinks all other men are honorable."

With an oath, Robert of Provence began to stride up and down the room.

"You see? A trap. For him and me both. I was bound to come in honor, and I came. Now I cannot get speech with him, cannot see him, cannot warn him. They want his life, they want mine; and there is no help. Advise me, goat-girl! Advise me!"

"Then tell me the truth," she said quietly. He halted and stared at her. "You did not bring me here for the reason you said, *monsenhir*. You suspected a trap, yet, you came. You misdoubted these men, yet you came, and brought me. Why?"

A groan broke from him, and his hands fell.

"You're right. I evaded, Melanie. It's true that I wanted to see these men through your eyes, but there was something else. You have the look and stature and air of the young man himself, the heir to Castile. It came to me that in case of need you might don his garb and be taken for him, perhaps by night, while I rode off with him. After coming to know you, I repented; I could not do such a thing. Better to let him, a man, take what haps rather than that you, a slim sweet girl—"

"Oh!" Her face lit up suddenly. "Don't be foolish, Robert of Provence. Repent not, but be glad; let me serve you and him with my heart and mind and body, if I may."

"It is impossible," he said, gloomily. "I cannot reach him, to warn him."

"But I can," she exclaimed.

He shook his head. "No. You and I both are too well watched."

"You know the fine ladies here," she said. "Go and bring me some of their garments. If I can play the goat-girl and the prince, I can also play a fine lady. And here—take back your jewel, lest I lose it."

Robert of Provence stayed her hand.

"No. Keep it; you deserve the honor, not I," he said, and departed heavily.

AT SUNSET, the apartment given over to Prince Alfonso was gay with voices and splendid with great folk. Beziers and Count Rainier and the prince had been hawking most of the afternoon; now they relaxed, in the pleasant hour or two before dinner. The prince had changed into a silver-cloth surcoat bearing the arms of Castile, belted with a jeweled sword, and his hat was of black Genoa velvet, pricked out with ermine tails. He was a lordly figure despite his youth.

Something of a minstrel himself, he fingered a lute and sang a song, while the ladies in their jewels and fine gauds laughed and applauded. The count and Beziers were at the chess-board, and the two Castilian knights were in a corner with two ladies, and other knights were gambling at backgammon, when the girl came in.

The guards at the doors passed her respectfully through, deeming her one of the great ladies. A scarf of apple green enclosed her gold-red hair and hid its shortness; she wore a dress and bodice of sheerest white, the ruby flower ablaze between her breasts, and over dress and scarf and hair were strewn bell-like yellow acacia blossoms, so that she seemed some radiant woodland spirit as she moved.

Count Rainier looked up from the chess-board, and his jaw fell. She saluted the young prince and approached, smiling, to look into his eager eyes.

"Your Highness of Castile, I am commanded hither to amuse you and give you good appetite for meat and wine," she said blithely. "But this cannot be before so large a company!"

There was a burst of laughter. The ladies took for granted that Count Rainier had invented some new form of amusement for the prince; the count, seeing the ladies laugh among themselves and whisper, immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was some jest of theirs. What hesitation there might have been was banished by the prince, who stood up and took Melanie's hand: the invitation in her smiling eyes fired his blood, which was, after all, princely.

"Greeting, fair flower lady," he said. "Come with me into the inner room, while my two honest knights guard the door against intrusion. Ho, someone! Lights in the inner chamber."

The word was passed and candles were

brought; the sunset was dying out and dusk was creeping over the golden land of Provence. The ladies laughingly crowded about Count Rainier, demanding where he had found so charming a surprise. He, nothing loath to assume the sweet blame, winked and looked knowing, and held his peace.

But Prince Alfonso led the goat-girl into the inner chamber, while his two knights, grinning widely, barred the door behind them. The young prince, stooping to kiss Melanie's hand, got swift astonishment. She drew away, and clasped his arm with firm strong fingers.

"Look, my lord!" She touched the jewel at her throat. "Do you know this? The prize won by Robert of Provence?"

"My faith! Of course it is!" he exclaimed. "Who are you?"

"Nobody," she said fiercely. "Listen and don't talk. It's a plot against you. I've come from Robert to warn you that you must get away, swiftly!"

"So?" He betrayed neither surprise nor alarm, but regarded her coolly. "I've seen you somewhere, before now."

"I am Monsenhir Robert's audiart," she said, "dressed as a woman in order to reach you."

"You make a charming one—"

"Stop it! I tell you, there's not time to waste," she broke in. "Your two knights are false; they'll betray you. Robert is waiting below the castle entrance, with horses. The gates will be closed in another fifteen minutes; act, act, act at once!"

The prince shrugged. "Impossible. I tried twice this afternoon to ride away, while we were hawking. They watched me too closely; then I was certain of the trap. I was a fool to come."

"Worse fool to stay," said she. "Change clothes with me now, swiftly. Go down the little side stairs from this room. You'll find a guard at the bottom, but he won't stop a woman in the gloaming. You'll get past."

Prince Alfonso laughed a little, shrugged again, and tossed off his hat trimmed with ermine tails. . . .

OUTSIDE, in the antechamber, resounded laughter and raillery galore. Beziers and Count Rainier went on with their game, and the count was much admired for so gallantly entertaining the royal visitor.

Two of the ladies, then two others, and presently most of the company, clustered about the two Spanish knights, with giggles and low talk, praying them to relax their guard ever so little. They wanted a peep at the royal love-making, all of them. No harm, said they, to slide the door open a crack!

Meantime, over the chess-board, Beziers flung his host a growl and a snarl.

"Clever rogue, Rainier, to provide him with a wench! Now's the time. What are you waiting for?"

"Eh?" Count Rainier was startled at the question. Then, comprehending, a twist came to his lips. What, you wouldn't give the young fool a last kiss?"

"Bosh! Our lives are at stake, aren't they?" said the practical Beziers. "Let him die upon a kiss. A pleasant death for any gentle knight," he added with a sneer.

The door, which had been a trifle open, closed again. There was a burst of giggles and low voices. One of the ladies rushed up to the two lords, as they rose from the table.

"Oh, you should see him simpering," she cried, laughing. "They opened the door a crack. He's playing the lute and singing to her. Come and take a peep, do!"

The two men exchanged a glance, went to the door, and the company made place. Amid silence, the door was slid open and they peered into the inner room. There, sure enough, was the prince, his back to them, a lute in his hand. His voice came to them in a simple clear cadence, like the voice of a girl.

Close the door
And draw the fire!
The wind is up . . .
'Tis my desire!

Beziers drew the door softly shut again and turned, chuckling.

"You were right, Rainier. A kiss will follow the song; let him get occupied. And look out for that sword of his. He can use it— Hello! What's all this about?"

They swung around, as the company hurriedly scattered. One of the guards from down below came rushing in. He was too excited for any salutations.

"My lord, my lord count! Horses on the road!" he panted. "A woman went out, past the guards, a girl in a white dress. The horses sounded immediately after, as if waiting for her."

Beziers and the count exchanged one glance of startled surmise.

"Ha!" said Beziers, gripping at his dagger. "Whatever it means, Rainier, act first and talk after."

"Aye. Aside, all of you aside," barked the count. "Beziers, have the doors closed behind us, for this is our affair."

He flung wide the door, hurled himself into the room beyond, and Beziers followed; then the door was closed again. There would be no luck in having witnesses to the killing.

Steel aglitter, the two came face to face with the prince. It was his hat, his surcoat, his jeweled sword—but not himself. The pale, frightened face that looked into their hot oaths was not that of Alfonso. And there was no one else visible.

"Ha!" Beziers checked his thrust. "It's that girl of yours, Rainier. He's gone in her guise—"

"Who in the devil's name are you?" burst out the count. Not waiting for any reply, he drove forward with his point, straight for her throat. He missed, for she ducked back; savagely, Rainier hurled himself at her, and Beziers scuffled around the *prie-dieu* to get at her from the side.

"Whoever you are, I'll have you flayed alive for this night's work," snarled Count Rainier.

He was upon her now. The prince's jeweled sword was out, and made feeble play against his blade; he twisted his own about it, twisted it from her hand, sent it flying across the room. Laughing cruelly, he drove a thrust at her breast . . .

The point pierced her not. The blade bent, sprang back, recoiled.

"Witchcraft!" exclaimed the count. "Pull her down, Beziers—"

BEZIERS yelped shrill, sharp warning. Something rushed and swooped, forced the girl's figure aside, sent a glittering blade playing at the two men. Half fearful of more witchcraft, the count recoiled. As he did so, Beziers pitched forward into the light and lay there, blood pouring from his throat. The thirsty blade reached for Count Rainier.

"You! *Pardieu*—you!" gulped the count, recognizing Robert of Provence. "You, his friend—"

"Aye, he's gone and I'm here, traitor," said Robert, gasping a little as he fought. "You who try—to murder women—"

His blade darted in. Rainier collapsed; he was pricked in the thigh. Not to death, indeed, but enough to cripple him for many a day. The troubador dove forward, knelt above him, twisted the golden ring from his finger, and looked at the white, stricken Melanie.

"You thought I'd abandon you? No, a thousand times no! Throw a cloak about your shoulders. The prince is gone, but two horses are awaiting us."

"No, no," she broke out. "Impossible! The gates are closed now."

"Aye," said the troubador gayly. Laughing, he held up the ring. "This signet opens the little postern gate by the tower—so hurry! . . . What's wrong? Death of my life! Blood? You were pierced?"

He came close to her, looking at the blood on her bosom. She faced him confusedly.

"No. His sword—the point caught on the jeweled flower, *monsenhir!* It was all broken, and scratched me."

He checked her hastily. Voices were at the door, feet were kicking at it. One sweep of his hand knocked the candles over; an arm about Melanie, he guided her to the stairs and closed the little door behind them.

"By the time they remember these stairs

we'll be safe," he muttered. "Careful of the man below! Had to kill him, when I returned."

"You came back, just for me?" she gasped.

"No! For mine honor!" swore Robert of Provence. "Careful, now; here's the bottom. Don't step on him. Now for the street, the gate, the horses. Are you all right?"

"Yes," she answered.

His lute was safe with the horses; and if hot pursuit deviled the night roads, there were roundabout ways that proved clear. Thus it happened that in the sunrise they came close to a rocky slope, with green beyond and the white forms of goats; a cry of amazed recognition broke from Melanie.

"Back again! My own place—look, there among the stones are my old clothes."

She dismounted, hurriedly, all in a fever. Robert, also dismounting, laughed.

"What, Melanie? Look, child, come with me! On to Marseilles, on to Orange; there my wife Elaine waits. God knows I've given her no very happy life, yet she's a true sweet woman, and I shall ever remain her gentle knight—"

Melanie broke from him abruptly. She darted among the rocks. The lordly garments of the prince were flung out; presently she reappeared in her ragged gown, clutching at the jewel hanging under her throat.

"This is all broken. Only the red stone is left!"

"Keep it, keep it, for it's yours," Robert broke in impatiently. "Come here and let me reason with you, wild nymph!"

She came not near him. Something flashed and glittered in the level sunbeams, to fall beside him with a clash; the gay belt and sword of Alfonso, and the lissom coat of steel links that had preserved her tender body from the sword.

Melanie turned and began to ascend the hillside toward the goats above. His voice checked her briefly.

"Melanie, Melanie! Don't leave me like this. Don't you love me a little?"

"Too much, Robert." She turned and looked back at him, not smiling nor laughing now. "There can only come sorrow of further traveling. You speak your wife's name at the end instead of at the beginning. Go back to her and resume the life that belongs to you. Two days of it are enough for me. I prefer my own . . ."

She turned and went on, her words dying out along the steep hillside. The green of trees and sward died away, merging into the red glory sunrise. This passed again; the sunrise itself died, and was gone.

•

SHIPMAN, with a start, came to himself. He found before his eyes only the radiance of the enlarged ruby, all its flaws plain to see. His breath came fast as he turned to the girl beside him.

"They were real—that was yourself! You were Melanie. See here, Miss Crews, you must agree to come again, soon, to try this out with other stones."

She smiled. "I'll come again, yes, with the stones that appeal to me. But give me my ruby back, quickly. I'll be late for my appointment."

He took it from the machine. Before he realized it, she had gone. He thought to glance at his watch. On the first occasion, time seemed to have halted altogether. But now he stared, incredulous. They had been in the examination room an hour and twenty minutes!

He was still staring, when his assistant approached, with a letter.

"Mr. Shipman, you'd better know about this, in case anything turns up. The police in Beverly Hills have sent it to everyone in the trade. It's about the Negeletti ruby."

"Eh?" Shipman took the letter and the photograph and stared at them dumbly, blankly. He was still thinking of old Provence, of the scenes he had just witnessed.

"Stolen last week," went on his assistant. "Not one of the world's wonders as a ruby, of course, but interesting for its historical associations. Brought from the Orient in the time of the Crusades, you know. Siamese ruby, a trifle over seven

carats. Exact details are there; they think it might be offered for recutting, by the thief."

Shipman's eyes focused on the letter, on the photograph. Recognition leaped in his brain; incredulous recognition. It was the very stone. Even to the gold girdle around it. The very stone!

For a moment he sat staring in silent amazement at the photograph of the gem he knew so well.

He wakened suddenly. "Get me Crews, the broker, on the phone."

Two minutes later, he was speaking to the broker, whom he knew by name only.

"Crews? This is Andrew Shipman, of the Gem Laboratories speaking. I'd like to know where to get in touch with your daughter, if you'll be so kind."

"My daughter?" repeated the broker.

"Yes. Miss Miriam."

"You must be drunk," came the indignant reply. "I haven't any daughter, man! I've never been married, thank heaven! You've got the wrong man."

He hung up abruptly, and Shipman was left with an even more baffling mystery. But he had to find the right man—and quickly.

Ten minutes of frantic telephoning told Shipman that there was no right man. There was no Miriam Crews. He sat looking blankly at his office wall, faced by the one inescapable conviction.

He had had the Negeletti ruby here, in his hands, half an hour previously. And the girl whom he had so admired, the girl whom he still admired with all his heart, the girl who had made a fool of him—was the thief.

A gun crashed as Smooth turned; and a voice called, "Okay, gentlemen—get on with the party!"

Crooked Caribbean Cross

By BORDEN CHASE

STARTING out in New York to trace a gun that should never have turned up there, SMOOTH KYLE and GILDA GARLAND eventually landed in Bolivia and found themselves up against an infinitely tougher assignment: fighting a sinister Fifth Column menace that spread its tentacles over all of South America and encircled their homeland as well.

INSPECTOR MCNEARY of the Treasury Department, who is directing their work from New York, is profoundly worried; for the safety of the nation is directly threatened by the operations of German agents, aided by American and South American gamblers.

The set-up:

BIG RENO CORDOZA, a Manhattan toughie, was found carrying an automatic that had been shipped to England with a consignment of arms. Radio reports indicated that the *Clivedenning*, the ship carrying these arms, had been torpedoed and sunk.

So *where* and *how* did Big Reno get the gun? As he is about to tell, he dies suddenly, victim of *curare*—deadly South American poison—mysteriously left on a sliver in his shoe.

RAMON OBALDA, a lawyer who visited Big Reno shortly before his death, is found to be directing certain mysterious activities of JOSEPH GARADO and MIGUEL PANZA, South American gamblers operating a place on Madison Avenue. And these two employed Reno as a steerer before he was picked up by police.

story started in the Argosy for October 5

Investigation of Obalda runs into a dead end when he is found, killed by *curare,* at the place where he was supposed to meet his boss; and the boss is gone, undiscovered.

MEANWHILE Smooth, having shot Panza to save the life of MARIA VALERA, a Bolivian singer, flies with Maria to Cuba in pursuit of Garado and STEVE DREYFUS, a gambler who has been working with the South Americans. Gilda, left in New York, continues the investigation at that end.

With the Cuban Captain TEODORO SEIJO, Smooth discovers a German arms hideaway and submarine base in an island cave; and later, having a glimpse of Maria's brother, CARLOS VALERA, he is sure that Carlos was among those present when he ran into a gun fight with the Germans there.

But Captain Seijo is unable to check further on the Valeras. When he visits the home of RUFINO PONSICO, Bolivian patriot with whom they were staying in Havana, he finds that all three have fled, leaving no trace.

Steve's next act is to stir up STACEY BELLVILLE, a gambler operating in Havana, whom he suspects of having some connection with Garado and Dreyfus. With a pilot, ENTRIALGO, and a plane provided by Seijo, Smooth chases Bellville to La Paz, Bolivia; and on the way they are shot at by a blue plane.

Once they reach La Paz, things happen fast. Much to Kyle's surprise the American Consul, BILL CONOVER, takes a personal interest in him—though Smooth is sure he never saw the man before.

Then at dinner he and Entrialgo meet two Bolivian beauties: DOLORES CONCORDIA and ROSA PRIETO. Suddenly remembering the name of PABLO PRIETO, local politician who belongs to a strong pro-German group, Smooth concludes that the girl has been sent out to get him—and becomes interested in her a once.

Together they go to visit a new gambling place that has opened up; and Smooth gets another shock. Working in the place are MARTY DOYLE and TOM BENSON, gamblers whom he knew in New York. And for the payoff: the beautiful Esposita, who runs the place, turns out to be—none other than Gilda Garland, whom Smooth thought safely back in New York!

GILDA explains that she has established this place as a front in order to join forces with Smooth in La Paz, where she logically expected him to be. Her system, however, is the opposite of that used by Garado and Panza in New York: her fixed wheels rob the small-timers, and pay off the big politicians.

After they talk this over, Smooth leaves with Rosa Prieto, and they set out for the gambling establishment of SEÑOR DULTANTO—another friend of Garado's. Instructing his pet cab driver, PETE QUILLACOLLO, to stand by, Smooth enters and meets Dultanto; asks to get in a poker game.

But he is watchful. Dultanto looks about as sinister as Mickey Mouse; his smile would put most people at their ease. But it lifts the short hairs on the back of Smooth's neck, and makes him wonder what is going to happen next. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

MEET ME WITH SABERS

THREE men were seated at a green-covered table. Two were obviously Germans. The third was wearing the uniform of an army officer. Dultanto introduced them as Herr Mueller, Herr Mittelstaedt, and Colonel Salgar.

Mueller looked up and grunted when Smooth explained that he spoke almost no Spanish and less German.

"Dot is nodding new," he said gruffly. "You Yankees of the North do nod bodder to learn. You know no bedder."

"Thanks," said Smooth easily. "We *have* been stupid—about you guys." He took out Panza's wallet and bought chips. "What are we playing—anything opens?"

"Si señor," said Colonel Salgar. "And there is no limit—*comprendo?"*

"And we play only for cash," added Herr Mittelstaedt, in perfect English that carried a slight Oxford accent.

"Then let's hope you've got enough," said Smooth.

The cards were shuffled and cut. Colonel Salgar dealt and Mittelstaedt passed. Mueller opened for a hundred bolivianos. Smooth glanced at his hand and found four queens winking at him. He moved a pile of chips toward the center of the table and said, "Up!"

"Herr Gott!" cried Mueller. "You know what you do? You raise two thousand bolivianos!"

"My error," said Smooth. He moved an-

other stack forward. "I meant to raise it four thousand."

Mueller threw down his cards. Mittelstaedt looked again at his hand and tossed it into the discard. Colonel Salgar smiled and pushed a stack of chips to the center.

"It is a pleasure to play with you, *señor,*" he said. "I will stay." He picked up the deck. "How many cards?"

"Three."

The officer's eyes widened. "I beg your pardon—how many?"

"Three," said Smooth again as he discarded.

Colonel Salgar flicked three cards across the table. He dealt one card to himself and looked long at Señor Dultanto who stood at a little distance from Smooth's shoulder. Then he discarded and picked up the single card.

"It is your bet, *señor,*" he said. The laughter had gone out of his voice.

Smooth looked at his draw—a four of clubs. The second was a nine of clubs. The third was a king of diamonds. Now he was sure he had walked into a cold deck. The four queens had been fed to him with the expectation that he would raise heavily before the draw. Mueller and Mittelstaedt would then, of course drop out.

• But Colonel Salgar had dealt himself the five, six, seven and eight of clubs, along with an off card to prevent him from holding a pat hand. That might have appeared suspicious. But no matter how much Smooth raised before the draw, it would have been quite legitimate for Salgar to stay and try to fill his double-end straight flush.

Had Smooth decided to stand pat with his four queens, the next card would have gone to the dealer: a four of clubs. This would have given Salgar a straight flush from the four to the eight.

On the other hand, if Smooth had pretended he was trying to improve two pairs and had called for one card, he would have drawn the four. The next card—the nine of clubs—would fill the top end of Salgar's straight flush.

It was an old gag: one seldom used in fast company. But Colonel Salgar was evidently not a professional. He had brought in the cold deck too quickly and Smooth had used the routine method of spoiling a fixed deal. He had simply tossed away one pair of queens and held the other pair.

Now he glanced quickly at his cards and pushed a stack of chips to the center.

Salgar shook his head. "It is yours, *señor.*"

Smooth pulled in the chips. "Thanks a lot, Colonel. Too bad you didn't fill. We could have made it an interesting hand."

"No doubt," said Salgar.

THE deal went to Mittelstaedt and Mueller, then came to Smooth. His fingers were a little out of practice but he made them behave with sufficient agility to confuse the men at the table. Señor Dultanto was standing near the entrance of the room and Smooth caught an amused expression on the gambler's face as the play started again.

"Won't you join us?" asked Smooth.

"I think not," said Dultanto.

Smooth shrugged, glanced at his hand and realized he had been just a bit sloppy in the deal. He waited for Mittelstaedt to open and wondered if the German had the kings that were intended for him. When Mittelstaedt put out a stack of chips Smooth felt better. Mueller stayed. So did Smooth. Salgar raised. The others played along and Smooth dug deep to fill his straight.

"Make it big," he said casually to Mittelstaedt.

The German smiled. "You seem to be lucky."

"Why not?" said Smooth. "I'm dealing."

Colonel Salgar lifted an eyebrow. "I hope you are joking, *señor.* We do not encourage cheating in La Paz. The last stranger who tried it was—er—crossed off the list. I think you know what I mean."

"Perfectly," said Smooth. "The last stranger was crossed, and the last native was—er—double-crossed."

Colonel Salgar's dark face colored and he studied his cards. Study did him no good. Nor did it help Mittelstaedt. Smooth's flush beat the German's threes and again Smooth reached for the pile.

A tall, handsome man with a black goatee and iron-gray hair had come into the room. He watched the play until the deal came around to Smooth again and then looked at Salgar. "Do you mind if I join?" he asked quietly.

The colonel gestured toward an empty chair at Smooth's right. "It is an honor, Señor Valera. Who could object to playing with one of the *gente decente?*"

Valera bowed to each of the players and seated himself. He turned to Salgar. "The sons of good families, as you call us, have to ask many favors in La Paz these days. Sometimes I wonder why our forefathers bothered to fight with Bolivar for freedom if we are now to hand our country to foreigners without a struggle."

Tension had come to the room. Mueller and Mittelstaedt said nothing but it was obvious they were displeased. Colonel Salgar seemed ashamed. He introduced Smooth who immediately offered the cards to Señor Valera.

While the tall grandee riffled the deck between his slender fingers Smooth thought of another Valera whose fingers were equally slim. Marie Valera—the girl who had saved his life, offered to help him, and had then disappeared with her brother.

Undoubtedly this gentleman was a relative. That he was a man of family and importance was evident by the silence that had greeted his remark.

COLONEL SALGAR grew more ill at ease as the game progressed. The Germans were annoyed but made no comment. For a time the stakes were small. Smooth played honestly but watched Colonel Salgar. He caught the officer dealing seconds to Valera and filling hands for the Germans.

Then Smooth decided it was time for fireworks. He started an interesting story and riffled the cards a dozen times, building a set of hands. The story continued, and still he kept shuffling.

"You will rub off the spots, *señor,* if you do not deal soon," said Salgar at length.

"Sorry," said Smooth. "I'm just trying to keep the game honest. Nothing like a long riffle once in a while."

He put the deck in front of Valera and held his breath. The tall gentleman touched the deck but did not cut the cards. And this was what Smooth wanted.

There was dynamite in this deal. Colonel Salgar opened, with aces and fours. Mittelstaedt raised on three tens and Mueller raised again on three queens.

Then it was Valera's turn. He saw Mueller's raise and kicked it slightly. Smooth dropped out. Colonel Salgar looked again at his aces and fours, and decided to stay.

There were two more raises that caught Salgar in the middle, but he was in for money and had to stay. Then it was time for the draw.

"One," said the colonel. Smooth flicked him an ace to make a full house. He looked at Mittelstaedt.

"Two for me," said the German. He got another ten to make four, folded his cards and tried to look bored.

"Zwei!" grunted Mueller. "Doo card for me!"

Smooth spun the fourth queen across the table along with a deuce. The German's eyes popped and he leaned forward eagerly. Then Smooth turned to Valera.

"One card, *señor,*" said the tall gentleman.

"A pleasure," said Smooth.

He dealt to Valera, put down the deck and leaned back in his chair. Dultanto had left the room for a moment but now he stood near the entrance. Salgar checked and Mittelstaedt bet. Mueller kicked it and Señor Valera bought additional chips. He piled up two stacks and pushed them toward the center of the table.

"Herr Gott!" said Mueller. He dug out a fat wallet and put it on the table. "I push it up—so!"

"Why not wait for your turn?" said

Smooth. He turned to the colonel. "Up to you."

Salgar looked at his hand. He looked at Smooth Kyle. Then he tossed his cards aside and shook his head. Mittelstaedt shrugged, saw the raise and came again. Mueller was almost blubbering in his eagerness as he boosted.

Once more Señor Valera raised. Mueller's lips were trembling now. So were his hands as he bought more chips. He waited impatiently for Mittelstaedt and then kicked it again.

Each time the pot grew Smooth turned to Colonel Salgar and smiled sweetly. At length both Germans were forced to call.

"A straight flush," said Valera quietly. He showed his cards—the same cards Salgar had tried to deal to himself earlier in the game. "The four, five, six, seven, and eight of clubs."

"And how do you like them apples?" Smooth asked Salgar. "Isn't that a beautiful hand, Colonel?"

"Very," said Salgar slowly. "If anyone but Señor Valera had held it, I might *possibly* believe there had been some cheating"

Valera's eyes grew bright. "You question my honesty, Colonel Salgar?"

"Not yours, *señor,*" said Salgar.

"Mine, perhaps?" said Smooth.

"And if I do?" said Salgar slowly. "Does that interest you, Señor Kyle?"

VALERA leaned forward quickly. "It interests me, greatly. I am not accustomed to having my friends insulted."

Salgar laughed. "Señor Kyle is your friend?"

"He is."

Mueller leaped to his feet. *"Ach! Mein lieber Gott!* Id is a trick! Dey are friends! Dis Yankee from de Nord gives goot cards to Valera!"

"You are a fat pig, Herr Mueller," said Valera quietly. "I will be happy to kill you in the morning."

Mittelstaedt was standing now. "Rather odd, I might add," he said in his affected Oxford drawl. "The *Andinos* are gamblers —quite. But seldom have I seen one of the *gente decente* condescend to play in the house of Señor Dultanto. Yes, it is rather odd."

Señor Valera smiled. "And you, too, Herr Mittelstaedt—it will be a pleasure to accommodate you." He turned to Colonel Salgar. "Would you care to join your friends, Colonel? I shall be glad to have my representative call upon you."

"I have no wish to duel with you, *señor,*" said the colonel. "If you insist, I can do nothing but oblige. But I have offered you no insult."

Smooth was enjoying this. "Perhaps the colonel would like to try a waltz with me? I'm not much with a sword, but I can toss slugs with you if it's in order."

Colonel Salgar's smile was thin. "I doubt that you will be in La Paz in the morning, Señor Kyle. Your kind seldom wait for the sun to come up."

"Aren't you going to be surprised!" said Smooth. He turned to Señor Valera. "Would you mind telling me just how I go about this dueling business?"

Valera frowned. "You are a visitor, *señor,* and I must warn you Colonel Salgar is an excellent shot. I know of only one person in La Paz who can surpass him." He turned to smile at Mittelstaedt and Mueller. "You gentlemen will have the honor to meet that man in the morning."

Mittelstaedt bowed. "As long as you have been kind enough to make the challenge, the choice of weapons rests with Herr Mueller and me. I think we both prefer the saber."

He glanced at his companion, and he could not keep the triumph out of his eyes.

"As you wish," said Valera. He glanced at his wrist watch. "Shall we dispense with formalities and agree to meet at six in the morning near the church on the Alto?"

Mueller grunted. "Dot is goot!"

Smooth drew a deep breath and looked at Salgar. "Do you get up that early, honeysuckle?"

"I shall be there," said the colonel sharply.

CHAPTER XXVII

FORCE IS ON THE MARCH!

HE LEFT the room, pausing to look wisely at Señor Dultanto who stood not far from the table. The gambler's smile was bland as ever. He bowed Mueller and Mittelstaedt out of the room and turned to Señor Valera.

"I am sorry, *señor,*" he said. "But in an establishment of this sort, it is not always possible to guarantee the behavior of each guest. This Yankee of the North is a stranger and—"

"That will be enough!" said Valera. "Señor Kyle is my friend!"

Dultanto bowed again and stepped aside. Valera motioned to the door and Smooth marched from the room. He looked about for Señorita Prieto but she was not in sight.

Valera walked quickly to the hall, took his hat, coat and cane from one of the white-coated attendants and held the door open for his newly made acquaintance. Smooth pulled his black felt low over one eye, tossed his top coat over his arm and swished out of the gambling joint with all the elegance of a movie actor playing in the Three Musketeers.

"Ah, me!" he said. "If taffy-head could only see me now!"

"Pardon?" said Valera.

"Just a random thought, *señor,*" said Smooth. He preceded Valera to the street, crooked a finger at Pete, the hackman, and opened the door for Valera. "May I drop you at your home?"

Valera stepped into the car and Pete moved close to Smooth. The hackman's eyes were wide in his round face. "You're with important man now; you know that, eh?" he whispered. When Smooth nodded the driver motioned toward the corner of the square.

"Skinny feller down there watching you. Waiting since you went in. When your girl came out alone he goes inside, then comes out again to wait."

"Thanks," said Smooth quietly.

He got into the car and Señor Valera gave the driver an address. They left the small square, reached the Prado and rolled along the wide avenue to the older section of the residential district. Here Pete turned into a curving driveway and stopped before a home of gray stone where tall Corinthian columns supported the rounded dome of an elaborate portico. Señor Valera gestured toward the house.

"There are but a few hours until morning," he said. "Will you be my guest?"

"A pleasure," said Smooth.

He paid off the driver and followed Valera. When a butler opened the door, Smooth walked into a magnificent entrance hall and drew a deep breath.

A grand stairway with a deep-piled red carpeting circled from the main floor to the upper stories. Marble busts stood in niches at each landing and the pearl-gray walls were heavily ornamented with gold frescoing. Off to the left was a drawing room and through the open door Smooth could see a gold-plated and richly carved grand piano, behind which hung a Sixteenth-Century tapestry.

SEÑOR VALERA spoke quickly to the butler and walked with Smooth to the library. Again Smooth found himself in a room whose furnishings had cost a sizeable fortune.

The cabinets that held the books were of heavily carved hardwood that matched the mantel above the wide stone fireplace. Here a half dozen long logs blazed on a pair of huge andirons. The easy chairs and lounges were covered with priceless brocades and on the paneled walls were four old masters.

"Very nice," said Smooth slowly. "Very nice indeed!"

"Much nicer than I deserve," said Valera. He motioned Smooth to an easy chair near the fire and sat facing him. "Like other *Andinos,* I did not appreciate my home until the war came."

"Andinos?" said Smooth, "I don't quite understand you."

"That is a term applied to those who live in the mountains—the descendants of

those who fought with Simon Bolivar, the Liberator. Our families came to this country long ago. In fact, my people helped to build the church near which we will meet those swine in the morning—the church of San Francisco. It was built in 1547 in the upper town that is called El Alto."

"That makes pikers of the boys who arrived on the *Mayflower,* doesn't it?"

Valera smiled. "Our people got here a few years earlier, but unfortunately their descendants did not have sense enough to hold what their fathers had built. I am an example, *señor.* The Valeras, like the Patinos and many other families, built this city from nothing but a wilderness. Our money came to us from the tin mines, the silver mines—and there was lead, zinc, bismuth, and even gold.

"We grew soft and left our homes to travel in Europe and build other homes in Paris and Rome and London. Now the war has driven us home again; and what do we find?"

"I'll pass," said Smooth quietly.

"We find," said Valera sorrowfully, "that Bolivia has been sold to the Germans. They are in the government—in the army—everywhere. Their money has corrupted the Bolivians who are in power. Germans dictate the policy of the country and rewrite its laws.

"Soon they will no longer place puppets in office and rule through them; they will turn the country into a fascist state and rule from Berlin."

Smooth was silent for a time. He watched the fire play along the logs and sipped the drink that the butler had put on the table at his elbow.

"There is a little piece of paper in a vault at Washington," he said after a time. "It's called the Monroe Doctrine. Have you ever heard of that, *señor?"*

Valera lifted one hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Paper will not stop a *blitzkrieg.* It has failed to stop infiltration. Action is needed—it is needed now before it is too late! But how can we act? What is there to do?"

He laughed bitterly and lifted his drink. "To night I went to Dultanto's hovel, knowing I would find such men as Mueller and Mittelstaedt there. It was my desire to provoke a quarrel with as many as possible and perhaps rid my country of the vermin. But when these are destroyed, others will take their places."

"Hold everything," said Smooth. "Do you mean you deliberately started that jam?"

"Naturally, *señor.* I knew you were dealing those cards from the bottom."

"Well, not exactly from the bottom." Smooth laughed. "But the idea is the same." He paused and looked across his glass at the tall aristocrat. "What else do you know about me, Señor Valera?"

"Only what my niece wrote in a letter that arrived this morning. Her name is Maria Valera, and she is living at the home of Señor Ponsico in Havana."

"What did she tell you?"

"That she had met you in New York while she was watching Panza and Garado. She writes that you are in the employ of the United States Government and have been trying to trace a gun found on Reno Cordoza before he was killed. She thinks the gun in some way concerns Bolivia and wants to know whether it is safe to work with you."

Smooth laughed. "Since then she's decided to work with the other side—or something."

Valera's heavy eyebrows drew down. "That calls for an explanation, *señor.* Maria Valera is a patriot!"

SMOOTH studied the fire while he tried to line up this new situation. Maria's story had been good until the day Smooth left Cuba. She claimed to be working for her country and trying to learn what Garado and Panza were up to. But then had come that business with Carlos—and her disappearance. Now this obviously wealthy *Andino* claimed her as his niece.

Again Smooth juggled the figures. Señor Dultanto appeared to be the Number One man here in La Paz. He had arranged Bellville's flight from Arica, and had un-

doubtedly sent the fighting plane to stop Smooth and Entrialgo.

The chances were even that Steve Dreyfus and Joseph Garado were somewhere in town, and it was a safe bet the seaplane had landed that load of armament not too far from La Paz.

Dultanto knew about Smooth. He had sent Rosa Prieto to walk him into that creepy joint on the square. The place was a set-up for a murder. Still, it was reasonable to suppose that Dultanto and the mob might hesitate to order a United States Government agent knifed during a card game. That would cause an investigation by the Consulate—something that would not help the Dultanto crowd.

A challenge to a duel was something else again. Such things were still done south of the Equator. And if Smooth were killed in the morning in front of witnesses, that might do the trick very nicely.

So far the figures were adding. Now it was simply a question of whether Señor Valera was telling the truth, or whether he too was part of the mob and had staged an elaborate setting for a fast play.

True, Smooth had provoked the quarrel by stacking the cards. The rest had seemed to be on the level. But these Latins were proving to be a clever people. They might be lousy lovers, but they certainly knew the art of double cross.

"Something is puzzling you, *señor?*" asked Valera finally.

"Yes," said Smooth. "You are."

"Why?"

"I want to believe you but common sense tells me not to."

Valera smiled. "I do not blame you. But in a few hours you will know. Herr Mueller and Herr Mittelstaedt are members of the German group here in La Paz. When I kill them, perhaps you will trust me. Until then, keep your secret, *señor.*"

"THAT sounds all right to me," said Smooth. "But while we're waiting for morning, would you mind giving me the political set-up in La Paz?"

"Gladly," said Valera. "At present the leading families of Bolivia are bringing pressure upon the government to restore the rule of the land to the people of Bolivia. The same is happening in other countries.

"The *Andinos,* or as we are sometimes called, the Yankees of the South, know *Der Tag* is close. We are doing all in our power to clean the fascist influences from our governments and work in co-operation with the United States.

"Here in La Paz we have been making some headway. Given a few more months, we might rid our government of all German and Italian influence. But now a new faction is working against us."

"Who are they?"

"People like Dultanto, Panza and Garado. Someone is financing them with unlimited funds. They are employing men such as Dreyfus and Bellville to open gambling houses in Cuba and New York. To these places are attracted men like Pablo Prieto, Manuel Castellon and Jose Codas—citizens of Bolivia who have the confidence of the working class. There are also some wealthy Bolivians who visit these places—men such as Señor Aldoza whose family is good."

"And these people are trying to muscle in?"

"Muscle?" said Valera vaguely.

"Trying to take over the government."

"Oh, I see: muscle the government," said Valera. He laughed. "That appears to be the case."

"Can't you round up enough votes to beat them at the election?"

"Elections in Bolivia are sometimes—er—slightly irregular. We change presidents quite suddenly, but seldom through an election. The custom is to have a bloodless revolution in which the new candidate is first made provisional *presidente.*"

Smooth nodded. "And that's what Dultanto and his mob want—a bloodless revolution?"

"It may not be altogether bloodless this time, *señor.* It is that which worries us." He glanced at his wrist watch. "But we have talked too long. You will need some

rest in order to be at your best in the morning."

He stood and walked with Smooth to the winding staircase. On the upper floor he opened the door of a luxuriously appointed bedroom and stepped aside.

Smooth looked at the enormous bed that stood against a tapestry-covered wall. The head and foot were of Circassian walnut. Twin columns spiraled to the carved moulding that edged a panneled ceiling. There were brocade-covered chairs, bureaus and tables of patterned hardwood, and a pair of wide windows that looked out over a garden.

"And you left this for a home in Europe?" said Smooth.

"We seldom appreciate what we have, *señor,*" said Valera. He gestured toward the furnishings. "Such things as these are unimportant. Men can live happily without them. But now we of the Andes are about to lose a treasure that is above and beyond all valuation."

"And that is—"

"Liberty!" said Valera. He walked to the window and looked out into the night. "Once that is gone, all else becomes nothing. You of the North are equally to blame. Always you have taken liberty for granted. It is your birthright, therefore you believe it will always be with you."

He turned and faced Smooth. One hand was lifted in a gesture that would have been over-dramatic in a lesser character than Señor Valera. "Force is on the march! The strength to seize and hold and subjugate; that is the new idea. And we who have grown too soft to hold our liberty must now lose it to this new idea!"

It hit Smooth hard. Hit him right in the chest. Gilda had said something like this. The same thought had been present in the conversations he had held with Entrialgo, the Cuban. Smooth had seen it in McNeary's face—heard it in his voice.

Everywhere people were looking fearfully toward this new idea. And now this tall gentleman with the iron-gray hair and military bearing had put it into words again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BLADE GOES HOME

SMOOTH was silent for a time. He walked to the window and stood beside Valera. "There are just two questions I'd like to ask, *señor,*" he said. "Will you tell me if this new idea can think and breathe and walk? Can this force you talk about move of its own accord?"

"I do not quite understand."

"Then let's put it this way: is this idea something greater than man? Is it a god-like thing? Or is it something that was created by men?"

"Naturally, men have created it."

Smooth shrugged. "Then why let it get you down? I've never yet met the man I'd be afraid to try a waltz with. And—if I'm any judge of character—neither have you. At home in the States are millions more who will try their luck with anything that walks, crawls, swims or flies.

"If these Krauts with their new idea want to play rough—well, that's something for Hitler to worry about. The Kaiser got some foolish ideas a few years ago and had them knocked out of him. Hitler doesn't look any tougher to me than the man who ran the country before him."

Valera shook his head slowly. "But these people have no conscience! No scruples! They use trickery, deceit; they bribe and lie and cheat. They weaken a country first and then march across it."

"So what?" said Smooth sharply. "That racket is old! The mobs used it in New York and Chicago long before Hitler knew the meaning of the double cross. He can't teach us anything we haven't already seen. We licked the mobs, *señor.* In my own small way, I helped a little. Now I'm using the same routine on these Krauts in your city."

"Routine? I did not know there was one. What is it that you do?"

"Start trouble, step back, and see what happens," said Smooth. He pointed to the phone. "Will you try to get a number for me, *señor?* My playmate has opened a place on Calle Recreo and I'd like to talk

with her. The last time I saw her she was calling herself Señorita Esposita."

VALERA was confused at the sudden shift in conversation. He tugged at his goatee, shrugged and reached for the phone.

"I will not try to understand you, Señor Kyle. And this Señorita Esposita—she too, is a mystery. There is much talk about her in La Paz. Within a few days she has become the woman whose name is on everyone's tongue."

"Why?"

"Oh, there are a thousand stories about her. Some say she is rich, some say she is financed by the Germans. Others claim she was sent by the United States. Everyone says something different, but all are agreed that she is charming. And now I hear you call her your playmate!"

He lifted the phone and spoke to the operator. There was a long wait and again he spoke rapidly in Spanish. Then he smiled and handed the phone to Smooth.

"I will call you in the morning, *señor,*" he said. "Sleep well."

Valera left the room and closed the door. Smooth lit a cigarette, drew deeply and said, "Remember me, gorgeous? I'm the little boy in the blue suit."

"Hello, flap-ears," said Gilda. "Where are you?"

"With a friend."

"Is she nice?"

"Not bad for a brunette. She's cute but she calls me Cuddles. Think you can straighten her out?"

"Act your age, ape! Things are getting so hot in La Paz you could fry a steak on them, and there you are playing house!"

"Now what's wrong?"

"Everything," said Gilda. "I don't know what it is, but something is getting ready to break. You can feel it."

"Me? I can feel it?" Smooth laughed. "All I can feel is a cold breeze blowing in through the window."

"Then close the window and take an aspirin," said Gilda. "Your friend Entrialgo has a surprise for you, handsome. He's a fast worker, that Cuban. I can't tell you about it over the phone but I'll wait for you at the hotel."

"Better not," said Smooth. "I've got to see a dog about a man in the morning. Catch you at breakfast. And remember, toots—I think you're grand."

"The same to you, funny-face. Keep your head down and try to put three in his chest. 'Bye, now!"

There was a click and Smooth looked at the receiver. Then he jiggled the hook and told the operator to call the number back. The answer was in Spanish. Smooth tried again. It was still Spanish.

Smooth hung up and took off his coat. That last crack of Gilda's about "three in the chest" sounded as if she were still one jump ahead. In some way, she might have learned of the fight that was scheduled for the morning. Or again, it might have been a chance remark.

Smooth took his gun from its leather and pulled out the clip. He emptied the chamber and put his thumbnail under the muzzle. No use trying to figure Gilda. No use even thinking about it.

Smooth cleaned the gun, reloaded it and put it in its holster. Then he stretched out on the bed and went to sleep.

IT WAS still dark in La Paz when Señor Valera introduced Smooth to four gentlemen who would act as seconds. Each was military in his bearing, polished in his manners and happy to be of service to a friend of Señor Valera.

A car was waiting and they drove through the deserted streets to the Alto. Smooth drew the lap robe over his chest to keep out the sharp morning breeze. He had little to say, but watched with interest as the car climbed to steep and winding streets to the town on the heights.

Señor Valera pointed to the cathedral, now complete after a century of construction. He pointed to the snow-capped peaks of Illampu and Illimani. The car passed a row of attractive homes, swung sharply up a street that appeared to be almost vertical and reached a level stretch.

"The church of San Francisco," said Valera. He gestured toward an ancient stone building. "We are almost there."

A ten-minute drive took them to a field bordered by rows of century-old trees. There were gardens of multi-colored blossoms edging the lawn and a winding dirt road continued on past the field to the pre-Incan Palace of Tiahuanaco.

The car stopped and Smooth saw another car standing beneath one of the wide-branched trees. A group of men were beside it and Smooth recognized Herr Mueller as one. The German had removed his shirt and was testing the balance of a heavy saber.

Señor Valera took off his coat, tossed it across the side of the car and opened his tie. He was unhurried in his movements and occasionally exchanged some light remark with one of his seconds.

There was a lengthy conference between Valera's friends and those of Mueller, Mittelstaedt and Salgar. Then the seconds returned and spoke with Valera. A man who was evidently a doctor put his instruments on a towel that had been spread upon the grass. He carefully wiped the blades of two sabers with an antiseptic-soaked swab of cotton.

"You do not mind waiting?" asked Valera. "I will try to be as brief as possible."

"Oh, take your time," said Smooth. He glanced toward the heavy-set German who was walking toward the field. "Better watch your step with Mueller. I noticed one of those Heidelberg dueling scars on his jaw."

"So much the better," said Valera. He shook hands with Smooth, took a saber from his second and smiled. "I have been thinking of what you told me last night, *señor*. Men have ideas; but they are only men. So—we shall now eliminate a few of those men and the ideas along with them."

"Now you're talking, pal," said Smooth. "Get right in there and start pitching. While you're at it, carve off an ear as a souvenir for me."

Valera laughed and walked onto the field. Smooth saw him whip the blade to get the heft of the steel; and it was only then the place came alive.

UNTIL now Smooth had walked through this thing as if it were a dream. Duels just didn't happen any more. Not real duels.

He had seen a few so-called affairs of honor in Europe. Each man had strutted magnificently, made eloquent speeches to his friends and then stepped onto the field to wave a sword. A single scratch on a forearm brought an end to the affair. Both duelists embraced each other and the whole crowd had adjourned to the nearest bar for some serious drinking.

This was going to be different. Smooth saw that when the men crossed swords. He knew little of sword-play; but even a novice could not mistake the vicious slash with which Herr Mueller opened the party.

It was meant for Valera's face but the Bolivian parried easily. His point flicked the German's chest, drawing first blood, and Smooth waited for the doctor to rush forward and examine the wound.

Instead, Mueller charged forward like an angry bull, lashing at Valera's blade with all the strength in his broad shoulders. The Bolivian laughed and turned the German's blade easily. Then his own saber whipped forward and Smooth heard Mueller cry out.

"Your souvenir, Señor Kyle!" called Valera.

Smooth blinked. The thing was getting messy. It was all very well to ask for a man's ear, but it was something else again when you got it.

Smooth decided he didn't like saber fighting. He took out his case and lit a cigarette. When he looked again toward the field he saw the doctor kneeling beside Herr Mueller. Later, the German's seconds carried the man to the car. Valera tossed his sword to the grass and came toward Smooth.

"You are right, *señor*," he said quietly. "They are only men."

"How badly is he hurt?"

"He is not hurt, *señor*. He is dead."

Valera accepted a glass of brandy from one of his seconds, the sabers were again swabbed with antiseptic and the Bolivian walked jauntily to the field where Herr Mittelstaedt waited. There were the usual formalities, and Smooth seated himself on the running board of the car to watch.

Mittelstaedt was much better than Mueller had been. He fought carefully and saved his strength. Valera thrust and the German parried easily. He did not attack in return, but for a solid five minutes let Valera do the forcing. Then he made his move.

It was fast as light—a short slash that would have opened Valera's skull had it landed. He forgot his caution and lowered his blade to thrust. Valera stepped in, parried and straightened his arm. Smooth reached for another cigarette as the blade went home.

CHAPTER XXIX

CRASH PARTY

HE PUT out his hand when Valera walked from the field and the Bolivian shook it warmly. There was more brandy, more conversation, more arrangements.

Then one of Colonel Salgar's friends came toward the car with a richly carved hardwood box. He opened the cover and offered it to Smooth. Two beautifully matched dueling pistols rested on their cushion of black velvet.

"No dice," said Smooth. "I might miss him with the first shot and it takes too long to reload. Ask him if he wants to make it automatics."

"That ees vary irregular," said the second.

"Sorry—it's the best I can do. Of course, if Colonel Salgar is afraid to use that gat he carries—"

"Colonel Salgar is not afraid!" said the second. He marched back to the car beneath the trees.

Again there was conversation. Señor Valera joined Salgar's friends and whatever he said to the colonel had the desired effect. Salgar took a heavy automatic from the car, bowed to Valera and walked onto the field.

"The distance will be fifteen paces," said Valera when he returned. "Closer would be murder, with automatics. You will each fire six times. May I examine your gun, *señor?*"

Smooth handed over his automatic. One of Colonel Salgar's representatives examined it closely, saw that Valera had extracted the extra shells from the clip and went back to the car. One of Valera's men did the same with Salgar's gun. Then Valera shook hands with Smooth and pointed to the field.

"It may straighten your aim to know Colonel Salgar is sometimes spoken of as the next president," said Valera. "He is greatly favored by the German group."

"One of Hitler's boys, eh? Thanks, *señor.*"

He stepped onto the field and suddenly wondered what had happened to his legs. They felt light and seemed to be moving of their own accord. The gun in his hand had grown heavy, and for the first time in months Smooth realized how beautiful the sun could be in the morning.

Why, this was a perfectly grand world! There were trees and birds and flowers—and Gilda. A fine chump he'd been! Colonel Salgar could probably shoot the teeth out of a comb at a hundred yards. And now he was going to tattoo a design on Smooth's chest.

"*Buenas dias, señor.* Have you noticed how nice the sun is this morning?"

It was Colonel Salgar talking, and Smooth wondered if the mug was a mind reader. Then he realized that Salgar's cheeks weren't any too rosy for all his smiling. He winked at the officer and turned to a man who was probably the referee.

"What's the set-up?" he asked.

"You will stand with the backs together," said the official. "I will say in English to commence. You will walk fifteen paces. You will turn and I will call in English—Fire! You will fire until guns are empty or one is dead."

"Very simple, indeed," said Smooth.

He stood with his back to Colonel Salgar and wondered whether the Bolivian was having trouble with his knees, too. It wasn't so much that Smooth objected to people shooting at him. Dozens had tried that. But the formality and quiet of the place was getting him. And those blossoms that looked so beautiful kept reminding him of floral wreaths. He heard the official give the word and he stepped off.

One, two, three—Smooth wondered what would happen if he turned quickly and dropped one into Salgar's hip pocket. Then he wondered what would happen if Salgar decided to do the same. Eight, nine, ten—it would be just like that mug to try a fast one. Thirteen, fourteen—and now for the payoff!

A GUN crashed as Smooth turned. "Why, you—" He leveled his automatic. His legs were all right now. That two-bit Bolivian had tried to jump the barrier.

Smooth saw that the official's arm was still high. Then he saw that Colonel Salgar was equally surprised.

"Okay, gentlemen!" called a voice from a nearby clump of trees. "Go right ahead with the party!"

That voice was familiar! Smooth crouched and turned toward the trees. Again a gun crashed. Smooth saw Clipper Delf step forward and fire three fast ones toward a flower garden at his left. The gunman was running now, weaving from side to side. He fired again.

A man stumbled from the garden. There was a gun in his hand and he was trying to lift it. He fell forward as Clipper's automatic crashed again.

"What gives, Clipper?" yelled Smooth.

"A couple of bums tried to make this a sure thing!" called the gunman. "Keep your eye on that dude with gun!"

Smooth spun to find Colonel Salgar's gun leveled. He heard the whine of a slug and the crash of the officer's gun.

As Smooth aimed he saw fire spurt from Salgar's gun again. Then his own automatic was kicking back against the heel of his hand. The first shot was bad. The second was better. Smooth got a third across and saw the colonel drop.

The quiet field had become a madhouse. Señor Valera had caught up a saber and was running toward the group near the German's car. Other guns were talking and men were running for cover.

Smooth sprinted across the field toward the flower bed. Clipper Delf was shoving shells into a clip. He waved to Smooth and laughed.

"You looked very elegant out there, Smooth," he said. "Too bad the boys from Lindy's couldn't see you."

"Never mind the smart cracks. What are you doing in La Paz?"

"Keeping you alive. Gilda was afraid someone would try to put a crease in your brow—and she was right!" He pointed toward the flower garden. "Four of them back here. Let's go, pal."

Smooth ran with Clipper toward the flower-laden bushes. A gun slammed and he tried a few quick ones in return. Clipper shouted and pointed to the left.

Smooth saw three men running. He had one shell left in his gun. He leveled and squeezed. Clipper fired at the same time.

A man went down and the other two raced toward a car parked further along the dirt road. They reached it, leaped aboard; and the car rushed off along the road.

"Two out of four," said Clipper. "Not so good, I must say."

"Did you see who they were—the ones in the car?"

"Yes. Steve Dreyfus and that Garado chump."

"Check," said Smooth. "I thought I recognized Steve." He pointed to the man who had gone down. "And here's our old pal Stacey Bellville. He had to fly all the way from Cuba to get this."

HE KNELT beside the gambler and rolled him over. Stacey's eyes were open and he tried for a grin. Two bullets had caught him in the back and when he

attempted to talk he coughed. Smooth lifted his head while Clipper Delf mechanically shoved shells into his clip.

"Nice—shooting," said Bellville.

"Not bad," said Smooth. "But why did you tie in with this mob, Stacey? I can understand a lot of things but I can't understand an American fighting his own kind."

"American?" said Stacey. He coughed and breathed heavily. "Not me, Smooth. The real name—is Schlözer—born in Schönhausen, like Bismarck. Always—always worked for the—*Vaterland.*"

"Well, I'll be damned," said Smooth quietly.

"Soon," said the gambler. He gulped and tried again. "You'll lose—lose—lose! First South America, then—then the—world!"

Smooth felt the man's head sag. He lowered it to the ground and turned to watch Clipper Delf looking at the first man who had been hit. Smooth joined him and saw that Clipper had nailed Señor Dultanto neatly between the eyes.

"Dultanto, eh?" he said. "Too bad your're so handy with that gun, Clipper. This chump could have told us plenty."

"Can I help it if he forgot to duck?"

Smooth laughed and refilled his gun. He walked with Clipper to Señor Valera's car and found the Bolivian had added another of the German's group to his score. The others had managed to get away in their car and now Valera was anxious to chase them.

"They are murderers!" he cried. "Such a thing has never before happened in La Paz. I apologize, *señor,* on behalf of my city—my country!"

"It's all right with me, *señor,*" said Smooth. "The boys bit off a little more than they could chew." He gestured toward the others. "Any of your friends get hurt?"

"A few scratches," said Valera. "We will chase those scoundrels and later return to my home to see what can be done about this disgrace. When the gentlemen of La Paz hear of it, things will happen quickly. That Salgar! An officer! He should have been roasted over a slow fire."

"Not a bad idea, either," said Smooth. He introduced Clipper Delf. "Unfortunately, I've got a few other things to do this mornings. I doubt that we could catch those duck-hunters, but my friend and I would appreciate a lift into town. Later, perhaps, I'll give you a ring."

"Señor Kyle, you are strange!" said Valera.

He motioned Clipper and Smooth into the car; the others joined them. . .

CHAPTER XXX

JOYRIDE FOR GILDA

GILDA was having a late breakfast in her sitting room at the Hotel Paris when Smooth and Clipper arrived. At least, a breakfast had been served; but it was still untouched.

She was wearing a powder-blue negligee of French flannel, and a pair of deep crimson mules. Her eyes were tired; and when Smooth bent to kiss her, Gilda caught his nose between a thumb and forefinger and squeezed hard.

"Easy on the schnozz!" cried Smooth.

"A fine ape you turned out to be," she said. "Can't a girl get one night's sleep in this town without worrying about how many people are going to toss bullets at you?"

"Who told you?"

Gilda's laugh was short. "As a government agent you make a fine Boy Scout, handsome. Clipper Delf has been tailing you ever since you reached town."

Smooth swung to face the gunman. "So that's it! Pete told me some egg was following me. If I hadn't been so busy I'd have come looking for you, Clipper."

"You did, once," said Clipper. "When you left Gilda's place you almost spotted me. Then that round-hipped gal with the soft eyes came along and you forgot everything."

"And why not?" said Smooth casually.

Gilda picked up a roll, buttered it carefully, and threw it at Smooth. He ducked

and Gilda lifted the coffee pot. Smooth put up both hands and backed into a corner.

"You and your *señoritas!*" said Gilda. "Why is it that every clue you follow is wearing a skirt?"

"Now wait a minute, taffy-head," said Smooth. He walked forward, holding both arms in front of him defensively. "I guessed right about Maria Valera. She's a good kid and she's pitching for our side. I slept at the Valera house last night and—"

"You *what?*" said Gilda and she lifted the pot again.

"With her *uncle!*" yelled Smooth. "He's a rare old bird; likes to play with swords and things."

"Explain—but fast!"

Smooth told of what had happened and Clipper put in an occasional word. While Clipper talked Smooth helped himself to Gilda's fruit juice. While Smooth talked Clipper sampled the eggs.

In desperation Gilda ordered two more breakfasts sent to the room and the men went on with their story. When they had finished Gilda shook her head slowly.

"It all adds up to zero," she said bluntly. "All this talk about Prieto, Aldoza and the rest gets us nowhere."

"But those are the birds who intend to take over! They want to grab the government!"

"That's something for Valera and his pals to worry about," said Gilda. "We weren't sent here to run the country."

"Sent here?" cried Smooth. "I had to think my way down here!'

"Quiet, handsome!" said Gilda. "You've got to face McNeary before long. And when he sees you he's going to ask two questions."

"What's the first?"

"Where did Big Reno's gun come from?"

Smooth laughed. "Get up to date, gorgeous. I learned the Germans had a submarine base near the Isle of Pines. Every time they knocked off an ammunition carrier, they grabbed some stuff and brought it to this base. That's where Reno got his gun, and that gives me one hundred percent on the first question."

"Remarkable," said Gilda quietly. "Now try the second."

"Let's have it."

"What happened to the munitions after they were delivered to the Isle of Pines? Where did they go?"

"Wait a minute—that's two questions."

"Then answer the first."

"With pleasure," said Smooth. "They were loaded onto a seaplane, and that makes my score perfect."

"Not quite! Where did the plane go?"

SMOOTH breathed deeply. "I was afraid you'd do that, beautiful. Now you've gone and spoiled everything." He broke a piece of toast, reached across the serving table and dunked it in Gilda's coffee.

"Just between you and me and the next-door neighbors—I haven't the slightest idea where the plane went. That's why I'm bouncing around the mountains instead of tearing a herring with the boys in Lindy's."

"Did you learn anything from Valera?"

"Plenty," said Smooth. "He taught me how to take off a German's ear in one easy lesson."

Gilda rested her head on one hand and looked long at Smooth. Often she wondered what crazy twists of luck had kept him alive. And more often she wondered how he had managed to break some of the toughest cases ever handed to an agent. Nothing he did ever seemed to make sense. He had made enough wrong guesses to qualify him as a sport writer for any newspaper. But it never bothered Smooth Kyle.

Perhaps that was the answer. Nothing really bothered him. He took the good breaks with the bad, confident that the sun would come up in the morning and everything would be right again. And now he was facing her across a breakfast table less than an hour after a gun fight, and Gilda knew he had completely forgotten the dangers of the morning.

"Would it interest you to know," she said slowly, "that I've been working while you were following those feminine leads around La Paz?"

"That's your own fault," he answered.

"A girl can have a lot of fun in La Paz if she meets the right people."

"Smooth! Be serious."

"But I am," he said. "I've been waiting for the past half hour for you to tell me all about yourself. So has Clipper—haven't you, feller?" He turned to Clipper who had seated himself in an easy chair. The gunman was fast asleep.

"A fine thing!" said Smooth, and reached for the water pitcher. "Here we are, fighting the battle of Bolivia and that chump goes to sleep."

"Let him alone," said Gilda wearily. "And please try to realize you've got work to do. This place is boiling. I could feel it last night. We've got to move fast, Smooth."

"In which direction?"

Gilda held her breath and counted ten. There was a knock on the door and she called; "Come in."

Entrialgo stepped into the room followed by a young Bolivian officer who wore the gold wings of the Flying Corps on his tunic. Entrialgo bowed to Gilda, shook hands with Smooth and introduced the young officer as Captain Padilla.

SMOOTH sized up the newcomer quickly. About twenty-five years old, olive skinned with dark hair, not a bad jaw and a good pair of eyes. Smooth liked the way Padilla had gripped his hand; but didn't particularly like the way the young officer bowed and lifted Gilda's fingers to his lips.

"Ah, you are more beautiful than the blue-white peaks of the Andes when they are touched by the early sun, *señorita.*" said Padilla. "You are like the heaven's new snow in the first flush of the morning-glow."

"And just as cold," added Smooth quietly.

Gilda wrinkled the tip of her nose at him and turned to smile at Captain Padilla. She motioned to a chair beside her.

"Sit down, Captain," she said, and her eyes made indefinite promises. "Were you successful this morning?"

"Who could fail when performing a mission for you, *señorita?*" said Padilla. "Ask for the stars and I will fly to the heavens and bring them back to you."

"In a green and yellow basket?" said Smooth innocently.

Gilda ignored him and gave Padilla one of her very best smiles that were always accompanied by a slight flutter of her long lashes. Smooth saw the Bolivian flier reach for the chair. Gilda poured coffee and Padilla's hand trembled as he took the cup. His eyes lingered on Gilda's bright blond hair, and Smooth knew Gilda's evening had not been wasted.

"Then the plane is ready for use, Captain?" she asked.

"Within an hour," said Padilla. "The guns have been mounted and the racks are being bolted into place at this very moment. It can take off before noon, *señorita.*"

"Take off?" cried Smooth. "For where? What happens around this place?"

Entrialgo laughed and nodded toward the Bolivian flier. "Captain Padilla is in charge of the army air field. He has been recommended to us by Señor Conover as an ardent patriot. One who loves Bolivia and is not in sympathy with those who would try to make it a Nazi state. We have asked him to equip my plane with bomb racks and machine guns."

"Why?" asked Smooth.

Entrialgo lifted one shoulder in a Latin gesture. "If our friend in the blue plane returns while we are searching for the ammunition depot, I would like to show him what real sport is like."

"Oh, we're going to look for the ammunition depot, eh?" said Smooth. His laugh was short. "I don't know much about Bolivian geography, but I *do* know there's over half a million square miles of it. If you fly eight hours a day you may find something in about forty years."

"It is not quite so bad," said Entrialgo. He turned to the Bolivian. "Will you tell Señor Kyle what we propose to do?"

"It will be a pleasure," said Padilla. He smiled at Smooth while Gilda refilled his coffee cup. "The Bolivian plateau is the only section of the country with which we

are concerned. It would be the logical place for such an ammunition depot.

"Fortunately the plateau is only eighty-six miles wide. It extends between the Cordillera Real and the Cordillera Occidental—two mountain ranges. The southern part is mostly desert and would hardly be a suitable landing place for a seaplane.

"That leaves us only two districts—the Yungas, which are the tropical valleys north of La Paz in the lake country, and the Valles, which are the valleys along the mountain ranges."

"How much ground do you have to cover?"

"Only a little over a thousand square miles."

Smooth shook his head wearily. "In other words you're going to try to find an acre of ground in a place the size of the state of Rhode Island—is that it?"

"I do not know of Rhode Island," said Padilla shortly, keeping his eyes on Gilda.

Entrialgo leaned forward. "It is not quite so difficult," he said. "We will search only along the shores of the lakes and rivers."

"And wind up with a headache!" said Smooth. "Deal me out of that picture."

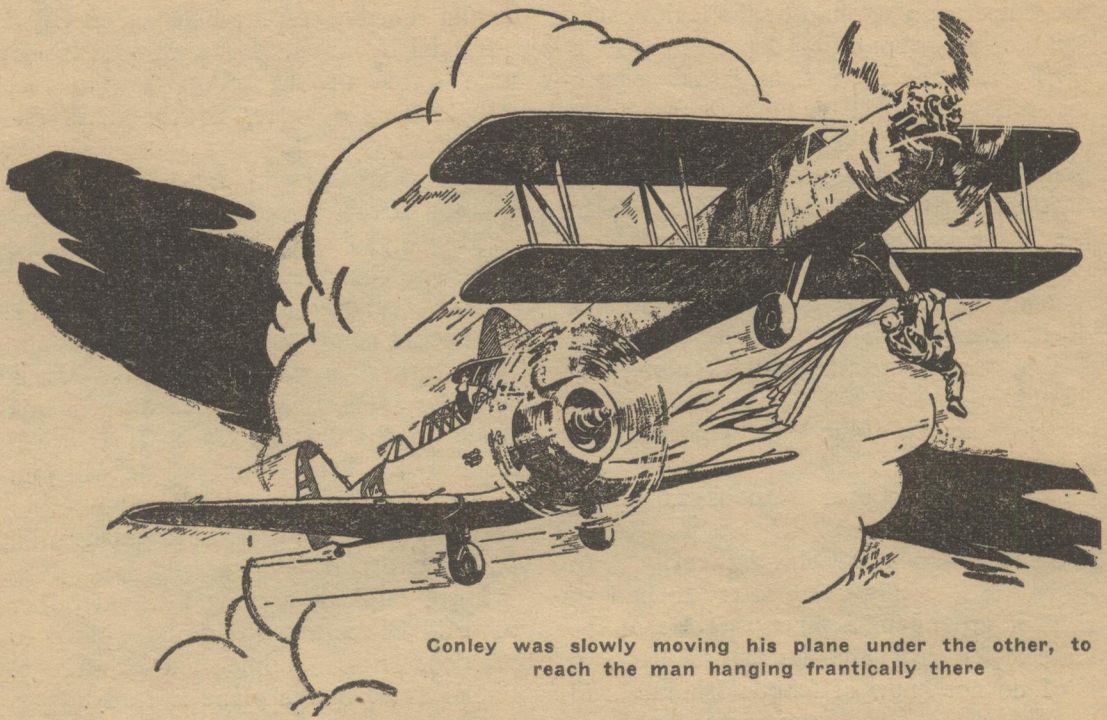
"Maybe you've got a better idea?" asked Gilda. She looked hard at Smooth and dropped a slow lid over one eye. "If you haven't, why not let us try this?"

She turned to Padilla and gave him a ten-dollar smile. "Señor Kyle likes to talk but he rarely says anything. If you will return to the field I am sure he will join you later for the first flight."

"And you, *señorita?*" said Padilla. "Will you fly with me?"

"I can think of nothing I would rather do," said Gilda. She stood and walked to the door with Padilla and Entrialgo. "Phone us when the plane is ready."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



Conley was slowly moving his plane under the other, to reach the man hanging frantically there

You Can't Waste Pilots

But pilots are expendable, cadet. Maybe you'll learn what that means when you're up in the sky playing hide-and-seek with disaster. A vivid novelet of the Army air school

By LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

Author of "Wings for Yankee Doodle", "The Devil Had a Treasure", etc.

I

ED STUART dogtrotted to catch up with Jacobs and Frank Conley as they walked together from hangar line to the solo-flight stage. His good-looking face was a moist red, but not from his running.

"That was a fast one you pulled, Careful," he growled. "You're getting pretty smart since Johns patted you on the back for your stunt flying."

Frank Conley turned to meet the cadet's anger. Ed was getting set to start a fight. He'd known Ed so many years, fought with him so much, that he could read the signs.

"I don't get you, Ed," he said mildly. There was a placating smile on his round, homely face to meet the other's scowl. Like Ed Stuart he was close to six feet in height, but of a lighter build. Ed could probably lick him. He usually had when they were kids, though he hadn't found it so easy.

"What's on your mind, Ed?"

"That date for the graduation show. Thought you were pretty cute gettin' it so far ahead, didn't you?"

The smile left Conley's face. "If Mary Regan wanted to give me a date, that's her business. Now quiet down."

"Don't tell me to quiet down. You've been getting along pretty hot in this flying, Careful. But don't kid yourself. I've been watching you. I know what you're afraid of."

"You damned fools'll both get kicked out," Jacobs warned them. "Here comes Radcliffe."

Captain Radcliffe had walked a little distance from the stage to meet them. "Shake it up, cadets. There's a couple of ships waiting."

He turned his hard stare on Conley. "What was the matter with you yesterday, Conley? When you fly formation you're supposed to stay in place."

"That was the first I've done, sir."

"Well, I want to see some improvement today. You and Stuart are to fly a V with Lieutenant Johns. Stuart on the right, you the left. Now get goin'."

Frank Conley walked over to the trim little low-wing trainer plane. He wondered what Ed Stuart had meant about him being afraid of something. But Ed was mad, and likely to say most anything. He'd be over it in five minutes and they'd be good friends again.

Lieutenant Johns taxied out with the lead ship and Conley maneuvered into position on his left and to the rear. Ed Stuart blasted his gun recklessly, wheeling over to the right.

Conley felt the same nervous tension that had gripped him the day before, during his first formation work. He couldn't understand why it bothered him so much, having another plane nearby in the air. Nothing else about flying bothered him.

THEY were taxiing rapidly across the field to get into position for takeoff. Lieutenant Johns stopped suddenly as a plane slid down out of the morning sun and planted its wheels on the runway.

Conley, who had been lining himself on Ed Stuart's plane, glanced up just in time, shoved weight on his rudder toe-brakes so hard that the tail-wheel jerked off the ground. The shining disk of his propeller was within inches of Johns' elevator.

It gave him a quick shock of apprehension. A thing like that—if his propeller had actually chopped into the empennage—was enough to wash a man out of training.

Johns continued forward again, unaware of the incident. But Ed Stuart had seen it. He was smiling, so that Frank Conley could see the white flash of teeth in his tanned, handsome face. Ed's helmet was stained a brilliant red, somehow in keeping with his quick, violent temperament.

Conley tried to match that reckless smile. He saw the reflection of his serious, tight-held mouth in the windshield and knew that he couldn't hide his nervousness from Stuart, who knew him so well.

They were in position for take-off and the leader turned his head to the right. Cadet Stuart raised his hand as a signal of readiness.

It seemed to Conley that they were spaced too closely for a take-off. He was still thinking of how near his propeller had come to demolishing the other's tail-group. What if that had happened in the air?

He saw that Johns was questioning him with a backward glance. He signaled ready for take-off. Johns' plane charged forward, tail-wheel lifting off the ground. Ed Stuart's ship was after it like a shadow.

Hesitating a moment, Conley shoved his own throttle ahead. When they lifted off his plane was several lengths behind its proper position in the V.

Conley slackened throttle as his plane slipped up into alignment with Stuart's. They struck a down draft of air over the bay. The lead ship dropped until it was almost out of sight below him. For a panicky instant Conley thought he would over-run it. He jerked his throttle and at the same time struck the down movement of air.

He was two or three hundred feet below Johns now, and far to the rear. He cursed himself savagely and pushed the throttle clear forward. He was certainly earning the nickname that Stuart had given him.

He had gotten it in high school, on the football team. Ed Stuart, the team captain, was always razzing him about being so methodical and slow. That was when he nicknamed him "Careful."

Careful Conley. The name had stuck and followed him on into college where at the last minute he was rushed and pledged by the same fraternity that secretly pledged Ed Stuart, a week before he set foot on the campus.

It had always been that way—Ed leading brilliantly while he struggled along behind. In football he was given the ball for short, body-punishing line plunges. His work was never the spectacular kind that appeals to fans. He was just a good steady hand, generally in there running interference for Stuart's wizardly open-field gains.

But despite any small differences he and Stuart might have had they were roommates and good friends at college. And always, near the end of the quarter, he helped Stuart bone up on his school work. Ed wasn't a very good scholar.

That is, they had been good friends until that night at the Homecoming dance when Ed gripped his arm and demanded: "Who is that dream of loveliness over there, Careful?"

Ed had that silly, exaggerated way of talking about girls. And it seemed to go over big with them. Not that Frank didn't think the girl was lovely. He had been going with her since he was a junior in high school.

"It's Mary Regan," he told Ed. "She drove up with my folks, for the dance."

"Not that homely little, freckle-faced—" Ed didn't finish the sentence. He was moving across the dance floor like a man walking in his sleep.

CONLEY'S wings made an even line now with Stuart's. Lieutenant Johns looked back and nodded his approval.

It was a loose formation, and now that they were in smooth, higher air it was easy enough to fly. They seemed to be hanging up there, motionless in their respective places.

Frank darted a quick glance over toward Stuart. Ed grinned and thumbed his nose. He was sitting nonchalantly with his head against the back rest. Frank wondered if he had ever been afraid of anything in his whole life.

Conley had been afraid of many things in his life. Especially he had been afraid that Mary Regan was going to lose her head over Stuart. Ed had a way of rushing a girl off her feet; sending her flowers every day, demanding every bit of her attention. His father had plenty of money so Ed could make the average college man look like a piker.

Frank didn't know even now how Mary felt toward them. She seemed impartial in her favors.

It was his own fault that he saw less and less of her. When they were out together he had an uncomfortable feeling that the entertainment that he could afford must seem pretty shabby compared to Ed's free spending.

Stuart had jockeyed his plane in a little closer to Lieutenant Johns'. Frank held back until Johns motioned impatiently for him to close up the V. He moved in cautiously then, his lips tight as the gap closed between his right wing tip and the lieutenant's empennage. The smallest touch might draw them together into tangled wreckage.

They seemed to be standing still in the air. But in reality their speed was close to a hundred and forty miles an hour. He thought of automobiles driving, runningboard to runningboard, at that speed. People would call it madness. But they were doing the same thing here, under more difficult conditions.

He tried to avoid this thought. But it persisted and increased in vividness and detail. That was his trouble: always imagining what *could* happen. He must have a cowardly streak or he wouldn't brood on such things.

Anyway, he'd gotten his courage up to the point of inviting Mary Regan down for the windup show. There would be the final flight tests in the morning. In the

afternoon they would do stunts and formation flying for the visitors. Some of the boys were going to make parachute jumps. Then there would be the dance and formal presentation of the small pilot insignia.

Johns dipped his left wing. That meant a turn to the left.

Frank jerked his throttle. He was the pivot of the turn. Johns' ship lay up on its side in a gentle bank. Stuart maintained his position. It was a beautiful thing to watch.

If done properly it had the appearance of being a simple maneuver. It really was, though the pivot man had to slow up just the right amount, yet maintain flying speed. And Stuart, following the longer path, must speed up just the necessary amount without over-running.

And, of course, all the time, even in this smoother air, there was a constant up-and-down movement between planes, that must be corrected instantly.

JOHNS held his hand up, knifing it forward and backward to show that he was coming out of the turn. Later, when they got used to it, most of these movement signals would be eliminated.

Frank hadn't speeded up quickly enough for the straight line flight. Or perhaps he'd stalled too much when the turn started. At any rate he was way out of formation.

Johns looked back. Frank couldn't see the expression on his face. But he must be getting impatient with this ragged flying. As Frank cautiously evened up with Ed, the other made a great show of yawning, patting his open mouth and making a shoulder gesture of resignation.

They flew straight ahead for a time. Stuart edged in closer and closer to Johns. His left wing tip was now grooved in between Johns' tail group and his right wing.

Frank held back from this extremely close work. There was no hurry about this thing. He stayed back there even with Johns motioning him in closer.

They made a right turn and another left. He held his position pretty well in these. He began to feel a return of confidence. That was the way it always went. He was slow at learning things. But, given time enough, he learned them well, sometimes even better than Stuart.

But in this flying they didn't allow much time. Either you learned quickly or got out and made room for a man who could. And excuses didn't do you any good—then or after.

The possibility of being dropped from training unnerved him. He'd made all his plans to continue on through army cadet work. He had quit his job with the telephone company and, worse than that, everybody in town knew that he and Ed were going to be army pilots. He had taken that for granted when they got the appointment for primary training in this civilian school.

He missed Johns' signal for a right turn. Or perhaps the leader thought they were good enough now that he didn't have to give signals.

Things happen so fast up in the air. They'd only been in the turn that time you could snap your fingers twice. But now he was way off to the left.

He banked. But Johns had signaled for a straightaway and then rocked his wings to break formation and land.

Frank loitered with turns, so that the others were down before him. He landed and sat in the plane for a while, his engine turning over at idling speed.

There was something about an airplane and about flying that still held him in awe. It wasn't at all like his feeling toward automobiles. You could drive a car five or six years and turn it in without a thought, other than a feeling of pleasure over the new one.

But he couldn't imagine doing that with an airplane, any more than you could do it with a horse that had given faithful service. It was even more than that. Airplanes seemed to have a magic that they shared with you; a miraculous sort of experience . . . flight.

Conley became aware suddenly that they were flagging him from the stage platform. He was getting in the way of other landings.

CADET BRYAN walked out to meet his ship, polishing goggles with the trailing end of his neck scarf. "Capt'n Radcliffe wants to see you, Careful," he told Frank, as the other climbed from the cockpit.

Captain Radcliffe led him a short distance from the group of cadets waiting their turns at flying. "Nice smooth air," he casually remarked, while they were still in earshot of the others.

Radcliffe was chief instruction pilot at the civilian school. Like all the other instructors he belonged to the Air Corps reserves. But he was the only one of them who had been overseas in the last war.

In some ways that had made him an old man long before his time. His hair was completely gray. His face looked like saddleleather that has been marked with deep awl grooves. And he seemed to live inside of a hard, protective shell.

You had the feeling that if his seamed, masklike face were cut it wouldn't bleed. Or maybe it would bleed crankcase oil. He didn't seem altogether human.

But in other ways he was young. He had the tight, hard stomach muscles of a twenty-year-old athlete. And his mind was young. Other men of his age were settled down. Radcliffe gave the impression that he never would lose that hard vitality—that air of being ready to take off at a moment's notice for the distant places of the earth or air.

Radcliffe dropped his casualness of manner as soon as they were away from the others. He squatted on one heel, started breaking a dry weed stem into small pieces.

"Formation bother you, Conley?" he asked.

"A little," Conley admitted, and squatted down near him so that the others wouldn't hear. Radcliffe was getting ready to tear him to shreds. These instructors were hard. They could lash a man with words till he had to clench teeth to keep from whimpering.

"You played football in college," the captain said. "Ought to know something about teamwork."

"How did you know what I did in college?"

A smile barely touched the older man's lips. "You'd be surprised what we know about you boys. Listen, Conley, when you drive a car in traffic you always figure the other man is about half-witted. Don't you?"

"Why . . . well, yes. You allow for him doing screwy things."

"Yep. Either that or you get a lot of fenders crumpled. Now in flying—I mean army flying—formation, it's a little bit like driving in traffic." He gave Conley a sharp, challenging stare. "But the other man's not going to do anything screwy. He's not going to make mistakes."

"Everybody makes mistakes," Conley said stubbornly.

"Men who make mistakes in this game die young."

"But in formation work they might kill another pilot with their mistake."

Radcliffe's mouth thinned. His eyes probed into the cadet's. "Did anybody ever tell you army flying was a pink tea party?" he demanded. "Army pilots are expendable, m'lad."

Conley puzzled over the statement.

"That's army talk," Radcliffe said. "Pilots aren't like trucks, tents or G.I. cans. They're expendable. They can be used up if there's the need.

"Don't take that too literally," Radcliffe said, standing up. "But on the other hand, forget that civilian idea that life, your life, is the most important thing in the world." He gave Conley a rough, friendly shoulder slap. "And now we're goin' to fly another formation. Johns will lead, I'll fly number two. You'll take three. Come on."

Conley glanced at his wristwatch just before they took off. It was a few minutes after ten o'clock. It was eleven thirty-five when they landed back. He drew a deep, shaky breath. Formation work certainly drained a man. He felt like dragging himself into a quiet corner and sleeping the clock around, but he was so wrought up with nerve tension that he couldn't possibly have slept

He felt that he hadn't done so badly. He wasn't worried all the time about what the other two pilots might do. But still there was something about formation work that unnerved him.

Radcliffe must have noticed this. He spoke briefly to him, in passing. "I think you'll make it, all right, Conley," he said. "Your air work's always been good, but . . ." he didn't finish the sentence. "Don't worry about it," he advised. "It's just some little thing that you'll whip."

II

"THEY do say," Ed Stuart spoke around a mouthful of cherry pie that he was eating in the field restaurant, "that a man might as well start packing his duds if he's shy about formation work around here. Capt'n Radcliffe's a nut for formations."

"They do say so, all right," Cadet Bryan agreed, acknowledging Ed's wink. He turned his head slightly to see if this had registered on Frank Conley. Old Careful was such a serious-minded dope that it was always fun kidding him.

Frank didn't hear them, though he was sitting right next to Bryan. He was in the grip of that strange excitement that often follows a hard bit of flying. It was new to him.

He thought of wnat Radcliffe had said about pilots being expendable, wondering what he'd really meant by it. Anyway, Radcliffe thought his flying was all right; told him not to worry. And he wasn't going to. Right now he felt as though he could fly anything with wings on it; do anything he wanted to in the air. He got up and paid for his drink and walked out, smiling.

Ed Stuart wiped the crumbs from his mouth. "Somebody musta left Careful a million dollars," he said. "Don't think he even heard us."

He frowned at a smudge of cherry juice and pie crumbs on the back of his hand. He remembered his long-distance call to Mary Regan, late last night. So that was why the other felt so cocky.

That was a dirty doublecross, Careful getting a date with Mary so far ahead. He couldn't understand why she didn't give the poor stooge his walking papers. He'd told her so, and added a warning: "Sometime you'll wake up and find I'm not hanging to your fishline any more."

That had been a mistake, threatening Mary Regan. "And some time you'll wake up and find that Frank isn't stooging for you any more, Edward," she told him, sweetly. "My, how lonesome and miserable you'll feel then."

And the devil of it was, he would miss old Careful when he was dropped out of the class. And of course he would be. There was something about formation flying that seemed to get him down.

•

In the recreation room Frank Conley was writing a letter to Mary Regan. If he sent it airmail, special, she'd get it just a short time before leaving for the air show.

The pen seemed to be moving of its own volition. He glanced back over the last page and could hardly credit himself with writing it:

> ***And the other evening I flew up into a sunset, Mary. The sun was a blazing red disk. When I took off its lower edge was just touching the ocean. I half-expected to see steam come up when it touched the water. But as I climbed, it seemed to climb, too, raising up from the water. Flying is the most wonderful experience that. . . .***"

He finished the letter hurriedly, in a more matter-of-fact tone, and he mailed it before losing courage. It was the first letter of that kind he'd ever written, to Mary or to any other person.

He walked out around the field where the boundary lights were just coming on. He wanted to be by himself so he could think about flying and about Mary.

She would get the letter sometime in the morning. She would leave for the field that afternoon with his father and mother. He had already reserved rooms for them at the beachside hotel.

THE next morning he was without that feeling of exultation that he'd had the previous night. He flew in another formation with Lieutenant Johns, Cadet Jacobs flying on the left. That feeling of nervous expectancy rode him again, made his flying erratic.

Not that he was any worse than the other cadets, he told himself. But he wanted to be outstandingly good. He wanted to fly so well in the show next day that people, especially Mary, would remark on it. And he would, too.

At lunchtime Amy Long, Radcliffe's secretary, showed them the primary pilots' wings that had just come. They were tiny things, silver with enamel inlay. By the time a man got his A.P. wings from the army he'd laugh at them, just as a college man feels toward his high school ring.

But right now they were very important. Any man of them who didn't get one the next evening would feel like putting a gun to his temple. They really were that important.

Ed pinned one to his lapel and started out of the room. "Might as well give it to me now as later," he teased.

Amy scuffled with him to regain its possession. He kissed her and handed it back. "Even trade, gorgeous," he said.

Amy slapped him. But not very hard. They could see that she was pleased at the hint that he would give up his rating for one of her kisses.

It was all foolishness. But it was fun. Frank felt nearer to Ed Stuart than he ever had before. He wished he could do something like that and have it mean nothing at all. And he might, too. In this business he was just as good as Ed Stuart.

But he wasn't. He found that out in the afternoon, with the first ten minutes of formation flying. Ed was on his right again. And he was pushing in closer and closer all the time, as though deliberately trying to show Conley up.

The air was rough. They bobbed around like corks. Frank could feel the stiff tension in his legs, pushed tight against the rudder pedals. He must be exerting pounds of pressure, the strength of one leg opposing the other. But he couldn't relax them.

His flying was jerky and uncertain. He'd push the throttle wide open, then almost close it, fearing that he would overshoot the lead plane.

Ed was deliberately heckling him, skidding his plane in too close, then going through a pantomime of being frightened. Even when banked up on a turn he'd kick upper rudder just enough so Frank had to edge away and make a banked turn to regain formation.

Several times Johns made wide motions of his arm to get Conley in nearer. He didn't notice what the other cadet was doing. When he looked to the right his plane was in place and flying steady.

Frank tried to regain that high feeling of recklessness that he'd had the previous evening. But it was no use. He was ridden with fear—a fear that he couldn't reason away. Sometimes it seemed he could feel Ed's wingtip touch his. And at a hundred-forty miles an hour!

A man wouldn't be able to think or move fast enough to avert tragedy if those wings ever locked.

His mind pictured the thing. The two planes would wheel toward each other. It would be a head-on collision. That would be the same as a man plunging into a brick wall at two-hundred-and-eighty miles an hour!

His stick jerked sharply to the right.

It had happened!

He saw that at one glance. Ed's wing had splintered with that first impact. The fairing bow was hooked around his.

TIME stretched out and he did nothing. His mind seemed blank and numb. Then thoughts came in a flood; urgent and contradictory. Give it full gun and dive! Tear loose from him. Watch out; Johns' ship is right ahead of you. Cut your gun and stall. No, keep all the speed you can. The more speed, the more control.

There was that frantic space of time when he could do nothing. Opposing mental orders blocked each other.

It was all over in the matter of seconds. He was still frightened. But his mind was rational now.

If they both kicked outer rudder at the same time they could break the lock. Those bows were made of hickory. But they were light. And they had little or nothing to do with the spars. They could rip those wing-tips off and still get down safely.

He couldn't shout this to Ed. But he could motion. Ed would understand him.

He saw, with surprise, that the upper part of Stuart's body was above the cowling pad. He was crazy! He couldn't possibly walk out on that smooth wing, without hand or footholds, and get them free of each other.

The next moment Conley understood. Stuart had one knee up on the pad. He got his other foot up beside it, holding to the windshield with his left hand. With a quick spring he slid over the other side and disappeared from view. He was bailing out with his parachute.

Conley felt a quick stab of anger and contempt. Stuart could have saved that plane. At least they might have tried it. There was always time to bail out if the wings didn't wrap around you. And in this case they wouldn't.

The other plane started slowly into a dive. Fear gripped Conley's heart. That plane was uncontrolled now. There was no telling what it might do. But if he tried to follow it they would certainly tangle.

He dropped the nose of his own plane for a moment. Whatever he did now to break loose would be a hundred times more dangerous. But it must be done, and without an instant's delay.

The dive speed was building up. He'd have to gamble on the other plane's momentum holding it on the straight course.

Quickly, savagely he jammed stick and rudder to the left.

He was free of it!

He eased back to level flight and rocked the ailerons. He was free of it and he still had control of his ship.

Conley idled his motor and nosed down into a glide toward the field. His teeth were chattering violently. And his body shook so that he could hardly control the plane.

He had to get down! He had to get down immediately or something would snap inside him. He would jump out. Or do something equally insane.

III

CAPTAIN RADCLIFFE rode in the crash car that came to get him; they met at the far corner of the field where he'd made that crazy landing and nosed over. They stopped first to pick up Ed. He was in the back of the light truck, sitting on the wadded folds of his parachute.

Frank stood leaning against the upslanting fuselage of his plane. There wasn't much damage done to it. Propeller tips were bent a little and one of the oleo struts was caved.

"Nice work," Captain Radcliffe told him. He was looking at Conley's white face. "Cigarette?"

Frank took one and finally got it into his mouth. He spit it out. He knew he couldn't hold a match to light it.

"You had to keep a lot of speed on her for control, eh?" Radcliffe said. "That's why you overshot your landing."

"No, it flew . . . it flew normal," Conley denied, stammering the words. "I . . . damn it, Captain, I had to get on the ground! I . . ."

"Don't think I didn't have to get on the ground." Ed Stuart grinned. "That left wing was about ready to wind itself around Mr. Stuart's little boy." He looked around at them proudly.

"Your wing was . . ."

"Sure, Frank. Didn't you see those wrinkles in the fabric? Both spars must've been caved when that air bump threw us together."

Radcliffe turned to the driver. "Bring the gang out here," he directed. "And you might as well ride back with him, Stuart. Frank and I'll look this over and then walk back."

They didn't look the ship over. It was

just an excuse for Radcliffe to be alone with Conley. They all understood that.

"What happened up there, Conley?"

Frank looked in at the instrument board of his plane. "I thought I'd forgotten to cut the switches," he said.

"You heard my question, Frank."

Conley faced him. "You heard what Ed said, didn't you?"

"I want your story."

"My story is the same, Captain. Can't expect a man to ride one wing down, can you?" He started to laugh. He clenched his jaws, but not in time to keep Radcliffe from noticing the hysteria.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

"Not a scratch. Except I sprained my ankle a little, getting out. Thought it might catch fire."

"Always a good idea to get clear of 'em," the captain agreed. "Come on, we'll get another ship. Johns is over at the stage. The three of us will fly together, like we did yesterday."

"Formation!"

Captain Radcliffe stopped. There was a pause. "It would be better, Frank," he said, kindly.

"But not today, Captain. I'll admit that I'm all busted out with scaredness."

"Hell, Conley, I've been scared so many times, and so badly . . . but if you don't go up now you'll start to think about this. By tomorrow it'll be just that much worse. Don't fool yourself there."

Conley clenched one fist into the other and saw the knuckles go white. "No," he said finally. "I can't go up now, Captain. I might kill you fellows. I—"

"Pilots are expendable."

"But I won't think about it, Captain. I won't worry about it. Honest. You'll see. Tomorrow I'll be—"

The change in Radcliffe's face stopped him. "I'm sorry, Conley," he said briskly. "But . . . well, we'll see."

CONLEY left the field early and walked over to the beach hotel. There was a field bus that went right by the hotel. But some inner urge whipped him to action.

He got there two hours early. They couldn't be expected until nine o'clock. He walked clear out to the park and back. It didn't seem as though he ever could get tired enough. His ankle hurt him and he took a perverse pleasure in this.

But he was getting himself more under control. He sat on a wicker chair in the long veranda facing seaward. There was very little light on the veranda. He could see the white phosphorescence of the tumbling surf.

He closed his eyes to this and deliberately made himself review that flight. Every detail of it. Psychologists said it was better to take things like that out of the mind and face them. And it did seem to help.

Of course Ed Stuart had lied about those wing spars failing. The fabric hadn't wrinkled at all. But Ed knew he'd back up the story. That wouldn't be the first time he had gotten the other out of trouble.

He relaxed wearily in his chair. Yes, Ed had lied. And now he was a hero at the field. And to show the other cadets how good his nerve was he'd asked to make an exhibition jump tomorrow.

Conley pushed these thoughts away. What of it? What satisfaction was there in being a fake hero?

Tomorrow he'd make himself fly a perfect formation with Radcliffe. He'd conquer that fear he had of being close to other planes in the air.

He got up, with hands in his pockets, and slouched through the door and crossed the lobby. Then he saw Mary Regan.

Her hat was off so that he could see the piled curls of her black hair. She was standing by the desk with his father and mother. She glanced up and the jet fringe of lashes emphasized the blueness of her eyes.

She stood for a moment with lips half-parted. "Frank," she said, and extended her hands. "Oh, Frank, it's grand to see you! But I thought you'd be in uniform." She turned, sharing him with his parents.

They had only a few minutes alone together before he must leave for quarters. He was glad of this. She had sensed that

something was wrong. He was sure of that. Several times he caught her looking at him in a questioning manner.

She came down with him, after the old folks were settled in their room. They stood for a while in silence, on the veranda.

He could feel her shoulder against his arm. "Where was it, Frank?"

"Where was what, Mary?"

"The sunset. The sun that you kept from setting. So that it wouldn't boil the ocean away."

He was painfully embarrassed, remembering the foolish things he had written in that letter. It seemed years ago that he had sent it.

She was so near that he could smell the fragrance of her hair. He knew that he could take her in his arms. She expected him to; wanted him to hold her and kiss her. There was a faint, musing smile on her upturned lips and her eyes were half-closed, dreaming.

He moved abruptly. The spell was broken by his stumbling words. "Mary, I . . . I guess I'd better be starting back to the field. We're supposed to be in quarters by eleven."

THE next morning his name wasn't on the bulletin board. Radcliffe had already checked him out on his flying. All but the formation work.

Maybe they wouldn't have an opportunity to get that in today. But he wasn't down for any of the stunt flying. Or the precision landings. His name wasn't there at all.

Radcliffe was in his office.

"No, Conley," he said. "You'll just have to stand by today."

"But my folks drove over from Los Angeles, Captain! They brought my—they brought a young lady friend of mine to see me fly."

Radcliffe closed his eyes, as though the morning sun hurt them. A silence grew in the room.

Conley stared at the motionless figure. He wet his lips and the cords of his neck jerked spasmodically. He knew, suddenly, why his name wasn't on the bulletin board.

"I'm washed out," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Washed out!"

Radcliffe's eyes came open. "No, not that bad, Frank. Anyway, I hope not. Major Jentries, Army Cadet Board, will be here today. I want you to meet him after the flying. I want him to see you and talk to you."

Conley's face tightened. "What good will that do?"

"It might do a lot of good, Frank. That plane you cracked up yesterday—I could see it wasn't damaged badly enough to affect its flying. I gave you a chance to alibi out of that. You refused to take it."

"So that washes me out."

Radcliffe ignored that; continued to speak without changing expression.

"And you could have avoided that suggested flight by claiming some injury to your head or side; you could have said that sprained ankle hurt too much."

Hope came back to Conley. "Then you think there's a chance for me?"

Radcliffe shook his head, slowly. "Not in this class. Our job here, Frank, is to select good pilot timber. Men . . . well, men like this Stuart, who can meet an emergency as he did yesterday and then forget about it; laugh it off. I'm not sure you're that kind."

Conley wanted to laugh. So Stuart had met an emergency yesterday. That was the type of man they wanted.

Radcliffe continued, "If possible I'll get the major's authorization to hold you over for the next class. Maybe we'll get you another test in formation flying today, while he's here."

Conley thanked him, though certain in his own mind that there was no chance. He knew Radcliffe was a fair man and was doing his best.

"Bring your helmet and goggles," Radcliffe told him, "and be around where I can find you."

That gave him an excuse for staying away from Mary and his father and mother, during the show. He found comfortable seats and left them before the flying started.

IV

THE other cadets knew, or guessed, that he was being dropped from the class. But they did their best to make him feel he was still one of them.

They maintained this pretense during an interminable day of flying in which he had no part. It irked him, this sympathy, this unconsciously patronizing attitude.

They intended well. They were a good bunch of fellows and he'd miss not being with them. But it didn't make it easier, having them ask him to take a cockpit while they started the engine, or sit in one of the cockpits with the engine running while they skipped over to talk with some friend in the crowd.

He sat in the cockpit of one of the trainers that Jacobs had just brought down from a stunt flight. The motor was idling but there was none of that old pleasure he'd had in the feel of its power, running in vibrations through his body. He couldn't fly it; wouldn't be allowed to.

Lieutenant Frazier taxied up with the old airmail cabin plane and Frank knew that the show was about over. Four cadets, lap and seat parachutes strapped to them, crossed the short space in front of the crowd and squeezed into the small cabin between wings.

Ed Stuart was the last one in. Before pulling himself up onto the walk-strip of the lower wing he turned and waved. Frank knew, without looking, that it was for Mary Regan.

Well, that was that. Stuart was in, and knew it.

He waited impatiently for Jacobs to come back and take over the ship. The parachute plane climbed in steep spirals. It was going to be a group jump, one man following the next as fast as possible.

The cabin plane was up to three thousand now, and had leveled off. Applause swelled up from the crowd. One by one the cadets were diving head first off the trailing edge of the lower wing.

The first man had pulled his ripcord. The small pilot 'chute flipped out from his seat pack, hauling the main parachute above him. It flared, like a puff of white smoke.

The other men followed in rapid succession. Their parachutes looked like white, inverted flowers, blossoming against the blue sky.

It was a pretty sight. Conley watched it and for a brief time forgot his own troubles. He had never made a jump, but one of the mechanics had told him there was nothing unpleasant about it, even before the parachute opened. The important thing was to land with your body slack and immediately pull the upper shroud lines to keep from being dragged.

FRANK was aware suddenly that one of the cadets hadn't jumped. There were only three parachutes in the air. The other man was on the walk-strip, moving forward in a crouch, so that the pilot wouldn't see him. He wore a scarlet helmet. It was Ed Stuart.

He stood up, near the leading edge of the wing, back braced against the wing strut, arms spread. He was giving the crowd something special in the way of thrills.

The pilot had banked his plane and was spiralling downward in easy turns. He must be counting the parachutes below.

He leveled suddenly. It was as though a brake had been applied, slowing the plane.

Stuart's arms threshed the air, trying to hold his balance. The plane was below two thousand now. They could see his desperate attempts to stay on the wing.

He fell, but before he completely lost balance he had pulled the ripcord of his seat pack 'chute.

The action must have been instinctive. The fluttering volume of silk ran back in a white stream.

But it was too late to keep him from falling forward. It seemed that his body was aimed straight for the dim blur of the revolving propeller. Even above the sound of his idling motor Frank Conley heard a combined gasp of horror from the massed spectators.

Then the second parachute cascaded and was blown back, tangling in a landing gear wheel.

Stuart fell, but the shroud lines of the second parachute brought him up with a quick jerk. He was dangling ten feet or more below the plane.

Confused shouting from the people came to an abrupt silence. The first parachute had slipped from the wing, a confused tangle of silk that clung about the helpless man, increasing his peril with its weight and drag.

Shroudlines from the lap-pack parachute still held him suspended from the plane's landing gear. These might come untangled at any moment.

He was struggling frantically to get cleared of the silk that was held tight about him by the plane's speed. These movements started him spinning. He seemed to realize the danger of this. He stopped all movement for a time.

The crowd held its breath.

The pilot of the plane couldn't see him. That space under his wing was a blind spot. But he had felt the jerk as Stuart's weight was stopped in its fall. He must have realized what had happened.

The sound of the engine diminished. Frazier had cut his speed down as much as he dared. He was making wide, gently banked turns, keeping within gliding distance of the field.

There wasn't much to be gained by this. If he landed he would drag the body across a rough field at fifty or sixty miles an hour. Stuart would be dead long before he could brake to a stop. Dead and horribly mutilated.

It may open, Conley thought. If he gets untangled from that first 'chute and lets it drop, it may open.

That would be the worst possible thing. Unless by some happy chance the shroud lines of the other came untangled at the same instant. They wouldn't break. One of those many silken cords would support a man's weight. The pull of the opened 'chute would be enough to drag the airplane out of control.

WORKING cautiously, Ed Stuart had gotten himself untangled from the parachute silk. He clung to it for an instant, held it bundled tightly in his arms.

"Hold it!" Conley shouted, as though the other could hear him. "Tie knots in it, so it won't open."

But Stuart let it fall from his arms. It swept back of him, in a slanting loop.

Conley held his breath, gripping the control stick until his muscles ached. It seemed a lifetime, while the parachute whipped in the travel stream, before he was sure it wouldn't open.

So far, then, the first danger had been averted.

He gulped air into his starved lungs. There was a chance now for Stuart and the airplane. Ed might climb up to the landing gear wheel. He could straddle it and get himself free of the parachute harness. Then he could work his way up the landing gear struts and onto the wing.

Ed was climbing the shrouds. A tense interval followed as they watched him. He was strong, but that parachute dragging behind him would be a terrible hindrance.

Each time he shifted weight to get another handhold above there was a quick, hard jerk on the shrouds. And each time the watchers expected them to come untangled from the wheel, Stuart would fall, dead weight.

Once, during the climb, Frank's eyes dropped in a swift glance over the crowd. They were silent, faces uplifted as though they all prayed in unison.

Stuart was tiring. He rested longer before releasing with one hand and reaching above. At last his hand touched the wheel.

He pawed at it frantically as it turned. It was a pitiful thing to watch.

A high, whinny scream cut the air. "Do something!" a woman shrieked. "For God's sake, somebody do something!"

That broke the spell that had held them with fascinated horror. Frank's eyes dropped to the control stick he was gripping. There was a chance. Providing the 'chute remained tangled in the landing gear.

CONLEY jabbed the throttle wide open, shoved the stick ahead. His plane charged forward in a wild, cross-field take-off.

He pulled the goggles down over his eyes and kept the stick back, his engine laboring with the steep climb. All that happening up there had taken but a few minutes.

The time still dragged. It seemed that minutes and hours passed as he mounted to a level with Frazier's plane. By this time Ed must have released his hold and dropped.

The tangle of shrouds might check his fall again. But it was doubtful.

Conley banked and came around on the left side of Frazier's plane. He relaxed in his seat. Stuart had finally lifted himself, gotten one leg wedged between the wheel and oleo strut. He had unhooked the seat-pack harness and was freed of that parachute.

Conley flew alongside the other plane and waved encouragement. He was shocked by the look of utter terror in Ed's face.

Frank throttled to stay in position. Stuart raised his hands, gripping the strut. They slipped on its greasy surface.

Frank made motions to him to unhook the other parachute harness. He couldn't possibly get up and over the leading edge of the wing with that drag on him.

Stuart seemed past understanding. He was raising himself slowly, cautiously. He had one knee on the rubber tire, his hands gripping the smooth steel of the oleo.

The lower shrouds had caught around the strut, stopping his climb. The wheel turned under his weight.

Conley shut his eyes. This time the shrouds must certainly come loose. But when he opened his eyes Stuart was hanging with his shoulders just a few inches below the wheel.

In spite of everything, those shrouds had held him!

All fight seemed to have gone from him. He hung limply, the propeller cutting a sharp, metallic path a few feet from his head.

V

RADCLIFFE was talking with Major Jentries when the parachute plane took off. "He's done perfect work in ground subjects, Major," he said. "His air work is excellent, too, though he had a little trouble with landings. He whipped that and I think he can whip this—whatever it is that bothers him in formation flying."

The major was a stocky little man, with the face of a pugilist. "There's two things against carrying him over," he objected. "First, the cost. But more important, our advance schools are overcrowded already. That idiotic demand for fifty thousand airplanes tomorrow or the next day! That means a hundred-fifty-thousand pilots. We'd have to have two million men to pick and choose from. And not one second to spare for a man who's on the doubtful list. You see my point?"

But Radcliffe had stopped listening. His eyes were lifted to the cabin plane. "*There's* trouble," he muttered, under his breath.

"Is that part of your show?" the major asked, his voice critical. "We're not training wingwalkers, y'know."

"It's Cadet Stuart. He's a little reckless —oh-oh!"

"That fool's going to kill himself and the pilot, too! Why in the devil'd he pull those 'chutes?"

"Kramer, get number six going!"

"Where's some extra goggles? Gimme a pair of goggles, somebody."

"You'd better stay here, Major."

"Like thunder. Hurry up! I'll take rear cockpit. That damned, addle-brained show-off! There's another plane taking off, cross-field. You teach 'em wild flying here, Captain."

CONLEY edged his wing into close formation with the parachute plane. Lieutenant Frazier, humped over his control stick in the open cockpit of the old mail plane, didn't see him at first.

Conley moved in, nearer and nearer. Frazier's head jerked around. His jaw

muscles were bunched, his lips set in a straight, tense line.

He pointed downward and nodded that he realized what had happened.

Conley clenched knees against the control stick. He was so near Frazier it seemed as if he could shout out the plan that he had conceived for rescuing Stuart. But of course the engines would submerge his voice.

He held his left hand raised, spread, palm down, moving it as though it were an airplane. He put his right hand under it, then pointed to his own plane.

Frazier nodded, after a moment's hesitation. He understood that Conley was going to fly under him, very close. Conley would be in his blind spot. He wouldn't be able to see him. He must fly straight ahead and as steady as he possibly could.

Conley moved out and eased stick forward when he was clear of the other's wings and tail. He saw another plane come into position alongside Frazier.

Radcliffe was at the controls, in the front cockpit. There was another man in the rear cockpit, bareheaded, with a square, aggressive face.

Frank slid into position under the cabin plane. He had to keep far enough below the dangling figure of Stuart so that there would be no danger of the propeller striking him.

Danger! It was a relative term, here. It was all dangerous. Terribly dangerous. He had to depend absolutely on Frazier maintaining level flight. He had to take that for granted.

Radcliffe had moved away far enough to be able to see both pilots at the same time. He was in a position to relay signals between them.

Stuart saw the wing of Conley's plane move slowly beneath him. Conley was still ten feet or more below his reach. But the promise of rescue brought life back into him. He managed a faint smile to show that he understood what the other was trying to do.

They struck a small air pocket. There was that breathless moment when the propeller seemed to whirl in a vacuum. Then the drop. It seemed for an instant that they were going to strike.

Conley had dropped the nose of his plane. He flew for a time, getting the plane steadied. Then he opened his throttle very slightly and edged his stick back. Slowly, carefully he moved his right wing up nearer to Stuart.

It would have been comparatively easy with an old-fashioned biplane. But with the low-wing, Conley had to bring his plane up until his tail-control surfaces were in the other propeller turbulence.

Fore-and-aft cabane struts made a diagonal slant from the top of his fuselage to spar fittings a few feet out from the wing-root. Those would give Stuart a hand- and foot-hold while he released himself from the parachute harness. He could cling there easily while the ship was landed.

STUART'S toes dragged across the leading strut. Conley edged up just a little nearer. Stuart's weight was on the wing now, one foot bending the fabric in between ribs.

A little higher and he was gripping the cabane struts only a few feet away.

"Unhook your parachute," Conley shouted. He motioned toward the chest and leg hooks.

Stuart shook his head. He pointed to the empty rear cockpit. He was afraid to ride it down, out there on the wing.

Conley looked despairingly toward Radcliffe. The captain was making violent motions for Stuart to release himself.

It was no use. Stuart was completely unnerved. He continued pointing toward the rear cockpit, motioning Conley ahead.

Conley estimated distances. To get the rear cockpit under Stuart he would have to move forward until his head was directly under the propeller of the cabin plane.

He made one last attempt to persuade the other man. Grimly, then, he lowered down until Stuart dangled free.

Conley relaxed for a moment, breathing deeply. It seemed that during the last

few minutes his lungs had ceased their work.

He wasn't afraid. He was so filled with anger that there was no room in him for any other emotion. He hated Ed Stuart in every tissue of his body.

It seemed as though there had never been a moment of his life that the other hadn't dominated, always demanding things of him. And never, in his selfish existence, had Stuart thought to repay.

Conley changed hands on the joy stick, wiped the dripping sweat from his right palm. Very slowly he started climbing into position beneath that murderous propeller.

For moments, then, he did not seem to be breathing.

He felt a slight jar on the cowling behind him as Stuart's foot dragged over it. A roaring sound grew in his ears—the propeller.

It was like water falling from a tremendous height. Rather, it was like a saw; a huge circular saw, whipping the air, snarling like a hungry beast.

He crouched in his seat, bending his head forward as the volume of sound increased. He didn't dare look upward.

If he moved his eyes he would be certain to move the stick infinitesimally. Just one slashing cut from those propeller tips and he would be gone. They'd both be gone.

Pilots are expendable. Radcliffe had told him that and he hadn't understood why.

He did now. It made the whole thing very simple. All a man had to do was accept that and he'd never again be afraid of anything in flying.

He wouldn't be afraid of what the other man was going to do in formation. He wouldn't be afraid of anything.

There was death up there. He could feel the very breath of it stirring around his face. A dead man doesn't have to be afraid. You can't hurt a man who's already dead.

A hand touched the back of his helmet. Stuart's voice came to him, a hoarse shout: "I'm loose. Take it away, you fool!"

CONLEY stood nervously watching the other cadets march up to receive their pins from Jentries. It seemed a long way across the polished dance floor to where the major stood, with Radcliffe on his left and the other instructors ranked beside the captain. A man could slip or stumble and make a terrible fool of himself, marching up there.

You saluted, the major pinned the wings on your lapel, you shook hands with him, saluted again and made a left face. It was awful!

Poor Ed! Before they landed he had already regained his cockiness. He'd stood up in the rear cockpit, shouting to Conley:

"Mr. Stuart's little boy sure gave 'em a thrill. Eh, Careful? If you'd been in that spot, kid, you'd be too scared to talk. I was even scared myself, when I fell the second time. Sorta scared."

Radcliffe had landed before them and was waiting. Except for his eyes you couldn't tell that he was angry. He had spoken to Stuart in a low, even voice: "Turn in your equipment, Stuart. You're through."

. . . Conley marched across the dance floor, stood before the major and saluted. Jentries bent, fastening the small wings to his lapel—those wings that meant so much. Jentries was talking out of the corner of his mouth, in a low monotone:

"Didn't get a chance to tell you, cadet. Handled yourself well in that parachute business. And a nice formation you flew, afterward. Good windup for the show."

They shook hands. Conley saluted. He was shaking hands with Radcliffe.

His mind was filled with all sorts of confused thoughts. Mary would never know how near he'd come to not flying in that formation. Pilots are expendable. He'd better not tell her about that.

Poor old Ed! Talk to Radcliffe tomorrow, after he'd cooled down. There might be a chance for Ed in the next class. Pilots are expendable. No. He wouldn't speak about that to Mary. There were so many other things for them to talk about.

The roar was deafening, and Cleve felt himself lifted from the deck and flung out to sea

The Scarlet Blade

By MURRAY R. MONTGOMERY

RICHELIEU has persuaded KING LOUIS XIII to sign a secret treaty with England, but France's relationship with Spain is so delicate at the moment that if the contents of the treaty is disclosed, war with Spain will be inevitable. So Richelieu selects the two ablest—and most troublesome—men in his guard to protect the treaty—those two dashing rakehellies, RICHARD CLEVE and GUY D'ENTREVILLE.

DON DIEGO DE ISLA, the Spanish agent provacateur operating in France, makes one attempt to eliminate Cleve and d'Entreville, which is a dismal failure. But JACQUES DEBRILLE, the professional spy, who has already told Don Diego of the French-English treaty, suggests another method of obtaining that vital document.

On the night of a reception at the Louvre Cleve and d'Entreville are stationed outside the treaty room. A stranger uses insults to lure d'Entreville into a duel; and while he is alone, Cleve is attacked from behind. Thus the treaty is stolen.

THE two rakehellies discover that Don Diego has left Paris, apparently for Le Havre, the nearest port. They set out in furious pursuit. In spite of the efforts of CAPTAIN CORDEAU, who has an order for their arrest, Cleve and d'Entreville reach the seaport—to find the Spanish ship, *El Con-*

The first installment of this three-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for October 26

quistador, ready to sail for Spain, with Don Diego and the treaty safely aboard.

Disguised, the two guardsmen are able to find loading work aboard the ship. They are attempting to stow themselves away when they are detected by PEDRO PIZON, Don Diego's aide; they are overpowered and thrown into chains. Just before their capture, however, they have managed to place in a bottle the order for their arrest which they stole from Cordeau, and a spoon identifying the ship. Hopefully they throw the bottle into the harbor.

AFTER days of suffering in the hole, Cleve and d'Entreville are given clean clothes and hauled before Don Diego. It is the Spaniard's cruel pleasure to entertain them at dinner that evening, for on the morrow they are to be hung. Now, on his way to the cabin Cleve has kicked one end of a rope over the ship's side, and in the presence of Don Diego he conceives a mad plan which he manages to explain to d'Entreville. The two men back to the afterport; the next instant they are through it, plunging into the night sea.

d'Entreville, who cannot swim, clings to Cleve until they locate the rope. Then by frantic effort Cleve is able to climb into the rudder chains and from there through the port of a gun room. A moment later he has thrown a rope to d'Entreville, and the two rakehellies are again aboard *El Conquistador. . . .*

CHAPTER XIII

GHOSTS IN VELVET

FOR the better part of ten minutes they lay beside the stern-chaser, two bedraggled figures, glistening, half-naked, and too weary to speak or even congratulate each other.

The cant of the flooring told of a freshening breeze; the earlier calm had ended. Except for the increasing creak of the rigging and timbers, the barque made headway in silence. In the cluttered gun room nothing but the rasp of their breathing disturbed the stillness.

Finally, Guy sat up. He was cold, shivering. His voice came shakily between chattering teeth.

"*Sango demi!* The first thing we do is find some clothes. I don't know how you are, Cleve, but I'm practically naked."

Cleve spoke without moving, without even opening his eyes. A great lassitude seemed weighted on him. But there was no suggestion of it in his tone.

"Damme," he snorted. "You learn to swim, avoid a disagreeable banquet, and still complain. Faith, next time I decide to leap off ship-sterns, you stay home."

Guy crossed arms over his bare chest and massaged his biceps vigorously. "Very funny," he grunted. Warm blood began to circulate through his shoulders. He stood up. "I wonder if they keep clothes down here? *Parbleu!* It's so black I can scarce see my hand in front of my nose."

"*Your* eyes should be excellent in the dark," Cleve sighed. He rolled over. "Kitten."

A wet palm reached out of the darkness and clipped the speaker smartly on the stomach.

"Ouch! That hurt!"

"*Pecaire*! 'Twas supposed to."

"Well, where are you going now?"

The Frenchman had stepped around the breech of the stern-chaser and was now groping blindly through the cabin. He didn't answer Cleve's question. A dull thud and a stream of subdued blasphemies were the result of his stubbing a toe against a large sea-chest. Then there came an exclamation of triumph, followed by the glint of flint on steel, a puff of flame, and wavering light. He'd chanced upon a box of candles and a tinder-box.

"*Corbac!*" he exclaimed. "That is much better."

"Especially for your toes," Cleve said.

He sat up, rubbed his eyes. The parts of the cabin which had been previously obscured became apparent. He noted with satisfaction the single door up forward; its reassuring thickness and its heavy lock. Besides being a gun and powder room, the cabin appeared also to be a luggage compartment. The trunks of Diego, Pizon and retinue were piled neatly in a corner.

"Faith! Besides offering their hospitality, Diego and Pizon now offer us their wardrobes. You know, Kitten, perhaps

we've been doing an injustice to those rats."

D'Entreville frowned slightly. Although they were safe enough for the nonce, their hoarse whispers resounded hollowly through the silence of the room. It was dangerous.

"Speak more softly, Cleve." He regarded the pieces of baggage and smiled. *"Pecaire!* We may die before the night is out, but by the Devil, we'll die in style!"

WITH the efficiency of professional thieves they looted the trunks. They hauled an impressive display of finery from the chests. Cordovan boots of softest leather, plumed hats, collars of Venetian lace, silver-slashed doublets, velvet capes, jeweled rapiers, daggers, and even breastplates and morions. They pawed through the mass, cheerfully making their selections.

Finally arrayed in a costume of forest-green, d'Entreville stepped back. There were buckles of silver on his russet-colored boots. The sword that hung at his hip was silver-hilted and his broad-brimmed hat was gray with a yellow plume.

"Cleve," he said, grinning, "as one fop to another, how do I look?"

The Englishman studied him critically. "Too conservative," he decided shortly. "Now take me for example. Blue cape, scarlet doublet and breeches, white boots. Frankly, you can't really look at me without holding your ears."

" 'Tis rather loud," Guy agreed.

"Understatement. This costume shrieks. It's one of Pizon's, I'll warrant. Ah, here's the prescription." The speaker bent down and plucked a gold medallion from one of the gaping chests. He strung it on his chest.

"What's that for?" d'Entreville wanted to know.

"Bravery, Kitten. It takes courage to appear in these clothes. Damme! I feel like a blasted butterfly."

. . . They hadn't a set plan as they stole softly out of the gun room and down the slanted corridor toward the mizzen companionway. At the foot of it, Cleve gripped d'Entreville's arm tightly and murmured: "Faith, Kitten! Are we just going to walk up to Don Diego's cabin and request the Treaty and our liberty?"

In the starlight that sifted down through the deadlights above, Guy's face was hard. There was a challenge in his eyes. He nodded.

"Something like that," he replied softly. "I have a sword now. I can get him before he gets me with his crew. The Treaty will be destroyed by then." He shrugged. "Dying won't be so difficult." Then he smiled faintly. "As for you, *mon ami*—stay here. I'm a Frenchman, this is for France."

Cleve's lips were twisted sarcastically, but his eyes displayed open admiration. "And you're just enough of a fool to go out that way! A damned show-off."

Guy shrugged. "If I destroy the Treaty, I've served my purpose. *Pecaire!* Have you a better plan?"

The Englishman nodded. "Certainly. Let's take the ship!"

"What?"

"Let's take the ship. Damme! I'm in the mood for exercise anyway."

"Sangodemi, Cleve! Have you lost your sense entirely? I know that you have always been touched with madness, but think, man! There are only two of us."

Cleve grinned.

"You've been counting, I see. Of course, there's only two of us. But, we're such exceptional fellows, Kitten!"

"Nonsense. *Mordi!* Such insanity! Two men capturing a fully manned barque."

Cleve's voice came soft through the murk. "Want to wager, Kitten?"

"Parbleu! The odds are a thousand to one."

"I'll take them. Mark this, the crew is asleep. The Watch will expect nothing." He paused. "Well, Guy. What do you say?"

"I say it's utterly mad," d'Entreville muttered; and then he chuckled. "But, *mordi!* I'm a trifle mad myself. Let's be about it, Cleve. I'll take the starboard and you the port, we'll meet on the quarter-deck." He paused uncertainly and added: "I hope!"

AS THEY went out on deck, they met an ear-ringed seaman, who upon seeing Cleve's gaudy costume, tugged respectfully at his forelock and bowed.

"Good evening, Señor Pizon."

Cleve's fist flashed briefly, descending on the nape of the man's neck. "Good evening my man," he said, and caught the sailor's limp body. He looked up at Guy. "First come, first served, Kitten. Pull the fellow into the shadow of the companion and bind and gag him."

Then he strolled leisurely down the deck. D'Entreville stared after him and cursed. He jerked the sailor down the companion, cut a length of rope into segments and tied him securely. After a hurried check, he looped the rest of the line around his waist and returned to deck.

He found Cleve leaning nonchalantly against the starboard bulwark, staring idly out to sea.

"There were only two watches forward," he said. "As an added precaution I bolted the forecastle companionway from the outside."

"What did you do with the watches?"

"Dragged them here. There at my feet. Care to truss them up, Kitten? I believe I'll go aft and have a talk with the helmsman."

"Ah, no!" D'Entreville disengaged himself from the rope and handed it to the Englishman. "Tie them yourself. Do you want to hog all of the fun? Besides, we agreed on a plan of action. I was to take the starboard and you the port. What happened?"

"There wasn't anyone on the port," Cleve muttered.

He bent down and began binding his victims. Guy walked away. A thick, threatening silence lay over the ship. Suddenly, from the quarter came a short cry, and then an indistant thud. Cleve, his fingers darting through a series of intricate knots, stared apprehensively over his shoulder. Had that stifled outburst been noticed, or had the men below slept through it undisturbed? Then he stiffened.

"Egad! I had forgotten you!"

There was a dark figure cautiously descending the forward rat-lines, moving stealthily against the lift and sway of the rigging. The lookout from the tops! Apparently, the fellow had watched the slugging from his perch, and having decided that silence was the better part of valor, was now attempting to sneak an alarm to his sleeping comrades below.

"But I don't think we shall allow you that privilege," the English rakehelly breathed.

He fondled the belaying-pin he had been using with noteworthy results and slunk along the bulwarks. He met the man as he landed. Straightening swiftly, Cleve said: "Let's be star-gazers, m'lad," and swung. The lookout suddenly lost his ambition.

THREE minutes later Guy stood beside him, panting slightly. "I lashed the wheel," he reported. "*Sandiou!* It was a close call, though."

Cleve rose from the tightly bound lookout. "What happened?"

"*Mordi!* There were two of them on the poop—the helmsman and the first officer. The First was in a chair. I thought he was asleep, but as I bludgeoned the helmsman, the villain jumped me. I feared he would raise the ship before I silenced him."

"You silenced him, and that is the important business, Kitten."

"*Oui*, I suppose so. Look, Cleve, as I stood there on the quarter an idea struck me. Why not load these wretches into the long-boat and set them adrift. We can throw them a poniard and a few provisions. It will take them off our hands."

Cleve nodded. That would be the safe way to play it. "All right," he agreed. "Take care of that, Guy, while I set to work insuring our conquest of the deck."

"What do you mean?"

Cleve smiled in the starlight. He had been acting on impulse as he went along, but now he had a plan clearly in mind.

"Merely this," he said, "there are two light carronades up in the bow, and I think they'd look much handsomer set in

the poop. You can sweep the whole ship from the poop."

D'Entreville chuckled as he saw the other's intent. *"Bien,"* he said. "As soon as I'm finished here, I'll help you. There is a demi-culverin on the quarterdeck already."

"Faith! Now *that* was very kind of the ship's designer," said Cleve, and glided away.

It took them three-quarters of an hour to accomplish their respective missions. Three quarters of an hour in which the sweat of labor and growing apprehension drenched their bodies and their clothes. D'Entreville found that lifting squirming men over the side and into the davited longboat on the poop was strenuous exercise. Added to this, on two occasions, he had been forced to leave the task to stalk sailors who had appeared unexpectedly to stand watches.

"Pecaire! Never saw so many cases of insomnia," he complained.

And Cleve— Faith! The bow-carronades belied their classification as light guns; they were anything but that. Short, squat little weapons with large bores and heavy bases, they could not be lifted by one man. He was forced to take them apart, lug them to the quarterdeck, and reassemble them again.

He was completing the job as d'Entreville cautiously lowered the longboat and cut the lines. Then they met for a short conference. A council of war.

"We need powder and ball," Cleve said. "I'll like to turn that culverin behind us, but the noise would wake Diego."

D'Entreville nodded. *"Oui.* We've been uncommonly lucky until now. It's best not to press it. Are the carronades loaded?"

"About two charges apiece."

"Peste! That isn't sufficient. Wait here, I'll see if we can't remedy it."

He turned without giving Cleve opportunity to protest and glided down the break in the poop and across the deserted decks. Amidships he paused before a dark companionway, drew his rapier and disappeared from the Englishman's view.

Perhaps five minutes elapsed before he emerged. During that time Cleve stood gripping the pooprail, straining his ears to catch any sound besides the sail-whispers of the sleeping barque, and praying.

D'Entreville had found the ship's magazine. He staggered to the quarterdeck, bent beneath the weight of a canvas bag crammed with powder, ball and muskets.

"Parbleu!" he gasped lowering the load. "I feel like a cursed Atlas." He smiled grimly and pointed to the munitions, then to the carronades placed on the port and starboard sides of the quarter. "But, I also feel safer. We control the poop. Let them come!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE SLEEPING BEAR AWAKES

BUT Cleve wasn't satisfied. It was true, that for the first time in over a week, fortune had smiled. But how long would that smile last? Suddenly the futility of their position struck him. What was the next move? Where did they go from here? They were two against four-score men. Anything could happen.

"Faith," he murmured softly. "I feel like the man who has grabbed a sleeping bear by the tail. There remains nothing else than to hold on." He paused. "And pray."

Guy had overheard. *"Sangodemi,* Cleve, let's put the future aside. It's not like you to brood."

They stood for a moment in silence, staring absently at the deserted, star-washed, decks. The barque seemed barely to keep headway under a fragile breeze from the northeast. She had been partially becalmed all night. The peace of the night seemed to have settled over her. The lull before the storm, Cleve thought, and looked up with a frown.

"Damme! Who's brooding, Kitten?"

"Corbac! You are."

"I am not. I've been thinking. Do you realize that if we hold the quarterdeck for any length of time, we're going to get hungry, and thirsty?"

Guy nodded quickly. *"Pecaire!* That's right. One moment I'll go and fetch—"

Cleve grabbed his arm. "I'll go," he said. "You stay here and see if you can't fix some sort of barricade. There are several small kegs lashed to the base of the mizzenmast."

"Oh, very well."

But Cleve never reached the ship's galley. As he stepped quietly across the waist, a faint noise from the bow attracted him. He froze. The noise came again: a soft clinking sound that might have been unheard under other circumstances. With a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach he drew his blade and began to move forward.

He heard voices as he neared the forecastle. Muttered commands in Spanish followed by the soft pad of feet. Something was happening. He shrank against the mast and peered cautiously around.

Dimly, in the night, he made out two shadowy figures hunched in front of the companionway to the crew's quarters. He had locked that companion after he'd taken care of the forward watches. The two figures were joined by a third—and then a fourth. A fifth!

"Well, so that's it, eh?" he muttered.

The men climbing stealthily over the bow were the watches whom he and Guy had cast adrift a half hour before. They had used the poinard the French cavalier had cast them to cut their bonds. The barque had been moving so slowly that they had managed to row back to her. They had circled the stern carefully so as to come up under her anchor chains. Now they were using the links to steal aboard.

Cleve stepped out from behind the mast. He meant to stop this business quickly and efficiently. The watches weren't armed; he was.

"All right, m'lads," he said softly, "Relax!"

BUT the sailors had other ideas. Disregarding the rapier Cleve held, they whirled as one man and charged. He got one of them through the chest, before they bore him down. And then he was fighting for his life.

A hobbled boot smashed the sword free of his fingers. A pair of hands crushed his throat. He lay on his back, kicking indiscriminately in all directions. A cursing, yelling, seaman held one of his arms. He wheezed in Cleve's ear as he attempted to break the arm.

Somehow the Englishman managed to draw his legs up to his chest. He did it fast enough to crash one knee into the face of the man choking him. The grip on his throat lessened and he gulped in air gratefully. Then he shot his legs hard into the massed bodies overhead. Men catapulted off of him. He jabbed a fist into the throat of the wheezer, and rolled to his knees.

"By Gad! That's better," he panted.

There was a pause, caused by the fury of his counter-attack, and he made use of it. He saw his rapier lying a few feet to the right. With a cat-like bound he threw his weight against an on-coming sailor and scooped the light weapon up. Somebody was clawing his face from the side. He flung his arm back, his elbow striking brutally into the fellow's nose, and whipped the sword upward into the groin of another assailant charging at him from the starboard. A scream of agony rent the night. Cleve jumped to his feet.

He had to get out of here. The companion to the crew's quarters was open and sleepy-eyed men were pouring through it, brandishing knives, cutlasses and pistols. Cleve sent his blade darting into the ring of bodies surging in on him. It drove them back. He retreated.

But now the forward part of the boat was black with men. A pistol roared in the night and the ball smacked viciously into the bulwark beside him. It seemed as though he were fighting a million men. Cutlasses chopped at him from three sides. One nipped him in the arm. He laughed, but the pain of that wound enraged him.

His blade became a viper's tongue, licking quickly in and out among the clumsy cutlasses. A man crumpled, stung through

the throat. Another reeled back clutching his side. For one furious moment the Englishman's cautious retreat halted.

"Sacre bleu, Cleve! Down! Get down! Hit the deck!"

Dimly Cleve heard d'Entreville shouting these instructions. He gave a panting yell and fell back. The rapidity with which he sent himself sprawling to the boards knocked the wind out of him.

A fraction of a second crawled by; and then, from the quarterdeck, came a frightful crash. He heard the grape-shot scream a few inches over his head, and heard the agonized chorus of groans, curses and screams which rose from the gory heap in the waist. The crew had been riddled horribly by that rain of death from the carronade.

Then he was on his feet again and pounding toward the poop. His breath came in great gasping sobs. He felt hot and sick with the effort of it.

THE door of the master's cabin burst open, and Don Diego appeared, fully dressed and clutching a sword uncertainly. Cleve bowled into him before the Spaniard had a chance to use it. The door loomed in welcome. Hurdling the prostrate Don, Cleve sped through and slammed it shut behind him. He shot the bolts, and sagged for a moment in panting relief.

On the quarterdeck, Guy crouched behind his smoking gun and eyed the carnage he had wrought. Fifteen bodies littered the forward decks, some mangled horribly. He licked his lips. The rest of the crew had scattered. He could distinguish the black bulk of them clotted in the bow. Directly below him Don Diego was crawling to his feet, cursing monotonously. The Spaniard looked up, saw Guy, and stopped. D'Entreville picked up a musket.

"Get up forward with the rest of the scum," he said. "Go on! Run, before I put a ball through you!"

Diego's fat face was ludicrously amazed. *"Dios!"* he exclaimed. "You're dead. You're drowned. I saw you—"

"Corbac! On your way, *señor!"*

"But how? What—"

The French rakehelly planted a ball directly between the speaker's feet. He picked up another musket.

"Allez!"

Diego left. He lumbered across the decks toward the others.

Below, Cleve suddenly found himself in more trouble. With his back against the door he stared across the lantern lit confines of the master's cabin into the beady black eyes of Pedro Pizon.

Pizon had been sleeping on the window seat. Upon the Englishman's crashing entrance, he had looked up in startled confusion. Now recognition was followed by incredulity. *"Diablo!* You!"

Gasping, Cleve could do little else than nod. A minute crawled by as they faced each other. And then Pizon acted. He rolled off of the window seat and came up with a pistol. Cleve rammed his body to one side, and the murderous-looking pistol went *click*. Nothing happened.

"Empty!"

The word came like a snarl from deep in the Spaniard's throat. He surged forward, drawing his rapier.

"Por Dios! I've attempted to finish you three times, Cleve. But now I shan't fail. How did you escape drowning? How come you here?"

The Englishman shook his head. He was almost done in. He needed his breath for other things besides talking. So he lounged there against the door, blade slanted wearily across his boot. Pizon paused beside the table.

"Tired, aren't you. Well, *señor,* we shall make you a trifle more tired before the end."

Cleve didn't say anything. He watched the other alertly and waited. Pizon was fresh; he wasn't. From above Guy's voice boomed:

"And mark this, Diego; I have another carronade waiting up here, besides two muskets. Send your men aft and I'll blow them back into your fat face. Stay where you are. Understand?"

"Fool! Do you think you can take this

ship?" Diego's rich voice returned. "Best surrender now, and you'll have a quick death. Later . . ." He laughed cruelly. "I am a man of whims, *señor*. I know several amusing tricks."

THEN Pizon charged. Cleve was barely prepared for it. He had been listening to the voices outside. The swarthy aide's blade leaped viciously at his throat. He caught it on his hilt, deflected it past his cheek. Pizon leered.

"I'll play with you a while, swine!"

Cleve met his next thrust with a ready blade and a quick riposte. "Play lightly, laddie. I'm wearing your clothes. It would be a shame to ruin such fine cloth."

"Diablo!"

"Ah, now, temper, old man. Temper."

The Englishman laughed. He felt fresh vigor pouring into his body. For the first time he began to carry the play toward the Spaniard. His blade knitted a circle of peril around Pizon, driving him back—back in increasing disorder.

In the center of the saffron-washed cabin, the dark aide made a stand. He somehow managed a quick binde that momentarily stopped the waspish offensive; drove Cleve to a loss of balance, and allowed two murderous thrusts in sixte. The English rakehelly parried one miraculously and felt the sting of the other lightly. No damage!

But Pizon pressed on, fighting with the savagery of desperation. He fought with his blade low, an Italian crouch which he had adapted for his own requirements.

"Why don't you sit down?" Cleve panted. "It would be easier."

Pizon's lips writhed, but no sound came from them. His high forehead glistened with sweat. And then he made his first and only mistake. He attempted a double feint at the stomach, but Cleve broke it up with a flashing seconde that jerked the Spaniard off balance. There was a quick opening and the Englishman found it. His steel rasped over the other's hilt and slip deep into Pizon's side. The Spaniard staggered back clutching the wound. His rapier clattered to the floor and his eyes were big, amazed.

"You did it," he accused stupidly. "You did this to me *Dios!* It burns. It burns!"

He felt the window seat against his calves and sat down. Crimson leaked between his clutching fingers. He sprawled wearily against the ports and lay there staring at Cleve and wheezing harshly.

"You'll live," Cleve said. He knew that he was lying, but a plan had struck him. "You'll live, Pizon, but not if you don't talk."

There was hope in Pizon's eyes now. "What do you mean? I am wounded, *señor*. You wouldn't slay a wounded man."

Cleve lifted his blade. "Damme! Why wouldn't I?"

The Spaniard writhed in a spasm of agony. "You devil," he gasped.

"Where is the Treaty? Where does Diego keep the Treaty?"

The Spaniard was growing weak; he was dying; and yet no recognition of the fact showed in his eyes.

"If I tell," he sobbed painfully. "If I show you, you'll let me live, *señor.*"

Cleve nodded. He felt dirty doing this. Why couldn't he let the man die in peace; allow him the dignity of a quiet death?

Pizon pointed weakly toward a small writing desk on the starboard side of the room. "In a black dispatch case you'll find—"

A streak of pain seemed to stiffen his body. It choked short the words he was uttering and held his lips stiffly agape. By the time Cleve reached him, he was dead.

The cavalier lifted the Spaniard's limps legs to the window seat, threw his ragged cape over the corpse; and then turned to the desk.

Now that he was close to the thing, he moved fast.

He was forced to open three drawers before he found the case. It was lying partially concealed beneath a litter of correspondence and pen-quills. Trembling slightly, he fumbled with the brassy clasp, opened it and thrust his hand inside. The case was empty. The Treaty was gone.

CHAPTER XV

AND DOWN WE GO

ON THE poop, Guy placed a musket conveniently at his knee and fumbled hurriedly among his store of munitions. The portside carronade needed to be reloaded—and reloaded quickly. A brooding silence hung over the wallowing barque, and he realized that it was but a prelude to danger. Don Diego was not the type to give up his ship to two men.

Shortly after their bellowed conversation, the Spanish noble had collected the frightened crew and sent them down into the forecastle. Even now a council of war was being held. Both carronades had to be ready!

Swiftly he selected a fresh powder charge and rammed it home. He found a package of thick brown wads lying beside the squat base and crammed one hard against the powder. He heard a noise and grabbed up his musket. Then he saw the slim outlines of Cleve against the mast-light on the mizzen, and he put the gun down again.

The Englishman bent down beside him. He was laden with three bandoleers, a brace of pistols, two muskets and a half-keg of ball.

"Pizon disputed my right to be in the cabin," he said and shrugged. He put the arms and munitions near at hand and picked up a handful of grape. He poured it down the hungry muzzle and followed it with several more. D'Entreville sprinkled black powder into the touch-hole and picked up one of the pistols Cleve had brought.

"Where did you get this, *mon ami?*"

"From the arms rack beside the door. I stripped it of everything. I suppose I should have—"

A shout arose from the forward hatch.

"Corbac!" Guy exclaimed. "Diego's ordered them to rush us!"

THEN like a bellowing herd of cattle men swept along the decks from the darkness of the bow. They surged toward the silent quarter, fierce in their intent to take it by sheer weight.

Cleve half-rose. D'Entreville yanked him down. Musket fire began to wink from the shadowy companions, from behind masts.

"Sangodemi! Keep down, Cleve. We have the better elevation. The lip of the deck flooring protects us from low shots."

Cleve nodded. He scuttled crab-fashion across the deck to the other carronade. Between the balustrades of the poop-railing he saw how close the attackers were. Diego must have fired them with a patriotic fervor.

They kept yelling: *"Viva* Philip! *Viva Hispania! Viva Hispania!"* Ugly pikes, cutlasses and knives glittered.

"Let them come close," Guy roared above the bedlam. "Mark me, Cleve. Let them come up to the muzzles. *Pardieu!* I told Diego I'd blast them to—"

He touched his match to the breech. The flame was sudden and terrible, lighting the faces of the swarming crew. A great invisible hand seemed to strike them down; to bowl them into ghastly bleeding heaps. D'Entreville turned away from the slaughter.

"Dios y Diablo! Go on, you swine! Don't allow them time to reload that gun!"

It was Diego howling orders from the bow; sending a new wave of seamen against the smoke-cloaked quarterdeck. Brave Diego! D'Entreville cursed him for a monster.

Then he felt suddenly numb. The crew was obeying. More men were rushing down through that crimson waist, rushing desperately over the riddled bodies of their comrades! They were coming, and he had nothing but an empty cannon with which to stop them.

Even as he sponged out for reloading, he realized the futility of it. The defense of the poop was over. Finished! They'd be on him before he could ram home the first charge.

And then once more the quarter was wreathed by flame-pierced smoke. The

assault party melted under a hail of grape; dropped to the decks like so many stringless puppets. Guy stared in unbelief through the gun-haze, and Cleve patted the carronade in front of him and grinned.

"Forgot to fire last time, Kitten!" he said.

After that there were no more senseless charges against the poop. The fifty bodies littering the waist argued mutely against it. A tribute to Don Diego's stupidity.

But it did not mean a cessation of hostilities. Having learned a bitter lesson, the Spanish Don attempted other tactics.

HIS first proved more annoying than dangerous. By sending musketeers beneath the decks and then up through the hatches and companionways, he attempted to pick off the defenders. Shadowy figures would flit suddenly from hatch to a mast; always advancing; firing alternately; seeking to filter aft, one by one, until they could rush. None ever penetrated further than the mizzen.

The cavaliers met the move, lying flat on the quarterdeck and poking flaming musket-mouths between the rail balustrades. They offered practically no target and their elevated position gave them a definite fire-advantage. After an hour of desultory fire, the snipers were withdrawn.

Then Don Diego had ten or twelve sharp-shooters climb the shrouds. If height was an advantage he meant to have it. From the tops the musketeers poured a dangerous fire down upon the cavaliers. And there was no defense against it. No place to take cover. The hot balls slapped viciously into the flooring all around them. Cleve was grazed painfully before d'Entreville solved the problem.

Working with desperate swiftness, the French rakehelly extracted all of the quoins from the breech of the starboard carronade. Gradually the muzzle tipped back until it was staring belligerently at the ghostly sails above. A musket-ball hissed through the dark and splattered against the rail.

Guy added a handful of grape-shot for good luck and fired. The carronade heeled madly back against its base. She roared up into the night. And the snipers came down, but only three of them on their own volition. The other eight made ugly squashing sounds as they thudded limply to deck.

Cleve sighed. "Damme! Give it up, Diego," he called. "We're on this quarterdeck to stay. Keep feeding us men and you soon shan't have any left. Disarm and perchance we can get this hulk to a port. A *French* port, incidently."

There was a moment's stillness; and then, a volley of pungent curses and threats fouled the air as Don Diego made reply to the terms. *Por Dios!* The ship was nearing Spanish waters! The proud vessels of King Philip were all over these waters.

He concluded: "And if we can't capture you, then we'll lay siege until you drop from exhaustion. Two men can't take a ship this size, mark me, *señors.*"

"Sangodemi! But we're doing it," d'Entreville roared back.

But Cleve licked his dry lips and shrugged. What Diego said was true. If, in the dawning, the barque should come within hailing distance of a Spanish boat, the game would be over. From his position in the bow, Diego would be able to yell explanations across the sea and the other ship would make short work of the two men holding the poop.

Cleve sighed.

"Faith! We fight a losing battle, I'm afraid, Kitten," the English cavalier told his companion. "Even if we're not stopped by another ship in the morning, there remains the fact that we are but two against a possible twenty. Already, I'm about done. How long can we hold out without collapsing over our guns?"

"Corbac! Long enough to sink the ship! A ball from the demi-culverin behind us, and we start down. There'll be no surrender, Cleve!"

"Damme! Who said anything about surrender?"

"Well, you inferred as much."

Cleve smiled tiredly. He repeated a line from an old pirate chanty:

And when we can't give blow for blow,
Then scuttle the vessel, and down we go.

D'Entreville nodded agreement.

CHAPTER XVI

HIS SWORD IS FIRE

THE morning found their position still unchanged. Diego had decided to watch and wait. He kept musketeers posted at strategic points to prevent their securing food or water from the deck larder amidships.

The two defenders lay sprawled on the sun-swept quarterdeck and licked their drying lips. Thirst was beginning to torture them. Added to this, they were sodden with fatigue. The snipers and the sudden alarms that were cruelly devised to keep them awake, had been all too successful.

"Sail ho!"

The cry came from up forward, from the lips of a seaman squatting behind an improvised barricade beside the leeward bulwarks. D'Entreville sat up with a curse. He craned his neck and saw nothing.

"It's behind us," Cleve explained. "Coming over the northern rim. That small patch of white. See it?"

Then the Frenchman saw the square topsails of a ship, stark white against the glimmering blue of the horizon. A sensation of utter futility went through him. That boat was coming fast, rising slowly out of the sea.

It was only a question of time. Previously, he and Cleve had fixed the wheel so that the long black barque had come about into what little breeze there was. To get back on a decent tack, without the aid of a crew to handle the sails, was out of the question.

"We can't outrun him, Cleve. *Pecaire!* I guess this is the beginning of the end, eh?"

The Englishman frowned, never taking his eyes from the growing sail at the stern. "Maybe," he said slowly.

D'Entreville stood up. An ambitious sniper sent a ball screaming off the poop-rail beside him. He ignored it, his lean face tense and white.

"Before we get the culverin ready," he said, "I'm going to swing down the stern and through the windows into Don Diego's cabin. *Mordi!* When we go down, I want to make certain that the Treaty goes with us."

Cleve shook his head. Another musket ball hammered into the rail. With an almost leisurely motion he raised a pistol and returned the fire.

"Don't bother," he said carefully. "The Treaty isn't there. I searched for it."

"Thoroughly?"

"Yes. I feel certain that Diego carries it with him."

"But—"

"Say, is there a glass up here on the poop, somewhere. I'd like to have a better look at that ship."

D'Entreville picked up a heavy brass spyglass from beside the wheel-post and handed it to him. He did it automatically, while his mind digested the other's disheartening news.

Cleve crawled to the after-rail and clapped the glass to one eye. He remained a long while, peering over the sparkling wavelets of the sea. So intent was he that d'Entreville frowned.

"What is she, Cleve?"

"A damned big frigate," the other replied. "She's fast, too. She is fairly leaping along with a bone in her teeth."

Guy cast a nervous glance forward along the decks. They were deserted clear to the rough barricade the Spanish had thrown athwart the bows. Men were half-standing, shading their eyes and staring at the oncoming frigate.

"How long before she catches us?" he asked.

And then, Cleve gave vent to an excited curse. "Damme!" he erupted. "Damme! She's not Spanish. No, by Gad! She's French!"

"FRENCH!" The word burst from Guy's throat. He leaped toward the stern and stood beside Cleve staring incredulously out to sea.

"*Parbleu!* Give me that glass!"

Cleve turned and handed it to him. Then he saw that the forward part of the poop was unguarded and crossed it swiftly. It was well he did. An enterprising sailor, envisioning praise and gold from his portly master, was crawling stealthily along the decks. The English cavalier sighted carefully along the barrel of a musket and pulled the trigger. The sailor stood up and flopped clumsily to his face.

"And let that be a lesson to you," Cleve muttered and picked up another musket.

Don Diego's rich voice floated back from the forecastle: "You'll pay for that man's death, *señors*. Pay by lingering longer on the rack. When that distant ship of Spain arrives, it will be my turn." He laughed. "My turn, do you hear?"

Without a spyglass, he was still unaware of the frigate's nationality. From the stern, d'Entreville yelled: "Oh no, *monsieur*. Look again. 'Tis not one of your cursed Spanish ships that comes, but a Frenchman. The game is done, Diego! That Treaty you have stolen will never reach Madrid. We've won, *monsieur!*"

From the forecastle came the murmur of speculation. And then one sharp-eyed man unleashed a cry of anger.

"*Diablo,* Excellency! The swine speaks the truth. That ship is flying the lily-banner. She's French!"

"*What!*"

"*Por el amor del cielo,* Excellency! Don't hit me! I am not lying!"

"Fool! You *must* be. These are Spanish waters."

Ariza broke through the wrangle of voices. "*Por Dios,* Excellency. He is right! She is not built after the Spanish fashion. Her free-board is much lower in the stern. And that banner at her peak is white and gold."

Veins stood out on Diego's forehead. His little eyes were snapping. But he controlled the awful anger that welled up inside of him. His thick fingers touched his doublet. beneath which the vital document was concealed.

"How long will it take the French to overhaul us?" he asked Ariza

The *capitan* frowned thoughtfully and stared hard at the distant frigate. "Two hours, Excellency, if the wind holds. Maybe more."

A crafty glitter replaced the anger in the don's eyes. He said: "How far are we from the Spanish Coast?"

"About sixty leagues."

"Near enough to make it in the longboat?"

The don's idea was plain and Ariza smiled slightly. "*Si,* if the weather remains as it is."

Diego chuckled. "*Bueno.* The longboat is riding at the bow beneath the anchor chains. Provision it, while I rob Cleve and d'Entreville of their triumph. *Por Dios!* I am too quick for them, *señor.* Too clever! And I always have been. They have met their match."

He arose from his crouched position. They had been conversing, in safety, behind the foremast. He peered cautiously around it.

THE bullet-scarred poop was framed by ragged sails, red-splotched decks, the crisp blue and gold of the day on either side. There seemed to be no life on it, but Diego was not deluded.

Two firebrands lay concealed back there; two devils who had returned miraculously from a watery grave to take the barque and the lives of two-thirds of its crew. The Spaniard was vaguely aware of how they had accomplished the last two things, but their return from certain death remained a riddle.

"So you dogs think you have won?" he cried. "Ah no! The Treaty for which you have worked miracles is still in my hands. Before this week is out, His Gracious Majesty Philip of Spain will have it in his hands to show the world the treachery of France. He will have the proof necessary for a declaration of war. Our all conquering armies will march. *Adios, señors!*"

D'Entreville frowned. He was lying against the stern-rail with the spyglass against his eye. His lean face was smudged and powder-grimed; his fine clothes torn.

He had just ascertained the name of the pursuing ship. *La Gloire.* But Diego's words held his attention now.

"What does he mean?"

Cleve shrugged and fondled his musket. "Damme, I don't know. But I don't like it much. Fatty has something brewing."

Musketry broke out forward and they ducked against the flooring, only to sit up again in surprise. No bullets hissed through the air. The fire was not directed at them.

Cleve said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

He peered through the thick balustrades. Stacked amidships and lashed firmly behind the main hold were three inverted dories. A withering fire was being poured into them, sending long splinters of black and yellow into the air. It continued until the small boats were sieves. And then the firing stopped. Silence fell.

But not for long. Two heavy hogsheads were lifted to the rim of the barricade and sent crashing across the deck. From them a yellowish liquid gushed, soaking deep into the wood. D'Entreville caught the lettering on the side of one almost immediately.

"Lamp oil!"

"Lamp—"

Cleve leaped to his feet. Suddenly he knew what was going to happen. But even as he cried out, a hand hurled a flaring torch down from the bow into the pooling oil. An indistinct plop . . . a puff of lambent flame . . . and the decks swirled into a small inferno that grew and grew.

High yellow flames licked the lower sails and ran up them quickly. Black smoke arose in a swelling column. The bows were partially obliterated by it. And through it all came the mocking laughter of Don Diego. D'Entreville cursed.

"*Sangodemi!* He's fired the ship! He's gone mad!"

"Don't be a fool! He's escaping. The longboat is tied forward. That's why they wrecked those lifeboats. We're being left here to roast while he rides safely to Spain with the Treaty. A neat trick, Kitten, and well worthy of the cunning devil."

"So now," said Guy quietly, "this *is* the end of our voyage."

CHAPTER XVII

ARREST THESE HEROES!

A CURTAIN of fire raged upward, totally obscuring the port side of the bows. But through flame-gaps to the leeward could be seen the flitting figures of the crew, swarming over the bowsprit base and down the anchor chains.

D'Entreville bent over, swearing inarticulately, and touched off the port carronade. A few screams rewarded the effort. Then he hurdled the railing, blade in hand, and charged.

Cleve let him go. He had other plans. Because of the slant of the waist, the fire was eating aft toward the main hatch. If it ever reached the powder magazine . . .

He tore over the rail and across the deck. He saw Guy leap dextrously through a curling hole in the flames; and then Cleve was plunging down the after-companion.

There was a heavy sledge hanging from pegs on the wall of the corridor. He snatched it up and continued his way. Acrid smoke was seeping down from above. It caught in his throat, set him coughing. He held his breath and raced on, down another staircase until he was standing in the cool dim depths of the bilge-deck where the air was damp and clear of smoke.

A sea-cock bulged to the left. He slammed the heavy sledge against it and a spray of sea water leaped upward to drench him. But he didn't pause. He ran along the length of the ship, moving forward, cracking open one valve after another until he was wading knee deep in chill, brackish water.

Then he regarded the job, satisfied. With luck the sea would reach the powder magazine before the fire. At least there was a chance now that they wouldn't be blasted into eternity.

When he reached the deck again, through the forward companion, *El Conquistador* was already beginning to settle. Heat blistered him. The mainsails were sheets of flame. Suddenly from the bow came a roaring boom—the thunder of a cannon.

"Good Lord! Has the fire reached the

guns already?" Then he saw the cause and laughed. "Damme, Kitten. Giving a celebration?"

D'Entreville, wreathed in powder-smoke, was bending near a huge black bow-chaser, a long eighteen. He didn't answer Cleve; he was too busy spitting wild, furious curses. He leaped over the gun-tackles suddenly, to sponge out the iron monster.

"Corbac et sangodemi! Missed! I missed the swine!"

Cleve slapped out a star-shaped spark that had fallen on his shoulder, and went to the bow. A glance over the bulwarks told him d'Entreville's target.

The longboat lay dead ahead, heavy with men, its oars moving desperately. It looked like an oblong spider. White strained faces stared back at the doomed barque. The gross frame of Don Diego could be distinguished in the stern.

His heavy voice could be heard above the crackling flames, urging the sweating oarsmen to row, and there was a thread of terror in his voice. He had never expected the two men on the barque to reach the bows. He had forgotten the long-range bow-chaser.

WITHOUT a word, Cleve leaped back to the breech. His practiced eye followed the length of the barrel, sighted along it carefully. He jerked a quoin from its place to elevate the muzzle slightly. Guy's shot had been high, he could see the white patch of it in the sea, but by now Diego's straining craft was abreast it and passing.

Guy rammed the powder home with a flip of the rammer. Both men were working furiously and efficiently, without a word. They knew the importance of this business. It was their last chance, after many failures. Guy crammed in the wadding and lifted the heavy ball to the lip and sent it rolling down the gaping maw. He set his weight to the rammer again and rammed the charge firm.

"Ready!"

Cleve inserted a quill of black powder. He checked his aim. Fortunately there was practically no sea-swell. The weight of water pouring through the sea-cocks held the ship steady as a stone fort. Breathing a prayer, he set the match to the touch-hole.

The report crashed with a swirl of choking smoke, to roll out across the water. Like a thing alive, the bow-chaser reared insanely against the stout manila of its breech-ropes. The target was obliterated by a cloud of smoke. A stunned, tense, silence. There would be no third try. Diego would be out of range before they could reload again.

And then a sob broke from d'Entreville's throat—a sob of relief and thanksgiving.

The boat had been literally blown out of the sea. A few bobbing heads and splinters marked the spot where it had been, where before it had been surging desperately away.

Diego was finished. They saw his bloody head for a flashing instant, and then he sank out of sight, carrying with him the stolen Treaty. A few bits of bloodstained wreckage, and that was all. One by one the heads disappeared, and so the peril of a Spanish war was ended.

Cleve opened his mouth to say something, but the words wouldn't come. He could find no words for the surge of triumph in him, none that would pay full tribute to his victory. Finally he exploded: "Damme! Well, *damme!*"

And then something behind him unleashed all of the thunders of heaven. He felt his body clutched, pygmy-like, in an irresistible grip and lifted out over the rippling sea. The thunder deafened him, and he fell in silence. His consciousness was fast draining away. His mind seemed to have room for only one thought, and that kept repeating crazily:

"By Gad! By Gad! The fire won the powder magazine after all. Shouldn't have wasted my time."

HE WAS barely aware of things after he struck. He felt the cool quiet of the sea close over him, heard the soothing

ripples of his passage, and tasted brine. Then he was on the surface again, treading weakly, too stunned to fear the heavy bits of debris that plummeted into the water all about him. A fragment of wood crashed against his shoulder and sent a streak of agony through his body. He fainted.

It must have been only a moment later that he recovered consciousness, then Guy's white face swam into vision. There was a ragged red wound from temple to jaw. Cleve, hardly able to move, reached for him and sank into the sea again. Firm fingers gripped him, dragged him back into the air by the nape of the neck. He felt air flood into his lungs and the mist cleared a trifle.

Something nudged his shoulder. It was the charred butt of a mast. Ropes were trailing from it.

Guy said, "Hold on to it, Cleve. I'll lash you to it. *Corbac!* You're in bad shape. One moment."

He felt the other tie a rope under his arms, and the pain of it made his mind fade into oblivion. He kept shuttling back and forth, after that. Back and forth between consciousness and darkness. They must have hung to that bobbing mast for hours, but he couldn't rightly remember.

Then there was a brief moment of clarity. He saw the glistening yellow sides of *La Gloire* looming over him. Cordeau's bushy red face was glaring down at him.

"You two knaves are under arrest," Cordeau said. "What happened to that barque?"

"I've wondered for a long time, Cordeau. What *did* happen to it?" Cleve laughed in a whisper. It hurt too much to laugh louder. "Suddenly, I turned around and there was no ship. No ship . . ."

The pain struck again when they lifted him aboard and he fainted. After that, his mind recorded a sequence of blurred pictures, cloudy, distant, and fading quickly. He had a vision of a deck with many people cluttering it and everyone talking. He heard Guy croaking hoarsely.

Next he was in a room. Comfortable. A man leaned over him and worked with something on his shoulder. From the conversation he learned that he was suffering from shock, exposure and a broken shoulder bone. But he'd live. In a few days he'd be able to take to the deck.

"That's important," he thought. "Always be able to walk."

Time was a swift-flying streamer, but his half-conscious mind managed to pick up scraps of information. The bottle had been picked up, its meaning deciphered by Colonel de Chais in Le Havre.

"Might have known Cordeau wouldn't have the wit," Cleve thought. The frigate had been following *El Conquistador* for days, and Cordeau had been prepared to follow them to Africa, if need be.

It seemed that their escape from Paris had put the pompous captain in a bad light. Their recapture, at all costs, had been imperative—to Cordeau. No man could tell what Richelieu might have done if he had failed. The Cardinal wasn't very lenient with bunglers.

"But now I've got you, my precious rogues," Cordeau was saying. "I've broken rules, exceeded my authority and commandeered a warship without orders. But the sight of you two dogs languishing in La Bastille, where you belong, will be more than ample pay for the trouble!

"Parbleu! The man aboard that ill-fated black barque—whoever he was, *messieurs,* he betrayed you. He dropped a flask with your arrest orders in it, and an identifying spoon to mark the ship upon which you had fled. *Sandiou.* If that man were but here, I would feel honored to throw my arms about him and kiss him respectfully on both cheeks!"

Slowly Cleve opened his eyes. He found himself on a cot in the polished wardroom of the frigate. Sitting in a chair nearby was d'Entreville, his face swathed in a white bandage, his left arm in a sling. At the foot of the bed stood Cordeau. Cleve regarded him steadily.

"You try it, *monsieur le Capitaine,*" he said evenly. "You try it, and I'll kick you into the middle of next week!"

THE palace of the Cardinal was *en fête.* The men of the Guard were gathered in groups, filling the entire area of the main court. Capitaine Cordeau appeared from his headquarters and strode stiffly toward the dias at the far end. A silvery blast brought the guardsmen to order.

"Attendez!"

Without another word the men slipped into disciplined formation. Their white surcoats, emblazoned with the embroidered hooped cross of the regiment, were dazzling in the sun. Tasseled pikes glittered, plumes fluttered, swordhilts twinkled. In silence Cordeau stepped to the dias and pulled a be-ribboned document from his sash.

In the front ranks, one Guardsman slyly nudged another. "What's biting Cordeau?" he whispered. *"Corbac!* He looks as though he has just swallowed a lemon."

The other man shrugged. "I don't know," he replied. "One moment, he's going to read."

Cordeau held the paper at arm's length and squinted at it distastefully. He was quite red in the face. The regiment awaited him in patient silence. Almost furtively, he cast an eye up to the balcony where the Cardinal and the King were standing. He shrugged hopelessly, and loudly cleared his throat.

" 'Be it known, on this the second day of August, the year of Our Lord 1630, that Coronets Monsieur M'Lord Richard Cleve, and Monsieur le Comte Guy d'Entreville' " —he paused, lips sagging—" 'be elevated to the rank of lieutenant, in *Monseigneur le Cardinal's* Regiment of Guards.' "

The speaker's fat face was beet-red, but he continued doggedly. " 'That they be cited by me, their *commandante,* as brave, resourceful men, who have won their new ranks by deeds far outside the line of duty, inasmuch as by the gallantry of their actions they have saved France. This bravery in . . .' "

Up in another balcony, a bit above the one occupied by Richelieu and the King, two bandaged men listened to the hesitant words of the *capitaine,* grinned as the voice rose in their praise, and slowly shook hands, well satisfied.

THE END

LOOKING AHEAD!

HOLOCAUST HOUSE

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE TOLD you that the argument over the technique of writing historical fiction was going to turn into quite a business. Well, it has; we have on hand this week a really exceptional letter—a brilliant and learned defense of "The Harp and the Blade."

ASPER

So Mr. Andrae dislikes the use of slang in "The Harp and the Blade," and would like to have the author stick to the language really spoken by the characters. Andrae even includes a list of tabooed words, words to be struck from Webster's pages. Well, friend Kenneth may be scholar enough to read fluently Old Frankish, Monk Latin, Old Erse, Old Icelandic, to say nothing of that perplexing and practically unknown tongue, Pictish, and Mr. Myers may be scholar enough to write such a macaronic novel, but I doubt very much whether I, the editors of ARGOSY, or the average reader could make very much of the story.

But perhaps Mr. Andrae has misstated his objection, and merely groans under the delusion that historical characters spoke in the "How now, Horatio" vein so weightily affected by Scott on the model of Shakespeare's chronicle plays. This is really a popular mistake. But why should common people speak in that fashion—in a highly educated, artificial and rhetorical fashion?

Wasn't education practically restricted to the Church, with only an occasional noble capable even of writing his own name? And wouldn't the populace speak even more slangily under such circumstances? I think so. Look at a later time, read the vulgar French literature of Rabelais's period, see what a poorly combined mess of pornography and vulgarity it was.

And what's the matter with the terms *lousy, chivvying, beat up*, etc.? Does the word *lousy* offend Mr. Andrae's Victorian ears? *Chivvying* is a very old hunting term, still used in rural England, probably derived from *cheval* or *chevaux*. *Beat up*: I suppose Mr. Andrae objects to the intensificatory adverb *up*. Look into Webster, Mr. Andrae, for a definition. It's also historical, as far back as Beowulf.

Besides, we must remember that we are viewing this great, noble, and simple (no, I'm not the author in disguise) picture of tenth-century France, through the eyes, and thus through the distorting lens of Finnian, a member of the society he describes. Thus, Myers, as an artist, is obliged to use contemporary terms to endeavor to awaken the same reactions in us, as the Medieval slang did in Finnian.

Mr. Myers must surely have done a great deal of research work to achieve such a scholastically correct height. It's a marvelous piece of work. In the entire story I can find only two slight errors, and both of these are more differences of opinion than actual errors. First: *nicors* in France. So far as I know, the *nicor* was strictly an Anglo-Saxon monstrosity, witness Beowulf's battle with the *niceras*. I don't believe that they frequented France. I may, however, be wrong on this. Secondly, Mr. Myers assumes a far-spread Pictish race before the Indo-Europeans, an assumption probably obtained from MacDougal's "Pictish Nation." In the light of later anthropological discoveries this does not seem to be correct.

Finally, one small criticism of the story itself. Wouldn't a talented scholar like Finnian know from his Caesar, Tacitus, and from hearsay that Omnis Gallia was once inhabited by Kelts? Then why should he marvel at hearing the Pictish priest mumble some garbled Keltic?

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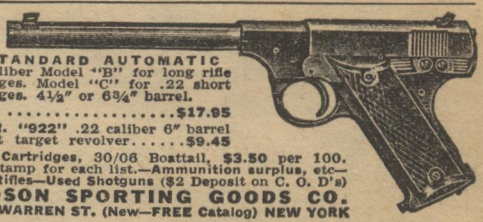

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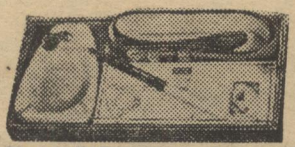

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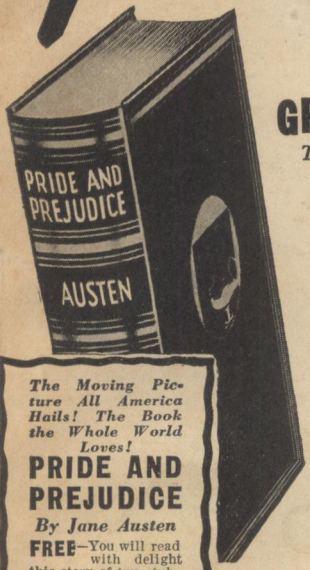

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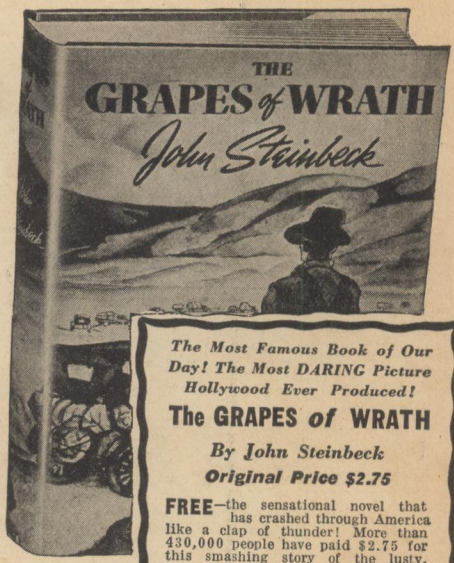

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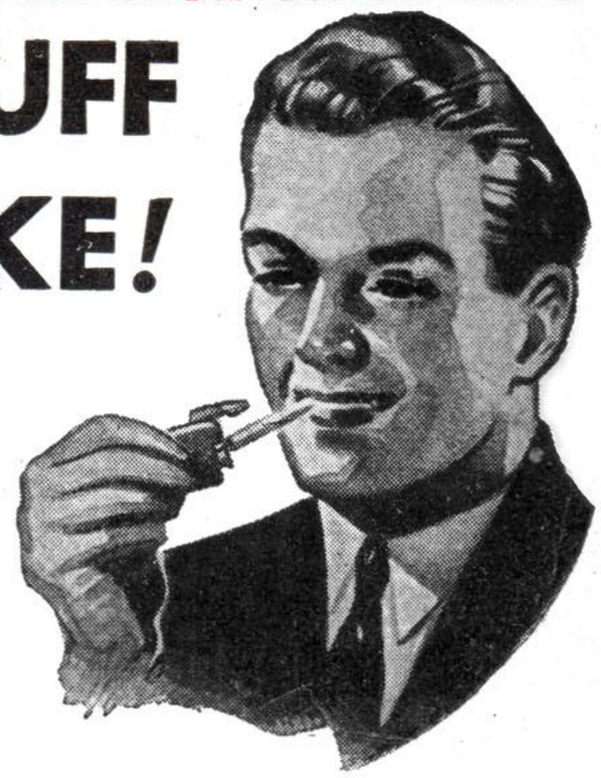

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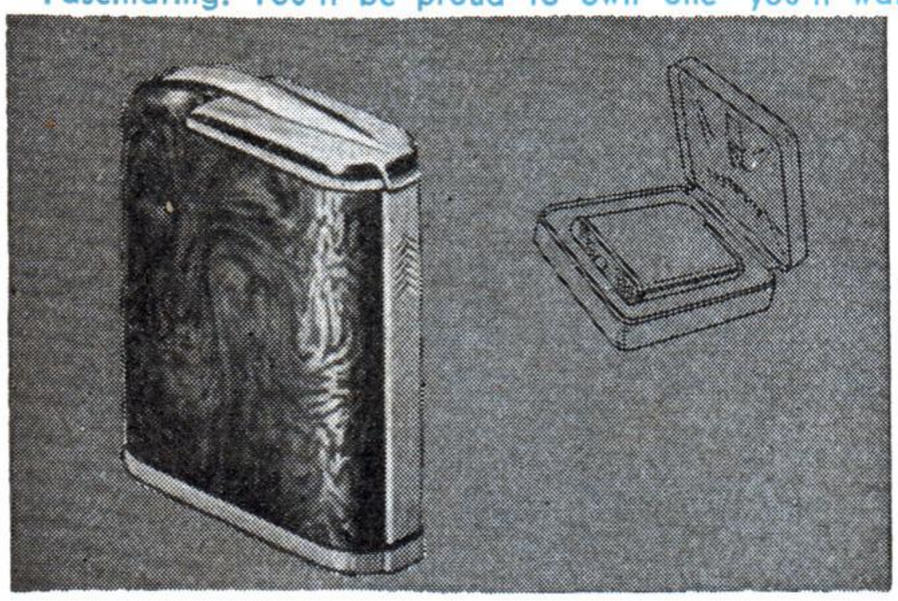

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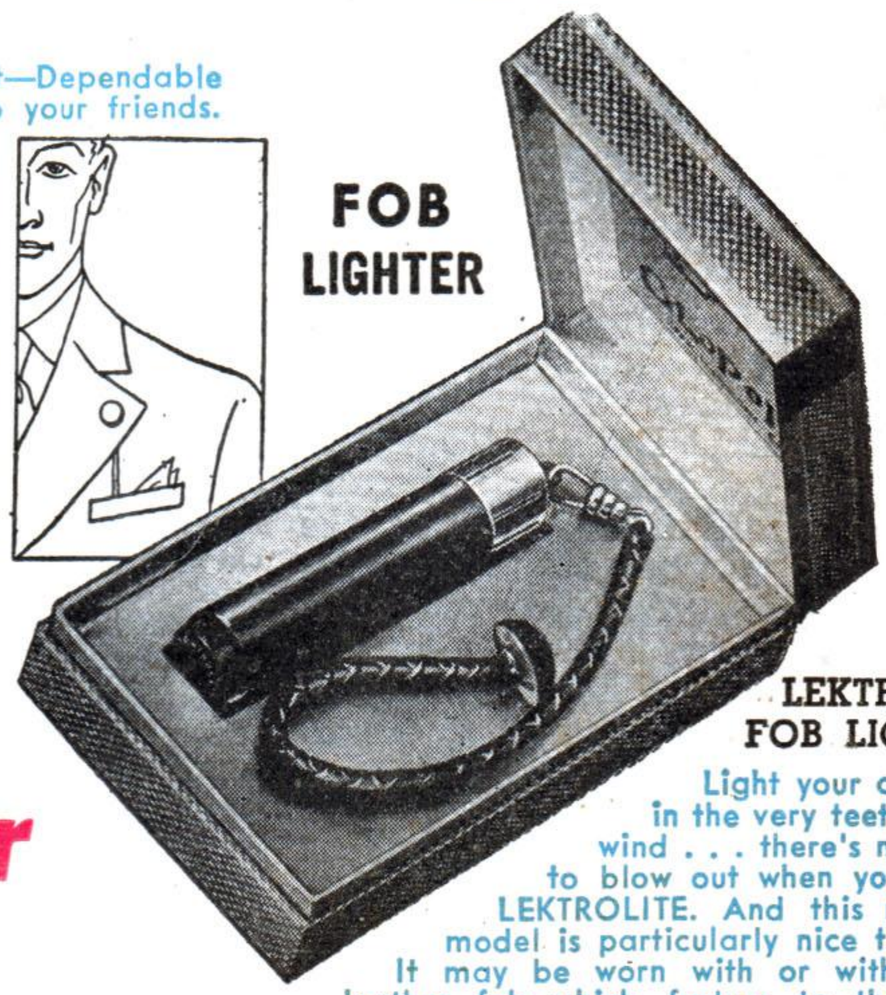

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