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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 310 | CONTENTS AUGUST 16, 1941 | Number 1

Looking Ahead

The Quest of Tarzan

They seek to hold him prisoner. They cage him in steel and ring him with their watchful guns, and they are many, while he has no ally. But when at last he lifts his terrible war cry, they tremble, for this white giant is Tarzan of the Apes; and his wild cunning and the might of his two hands cannot be vanquished by steel bars or rifles. A magnificent new novel by the master of adventure fiction,

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Meet William Williams, of San Pedro and other West Coast points. Mr. Williams sometimes watches boats—quite lazily, it would seem, but with the welfare of his Uncle Sammy in mind. And when the Oriental brethren start following a happily engaged couple with malicious intent, Mr. Williams sees—and does—things that would astonish you. An exciting short novel by

SINCLAIR GLUCK

Coming in next week's Argosy—August 23

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

A **RED STAR** *Magazine*

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.

WILLIAM T. DEWART, President & Treasurer — WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., Secretary

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE, 111 Rue Réaumur

LONDON: THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD., 3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill.

Published weekly. Single copies 10c; Canada 12c. By the year $4.00 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and Cuba; Canada, $5.00. Other countries, $7.00. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remittances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Entered as second class matter November 28, 1896, at the post office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright and must not be reprinted without the publisher's permission. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyright in Great Britain. Printed in U. S. A.

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Town Marshal

By Walt Coburn

Author of "Night Ride," "Wet Beef From Mexico," etc.

They cut down two lawmen in Hackberry, and then offered Jeff Kettle the same job in place of a hanging. So Jeff took it—holding a pair of deuces against a stacked hand of hatred and gunfire

CHAPTER I

SAVE THE GALLOWS

THEY HAD Jeff Kettle in the country jail, charged with horse stealing and murder. . . . "I ever stole a horse in my life!" The tall, rawboned, hawk-beaked Texan lifted his voice out of its lazy drawl and his green-gray eyes glinted.

"Lock 'im up!" snapped the goat-whiskered judge, flinching under Jeff Kettle's menacing stare.

"And keep them leg irons and handcuffs on 'im," he added grimly.

So Jeff Kettle was locked in a cell and a heavily armed guard sat in a barroom armchair just outside the door, a sawed-off shotgun across his lap.

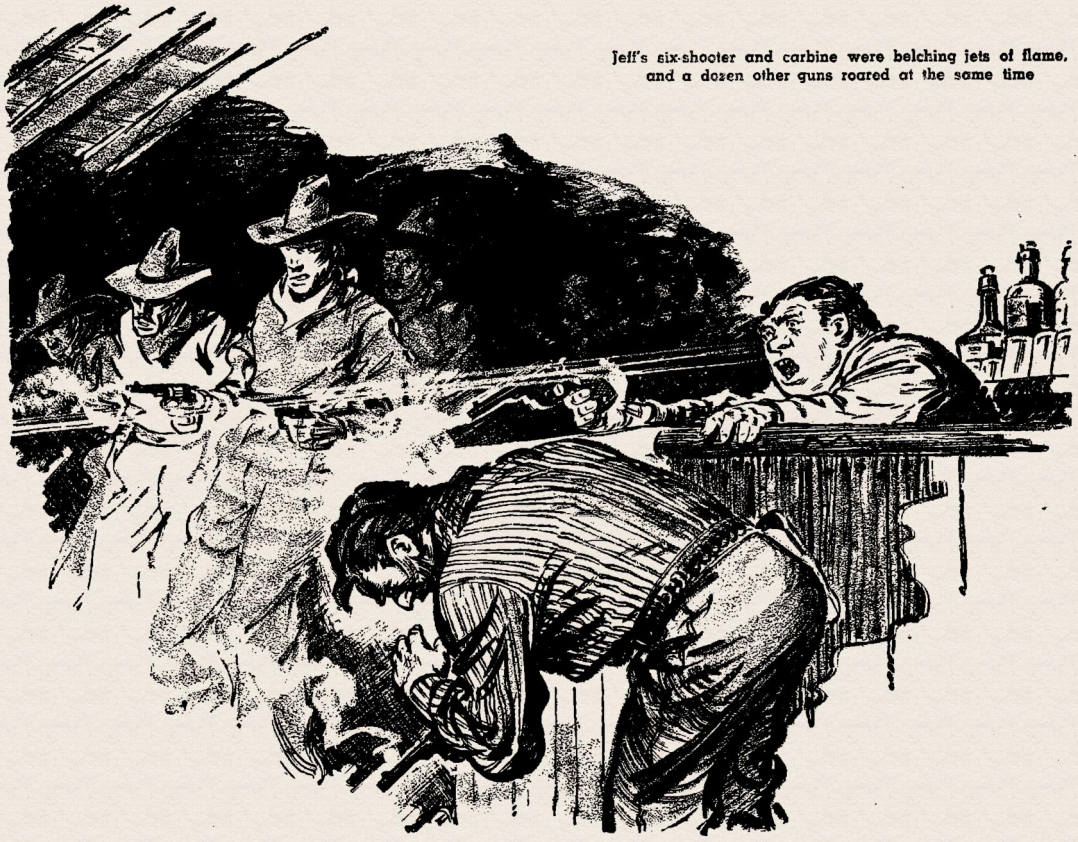
"Them sons cain't make that horse stealin' charge stick," Jeff Kettle told the shotgun guard. "Looky here. When a man's dead, he's dead, ain't he? He ain't got no more use fer a horse in Hell than I got fer a sheep hook. Ain't I right?"

"So far," nodded the man with the sawed-off shotgun.

"All right, then. That feller was dead when I taken his horse. Deader'n hell. I know he was dead because I rolled 'im over after I shot 'im and I taken a good look at 'im. That forty-five slug had hit 'im dead center where his eyebrows met. And you could shove your fist in the hole it tore outa the back of his skull. His sheep brains—"

"I seen it," interrupted the paunchy guard, "you don't need to tell me."

"My horse was laig-weary. His'n was fresh. I swapped horses with a dead man. No damn' goat-whiskered, likker-



Jeff's six-shooter and carbine were belching jets of flame, and a dozen other guns roared at the same time

soaked judge kin hang no horse thief charge ag'in the name of Jeff Kettle. Hear me?"

"They kin hear you," said the pot-bellied shotgun guard, the armchair creaking as he shifted his heavy bulk, "plumb over in the next county. Can't you talk without bellerin', Kettle? And do you have to rattle them laig-arms and handcuffs thataway?"

"I got a right to beller. And if you don't like the rattlin', take these things off a man. A likker-swillin' judge and a spittoon-cleanin' saloon swamper fer a guard. Pinnin' a horse thief charge ag'in' a man! Arizona Territorial law! Hell!"

Jeff Kettle turned away from the steel-barred door, clanked his way across the jail cell to the barred window set in the three-foot-thick adobe wall of the jail, and shouted profane instructions to the Mexicans who were building a scaffold.

"Thirteen steps up to the platform, you paddle-footed *pelados! Trece!* Learn to count! And if you gotta sing on the job, give us somethin' lively!"

The Mexicans laughed and then went on with their hammering. They sang sad little ranchero songs as they labored. They were a little afraid of that big *Tejano* with the bloodshot green eyes and hair the color of new rope. A gringo *Tejano* so tough that the law kept him handcuffed and hobbled with heavy leg irons and posted a shotgun guard outside his cell door.

They would tell and re-tell it for many years to come how they had built the very scaffold that had hung the notorious *bandido* outlaw Jeff Kettle.

One of the Mexican laborers with a strain of the troubadour in his make-up had composed a song about Jeff Kettle. He motioned with his hammer for the others to be quiet.

Sitting with his legs, bare-shanked, encased in ragged cotton pants, bare feet in cowhide huaraches sandals, dangling as he sat on the scaffold platform, he sang. Beating time with his claw-hammer, eyes dark and bright in the shade of a battered straw sombrero, he sang his song to the gringo prisoner. To the big, tough *Tejano*. The Texan whose deeds were almost legendary along both sides of the border line separating Texas, New Mexico and Arizona from Old Mexico.

Jeff Kettle stood there at the little barred window and listened. The Mexican language was as familiar as his own. As the song went on to tell of his many real or fabricated lawless deeds, a wide grin spread across the Texan's flat-planed, lean-jawed leathery face.

HE WAS still listening to the song when a big key rattled in the lock of the cell door. Jeff Kettle turned his head, his grin giving way to a hard-eyed scowl. He stared at the sheriff and two deputies and a man who looked like some sort of well-to-do business man or perhaps a doctor.

"Keep your shirt on, Jeff," growled the sheriff. "You got a visitor."

"I got no use fer visitors. I'm straw-bossin' that scaffold job out yonder. And one of them *pelados* has made up a song. Clear out!"

"Your visitor's got your reprieve in his pocket. He comes straight from the governor."

They hadn't taken the prisoner's money. He managed with his handcuffed hands to fish out some silver dollars. Raising both manacled hands above his head he threw the silver dollars through the barred window. The Mexican scaffold-builders scrambled for the money. Jeff Kettle grinned flat-lipped and clanked his way to the cell door.

"Take these damned irons off me, Governor. Then let me git a-holt of the skinny neck of that goat-whiskered, likker-soaked judge that called Jeff Kettle a horse thief."

"He ain't the governor, Jeff," said the sheriff. "He's just reppin' for the governor. And if you don't tame down you'll still be wearin' them steel bracelets and leg irons when you stretch rope. Reprieve or no reprieve. You simmer down or you'll be hung and planted in the boothill with them steel ornaments.

"This gentleman's come to make a dicker with you. But he ain't steppin' into no jail cell with a locoed thing. Either you quit that pawin' and bellerin' or he tears up that reprieve and takes the news back to the governor that he got here too late. Name your game, Jeff Kettle."

"I'm as peaceful as that sheep feller that's gone to Hell to tend the Devil's woolies. I'm shore willin' to dicker. But no man kin call Jeff Kettle a horse thief and stay above ground."

"Somebody," the sheriff told the uneasy-looking man from the territorial governor's office, "slipped Jeff a bottle durin' the night. It's likker that makes him paw and beller. Take Jeff Kettle sober and he's as quiet-mannered as a sky-pilot preacher."

THE man from the governor's office stepped into the jail cell with all the outward and inward symptoms of a man entering a lion's cage. Jeff Kettle sat down on the edge of the bunk. The sheriff and his two deputies and the shotgun guard walked beyond earshot but kept a cautious watch on the prisoner and his visitor.

"I have in my coat pocket," said the man nervously, "not a reprieve that postpones your death sentence, but a conditional pardon. You will be released immediately. And you will go straight from here to the town of Hackberry where you will assume the duties of town marshal. You will also take over the job as foreman and general manager of the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company."

"Town marshal of Hackberry," said Jeff Kettle softly, his greenish gray eyes narrowing a little, "and ramrod of the Double Link outfit, which is the brand owned by the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company."

He looked out the window at the nearly completed scaffold. Then back at the man who represented the territorial governor. His grin was flat-lipped, mirthless, a little bitter, partly hidden by his drooping rope-colored moustache.

"I reckon it beats hangin' for a horse thief, at that. Gives a man a chance to die with his boots on, and a smokin' gun in his hand. I ain't askin' you how come the governor is takin' such a int'rest in the Double Link outfit. A man that asks no questions gits no lies throwed at 'im. I ain't askin' what happened to the last three-four men that taken that town marshal of Hackberry job because I know the right answer.

"Just like I know Cabezon Carter, who is now ramroddin' the Double Link. And I know the renegade cowpuncher crew he's hand-picked to work for the Double-Link." Jeff rolled and lit a brown paper cigarette and let blue smoke drift from his nostrils and mouth with his next words.

"Unlock these handcuffs and laig-irons, mister. Give me back my guns and my horse. Pin that town marshal law badge onto my shirt. I'm your huckleberry. And no questions asked. You've made a deal, mister."

The man from the governor's office smiled nervously and beckoned to the sheriff.

"Turn Jeff Kettle loose, sheriff. Give him his guns and his horse. Here's his pardon, signed by the governor."

"You'll quit town peaceful, Jeff?"

"Plenty peaceful, sheriff. I've just closed a deal with the governor's rep. I got some chores to do in the other part of the territory. Gimme that tin badge, mister. I want to shine 'er up. Git the bloodstains off it if it's the one that them other town marshals of Hackberry wore.

"Now unlock me, sheriff. Undo me. And if you got ary kind of a batch of reward dodgers on hand I'd like to look 'em over before I pull out. I got a notion that there's a big bounty or two on the hides of some of them Double Link cowhands. The governor's rep said nothin' about wages. I reckon I'm workin' on a sorta bounty commission."

Jeff Kettle waved aside the nervous protests of the governor's representative who tried to tell him what his salary as town marshal and general manager of the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company would be.

An hour later Jeff Kettle was forking a big sun-faded sorrel gelding. Around his lean waist was a filled cartridge belt and holstered cedar-handled six-shooter. A carbine was shoved in his saddle scabbard. A pouch made out of an old boot leg was filled with Winchester 30-30 cartridges and hung from his saddle horn. He rode past where the Mexicans still were working lazily on the new scaffold. Their eyes popped when they recognized him.

Jeff Kettle threw them another handful of silver dollars and told them to finish their job. That he might need it some day to hang a goat-whiskered whiskey-soaked judge, a bushwhacking sheriff and a pot-gutted shotgun guard. He thanked the Mexican who had made up the song about him and rode off whistling tunelessly through his big white teeth.

The Mexicans waved their battered straw sombreros and called vivas after him.

Sheriff Tim Maloney stood in the doorway of the adobe jail, his hand on his gun, backed by his two deputies and the paunchy shotgun guard, and watched their erstwhile prisoner ride out of town.

A bleary-eyed man with gray chin whiskers, hidden in the back room of a saloon, lifted a corner of a low-pulled windowshade and peered out, cursing the man he had condemned to death for horse stealing and murder. Cursing the territorial governor for this miscarriage of justice that had robbed the hangman's rope of its outlaw burden.

CHAPTER II

WELCOME, MR. DEATH

MANY of Jeff Kettle's enemies have called him a cold-blooded murderer, a bushwhacking coward, a drunken braggart, a hired killer, a bounty collector and a glory hunter.

Jeff Kettle never bothered to deny those accusations. He did his arguing with a hair-triggered single-action Colt .45 and a Winchester 30-30 carbine. And those two guns had a habit of winning all such arguments.

But even the man's worst enemy could not have scorched a sign of the brand of cowardice on Jeff Kettle's tough hide that day when he rode openly down the wide, dusty main street of the little cow town of Hackberry, his nickeled law badge pinned to his flannel shirt for all men to see. And with the news of his coming preceding him by hours, that took the sort of courage that lifted the man far above any accusations of bushwhacker cowardice.

Jeff Kettle was not the first nor the last lawless man to be given a law badge and the tough job of cleaning up a tough town. It took a man of that outlaw breed to deal with the quick-triggered hard-riding gentry that made such cow towns as Hackberry tough. Such cow outfits as the Double Link, outlaw cattle-rustling spreads.

Range news spreads like prairie fire in the cow country. Its method of mouth to ear to mouth to ear transmission is called the rustling of the leaves.

Saddled horses stood at the hitchrack in front of the Double Link Saloon. A few loungers lazed in the shade of the general mercantile store and post office and around the livery barn. None of Hackberry's women or children were in sight. Men's faces showed at the windows of the saloon and general mercantile store.

The blacksmith in his open doorway let down the hind leg of the saddled horse he was shoeing, wiped sweat from his grimed face, and stared. A dog barked at Jeff Kettle's horse and was called sharply back by the voice of some unseen person.

Jeff Kettle, sitting stiff-backed in his saddle, rode the length of the wide dusty street, his sweat-marked sorrel gelding's shod hoofs kicking up puffs of dirt as the horse shuffled along at a fast running walk.

The new town marshal's greenish gray eyes, shaded by the slanting brim of his Stetson hat, were narrowed, shifting, alert. But his head never turned to right or left as he rode down the street to the livery barn. As he pulled up and dismounted he slid his saddle gun from its scabbard. He told the gray-haired limping barn man to take damned good care of the sorrel horse. He left his chaps with his saddle.

Then Marshal Jeff Kettle walked back up the street on his long saddle-bowed legs, pants tucked into the tops of his boots, Texas style, heavy cartridge belt slanted across his lean flanks and the open holster tied low on his thigh so that his hand, swinging as he walked, brushed the cedar butt. Carrying his carbine in the crook of his left arm.

He stopped at a small, low-roofed adobe cabin this side of the saloon. Above its door was a weatherbeaten sign that bore the crudely painted label TOWN MARSHAL'S OFFICE. He lifted the latch of the unlocked door, kicked it open, then leaped back.

FROM the gray-shadowed interior of the adobe cabin came the sudden blast of gunfire. Cursing. Then Marshal Jeff Kettle smashed the pane of the one window, jerked down the drawn blind, flattened himself against the outside wall as bullets whined through the window.

He jumped in through the open doorway, the six-shooter in his hand spewing fire. A few seconds filled with the deafening roar of guns in the small adobe cabin: then an abrupt silence.

Then those who watched from the windows of the general mercantile store saw the new marshal of Hackberry drag three dead men, one by one, out onto the wide plank walk where he left their bullet-torn, blood-spattered dead bodies.

There was a faint, flat-lipped grin on Marshal Jeff Kettle's dust-powdered leathery face as he reloaded his six-shooter, closed the door of his powder-smoke-filled office and walked up the sidewalk and through the swinging half-doors of the Double Link Saloon.

The bar was well lined with men who stared, silent, grim-mouthed, hard-eyed, at Jeff Kettle. He took his place at the end, laying his carbine across the liquor-stained pine board bar so that its muzzle pointed straight at the big red-faced saloon man who was serving the drinks.

"If it ain't," drawled Jeff Kettle, "it should be the custom for the house to buy drinks for a new town marshal. Give 'em what they've bin drinkin'. I want the best whiskey you got."

Some of these men were Double Link cowpunchers. Jeff Kettle had read that brand on half a dozen saddled horses at the hitchrack. But Cabezon Carter was not among them. Jeff Kettle knew Cabezon (Big Head) Carter. And he reckoned that he had just shot three of Cabezon's gun toters.

There was a large placard on the back bar, set up behind the rows of glasses and tilted against the wall. The black lettering on the white cardboard had been painted on with a brush. Jeff Kettle stared at it.

WELCOME TO JEFF KETTLE THE NEW TOWN MARSHAL!

Underneath was a crudely drawn skull and crossbones. A heavy black border followed the outside edge of the cardboard.

THE beefy, red-faced saloon man moved uneasily as the Texan's greenish gray eyes looked at him with cold appraisal. Then the new town marshal's eyes slid a slow and calculating scrutiny down along the line of men standing at the bar. He could hear their heavy breathing in the taut silence.

His eyes went back to the saloon man. Jeff Kettle's carbine was still pointed across the bar. His left hand was on its breech. His thumb slowly pulled back the hammer. It came to full cock with a *click-click* that sounded loudly.

Jeff Kettle's back was to the wall and his right hand was on the cedar butt of his six-shooter. His slow Texan drawl broke the silence. He talked straight at the saloon man.

"Your name is McMahan. Porky is what they call you when you're behind the bar sellin' your forty-rod likker. But it's Judge McMahan when you shed that dirty bar apron and hold your kangaroo court in the back room. I'm givin' you till daybreak to git out of town.

"I reckon you're the main boss of the welcome committee and that's your sign on the back bar. You'll find your three-man welcome party laid out on the sidewalk. Send somebody down there with a wagon to pick up their carcasses and plant 'em. Now take down that sign and burn it in the stove yonder. It ain't needed any longer. Git busy!"

The big saloon man's face was mottled. Fear showed in the pig-like pale eyes set in the bloated face. Sweat beaded his forehead and trickled from between a cheap toupee and the bald skull beneath.

"You got me all wrong, Marshal!" McMahan's whiskey voice croaked dismally. "The boys fixed that sign for a josh . . ."

His voice trailed off into silence under Jeff Kettle's gray-

green stare. He took down the sign and tore it in half. Then with an attempt at hoorawing bluster he waved a thick hand at men at the bar.

"Marshal Kettle wants the sidewalk in front of his office cleared. Two-three of you boys git at it. It musta bin them three drunks I had to kick out my place. They was ornery and huntin' trouble. They was mebbyso just a-hoorawin'. But Marshal Jeff Kettle plays fer keeps. Tell him, boys, how we're hell for playin' jokes here at Hackberry."

"Yeah"—Jeff Kettle grinned faintly—"tell me, boys. I'm a-listenin' hard."

Three of the men at the bar sidled out the back door. McMahan waddled from behind the bar on thick legs that supported his heavy-paunched two hundred and fifty pound bulk. He shoved the torn placard into a round sheet-iron stove and set fire to it, then waddled back behind his bar. Eyeing the cocked Winchester.

"That thing might go off, Marshal. I'm a hefty target."

"Yeah." Jeff Kettle nodded. He left the hammer cocked and poured a drink for himself, his right hand still on his six-shooter.

From outside came the pounding of shod hoofs. Jeff Kettle shifted his eyes toward the doorway, his grip tightening on his six-shooter. He was expecting Cabezon Carter.

But it was not the ramrod of the Double Link who came through the swinging half doors. At first glance he thought it was a boy in his teens. Then he saw it was a girl in the hat and boots and chaps of a cowboy.

HER face looked white under its powdering of dust and sun tan. Thick black curly hair showed under the brim of her dusty hat. Her nose and cheekbones were freckled. Her eyes were so dark and gray that they looked almost black under thick black lashes and black brows that were almost too heavy for a girl.

She halted just inside the doorway and looked straight at the heavy-paunched saloon man.

"Who killed him, Porky? Who killed my brother?"

Porky McMahan grinned and patted his toupee into place on his slippery bald head.

"Nobody's killed Gene, Miss Lou. Don't get excited—"

"Don't lie to me!" The girl's voice was brittle. "I saw him stretched out on the sidewalk with two other dead men. His hat over his face. A crowd gaping from the store windows like so many sheep. I knew Gene by that new buckskin jacket."

"Gene lost his jacket to Joe Price in a poker game. Gene's in the back room a-sleepin' off a jag. He's—"

"I told you not to give him another drink, you red-faced toad!"

"Gene fetched his own bottle. He got it off a whiskey peddler. I put Gene Deniff's name on my Injun list like I promised. Ask the boys here, Miss Lou. They'll tell yuh."

"Give me a bucket of water."

The girl's voice had lost its tense, scared tone. The color was coming back into her cheeks. Her smoky gray eyes blazed with anger.

"Lemme help you sober 'im up, Lou," said a tall, long-muscled young cowpuncher who had an easy grin and blue eyes that looked faded against the background of his weather-stained clean-shaved face. His hair was so tow-colored it looked white.

"You're a little late with any help, Cotton Top. You and your Double Link amigos can keep your help. You'll need it to save your own two-bit hides when that man killer Jeff Kettle hits town. He shoots 'em before he takes the trouble to read their brands."

Porky McMahan, lifting a wooden bucket of none too clean water up on the bar, turned to look at the new marshal. The girl's angry eyes followed the saloon man's glance. She saw the badge pinned to the big Texan's shirt: saw the wearer of that badge for the first time. And the anger in her dark gray eyes gave way to something that was a mixture of curiosity and loathing.

Jeff Kettle tossed down his drink, let the hammer down on his carbine and picked the gun off the bar, cradling it in the crook of his left arm. He met her unpleasant stare without flinching. Then he took the bucket of water off the bar and walked toward the back room without a word.

The girl stood there a moment, staring after him; then without a word she followed him into the room at the rear of the saloon.

CHAPTER III

DON'T COME A-SHOOTIN'

IT WAS a large room with several green cloth-covered poker tables, chairs and a crap table. Several tarp-covered bedrolls were pushed against the wall. One of these beds was unrolled and on it lay a young cowpuncher. He lay sprawled on his back, breathing heavily. His mop of curly black hair was tousled and one closed eye was discolored.

Blood spattered his gray flannel shirt. His mouth was bruised and swollen and flecked with dried blood. His six-shooter holster was empty. He looked as if he was no more than twenty years old.

Jeff Kettle stood over him. Then as the girl came into the room, closing the door behind her, he threw the contents of the big wooden bucket into the face of the young cowpuncher who, Porky McMahan had said, was sleeping off a jag.

The young cowpuncher came awake pawing and sputtering and cursing thickly. He sat up groggily, tried to get to his feet, lost his balance and sat down heavily, wiping water from his bloodshot eyes.

"You can't do that to me, you damned—"

Then he saw the girl and his bruised mouth twisted in a sneer. He got slowly to his feet and stood there swaying a little, legs spread wide to hold his balance.

"You get outa here, Lou. You come in this damn' saloon, making me look cheap. Puttin' me on the Injun list. Makin' a man look like he's a weak-minded fool. I'm free, white and twenty-one and—"

"Wipe your face and dry up, Curly." The girl's voice was as sharp as a knife blade. She looked up at Jeff Kettle.

"Lock him up in your calaboose, Marshal. I'll be responsible. The charges against my brother Gene Deniff are cattle rustling and horse stealing."

Jeff Kettle glanced at the bleary young puncher, and then his eyes went back to the girl.

"Just as you say, lady."

"This is Jeff Kettle, Curly," said the girl. "The new town marshal of Hackberry. I think he just killed three men. So don't act tough. He's traveling on his tough rep."

"Who," Jeff Kettle asked the girl, "keeps the key to the jail?"

"Porky McMahan. I'll get it."

Young Gene Deniff came at him, swinging wildly. The lanky Texan caught one of the flailing arms, spun him around and held him with a hammerlock.

"Take 'er easy, Curly," he said quietly, "and nobody'll git hurt."

Lou Deniff came back with a big long-handled key. She opened a back door and held it open.

Jeff Kettle crammed Gene Deniff's hat on his tousled dripping head and propelled him out into a sort of alleyway. He handed his carbine to the girl.

"Lead the way to the jail house, ma'am. I'm a stranger here."

Gene Deniff's brief display of fight had left him sick and sullen. "Let me go. I'll go along. The jail's cleaner than Porky's snake room at that. She's lyin' about the cattle rustlin' and horse stealin'. And the boys will tear down that jail when they find out I'm locked up."

"That would be just one more bet," snapped the girl, "that you'd lose, Curly."

"Quit callin' me Curly."

"Then quit acting like a two-year-old cry baby. And take a look at that. It might sober you up."

Lou Deniff halted and pointed. They were loading the three dead men from the sidewalk in front of the town marshal's office into a spring wagon and throwing a wagon tarp over the bodies.

"They tried to bushwhack me," said Jeff Kettle flatly. "Their luck turned bad."

"That's the way they got our father," said Lou Deniff. "He was the last town marshal here at Hackberry."

Jeff McMahan nodded. "So I figured when I heard McMahan say your name was Deniff. I knowed Ike Deniff in Texas. Did he ever tell you that he killed Jeff Kettle's father?"

"In a fair fight," said the girl quickly.

"In a fair fight," agreed the big Texan quietly. "Then he taken his family and quit Texas."

"Before Jeff Kettle got back to Texas and killed him. They claim that when a man is too tough for you, you bushwhack 'im."

"That's what they claim, ma'am. Is that the jail yonder? It don't look like much."

"Four 'dobe walls, a steel door and a barred window," said the girl crisply. "A one-roomed affair. The prisoners are just one happy family. They eat when Porky remembers to feed 'em. And the prisoner furnishes his own bedroll or sleeps on the floor or fights another prisoner for a share of his soogans. Curly's bedroll is at the ranch. Maybe he's got money left in his pockets to buy a couple of blankets at the store. Or did they roll you, there in the snake room, Curly?"

"The boys," Gene Deniff grunted, "will get me out before bed time."

THE girl smiled faintly and unlocked the heavy steel door. The air inside the one-room jail was clean and fresh enough. The place was bare of any sort of furniture. Just a bare and empty adobe house with a barred window and a steel door. Gene Deniff walked in and slammed the door behind him. His sister turned the key in the lock and handed it to the new town marshal.

"He'll be sober by tomorrow morning. I'm not bringing any charges against him, of course. Sober, he's a mighty fine boy. Give him two drinks and the Injun in him boils to the surface. We're quarter-breed Cherokee and proud of it most of the time. Where can we go for a strictly private talk? There's something I want to talk over with the man who wears the badge my father wore when he was murdered. Or would you want to take up anything for the man who killed your father?"

"Lon Deniff killed Bill Kettle in a fair fight on the main street of Marfa, Texas," said Jeff Kettle. "It was a whiskey fight. Now they're both dead. I hired out to wear this badge. We kin talk at the town marshal's office. It's kinda messed up but I don't know ary other place."

Lou Deniff shook her head, forcing a thin smile. "I'm not as tough as you think I am. My father was murdered there. There's still blood on the floor in there that's not yet dried. No thanks."

She pointed to a grove of big hackberry trees down the creek beyond town.

"Half a mile is a long walk for a cowpuncher," she said. "Think you can make it?"

"I kin try."

They walked on in silence. It was a strange silence and there was no friendliness in it. The girl had unbuckled her light leather chaps and slung them over her shoulder. She wore faded overalls and her silver-mounted spurs tinkled as she walked beside him. Her head came to the level of his wide shoulders and he shortened his stride to keep pace with her.

They sat down on the creek bank beneath a big hackberry tree. He let her break the silence.

"I hate you," she said flatly, "and I hate everything you stand for. You're a hired killer. You're no better than Cabezon Carter and his cattle-rustling renegade Double Link cowpunchers. But you're the only man who can help to save the outfit our father left Gene and me. And I can be useful to you. It's a business proposition all the way through.

"You can't clean up Hackberry alone. And you can't take over the Double Link outfit and run it all by yourself. Not even Jeff Kettle can get that big job done without help. I'll furnish you that help. And in return, you save the outfit that Cabezon Carter is stealing from Gene and me. No friendship gained or lost between you and me. Strictly business."

Jeff Kettle wiped away the beginning of a grin with the palm of his hand. He nodded slowly.

"IT'S A deal. No friendship. Strictly business. If Cabezon Carter is stealin' your outfit, I'll steal it back and hand it to you with some mavericks for int'rest. And now just how do you think you kin help a man like Jeff Kettle clean up Hackberry and take over the Double Link outfit?"

Lou Deniff was quick to detect the faint tone of derision in the big Texan's voice. Her face flushed and her dark eyes glinted with quick anger.

"Porky McMahan will do anything I want him to do. Half those Double Link cowpunchers will quit Cabezon Carter and back your play if I ask them to take their orders from you. I'll go back right now to the Double Link Saloon and prove it." She started to get to her feet.

Jeff Kettle reached over and took her arm, pushing her back. She jerked away, recoiling as if some sort of a vicious animal had pawed at her.

Jeff Kettle's jaw muscles tightened in hard ridges. The cold hard glint came back into his greenish gray eyes.

"I gave Porky McMahan till daylight to quit Hackberry," he told her, his voice matching the coldness of his eyes, "and I wouldn't hire one of them Double Link renegades if they was the last cowhands on the face of the earth.

"You better git on your horse and ride on home. I'll turn that brother of yourn loose in the mornin' and run him outa town. I'll hand you back your cow outfit when I've taken it away from Cabezon Carter. And the best help you kin give Jeff Kettle is to keep outa the way and wait till the dust settles. This ain't goin' to be ary woman's tea party. You don't need to r'ar back like a bronk, lady. I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole."

Jeff Kettle got to his feet. Lou Deniff was on her feet, her small fists clenched, lower lip caught between her white teeth. They stood there looking into each other's eyes in the gathering dusk.

Neither of them had noticed that it was getting dark. They had not seen the man who had followed along the creek, keeping behind the brush. Now a dry stick cracked under a man's boot. A harsh, tense voice barked from the brush.

"Don't claw for a gun, Kettle, or I'll kill yuh. Hit a lope, Lou. I'm settlin' with this gun-slingin' snake. Makin' up to you—"

"Cotton!"

The girl jumped in front of Jeff Kettle. Her voice was shrill, brittle as breaking glass.

"Cotton! You boneheaded idiot! You tow-headed fool! Come out of that brush. You're not shooting anybody. Come out in the open like a white man."

"Come on out like the little lady says, Cotton Top," grinned Jeff Kettle. "Nobody's tryin' to steal your girl. You'll oblige me by puttin' her on her horse and ridin' home with her. She's kinda underfoot."

The tow-headed young cowpuncher came out from behind the brush, his six-shooter in his hand. His face looked bone white in the twilight and his blue eyes were hard as glass. He walked slowly toward them, breathing hard, half crouching, talking through clenched teeth:

"I'm out in the open, Kettle. I'm no bushwhacker. Git outa the way, Lou. Git out the way."

Until not ten feet separated them. His cocked six-shooter pointed upward, ready to throw down to shooting level. Coming on. Step by step.

Jeff stood there, a grin on his face, hands lifted to the level of his wide shoulders. Then he moved. Moved so swiftly that neither the girl nor the tow-headed young cowpuncher had time to anticipate his actions.

He flung the girl aside with a shove of his hand; leaped, slapped Cotton Top's blazing gun out of his hand, then crashed a short, hard, jolting right fist into the tow-headed cowboy's face. He followed it with another hard swing that all but lifted the slim cowpuncher off his feet.

Cotton Top went down in a limp heap. Jeff Kettle picked up the young cowpuncher's six-shooter and his own carbine. He made no move to help Lou Deniff to her feet, but handed her the six-shooter. "Throw some water on him and he'll come alive. He work for the Double Link?"

"No. He has a little outfit of his own."

"Tell him," said Jeff Kettle, "to drop in at my office. I want to have a powwow with him. Tell him not to come in a-shootin'."

CHAPTER IV

THE CARBINE ROARS

JEFF KETTLE, his carbine in the crook of his arm, walked down the main street of Hackberry to the livery barn. It was dark now but there was a nearly full moon that lighted the street and threw the outlines of the low-roofed adobe buildings into bold relief.

Blobs of light showed here and there where windows were uncurtained or doors flung open. Horses with saddle cinches loosened stood at the hitchracks in front of the saloon and the general mercantile store across the street. A couple of wagons, teams tied to the mercantile hitchrack, was being loaded with supplies by ranchers.

Hackberry looked as peaceful as the average Arizona cow town.

Jeff Kettle saw that his horse had been watered, bedding in his stall, the manger filled with hay. He took the barn man's lantern and walked along the stall, reading the brands of the horses stabled there. Then he went back up the street.

If he was aware of the fact that he made an excellent target for bushwhackers crouched in the black shadows of the buildings, he gave no outward sign of apprehension. He walked straight-backed, long legs moving with the stiff gait of a cowpuncher wearing high-heeled boots; and he still had that short-barreled carbine in the crook of his left arm.

He sized up the horses at the hitchrack; then stiffened as he saw a light burning inside the town marshal's office. Somebody had repaired the broken window and replaced the window shade with a new one. The light glowed faintly behind the drawn blind.

He shifted his carbine to his left hand, lifted the latch, shoved the door wide open with his foot, stepped back into the shadow, his six-shooter in his hand. Then he grinned faintly, his heavy bleached-looking brows bunched in a puzzled scowl.

The only occupant of the adobe house that served as office and living quarters for the town marshal was a woman. A woman with cropped thick copper-colored hair and opaque brown eyes that were black in the shadow of thick, long black lashes. A strikingly handsome woman dressed in a severely tailored black skirt and jacket and white silk blouse and a man's string bow tie. She had cleared the flat-topped desk of its litter of empty glasses and bottles and cigarette stubs and was playing solitaire.

"Come in, Jeff." She glanced up, smiled, went back to her game of solitaire. "Shut the door and bar it . . . Black deuce on a red trey . . . it's got me licked again . . . . Unlucky at cards, Jeff, lucky at what?" Her voice was throaty, husky, warm.

She got to her feet and stood there: tall, lithe, more handsome than beautiful, offering her red-lipped mouth.

JEFF KETTLE put his carbine in the empty gun rack and reached for the sack of tobacco and cigarette papers in his shirt pocket. He made no move to accept her proffered lips.

"Long time no see you, Lolita," he said flatly.

"That's your fault and my hard luck, Jeff. Shake?" She held out a long-fingered beautifully shaped hand.

"I'd rather not. It wouldn't mean anything. What fetches you here?"

The woman looked at her hand, shrugged her tailored shoulders and sat down.

"I live near here—at the Five Mile House. The liquor is good. My gambling games are on the level. A good piano player and a few Mexican *sêñoritas* to dance with the cowboys. I heard you were running Porky McMahan out and I drove over to make a fast deal with him for his Double Link Saloon. And to give you a little motherly advice.

"You've bitten off a bigger hunk of tough meat than you can swallow, Jeff. Cabezon Carter and his boys won't take it layin' down. You're outnumbered. Licked before you start."

She shuffled and riffled the cards; cut them three times; dealt three poker hands, dropping the cards face upward. One hand held no better than a pair of deuces. The next hand was a full house. The third hand held four aces and the joker.

"Your hand, Jeff," she indicated the deuces. "Cabezon's full house. I'll keep the aces. It's just like that."

Her eyes were like black agates. Her red lips twisted in a smile that had both mockery and bitterness. She looked older than she did when she had offered to kiss him.

"Cabezon Carter sent you here to throw that scare into me?"

"Cabezon sends me nowhere. And I'm giving you this fair warning just for old times' sake. Take it or leave it. There was a time when you thought my advice was worth more than a Mexican peso."

"Pass that advice on to your amigo Cabezon Carter, then. You can deal pat hands from a cold deck of marked cards, Lolita. But it takes more than that to make me push back my chair and quit the game. The Double Link is a million-dollar outfit if it's run right. That's a big jackpot. I've got a few little white chips in the game. I'll play my deuces. You kin pass that along for what it's worth to Cabezon Carter when you git back to your Five Mile House. *Adios*, Lolita."

"You might thank me for getting this office of yours cleaned up while you were watching the moon rise with the little Deniff girl."

"Leave Lou Deniff out of this, Lolita."

"Oho! So that's how it is."

She got to her feet, fluffed her thick mop of coppery hair with long, ringless fingers, and pulled on a small black felt turban.

"Up to date," she said, her voice hardening, "that little black-maned filly has been shoving her freckled pug nose into everything. She has a tomboy complex. She and her weak-minded twin brother had better take Cabezon's offer for their two-bit outfit while the offer still holds. Otherwise she'll wind up dealin' 'em off her arm in some railroad hash house. You're a sucker, Jeff. Just a big old country boy at heart.

"You muffed your chance when you wouldn't even shake hands. You said it wouldn't mean anything. You were dead wrong. I can deal Cabezon Carter those two puny little deuces and you could win the jackpot with that full house and I'd deal myself out. But you queered your chances. *Adios*, Jeff. I'll see that you get the best funeral this town of Hackberry ever attended."

Jeff Kettle grinned through his tobacco smoke. He slid back the iron bar, opened the door, and stood aside to let her pass. She stood there on the sidewalk pulling on a pair of black gauntlet gloves.

A Mexican drove up in a top buggy drawn by a sleek black team of trotting horses. The woman called Lolita stepped up into the buggy and took the lines. She drove down the moonlit street, leaving a cloud of dust to settle slowly in her wake.

"Lolita," said a tall man who stepped out of the shadows, "shore drives like she was stung by hornets."

The speaker was the tall tow-headed young cowpuncher called Cotton-Top.

JEFF KETTLE nodded, a faint grin on his face, his greenish eyes hard. "Feelin' better, Cotton?"

"Inside, yeah. You like to busted my jaw, mister. I shore went off half cocked."

"A young feller in love," said Jeff Kettle, "gits thataway. Come in and shut the door. We're standin' in the light."

Inside the office with the door barred, the big Texan pointed to the three poker hands that lay on the table.

"Lolita dealt 'em. The pair of dirty deuces are mine. She slid Cabezon Carter that full house, and kept four aces and the joker for herself. And that lady is the fastest dealer in the West. She don't make mistakes.

"That's just about the way things appear to stand right now, Cotton. With the odds stacked high ag'in' me. I'm playin' them deuces for the present, but the jackpot is big. So when the sign is right I'll call 'er a misdeal and break out a new deck of cards and it'll be Jeff Kettle that handles the deal. The big jackpot is the Double Link outfit. I asked you in to see if you want to string your bets along with mine. I can't guarantee you a damn' thing."

"You don't need to, mister. Not if you're goin' after Cabezon Carter. My name is really Cotton. Pete Cotton. My older brother Sam Cotton wore that town marshal badge till he got bushwhacked along the wagon trail between here and the Double Link ranch.

"Then Ike Deniff took the job and got murdered. Shot through that window one night while he was makin' out a report on some Double Link investigation he'd made. I was offered the job of town marshal. I ain't ashamed to admit that I didn't have the guts to tackle it.

"Now, if you still want me to side you, I'll try to make a hand. I ain't much force. Never had a gun fight in my life. But I know every foot of this cow country and I kin show you where the bulk of the Double Link calf crop goes when them calves is old enough to be weaned and put into another iron. I kin take you to where them Double Link cows with big unbranded calves is rangin' right now, ready for weanin' in a week or two.

"I've bin reppin' with the Double Link roundup, gatherin' my stuff. Lettin' Cabezon git the idee I was yellow as a coyote's belly; lettin' him ride along with the notion he kin buy my ranch at his own cut-throat price. Markin' time, sorta.

"That's what caused the split-up between me'n Lou. She called me a coward and some other hard names I couldn't swaller and grin about. She rode off in a big huff just now, headed for home. She told me that the only way to prove I wasn't a coward was to throw in with you. So I come. You give the orders, Marshal. I'll try to make a hand."

"Saddle your horse and Gene Deniff's horse. Meet me at the jail."

Jeff Kettle turned the lamp wick lower and led the way out onto the sidewalk. He took the jail key and his carbine with him. They separated and Jeff Kettle walked to the

jail at the edge of town. He unlocked the big steel door and shoved it open, peering into the black interior, braced to meet any attack.

"Come on out, Curly!" he said flatly. "I'll sober you up some and send you home."

No sound, no movement of any kind came from the thick darkness of the jail. Jeff Kettle struck a match, cupping the yellow flame. The jail house was empty. The bars were intact on the small window. Jeff Kettle grinned ruefully and left the jail door stand ajar.

Cotton rode up on a lope and slid his horse to a halt. His voice was a little excited.

"Gene's horse wasn't at the barn."

"And Gene wasn't in jail. Looks like there's more than one key to this one-roomed lodgin' house. You think Lou Deniff is safe, ridin' home alone?"

"Nobody's ever harmed her yet and she comes and goes all the time."

"Then put up your horse and we'll git some supper and a few hours sleep. We got a chore a-waitin' at daylight."

"Porky McMahan?" Cotton's voice was tense. "He says nobody kin run him outa town. Them Double Link men is there to side him."

"So I figgered. Where kin we git a good bait of grub?"

"The Chinaman's is the only eatin' place in town."

"Meet me there."

THEY ate steak and fried potatoes, bread and canned tomatoes and dried apple pie. The coffee was black and strong. Then Jeff Kettle bought a tarp and blankets and soogans at the store and carried his new bedroll to his office across the street.

There were two bunks in the place and the marshal divided the blankets with his tow-headed young deputy. He slept lightly enough to know that Cotton Top slept hardly at all. At the first streak of dawn Cotton Top was pulling on his boots and buckling on his cartridge belt. Jeff Kettle took his time. He washed in the little leanto shed at the back that was equipped with water bucket and basin.

Then he took his carbine from the gun rack and told his young deputy that it was about that time of the mornin'.

"You mosey around to the back of the saloon, Cotton, and take a stand in behind that pile of empty beer kegs. If Porky McMahan comes out the back door, holler. But don't shoot unless you got to. Just lay low and keep track of what goes on. Don't shoot at nobody unless you're crowded to it."

Jeff Kettle walked slowly up the sidewalk, his carbine cradled in the crook of his left arm, right hand brushing the butt of his holstered six-shooter as he walked.

A man poked his head out above the half doors of the Double Link Saloon and pulled it back like a turtle.

"He's a-comin', Porky!" Jeff Kettle heard him call out.

No other sound came from the saloon. The street seemed deserted save for the half-dozen saddle horses at the hitchrack in front of the saloon. A rooster crowed. Jeff Kettle's boot heels sounded against the plank walk. Faces showed dimly behind the windows of the general mercantile store across the street. The curtains of the saloon windows moved.

There was a grayish look to the big Texan's leathery face in the half light of early dawn. His green eyes were puckered, narrowed to slits. His mouth under its drooping rope-colored moustache was a thin, lipless line. He held his cocked carbine in his left hand, just above the level of his overalls waistband.

Until he reached the saloon doorway his gait had been slow, measured, deliberate. Boot heels clumping loudly in the hush of the early dawn. Then he was through the swinging half doors with a long, swift stride—the carbine in his hand roaring.

CHAPTER V

OUTLAW PARTNER

ONLY the mottled face and burly right shoulder and arm of Porky McMahan showed above the bar. The gun in the saloon man's hand spat fire and the bullet grazed the big Texan's ribs.

The mottled face of the saloon keeper was suddenly distorted, then covered with blood. And from that bloody mask of torn flesh came a horrible agonized scream. The big man dropped his six-shooter and his two hands were clamped against the blood-smeared face as it dropped out of sight behind the pine board bar.

The six-shooter in Jeff Kettle's right hand was belching jets of flame. Other guns roared. Half a dozen separate fights were going on at the same time. Then the guns went silent and Jeff Kettle stood there, his back to the wall, smoking six-shooter in his hand, his carbine on the floor at his feet. From behind the bar came the moaning and cursing of Porky McMahan.

Jeff Kettle grinned faintly at six hard-looking cowpunchers who grinned back at him, hard-eyed, grim-jawed.

"That just about takes care of it, boys." Jeff Kettle eyed half a dozen dead or wounded Double Link cowpunchers on the floor.

"That was cuttin' 'er almighty close, Jeff," said one of the men he had nodded to. "That taller-paunched son wasn't shootin' to miss. Your shirt's a-bleedin'."

"Drag that pot-bellied thing out from behind the bar and help yourself to the best in the house. He kin do some ponderin' while he's gittin' the bird-shot picked outa his face. There's nothing like a thirty-thirty shell loaded with birdshot and aimed right to take the fight outa things like that Porky."

Jeff Kettle walked to the back door and flung it open.

"Come on in, Cotton, and meet some boys that will be workin' that Double Link range with us. They drifted in durin' the night while we was takin' on some sleep."

. . . Cotton Top found the town's only doctor in the store across the street. He wasn't much of a doctor but he did know how to patch up gunshot wounds. He taped up Jeff Kettle's bullet-nicked ribs, bandaged a few minor wounds Jeff Kettle's men had gotten, dressed the wounds of three Double Link cowpunchers and pronounced the others dead.

Then and not until then did the new marshal of Hackberry let the doctor attend to the shot torn face of the groaning, slobbering Porky McMahan who sat in a heavy barroom chair, holding his face in his hands, blood dripping through his fingers onto the floor.

"Patch him up, Doc," said Jeff Kettle. "Then load him in a rig and send him out to the Five Mile House. If ever he shows up in Hackberry again I'll fill that big paunch of his full of bigger hunks of lead than bird-shot. Hear that, McMahan?"

Fear showed in the pig-like eyes that had luckily been

spared by the small but efficient charge of bird-shot. He nodded his bandaged head.

The marshal of Hackberry sent Cotton over to the Chinaman's.

"Tell the Chink to cook us the best breakfast he kin sling together and holler when he's ready. Have them Double Link horses out yonder put in the barn and the saddles locked up."

He gave orders to his tough-looking crew. "Drink all you want, save out a quart apiece, then smash every bottle and barrel of booze in the place. My orders is to dry up the cow town of Hackberry."

"It would have paid you, McMahan," he told the bandaged Porky, "to sell out your booze to Lolita last evenin'. Mebbyso she'll give you a job a-swampin' at her Five Mile House when that face of yourn heals."

He turned to the doctor. "Load this thing in a rig and git him on his way. Then plant the dead 'uns. You're the town undertaker, so Cotton tells me. You cash in on us, livin' or dead. Well, you look like you had some buzzard blood in you. Git busy."

IT WAS about an hour later when Jeff Kettle, forking the best Double Link horse at the livery barn, one of Cabezon Carter's string, rode out of town. Cotton Top and the six hard-looking cowhands who had appeared from nowhere heavily armed and traveling without bed-horses, trailed behind. They emptied their guns at the rising sun as they rode down the wide and dusty main street of Hackberry, headed for the rough-timbered country beyond. The Double Link range.

"Where them cowhands come from, Cotton," Jeff Kettle told the young tow-headed cowboy, "or how they happened to git here last night, is just their business and none of yourn. You swing past the Deniff ranch and see is the little lady all right. If her brother is there, tell him to stay there with her. I don't want neither of 'em showin' up on the Double Link range.

"You'll find us at the Double Link headquarters ranch. And ride wide of the Five Mile House. You're marked from now on. Ride cautious. And I've got a notion that there's some of the Double Link outfit hanging out at Lolita's place."

"Her and Cabezon," said Cotton Top, holding two gloved fingers up, "is just like that. *Muy amigos.*" He rode off grinning.

. . . Gene Deniff's jail break was worrying Jeff Kettle for some reason he could not actually explain to himself. Gene Deniff's escape from the jail didn't matter much one way or another. Just a weak, wild young fool with a hangover.

But who had a key to the jail? He had searched Porky and the Double Link men, both the living and the dead. The wounded saloon man had loudly and, so the marshal figured, truthfully denied all knowledge of a second key to the jail door.

But there was a second key. Who had it and why had they let Gene Deniff out? It stuck in Jeff Kettle's mind like a sandbur in a saddle blanket.

THE Double Link headquarters ranch was deserted except for a Mexican who rode the horse pasture fence and looked after the horses and did odd jobs around the place. He lived in one of the adobe houses with his wife and kids.

The Double Link had two remudas. The round-up was using one now, each cowpuncher riding a string of seven horses. When they had worked two or three weeks they would pull in at the ranch, turn the remuda into the horse pasture, and Cabezon would mount his men on a fresh string of horses.

He would lay the outfit over here at the ranch for perhaps a week while they pulled the shoes off the horses they had been riding and tack new shoes on their fresh string. A couple of blacksmiths would come down from Hackberry to help. Every man in the outfit shod his own horses, the two blacksmiths working at forge and anvil shaping shoes to fit the trimmed hooves.

Jeff Kettle's men wrangled the horse pasture. The Mexican was put to work in the blacksmith shop. They worked from daybreak until it was too dark to fit a horseshoe. And no man labored harder than Jeff Kettle.

"Nothin' like shoein' horses," he told his men, "to sweat the likker out of a cowhand's hide."

The Mexican told them that the round-up was due back at the ranch almost any day. They had been working nearly a month. They would be pulling in at the ranch for fresh horses. Which fitted into Jeff Kettle's plans like a foot in a shop-made boot. They shod five horses apiece and carried cold shoes along to finish the job.

Cabezon was working the lower range with mess wagon and bed wagon. Jeff Kettle found pack saddles and plenty of grub in the store house. He outfitted a pack outfit and they pulled out at moonrise, his men using the bedrolls

they found in the bunkhouse—the tarp-covered beds that belonged to the men they had fought and whipped in town.

"This sets Cabezon's outfit afoot for fresh horses," Jeff Kettle told his men, "and we throwed him short-handed back yonder at Hackberry. We'll camp back yonder in the rough country tonight, stand horse guard with Winchesters, and start workin' the upper range in the mornin'."

"Fetchin' along them beds," said one of the weary and sweat-marked men, "was just some kind of a mistake, wasn't it, Jeff? What a man needs when he works for you is a lantern, not a bed." But he grinned when he said it.

"You hired out for tough hands and you're gittin' fightin' wages. You boys was a-gettin' soft, roundsidin' there in the hide-out, drinkin' moonshine likker and janglin' over poker hands. Sweatin' and long circles, brandin' fires and ropin' slick-eared calves and mavericks is what you need to put you in shape to outfight a sheriff's posse. Nobody's feelin' a lame back from tackin' shoes on ponies any worse than me. I was puttin' on taller there at the Sacatone jail."

"Yeah," grinned another tough cowhand, eyeing the Texan's big boned hard-muscled frame, "you shore look bloated. I bin in that Sacatone jail. It's jerky and beanses three times a day. . . . Camp at the head of Manzanita Canyon, Jeff. Good feed and water and if Cabezon's outfit shows up we kin make a stand there." The man had worked for the Double Link and knew the range.

COTTON TOP had failed to show up at the ranch and that was worrying Jeff Kettle more than he let on. He was too short-handed to send a man back to the Deniff ranch to see what was holding up the tow-headed cowboy. He tied Cotton Top's failure to show up with the disappearance of Gene Deniff.

And he was worried about the girl Lou. She bothered his thoughts too much and and he cussed himself for it. She was, he told himself, just another girl—a kid at that. And he was too old a hand to get fool notions about a kid. Women like Lolita were his kind, not snub-nosed freckle faced kids.

Anyhow, she hated him. Hated him like she hated a rattlesnake.

And that's about what he was: a rattler. Rattling a warning and striking hard and quick. Even right now he was playing a game that was not quite on the level. He aimed to get a lot more out of this job than that territorial governor suspected. And to get the job done he had hired as tough a bunch of border-jumping renegades as ever drifted a herd of stolen cattle out of Mexico.

That arrest and conviction back at Sacatone had a bad smell. It had been a frame-up. Jeff Kettle and this same bunch of renegades had taken sides in a sheep and cattle war.

It had been fought out to a bloody finish without the help or hindrance of the law. It had been over and done with months ago, when he rode into Sacatone on that sorrel horse he had swapped for—when he killed the man who had hired out with his bunch of gun-toters to fight on the sheepmen's side. And he had been jailed for a horse thief and then other charges rung in on the deal.

Then that dude from the governor's office showed up with that conditional pardon. It had been a frame-up from the start.

"We'll take the Double Link outfit," he had told these renegades, "and we'll hand it over to them dudes that form the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company. But before they git 'er, they'll lay cash on the line, boys. And it won't be pesos; it'll be a South America stake.

"We got the governor backin' our play. The territorial law behind us. We'll lean back ag'in' that law till she bends. Ain't this a shore purty badge, you curly wolves?"

Cabezon Carter had been ramrodding the Double Link for several years, stealing the outfit blind. Jeff Kettle had an old grudge to settle with him; an old bone to pick with that too-handsome range dude that the Mexicans had nicknamed *Cabezon*: big-headed and stubborn, obstinate. A top cowhand, a fast gun slinger, a fancy dresser even on the range. A ladies' man.

There had been a night at Juarez when Lolita had turned over her gambling house to her head dealer and left word for Jeff Kettle that she had gone across the Rio Grande to El Paso on some business. And the big Texan had found her dancing at the Paso Del Norte Hotel, wearing the dress he liked best, her red head close to the sleek black barbered head of Cabezon Carter, Jeff Kettle's partner in the lawless business of handling "wet" cattle out of Chihuahua.

Cabezon's job being the smart-headed business of selling the cattle that Jeff Kettle and this same crew of border jumpers risked their lives to gather down in Mexico, where they had to out-fox the Rurales and Villa's rebels and the Border Patrol and Texas Rangers.

"I'd orter kill you both," Jeff Kettle had told them there in the hotel lobby. Keeping his voice down to a lazy drawl. "But I got a better notion. It ain't too late to git a Mexican marriage license and somebody to hitch you two double-crossers in double harness. You'll have one another for better or worse for the rest of your lives.

"And you'll git to hate each other when you learn one another's tricky ways. I got her weddin' ring here in my pocket, Cabezon. Now let's take a little pasear back acrost the Line to Juarez. Try to back up on this deal and I will kill you both."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Sonny moved in on Cannon, hammering the body of the taller man

Kid Felony

By William R. Cox

Author of "Peanuts to You," "The Gloves Hang High," etc.

So he's a momma's boy, hey? That's what you think; because Sonny is the only man who ever took the championship by a kayo *outside* the ring. And Mom is a manager who can outthink the electric chair itself

I

SONNY sat in the corner, working the worn gloves together, breaking the padding away from his bandaged knuckles. He sat sideways on the stool, so he could look at Mom and she could look at him.

It was only the semi-finals of the Midstate Amateurs. It wasn't anything big, like the Golden Gloves, or even like the finals, tomorrow night. But although Mom didn't show it, she was always a bit worried.

Lots of people thought it was funny for Mom to be there, right at the ringside, whenever Sonny fought, and that was another reason he always had to grin at her and wave. He had to show people that he wanted her there.

Sometimes, when the New York managers came down to peer at the local talent and went off muttering that they were a buncha bums, it did embarrass Sonny a little that Mom should be down there, practically handling his corner from her close-up seat, whispering to Oofty Magrew just before he climbed into the ring with his sponge and his pail. But he knew that wasn't right, to feel like that.

He looked over this Towel Ricks, from the Uptown Club. Horace Pettibone was always looking for middleweights to beat Sonny. Towel Ricks wasn't the one this time. Towel was a kid from the Y, and Sonny had fought him before.

Horace Pettibone had a face like a horse, and muscles all over him from constant exercise. He was old, Sonny reflected. He must be forty-five. But he tried to stay young, despite baldness and that horse face. With muscles, he tried to stay one of the boys.

Mom said, "Horace is an adult-infant."

That was out of a book, Sonny knew. Mom was always reading her pretty eyes out. Privately, he had another word for Horace Pettibone. He never let Mom hear him say it, though.

The referee called them out and mumbled at them. He was an old battler with a busted nose and slightly scrambled brain, but he was capable enough. Sonny went back and pulled on the ropes. He had long arms and nice, sloping shoulders, and little muscles under his shoulder blades which danced a jig and promised hitting power.

Towel Ricks came out all fancy, dancing, his hands high. Towel liked to step around and box. He moved in and out, very swift. He had been a track man in high school.

Sonny was different. Sonny fought in the square. He moved on the four sides of the box, stepping almost flat-footed, so that he seemed slow. His big forearms blocked most of the blows. Then he would counter.

Towel threw a gingerly left, dancing back immediately. Towel was a real amateur, all right. He had all the elbow motions and a nervous habit of thumbing his nose with his right thumb and snorting like a porpoise.

Sonny took a couple high on the head. He kept shuffling in, standing upright, his gloves cocked on his chest. He weaved a little and Towel tried a right cross.

Sonny dropped the left in a short, straight one. Towel caught it on the nose. His eyes rolled and he tried to run hastily to the other side of the ring. Sonny followed implacably, his crew haircut bobbing as he feinted.

Towel got his feet crossed. Sonny hit him once, twice, left to the body, right hooking into the base of the jaw. Towel fell on his face, clutching at the canvas cover of the ring floor. The referee slipped Sonny a wink and perfunctorily counted Towel out.

SONNY turned off the ropes and waved down at Mom. Her blond head nodded at him, brightly, amusedly. Mom always seemed tickled about something. She was the prettiest woman in the gym, with her yellow hair carefully bobbed and curled, her blue, long-lashed eyes, her plump, youthful figure.

Mom was forty, but you'd never know it. Sonny got a big lump in his throat when he looked at her sometimes, she was so beautiful.

Oofty Magrew's little, beady eyes were calm. He said, "Okay, kid. You got past the chump. Now you got on'y the champ."

Sonny said, "Let's get me a shower."

He went down the little steps and up the aisle of the crowded gym floor, nodding to acquaintances, mitting his pals. He knew them all. He had been raised in Midvale. They cheered him, laughed at him, with him. They were all his neighbors, they all knew Mom.

He was through for the night, so he dressed quickly. Oofty Magrew said, "This Cannon—he came through the Golden Gloves in Chicago. Pettibone rung him in. That Pettibone would do anything to win for them Uptown boys."

Sonny said, "We've been through that, Oofty."

The little man was stooped, grizzled. He said "We-ll. I dunno. I couldn't never teach you much anyways. You always had the boxin'. Your daddy left it to you. . ."

Sonny said, "I'll fight him the way he fights me, pal. His name might be Cannon but can he hit like one?"

That was a dumb crack, but Oofty laughed, showing that he lacked an incisor. Oofty was essentially good-natured, although the other kids from the Boy's Club were scared of him. He had been boxing instructor since before the War. The other War, the one Sonny's Pop had caught his death in.

Sonny went back down to ringside. Mom made room for him to kneel at her feet and said, "There's Cannon."

Ed Cannon was taller, rangier than Sonny. This was the first time Sonny ever saw him. Cannon was really a ringer, as Oofty said. He had class. He was belting poor Joe Cave all over the ring. Oh yes, he was a hitter, too. He dropped Joe on his haunches, and when Joe got up, too dazed to take nine, Cannon was in there belting the hell out of him, cutting him to ribbons with short, punishing blows.

Mom said, "I do not like that boy."

Her face had taken on a careful expression and Sonny knew that meant that she was disturbed inside.

Sonny said, "I'll take him, Mom. He can't do that to Joe."

Mom said, "If you go down tomorrow, you'll take nine. Or I'll make them stop the fight."

She would, too. They'd stop it for her, too. They knew her the length and width of Midvale. They knew she was ring-wise.

Sonny said, "Let's go, Mom. I got to work tomorrow. This Cannon—he'll be tough."

THEY got up and walked slowly out of the gym, and Mom only spoke to a few people. They all knew her, but she was a great one to keep to herself. Sonny waved at them all over again, nodding and grinning. They said Sonny was just like his Pop, a great mixer. Mom was reserved.

Mom had little feet and slender ankles, climbing into the modest flivver. She always drove—said it made her nervous for Sonny to take the wheel—and she drove fast and well. They went home to the little white house in the suburb of Midvale. It was a tiny home, but it carried no mortgage.

Pop hadn't been rich, what with the gas which had left him handicapped for the years after the war, but his insurance had been ample. And there was a little pension, of course, and what Sonny made in the bank.

They got in the house and Mom sat down without taking off her hat. Sonny sat down, too, but first he got a glass of milk and a handful of cookies.

Mom said, "Sonny Potter, you'll be twenty years old tomorrow."

"Yes'm," grinned Sonny. "Practically ancient."

Mom said, "Your father was heavyweight amateur champion at twenty."

Sonny said, "I know it. I'll be middle champ."

They looked at one another and Mom was serious. Sonny nodded and ate another cookie. He said, "Don't you worry, Mom. He may be a pro, that Cannon. I know what you're thinkin', about Pettibone and everything. He may be a pro, all right. But I'm fightin' for you and me—and Pop, too."

There wasn't anything heroic about Sonny. He was very quiet and matter-of-fact. It was just a thing they had wordlessly planned, mother and son, through the years. They understood one another.

II

THE First Savings wasn't a very big bank, and the office of J. Bradley Borden, President, wasn't luxurious. It was kind of crowded, with Cashier Horace Pettibone and the auditor, Casey, and Captain Steve Duryea and Sonny all inside at once, looking uncomfortable.

Sonny kept staring at Horace Pettibone. It was like a dream, a bad dream. He knew Horace hated him. There was good reason for that, if you knew Horace.

That went back to 1918 and 1919, when they thought Pop was dead in the War. Horace was after Mom then. Sonny didn't like to think about that. Old Horseface running around after Mom, insisting that Pop was dead and why didn't she have enough sense to marry the future cashier of the bank.

Mom had sense enough not to. So Horace hated Pop, and stopped that loan Pop had needed, and then Horace went on hating Sonny.

Horace was civic-minded and muscle-bound and the Uptown Club was his pet. He ran the athletic teams for the sons of the white-collar class. He ran about everything he could get his fingers into.

J. Bradley Borden was saying heavily, "The auditor found it in Potter's books, Captain Duryea. Ten thousand dollars. I'm sorry, but . . ."

J. Bradley Borden was one of those semi-authentic rich men. He was a gray-haired, heavy-set man with sharp brown eyes and a hard mouth, from saying "No!" to prospective borrowers. Sonny scarcely knew him, although he had worked in the bank for two years, since he got out of high school.

Casey, the auditor, said, "That's true, Captain."

Horace Pettibone said unctuously, "Maybe Sonny will make restitution. If he would return the money, couldn't the bank—"

Borden said sternly, "I can make no promises, you know. The law must be served. Potter was a trusted employee. If an example is not made . . ."

Captain Steve looked as if someone had socked him in the belly. He was lean and brown and tall and he wore careless tweedy clothes and everyone liked him, even though he was a cop. He looked at Sonny, almost scared. He said,

"What about it, Sonny?"

Sonny shook his cropped head. He hadn't been able to talk, yet. His mind was going around like a squirrel in a cage, but nothing came out of it. He said finally, "You better get Mom, Cap'n."

Duryea shook his head a little. "You've got to talk, Sonny. Why did you take the money?"

Sonny said surprisedly, "You don't believe I took it, do you, Cap'n? You know me better'n that!"

Something happened to Duryea's face then. It got hard, then soft, then very hard again. He said briskly, "Well, he won't talk! I'll have to take him in."

Pettibone bleated, "Now, Captain Duryea! This boy has always been clean. I know him."

Duryea said, "I've know him since before he was born. Don't tell me. I'm taking him in!"

Borden murmured, "All for the best. I think you're right—An example. . ."

The auditor looked sorry, but resigned. Pettibone looked shocked. He said, "I'll call Mrs. Potter. I'll get bail right away, Robert."

That was Sonny's name—"Robert". Few people knew it. That had been Pop's name, too. Sonny hated for Pettibone to use it. He found his voice now, and cried, "You will like hell call Mom. Cap'n Steve'll call her. You keep outa my business, you old Horseface! We'll catch up on you! You're afraid I'll lick your champ tonight, that's what. I never made those figures in that book, and you know it! You've framed me, that's what! Wait'll Mom gets into this. Wait'll—"

STEVE Duryea jerked him to his feet. He almost lost his head and socked Steve, then. He said, "Don't you maul me, Cap'n! I'll go along. But don't maul me!"

Duryea took out a blackjack and waved it. He said, "You'll come all right. Step along here, now, or I'll give you a taste of this."

Pettibone turned pale. President Borden said, "Now, don't be too harsh, Captain." Casey looked sorrier than ever.

Sonny froze inside. Captain Steve had always been his pal. This was terrible. They all believed it—everyone of them. Maybe Casey . . . He implored the auditor, "You all Mom. Tell her—just tell her what you all think. Mom'll know what to do."

As he went out, his wrist securely clasped by Captain Steve, he heard Bradley Borden say, "Strange that a mother's boy should steal. But perhaps they're the worst kind. Oedipus complex, you know. Something wrong in their makeup."

If he could have broken away from Steve, he would have gone back and murdered Bradley right then and there. And Pettibone, too. He could have killed the two of them, with his bare hands. They couldn't talk about Mom like that. Nobody could talk about Mom at all—anyway.

Then it struck home, just as Steve was putting him in the car. He was a criminal, now. He had no rights. He could not do anything about anyone, no matter what they said or did. The cops had him. The cops could handle him, with their blackjacks, their manacles, the gang of them, bullying him.

He was scared for a brief moment or two, as the car started down toward Headquarters. He was scared, and then he was not scared any more. He was numb, and inside him a fire began to burn. The injustice of it, the nightmare of Steve's sudden brutality, everyone's disbelief in him, fanned the flame. It grew.

Maybe he could get out on bail. Maybe he would have a little time before they put him in a cell and made him slave on the roads and stuck him back into the cell each night.

His hands opened and closed. He looked at Steve and said, "You dirty rat! You'd believe I stole money!"

But he did not say it aloud. He was learning very quickly not to overstep himself. Steve was staring straight ahead, his face very hard and still, driving through the heavy downtown traffic. Sonny sat quietly, thinking happy thoughts. He was thinking what he would do to Horace Pettibone and J. Bradley Borden if they let him loose for a little while.

Mom was down at headquarters ahead of them. She must have driven the flivver at a terrific speed, Sonny thought. She said, "Casey called me. It's all right, Sonny."

He said, "It ain't all right."

"It's not", she corrected him absently. She said to Steve, "Oofty Magrew has three of the Boy's Club sponsors who will go bail—any amount. Get it set quickly, Steve."

Steve was different with Mom. He was very polite. It would be all right, now that Mom was here. Sonny hugged himself, planning his course of action. He could beat it out of that Horseface. He could make him tell the truth . . .

Steve and Mom went into another room. Sonny sat very still, rehearsing what he would do and say to Horace Pettibone.

III

OF COURSE he couldn't fight Ed Cannon. They didn't think it was proper, even though nothing had been proved against him. He walked the streets, stumbling a little at times, so deep was he in thought.

Mom said, "It'll be all right. I know how you feel, Sonny, but you must get yourself together."

"I'm all right," he told her "It was Horace Pettibone, y'know. That old business—" He couldn't talk about that. He and Mom never discussed things like that.

She said, "Maybe you'd better take a walk. Captain Duryea is coming over."

"That big stiff! He threatened me with a blackjack. Let him take off that star and I'll take him on, and I'll spot him the blackjack. The big goon!"

"Steve Duryea is my friend, Sonny. Whatever he did was in your best interests."

"Shakin' that mace at me? You call that best interest? I'll show that slob! I'll show Horace Pettibone, too!"

She held him by the shoulders, looking straight into his eyes. Her face was hard, the way Duryea's had been, there in the bank.

"Now listen, Sonny. You're not to hit anyone. You're not to go near Horace Pettibone nor Mr. Borden. And you are not to be disrespectful to any police officer, anywhere. Those are orders, Sonny!"

He said, "Okay, Mom."

Then he went out and walked.

He hadn't really meant to walk over on Oak Street, where Horace Pettibone lived. The fights were over now. It was late—after midnight. He had to get home; Mom would be worried.

He turned in front of the house in which Pettibone lived with his sister. He started back. Then he saw the shadow, lying across the walk leading up to the front door of Pettibone's house. The street light shone on it. There was a pool of something black, too.

He walked up the path. He went on tiptoe, aware that he had no right in the neighborhood, that Mom had cautioned him. He kept out of the pool and stared, bending close in fascinated horror.

There was a club—a piece of iron pipe wrapped in newspaper. He picked it up without volition, noting the marks of blood and the tendrils of hair. He stared at the stark, dead face of Horace Pettibone.

The skull was mashed, but the face still was horselike, without dignity even in death. Sonny straightened, stared about. The sister—was she home? He had to *do* something at once. He started for the front door.

The car drew up at the curb. Sonny hesitated. He was suddenly aware of the weapon in his hand. He dropped it in panic. It clanked upon the cement walk.

A voice said gruffly, "Halt! If you run, I'll shoot!"

It was the cops, all right. They would grab him again. Sonny ducked and sprinted, jumping the hedge. He ran down the side of Pettibone's house. Something whistled close to his ear and he heard a sharp report. They were shooting!

He swerved, took a dive over a large bush in the next yard. The houses were well spaced. He ran past a tree, through an alley. He cut across a lawn and came to the next street. He slowed, making himself stop the headlong flight. Then he walked along at a natural pace. If he could get to Vine Street, he could slip over the back lot.

The squad car came around the corner on two wheels. Sonny stepped off the sidewalk, into a driveway. As long as they stayed in the car, they would never get him. They sent their spotlight dancing along the rows of houses, but Sonny was well hidden. After awhile they started to drive off. Sonny came cautiously out. Sure enough there they were, parked down the street, waiting for him to show himself.

HE WENT back around the block the other way. He trotted across back yards, bouncing over fences, picking his way through gardens in the dark. He made Vine Street and cut across the open lot without haste; went around to the back of the little white house and let himself in.

From the living room his mother called, "Is that you, Sonny? We've been worried!"

He said, "Uh—yes'm. I'm havin' some milk."

It choked him. He couldn't drink it. He poured it down the sink and sneaked to the stairs. He could hear Duryea's laugh and his mother's low voice.

They were in there enjoying themselves, Mom and Captain Steve. While he shuddered on the stairway, his hands clammy, his stomach in knots, they were giggling like a pair of kids. It made him furious, then very unhappy. The phone rang and he bolted up the stairs.

The instrument was in the hall. Mom answered and said, "It's for you, Steve."

Duryea took it and listened for a moment. Then: "All right, I get it . . . Yes . . . Just came in . . . I'll question him . . . Certainly. Leave every as it is. I'll be right over."

In the bathroom Sonny found mud traces on his hands and on the knees of his trousers, where he had slipped once. His right hand was flecked with something; he stared at it. Yes, blood. Horace Pettibone's blood.

He washed hastily. Cold water, he had heard somewhere. Cold water would remove blood. He dried his hands, examined them frantically. They were clean; he was sure they were.

He dragged at his clothing. He heard Mom call, "Sonny!" He got undressed, scrambling into his pajamas. Mom said, "Sonny! Come down here!"

He ruffled his hair, got into a bathrobe, calling, "I'll be down. I was almost in bed, Mom."

The pants and shoes were stuffed under some things in his closet. He tried to appear at ease, going down. Panic had him by the throat.

He went down the stairs, his hands stuffed into his bathrobe pockets, and went into the living room. Cap-

tain Duryea was standing in the center of the rug, his hands clasped behind him. Mom was sitting on the straight chair, the one with the arms and red velour covering. Her blue eyes looked at Sonny, looked through him.

For a long moment there was silence. Then Mom said, "Tell us about Horace Pettibone, Sonny."

Sonny opened his mouth to make denial. He did not look at the detective at all. He just looked at Mom's blue eyes. Then he said:

"I found him. I wasn't gonna let those cops push me around. I found him—but I didn't kill him! I didn't, Mom. You told me not to touch him. You know I wouldn't, if you told me not to!"

IV

THEY kept taking him out of the cell and asking him a lot of questions. They didn't slug him, although one big, tough cop had started to. He had tried to hit back and Captain Steve came in and said, "What's this?" in a terrible voice and then they hadn't tried it again.

But they asked him a million questions and they had him under that bright light, which hurt his eyes. Then they put the machine on him—the lie detector. That didn't work, because of course he was telling the truth. It stopped them for half a day.

Then they were after him again, offering him cigarettes, which he never smoked, giving him an hour or two in the gym, plying him with milk and cookies and a steak. And they asked questions. They even asked him about Ed Cannon, and the fights, and Horace's Uptown Club. He told them what he knew. Mom had said to tell the truth and tell all.

There wasn't much, but he told them Cannon was a stranger to him, that Horace had believed Cannon could lick him, but had been a little scared right on. That Horace knew damned well Sonny was a born fighter. Hadn't his father been the greatest amateur Midvale had ever known? If the gas hadn't got Pop in the War, he would have been a pro, and a champion, too.

He almost cried when he said, "And if Pop was here, you guys would be turnin' me loose. He'd know how to get me out of this."

Steve Duryea, who had not been among his questioners, strangely enough, turned and walked out of the room at that. Steve had been a pretty good friend of Pop's in the old days, Sonny remembered.

The fingerprints had been the thing. He told them again and again about picking up the piece of pipe, not even knowing what he was doing. But they had a fine set of his prints, and there were no others on the crude weapon.

Coupled with his threats against Pettibone, the circumstance of the stolen money, about which no one seemed to have any doubt, they thought they had enough to charge him.

"Murder in the first," the tough cop told him. "You'll burn, momma's boy!"

He tried to get right through the bars after the tough cop, then, not because they were charging him with murder, but because of the slur on Mom. The cop just laughed and said to the turnkey, "Ya see? He's a wildcat. Them Momma's boys fool hell outa ya."

He really did weep then, because he was helpless, and it was his twentieth birthday and he still had not seen Mom. He lay face down on the cot and tried not to shake much, so no one would notice it.

THEN Mom came and sat alongside of him, and Steve Duryea was there, too. He raised his tear-stained face and shouted, "Can't you get that damned cop outa here while you visit, Mom?"

Steve went out without a word, and Sonny cried pretty hard, his head in Mom's lap. After a moment he got hold of himself and said. "Look, Mom. Can't we hire a detective or something? Some guy must have stolen that money and killed Horace. Can't we find out who did it?"

Mom said, "We're trying, Sonny."

"If they'd on'y stop askin' me those questions. I don't know anything about it. Anyone coulda fixed those books. I wasn't of any importance in the bank. Horace couda fixed them and stole the money. A tramp coulda held Horace up and killed him. Horace was proud of his muscles. He wouldn't have stood for a holdup by a guy with a lead pipe."

Mom said, "That's right, Sonny. We're working every angle of it."

"Steve Duryea's workin' them," Sonny said bitterly. "He don't believe I'm innocent, though. He stands around and lets them ask me those questions, under that awful light."

Mom said, "You never heard of Ed Cannon before he came to Midvale, Sonny?"

"Why do you keep askin' that? Of course we heard of him. He's the Golden Gloves champ, from Chicago. He had some kind of a job here, and Horace pounced on him."

Mom said, "I see. He's a good fighter, though, isn't he, Sonny?"

"He's practically a pro. Those guys always are. They have a hundred bouts before they actually turn pro. They get paid under the table by crooked amateur promoters in some towns. You know all that, Mom."

She said gently, "Yes, Sonny."

He examined her, forgetting himself for the moment. He was shocked at the crow's feet at her eyes.

"Look, Mom. I've been a little scared, see? I guess I've been screamin' and hollerin' before I'm hurt. If I didn't do those things, they can't do anything to me, can they? If I just keep goin' along, telling the truth, they can't put me in jail, can they? I guess I've just been a sissy. Don't worry, Mom. It'll be all right."

She got up. Her face was rigid with effort. No tears came. Her voice was very steady. "Yes, son. That's right. You hold on tight. We'll have you out soon."

She turned and almost ran from the cell. The turnkey let her out the corridor door, and there was not a sound out of her. But Sonny knew. Outside, she'd cry. She was near the breaking point. They hadn't found anything. He was in a tough spot.

He sat down on the cot. He wasn't frightened, now. Something in him, some heritage, settled the butterflies in his stomach, cleared his head.

They had a good case against him. There would be an indictment soon. Then he would be tried. It would be terrible for Mom, whether they proved it or not. If the guilty person wasn't found, it would be awful for Mom, always, even if they didn't electrocute her son.

He didn't even wince at the thought of the chair. He sat solidly on the edge of the iron cot and made his mind work.

THEY came to get him again for another siege in "Coney Island", the third-degree room. The tough cop's voice said from out front, "Duryea ain't here. I'll make the rat talk. He kilt the guy, didn't he? I'll larn him."

The turnkey was unlocking the door which led downstairs. There was another door alongside, one which led to the alley where the garage was. Sonny held his breath for a second. Then he belted the turnkey. He hit him right on the ear. He grabbed and caught the keys before they could hit the floor. It was very simple, really.

He let the keeper down easily. He didn't want to hurt the guy. He wished it was that tough cop. He would have loved to sock that wise egg.

He tried a couple of keys, found the right one. He guessed he wouldn't have much time. . .

In the alley there was a car. Sonny leaned into it. The keys were in the ignition! He got in and let the clutch out, pushed the starter. It was a Ford, but it turned over quiet as a dynamo. He eased it out of the alley without fanfare.

He hit the street and turned toward the railroad yards. If he could hop a freight, get away, he thought dimly, he could change his name. He would enter the ring, come back some day when he had money. Then he would show them. He would find the guilty party or parties then.

He had reached the intersection of Delmar and Fortune Streets before he knew he could do no such thing. First, he couldn't leave Mom. Second, how would he solve the crime years from now if they couldn't pick up a trail now, right after it was done?

No, he couldn't run now; he couldn't just walk out and leave the whole mess behind him.

He parked the car skillfully. He got out and looked at it. There were letters on it: *Midvale P. D.* 35. He had stolen a squad car! Was he lucky to have decided to abandon it!

He took a deep, ragged breath.

They would be looking for him and for it by now. Delmar Street was in the most exclusive section of Midvale. He loped along for a block or two. This was the high-hat section of town. They wouldn't look here first.

He knew someone who lived out here. Who was it? Why—of course. It was J. Bradley Borden, President of the First Savings Bank. He would have to steer clear of that street. It would never do to run into old Borden.

He was almost in front of Borden's house. Funny how he came to the dwellings of the two bankers: Horace Pettibone first—now Borden. He hurried on. There were lights in the house. It was only about eight in the evening.

HE SAW Borden through the window: walking up and down, talking to someone. The other figure arose and walked, too. It was Casey, the auditor. Sonny bet himself that they were discussing the robbery and the murder. In a little while they would know that he was free.

He went on, over the back streets, keeping in the shadows. He crossed to the Belle Heights section. There was only man who could really be trusted now.

V

HE CAME to a tiny house, set back on the lot; and after he had scratched on a window Oofty Magrew came out. The little man squinted and said, "Hey! You're supposed to be in the gow!"

Sonny said, "Come out here. Turn off the light."

Oofty came out. In the kindly darkness, Sonny said, "I got to find out who did it. Look, Oofty, the on'y thing to do is start at the beginning. At the bank. Oofty—will you sneak over to my house? They never took away my key to the side door of the bank. It's in my dresser drawer, the top one on the left. Will you do it, Oofty?"

The little man said, "Cert'ny. Stick here, kid."

That was Oofty. He had trained Pop. There wasn't ever any doubt about the little man. Hell or high water, he was on Sonny's side.

Sonny waited ten years in the back yard. It was getting cool and he had no coat. He shivered, and then finally Oofty came back.

Oofty said, "I got it. Your Mom is worried to death, Sonny. She's afraid some copper will shoot you. They got you tagged as a desperate criminal."

Sonny nodded. "A place they won't look for me is the bank. Take it easy, Oofty. If I don't find somethin', I'll try to go back and fight it."

Oofty said, "I'll be around, Sonny."

He went back downtown. It wasn't easy to make the bank. He had to jump fences again, and creep through back yards littered with garbage and ash cans, but he came up the side street at last.

He had used that door many times. The key worked beautifully. He slipped through the heavy door, and there was the bank, as he had seen it hundreds of times, quiet and brooding over the gold in the vaults.

There was a night light, but by keeping his head down below the level of the counters he got to his cage. There was a trick about getting into the cage. He manipulated the spring lock with his long fingers through the steel wire.

He got in and crouched on the floor, looking around the familiar cubicle. They had taken the book for evidence, of course. Yet he felt there should be something.

He was still crouched there when the street door opened again. He froze, keeping his head down so hard that it hurt his neck muscles.

A voice said heavily, "Come into my office."

Firm footsteps went along the tiled floor and into the office of the President. There were two men, and one of them was J. Bradley Borden.

SONNY waited awhile, then he crawled along the floor. The tile was cold on his hands and knees. Funny he should think of that. There was a narrow corridor formed by the cages and a row of filing cabinets. He got close to Borden's office door, but he couldn't quite see through the crack.

Borden was saying, "Now you've got to be reasonable, you know."

"Reasonable, hell," said a husky voice. "I'm in on this all the way. You think I'm goin' back to Chi? I'd be nuts, after—"

"You can't do this," Borden cut in. "The traffic won't stand it."

"I can do it, because I know too much," said the other

voice. Sonny had never heard it before, he was quite sure.

Borden lowered his voice almost to a whisper then, and Sonny couldn't catch any more. It occurred to him that he wasn't in a very good spot. He crawled back past the filing cabinets; squeezed into a dark corner and waited, holding his breath.

It was half an hour, and his foot went to sleep. He almost sneezed; and then the door opened and Borden came out. Sonny took a chance, but he had to see. He stared eagerly at Borden's companion.

It was not Casey, the auditor, as he had hoped and expected. If it were Casey, it might be something about his case. It was a tall, wide-shouldered young man. In the half light, it seemed that Sonny should know this man. He wore a topcoat with upturned collar; and his face, white in the reflection of the night lamp, was sullen.

The two went out and Sonny collapsed. There was nothing. He had seen the young man, maybe. But he did not know him, and there was nothing to connect him with the case.

For a time he sat there, trying to decide upon a course of action. He got out of the corner and woke up his foot by stomping it. He did not know which way to turn. He had been foolish to think there was anything in the bank.

Maybe he had been foolish to escape headquarters. Mom was more scared than ever. Maybe he ought to call them on the bank's telephone and tell them to come and get him.

He went idly into the office of the president. He sat in the chair, the big one behind the desk. He put out his hand to the telephone. The bell jangled and he almost fell off the chair in his panic.

He recovered himself. He stared at the black instrument. Twice he reached forth to answer it. He never could resist answering a ringing phone. His brain clicked again. Who would be calling the bank at this hour? A wrong number. Or—someone who knew J. Bradley Borden was to be there!

He snatched up the receiver. He deepened his voice and said, as he had heard Borden say so many times. "Yes?"

The wire hummed with the excitement of the man at the other end. "This is Casey. The kid is loose! He slugged a guard. You better watch out!"

Sonny said, "Yes?" stupidly, cursing himself for lack of invention.

"His mother is plenty smart. If they ever get a lead . . . I better not talk anymore. I'm taking the midnight. I'll wire you. S'long."

Casey hung up, and the shivers that went up and down Sonny's spine were like jumping into a cold bath after a hard fight. His finger sped on the dial.

Mom must have been sitting next to it. She spoke right away, eagerly, "Hello! Who is it?"

"It's me, Mom . . . Now don't get excited. I'm in the bank."

"Sonny!"

"I just took a call. Casey. There's somethin' funny, Mom. I—if you could send Oofty down in his car."

Mom said, "What happened? Quick!"

Sonny told her. His voice trembled a little. He ended. "Maybe it's nothing. But where is Casey goin' on the midnight? And why? What are they scared of, Mom? Who was the guy in here with Borden? It's all queer."

Mom said, "Hang up, Sonny. And wait."

He hung up and waited. He had done a lot of waiting, and it wasn't any good. He wanted to get at something. If he could punch something, it would be better; a good sock at something would help. He made balls of his big fists and hung on, making his heart stop its terrific pounding.

VI

SOMEONE knocked gently at the side door of the bank. That would be Oofty. He leaped to his feet and was outside in a split second.

He ran straight into the arms of a man who was too big to be Oofty. He tried to swing away, tried to get his left hand up there and start punching. Steve Duryea said, "Hold it, Sonny. Your Mom's in the car."

He stopped swinging right away. He got into the back seat with Mom. She grabbed his hand and held it. She said rapidly, "Steve is on our side, Sonny. He has been right along, only he did not dare show it. Please, Sonny, believe in Steve. If this doesn't work out, what we're going to try, is that Steve will say you gave yourself up to him. Please, Sonny!"

Sonny said, "All right, Mom. Whatever you say, Mom. Don't worry, you don't have to beg me, Mom."

She calmed down then, and that was more like it. He simply couldn't stand having Mom upset. All his short years he had tried to keep Mom from being upset.

Steve was driving like mad. He was going across town to the district where the Uptown Boy's Club had their headquarters. He pulled up in front of the building and said, "Sonny, you know they have rooms upstairs for some of the boys in this outfit."

"Sure," said Sonny. "That's where Horace stuck this Cannon. He gave him room and board to fight for the club. He had him a job somewheres, too."

"The job," said Steve in a hard voice, "was yours. He's working in your cage right now."

Sonny said, "Does that make sense, Steve?"

"Yes. It makes sense. But we haven't a thing. Not one little thing. Now I am going up to see this Cannon. I am going to try something on him. I want you to stay here with your mother until I come back. Will you do that?"

"Sure," said Sonny. "But I don't get it."

Steve went up into the Uptown Club. Mom said, "Steve was your father's friend, Sonny."

But Sonny was trying to reconstruct something. He sat there, holding onto Mom's hand, his mind's eye straining itself. He writhed with the effort. Mom said, "What is it?"

"I dunno," Sonny almost whispered. "I—there's something in my head. I can't put it together. If I could . . ."

Steve came out, looking puzzled. He said, "Cannon isn't in. He got a phone call and went out."

Sonny said, "Steve, let's go by Borden's house."

"What for?"

"I dunno," said Sonny desperately. "But let's."

THEY drove slowly and none of them said anything. Mom squeezed tight on Sonny's hand, but she was still as a mouse. Opposite Borden's house, Steve parked the car. There were the same lights. Borden walked up

and down, as was his habit. Another figure rose and lit a cigarette, but this time it wasn't Casey. It was the young man who had been in the bank.

Sonny said, "I knew it! I knew there was something!"

Steve said, "What?"

"That's Cannon! He was in the bank. I didn't recognize him, because I on'y had seen him in ring clothes. He's blackmailin' Borden about something! I heard them talking!"

Steve said. "I can't bust in there. Borden practically owns City Hall. He'd throw me out."

"Have you got Casey covered?" Sonny asked.

"He's tailed," said Steve. "He'll be tailed on the midnight to wherever he's going."

"If we could only hear what they're sayin'!"

They sat for a moment. Then Mom said quietly, "Let me out."

"What for?"

"I can go in. I can go to Banker Borden and plead for my son."

Steve exhaled sharply, "Of course. Leave the door on the latch."

Mom said meekly, "I thought of that."

Sonny said, "Now, Mom. You might get hurt, and—"

But she was gone, across the street on her dainty high heels, across the walk and up to the door. Steve muttered, "What a woman!"

Sonny didn't say anything. He watched. Mom got in, all right. Then they could see her, in the room, talking to Borden. But Cannon wasn't there.

Sonny was out of the car before Steve could stop him. He was across the street and around the back, quick as a flash. Cannon was just leaving the back door.

Steve was coming. Sonny said, "You'd better stop."

Cannon started toward him. He opened his mouth to yell, at the same time reaching to grab hold of Sonny.

Sonny laughed. He stepped back. He stepped in. He cocked the left in Cannon's face. Cannon staggered back, the moonlight gleaming on his hard face. He slipped out of the topcoat and Sonny gave him plenty of time.

"You're the champ, huh? By default!"

Sonny moved in, bobbing a little. He feinted, but Cannon was smart and long with the left. Sonny took it on his head and dropped the right to the body. Cannon shortened his punches, swinging savagely for the face. He was a killer, all right.

Sonny took a couple. He was digging in, his arms like pistons. He was hammering the body of the taller man. Cannon retreated, seeking a free shot. Sonny ducked and weaved. Cannon tried a left-right, one-two. Sonny took the left on the jaw, feeling the knuckles cut his face.

He was inside the right. His own right curled a slashing hook to the body. He felt Cannon fold a little.

He stepped back, then in, pivoting. He threw the right cross to the chin. Cannon went over backwards as if someone had jerked a string.

Sonny said solemnly, "One-two-three-four-five . . ."

Behind him, Steve said, "He won't get up."

"I coldcocked him." Sonny grinned. "Now what do we do?"

Steve produced a pair of manacles. He clicked them on Cannon's wrists, hauled the still-dazed man to his feet, dragged him out into the street. Then he said, "Watch him. I'll go check up on Mom."

Sonny watched him. Cannon shook his head, came partly to his wits. He said, "You ain't got nothin' on me."

"A guy that talks like that's got no right workin' in a bank," said Sonny.

Cannon said, "You'll hang. I'll see you hang."

"They electrocute you in this state," said Sonny.

Cannon bit his lips and didn't talk. Sonny could see Mom through the window, talking to Borden. Steve was inside somewhere, too.

THEN suddenly the neighborhood was full of light. Huge flash lamps focused on Steve's car, on Borden's house. Men ran from all directions. Borden had managed to call the cops.

The chief came, very impressive in full uniform. He stared at Sonny, ordered him out of the car. The tough detective grabbed him and Sonny had to bite back the desire to slug.

In a moment they were all in Borden's house—the tough detective, Cannon, still in Steve's cuffs, Sonny—and they caught Steve in the hall.

The chief roared, "What is the meaning of this? Duryea, you're under arrest! This is an outrage."

J. Bradley Borden was clucking and fussing and saying, "Mrs. Potter must have let them in. I am afraid this is some sort of conspiracy to free the boy. I dislike—"

Mom stepped forward, then. She had that Look on her face. Sonny edged a step away from the tough detective. Mom was going to give it to them, now.

She said, "You dislike what, Mr. Borden? Falsely accusing people? You didn't hestitate to let my boy go to jail."

"Why the facts—he deserved—a lesson to everyone, you know." Borden was playing confused, but his eyes were sharp and his hard mouth was firm.

Mom said, "This Cannon. Horace Pettibone took credit for bringing him here. But you are the chairman of the board of directors of the Uptown Club. You brought him here."

Borden said, "That is not true. I—er—took an interest in the boy, as I always do . . ."

"Boy!" said Mom, her eyes flashing. "He's a man! look at him!"

Cannon's teeth showed. He took a step forward as if to menace Mom. Sonny slipped over a little, but Cannon stopped. He sure did look old, now that Mom mentioned it. He looked tough, too.

"Oofty Magrew wired Chicago tonight," said Mom. "After Sonny saw him in the bank and overheard your conversation."

Borden's face changed then, and his voice got hard. "What nonsense is this? I was not in the bank tonight."

"Not when Casey called you," taunted Mom. She was goading him now. Even the chief looked interested. The tough detective forgot to watch Sonny.

Mom said, "Casey thought he was talking to you—but he was talking to Sonny."

"This is ridiculous!"

Mom went right on: "Steve Duryea has been going over the altered figures in Sonny's book. On the stand he will have experts to swear that they were not made by Sonny. They were made by Casey, the auditor. Numbers are as distinguishable as handwriting, Mr. Borden."

"You'd better take her away," Borden said to the chief. "She is unbalanced."

The telephone rang. Steve stepped to it before he could

be stopped. He said, "Hello! . . . Yes, Hubert . . . Yes . . . That's what we wanted to know . . . Okay, Hubert."

He hung up. He turned to Borden and said, "We picked Casey up. He has sixty thousand dollars worth of bonds in his pockets—and two tickets to Honduras."

"Two?" yelled Cannon. "On'y two?"

Steve said, "Certainly! You brought down hot bonds from Chicago, didn't you, Cannon? Casey altered the numbers and stuck them in the vault. Borden took out sixty thousand in good bonds. You thought you were going to get in on it, but—"

STEVE moved awful fast, even Sonny admitted. He grabbed Borden, spun him around. He fanned him with great expertness. He took a gun from Borden's pocket. He said, without letting go his grip on the ashen bank president:

" You were to get—this. Mrs. Potter saved you by walking in here. You were to get what Pettibone got."

Cannon yelled, "He did it! Borden killed Pettibone. The horsefaced sissy wouldn't go for the thing. Borden went down to argue with 'im. He had the pipe in his car. He got it outa the garage. I drove his car, I tell you!"

The chief said, "You're under arrest, Borden." The chief was a big bag of wind, Sonny thought. He never had an original thought in his life. Steve, though—

Steve was in charge, now. He said, "It was all pretty amateurish. Borden, you've been gambling and losing. So you thought you'd clean out the bank and leave town."

"But you couldn't do it alone. You weren't smart enough. You had to throw suspicion upon a kid, drag in your auditor. You had to get in those hot bonds to give yourself a head start, so they wouldn't pick you up in mid ocean, by cable. The black light down at the lab will show the altered numbers on the bonds now in your vault. You'd better confess, Borden."

He would confess, all right. They had enough on him, anyway, even Sonny knew that. Mom came over and stood beside him, her fingers digging into his arm. The tough detective said, "That kid slugged a turnkey. He aint outa this—"

Steve snapped, "If he hadn't connected Casey and Cannon and Borden, we might not have broken this tonight. And if you want to stay out of uniform and off a beat out with the goats, you'll shut up, Flannagan."

Sonny begged, "Lemme take one sock at that wise guy," but Mom dragged him out.

THEY got into Steve's car. It seemed he was off duty, anyway. He'd just been working this case twenty-four hours a day, on duty and off.

Mom kept saying, "But we were lucky. We didn't have much to go on. Steve, you saved us."

"You bluffed him until we picked up Casey," said Steve. "I really didn't suspect Casey. I'm not a handwriting expert. You made that up."

"It had to be Casey," sighed Mom.

Sonny said suddenly, "Hey!"

"What?"

"That guy Cannon was a ringer, wasn't he?"

"A pro, from Chicago. A ham and beaner," grinned Steve.

"Then I'm the champ!"

"Sure, you're the champ."

"On my birthday I was the champ, because he didn't have a right to it," insisted Sonny.

"That's right," said Steve.

There was silence for a moment. Then Mom said, "You can turn pro, Sonny. It's all right, now. You're entitled to the championship. I told you if you won it you could turn professional."

She patted his arm. Then said, "And I'll handle your business."

Sonny sighed. He thought Mom and that big goon Steve had been getting too friendly. But he guessed Mom could never forget Pop, and how he had wanted to turn pro.

It was up to him, now. He leaned against her. He guessed he was just a momma's boy, all right.

Sea-Pusher

"If you can't whip a man, it's better to make friends with him." That's something for a young engineer to remember, when the relentless tide is ripping away at his last desperate stand

By John and Ward Hawkins

BILL OVERBECK saw her when he left his car. She and the dogs were on the beach, perhaps a hundred yards short of the new breakwater and the pile-driver working there. He frowned, thinking, "Between me and trouble . . ." And then he took the shore path, walking like a man with a job to do.

He was an engineer and he looked like one, which means he looked like any well-built, serious young man who wore field boots and riding breeches and wore them well. His hair was black; his hands well kept and brown. His face was dark, burned so by wind and sun.

Sand masked the sound of his approach. The three dogs held the girl's attention. They were poodles—black, sharp of nose, and trimmed until they looked like ruffed clowns. Two of them stood on their hind legs now, with one forepaw lifted in stiff salute. The third walked a small red-and-white barrel.

Bill Overbeck said, "Hello, Marie."

Marie Piper said, "Hi, stranger." She spoke to the dogs then, and they came to nuzzle at her hand. She fed them and they dropped at her feet, red tongues lolling.

"They're odd lookers," said Bill.

"No cracks. These dogs work for a living."

"And their owner talks you into exercising them."

There was a moment of pause and above the thump and pound of the pile-driver they could hear the clatter of hammers, the drone of power saws, the heavy muttering of a shovel engine. The amusement park—Doc Piper's Spoon Point Park—was nearing completion. The construction crews were working against a deadline that was but a month away.

"Doc would have a time trying to run this park if you weren't around." His three-cornered grin was warm. "You're swell people, Marie. And beautiful."

Marie Piper said, "Thanks, pal."

She was tall, and her hair was a rich, dark red. She wore shorts and a loose blouse of white. Her legs were slim and straight. Her body was a dancer's body, full-breasted, lovely.

There was a cool directness about her that had once bothered Bill Overbeck. Within an hour of their first meeting, she'd said, "A boat ride would be fun—if it's just a boat ride. I sing for my supper, and that gives some people ideas. I want to be sure . . ."

Bill Overbeck could still remember the hot burning in his face, Marie's clear, delighted laughter. "I'll go," she'd said. "Anybody who can still blush is safe to have around."

That had been a month ago, and now—

Marie Piper said, "Aren't you here early?"

"I had to be," he answered. "Your father's got to stop work on the breakwater. I'm here to tell him that."

"He'll scream like a wounded banshee, Bill."

Bill Overbeck said, "I know. It would be easier if Ben Holliday wasn't fighting your father. This will look like something Holliday planned." He frowned and his voice turned thoughtful. "It isn't, Marie. It's simply a matter of engineering. The harbor won't be safe if your father builds the breakwater."

"I hope he believes you." Her eyes were gravely dark, troubled. "It's not going to be fun, but we might as well get it over. Come on."

"There's no reason you should—"

Quickly, she said, "You're the county surveyor and you might be the best engineer in the world. But you're still giving away weight when you tangle with Doc Piper. You're little Daniel and the lions are big. I'm going along to see that you come out with a while hide."

"You're not!" he snapped. And when surprise tightened her mouth, he went on, almost roughly: "This is my job, Marie. I'll handle it alone."

THE pile-driver was moving, thrusting its awkward bulk outward on a newly finished bent, when Bill Overbeck reached the breakwater. Gear cluttered the working deck. Taut cables growled on slowly turning drums. A workman shouted: "Easy! Easy!" The foreman came to meet Bill.

He was a big man, stocky and solid, and there was impatience in the lift of his hand. "This's no place for tourists," he said harshly. "How's for you to beat it?"

Bill Overbeck said, "I'm shutting you down."

"You—" The words got to the foreman then, and his eyes narrowed. "Who the hell are you!" he demanded. "Where do you get that kind of talk?"

Bill Overbeck handed the foreman the single sheet that was Doc Piper's application for permission to build. Stamped in bold red letters across the form were the words: *Permit refused.* The foreman read that, read it again. Then his scowling eyes came up.

"Okay," he growled. "But I'm sendin' for Doc."

Quiet held the working deck. The foreman and crew drew away, leaving Bill Overbeck alone. He could see the full curve of the harbor: the Holliday Mills, the town, the green lawns and hedges of the North Shore homes. His eyes followed the beach to the Neck. The source of trouble—the reason for the shut down—was there. Mentally, Bill Overbeck reviewed the facts. He'd need them when Doc Piper came.

Spoon Point looked like a spoon, thrusting its tapered bowl between sea and harbor. The Neck was the short, crooked shank of that spoon. The Neck tied Spoon Point and the mainland together; it carried the one road by which it was possible to reach Spoon Point by car.

Once the Neck had been wide, but it lay directly in the path of the prevailing south-west winds. There were no trees, no growth of any kind to hold the shifting sand. Slowly the wind had worn the Neck away until it was a low saddle between point and mainland.

River and sea had helped, gnawing at the Neck from both sides, as hungry dogs gnaw at a bone. Narrowing with the years, it was but a thin, thin barrier now. And once the sea broke through—

The foreman said, "Here's Doc Piper."

DOC PIPER was short and very fat. Marie had once said, "I think he wears his hat to bed; I've never seen him without it." Bill Overbeck felt the same way about Doc's suit—a dark, wrinkled serge—for the man wore no other.

There was a deliberateness in the way he came out the breakwater now. He did not hurry; he never hurried.

"Well," he said. "What's gone haywire now?"

The foreman said. "This guy shut us down."

"He did, eh?" Doc Piper's eyes were hooded, blue and unfriendly. "What's the idea, surveyor?"

"This—" Bill Overbeck paused then, searching for simple, non-tecnical terms. "The river sweeps in against this shore," he said finally. "Your breakwater would be a sort of dam pushed out into the current. The result would be an eddy, swirling into the pocket between here and the North Shore. That eddy would eat through the Neck and make an island of Spoon Point."

Doc Piper looked at Overbeck in wary silence. Then he

Bill worked feverishly, thrusting the fence sections into place, while Marie stood by

turned to the foreman. "What do you think?" he asked. "Does that sound like the McCoy?"

"Hell," said the foreman. "I wouldn't know."

Doc Piper said, "What's the rest of it?"

"The Neck's got to be protected," Bill Overbeck said earnestly. He went on, watching Doc Piper's face as he talked, wondering what thoughts lay back of the man's shallow eyes. He explained how each tide would widen the channel between point and mainland, once the cut-through came. How the southwest storms would drive thundering seas through to batter the island, the North shore homes . . .

"What do you want me to do?" asked Doc Piper.

Bill Overbeck took a deep breath. "Talk to Ben Holliday." he said. "Work out a plan so the two of you can split the cost of saving the Neck. The danger of a cut-through is still there. If we get a southwest storm with the spring tides the Neck will—"

"Wait a minute," Doc Piper said. "I thought a county surveyor's job was to look after the roads. How come you're buttin' in on this harbor stuff? What's it get you?"

"Current control and sand erosion are—"

Bill Overbeck stopped there, remembering how he'd explained this to Marie. "It's my future," he'd said. "I'm a Bachelor of Engineering—and they're a dime a dozen. I'm doing research in my spare time, in current control and sand erosion. Next year I'll do my thesis and get the degree of Civil Engineer. There aren't so many of those. A man can get a good job then."

Like that. It had been easy to talk to Marie about his plans—she was a part of them—and about the years ahead. She'd laughed, turning her shining face to his, saying, "And then you can make the river behave, but I'll take care of the house. It's going to be a real house, Bill. With a front porch and flowers and a kitchen big enough to turn cart-wheels in.". . .

Doc Piper said, "Well, surveyor?"

"I know the river," said Bill Overbeck. "I know there's going to be hell to pay unless something's done about the Neck. Why wouldn't I tell you?"

The tightening of Doc Piper's mouth was his only change of expression. "I might think you were on the level—if Ben Holliday wasn't your boss. Up to now that guy's tried everything but dynamite to get me out of here."

A bitter light shone in Doc Piper's eyes. "He got to you and you stopped my breakwater. Okay—so you stopped it. You can still tell your boss I'm not going for any scare story. How do you know what's going on at the bottom of this river? You ain't been down there to look. Yeah, and how do you know what the ocean'll do?"

"There are—" Bill Overbeck began.

A voice said, "He does know, Dad."

MARIE PIPER had come along the walk on silent feet. Wind-ruffled hair gave her an elfish look, though her face was grave and unsmiling.

Doc Piper said, "Who sent for you?"

"You growl," said Marie. "Do you ever bite?"

He said, "Talk—that's what you came for."

"Rivers are a cinch for Bill," said Marie. "He's been making maps and charts of this river for three years. He's working for a degree."

"Degree," said Doc. "Oh, that's college stuff." He was quiet for a moment and then a hard grin touched his mouth. "I'll come over and have a look at those maps tomorrow. Then maybe I'll talk to Holliday."

Later, when the others had gone, Marie Piper and Bill Overbeck walked back along the sandy path to his car.

He said, "Thanks, Marie."

"That breakwater meant a lot to Dad," she said. "He was going to have a boat concession and floats for swimmers out there. When you stopped him he thought it was because Holliday told you to stop him."

"Trusting chap, isn't he?"

She frowned. "Dad's had a small circus and a dozen different carnivals. There's a chiseler in every town, Bill. In Dad's business you meet them all. Everybody has their hand out. You have to pay off to go on eating. You can't blame Dad for being suspicious."

"I guess not."

"All his life he's wanted roots. This park's been his dream, and every dime he's got is sunk here. All the others—the concessionaires, the ride men—put their money in with Doc's. They want to live like white people. They want to have homes and—"

"Ben Holliday's fighting them," said Bill Overbeck. "Then Doc thawed out because you said I was honest. He doesn't trust me, but he'll take your word."

"Something like that," she said soberly.

He tipped her chin up. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Marie." He kissed her, then, and his hands were warm upon her shoulders. "But I'm not Holliday's stooge, Marie. I won't let you down."

Gravely, she said, "Be careful, Bill."

AT NOON the next day, County Commissioner Ben Holliday appeared in Overbeck's office. Ben Holliday had once been a logger. Few remembered it, for in three years he'd owned a camp of his own, and from there he'd come up fast. Now he owned West Coast Lumber—the timber, the mills, the yards—and almost everything else worth while in Snokomish County.

He was a big man. Money and position had given him a certain polish. He dressed well; his linen was crisp and white. But there were signs of the logger still: the cable scars on his big hands, the rough-shod way he did business.

"Overbeck," he said. "Had your lunch?"

Bill Overbeck said, "Yes."

"Some other time, then." Ben Holliday leaned on the drafting table, became confidential in a heavy, bearish way. "About Spoon Point," he said. "I heard how you stopped Piper on that breakwater yesterday. Thanks. I never forget a favor."

"Just a minute," said Bill. "That wasn't done for your special benefit. Doc Piper will gain by it, too."

"What do you mean?"

"The breakwater would have set up an eddy to chew chew away what's left of the Neck. Once the Neck is gone—once the sea gets a clear sweep through there—" Bill's hand went out in a flat gesture. "In three months there wouldn't be enough left of Spoon Point or the North Shore to build a sand box for a schoolboy."

Holliday's thick brows went up. "So?"

"Stopping the breakwater doesn't mean the Neck is safe," said Bill quickly. "It isn't. The first time we get the right combination of wind and tide it'll wash out."

"Haven't you mentioned this before?"

"I have." Bill Overbeck took a deep breath. "I gave

you a complete written report six months ago. The county has no money for harbor work, and the Army Engineers won't touch it. But we need sheet piling out there, need it badly. Doc Piper's coming in today to talk to you about splitting the cost of—"

"Here!" A slow grin widened Holliday's eyes. "We can repair the Neck any time. But listen. Now we can use this as a lever to pry Doc Piper off the Point. I'll have the papers play up the Neck. I'll prove the Point isn't a safe place for an amusement park. It's a sweet angle."

Bill Overbeck said, "I know Piper and some of the others. They seem like nice people. Why fight them?"

"They're bums," said Holliday evenly. "I own the North Shore. It was the finest residential district in the state till Piper came along. He moved in with his pick-pockets and cooch dancers and built a carnival not two hundred yeards from my dock. Property values hit the toboggan. You see? We don't want their kind. As county officials it's our duty to run 'em out."

Bill Overbeck said, "But I—"

Ben Holliday clapped him on the shoulder. "We've got 'em now." He laughed. "And if you find another gimmick like that breakwater you know where to bring it. I'll see that you're taken care of."

The commissioner's laughter seemed to echo in the room long after he had gone. Then it was quite. In that pause, Doc Piper's voice was like a shower of ice water.

"So you're a Boy Scout," he drawled. He was standing in the doorway, small, fat acidly bitter. "So you did me a good turn by stoppin' the breakwater?"

Bill said, "That's right, Doc."

"I come to see your maps," said Doc. "I heard you talkin' to Holliday, an' I listened. Maybe that ain't polite, but I don't worry about bein' polite when a guy's tryin' to put a knife in me. I heard plenty."

Bill Overbeck waited.

"I ain't goin' to waste time here. Not now." Doc Piper slanted blue eyes at Bill. He seemed to dislike what he saw, for he nodded sourly to himself. "And if there's any more trouble—if another gimmick like this breakwater turns up to stop me—I'll know who's back of it. Yeah, an' you better be hard to find."

Bill said. "Dammit, Doc, listen—"

But he was talking to an empty doorway.

A FLURRY of wind-whipped dust met Bill Overbeck on the street. To the southwest the sky was dark with angry, low-flung clouds. Storm clouds. Bill Overbeck's face was sober.

A storm meant heavy seas. It meant added height to tides which, alone, were a real threat to the Neck. Even though Ben Holliday ignored the danger—even though Doc Piper refused to believe it existed—there was trouble in the wind. Bill Overbeck turned in to a coffee shop. James Gates found him there.

James Gates was young, a law student who worked in the county recorder's office. His face was a thin, impatient wedge.

"Bill," he said excitedly. "I've been lookin' for you!"

Bill Overbeck said, "And now what?"

"It's about this scrap between Holliday and Piper. Holliday will give his right leg to bust Piper. I found a way he can do it. A legal way!"

Slowly, Bill said, "Why bring it to me?"

"I've got to be sure I'm right. Look. The road out to Spoon Point—the only road—runs through Holliday's North Shore property. There's a gate on that road, and the gate's been closed once a year; Holliday's caretaker will swear to that. Holliday built that road with his own money. He's kept it repaired. Follow me?"

Bill Overbeck followed him only too well.

"Then, according to the law of this county, it ain't a county road. It's a private road. Am I right?"

Reluctantly, Bill nodded. "If you're sure the county has spent no money on it. Even a dollar—"

"Not a dime," said Gates. "I looked it up. So it's a private road. Holliday can close it and leave Doc Piper with no way to get to his park. No way for his customers to get there." Gates was jubilant. "Won't that bust Piper?"

Bill thought a moment. Doc Piper could condemn a road through Holliday's property—a "gate-way"; he had that right under law. But the coast of the right-of-way alone would be ruinous. A ferry service would be just as bad . . . .

Bill said, "I guess it will."

"Damn' right!" Gates grinned. "I'll see that you get a share of credit. Holliday will—"

Bill Overbeck's hand shot out to catch Gates by the shoulder and pull him close. "Leave my name out of this," he snapped. "Understand?"

"S-sure!" Gates spluttered. "I thought—"

"Beat it!" said Bill.

There was bitterness in Bill Overbeck's eyes as he watched James Gates hurry away. Frightening Gates had been wasted effort. Doc Piper wouldn't need two guesses to decide who'd thought up this gimmick. Bill Overbeck was county surveyor; roads were a part of his job. And Marie—

She was Doc Piper's daughter. The loss of Spoon Point would hurt them both.

BEN HOLLIDAY wasted no time. He closed the road at three. He stationed county police at the North Shore gate to make the closing stick. Doc Piper, Marie, and Doc Piper's lawyer arrived at the courthouse some thirty minutes later. Bill Overbeck saw them pass his door on the way to the district attorney's office.

Then, driven by an impulse he did not try to name, Bill Overbeck went into the hall to wait. He knew in advance what the district attorney would say. The closing was legal. Doc Piper was beaten.

They passed him without speaking. Doc Piper's scowl was black. Marie was pale; her lips a bloodless line. Her eyes touched Bill's face—eyes dark with hurt—and then she was gone, hurrying down the hall.

"Here's good news," the draftsman said, when Bill returned to the office. "A Coast Guard report says the storm is swinging away. We'll get only the edge of it."

Bill Overbeck's mouth pulled down. "We'll get the swells though, and they'll be big!"

"What can they do?"

Bill said, "I wish I knew—definitely."

Spring tides, swells kicked high by a southwest storm—these were factors which combined to promise trouble. But it was no more than a promise. The Neck had withstood the onslaught of a thousand storms. Perhaps . . .

"I'll get in touch with the cops at the North Shore

gate," said Bill. "I'll have them watch the Neck for me. It's all I can do."

. . . The storm blew itself out in the small hours of the night. Morning brought sunshine, cloudless sky, and a delegation of farmers who wanted something done about the Beaver Hill Market Road. They had a petition and the weight of numbers. There was nothing Bill Overbeck could do but accompany them on an inspection trip.

"Take my phone calls," Bill told the draftsman, as he was leaving. "I'll be back around noon."

But he wasn't. Noon found him trying to convince the delegation that he had little to say regarding the allocation of road funds. At two-thirty the argument got its second wind. The five o'clock whistles were blowing when Bill Overbeck reached the courthouse.

"Here's a headache," the draftsman said. "The noon high tide took a healthy bite out of the Neck."

Bill Overbeck said, "I'm on my way."

Twenty minutes later he was on the Neck. The tide had ebbed to full low, though the swells were still big, and the cut was a raw wound between sea and road. It was a wedged-shaped cut, perhaps twenty feet wide at the base. The point was thrust deep toward the low backbone of the Neck and the road there.

Aloud, Bill Overbeck said, "One more tide . . ."

HE FOUND Ben Holliday at home. Holliday listened, smiling a little, while Bill Overbeck explained the need for men and equipment: "We've got to save the Neck. If we don't there'll be no North Shore, no Spoon Point!"

"The storm's gone," Holliday replied. "The danger is past. I'll repair that washout the first of the week."

Bill said, "Sure the storm's gone, but the seas are still there. They'll add four feet to the next tide—the highest of the year!"

Holliday smiled again. "So you're still jumping at shadows?" He paused, held silent by the anger in Bill Overbeck's eyes. "All right," he said abruptly. "I'll get you men. I'll phone the mill."

Going back to the car, Bill Overbeck knew that he had not convinced Holliday; that Holliday had given him the men because that was easiest thing to do. And the men, when they climbed down from the truck an hour later, reflected that attitude.

There were five of them, a shabby crew of yard-men from the mill. They'd brought four shovels and a pile of old burlap bags. Bill Overbeck looked at them and swore. He turned on the foreman.

"Go back to town!" he snapped. "I want twenty good men, shovels for everybody, and at least a thousand sacks. I want them here in a half hour. Move!"

The foreman gulped. "Mr. Holliday said—"

"Be back," Bill growled, "in a half an hour!"

The foreman was small and bald. Bill Overbeck was big and anger rode him hard. The foreman did not argue.

"You others," said Bill. "Come with me."

He led them to the washout, down to the wet and hard-packed bottom. Then he pointed seaward. Huge seas broke there—giant, storm-born swells.

"Take a look!" Bill yelled. "By midnight there'll be a nine-foot tide boosting those seas into this hole, ripping the Neck to shreds. One of those breakers can move more sand than you four could haul in a week. We've got to stop that. Here's the way we'll do it."

They'd build a wall of sandbags across the mouth of the washout, he told them. A wall as high and as wide as they had time to make it. They'd brace that wall with loose sand, as best they could . . . .

"All right," he finished. "Get going!"

FULL darkness had come before the truck returned, and the foreman trotted to Bill's side. "I couldn't get but twelve men," he panted. "But I got lights, an' plenty of sacks an' shovels. I—"

"You tried," said Bill. "That helps."

They built the wall of sand bags then. They worked in the white glare of carbide lamps with the heavy beat of surf loud in their ears. Bill Overbeck swung a shovel himself. He carried bags, trotting through soft sand to the washout; he helped heave them into place. He set a blistering pace for the others, and he held them to it without rest until ten o'clock. The incoming seas were close then. Bill waved the men back.

"That's all for now," he shouted. "Get a rest."

There were cars clustered around the truck when Bill Overbeck reached the road. Other headlights burned on the Spoon Point side of the Neck. Marie Piper and Doc Piper were there. Bill Overbeck had started that way when Ben Holliday touched his arm.

"The Coast Guard have been broadcasting warnings," Holliday said. "There's hell to pay all along the coast. There's two hours till the tide's high. I—ah—thank God you've got the washout blocked."

"It's blocked," said Bill. "If it will hold."

Moments slipped away. Deeper became the thunder of the surf. The swells reached the base of the wall, smashed there savagely. Spray drenched the road, soaking the watching men. Bill Overbeck saw one end of the wall weaken and give.

AT TEN-THIRTY the wall was gone, completely gone. Roaring seas had crashed through the sacks as an army tank crashes through paper. Great swells poured into the cut. Fountains of foam and water leaped high across the road. The steep banks of the cut seemed to melt.

Ben Holliday said, "What'll we do now?"

Harshly, Overbeck said, "Pray for luck!"

"I don't know any prayers," a flat voice said, and Bill Overbeck turned to find Doc Piper beside him. The fat man's face was wooden, expressionless.

"I sent my crew down to help," he said.

Bill said, "Thanks, Doc. We can use 'em."

"Think you can keep it from cutting through?"

"The chance is damned slim," said Bill.

He got the crew started again. The road would go, he told them. But for a while it would act as a barricade and give them time to build another wall just beyond. And when the road was gone and the seas rolled through they would still have a chance. The greatest strength of the breakers would be spent before reaching the new wall. And thus they could hope to hold that wall—if the tide came not too high.

They worked: worked with the concentrated fury of men who are nearly beaten. Bill saw Doc Piper bent low, staggering under the weight of a sand-filled sack; he saw Holliday, naked to the waist, swinging a shovel. Marie Piper was there, carrying water for throats burned dry.

Eleven-thirty. A long section of pavement buckled,

cracked, and dropped suddenly into a boil of black water. Eleven-thirty, and the crest was still an hour away. The sea would rise much higher. The last barricade would go.

Holliday came to say, "We got her stopped!"

Bill Overbeck did not answer at once. He was tired. His shoulders were numb with an ache that had spread upward from his thighs; weariness dragged at his legs.

"Maybe," he said at last. Maybe."

What good were ten men, fifty, a hundred? What good was their strength against battering tons of water?

Marie Piper brought coffee then, steaming and black. "Drink this, Bill," she said. "You look as if you need it."

"I do," he said, "and I want to talk to you."

"There's nothing to say, Bill."

"Do you think I closed the road, Marie?"

"Bill, I—" Her eyes met his, clung there for a long moment. "Doc says you're behind it, Bill. What I think doesn't matter. We're on opposite sides of the fence. The people trusted Doc—all the swell folks who were only trying to earn a decent living—saw everything they'd worked for snatched away today. They're my people, Bill. I'd be a rat if I didn't stick."

"They're swell people," he said. "They're fighting, now, to save the road they can't use." His voice was gently insistent. "Marie, do you think I closed the road? Tell me, Marie. I've got to know."

She looked away, and when at last she spoke the words were husky, muffled. "No," she said. "I don't."

"You happen to be right. And thanks."

"Bill," she said. "Will the new wall hold?"

"I'm afraid not," he said.

HE LOOKED at the cut again. It was the shape of a triangle—a hundred feet wide at the base, and perhaps a hundred and fifty feet deep. Three quarters of the Neck had laid within those limits. That area was lost. That part of the Neck had been swallowed by the sea. The sand that had made up its bulk was gone.

And there could be no repairs. Now that the sea had opened a way of attack, even a normal tide would be more than men could fight.

A complete cut through was only a matter of hours—this tide or the next. Then the North Shore homes would be full in the path of battering swells. Spoon Point would be a crumbling island.

Marie said, "I didn't know the sea was so strong." She looked down at racing water. "Doc says, 'If you can't whip a man you'd better make friends with him.' It's too bad you can't do that with the sea."

"It's a thought," Bill said. "If I can find the guy who has charge of oceans, I'll ask—" He stopped and one hand came stiffly up. "It might work," he whispered. "It's a long chance, but it's worth a try!"

A half dozen of the amusement park crew answered Bill Overbeck's shouted summons. He got them aboard Doc Piper's truck. He pushed Doc Piper into the cab. He yelled at him as the truck howled down the park road.

"You've got rabbit-hutch wire strung around the park flower beds. I've got an idea, and I need that wire. I need four-foot lengths of water pipe. Okay?"

"What can I lose?" said Doc Piper. Then he turned sour, remembering. "But why the hell should I? The best I'd do is save the Point for somebody else. Holliday's got me licked."

Bill said, "Maybe. And maybe not."

"Keep talkin'," said the fat man.

"I will," said Bill Overbeck. "Listen . . . ."

WILLING hands gripped the wire from flower beds. Other rolls came out of Piper's warehouse. Water pipe was cut in four-foot lengths. Then, under Bill's orders, the small-meshed wire was cut in twenty-foot sections. Four lengths of pipe were fastened to each section.

The result was a fence—a strip of rabbit wire, two feet wide, fastened to the top of pipes that were four feet long.

Ben Holliday met the returning truck. He shouted, "Bill! That wall won't hold!" His thick voice broke upward to near-panic. "You've got to do something quick!" He stopped as the first rolled fence section hit the sand at his feet. "What's this? What—"

"Rabbit wire," said Bill Overbeck.

Holliday said, Wire? Are you crazy? We couldn't stop those walls with sandbags, and now you bring a sieve." His mouth jerked. "But we'll try it. We've got nothing else. Come on. Hurry!"

"So he's crazy," Doc Piper said dryly. "That's all I want to know. That wire's mine. He's not throwin' it away unless I get paid."

Bill said, "It's our last hope, Doc!"

"I'll give him a check," said Holliday quickly.

"Sure. An' then stop payment in the morning. You knifed me once. That's enough. I don't want your check."

"Then we're whipped," said Bill.

Holliday snapped, "Like hell we are! Piper, Bill will give you an order on the county emergency fund. I can't stop payment on that. It's just as good as cash."

Doc Piper said, "Now you're talkin' sense."

The order was written. A grin shone in Doc Piper's eyes as he tucked it away. "Okay," he said. "Let's see if these fences'll do the work."

Bill Overbeck took one end of a fence section; a big-shouldered workman caught up the other. They swung it between them, hammock-like, and trotted to the cut edge. There they paused, waiting until a sea had washed in and back.

Then, twenty feet from the crumbling sandbag wall, they set the fence in the sand. Their weight alone was enough to drive the pipes deep. When they ran for the bank the fence was in place—a flimsy barrier.

Again and again that process was repeated. The truck brought new sections as fast as they could be made. Pairs of men plunged thigh-deep into the boiling wash.

A few of the fences were swept away—but only a few. Water could find no real resistance in that front of wire. It raced through, spending its strength, and then retreated.

With the moments, the number of fence sections grew. Twenty, thirty, a hundred, marching seaward in staggered rows.

"It's only wire," said Marie. "How can—"

Bill Overbeck watched the rolling swells. "You said it was too bad we couldn't make the sea work for us. That's what I'm trying to do."

"What do you mean?"

"Every swell that hits the cut is heavy with sand; heavier still when it sweeps back to the sea. Water must move very fast before it can carry sand; that's the first thing I learned down here. Those fences won't stop the water, but I hope they'll slow it down. D'you see?"

Marie Piper said, "I think I do."

"If I'm right—if the fences act as a brake—then the water will drop its load of sand. Each incoming sea will bring sand, and leave it. Each sea will build up, instead of tearing down."

He forced a grin. "But if I'm wrong, this's the end of the North Shore, of Spoon Point. Ten minutes should tell the story."

The tide was at flood now, and most of the time the fences were buried in a smother of foam. One end of the sandbag wall was gone.

Bill Overbeck said, "Maybe—"

And the shout came then, ringing clearly from the cut-edge. "She's fillin'! So help me, she's fillin' in!"

IT WAS later, much later, when Doc Piper came around to say, "That King Canute guy told the sea to back up once, didn't he? You got away with it, Bill. You make him look like just another hayshaker."

Marie said, "Look who's tossing bouquets."

The tide had reached the crest, had turned, and the ebb was an hour old. Men had gone out to pull the fences, to re-set them before they were buried by rising sand.

And that sand came up fast—four feet in the one tide—for the sea harnessed was as strong as the sea running free. The Neck was safe. The next tide would almost heal the break. No other tide could threaten it again.

Bill Overbeck said, "Doc, you'd better swap your bouquets for a brickbat. Here comes Ben Holliday."

Ben Holliday wasted no time in greetings. He got greenbacks from his pocket and thrust them at Doc Piper. "I'll take that requisition and give you cash," he said. "And to show my gratitude for the help you gave me, I'll throw in a five-hundred-dollar bonus. . . ."

Doc Piper rocked back on his heels, dirty, hatless, but enjoying this moment immensely. "So you finally got wise," he said. "It took you long enough."

"Now see here, Piper—"

"Save your breath," Doc Piper said. "I did some fancy finagling to get that requisition. Five hundred dollars won't buy it back. You're stuck, Holliday."

"You had me whipped when you closed the road. You could close the road because it was yours—because the county had never spent any money on it. That's all changed. The county spent fifty bucks here tonight, and I've got a requisition to prove it. That money was spent to save the Neck—and the road. So now this's a county road, Holliday. So now I can use it all I damned please!"

Holliday looked at Doc Piper. He looked at Bill and Marie, and there was anger in his eyes. His expression changed to a grin. "Neat," he said. "As one wolf to another, that's as cute a bit of business as I've ever seen."

"Thanks," said Doc Piper dryly.

Holliday rubbed his chin. "Well, I guess there's room for both of us," he said. "I've been thinking about your park, Piper. It seems to me that a good night spot might be well worth while. I've got some money that isn't working. If you . . ."

"Bill," Marie whispered. "We're not needed here."

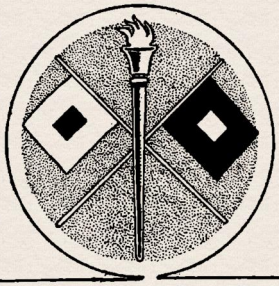
"Let's go," he said. And together they climbed the low hill to his car. She gave him a smiling glance. Her hand was warm in his.

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

• SCREAM BOMBS •

The idea of the scream bomb is not new; the Chinese used it 2000 years ago, only then it was a "whistling arrow." A small tube was fitted to the head of each arrow to make it screech during flight. Later this weapon saw some brief service in Europe. At first it stampeded cavalry horses, but they soon grew accustomed to it, and it was discarded

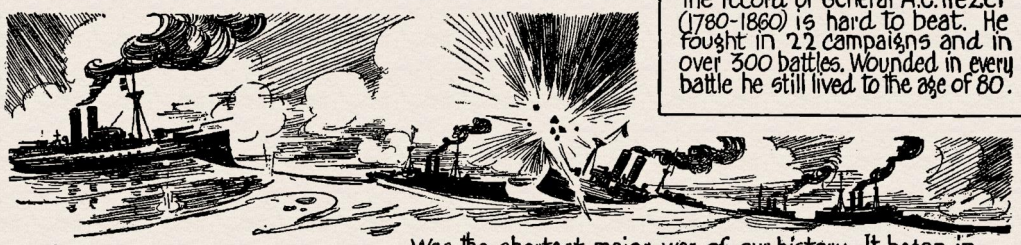


•INSIGNIA of SIGNAL CORPS•

The insignia of the U.S. Signal Corps is crossed semaphore flags. The device may be somewhat out of date, for one major of the corps claims that with the sole exception of himself, no one in his outfit could signal with such equipment.

• FRANCE'S MOST DURABLE SOLDIER •

The record of General A.C. Trezel (1780-1860) is hard to beat. He fought in 22 campaigns and in over 300 battles. Wounded in every battle he still lived to the age of 80.



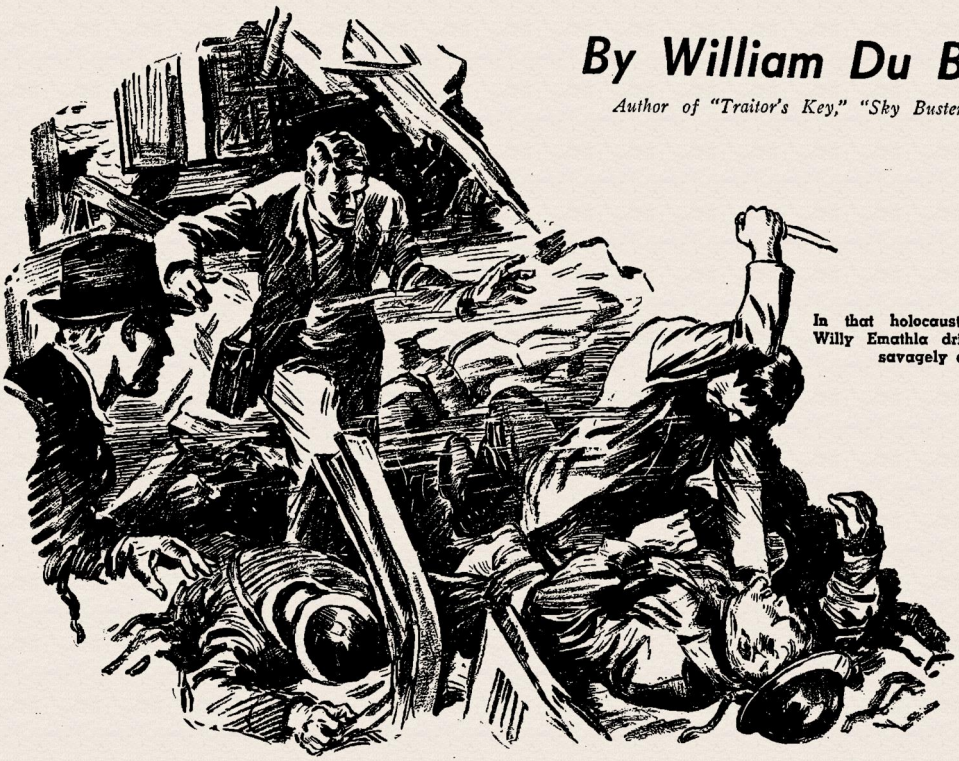
• The SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR •

Was the shortest major war of our history. It began in April, 1898, and ended in August of that same year.

The Blackest Night

By William Du Bois

Author of "Traitor's Key," "Sky Buster," etc.



In that holocaust Ames saw Willy Emathla drive his knife savagely down

Above London the planes were screaming and the bombs were plummeting down. And deep below the city three Americans were juggling with dynamite and with the Empire's tomorrow . . . until a Seminole lifted his wild war-cry

I

THE gray roadster turned out of the Parkway and entered the drive that skirts the Hudson just north of New York's city line. The driver, a behemoth who bulked grotesquely over the wheel, glanced at his rear-vision mirror before he cut his motor and coasted to a stop at the parapet commanding a sweeping view of the river and the soot-blackened palisades on the Jersey side. The moonless night was not quite dark enough to hide the business coupe idling down a clover-leaf from the Parkway, to pause inconspicuously on the drive a scant hundred yards away.

Still followed, thought the man. Well, that's as it should be.

The behemoth shoulders heaved as he chuckled at a joke all his own; one Gargantuan arm dropped like an overstuffed python across his companion's shoulders, a peroxide lady from the back row of the Broadway Burlesque. A lady who looked her age, even in the crisp winter starlight, as she snuggled expertly into the pneumatic embrace.

"I was wondering why you brought me so far uptown, darling. Say, what *is* your name, anyhow?"

"Is that important?"

The man's English was flawless, with the faintest guttural overtones. He kissed the peroxide lady thoroughly but casually—precisely as though he were performing the act for the benefit of an audience, without personal interest. His eyes had not left that rear-vision mirror for an instant. The lady sat up slowly, and straightened her hat, with a provocative sigh.

"I don't do this every day, you know—not without an introduction. After all, you know *my* name."

"Only because it is printed in the theatre program."

"You are a queer one. Sending that note backstage tonight, with a five spot inside. Suppose I'd just kept the money, and thumbed my nose?"

"You would not be so unkind. Did I not promise more, when the evening is over?"

"All right, mister. I'm here—in your car. Don't tell me we just go on admiring the view?"

"We will do just that, if you do not mind too much. Perhaps for ten minutes." The behemoth glanced precisely at his watch. "Then, with your permission, I will present you five dollars more, and drive you home." Again he chuckled, and hugged her closer, with his eyes on that mirror. "Billie, my love."

But Billie had already stiffened indignantly. "Come off it, mister. What's your game?"

"Will you not believe that I am just lonely?"

"Doesn't a fat man have friends?"

The behemoth laughed in earnest. "I have friends in every language. Only in New York do I find myself

at——how can I explain it? Well, say at loose ends."

"And you wanted a nice girl to tell your troubles to?" The lady's voice was mocking.

"Believe it or not, yes."

"Well, mister, I've been on some strange parties in my time, but—"

"Can you not relax, with your head on my shoulder? Look across the river—there in New Jersey. Is there not poetry in industry at full blast?" The man's voice dropped to a taut whisper. "That factory on the palisades, pouring forth munitions day and night. Munitions for England—"

The lady yawned pointedly. "To hell with your poetry. I still say ten bucks is a lot to pay for a kiss."

"It is still my privilege." Once again, the man glanced at his watch. "Let me give you a cigarette before I drive you back." He withdrew his arm from Billie's shoulder, and bent toward the instrument board to press a cigarette into the mechanical lighter, which sprang to red life under his huge paw, like a snake in the dark.

Billie accepted the lighted cigarette, and took a deep drag, with her eyes on the river. Behemoth started his ignition, and eased down on the clutch.

"The poetry of a great city in the night, my dear. The humming wheels of industry—"

"Holy hell, mister—look!"

Across the Hudson, a great orange flare lighted the sky. The detonation followed, swift and unreal as a nightmare: a mighty explosion that seemed to shake those soot-blackened cliffs from crest to waterline. . . . Behemoth backed his car into the drive again, and started up the clover-leaf to the Parkway, watching the business coupe pick up his trail with a slow, contented smile.

"Apparently the Universal Powder Company has met with an accident. It is fortunate for us that we were across the river when it happened. . . . Thank you for a pleasant evening, my dear. What is your home address again?"

•

THE French windows of the penthouse living room opened to a terrace twenty stories above the roar of midtown Manhattan, muffled somewhat now in the snowfall of a bitter December morning. The cat-foot butler had already crossed from the dining room to shut out the storm when the man spoke softly from the big, littered desk in the corner.

"Never mind, Roberts. The fresh air helps me to think."

The butler, whose knowledge of his master's moods extended over the years since the First World War, withdrew as silently as he had come. Christopher Ames sat at the desk for a long time, staring after the perfect decorum of that retreating back.

Ames matched the setting perfectly. New York's most successful playwright for the past decade, he had built this snug heaven out of the sheer brilliance of his own brain—with the able backing of Michael Towne, his playboy producer. Observing the rewritten manuscript on the polished Chippendale desk, the fine furrow on Ames' brow, a visitor would have sworn that the dramatist was wrestling with no problem but a recalcitrant second act.

Of course, it would be unfair to dismiss Christopher Ames as a dramatist pure and simple. A slender man with a head fit to be stamped on a medal, Ames had come out of obscurity ten years ago to take Broadway by frontal assault. Since his success, he had gone his own way tranquilly, as though oblivious of the rewards success can bring.

Michael Towne had seen to it that Ames' royalties were soundly invested during the long depression, to say nothing of the wild uncertainty that followed Germany's mad plunge for power in '39. It would be equally misleading to dismiss Mike Towne as a high-pressure dilettante, a hunter who has stalked adventure through the jungles of the world, and found the hunting good. Michael's good works had extended to more than one continent—no less effective because the gesture was always anonymous.

At this moment, he was in Bermuda, presumably recovering from a broken shoulder at the Castle Harbor. Ames fingered a cablegram from his friend, now two days old; the furrow in his brow deepened as he read it through for perhaps the tenth time. In the last few days, Christopher Ames had missed his friend keenly. He glanced up as Roberts appeared in the foyer arch, impassive and soothing as ever.

"Washington on the wire, sir. Shall I put them through?"

Ames lifted the telephone at his elbow, and spoke briefly to a distinguished personage in a certain Federal Bureau. "Nothing new on that Jersey blast. I'm waiting for Mike before I make a move. . . . Certainly I'll keep you informed if we jump off for parts unknown. . . . With all that coöperation, you deserve some return besides a pair of seats at my next opening. . . ." Ames was laughing when he replaced the receiver though his scowl had deepened further. "Perhaps you'd better close those windows after all, Roberts. No new reports from the air-field, I suppose?"

"All planes are grounded, sir. If Mr. Towne came up from Bermuda today, they'd discharge him with other passengers at Baltimore. Incidentally, sir, that dark person is waiting to see you in the foyer. I mean Mr. Towne's bodyguard—"

"Willy? Why didn't you say so? Send him in, Roberts."

WILLY EMATHLA paused in the doorway before taking a deferential step into the room. A supreme example of a race that has been permitted to wither away on this continent, the Seminole carried his pride quietly, with a dignity that transcended loneliness. Michael Towne had rescued him years ago from a juke-joint in Miami; the course in recuperation that ensued had included four years at Carlisle, where Willy had learned the white man's manners, along with his wisdom.

"Sit down, Willy," said Christopher Ames. "I'm still waiting news from Michael. I hope you're enjoying your vacation."

"The fact is, Mr. Ames, I have been working at the Library." The Seminole's speech was exact, without mannerism; the clipped diction that went perfectly with the quiet dark clothes, the slow smile.

"I've been working *here*, as you can see," said Ames. "So far, the lack of results has been startling."

"Has it occurred to you that we may be approaching this problem backwards?"

"Frequently, Willy. Have you any suggestions?"

"If you will permit—" The Seminole leaned forward sharply. "This morning, at the Library, I have studied an interesting subject—radioactivity. The principle of wireless transmission—explosion by remote control—"

"Go on," said Ames.

"We are tracing the origin of certain sabotage in various parts of America. Particularly at the Universal Powder Company's plant in Cliffside, New Jersey." Willy's voice was unemotional as a statistician droning a weather report. "An explosion that caused the death of ninety-one workers on the night shift, and destroyed most of a huge munitions shipment destined for England. You

have attempted to explain that disaster, Mr. Ames—to track down its perpetrator, with the aid of the government's agents—"

Ames smiled. "Thanks for putting it so delicately, Willy."

"You will forgive me for rehearsing the circumstances, sir, but I wish to make my point clear. From the beginning, you have believed these explosions were engineered by a man known as Captain Alfred Somers—attached to the British purchasing commission here, but in reality a foreign agent. Back of this Captain Somers stands the international saboteur Paul Derring—"

"The man who will do anything for a price," said Ames.

"The man who has supplied Somers with money and detailed information from the start," continued Willy. "At this moment, of course, we have no proof of Derring's complicity, or knowledge of his whereabouts. At the time of the New Jersey blast, we even lacked sufficient data to dare arrest Somers.

"It was only *after* the disaster that we learned a considerable quantity of nitro-glycerine had been cached in various parts of the Universal plant; that a blueprint of the factory had been stolen, indicating the precise location of these stores." Willy held up a soothing palm, as Ames stirred restlessly. "Forgive all these details, but they are quite necessary to my point.

"We know that Captain Somers was touring Broadway on leave, the night of the explosion. He entered the Broadway Burlesque, made the acquaintance of a—a lady of the chorus, and took her for a drive up the West Side Highway to a point beyond the toll-bridge, where he parked beside the river bank. I myself can testify to this, since I trailed him in another car, pursuant to your orders.

"I watched Captain Somers carefully on that dark side road; perhaps I did not observe carefully enough. It is obvious to me that he brought the girl to that lonely spot only as a blind; just as it is reasonable to assume that he chose to park on the river bank, so he could watch the results of his handiwork across the river.

"One thing has puzzled me from the start, however. Why did Captain Somers bend over the instrument board of his car at the precise moment the explosion occurred, a good two miles across the Hudson River? Was the captain really lighting a cigarette for his lady—or did he, perhaps, press a button to ignite that glycerine by remote control?"

Willy Emathla settled comfortably in his chair, his face an impassive copper mask again. "Of course, Mr. Ames, if that is too fantastic—"

"Would it surprise you to learn that I've been following the same line myself for a week now?" Ames smiled wanly again, and pushed aside his scrawled-over manuscript to show a dozen sheets of foolscap ditched with hieroglyphs. "Unfortunately, I am a dramatist, not an electrical wizard like the captain."

Willy hitched his chair a bit nearer. "Study the blueprint of that factory carefully, sir. Assume that an electric cell were planted at a central point, equipped with a detonator. Assume the captain's roadster is equipped with a portable, two-way radio, not too different from the kind used on every police car."

HE CONTINUED in this vein for quite awhile. Christopher Ames listened in thoughtful silence, and added an occasional scrawl to his notes from time to time. "It's possible, Willy. If you ask me personally, I'd say it was quite likely. But who else would buy the idea?"

The Seminole scowled. "If I had had your permission to apprehend Captain Somers that night—if I could have persuaded him to explain the mystery of remote control in person. . . ."

Ames took a disconsolate turn of his living-room carpet, and stared out at the storm for a long, sullen moment. "Captain Somers happens to be an important member of a British purchasing commission—with a good British passport. We watched him like hawks when that airplane shipment smashed up on the Coast; again in Texas, when the oil line burst; yet again here in the East, when they were negotiating with Universal to speed up that munition delivery.

"The man weighs almost three hundred pounds, Willy: hardly the figure for a spy, or an agent provocateur. True, he has the lightest of accents, which a boyhood in the Dutch East Indies explains more than adequately. So far, we have only coincidence to back us, plus the fact that Somers was seen last month in an Havana cafe, with a man resembling Paul Derring. No, Willy: we can't indulge in the luxury of a personal third degree, on those slender grounds. Captain Somers would have our badges in the twinkling of an eye—or should I say, the snap of a handcuff?

"Our problem would be the same, in essence, even if Captain Somers were an avowed member of the Nazi party. Remember, we are still a nation at peace; even though we are straining every nerve to prepare for war."

Ames kicked open a French window, and stepped out into the white swirl of the wind. "This storm will die down by evening, Willy. Perhaps we should book passage on the next clipper for Bermuda, in case Michael isn't coming back after all. It must be dull work for him, watching Captain Somers alone. Apparently the overgrown elephant has done nothing but sun-bathe at Castle Harbor, since he registered there for his vacation—"

And then Ames broke his sentence in the middle, as Roberts came in from the foyer, bearing a radiogram on a silver tray. . . . Willy Emathla snapped to attention out of the deep leather armchair as Ames spread the blank on the desk-top.

LILY CROP UNSEASONABLE. ADVISE INVESTING BRITISH CONSOLS DESPITE ASSOCIATED PRESS REPORTS.

TOWNE

"Code," said Ames. "Don't tell me they're cutting in on messages." He had already reached eagerly for the cipher-book he had shared with Michael Towne these many years. Ten minutes later, the result was spread out on a second sheet, for Willy's eyes:

SOMERS TAKING LISBON CLIPPER HERE TODAY. POSITIVE JOINING DERRING LONDON. TRAILING HIM FROM HERE. EXPLAINING YOU MAYFAIR HOUSE.

"So we're to join Michael in *London*—not Bermuda."

"Why does Somers go back at this time?"

"Another question for Michael to answer. You've visited England before, Willy?"

"On several occasions," said the Seminole calmly. "Mr. Towne's Mayfair house has been closed since the war, however."

"Apparently he's planning to open it again, as wide as the air-raid wardens will allow." Christopher Ames crossed to the windows, and shook his fist at the snowstorm. "London, Willy—the moment our plane has a ceiling, and let the bombs fall where they may. If our British cousins can laugh at them, so can we."

The Seminole was on his feet now; his eyes were snapping with excitement. "Do we fly our own ship over?"

"Why not?"

"But the wartime regulations—"

"Any regulation can be waived, if the need is great enough. Remember, Michael is over the Atlantic at this moment; we must not arrive too far behind him. Now do you understand why we couldn't risk losing our badges too soon?"

Christopher Ames pounced on the telephone, and dialed the airport.

II

TWO days later, in a pock-marked apartment building in London's West End, a behemoth of a man stood at a leaded bow-window, staring down at the distant flash of the Thames in the clear winter sunlight. Perfect flying weather, and yet, the bombers had not come over today from their Channel airdromes. London enjoyed a brief breathing spell, after its autumn of torment. The behemoth glanced mechanically at his wristwatch, as Big Ben chimed the quarter-hour. At that moment, the bells in that tall, proud tower had a clarion note of defiance, undimmed by centuries.

"Well, Captain Somers? Is our position clear to you now?"

The man who stood at the far end of the stripped parlour with his back to the cheerful roar of the heater, was big-boned and lithe; from square shoulders to polished boots, he gave the impression of strength, immense and unpredictable as a coiled spring. Somers turned back uneasily from the view: there was mastery in that tone, in those slitted, faintly reptilian eyes.

Paul Derring could be theatrical when he chose, like a movie idol of silent days: when their paths first crossed, Somers had been struck by the man's uncanny resemblance to Jack Gilbert in *The Merry Widow*. This afternoon, Derring's voice was insistent. The Gargantuan Captain Somers cringed slightly as he answered—and cursed himself for cringing.

"I understand perfectly, Paul. And I still say it is most unwise to bring them buzzing about our ears. Especially at a time like this."

"How often must I explain that your job here is over, as well as mine? Good God, man, you can't lose your nerve now! Why, we're only waiting on the Cabinet; once it condescends to hold another secret meeting—"

Derring did not finish the sentence; but his eyes blazed with excitement as they met and held Somers'. The captain smiled wryly.

"Wouldn't it be slightly awkward if they tracked us down? Found this little hideaway, for instance?"

"On the contrary, I expect Ames, Towne, and that Indian Nemesis to follow you here, when I consider the time is ripe. Certainly you're too large a decoy to miss, even in the blackout."

"And see through our plan, from start to finish. Believe me, they've guessed enough of it now. That last job, on the Hudson—"

"Try to stick to the point, Somers. You happen to be an electrical genius, with a certain unpatented invention that is very useful to me. Perhaps your usefulness does not end there. If I decide to employ you as a decoy to lure three of my greatest enemies across a whole ocean to their destruction—well, that too is my affair. Will you continue to take your orders, without question, or—"

But Somers stood his ground now. "Only if I can see the point in advance."

"Very well. I'll explain a second time. You were sent to Bermuda on a rest-cure for one purpose—that Michael Towne would follow you. For the same reason, you left that note of mine where Towne would be sure to find it, just before you took off for Europe again.

"Now Ames and Willy Emathla have joined Towne here in London, precisely as we hoped they would. Naturally, Ames is much too clever not to realize he is being baited; we must proceed with great caution from this point on. I still say it is worth the risk, if we can bag the three of them at the same time we finish our last job here." Derring smiled significantly. "A job that may make *all* risk unnecessary, Somers. A job that could conceivably end this war."

"The compliment is accepted," said Somers dryly.

"Your charge was planted for you, thanks to the efficiency of our friend at the Embassy, while you were busy in New York. All you've done since your arrival was to make sure the detonator is operating properly. . . . Why shouldn't I use you for a job of my own, while we're sitting here waiting? Your salary is large enough."

"Haven't I earned it, so far?"

"From your employers' point of view, yes. Those American jobs were admirably planned, and on schedule. As paymaster, I question the wisdom of that kind of sabotage—especially in America. You see, Somers, Americans are a queer people. You can't threaten a nation that has never lost a war, or started one unjustly. You can't dynamite them into submission, either. Blowing up their factories has a queer way of getting their dander up—that's all."

"How do you know so much of America, Paul?"

Derring met the sneer coolly. "I was an American myself, once—before I took up international piracy. . . . Now, to business. I'm reliably informed, via our friend at the Embassy, that the Cabinet will meet in secret session tomorrow. As a certain well-known Nazi orator would say, that will be our supreme moment.

"Our retreat can't be kept open forever; God only knows how we've managed to preserve that retreat to date. Naturally, I shall put a deadline on my own private plans for revenge, once I have verified that Cabinet meeting. If Ames and Company are not in my hands by tomorrow midnight, I must postpone their extermination. Could I be fairer?"

"Much," said Somers. "I'll still take orders—to a point."

"You will take orders to the end, Captain. Or would you prefer me to terminate your career now, with a simple phone-call to the Foreign Office?"

Derring's eyes were really reptilian, now. Somers—a traveled man, after all—was reminded forcibly of a king cobra he had once observed in a Bombay bazaar, in the act of charming a rabbit. The comparison was grotesque, of course; and yet, as those eyes drew nearer, the gallant captain quaked with all his three hundred odd pounds.

"Standing by for orders, Paul. Where do I start?"

THAT night a cold rain fell in the great hollow valley of the Thames; with morning, a colder fog swirled out of the north sea, blanketing the valley from Tilbury to Richmond. By mid-afternoon, the air over London had assumed its traditional peasoup hue, brown as the exhalation from Sherlock Holmes' mythical briar.

Picking his way down the shattered pavement of Oxford Street just this side of nightfall, Christopher Ames turned into Park Lane more by luck than instinct, and followed the railings of Hyde Park into Mayfair.

The brown swirling blanket was kind to the battered face of London that night; Ames passed by the gutted facades of the proud houses along the Park with his eyes straight ahead. In his bowler and shaggy Harris burberry, he might have passed for a not too prosperous City man at that moment; like the native, he had learned

to keep his eyes ahead during his two days in England, to ignore the damage on either side with their calm and unshakable courage.

Armed with a letter from the American Embassy in addition to his own imposing credentials, Ames was returning from a long afternoon divided fruitlessly between Scotland Yard and the Foreign Office. He had walked off his irritation in the Park, and stopped at the Cumberland for a fortifying whisky soda before returning to Michael Towne with the news of a complete stymie to their efforts to track Paul Derring down.

The fog had made the blackout superfluous that night, Ames noted absently, while he followed the tortuous course of Curzon Street through the heart of Mayfair; and yet the air-raid wardens were enforcing the regulations with their customary thoroughness. One of them stepped down from the curb to salute Ames politely as he entered Marquis Square, where Michael Towne's London house had stood since his family emigrated to America in the days of the Restoration.

Marquis Square is a seventeenth-century jewel in the modern setting of Mayfair, as yet mercifully untouched by the bombers, save for a crater in the pavement before Michael's house, gaping in that sad *chiaroscuro* like a raw wound.

Ames stepped over the crumbling masonry of the Wren staircase that swept up to the great, fanlighted doorway—which still stood intact, though its face was scarred by bomb-splinters. The house echoed with musty loneliness when Ames admitted himself with a latchkey and traversed the formal hallway, muffled to the chandelier in cheesecloth—a loneliness that shattered to bits as a voice boomed welcome from the drawing-room beyond.

MICHAEL TOWNE roamed the shining desert of parquet restlessly, with a scowl that matched a periwigged ancestor on the wall—the famous full-length Van Dyke portrait of George Towne, fourteenth earl of Forham and Knight of the Golden Fleece, who had died to stop Cromwell at Naseby three hundred years ago.

Not that there was anything really British about Michael Towne—an ash-blond giant cast in a mold that was American to the core. The super-playboy who had fallen heir to a Texas county bristling with oil-wells, and abandoned it to go hunting over the seven seas . . . just as he had forsaken the sport today, in favor of the more exciting business of hunting men.

"What news, Kit? Will the powers that be coöperate with us at last?"

"I'm afraid I've some bad news for you, Michael."

"News be damned. You and I have made our own news all these years. Just because a Foreign Office can't see eye to eye—" Michael Towne collapsed on an Empire love-seat that groaned beneath his bulk, and grinned boyishly at his friend. "Did they say no again, Kit—really?"

"They refuse to believe that Derring is in London, or that he could have any possible connection with Captain Somers. According to their own operatives, Derring is still lurking somewhere in the West Indies, running fuel for the U-boats."

"The Empire has caught up with the war," said Michael bitterly. "Too bad they can't catch up with their other enemies."

"Or recognize their friends," put in Ames.

"For two pins I'd take Willy with me and trip up Somers now. What more can they do than jail us?"

"Perhaps you'll be surprised at the efficiency of the Foreign Office where three crusading Americans are concerned."

"Do they understand clearly that we've kept tabs on Somers for months now? That I followed him from Bermuda, when Derring ordered him to report to London?"

"Captain Somers has been promoted since our last meeting," said Ames drily. "In fact, he is now an all but indispensible cog in the Admiralty. Of course, they have checked carefully on my recommendation—in collaboration with Scotland Yard. I regret to state that Somers' reputation emerges untarnished by a doubt. You may storm all you like, but the corpulent captain *was* officially on vacation in Bermuda last month."

"What about that note from Derring?"

"That note has been dismissed as a clumsy forgery, Michael. It's unthinkable to them that Derring could be sending notes from London to Bermuda at a time like this—with a price on his head at every port in the Empire."

"At least they might put a watch on Somers—make some effort to keep track of his movements."

"I can quote the Office's spokesman directly there. 'Really, old boy,' he said, in perfect Oxonian, 'shadowing the captain at this late date would be a fantastic waste of time. Don't you agree, really?' At that point I took my hat and departed, Michael."

MICHAEL TOWNE studied his friend's face intently in the murky light. "Answer this frankly, Kit: D'you think I'm camping out in this stuffy bomb-trap because I enjoy the company of my ancestors?"

"No, Mike."

"Would I bring you across three thousand miles of winter ocean on a wild-goose chase? Derring is in London, Kit; Derring—and Somers—are up to their chins in some deadly business. I'd stake my eyesight on that."

Ames met the challenge levelly. "Scotland Yard to the contrary—so would I."

"Then let's take Willy tonight, and go after Somers in earnest—and to hell with consequences."

"Very well, Michael. Perhaps it is time we substituted force for diplomacy. By the way, where *is* Willy?"

"At Hammersmith. I sent him down this noon, to go over the motors on the plane. The War Office has been much more friendly to us, you know; they gave us permission to anchor across from the Embankment, if we felt safer there."

Ames smiled grimly. "Decent of them, I'm sure. After all, it'll be easier for us to load for our return journey from Central London."

"Say that again, will you?"

"I told you I'd brought bad news out of Whitehall this afternoon. Either we're flying that amphibian of ours across the Irish Channel tomorrow—under our own power—or we're risking internment for the duration."

"They wouldn't dare."

"England is at war, Michael. From their point of view, we're nothing but three crusading intruders with more courage than brains. The fact that we come from a potential ally is all that's saved our hides, so far. Naturally, it rubbed them the wrong way from the start—flying into the country from Newfoundland, cool as a comet from Mars."

Michael was pacing the parquet again, with frenetic concentration. "What about your military passport?"

"That was good for a limited time only. Believe me, it strained every wire I could pull in Washington—to the breaking point."

He paused, and stood frozen at the boarded windows giving to the square. A dull, thudding reverberation was shaking the horizon, far-off as yet, but insistent—the rumble of giants at bowls, unreal as summer thunder, with a sinister overtone all its own. . . .

"Archies, firing downriver," said Michael calmly. "From

Tilbury or West Ham, at least. Don't let it throw you, Kit. The sirens haven't even sounded off, so far."

"We can hardly hunt Somers down in an air-raid. Chances are he'll lay low through the night, in the Admiralty dugout."

Mike Towne crossed to the mantle, took down an army .45, and socked it into an armpit-holster. "I'll hunt down that fat rat tonight, if he's hiding in 10 Downing Street."

He continued his preparations methodically; Ames stayed at the boarded window, staring out at the brooding, dead empiness of a city in blackout and fog. The devil's drums sounded again—nearer, this time. Which is worse, Ames wondered, the raid itself, or the endless strain of waiting? *TNT* in ton lots, wiping out a thousand years of history in one casual, screaming roar; neat chromium tickets to heaven, rained down from an uncomprehending sky.

And yet, these people, defiant of destiny, locked in a death struggle on sea and desert, could still shake their fists at heaven, and beat the raiders back. If there was ever a people worthier of survival; if ever a battle shone brightly from the soiled pages of history. . .

Ames broke his thought in the middle, and crossed the room to the fine Restoration mantle; standing beside his friend, he too began to gird himself for their man-hunt.

III

THE SIRENS had not yet sounded an hour later, when Ames and Michael stepped back from the mantle, their preparations complete. In battered tweeds and a slouch hat, a camera strapped to one shoulder, Michael could have passed for a newspaper man in a fog far less dense than now. Ames had discarded his burberry for a sweater and cap. Now he crossed to the windows one more time, to listen to the mounting roar of London's aircraft defenses, beyond the city's rim.

"Will they dare to come over in this weather?"

"It's still a nuisance value, Kit. They don't need targets, of course. All they do is come out on a diagram, and go back on their own radio beam. Goering's old game: dump the applecart at twenty thousand feet, and hope it'll hit something that can't hit back." He glanced up sharply, as a key turned in the outer door. "Here's Willy at last. I was beginning to worry."

The Seminole entered the room quietly and sat down outside the circle of light, a dark and nearly motionless silhouette awaiting orders. Neither Ames nor Michael Towne paused in their preparations to notice him: Willy's silences, in times of crisis, were only part of his efficiency.

"Is the plane berthed?"

"Hours ago, Mr. Towne. You can be aboard in twenty minutes, if need be."

"Where have you been since then, Willy?"

The Seminole answered quite calmly, though his voice seemed to come from an immense distance. "I was studying remote control, Mr. Towne."

"Remote control?"

"Mr. Ames will explain that, I think."

Ames came over swiftly. "Your cheek's cut, Willy—your coat-sleeve's ripped. Where have you been putting that hard head of yours?"

But the Seminole only smiled. "Science is a broad subject, gentlemen—especially for the Indian mind. It has taken me an afternoon to grasp this much of it."

Michael Towne was looming over Willy's chair. "You've hurt your head—how?"

"Please do not concern yourself, Mr. Towne. It is not serious."

"Answer my question."

Willy's smile was incandescent now; there was strength in every syllable, as his breathing returned to normal. "My head struck an attic beam in Piccadiily, gentlemen. In a house occupied by Captain Somers. I have been watching that house for some time; especially those who came and went by the side door."

"Why didn't you tell us this sooner?"

"I wished to be sure of my facts, Mr. Towne. Nothing seemed more important than those facts, when I hastened back to you; with the exception of Captain Somer's arrest, of course—"

"Go on, Willy. You can breathe later."

"Captain Somers is outside now, sir. Watching this doorway, from a bench in the square. He has been seated there alone, for the past half-hour. I've watched him carefully."

The scream of a distant siren put a neat period to Willy's words: a blast of warning, sustained, and drawing nearer to Mayfair with each turn of the air-warden's wheels. Michael had Willy Emathla by both shoulders now, shaking him violently.

"Will you tell you story straight, you stubborn aborigine?"

"There is no more time, Mr. Towne. Captain Somers will not remain above ground indefinitely, now they have sounded the under-cover signal."

AND then another sound punctuated Willy's remarks: an explosion that was a deep-throated rumble, starting from a point directly outside the hall door, splintering glass from basement to attic, shaking the hold house to its foundation-stones.

Ames reeled under the impact of the blow, palpable as a giant's fist crashing into his chest. Bombs don't strike twice in the same crater, he thought dully, as he fumbled his way into the hallway on Michael's heels. Willy was at his elbow, completing the unspoken thought:

"That was no bomb, Mr. Ames. That was a grenade."

Michael stood in his shattered doorway, shaking his fist into the fog.

"*Somers—*"

"He wouldn't dare."

"If it's a challenge, I'm taking it."

They went down the stairs in a reckless group, running through the cloud of brick-dust into the square itself, ominously quiet now, and nakedly empty as the moon. No, not quite empty: at the far end, where the broad gaveled walk joined the asphalt of Curzon Street, a behemoth of a man loomed like an heroic statue of evil, one arm upraised in the Nazi salute. Then the figure vanished into the pea-soup fog, as Michael's .45 spat flame.

"Timed perfectly, wasn't it, Kit? Even those wardens will think it came from the sky."

A crash like the end of the world, followed with a red flare like the opening of a furnace door, lighted the sky to the west, throwing the trees of Hyde Park into gaunt relief, showing a behemoth in a rain-cape, running with shoulders hunched for the shelter of the trees beyond.

"We can use that barrage too, you know. D'you suppose I winged him?"

"No such luck, I'm afraid. Don't fire again, please. We can be picked up even now, you know."

"Not tonight we won't," said Michael grimly. "It'll take more than bombs—and the British—to stop this hunting expedition."

And he vaulted the splintered railings of the Park, plunging into the sere winter underbrush on Somers' trail.

FOR a man of his bulk, Somers' running was a thing to marvel at. Michael almost overtook him at Hyde Park Corner, where the Wellington Arch stood proud and serene against a blazing sky; and again in the shadow of

the Ritz arcade, just before a blinding detonation knocked the three pursuers flat on the Piccadilly pavement.

Somers was gone, when they staggered to their feet again, groping their way blindly to the shadows as the fire-fighters screamed up in their lorries to put down the blaze.

"Wait, Michael. We'll be stopped in our tracks if they see us now."

Mike breathed stormily at Ames' side, a smoke-blackened troglodyte in the dark. "We'll lose him if we wait."

"I think not. Something tells me that the Captain is anxious to be followed."

"So we're being led on, eh?"

"Why else would he wait for us outside the house? It's a trap, all right, Michael. We were fools to take the bait."

"Perhaps you're right, Kit—you generally are. I'm following through regardless."

He went down the fire-scorched arcade on the run—for all the world like an All-American half-back taking the ball into enemy territory. Ames suppressed an involuntary sigh of admiration before he got to his feet and followed. Willy Emathla was already coursing down the other side of Piccadilly—a mobile shadow of a runner, slinking through the night with unerring speed.

Somers was waiting for them in the curve of Half-Moon Street. True to Ames prediction, he dodged them a second time in the mews beyond, and there was a half-hour of smashing, bulldog pursuit on Michael's part, lighted by incendiary flares on every side, orchestrated by an obbligato of man-made thunder.

The trees in the Palace gardens were burning like Christmas torches when they entered Piccadilly a second time. Once again, Somers waited mockingly under the empty arcade—a will-o'-the-wisp from Brobdingnag. This time, he darted west, swerving sharply into the street as a building collapsed just beyond in a buckling cascade of rubble and splintered beams. Willy Emathla, running low to the ground, risked everything in a flying tackle which missed their quarry's flying heels by inches.

The sirens were screaming in their ears now, a frantic warning to take cover. A bomber's motors droned overhead, epitome of the nightmare through which they had wandered so long. Ames could see the plane clearly now, a thunderbolt dark as the midnight from which it had come, rocketing earthward out of the fog.

For one breathless moment, it seemed certain that the dive-bomber would crash head-on into the Ritz arcade; then it leveled off, clearing the building cornice with inches to spare, to zoom back into the murk again. No bombs were dropped. Ames saw why, when the British Spitfire snored into view on the bomber's tail, rattling death from twin machine-guns as it drove the invader back.

Ames pulled himself together with a start. He was standing in the middle of Piccadilly, cheering the Spitfire on with bursting lungs: on either side of the blasted street, people were gathered in little groups, echoing that cheer to the roof-tops. A line of poetry came to his mind, unbidden:

For there'll always be an England. . . .

In that flash, he saw why the song was written. Yes, there would always be an England, despite all the Derrings in the world—even if the visible substance of empire seemed to be going up in smoke at this moment . . . Christopher Ames dashed the tears from his eyes with the back of one grimy hand, and stumbled down the street in Michael's wake.

This time, he was conscious of a really ominous roar of motors overhead; conscious too of a slowly converging knot of running men in uniform—men with soot-streaked faces and battered helmets on which the white lettering of the air-raid warden's insignia showed but dimly.

Michael had been caught in the rush now, and so had Willy; Ames felt a gentle but persuasive hand at either elbow, as the storm of running feet pattered in unison down the ramp of the air-raid shelter.

"This way sir—if you please."

The rest was lost, as a triple crash of bombs on Piccadilly blotted out all other sound. In a twinkling, the ramp filled with acrid smoke, through which the good British voices cut calmly, passing on unhurried orders. Again the gentle hand closed on Ames' elbow, guiding him along the concrete slope.

The flash that lighted the facade of the house above them with a sudden, eerie brightness failed to penetrate to Ames' stunned senses: he did not see the pock-marked walls or the heavy leaded panes of the bow-window on the second story, from which an all-too-familiar face looked down. Willy Emathla saw, and turned back to shout, just as a dozen ruthless hands pinioned both his arms to his sides.

A steel door slammed over their heads, with a crisp air of finality. Ames stumbled on into a steel-ribbed cellar, rubbing his eyes in the sudden, hard glare of the bulbs overhead. A gun-barrel touched his back—light but insistent, though the good British voices still murmured soothingly all around him.

Utterly bewildered now, Ames stumbled on, under the big work-light in the cellar's midst—to find himself face to face with Captain Somers, coolly unruffled in a trench-coat and helmet, like a bill-poster for Britainia.

IV

THE VOICES were still now, as if by common consent, though no orders were spoken. Somers leaned back against the dugout wall as he fumbled for a cigarette, fixing Ames with a wordless smile.

As he stared around the semicircle of uniformed men, Ames felt a slow, prickling chill spread along the base of his brain. Where were those good British faces now? In that revealing light, there was an identical hostile gleam in every eye. A fantastic picture crossed Ames' mind, for no good reason: the picture of three hunting cats, cornered at the back of a kitchen drain by a swarm of rodents.

Somers spoke pleasantly. "I'm expecting Mr. Derring in a moment now. If you gentlemen will surrender your arms in the meantime—"

Mike Towne's fist flailed out, catching an unwary warden flush on the jaw; Mike's knee rose unerringly to smash another warden in the pit of the stomach, as the man tried to trip him in a swarming rush. Then a gun-butt descended with a sickening thud, just behind the ash-blond giant's ear.

Mike fell forward, without a sound. A dozen other wardens had already downed Willy's writhing protest, while expert hands relieved him of his automatic; Ames, struggling across the damp concrete floor in an effort to reach his friend, felt other hands frisking him, with the same cool efficiency.

Somers continued, quite as though there had been no interruption:

"May I take this opportunity to unburden my conscience, Mr. Ames? As you may have guessed, I've not stirred from this shelter since the air-raid started. Prudence is often the better part of valor; I happen to know the efficiency of high explosives far too well to expose myself to them without cause.

"The saboteur you pursued so trustingly from Mayfair to the Ritz was one of our most trusted lieutenants here—a man who won his blue at Cambridge not too long ago, in the era when fascist-minded people still had a

place in the English sun. The disguise was simple enough, thanks to the fog: Two pillows under an ulster do not impede one's fleetness, as your Seminole hunter here can testify."

Ames cut in hoarsely. "Who are these men?"

"Why not ask who *I* am, Mr. Ames? Perhaps my answer will do for all of us. A British subject born in Malaya, I have served two masters for years: the government that has paid me a good salary in various capacities, and my own self-interest. These men about me are British subjects, too; none of us can be dismissed with a label.

"You may believe this or not, but some are real air-raid wardens: at least two of us have been decorated for bravery by royal hands. Others are government officials, of varying importance; all are distinguished by a common hatred for a government that must pass with German victory.

"Please do not think that we have a monopoly on treachery here in London: one of our most valued liaisons is in your own American Embassy—in the person of the attaché who approved your entry permits a few days ago . . . Perhaps this will make my position crystal clear, Ames. Of course, if you would like further examples—"

"Stealing my thunder, Captain?"

THE COOL voice of the newcomer stopped Somer's flow of insolence dead. Heels clicked in unison all over the crowded dugout as Paul Derring descended the spiral of staircase from the house above them—crisply contained, in a trench-coat and helmet to match Somers' own display.

Twin Hitlers in a crumbling world, thought Ames. Perhaps the trench-coat is the symbol of today's nightmare, to match the Napoleonic greatcoat of another century. He spoke easily, as he met Derring eye-to-eye; but his fists were clenched, inside the pockets of his shabby sweater.

"So we meet again, Derring. May I compliment you on your appearance? Very soldierly—if a trifle theatrical. Each day, you grow more like your master's image."

Derring ignored the thrust, not too pointedly. "All here, I see, including our Indian Nemesis. Too bad Mr. Towne had to be subdued. I should like him to hear what I have to say, but I'm afraid we can't wait for his recovery."

The voice was cold as tempered steel, with the same ruthless knife-edge. Ames kept both fists carefully in his pockets as he answered.

"I'd be glad to take notes, if it'll save you time."

"That will hardly be necessary. The fact is, Mr. Ames, you are here now for one reason only: I am an incurable sentimentalist, who cannot resist the temptation to underline his success in this too-imperfect world. Does that sound like bombast? Permit me to correct the misconception as I introduce Captain Alfred Somers, probably the greatest explosives expert the world has ever known. No less great, because his exploits are still unsung."

"I have a large acquaintance with the captain's exploits."

"Only from the outside, Mr. Ames—in common with your stupid detective friends here and abroad. For example, you were clever enough to guess that Somers was the guiding genius behind certain spectacular acts of sabotage in the defense program of the United States—culminating in that holocaust at the Universal Powder plant in New Jersey last month. Perhaps you also guessed that he was returning to England to plot a still more daring exploit? At least, I assumed as much when you took such pains to follow him here in force. Too bad you arrived in England after the parade has ended. I'm afraid we have nothing to show you now but a—a somewhat spectacular finale.

"Yes, Ames, you were quite right to think that I summoned Captain Somers here to engineer a coup for me. The groundwork was laid months before his arrival. As I've just hinted, one of the captain's cleverest assistants was working for me, on the inside. But I won't confuse you with details.

"Sufficient to state that the Inner Cabinet, so-called, is meeting tonight, at Sydney House. Perhaps a half-dozen outsiders know of that secret meeting—including the American Embassy. You see, they are planning the all-important discussion of increased aid from the States: it is quite possible that the ambassador will be present, though I've been unable to verify that."

DERRING stretched out his hand; a uniformed aide was already at his side, holding a box gingerly on upraised palms. A cheap, japanned case, feebly camouflaged to resemble an overnight bag . . . Looks like the sort of portable radio you take on picnics, thought Ames. Wonder what heavens would fall, if I straight-armed him now, and smashed it?

But Derring was continuing smoothly, almost as if he had anticipated the unspoken thought.

"Stay where you are, Ames. A wrong move at this moment would be most disastrous. That really sounded melodramatic, did it not? So be it. Nothing less than melodrama would suit the occasion. You see, this little box *does* contain the doom of Empire; one flick of this innocent radio dial will send those ministers to join history, *in toto*.

"Shall I elaborate on that incredible statement just enough to whet your interest? We've done nothing so banal as plant a time-bomb in Syney House. Only an innocent water-cooler in the cloakroom, containing forty pounds of glycerine, in a transparent capsule. Only a magnetized cell in the ceiling above, which produces an electrical vibration when energized by the radio-active beam released from this box."

Ames' eyes met those of Willy Emathla, in agonized scrutiny. The Seminole returned the look with a queer, twisted smile.

"Remote control—"

"In one of its more successful aspects, Ames. The captain could explain the mechanization in detail, if he would. It is really a most boring subject for a man who has no head for science.

"Just a detail, and I'm on my way. It might interest you to know that the assistant I just mentioned, who secured a blueprint of Sydney House for us, and planted both capsule and detonator, is one Thomas Kairns, attached to the American Embassy here."

Ames got to his feet with a strangled gasp, but Derring's voice was like a whiplash, now. "A trusted wheel-horse, much closer to the sanctum than you'd think possible. In fact, I believe it was he who checked your entry permits after your spectacular arrival, and took the necessary steps to insure your plane against internment.

"Fantastic? No more so than your meteoric raids into my private enterprises. Too bad that our last encounter should take place in the heart of a gallant democracy that has won the respect even of its enemies. Poor brave England, like its well-wisher across the Atlantic—it is *still* soft where it should be hard, temperate where only ruthlessness will prevail.

"I have learned to be ruthless in my time, Ames; tonight, I am a sentimentalist—"

"You're repeating yourself."

"The victor's privilege, I believe." Derring crossed casually over to the now feebly moaning Michael, and slapped him hard across one bleeding cheek. "Yes, I want you all awake and listening, when Sydney House comes crashing down. As you know, it is scarcely three blocks from here, so you're sure to hear the explosion clearly. Quixotic of me, I suppose, insisting that that sound should echo in your dying ears."

He prodded Michael's ribs with one heavy soled boot, not at all gently. "Captain Somers has his orders, of course. One moment after that explosion, the three of you will be shot, out of hand."

He went out without looking back, swinging up the ramp with one last theatrical flirt of his trench-coat. All but two of the uniformed spies followed him quickly, with the precision of soldiers entering a trench in zero hour.

Christopher Ames faced back to Captain Somers, still coiled in his corner like a slowly digesting python. The Luger automatic in his belt loomed large as Big Bertha now.

V

THE minutes dropped quietly away into the darkness. Michael sat up with a groan, and rocked his head between his hands, before he stared about him wildly. Ames dropped a detaining arm about his shoulder as he strove to rise and charge the nearer of the two guards, who had ranged on either side of Somers, with identical basilisk stares. Willy Emathla rocked to his feet groggily, and took a hesitant step toward the spiral of staircase, before their jailors stepped forward.

Now that Derring had swept on to other fields, Ames was able to take stock of their death-trap much more rationally. The cellar had evidently been used for a storehouse once, though the bins along either wall had been stripped bare long ago. Above, in the dripping ceiling, Ames could see house-beams mingled with the stout reinforcement of those steel girders, a snaking welter of steam-pipes and plumbing.

Willy spoke out of the too-oppressive silence, putting an unspoken question into cryptic speech.

"How long, Captain?"

Somers glanced sleepily at his wristwatch. "Ten minutes, perhaps. Depends entirely on how long it takes Paul to reach his hangar."

Ames cut in, despite himself. "So Mr. Derring flies a plane in wartime England?"

"Why not? It is no drain on the Empire. Gas and oil are furnished cheerfully by a certain airdrome in Germany not too far from here."

"But how does he take off from English soil?"

Somers smiled. "There are a few facts I think it advisable to withold from you, Mr. Ames, even now."

"At least, explain the timing of this explosion at Sydney House."

"He'll press the dial just before his take-off." Somers consulted his watch again. "Seven minutes now, at the outside."

Michael Towne entered the conversation snarling. "What's your game? If we've got to die, can't you get it over with?"

Once more, Ames silenced his friend with a gesture. "Derring left precise orders on that point, Michael. Whether we like it or not, we must spend all seven minutes more in this gentleman's company." He faced Somers again, with the faintest, most irritating of smiles. "Might I ask at what radius that radio-active beam is effective?"

"Within five miles, at the most."

"Why not from Berlin itself?"

Somers spoke evenly, quite as if he were discussing a laboratory problem with a fellow professor between lectures. "Unfortunately, my invention is not perfected to that point, as yet. I expect to work on it at my leisure this winter, once I am safe in Berlin again. Unless I am assigned to service in the East—"

"Then you *are a German?*"

"No more than Derring. We are both citizens of the world, working at the best wages . . . This time tomorrow, of course, he will be in Germany, along with the men who departed with him. By then, the police and army will have begun one of the greatest spy hunts in history, as usual a bit too late—with the brains of the government crushed out in Sydney House."

Somers paused reflectively. "I wonder if your American ambassador really plans to attend that meeting. His death *might* have repercussions. Not that that need concern us now."

Willy Emathla spoke darkly, with his eyes on the floor. "How long, Captain?"

"Three minutes. I'll stop talking, if you like. Perhaps you gentlemen would care to pray—or review your childhood?"

"Put down that automatic," said Michael, levelly, "and I'll illustrate *my* dying wish."

Somers drew his Luger, sprang the safety catch, and sighted down the barrel. "As head of a clean-up squad of three, Mr. Towne, I must decline the challenge. I'm afraid I'll need all my strength for our getaway."

WILLY EMATHLA lifted his eyes. "Do you plan to clean out the storeroom overhead, Captain?"

"Who told you about that storeroom?"

"Three minutes is little enough time." Willy's eyes were shining now. He took a fearless step forward, meeting Somers eye to eye. "Of course, these steel beams are solid. I suppose we'll have an even chance to come out alive, when it happens—"

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Hardly, Captain. I know you've enough nitro-glycerine capsules upstairs to blow this house sky-high. Surely, with Mr. Derring beyond call, and ready to press that dial at any moment now—"

"What are you saying?"

"Only that Britain will carry on tonight, despite the careful plans you've made to the contrary. The detonator in the cloakroom ceiling will not explode Sydney House, because *I removed it at six this evening.* With the reluctant assistance of Thomas Kairns, who was a clerk at the Embassy, once."

Willy was unshakable now, a heroic figure in bronze. "I say *was,* Captain, because Kairns is floating in the Thames at this moment, with a hole in his head. You see, I had no further need of him, thanks to my reading on the subject of remote control. Once that detonator was in my hand—"

Willy Emathla turned his back pointedly on Somers, and glaced up at the steel-girded ceiling. "But I'm wasting your time with details. It was really quite stupid of you, neglecting to guard this explosive-dump more carefully. Remember, I'd been watching that side-door for days now; I'd noticed a dozen ways to slip in without being noticed, even without the fog. Once Kairns had explained the location of your principal cache of nitro-gylcerine capsules, it was absurdly easy to plant that detonator *a second time* —precisely where it would do the most damage—"

He broke off there in earnest, as Ames gave a sudden, wild shout. Somers had whipped up his automatic to fire—and dropped his hand again, when one of the aids scrambled up the stairway with an animal bellow of fear.

Things happened fast after that—too swiftly, in fact, for conscious memory to tabulate. First there was a red flare of light, spreading downward from that stairway opening like a monstrous red fan—a blast of such awful nearness and intensity that the hell over London that night seemed remote as a child's nightmare.

Ames had a clear picture of the doomed aide, hanging for a split-second in midair, transfixed on a splintered steel beam, like a huge, brown moth. Then Ames whirled to find the second guard, and found himself knee-deep in an

avalanche of rubble, as one demonic scream echoed through the sudden, rushing darkness. . . .

Ames groped his way back to sanity through a spinning eternity; deafened as he was by the imminence of the detonation, he knew that only seconds had elapsed since he had gone under. He was dimly conscious of Michael now, already on his feet in the swirl of the settling cloud of mortar-dust; of a bloody, bubbling gasp somewhere beyond. And then the darkness was split anew by a familiar sound—the long, clear keen of an Indian war-whoop.

Christopher Ames groped forward blindly to restrain Willy Emathla, astride the behemoth chest of Captain Somers; but Michael stepped between them with a grim, set smile.

"After all, Kit, he's earned it."

The knife descended in one slashing arc; Somers gasped again, before he collapsed like a spent Zeppelin. The two white men watched in silence as Willy Emathla slowly rose to his feet, and lifted the dead sack that had been a man across his shoulders. For a moment, the Seminole seemed to stagger under the load; and then he walked out into the great, jagged crater that had once been a house on Piccadilly, bearing his burden proudly, as he vanished into the night.

Once more, Ames made a vague move to head him off, only to be restrained by Michael.

"This way, Kit—quickly! We've a little job of our own to do at Sydney House."

THE Lockheed amphibian roared out of Southampton that sleety afternoon, dropping a grateful British escort down the horizon as its twin propellers stepped up to maximum. The three heads visible behind the cockpit glass were immovable as patterns in an unchanging panorama—and they were united in a purpose all their own.

Fog and sleet and winter's rain had claimed England now. Alone with the empty sky to witness, the amphibian banked sharply, roared out of its course, and bore down boldly on the east.

A bulky bundle in the bombing compartment underfoot rolled groggily in that sudden maneuver; Christopher Ames reached down instinctively to steady it with his hand.

They were flying at twenty thousand, and Ames had already reach for the oxygen mask, when Willy put the plane into a power-dive. Ames watched the orange flash of the anti-aircraft on the horizon, as a man harkens to the roar of invisible dynamos in the night. The sight of the German landing field, the dun-colored hangar roofs and the planes parked on the blasted concrete runways, was equally unreal: a sudden glimpse between scudding flurries of sleet, a kaleidoscope without form or substance.

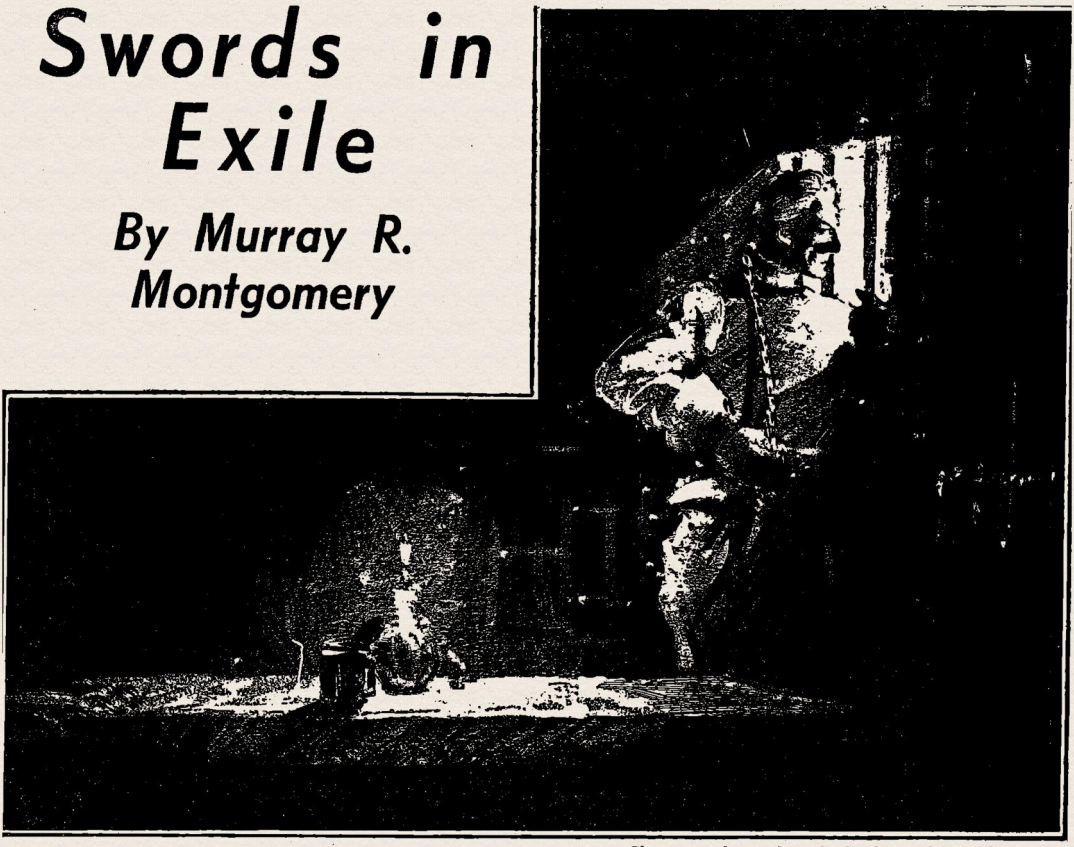
Willy Emathla leaned forward, and opened the bomb-rack wide.

The plane bounced skyward as it released its monstrous burden. As they zoomed into the mist again, there was hardly time to watch Captain Somers' body catapult toward the ground two miles below—until the chute ripped open, and the body floated gracefully down, grotesque no longer in the clean sweep of the winter wind.

Someone must have shouted orders then, for the firing ceased from all sides in unison. Now the plane had leveled off at five thousand feet, and was boring west again, into the heart of the storm. For the first time, the watchers on the ground could see the Aemrican flags, twin-painted on the amphibian's sides. They were still staring after it when the behemoth body crashed at their feet, rolled briefly as the wind sucked the chute away, and then lay still at the airdrome entrance, for good and all.

Swords in Exile

By Murray R. Montgomery



Cleve stared out through the bars of his cell

SUCH a grave situation exists in the Duchy of Montferrat that CARDINAL RICHELIEU is seriously disturbed. But even the Cardinal does not know the whole truth. BARON VON ERLA, an Austrian agent, is plotting with DUKE CHARLES OF SAVOY to wrest Montferrat from the control of France. To accomplish this, Von Erla plans that one MAZO GARDIER, a hired bravo, shall assassinate DUKE VINCENT OF MONTFERRAT. The duke's heir, COUNT HENRI, is a dissipated weakling, completely in the power of an adventuress named CATHERINE CORDOBA, who is Von Erla's ally. So very soon the duchy will flame with treachery.

Then into the center of Von Erla's careful plans come those two rake-hellies, RICHARD CLEVE and GUY D'ENTREVILLE. They arrive separately in Montferrat, for Cleve's aim is simply to overtake the Englishman SIR HARRY WINTHROP and obtain from him the pardon that the King of England has finally granted to the exiled Cleve. As for d'Entreville, he has two missions: He has been ordered by Richelieu to arrest and bring back his comrade Cleve, for the Cardinal can ill afford to lose the services of that daring Guardsman; and d'Entreville has also been commanded to investigate the whispers of treason in Montferrat.

IT IS more or less an accident that plunges Cleve into Von Erla's intrigue. During his journey to Montferrat he fell into a quarrel with the assassin Mazo Gardier and killed him, and now Cleve wears Gardier's jewel-hilted rapier. This distinctive weapon leads several interested persons to believe Cleve is Gardier. Catherine Cordoba thinks so, and her outlaw henchman, ANTONE THE ARCHER.

Then Cleve is frustrated in his chief purpose—to obtain his pardon from Sir Harry Winthrop. Sir Harry is staying at the palace of Duke Vincent of Montferrat, laid up there with a leg injury; and Cleve discovers that the English nobleman has been robbed of certain vital state papers. With them was Cleve's pardon. Immediately Cleve suspects DOCTOR DESPARTES, the palace physician who has been attending Sir Harry; the doctor, Cleve thinks, will sell the documents to some one of the foreign agents infesting Montferrat.

So now, in order to retrieve his pardon and serve England as well, Richard Cleve must stir his blade into the treacherous whirlpool of Montferrat. Accordingly, he seeks out Catherine Cordoba, who believes him to be Mazo Gardier; but at her house Cleve finds tragedy. Catherine Cordoba has been murdered, stabbed with a poniard belonging to Count Henri, who was found lying in a drunken stupor beside the woman's dead body. Cleve is told this by COLONEL DE BOUSSEY, the *commandant*, a huge, shrewd man whom Cleve does not quite trust.

BACK at the duke's palace, Guy d'Entreville has picked up some interesting crumbs of information. The grand-daughter Margaret of Duke Charles of Savoy is staying at the palace, sent there to attract the interest of young Count Henri. D'Entreville overhears her in conversation with her attendant ENRICO, and during the talk Enrico hints that he has had a hand in the killing of Catherine Cordoba.

Duke Vincent of Montferrat gives an audience to d'Entreville, but the old duke is so deeply distressed over his son's part in the sordid death of Catherine Cordoba that he finds it impossible to concentrate on the mysterious intrigues existing in Montferrat. At the end of the interview a guardsman appears to announce that the celebrated killer Mazo Gardier has been captured at the palace. Realizing that this is Cleve, d'Entreville obtains permission from the duke to handle the case of "Mazo Gardier". . . .

This story began in the Argosy for July 26

CHAPTER XVIII

COME INTO MY DUNGEON

THE key glistened like a silvered minnow on the hoop hooked to the jailor's belt. Cleve, staring through his barred window in the depths of the palace dungeon, regarded the symbol of liberty with a covetousness. He thoughtfully measured the distance between his door and the jailor's position, reckoning it to be approximately four feet. The jailor was asleep, snoring in deep wheezing gurgles with chin on chest and arms folded.

"Damme! Hold that pose, fatty."

The Englishman stepped back. His prison was small, square and foul-smelling. A mattress of filthy straw lay in one corner, and in the center a crude bench topped by a bottle-based candle served as the only furniture. The candle-flame cast dancing shadows upon the slimed walls, lending a touch of the macabre to the scene.

An iron collar had been bolted to Cleve's neck and then chained to a hook high in the left wall. But moisture had long corroded the hook with the result that he had managed to free himself by gripping the chain and jerking on it convulsively. Even so, his movements were now accompanied by the faint clank of free links dragging. He grinned. Sounded like Hamlet's ghost.

As he removed his sash, tearing it carefully into inch-wide strips, he speculated about Henri's crime. As de Boussey had intended, the crest on the fatal stiletto had told him the identity of Catherine's murderer. The Englishman had been in Montferrat long enough to recognize the escutcheon of the royal house.

Cleve appreciated the discretion with which the colonel had given the information with a common soldier in the room. If the story leaked out there'd be a scandal in Montferrat that might blow the lid off the plot-ridden duchy. Henri was a fool. Cleve dismissed the subject.

Being in this cell was the fault of that over-zealous popinjay at the gate, for Cleve had almost succeeded in talking his way past the new *capitaine* when his nemesis had appeared. Didn't the fellow ever sleep?

He sighed, bundled the straw from the bed into two lengths and lashed them together with strips from his sash. Complete, they formed a wand three feet long. He retrieved his hat and unhooked the brooch holding its white plume.

By tying the brooch to more sash-strips, previously knotted to the end of his straw-wand, he possessed a crude but efficient fishing rod.

The jailor was still asleep. Gingerly Cleve extended the improved pole and began to maneuver to drop the open tongue of the brooch over the fellow's key-ring. It was hard work, and leaning against the door, with his arm straining through the window, soon caused sweat to bead his forehead.

But after ten torturous minutes, his brooch-hook at last settled beneath the upper arch of the large iron key-loop and he discovered that the ring was not hitched to the belt, but lay free on the chair beside the man, propped against his side.

"Come to me, my darling . . . Easy . . . E-a-s-y . . ."

The straw wand curved and swayed beneath the strain, threatening to buckle. He gave up his attempt to hoist it through the air, surrendering to the slower, safer method of dragging it along the floor. He stepped away from the window to allow greater freedom of movement while lifting the ring perpendicularly. There was no strain now, for he was gripping the straw close to its extremity. Then, with a chuckle of triumph, he pulled the brooch into the room. But that was all—just the brooch. No key-ring.

"By Gad! I've been robbed!"

CLEVE glared out of his cell window into the grinning face of Guy d'Entreville. The Frenchman was standing back in the flickering wash of the dungeon torches, half-clad in shadow. He was holding, between gloved fingers, the precious ring; jingling it tantalizingly just out of reach.

Cleve sighed and leaned wearily against the door. The mere fact that it hadn't been opened immediately told him the whole story. Guy was bent on banter and bargain, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"All right, Kitten," he said. "What is it?"

Guy pursed lips and shrugged. "Nothing much. Your promise not to leave Montferrat until we've made certain of its security."

"Uh-huh." The Englishman nodded. He'd expected that. He rested chin on the windowsill and waited.

D'Entreville chuckled, toyed with the keys. The situation was perfect. For the first time in months he had Cleve cornered, and after being at a verbal disadvantage for so long, he meant to enjoy it.

"Come to heel, cheri," he advised. "One word and you go free." He looked sad. "Otherwise, I might decide not to know you. You might be forced to linger as that despicable villain, Mazo Gardier. Perchance you might hang."

"Kitten. I don't know what I'd do without you—but I'd rather!"

Guy laughed and lifted the keys. "Your answer, *mon ami?*"

"Go to the devil. I'll get out of here on my own hook!" Cleve nodded. "And I do mean hook," he said.

"Very well. But of course, I must needs warn the jailor to sleep further away from the door. *Au revoir, Gardier!*"

He turned as if to leave. But Cleve halted him with a single suggestion. "While you are out, Kitten, you might inquire about Antone's relationship to a certain lady known as Catherine Cordoba."

The Frenchman whirled, his eyes alight with interest. "What do you mean? *Parbleu!* Do you know Catherine Cordoba?"

"Did," the prisoner admitted. "Dead now, you know."

"Eh? *Pecaire!* How did you discover—" Then Guy stopped, realizing better than to ask the question. He stood arms akimbo, scowling. "For a man who desired no part of Montferrat's intrigues," he declared, "you have compiled a remarkable fund of information. Just how much do you know about her? How did you know of her death anyway?"

Cleve grinned and indicated the door. D'Entreville squirmed. Somehow he no longer held the advantage over this conversation that should be his. "You'll not walk free till I have your promise of aid," he decided, reverting to his original course.

"All right." the Englishman surrendered with a chuckle. "Since Sir Harry's dispatch case has been stolen, I might as well step into this mess, if only to get it back."

Guy smiled. "A robbery, eh? How sad, Richard."

Cleve's eyes suddenly narrowed. "By Gad! If you are the man who took it to force me into this business, I'll—"

Guy opened the door and shook his head. "*Corbac*! Judge not others by yourself, *mon ami*. I had no hand in it, although it is a thought. Incidentally, please remember you are my prisoner, subject to my orders."

"I'll try to, Kitten." Cleve grinned.

The French gallant's dark eyes began to glint angrily. His voice carried an edge. "Cleve, I am growing very tired of being called Kitten. Some day I shall become overtired; and then—" He broke off, staring at the iron collar about the other's neck. A slow smile broke over his features. "Fido!" he said.

Cleve fingered the fetters. "Rover is a neater name," he suggested mildly. "There is a key on the ring which will fit this harness."

Guy, muttering his disappointment, found the key. He wished Cleve had reacted more sensitively to Fido. He didn't bother to awaken the snoring jailor, for it would be inexcusable to take a man from a task which he pursued with such fervor. The French gallant merely dropped Duke Vincent's release into the man's fat lap; and then he and Cleve moved upward, out of the bowels of the palace.

DURING their progress, Cleve roughly outlined his adventures since the evening before, incorporating everything except mention of Mary de Sarasnac. He decided that she was not a fitting subject for Guy's ears at the moment. He even offered his theory concerning Catherine's ultimate aim and speculated as to the possibility of her ambition clashing with that of her unknown confederate, the baron.

"Then you doubt whether Henri murdered his mistress, *mon ami*?" Guy asked upon the Englishman's completion.

Cleve shrugged. "No, not entirely. 'Tis only a hunch that leads me to probe all possibilities. Catherine Cordoba was cold-minded enough to betray her confederate if it were to her advantage."

"Well—" They were passing through a small chamber now, an open ante-room preceding the palace foyer. "I speak not from intuition when I say that I doubt Henri's guilt, Richard."

"Ah. You've been holding out on me, Kitten. What do you mean?"

Guy repeated the dialogue between Margaret of Savoy and her deep-toned henchman, concluding enthusiastically: "Enrico is the slayer, Cleve. Mark me, it fits. Margaret has been sent here by her grandfather to wed Henri so as eventually to annex Montferrat to the House of Savoy, and such an annexation will be hastened if Duke Vincent dies unexpectedly. The only method to assure Vincent's death is to hire someone to kill him. Enrico realizes this. He hires Mazo Gardier for the deed and uses Catherine Cordoba to serve as point of contact with his killer.

"But Catherine grows ambitious, as you say, and decides to keep Henry for herself, after the duke's demise. Therefore, Enrico kills her and—"

The speaker ceased and scowled. Cleve was shaking his head.

"*Corbac*! What is wrong?"

"Oh, 'tis pretty enough," Cleve assured him pleasantly, "but why should the trouble come about *before* the duke's death instead of after it? Both parties can do nothing as long as Vincent lives. Circumstance would force them to work together. No, Kitten, it won't—"

"*Folderol*!" d'Entreville snapped. "Pure folderol! Cleve you're a nuisance. If Enrico is not the man, then Henri *must* be guilty."

"It appears that way."

De Maupin was descending the staircase as they entered the grand foyer and upon seeing them hastened forward. He was carrying Cleve's sword.

"Your blade, *monsieur*," he said presenting it. "I carried it to your suite but upon discovering your absence, decided to return it to the armory rather than allow so valuable a weapon to remain unguarded. *Ma foi*! 'Tis a magnificent sword, *monsieur*."

"It is," Cleve agreed, sheathing the blade.

DeMaupin continued: "I was desolate to hear of Capitaine de Merion's monstrous mistake, m'Lord."

The Englishman smiled. "So was I. Incidentally, m'lad, where does Doctor Despartes take residence here?"

The fop made a rolling gesture with one limp hand. "Third door to the left, the lower corridor of the north wing, *monsieur*. Only my duties prevent my escorting you to it personally. But now I fear that I must say adieu."

"Adieu," said Cleve.

After de Maupin had disappeared in a mist of perfumery, Guy finger-combed the crispness of his clipped military beard and regarded his companion quizzically.

"Despartes?" he asked.

Cleve had mentioned the loss of Sir Harry's dispatch case, but not his suspicions concerning the little physician. He saw no necessity to do so now. There would be sufficient time later.

"That's right," he said, and led the way across the foyer.

THEY had proceeded down the oak-paneled north corridor for nearly twenty paces and were beginning to follow its sharp bend to the right, when Cleve brought up suddenly.

He had counted the doors lining the left wall, and so far he and Guy had passed but two. The third—the entrance to Despartes' suite—lay just ahead. Emerging from it was the lithe, velvet-gowned figure of Mary de Sarasnac. Her actions were hurried, somehow furtive. Cleve yanked d'Entreville back and clamped tight fingers over the French rakehelly's mouth.

"Quiet!"

Guy said: "Sambodednee! Clebe, leb go!"

Then after a moment the Englishman released his hold. "Did you recognize that girl?"

"*Pecaire*! 'Twas Mary. Mary de Sarasnac. I'll never forget her! What is my angel doing in Montferrat?" Guy suddenly remembered his companion's actions. "Parbleu! And what right have you to interefere with our meeting?"

Cleve didn't hear him. He was peering cautiously around the corner, to catch the flare of her skirts as she disappeared through an archway further down. He straightened.

"Damme! I'd like to know what she is doing here, myself," he said. "One conviction grows. I am certain that she warned Duke Vincent of Gardier. Come along. Let's see what upset her so greatly in Despartes' suite."

"Curse Despartes!" Guy muttered and his lips thinned with determination. "*Mordi*! I am going after her!

"Do that, m'lad, and I leave for England within the hour."

Reluctantly Guy decided not to test that threat. "*Corbac!* You have nothing but ice in your veins, Cleve. I meet the only women who sets my heart on fire and—"

"Come along, Romeo."

They found Despartes sitting before a great mahogony desk—a desk littered with vials and tools of surgery. The man sat quite still, his back to the door, his head bowed as though in deep thought. Guy, who had preceded Cleve, determined to get the interview over with as soon as possible, drew up with a curse. His lips thinned grimly. There wasn't going to be an interview. Doctor Despartes was dead!

"A neat piece of work, too," Cleve muttered later, drawing forth the poignard which had been rammed to the hilt in the physician's back. "He never knew what hit him."

CHAPTER XIX

THE IRON HAND

THEY regarded each other from opposite sides of the corpse, each considering the same thought—the obvious suspicion; yet not wanting to say it. Finally d'Entreville shook his head.

"*Sandiou!* I'll not credit the thought! She did not do it, Cleve. She is an angel."

The English cavalier smiled grimly. "An angel true enough." He bent to remove a sheet of foolscap from beneath the corpse's left arm. "But whether an angel of death or not remains to be seen."

Then he studied the paper he had picked up. It appeared as a confession. The dead man had been penning it even as his slayer had struck. The document was unfinished. The last word, a proper name beginning with the letters *Cast*—, ended in a long jagged streak. . . .

"A confession turned into a last will and testament," Cleve observed and read:

I, Jacques Despartes, for thirty years an honorable man of medicine have this day disgraced my honor—the ethics of my profession—by becoming a common thief, a skulking robber.

Yet I stand not alone in my crime. My lust for wealth was seized upon by an unscrupulous villain who tempted it with the promise of ten thousand livres of gold. This man bribed me to steal a certain leather case. This I have committed and now he refuses me the monies. He laughs at me and drives my shame deeper into what has always been an honest heart. Therefore, I accuse the man known as Señor Juan Cast—

The Englishman looked up. "And that is all," he concluded. "A neatly timed slaying, Kitten. A split second later and that name would have been complete." He frowned. "Señor Juan Cast—something or other. Sounds Spanish."

"*Parbleu!* It also sounds familiar," Guy said. He scowled and then snapped his fingers." I have it! Juan Castro! The Spanish agent who financed Montmorency's rebellion in France last year."

"A guess, but damme, I believe you're right, Kitten. Castro just beat the King's patrols into Savoy by the width of a whisker. Faith! And if he is playing in Montferrat, we—"

"We have a battle on our hands," Guy finished evenly. "Castro is devilishly cunning. A master *intrigant!*"

THE sound of men in the hallway attracted them. They turned as the door burst open and Colonel de Boussey and three gentlement of the court strode in. The huge *Commandant* and another man had bared steel in hand.

"*Corbac!* What is happening in here?" de Boussey demanded.

Cleve smiled and slid the doctor's confession back atop the desk. "Wrong tense, Colonel. It *has* happened."

De Boussey crossed to the body, inspected it and shrugged. "I was told the truth. *Monsieur le Médecin* has been murdered. He is dead."

"Definitely," Cleve assented and walked away.

He found a chair by the window and sat down. He placed his feet on the wide sill. He felt peevish, half-angry. First Cordoba, and now Despartes. Every grip he had attempted to gain upon the mystery seemed predestined to failure. He was becoming tired of being pushed around. How the devil had he become enmeshed in this business, anyway?

It was obvious, of course, that Castro had bought Despartes to filch Sir Harry's precious dispatch case. But did the Spaniard's intriguing end there? It seemed hardly likely. Cleve had heard of Castro and it did not appear logical that Spain would send so important a figure to Montferrat just for the purpose of thievery.

Castro was not an apprentice. He was a spinner of webs, a shaker of nations. Undoubtedly the Venetian contracts were incidental to the real purpose of his presence in the Duchy.

But was that purpose intertwined with the plot of the late Catherine Cordoba? Was Castro her mysterious Baron X? Had he caused her death, or had Henri? Frankly the English gallant didn't know, so he groaned and gave it up. He was guessing and he knew it. So far he had been able to gather only a few pieces to the puzzle and none of them made sense. He swiveled in his chair.

Despartes' body had been carried into the next room. De Boussey was reading the man's confession. In the corner one of the gentlemen who had accompanied him was sitting on a wall-bench and holding a head that was obviously aching. Cleve recognized the owlish drunk past whom he had burst earlier in the day.

Finally, de Boussey folded the dead man's confession into his gauntlet cuff and frowned. "*Mordi!* His Highness must see this," he decided. "Who would have suspected Despartes of duplicity." Then he turned. "Monsieur Orlando. There is small need for le Comte de Casale to remain. Be so kind as to accompany him to the south tower."

The man addressed as Orlando nodded. He was a swarthy, beetle-browed fellow, stocky and of sullen mien. He had been in the drunk's room when Cleve had pounded through it. Then Cleve realized that the man must be the same Orlando of whom de Maupin had spoken—Henri's close companion. A most dangerous person and rumored to have once been a highwayman.

Orlando swaggered over to the gentleman with the headache. "Let us quit this scene, Henri. In the south tower we have a comfortable bed awaiting you."

AFTER they had departed, Cleve regarded De Boussey thoughtfully. A startling suspicion was darken-

ing his mind, although he was careful to keep it from his speech. "So that was Henri," he said.

"Oui." The big officer nodded. "He is to be confined to the tower. I was escorting him there when Mlle. de Sarasnac informed me of the doctor's demise."

D'Entreville looked up. He had been shuffling through Despartes' effects in the vain hope of discovering further clues to the man's activities. *"Pecaire!"* he exclaimed in triumph. "The fact that she raised alarm definitely proves her innocence, Cleve. I knew it all along."

The Englishman grinned. "All right, Romeo." He turned to de Boussey again. "Perchance you can tell me just who Mary de Sarasnac is, Colonel."

"Sandiou! Ward to the duke, *monsieur."* The speaker smiled. "Did you suspect that she—"

"But no!" d'Entreville exclaimed. "We are aware of the person behind M. Despartes' death."

The colonel frowned. "Really, *mon ami*?"

"Of a certainty. The rogue's name is practically complete in *Monsieur le Médecin's* confession. Señor Juan Castro!"

"Castro?" De Boussey hesitated a mere instant and then shook his head. "No," he said. "No. I have never before heard the name." His gray eyes narrowed. "But now that you speak of it, it does fit the title which M. Despartes' was striving to complete."

"There are other matters we have discovered concerning Montferrat," Guy continued. "We intend to—"

"We intend to locate Castro at all costs," Cleve interrupted swiftly and signaled the French rakehelly to hold his tongue. He stood up. "You see, Colonel, apparently the man now possesses important documents which I have sworn to return to my friend, Sir Harry Winthrop."

De Boussey nodded. "I understand. *Sandiou!* But it may be dangerous, *monsieur.* Who knows what peril may —"

A thunderous pounding upon the door prevented his completing the sentence. Then the partition burst open and a sergeant entered. The fellow was panting.

"Monsieur le colonel," he gasped. "I crave indulgence for this lack of courtesy, but you are urgently needed at the main gate."

Even as he spoke, de Boussey was moving toward the door, rapier held wide of his swinging stride; hat-plume rippling. *"Corbac!* What's amiss, Sergeant?"

"A mob, *mon commandant.* A yelling, ugly horde that screams for the blood of Monsieur le Comte de Casale."

De Boussey paused. "What?"

"I speak the truth, *monsieur.* A rumor has spread that Henri de Casale has committed murder and the people feel that at last his escapades have gone too far. They demand justice!"

"Sacre nom! Order out fifty horsemen, Sergeant. If they do not disperse—" He shook his head. "No. I had best handle this myself. Come along." And without another word he quit the room.

GUY regarded Cleve. "And now, *mon ami,* perhaps you'll explain why you beckoned me to remain silent," he said.

Cleve sighed, crossed to the desk and sat on it. "Faith! Because you talk too much, Kitten. I am not certain that our friend de Boussey merits full confidence."

The Frenchman's eyes widened. *"Sangodemi!* He is the *commandant,* isn't he?"

Cleve's eyes were opaque. "What of it?"

Invariably Guy grew short-tongued when Cleve grew cryptic. The present was no exception.

"De Boussey is trusted even by the Cardinal," he snapped. "If he is false, then no one is safe. Not even Duke Vincent!"

Cleve laughed and hooked his knee in the loop of his interlocking fingers. "I have a good reason for my contention, Kitten. Remember how you sought to prove Henri's innocence a while back, by using the escor. of Margaret of Savoy as your scapegoat?"

"Sacre bleu! Cannot I make a mistake without censor? I was wrong. I admit it. I know now that Henri is guilty."

Cleve leaned back still holding his knee. "I doubt it," he said.

"What? Now mark this, Cleve! I am in no mood to be made the butt of what you pass as humor. I—"

The English rakehelly wagged a reprimanding finger. "Temper. I doubt Henri's guilt because I doubt that he was ever out of the palace last evening. I told you of the chase I led the guards after leaving Sir Harry, didn't I?

"What has that to do with it?"

Cleve ignored the question. "Escaped by running through a gentleman's rooms and leaping from his balcony," he continued. Then he frowned. "That gentleman, Kitten, was Henri."

"So?"

"I am thinking of his suite, Kitten. The disarray of it bespoke an all night session. A gay carousal. I have seen such chambers before and they do not fall into that condition unless the revelry has enjoyed an exceptionally long life. Do you follow me?"

Guy nodded, frowning. He was pacing thoughtfully and finally turned. *"Oui.* But what has that to do with not trusting *Monsieur le commandant*?"

The Englishman regarded him in mock disgust; then slipped from the desk-top, grasped him firmly by the arm and began to usher him doorward.

"Did you say that you needed four days to solve this affair, Kitten. Or did you say four years? Faith! The latter is likely."

D'Entreville jerked free. *"Ventre Saint Gris!* No sarcasm. I asked but a simple question!"

"'Twas simple," Clive agreed and he grinned. Then he became serious. "Mark this, Guy. When I met de Boussey this morning at Catherine Cordoba's house, he told me that he had found Henri lying drunk beside her body. He showed me a stiletto belonging to Henri, which he claimed had done the deed. In brief, he strove to convince me of the Count's guilt. Yet now I have reason to believe that Henri was engaged in an all-night carousal; that he was never near his mistress's home. Faith! Isn't it sufficient cause for distrust?"

Guy nodded slowly. He smoothed his mustache, bit his lower lip and scowled. "It is," he admitted. "But there is a chance your being wrong. Henri may have gone out and returned to his suite."

Cleve brushed an imaginary speck from the sleeve of his doublet. "Possibly. De Boussey claims to have brought him home after discovering him in Cordoba's house." The Englishman grinned. "You brought me home once, Kitten. What was the first thing you did?"

D'Entreville didn't follow the other's shift in thought,

but he answered anyway. "Doused you with water and put you to bed," he said.

"Of course," Cleve assented. "Yet when I met our friend Henri, he was fully clothed, out of bed and unattended. Rather strange under the circumstances, don't you think?"

This information seemed to decide the French gallant. "Perchance you have struck upon something, Cleve. It might help if we question le Comte de Casale."

"You do it, Kitten," the other said. "I have a report to deliver to Sir Harry."

And as the door closed on their heals, another partition—which led to an adjoining room in Despartes' suite—opened slowly and a man stepped out. A pale-faced figure—Enrico, the bodyguard of Margaret of Savoy. He was frowning as he crossed the room.

CHAPTER XX

KITTEN IN LOVE

CLEVE walked from Sir Harry's chambers toward the south tower. He strolled along to the leisurely tempo of his consideration. If nothing else, his talk with the injured man had hardened his determination to regain the Venetian contracts.

Sir Harry was in despair over their sudden disappearance. He had lain abed, eyes staring, while Cleve had attempted a cheerful account of the progress. He had striven to assure the older man that proof of Despartes' guilt was akin to success. It hadn't worked.

Cleve had never been close to his father's friend, but now it moved him to see how the old bulldog was suffering. Surprisedly he realized that he had some respect and even some affection for Sir Harry.

"Damme!" he muttered, strolling along the carpeted foyer gallery. "Damme! I believe I'd go after those documents now if they were nothing but the old fossil's gambling chits."

Still he recognized, as he said it, that Sir Harry's despair only added to the urgency of the dispatch case's recapture. His future, as well as that of the older man's, was tied up in it. Faith! The future of a whole nation might well rest on his success or failure. *England!*

He thought the word and bit his lip. It seemed further away now than when he'd pounded hell-for-leather out of Paris two weeks ago.

His course led him to the elbow of the palace's south wing and past a casement which overlooked the bailey and part of the cobbled outer-fosse at the main gate. He paused.

THE fosse was jammed with people. Sullen, staring, people. A man more literate than his neighbors had supplied a placard upon which was scrawled: *Down with Henri,* followed by the single plea: *Justice!*

Facing the crowd from behind the iron-laced portcullis was a double rank of breast-plated palace guards, alert and immobile. The sun glinted on the wicked lengths of their red-tasseled partizans. Behind the guards a troop of horsemen were drawn up.

Cleve frowned. The horsemen wore bright green surcoats and gay yellow-plumed hats. They were men of Henri's personal troop—the most hated body of cavalry in Montferrat.

Egad! Surely de Boussey wasn't intending to use them! To turn them loose upon the mob in his present emergency would be like tempting to quench fire with lamp-oil.

But even as these thoughts streamed through the cavalier's mind, de Boussey stepped into the courtyard, waved once, commandingly to the troop and stood back, arms akimbo. The portcullis swung up and the troopers rode forth, a shouting, pounding group with bared steel flashing.

They struck the mob savagely, splitting it apart, scattering it with the flat of their swords. Then someone hurled a stone, and the next instant a hail of missiles rained upon the charging horsemen. From his point of vantage Cleve saw two riders, pygmy-like in perspective, real drunkenly in their saddles and then slide to the ground. The mob boiled around them, kicking, clubbing, hurling cobbles. It was a signal for the grimmer work to begin and Henri's men were not loath to take advantage.

No longer did they strike with the flat sides of their blades; now they slashed murderously with the cutting edge. Screams began to pierce the distant din, and when finally the crowd broke, scattering wildly like beads from a severed necklace, Cleve counted seven bodies on the fosse—two of them troopers.

"'Twill teach the scum manners," a harsh voice said beside him.

He turned, unaware of the other's approach. It was Signor Orlando, his white teeth smilingly framed against his swarthy skin.

Cleve resisted the impulse to knock those teeth and their attendant grimace down the man's throat. He lifted a polite eyebrow.

"Or more determination," he averred. Then he dropped the subject. But the deliberate ruthlessness of de Boussey's move both enraged and puzzled him. To use Henri's men had been stupid. What the devil was the matter with de Boussey anyway?

Orlando said: "You are here for a purpose, are you not, *signor*?"

Cleve nodded. "Yes. Is Henri de Casale in a condition to talk?"

The Italian shrugged and shook his head. "But no, *signor*. Unfortunately Henri is being held *incommunicado* under orders of His Highness Duke Vincent. Your comrade Signor d'Entreville was here but an hour ago and I was forced to tell him the same story. Henri is unavailable unless Duke Vincent deems otherwise."

"I see."

No doubt as to Orlando's veracity. To confine Henri during the present trouble was wise. Of consequence, Cleve found little reason to linger. He asked the Italian where Guy had gone, and upon receiving the man's shrug of ignorance, turned and retraced his steps down the corridor.

"A feather to a farthing that our poet is with Mary de Sarasnac," he wagered to himself.

IT WAS an easily won bet. D'Entreville and the love of his life were in the palace library at the head of the foyer staircase. Cleve found this out by asking de Maupin, who had seen Guy and Mary enter the room.

"At the top of the staircase, *monsieur*. *Ma foi!* 'tis unmistakable. The doors are gilt-paneled."

The doors were also adorned with tiny figurines depict-

ing life in the medieval monastry. Cleve discovered it as he stood outside of them and cheerfully eavesdropped on the French rakehelly's reverent recital of one of the many poems he had composed.

Guy originally penned the verse for a certain lovely named Desirée. But since Desirée had married someone else, the Frenchman was rededicating it now.

When I'm with you,
The things that you do,
Make all of my moments divine.
Your soft finger-tips
The thought of your lips,
On mine.
And ma cherie—

"Oh Lord!" Cleve sighed and opened the door.

They were sitting on a low divan before the window. Guy was eying her earnestly; she was relaxed comfortably in the couch's corner, a far-away expression on her face. But at Cleve's crashing entrance, both of them straigtened. He stood on the sill, arms akimbo, grinning.

"Would you two rather I be alone?" I asked.

Color rushed to Mary's cheecks. Her dark eyes began to sparkle with indignation. Then she turned to Guy.

"Who is this churl, *monsieur*? I have seen him before."

"That," d'Entreville admitted reluctantly, "is Richard Cleve."

"Some times known as Mazo Gardier," Cleve added and kicked the door closed with the heel of his boot and strode over the carpet. "Am I intruding?"

"Definitely," Guy snapped.

"Ah. 'Tis most kind of you, Kitten. I shall be glad to remain." He stood before them, arms folded, a look of puckish sincerity on his face. "Don't mind me, my friend. Pray continue where you left off."

Mary bit her lip. Cleve found himself admiring the way the sun-shafts glinted in the froth of her hair. She said to Guy: "Perchance he will go away."

D'Entreville shook his head. "*Non.* You are unacquainted with him. He is every other inch a gentleman, so he'll stay."

She stood up. "Then I shan't."

The Englishman shook his head and sidestepped quickly before her. "Faith now, I hadn't taken you for a coward, Mary."

She bristled at that, her fine eyes snapping. "La! By what right do you address me so intimately, *monsieur?* To you I shall always be Mademoiselle de Sarasnac. Do not forget it." She jerked shreds from her silken kerchief angrily. "Furthermore, I am *not* a coward!"

"Running away, aren't you?"

"No!" She plumped back upon the divan definitely.

D'Entreville arose at the same time. He was quite indignant.

"*Mordi!*" he choked. Have you no courtesy, Cleve? *Ventre saint gris!* This is not a barracks—"

"Temper, Kitten. No cursing, mind." The speaker nodded to Mary, sitting stiffly, and added in a discreeter tone: "Ladies present."

GUY didn't trust himself to speak. He stood glowering and then sat down. Cleve stood there, regarding both of them benignly.

"Undoubtedly Mary—er—Mademoiselle de Sarasnac was explaining how she discovered the dead man, wasn't she," he said politely.

"She was!" d'Entreville flared.

"Allow me to speak," the girl interposed and looked at Cleve. "I was passing through the hall, *monsieur*, when I saw a strange man hurriedly leaving *Monsieur le Médecin's* rooms. I called to him. He broke into a run and disappeared. I knocked upon the doctor's door, and receiving no reply, I entered." She bit her lip tightly. "He—he was dead. I sought assistance immediately."

"What did the fugitive look like?"

"An ape," she replied quickly. "His arms dangled and his legs were short. A horrible creature, *monsieur*. I shall never forget the way he grunted an answer when called upon to halt." She arose gracefully, defiantly. "Any more questions, *monsieur?*"

Cleve chuckled. Somehow the dark beauty of the girl was a challenge. He didn't know why.

"Several questions," he admitted.

"Well?" She frowned impatiently.

Cleve stared to the depths of her dark eyes and laughed. "Faith! And what are your plans for the evening, m'lass?"

She stiffened. "To stay as far away from *you* as possible, *monsieur!*" Then she turned to Guy. "Will you be kind enough, *Monsieur le comte*. The room seems to have become unbearably stuffy."

With a triumphant grin, d'Entreville proffered his arm. "But of course. Stuffiness invariably follows the English. And one Englishman in particular." He lifted his hand and wiggled the tips of his fingers cheerfully. "*Au revoir, mon ami.*"

Cleve returned the wave in the same manner. "Adieu, Cupid. Incidentally, recite the one you wrote to Constance. I like it better than—"

The tinkling crash of glass shattering in the window behind him halted his advice. Something thudded against his shoulder. It caromed past the curve of his cheek and fell floorward. A rock with a fold of paper tied about it.

"*Sandiou!*"

Guy's blade swept from its scabbard and he charged across to the broken window. Behind, Mary de Sarasnac bent to pick up the stone. Cleve approached, rubbing his shoulder absently as he extended his free hand. She ignored his wordless request, tore free the string holding the note, and scanned it swiftly.

"Nosey," he said quietly, and waited.

Meanwhile, d'Entreville had jerked open the casement and was glaring into one of the palace's after-courtyards. He glimpsed a fleeting figure; that was all. The man disappeared around the corner. Guy felt the weight of his rapier, looked at it sheepishly and resheathed it. Of what use was his sword, two stories up?

"Come here, Kitten."

He returned to where Cleve and Mary were standing. Cleve was fingering a paper.

Mary had given it up at last.

"Listen to this," the Englishman said. "It was tied to the rock." Then he read: "'Fear of my life prevents me from speaking to you in the palace, but should you wish to know things concerning the death of *Monsieur le Médecin*, I shall be at the Golden Crowns at seven. The table in the east corner.'"

It was unsigned.

CHAPTER XXI

FRIGHTENED TOWN

TWO hours had passed and Rue Vincent, leading from the Palace Gate to the center of Casale, was deserted. Purple shadows, growing longer in the twilight, darkened half its length and the stuccoed house-fronts lining its either side were shuttered tight as though night had already descended.

"Damme!" Cleve grunted. "Lively town."

Guy nodded grimly. They had been pacing silently along the narrow thoroughfare, the tenseness of the city heavy upon them. They had arrived at the end of it without encountering a soul. Not a healthy sign. The French rakehelly licked his lips.

"Lively," he accorded.

He jerked his wide hat-brim a trifle more firmly over one eye and glanced back toward the palace. With the sunglow framing it, the huge citadel was silhouetted in black contrast against the gold of the evening skies. The blackness made it seem sinister.

"The citizens are keeping to their quarters," he said. "Du Boussey has ordered a curfew."

They proceeded. The clock in the market place was striking the quarter hour as they strode across the square. It finished ponderously and returned to its brooding quiet.

Townspeople hurried furtively, like wary mice, along the edges of the mall. From second-floor windows worried faces peered. Casale was akin to a plague-ridden city, held breathless in fear. And yet it was not all fear. Cleve glimpsed the faces of a few men in passing. They were sullen, dangerous.

"Damn de Boussey anyway," he muttered.

Pacing beside him Guy frowned. *"Pardieu!* For what reason?"

"This," Cleve said and indicated the square. "The whole cursed mess is the result of our friend's *astute* use of Henri's troops. Had he used the guards on that mob with orders to maintain order without violence, it would have been an even wager that Casale would be less restive. Men were killed today, Kitten. The local lads aren't soon to forget it."

Guy shrugged. "De Boussey is a soldier," he replied. "He thinks as a soldier. Oft times an iron first rules where kindness is misunderstood for weakness."

"In this instance, an iron fist may well cause revolution," Cleve said quietly.

D'Entreville didn't answer. He recognized the truth of that. For a moment he seemed swept back to the library of Palais de Richelieu, listening as the Cardinal explained the importance of Montferrat to the scheme of French defense.

GUY had no illusions concerning his nation's fitness to fend off invasion once her enemies were inside. France was still licking wounds left by nearly sixty years of civil strife. She was not yet strong. She could not face a war on her own territory. If the bastion of Montferrat crumbled because of rats gnawing from inside, then such a war became periously imminent.

Renewed determination surged through the cavalier. But with his fresh resolve came an attendant feeling of impatience. Guy was a man of action. Show him a problem that was clear-cut, well defined, and he would proceed to solve it in a flash of the blade. Show him mystery, hazy uncertainties, and he was invariably bewildered and annoyed.

Montferrat was beginning to anger him.

A thousand questions swirled in his mind. Why had Catherine Cordoba been killed? Had Henri been her slayer? If not he, then who? And what was Juan Castro up to? Did not Enrico of Savoy mean anything to the scheme of things? Where did Antone the Archer fit into the picture? Most important of all these queries was this: Just whom were they really fighting? Spain, Savoy, or Austria?

It was Cleve who called his attention to the scuffle that suddenly was heard from behind them. They had been walking slowly up one of the crooked little streets leading from the market place, each intent on his own thoughts.

"Look Kitten, as uneven a brawl as I've ever seen."

D'Entreville turned and there, twenty paces away, two bravos were attacking a stripling youth with vicious swords. The boy was backing swiftly toward a corner, crying for assistance in a frightened soprano—a soprano which both Cleve and d'Entreville recognized! Their long blades flashed free of leather.

"Ventre saint gris!" the Frenchman shouted in amazement. "It is Mary!"

CLEVE made no comment. He recognized her the moment her hat went sailing to allow the lustrous ebon of her hair to ripple free. She was garbed in men's clothing—the same costume that she had worn when first they had met. Upon the loss of her hat, her assailants drew back, surprized, and then turned. But not soon enough. The two cavaliers were upon them.

It wasn't much of a battle. In fact as Guy later considered it, the affair wasn't a battle at all. One chance prick of his sword-tip and both bravos lost competitive spirit, deciding sword play not worth the effort when practiced with such earnest efficiency as the rakehellies possessed. They hurled blades earthward and refused to pick them up.

"Sandiou!" snorted Guy and shifted his rapier. " 'Tis no time to stop. Mark me. I'll entertain both of you left handed and alone! Go for your steel!"

But the bullies weren't foolish. They refused.

Meantime Cleve handed Mary her hat and regarded her quizzically. "Neatly done, lassy," he commented. "But suppose you explain."

She frowned and donned the hat. "You needn't use your sarcasm on me, *monsieur*. I was following you in an effort to be of assistance."

He studied her gravely, and then his eyebrows cocked up in amusement. He stared thoughtfully at the two bravos whom Guy had now backed against the wall of a nearby house. "Assistance?" he inquired politely.

She bit her lip. There was delight in the way she rammed her dainty court-sword back into its jeweled scabbard before making answer. He had never before met anyone just like her. Feminine and yet boyish, self-assured, proud.

She said acidly: "Those men were following you. But of course, being so all-wise, *monsieur*, you never suspected a trap in that note."

"Faith no," he replied seriously. "The Kitten and I are horribly naive. We carry weapons only because they are decorative. When did our friends begin to stalk us?"

"As you left the mall. They issued from a house and followed even as did I. La! 'Twas only because I trod too close on their heels that they discovered me and turned."

"Oh. And you trailed us the full way from the palace, eh?"

"Seeking to trick me, *monsieur?*" She smiled. "I was waiting for you in the market square."

He chuckled. "Faith. I think I like it."

Uncertainty wrinkled her brow. "You like what, *monsier*?"

"Your smile, lass. It's the first you've worn for me, you know."

Her lips tightened. She said nothing, and Cleve turned to the prisoners.

"If they can't find their tongues," he advised, "use the blade, Kitten."

"They shall find their tongues," d'Entreville promised. "They shall find them either now—or never!" He nodded to Mary. "*Mademoiselle* this is hardly the place for beauty."

"Why not?" she wanted to know.

The bluntness baffled the French gallant. Fair damsels had a moonlit niche in his consciousness; a well-defined place of soft music and beauty, far removed from blood and violence. He frowned.

"Why—er," he fumbled. "Why, this may not be pleasant, *mademoiselle.*"

"Faith, she is used to unpleasantries," Cleve interposed blandly. "Horse-stealing, hold ups, kicks in the chest." He turned to the captive bravos. "All right my gallant knights, would you care to reveal why you were so intrigued by the view of our backs?"

THE prisoners were sweating. They were roughly dressed men, unshaven—the sort usually found aloiter near pot-houses. They squirmed uneasily against the wall, staring fearfully at the sword beneath their noses. When Cleve's bright blade joined the French cavalier's, they looked at each other and bit their lips.

"*Corbac!* Speak up, you rats!" Guy barked. "It makes little difference whether we leave corpses or the living."

"Surely, you do not mean that, *Monsieur le comte.* 'Tis unworthy of you." It was Mary speaking from behind them.

Guy hesitated. Her good opinion of him counted. "Well," he temporised. "Well, er, that is—not if you wish otherwise, *ma petite.*"

Cleve shook his head. "No," he groaned to himself. "Please, no!" He closed his eyes. "*Ma petite,*" he murmured to the air and then regarded his comrade sadly. "Look, Kitten. Send *ma petite,* home. As long as she remains here, our friends are not going to be made talk."

"I'll not turn my back on murder, *monsieur,*" she snapped. "Besides, I am in this affair. I intended to see it to an end."

"There is but one thing to do," Cleve told Guy. "Proceed as before only—" He eyed the hirelings. "We allow our friends to walk in front."

"*Mais non!*" cried one of the prisoners.

"Silence!" d'Entreville snapped.

And so they marched away—sullen bravos in the van, Cleve and d'Entreville pacing behind with swords glinting, Mary bringing up the rear.

Guy was uneasy. He was beginning to curse precocious women. If there was going to be trouble, the possibility of Mary becoming injured bothered him. He mentioned it to Clive.

"We shall attend to *ma petite* immediately," the Englishman promised.

They were approaching a well, a moss-edged watering place set in the center of the street with an iron-rimmed bucket on the flagging beside it. Cleve was pleased to discover that the pail was half-full. He called a halt.

"This is where you leave us, lass," he told her.

She smiled stubbornly. "Ah no. La! This affair may prove amusing."

"It will be amusing, true enough," Cleve agreed and hoisted the bucket shoulder-high. "You know, m'lass, I am not in the least loath to do this." Before she could retreat he deliberately deluged her with water.

She gasped. "*Mon dieu!* You—you beast!" she cried. "You crude lout! Look at me. I—I am drenched to the skin."

He nodded cheerfully. "Precisely. Now trot along and change into dry garments."

She was quivering with rage. He decided on second thought that it might also be chill. She doffed her hat to free its crown of water; then she reached up and with neat accuracy slapped him.

"Take that, you churl, and next time—" her eyes widened. "What are you doing, *monsieur*?"

Cleve had placed the bucket deliberately beside the well and was approaching her, devils lancing in his eyes. "Discipline," he said. "At this point a spanking seems advisable."

But Mary was in full retreat. "I'll go," she said. "I am leaving right now. *Au revoir.*"

They watched her until the gathering murk of evening swallowed her up. Guy regarded Cleve questioningly.

"*Sandiou!* You wouldn't have done it, would you, *mon ami?*"

The Englishman smiled enigmatically. "She believes so," he answered and chuckled. "That is all that is necessary."

CHAPTER XXII

THE ASSASSIN BLADE

IT HAPPENED at a corner, a half square from the Golden Crowns, where a shade-murked alley joined the street. Cleve and d'Entreville had allowed their prisoners to advance almost ten paces ahead of them, maintaining greater silence with the distance. There was a possibility that the unsigned message was bona fide and the attempted ambush a coincidence. Whatever the situation, both cavaliers were not taking any more risks than necessary.

Their prisoners marched stiffly, fearfully; convinced that the two rakehellies strode immediately behind with hungry steel in their fingers. Then, as the men passed the alley, a trio of sword-bearing figures rushed from the shadows.

Corbac. I understood," Guy exclaimed. "They planned to take us three from the front and two from the rear. *Pecaire.* Cunning playfellows, eh?"

But the ambushers were quick to discover their mistake. The fellow whom Cleve had guarded began yowling, almost instantly, interspersing pleas for his life with deep

lunged mention of his name. The three assassins milled uncertainly.

"Hola, mes amis!" Guy cried. "Here we are!" And he grinned happily. This was the thing he craved—fine clean fight. Beside him, Cleve cuffed back his wide-brimmed hat and pinched the tip of his nose lightly.

"Take the three with swords," he directed. "I'll go after our late prisoners."

"Very well Cleve, I—" And then the import struck the French gallant and he stared. "Huh?"

The Englishman laughed. "Faith. Never mind."

A black-bearded giant in a grease-smeared doublet launched a series of murderous lunges at Cleve's throat. The English rakehelly found them easy to parry, but not when a second assailant decided to deal thrusts from the side. A weasel-faced little blackguard with a wispy goatee.

Parrying, *septime*, Cleve made a swift plan of strategy. He waited until the flanker darted in once more; then instead of merely side stepping with a parry as of before, he side stepped and charged—charged toward Black-beard! Black-beard reeled under the vicious counter attack and the weasel-faced hireling, startled, was suddenly at Cleve's left elbow. Before he could recover, the Englishman's free hand had jerked him sideways into the path of Black-beard's savage counter thrust. The man took his friend's steel in his shoulder. He made quite an ado about it. He withdrew, weaponless, cursing with pain.

"One!" Cleve counted. "Now 'tis your turn Kitten. I do believe I—"

The words died in his throat. One of their late prisoners on the fringe of the fray had selected a loose cobblestone. Cleve saw the rock arching leisurely toward him, but in the instant of preception he found his reflexes strangely rusted. The cobble grew. It loomed close; and then the world exploded in a sheet of dazzling blue light. He crumpled.

The black-beareded giant laughed. His blade lifted to drive the life from the prostrate English cavalier.

"Por Dios! Two! and I shall complete the business."

BUT his poised sword never landed. D'Entreville's blade seemed to lick obliquely from the left. The darkeeyed rakehelly's sinewy frame lunged forward to put weight behind it. The tip sank deep into the man's side.

But Guy hadn't time to watch. The man with whom he had been engaged was essentially an opportunist. While Guy had been puncturing Black-beard's hopes, the man used the Frenchman's exposed shoulder as an easy target.

Had he been a trifle more accurate, the fellow might have lanced steel into Guy's throat just under the jaw-line. But as it happened, the blade needled the air past d'Entreville's nose to remind him of unfinished business. He pirouetted cat-like, and landed astraddle Cleve's limp form.

"Mordi! Bad timing," he snapped. " 'Tis done, so!"

His rapier whipped up and over the assassin's recovering parry, crashing aside the weapon and sinking deep into his opponent's chest. The man staggered away, fingers clutched to the wound.

And that decided the remaining three ambushers. He of the wispy goatee, although wounded, had been contemplating re-entering the fracas, but now he decided to retreat. He led the others away, running with the blood from his shoulder seeping down his sleeve to drip unheeded on the cobbles of the street.

Guy stared after them, his sword held aslant across his boots, sweat-dampened hair-ringlets matted to his forehead. He took off his hat and mopped his brow with the back of his gauntlet. At his feet, Cleve stirred slightly and opened his eyes.

"Faith, I have a giant-sized headache and that's a fact," he stated and stared groggily around him. "What happened? Ah yes. A rock! A friendly fellow thought it playful to scull me with a rock and I misremembered to dodge. Where is the rat? I'll—" He ran searching fingers gingerly along the side of his head, found the lump and winced. "Ow!" He glared at d'Entreville. "Well, help me up, you oaf!"

IT TOOK them several minutes to organize a pursuit. But finally, after heatedly discussing the move, they set off after the fugitives.

Cleve wanted to return to the palace. As far as he was concerned, the affair of the note had yet to begin. The neat trap into which they had just walked had been but a preliminary skirmish and now the problem lay in discovering the man behind it. That the fellow lived at the palace was logical. Only a few had known of Despartes' death.

But d'Entreville felt otherwise. *"Sangodemi!* We have a fresh trail, Cleve, and the only sensible course is to follow it; capture one of our would-be slayers, and kick the information we desire out of him. Mark the blood-drops on the cobbles. They point the way."

But the tiny blots of red became increasingly hard to discern in the growing darkness. As the Golden Crowns hove into view, the two rakehellies lost the trail completely. Cleve chuckled.

"At any rate, we shall gain a tankard of ale from this hunt, Kitten."

"A lantern," Guy returned. "Perchance the inn will—"

A clatter of hoofs interrupted him. He stared as a trio of riders pounded out of the alleyway next to the tavern. Men's faces were revealed swiftly in the light of the fresh-lit court torches; and then they were away, galloping toward the town gate.

"Sandiou! Did you see them, Cleve?"

The Englishman nodded. "I'd recognize that goatee anywhere."

"They came from behind the tavern. Let's to horse and—"

"Behind the tavern!" Cleve suddenly snapped his fingers. He gripped Guy's arm. "Damme! Hold a moment, Kitten. An idea has just struck me."

Cleve's eyes were dancing. "Egad! I should be ashamed of myself," he said. "Remember our first night in Casale, Kitten? The musket-ball which bid us such a cordial welcome?"

Guy hesitated. "Oui."

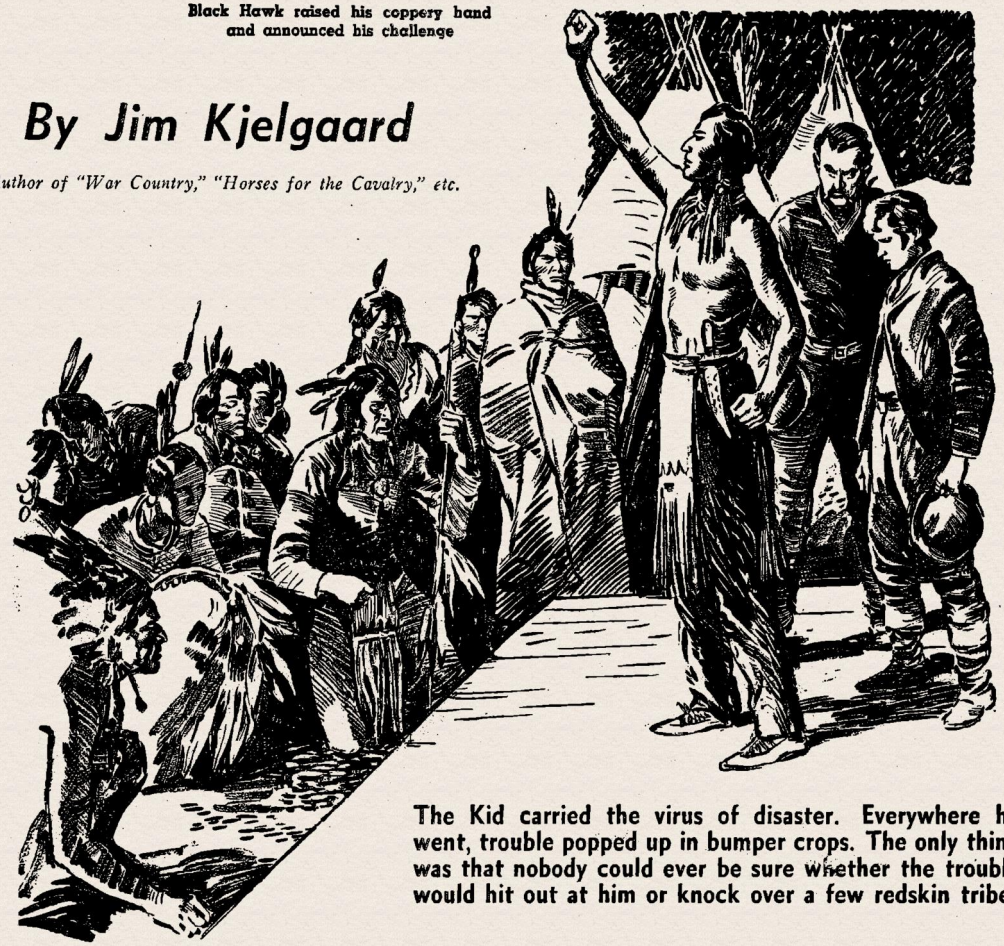
"It came from the house behind the tavern."

"So."

Cleve sighed. "Egad! Must I map everything for you? Does it not appear very coincidental that our friends on horseback also seem to have emanated from the same house, or at least from behind the Golden Crowns?"

Guy's eyes brightened. *"Pecaire!* It does, Cleve!" Then he hitched up his rapier. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Black Hawk raised his coppery hand and announced his challenge

By Jim Kjelgaard

Author of "War Country," "Horses for the Cavalry," etc.

The Kid carried the virus of disaster. Everywhere he went, trouble popped up in bumper crops. The only thing was that nobody could ever be sure whether the trouble would hit out at him or knock over a few redskin tribes

The Fire God's Kindling

BEN EGAN, scout for Tooker's cavalry, came out of the headquarters post at Fort Ganley and slammed the door behind him. Inside the post was a major, a colonel, two captains, two lieutenants—and not an ounce of brains among them.

Ben's mild little face was a mixture of despair and disgust. His walrus mustache had a forlorn downward droop and even his battered derby hat seemed to sit at a dejected angle on his head. His glance swept about, and strayed through the open stockade gate to find the Kid lying belly down on a grassy little knoll a few yards outside the fort. Ben spat, and started through the gate.

The Kid, a perpetual tenderfoot who seethed with the romance of the great West and blithely disregarded its harsh practicalities, was raptly intent on something in front of him. Ben saw a little wisp of smoke curling upward, and when he was still twenty feet away he caught the stench of scorched leather. He walked up beside the Kid and nudged him with his foot. The Kid, who had come West to seek adventure and had succeeded in creating plenty, turned a chubby, guileless face upward.

"Oh hello, Ben." He lowered his voice. "I was hopin' you'd come. Look. I got an entirely new way of makin' signals."

"You got a what?"

The Kid cautiously exhibited a ten-cent burning glass.

"A brand new way of makin' signals. Ike Keane sold me this. It's the only one of its kind in the country. When you use the right kind of buckskin, and hold the glass just right, you can mark buckskin without burnin' it."

Ben asked cynically, "How many signals ya made?"

"None yet. But I'm just learnin'." The Kid held up a four-foot square of what had been good buckskin, but was now burned full of various sized and various shaped holes. "Lemme show you. S'pose you was out some place, wanted to make a map of where you went, and didn't want anybody to find it. You just burn it on the buckskin, hang it in a tree—where no Indian would think of lookin' for it—and she's good for as many years as you want to leave it. Any time you want, you can go back and get the map."

" 'At's a wonderful idea, Kid," Ben said. "All ya gotta

do now is figger out what good a map will do a tree, or a Injun either. How much did Ike charge ya for that gadget?"

"Only twenty dollars. But look, Ben, that ain't the only use for it. Lemme tell you—"

Ben shook his head. Ike Keane was an itinerant trader who visited the fort, and had probably picked the glass up somewhere for a few pennies. But anybody could sell the Kid anything, and charge any price, if they surrounded it with sufficient romance and glamor.

"Nem'mine the rest now, Kid. I got two hosses in that meadow on Little Grass Creek. Will ya bring 'em in tonight?"

The Kid's eyes lighted. When Ben wasn't around to take care of his own horses, it meant that he had urgent business elsewhere. Urgent business meant Indians. And Indians meant adventure.

"Where you goin', Ben?"

Ben spat again. "Bah! Ya'd think some of the soft heads that run things around here would get some sense after a couple of hundred years! But they won't! Them an' their Injun policies!"

The Kid nodded sagely. "That's what I think."

"An' whatta them pink tea chair warmers in Washin'ton think?" Ben exploded. "Pacify 'em! That's what! An' how do they want the Injuns pacified? Pat 'em on the back till they purr!"

The Kid's eyes were shining. "When do we start out to pacify, Ben?"

Ben raved on, unhearing. "So Tooker gets his orders from Washin'ton. He calls in some more officers as don't know nothin' either an' they calls me in. They says, 'Ben, up on the Mactah reservation the Sioux is all ready to hit the warpath. You go up an' pacify 'em.'

"I says hadn't they better send sojers? They says no, sojers might make a fight. I says what the hell do sojers get in the army for? The man who goes up there alone is either goin' to get his hair lifted, or else the Sioux is goin' to listen to him, an' after he's gone they'll hit the warpath anyway. But if they see enough sojers around to knock 'em galley west, they won't even start no rumpus.

"They says no, the Sioux gotta be pacified. Go ahead up an' do it, Ben. Jumpin' buffalo ghosts! Mebbe I oughta take a teethin' ring with me!"

The Kid studied the horizon with feigned indifference.

"We'll have to go, Ben. Orders are orders. I'll tell one of the Indian kids to bring your horses in."

Ben sighed lugubriously. The Kid's one talent was for messing things up. Whenever possible, which was whenever he knew where Ben was going, he invited himself on scouting trips. More than once he had come close to losing both Ben's hair and his own. Ben's face took on the look of one who has talked too much.

He said sternly, "I'm goin' alone. If you don't bring them hosses in tonight, I'll scalp ya. If you even go near the Mactah, I'll turn ya over to the Sioux. Got it?"

STILL fuming inwardly, but offering no further protest, Ben rode out of the fort on a cavalry horse. Wrapped in a blanket and tied to the saddle behind him were three days' rations. He carried no weapons save a belt knife. The Great White Father had decided to make friends with his red children, and weapons were no sign of friendship.

The Mactah Sioux, under the leadership of old Chief Wimika, had been promised that that land bounded by the Mactah River, the Rocky Mountains, and the Canadian border, should be eternally theirs. They had been granted the reservation on condition that they cease scalping their white brothers.

Wimika was too old and too wise, had hit the warpath and been defeated too many times, to believe that the Indians stood any chance against the white soldiers. He and most of the Sioux who had ridden with him when the Indians still had the upper hand in their own country, would try to maintain the peace they had promised to keep.

But there was always a sufficiency of hot-blooded youngsters, inflamed with the traditions of their tribe, who were sure that they could do not only as well, but much better, than their elders ever had done. Kindled and ready to blaze, a spark would set these youngsters off.

The spark had been provided in the person of Black Hawk, the son of a mighty warrior who had slain four cavalry men in hand-to-hand combat before being killed himself. Black Hawk had been the owner of three hundred horses, and also possessed the Indian's fondness for gambling. Getting in a card game with a crooked Indian agent and his assistant, Black Hawk had been relieved of half his horse herd.

Two days later a more sophisticated Indian pointed out to Black Hawk where the cards had been marked.

Instead of confining itself to the two crooked gamblers, Black Hawk's wrath expanded to include the entire white race. But not even the most fiery of the young men cared to risk getting himself shot because Black Hawk had been cheated out of half his horses.

So Black Hawk went into the hills and stayed alone a couple of days. On his return, he announced that one of the various Indian gods—the officers hadn't been able to tell Ben which one—had become his special benefactor. The god had told him that the white men had under way a plan to murder every Indian, and had appointed Black Hawk the leader to drive the hated pale faces from the country.

The god had promised that no harm would come to any Indian, and Black Hawk had promised plenty of loot to all who rode under his standard. Any influential Indian who spoke that way would have small trouble persuading others at least to listen to him.

Ben frowned. Tooker already had a detail on the trail of the horses, and no doubt all of them would be recovered. But by that time the war could be started. Once the young men were on the warpath, nothing but bullets and sabres would stop them—and a lot of settlers were going to get murdered before they were stopped.

Ben swore again, making unprintable comment on all army officers. Fifty cavalry men, armed and ready to strike, could camp close to the Mactah village and almost surely prevent any uprising. They would be all ready to handle the Sioux if they did rebel.

As it was, Ben would have to depend on Wimika. The old chief usually had his tribe well in hand, and might be able to dampen his young firebrands.

FIVE miles away from the Mactah village, Ben turned from the trail into the forest. It was almost dark, and nobody who valued his hair went prowling around a Sioux reservation at night—even in times of peace.

Ben came to a little stream, rode his horse a couple of miles up it, and camped in a small grove of spruces close

to the water. Anybody who saw fit to track him would come up the stream. But they would be looking for a trail, and could be detected before they detected him.

With early dawn he was up again, mounted and riding on. From the top of a knoll he looked down on the Sioux village, a hundred lodges gleaming white in the early morning sunshine. The fact that there were women and children about showed that the village was not yet prepared for war. But there was a hushed tenseness about it, a fixed anticipation. It was like that moment immediately preceding the opening of a battle.

Suddenly a warrior, carrying a rifle and with a Colt revolver thrust into a well filled cartridge belt, stepped from the brush to grasp the bridle of Ben's horse.

Ben looked down at him coolly. The warrior was young, and save for the scalp lock, his head was shaven. Through insolent, half-closed eyes, he looked up at Ben. Ben raised his hands, palms forward, to show that he was unarmed.

"I come in peace."

"On what mission?"

"My message is for Wimika."

"You cannot see Wimika. Leave now."

Ben lowered his hands. To hesitate would be to lose all. He returned the young brave's insolent stare.

"I came to see Wimika. I do not deal with striplings who do not wear even one eagle feather. Get out of the way."

The young brave hesitated, half lifted his rifle. But the steady contempt in Ben's eyes, and long years of bowing to Wimika's authority, had their effect.

"Come then. I will take you to Wimika."

Ben rode behind the brave down to and through the Sioux village, which was crowded with Sioux who fell in behind Ben's horse as he rode to Wimika's lodge. Ben dismounted. Looking neither to the right nor left, since it would not do for a messenger from the White Father to notice the rabble, he walked in.

Wimika's lodge was a big one, decorated with many symbols commemorative of the numerous valorous feats Wimika had accomplished throughout his life, and it was elaborately furnished. Three women got up and left when Ben entered. Wimika himself sat on a deer skin covered dais at the end of the lodge.

Since he could no longer lead his tribe in battle, Wimika did not wear about his person any of the decorations he had fairly won in his younger days. He had even removed from his head the crest of forty eagle feathers symbolic of the forty scalps he had personally taken. But the old chief needed no artificial dignity. His intelligent eyes and austere bearing were regal. He continued to stare straight ahead, gave no sign that he knew anyone had entered the lodge.

BEN advanced until he was within a yard of the old man, and spoke in the Sioux language. "Wimika, I have come to make peace."

Still not deigning to look at Ben, Wimika spoke with quiet dignity. "There is no war."

"It does not befit a chief to evade issues as a squaw would. You know me, and you know why I have come."

Wimika's voice became edged with melancholy. "Yes. I know why you have come."

"We want no wars with you, Wimika. We want only to live in peace in our country, and leave you in peace in yours."

For the first time, Wimika looked at Ben.

"I am old. But I am not yet blind. Leaving the Sioux in peace in their country means leaving them until enough white men want that country. However, I have fought the white men all my life. I have seen them grow from a few, whom we could have killed easily, to many, against whom we have no chance. I do not want any more wars.

"But fear of a whipping, if he has never been whipped, never deterred the young dog from chasing the rabbit. Fear of bullets, if he has never been shot at, never stopped a young man from going to war. Among my young men is one, Black Hawk, who lost some horses through his own foolishness. Now he makes much talk and boasts largely of the magic he commands.

"The rest of my young men are somewhat impressed by him. They shave their scalp locks, stop peaceful messengers on the trail, and play at going to war. I have told them that the white men want no war, and all the Indians will be killed if they make one. Until now, they have listened to my words.

"Still I am glad you have come. My people know you, know that you are one of the few white men who never speak with a double meaning. If you come with me, and tell them yourself that the white men do not want to fight, they will believe you and no one will have anything to fear."

Ben breathed easier. This wasn't going to be as hard as he had thought. Perhaps, he admitted grudgingly, the officers had been right. Wimika realized fully that any Indian uprising could lead only to an ultimate massacre of the Indians. He had talked against war, and the young men had listened to him.

Ben followed the chief through the flap of the lodge to a platform in the center of the village. He mounted the platform with Wimika, who picked up the leg bone of an elk and struck a leather-covered drum three times. Ben turned around, waited for the village to assemble.

His eye was caught by a magnificent young warrior standing idly near the door of a lodge. Over six feet tall, the young brave wore a pair of elaborately fringed buckskin breeches. Ostentatiously displayed in his hair were three eagle feathers: he had taken three scalps. His neck was ringed with a string of grizzly claws. Tied about his middle and hanging halfway to his knees was a belt of dried reeds, dyed bright red. The warrior was Black Hawk and the reed belt represented the sign of the god he was working with.

The Sioux gathered and Ben began to speak.

"I have come to cement the bonds of friendship between the white men and the Sioux. I have come to tell you that our soldiers do not leave the fort, their rifles rust away for lack of use. I have come to say that we are grateful for peace, and grateful to our Sioux brothers for making no move to break it. I—"

From in back of Ben there was a sudden commotion, and an indignant voice rang through the entire camp.

"Lemme go!"

Ben turned to see the Kid, mounted on a little brown horse that was entirely in charge of four strapping Sioux. The Kid rose in the saddle, and his indignant roar was heard by every Indian.

"If you don't lemme go, the whole United States army will come up here and shoot every one of you! They will anyway if I tell 'em to!"

An excited quiver ran through the assembled Sioux.

Ben felt sweat break on his temple. Wimika gathered his blanket around him, and with that act seemed to wrap himself completely in melancholy. Black Hawk was bounding toward the platform. Ben tried to speak, but the crowd was in an uproar. The Kid was pulled from his horse and hustled up to the platform. His chubby face formed a beaming smile that was supposed to be reassuring.

"Hello, Ben. I came just as soon as I got your horses in. I thought you might need help."

WALKING slowly, his measured tread a funeral step, Wimika left the platform. The crowd opened up to let him pass as with head bent he returned to his lodge. Ben watched him go, and knew why he was going: Wimika could do nothing any more.

Adhering to and believing Wimika, who had promised them that the white man wanted no war, but at the same time pleasantly excited by Black Hawk's promises, the whole camp had heard the Kid roar out his threat of destruction. There were enough who understood English to translate for those who did not. The Kid was a white man whom many of the Sioux had seen around the fort. There was no reason to suppose that he did not convey the white man's sentiments.

Beside the Kid, Ben stood tensely on the back of the platform, waiting the shots and thrown tomahawks that would cut himself and the Kid down. They did not come, and Ben clutched desperately at a single ray of hope. The Sioux were with Black Hawk, but not completely.

Had Black Hawk been a seasoned warrior, the rest of them would have flocked to his standard. But he was very young, and had only three scalps to his credit. Among the Sioux were many veteran warriors not lightly to be talked into desperate adventure by a mere boy.

A yard in front of the two white men, and facing away from them, Black Hawk began to speak.

"I went into the hills with only my medicine bag. I spoke with the fire god. He said to me, 'Black Hawk, now is the time to drive the white man from Indian country. Black Hawk, you are the leader of the Sioux. Follow my voice, and you shall come to a marsh.'

"I followed his voice. I found the marsh. The fire god spoke again. 'Black Hawk, from the center of this marsh pluck as many reeds as you have fingers and toes. Wear them on your person. Thus shall you be given the cunning of the rail that hides in the marsh, the swiftness of the ducks that feed there, and the wisdom of the wounded elk that heals his wounds in marsh mud.

" 'Paint them my color, the color of fire, the color of lightning, the color of the sun, and I will guide you wherever you go. Yours shall be the destruction of the fire that leaves nothing in its wake, the devastation of the lightning that rends the mightiest tree, and rather than remaining passively to be murdered by the white soldiers, once again shall your people find a place in the sun.'

"I did as the fire god bade me. I returned, and imparted to all of you his words of wisdom. But you chose to believe an old man who is afraid to fight any more. You let yourselves be lulled into expecting peace. But all of you have just heard the white man say that his soldiers will come here and kill us! Can there be any doubt now as to who is right?"

"What's he sayin', Ben?" the Kid whispered.

"Just leadin' up to a parley," Ben said.

THE crowd was silent now, hanging raptly on Black Hawk's every movement. For a minute he stood with eyes closed and arms outstretched, not speaking while he let what he had already said sink in.

The mounting sun beat down harder, and little shimmering heat waves ascended from the walls of the lodges. Black Hawk turned to give Ben and the Kid one contemptuous glance. With his eyes Ben measured the distance to the long knife that was thrust into a sheath at Black Hawk's belt. It would take only one jump to get that knife and plunge it into Black Hawk's back. That wouldn't help anything, but it certainly wouldn't hurt.

Ben and the Kid, weaponless and surrounded by enemies, were lost anyway if Black Hawk won the Sioux over. And, if he started a war, let him be the first casualty! Black Hawk brushed one hand about the belt of red reeds, and continued his speech.

"Every man is given a tongue, and every man uses it. But I do not ask you to accept words. I can offer proof of what I have told you. We have two white men here. Give them each a knife, and let both of them fight me! If I—"

Ben's eyes ran up and down the Indian's magnificent physique. Given a knife and told to fight Black Hawk, the Kid would be killed in the first two seconds. Ben himself had seldom fought with knives, doubted that he could stand for long against Black Hawk, who must be a first rate knife fighter or he never would have made the proposition. The Indian went on—

"—do not kill them both, then do not follow me. If I am even so much as scratched, if the white men can see the color of my blood, call me a false prophet. But if I do kill both of them, then will it be proven that the fire god's medicine is great! If the white men have medicine any greater, let them use it now! Let them importune and have some sign from their god! Let me stand or fall with mine!"

Black Hawk stood dramatically erect with his right arm upraised and his right first clenched. For the fraction of a second, his spine and arm seemed to grow stiffer. But his pose was no longer dramatic. Ben, about to leap for the Indian's knife, drew back. He heard a startled squawk from Black Hawk, and both the Indian's hands shot to the seat of his pants. Ben looked, saw a thin smoke arising there. Then the dried reeds burst into flame.

Black Hawk leaped from the platform, and trailed by the smoke, still squawking hysterically, started running madly toward his lodge. A matter-of-fact looking squaw came out and doused him with a pail of water. But only blackened stubs of the fire god's great medicine still dangled from Black Hawk's belt.

For a moment the Sioux stood dumfounded. Then an old warrior began to laugh. The laughter spread, until all the village was rolling on the ground or leaning against the lodges, convulsed with helpless merriment. A couple of braves stopped laughing, cast friendly glances at Ben and the Kid, and started roaring all over again.

The Kid stood with jaws agape. Ben sank to a sitting position, and dangled both legs over the side of the platform. He shook his head, again overwhelmed by something he could not understand—though it was all very simple.

Knowing the Kid, he should have known that the seat of Black Hawk's buckskin breeches would be a perfect proving ground for the Kid's burning glass.

Craig crowded his man into a corner from which there could be no retreat —and put a savage period to the fight

Northward Rails

By Frank Bunce

JEFFREY CRAIG is fighting to complete a railroad—the Wisconsin Northern—that will open up a rich new empire in the Northwest of the Eighteen-fifties. Opposing him is the crooked manipulator,

WILLIAM BARSTOW, who has robbed the settlers of their investments by falsely promising to build a railroad in their name. Fronting for Barstow are

LUKE GRANVILLE, Madison banker, and

MILT WYCLIFFE, publisher of the newspaper in Lakehead, Wisconsin, where the new railroad project was started.

Forced to extreme measures because of a lack of capital, Craig locates a quantity of rail iron which is claimed by GAVIN STEPHENSON, the iron man; and as he struggles to complete the road southward, Stevenson has the law waiting in the nearest county. Once Craig comes out of the wilderness, he will be ticketed for prison.

In order to get his hands on the untapped riches of the Northwest, Barstow knows that he must gain control of the Wisconsin Northern before it is completed; and for this purpose he determines to lure Craig out of the wilderness and into the hands of the law.

ANNE WYCLIFFE, the publisher's niece, is intended to be the lure. Barstow has persuaded her that he is working in the settlers' interests, and that Craig is trying to rob them. Now he makes her believe that it is her duty to go north and trick Craig into marrying her, so that he can be turned over to the authorities.

But when she arrives at the construtcion camp Craig suddenly tells her that he loves her and wants to marry her, in spite of the prison term that exposure may mean; and just as suddenly Ann discovers that she loves him.

And on the next morning, before she has an opportunity to confess the purpose for which she came—and warn Craig against Barstow—her new happiness is shattered. MIKE SLANE, Craig's old friend, arrives in camp with the news that Barstow and five men are encamped at Mena Creek, waiting for someone.

Ann's explanation comes too late for Craig. Bitterly he tells her that she will have to go to Mena Creek with his party. "You see," he says, "I'm taking five men too. We, not Barstow, will have the advantage of surprise."

CHAPTER XXX

TEETH AND BOTTLES—LIKE GENTLEMEN

OUTSIDE, a chore boy held three horses, saddled and ready. On one her saddlebags and bedroll were lashed. The butt of a rifle protruded from Shane's saddle

The first installment of this six-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for July 12

holster, and Craig's pistol holsters, though covered, bulged.

In a few moments they were joined by Hauck, Durstine, and two other horsemen, and all of them set off southward along the supply road at a steady lope that, by noon, had brought them to the edge of Pupen marsh, thirty-eight miles from their starting point.

They stopped there briefly for tea and cold meat sandwiches, then went on at the same relentless pace. None of them said much; all had the same noncommittal absorption. There seemed no vengefulness in it. They only looked like men with a difficult job to do, intent upon seeing it through; but it seemed to Ann, anticipating the climax of this ride with a dreadful certainty, that their impassively was more ominous than threats or curses.

At about two they reached the grade line coming up from the south. A few miles farther on, Craig led them off the supply road onto a woods trail, dim with age, and so narrow and tortuous that they had to proceed at a walk and in single file. The forest, of beech and oaks and maples, was growing dark and cold when they reached the crest of a curving ridge overlooking Mena Creek.

The shadows from the hills were long and dark over the cup-like valley, but the settlement—straddling a slow, twisting stream—stood in the sun; and the log houses, the plank bridge and adventurous slashings up and down the railroad track all had a new, scrubbed, glowing look.

Craig stopped the party, and he and Slane went ahead to a point of great vantage. They talked; Slane pointing downward to an oak grove near the river, a mile or two from the village, Craig nodding thoughtfully. Finally, he turned in his saddle to beckon Ann on to him.

"I'm going to ask you to stay with us until we get to the bottom of this ridge," he told her. "There we'll stop, but I want you to keep going. Follow the trail two miles to its intersection with the wagon road, then go south on the road to North Junction. You may either continue on from there to Lakehead, or wait for a train to Madison, as you prefer. There'll be a special along some time this evening."

She was puzzled. "Why should I go to Madison?"

Slane had been regarding her intently. He said suddenly, with conviction: "Jeff, this girl's all right. She didn't bear nothin' last night. I kin tell."

Craig seemed to ignore that. He said to her, choosing his words with great care: "Your uncle is in difficulties there. I thought you might want to see him." He saw her look of alarm, and added quickly: "No, nothing has happened to him. He merely chose to tell the truth about certain activities in which he and Barstow and others were engaged. I believe you'll be glad he did, after the first shock is over; I think you'll be proud of him."

She would have asked more questions, but he beckoned on the others, and the party descended to the valley. At a point where the road swung southward again, to negotiate another ridge, he stopped. Ann stopped with him, but then, remembering his instructions, went on, following the trail until she was high above the others, and out of sight. Then she stopped and fixed her eyes on the oak grove—listening, with dread, for the sound of gunshots.

THE others, meantime, had tied their horses and looked to their weapons. All had pistols but Slane. He had a frontiersman's lack of confidence in short-barreled weapons.

Craig pointed out the grove. "That's Barstow's camp. We'll try to surprise whoever is there, and disarm and disperse them. All but Barstow. Mike, here, will take him back to Madison."

"What for?" asked Hauck.

"To answer to charges of fraud, conspiracy to defraud, grand larceny, embezzlement—a half dozen other charges. Milton Wycliffe has made a detailed confession concerning the operations of the People's Railroad company, the Mortgage Receivers' Association, and the misappropriation of funds of the Grand State League, involving himself, Granville, Barstow, and numerous others. We want Barstow alive, and I'd prefer to get him without bloodshed; but don't take foolish chances. Proceed as you please, and use your own judgment about what to do."

He started toward the grove. The others followed closely until he turned left to avoid a small slashing, and there Hauck and Darnley, the walking boss, and Colt, the dump boss, diverged to go around the opposite side. At the edge of the grove, Mike Slane slanted away to the left, Durstine to the right, and Craig went on alone.

Until then they had been walking through thickets of young beeches and poplars. But the oaks grew cleanly, intolerant of everything but their own kind; and down the wide aisles between them Craig could see the camp quite plainly.

There was a big fireplace of flat stones, over which a kettle was hung, and over the kettle a man crouched with the anxious vigilance of any outdoors cook. Across the fire two more men lounged, and behind them was a tent with its flap closed. Barstow was not in sight.

One of the lounging men looked up casually as Craig approached. He started to speak, then choked on the words as Mike Slane appeared behind him, his rifle leveled. His companion rose excitedly, but froze in his tracks, as Slane was joined by Colt and Durstine.

The cook, however, was one of those men of sublime or stupid tenacity of purpose who ignore odds. In the face or four armed men he jerked a pistol from the holster at his hip and started to raise it. Craig knocked it out of his hand. The man made a blind rush at him, that Craig stopped with a short blow to the jaw. The man went down, and lay still.

HAUCK and Darnley had come up behind the tent. They were not foolish enough to lift the flap and look inside. Instead, each grasped a stay-rope and jerked on it. The tent sagged, with a sound of ripping canvas, and both threw their weight on it to bring it down. They poked wildly around among the wreckage; then desisted, looking rather foolish. No one was inside.

Craig asked of one of the men by the fire: "Where's Barstow?"

"In town. Jack Gore's with him. You'll likely find 'em at Sad Sam Daly's tavern," one answered. He spoke eagerly, ingratiatingly, keeping his hands up at about the level of his chest.

"What about the other man? There were six of you, all told, yesterday."

"Bill sent him up to the Cuts, three, four miles north. He was to watch fer you, hustle back an' report how many men you had with you. Durned if I kin see how you got around him."

Craig left the speculation unanswered. He spoke to Hauck: "Jim, you and Colt and Darnley start back. Take the wagon road, and when you see that lookout, boot him out of the country. Tom, you stay here and look after these men. Don't let any of them slip away until I get back."

"Where are you going?" Durstine spoke resentfully, wounded at being assigned a snap.

"In after Barstow, Mike and I." Craig put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You needn't fret. That cook is likely to be problem enough for you, when he comes to. He's as stubborn a man as I ever met."

Slane said: "Why should we go in after Barstow, Jeff, when we kin wait here, an' git him easier? He'll be back."

"Because," said Craig, "I know Sad Sam Daly. He kept a saloon at Kaukalin when I was building from there, and he's death against shooting. I mean that literally. He keeps a two-barreled shotgun under his counter, and he uses it on any men that try to settle their differences with guns, instead of with boots and teeth and bottles, like gentlemen."

Mike's head bobbed, wagging slow comprehension. His one good eye began to gleam. "You hate Barstow pretty bad, don't you, Jeff? So bad you jest got to have your hands on 'im."

"Yes," Craig said, and walked away toward town.

CHAPTER XXXI

BATTLE OF THE GIANTS

SAD SAM'S tavern was a square, two-story log building occupying a choice corner on a dirt street facing the railroad and a wagon road along the river that some day might be a street. All its lower story was given over to a barroom, now quite well frequented, mostly with lumberjacks waiting for the first good snow that would send them back up into the pineries of the Lower Wolf.

Barstow, in a broad-brimmed hat and flannel shirt, sat at a table in the rear of the room, playing cards with Gore and two other men. At Craig's entrance, he looked up and half rose, his hand going toward a tail pocket of his frock coat; divining instantly that his plans must have miscarried.

But then, with a glance toward the long plank bar, he checked the movement and sat down again. He, too, knew about Daly's shotgun.

Daly himself was at the bar; an emaciated, mournful-looking man, whose sole topic of conversation, to those with whom he would talk at all, was his defective inwards. Craig went to him.

Hello, Sam," he said.

Daly turned lackluster eyes upon him. "Hello, Jeff. How are you?"

"All right," said Craig. He put a boot up on a crosstie—probably filched from his railroad—spiked to the foot of the bar in lieu of a foot rail. "How about you, Sam?"

Daly brightened instantly. "Bad off, Jeff. Terrible. Lungs, stomach, liver all out o' whack. Can't eat nothin', can't sleep nights . . ."

Craig let him talk while he watched Barstow. The man undeniably had nerve. He played out the hand he had been holding when Craig came in, then took the deck and dealt, without fumbling a card. Most of the money in sight was in front of him.

Craig took advantage of a moment's break in the flow of Daly's complaints to say: "Sam, meet Mike Slane. He's up here hunting with me. Skunk hunting. We're after a man wanted in Madison on a dozen counts of fraud and theft, on the evidence of one of his own associates. He's stolen millions, schemed to deprive thousands of people of their homes and farms; and to top it, he played the foulest trick I can conceive of to try to trap me here.

"He's in this room now, and I want him. I want to see that he gets what he deserves."

Some of the lumberjacks at the bar began to look interested. Others, who had seen Barstow's gesture when Craig came in, had discreetly withdrawn from a possible line of fire. Daly frowned, perplexed. He had a literal mind, none too nimble. "You can't arrest a man here, Jeff. It's unorganized territory, with no sheriff."

"I don't intend to arrest him here," Craig said. "All I'm going to do is beat him up so badly he'll be a case for the hospital at Madison. There is a sheriff there. The only thing that bothers me, Sam, is that he's got a gun. And I know how you hate to have your place shot up."

"What's that? A gun?" Daly stooped a little, though his eyes stayed above the counter; when he straightened, the famous shotgun, with its two flint hammers, was in his hands. "I thought everybody knowed better, by this time, than to bring a gun into my saloon. Who's got a gun here?"

"I have, for one," said Craig. The shotgun promptly swiveled toward him, but he went on calmly: "Don't get excited. I'll give mine up, but only when he does his. I'm talking about Barstow, in case you haven't guessed."

DALY swung the gun toward the card table. The two lumberjacks hastily slid to the floor and started crawling away. Gore sprang up, his dark cheeks livid. But Barstow sat still; thinking, estimating his chances. He hated to leave the table. Behind it, he had an immense advantage in any kind of fight. But not even its thick board top would be much of a shield against that shotgun.

"Bill, git up an' give me your gun," said Daly.

Barstow made his decision. He rose. He walked almost to the bar, and then Daly said: "That's fur enough. Butt first, Bill."

Barstow produced a short four-barreled pistol, butt first. But he held it, looking at Craig, who drew his own gun and put it on the bar. To Slane, Craig said: "Get out of the way, Mike. Over there by Gore."

Other men who had scattered and flattened when Daly's shotgun showed rose now, formed a close semi-circle about the prospective combatants. Barstow surrendered his pistol, then, with a lightning movement, whirled and struck.

Craig had expected that, and had thought he was ready for it. But he had failed to reckon with the amazing speed of Barstow's hands. The man's first blow caught him full in the mouth. He was just able to get away from the hard right hook that followed it, but another left caught and rocked him. He evaded Barstow's too-confident rush, drove both fists to the jaw as the other turned.

Barstow went down, sliding along the rough front of the bar. Craig went for his face with his boots, but Barstow was away and on his feet almost instantly.

Daly said sharply: "Hold on, there!" and his shotgun enforced the command. The two backed away from each other, turned to face him, and he said: "Jeff, what the hell is this? I thought you wanted to arrest this man, not kill him."

"I'm not particular," said Craig. "Either's all right."

Daly looked from one to another of them. Blood was spurting from Craig's mouth, and on Barstow's pale skin, just above the point of his chin on both sides of his face, red spots half the size of a fist were showing; the marks of blows that would have torn most men's heads off.

The tavern keeper sighed happily. He saw a great fight in prospect, one that men would talk about for years, all up and down the timber lanes. And they would tell how Sad Sam Daly had refereed it with his shotgun.

With a connoisseur's instinct, he prolonged the moment, addressing Barstow: "Then it's nothin' barred. That all right with you?"

"I don't know any other way to fight," said Barstow.

"Then go to it," Daly said, and laid down the gun so that he could enjoy the spectacle without distraction.

THE two were wary, closing up the distance between them. Each had learned respect for the other. Craig took a blow full in the face to get his own right across, and another red spot showed just under the other's cheek bone.

Barstow struck back, but swayed as Craig's fists an-

swered him. He lowered his head and closed in, but Craig eluded his clutching hands, pounded his exposed cheeks and temples mercilessly. Barstow rocked away, collapsing backward against the bar.

Craig followed gingerly. He saw how Barstow's hand gripped the edge, and was ready for his quick, leaping kick, whirling away from it. But one of his boots skidded on the wet floor; and before he could recover Barstow was upon him, imprisoning him against the bar with an arm around his neck from behind, a leg laced around his own from in front.

Slowly, inexorably, then, he began forcing Craig's head back.

The room, a moment before in tumult, suddenly grew still. All the intent half-circle of spectators saw what Barstow intended. By holding the lower part of Craig's body straight, jerking back his head and shoulders, he could break or pulverize Craig's backbone.

It would not take much. Craig was a tall man; his back met the plank edge of the bar at just the point where it was most vulnerable. Mike Slane started impulsively toward them, but stopped even before he saw Daly's clutch for the shotgun. He knew Craig would rather die than have help.

Only it was not pleasant to see a man die this way.

Craig realized his danger well enough. The first jerk Barstow tried sent a flame of agony up his spinal column and outward to every nerve end; but he stayed cool, utilized the momentary slackening of Barstow's grip to force his chin down into the angle formed by the other's forearm and biceps.

That gave him breath and a slight improvement in his position. It threw him a little forward; not much, but enough to enable him to hold out a little longer.

And more important, it gave him a glimpse of the one vulnerable spot on Barstow within his reach. His own hands were helpless, his head and one leg imprisoned; but the other was free; and Barstow's shin bone—the most sensitive spot on the human frame—conveniently exposed.

Barstow jerked again; again agony seared through Craig, seemed to explode in a flash of light before his starting eyes. But he refused to yield to the swirl of numbness that engulfed him, lifting his free foot, driving it backward against Barstow's leg.

He struck the exact spot he aimed at, and the leg twitched spasmodically, shuddered away, so that Craig was able to throw himself sidewise and outward, slip free of the strangling arm about his neck.

Barstow sprang after him, almost imprisoned him again; but Craig fought free with head and fists, and straightened, able to meet his man on even terms again.

THEY came back together slowly, but not from caution. They had forgotten caution now. There was contempt for consequences in their deliberate, unguarded approach to each other.

Barstow struck, and blood spurted from Craig's mouth again; but he drove his own right fist to Barstow's cheek, gashing it to the bone.

They closed, and traded a score of blows that had a savage power, but not enough to knock either off his feet. None was a direct full arm blow, struck with all of either man's body weight behind it. Neither had yet found an opening for such a blow, that would decide the fight.

Barstow tried to create that opening with a sudden, leaping kick at Craig's chin. Craig caught it on his shoulder, felt his left arm go dead, but pressed on forward, upsetting Barstow, sprawling him into the throng of spectators.

They scattered hastily, but again the man evaded Craig's boots, springing up to close with him. They staggered against the wooden stove rail at the rear of the room, crashed to the floor together.

They did not roll. They were too well matched for that, and their feet were so entangled that neither could try a kick or knee blow.

To the spectators, hastily reforming to ring them in again, the spectacle was more dramatic than any wild exchange of blows. They knew that the slightest change in position might give victory to either man; and it seemed that Barstow had forced that change when he worked his right arm up over Craig's paralyzed left arm, and brought it free.

They were so close together that a blow would have been weak and futile; but Barstow doubled only four fingers and a thumb of his free hand, and with the index finger poked at Craig's ear.

Craig saw the thrust and evaded it by turning his head away. He kew what a poke in the ear could mean. It could rupture an ear drum, drive a man mad.

Barstow tried again; again Craig was away. But now he was aware of a new danger. In turning his ear away, he was exposing his eyes; and Barstow's next thrust was at them. He missed, but only because Craig gave ground quickly, lifting the other over with him, as a shield.

For a moment, then, he was safe; but only until Barstow began poking at his ear again. With every thrust, Craig had to give ground, to evade it. It was like the turning of some stiff, reluctant wheel, with Craig going down to the bottom, Barstow rising to the top.

As well as any of the spectators, Craig knew what would happen to him when the wheel had turned all the way over—when he was fully downed. Only one chance remained to him, a desperate gamble that might only serve to hasten the end.

He waited until one of his shoulder blades was flat to the floor, the other touching it; then, as he had expected, Barstow put all his strength into an effort to flatten him. Simultaneously Craig strained too—but with the other, not against him; striving to keep the wheel turning, to throw Barstow on across him and underneath.

The corner post supporting the stove rail almost defeated him, blocking Barstow's descent. But the shock of the collision numbed him momentarily, long enough for Craig to break free and regain his feet.

BARSTOW came up with him, and for a third time they faced each other. But there was a difference now. Craig felt it; the spectators felt it, and yelled their delight, Mike Slane's exultant whoop rising above them all.

Even Barstow felt it, and the lift of his battered lips away from his bleeding teeth was a cornered snarl.

Both men were dog tired and slowing. Both were badly battered; their faces shredded, Craig's left arm hanging useless, one of Barstow's legs crumpling under him, somehow strained or torn in that battle on the floor.

The difference was that twice with the breaks against him Craig had proved himself unconquerable. He declined the advantage given him by Barstow's crippled leg, and walked straight on to meet him. Barstow's fists drummed against his face, but he gave no ground, swinging his own right hand to Barstow's jaw.

The blow turned the man half around, and to save himself he had to go backward, with a grotesque, hopping movement. Craig pursued him relentlessly until he had his man crowded into a corner from which there could be no retreat. And there he put a savage period to the fight.

Braced against the walls, Barstow was striking four blows to Craig's one, but none of them was very effective. Something more had gone out of him than merely breath and strength. Courage had deserted him too, as he saw

the inevitable end. For he had never known defeat.

Craig took those wild, panicked blows on shoulders, skull, cheekbones without flinching, while he set himself for a finishing blow.

Barstow ducked under the first, and pain like a knife slitting the veins of his forearm seared through Craig as his fist crashed into the log wall. But he disregarded it, and struck again; timing the blow so precisely that in trying to evade it, Barstow only propelled himself against it. He fell, and lay on his back, his mouth wide open and rigid.

Craig stood looking down at him a long time before he realized the fight was over. It was hard to get back the normal use of his mind and senses that, for thirty minutes that might have been thirty years, had been concentrated upon combat. He turned to the spectators, who seemed dazed as he; sifted out Mike Shane from among them.

"You can take charge of him now, Mike. I think he's a hospital case, now," he said.

"He is that. He sure is," said Mike. He spoke weakly, almost automatically; but suddenly, he opened his mouth in a tremendous whoop of exultation.

Daly had been sufficiently stirred to leave his bar, for the first time in anyone's recollection. Now he walked back and put his shotgun away, and then proceeded to break another tradition of long standing. He put a bottle and a whiskey glass up on the bar. He filled the glass, put away the bottle.

"Here, have one, Jeff. On me," he said.

Craig laughed, through crushed lips. "A drink? After that!"

Daley saw the point. He withdrew the glass, poured the contents back into the bottle. "No, I guess not. Not after that."

CHAPTER XXXII

ROYAL AMERICAN FOLLY

NEWS of Barstow's arrest reached Lakehead only after he had already gone through and was safe in the custody of officials in Madison. Arraigned before a special jury, he was promptly indicted on nine charges of fraud and theft, along with Granville and five others, two being the nominal heads of the Mortgage Receivers' Association.

Only one indictment—for conspiracy—was returned against Milton Wycliffe, and it was anticipated that his sentence would be light.

But it developed that he was prepared to sentence himself far more severely than any magistrate. On the day after his release on nominal bail, he was found dead, shot by his own hand. At his elbow was a careful, written restatement of all the testimony he had offered against his former associates.

No one, not even his niece, could feel that his suicide was an unrelived tragedy. In death he had a significance he had never achieved in life; though even this final grand gesture was not free from an element of futility. Promptly on their release on heavy bail, Barstow and Granville returned to Chicago, and so successfully fought extradition that they could never be brought to trial.

With this, however, most of the people they had deceived had small concern. Of more moment was the fact that the Mortgage Receivers' Association in forced receivership was obliged to compromise its holdings; and since these comprised the greater portion of the railroad mortgages, the strain upon the mortgagors was relieved immeasurably.

And then they had acquired another absorbing interest in watching the weather for signs of a hard winter that, by an ironic twist of circumstance, was now the only thing that could give them a railroad.

Almost everyone knew now what was at stake up there above the county line, where Craig was hammering a track like a slender wedge into the hills and swamps and forests that separated him from his southern railhead.

They had learned something about railroad building in the past three years; they knew better than to expect perfection now. They admitted that the things they were hearing about the road might be true: that a part of it was dangerously short of spikes and bolts; that iron-strapped wooden rails would close one gap, that these might even be laid bare across the marshes.

But all these things they knew were trivial beside one great fundamental: that the railroad must go through on time; that it must not fall again into bankrupt chaos, to become the loot of some new group of wreckers.

But they knew too that the railroad commission would have no such tolerant view, and they hoped ardently and anxiously as Craig himself for cold that would freeze those marshes deep and solidly, snow that would cover the road's other defects.

BUT that winter was perverse, alternating frost with thaw, heavy sleets that were never quite snows with long periods of drought. October was dry and warm, and Craig thrust his grade twenty miles farther south. But the November frosts were so severe that the work faltered; and in December when the first hard freeze came, he flung his rail confidently across the rigid face of Pupen Marsh.

But the freeze was followed immediately by mild weather that left only slush in its wake for week after week, as the year dwindled to its close.

On the twenty-ninth day of December, the track coming south met the track going north, and the last spike was driven with considerable pomp and oratory that deceived no one of the three or four hundred persons present—except the chief speaker, who was his excellency, the governor.

The governor was a man with an easy ability to see only what he wanted to see; and on the way up he had remarked with real enthusiasm the clot of immigrant wagons on the outskirts of Lakehead, camped there to await the opening of the railroad land office. Farther on the slashings of the squatters had similarly delighted him.

He may have had a moment's discomfort on one of the bad curves or grades, but he ignored that; and he failed to observe as everyone else did that only one train, the train that had carried him north, came to the junction point. The work train did not come south for the reason that it would have sunk to its stack in the mud of Pupen Marsh if anyone had been foolhardy enough to make the attempt with it.

His excellency even missed the significance of the fact that the town men who had come up with him, intending to pick up any preëmptors' claims that might be available, stayed in the coaches and confined their trading activities to table stakes poker. Those shrewd traffickers in the laws of probabilities saw things without illusion.

Ann Wycliffe was one of those who came up from Lakehead; and after the ceremonies Craig sought her out to offer a word of commiseration for her uncle's death.

A thousand times since leaving Mena Creek she had imagined meeting him again, picturing him alternately as reproachful, wounded, angry, tender; anticipating anything but the sedulous formality with which he greeted her. It was as if he had obliterated the memory of their moment's intimacy, of everything that had gone before it.

Even more disturbing to her was the new, bitter humor she saw in him.

"IT'S something of a joke, this railroad, isn't it?" he said, with a short laugh. "We've put sweat and blood —even our honor—into it. And now we can't even get bad weather, to cover our bad workmanship."

He thrust out a hand in a gesture intended as mockery, testing the mild, humid air. But abruptly she saw his face change, his arm get rigid; and looking down at his hand, she saw a snowflake speckling it briefly, before melting. At the same moment another touched her cheek.

He looked at the sky. It was a uniform, noncommital gray. He wet a finger, held it to the north, and a little wind touched it.

He summoned Durstine. "Tom," he said—and his voice had a perceptible undercurrent of excitement—"remember what the cook said this morning? He said his game leg was hurting him. He said that meant a norther, that was going to drive the temperature down below zero, and give us two feet of snow, on the level."

"Yes, I remember. But he's said that before. He's been saying it for a month," Durstine answered.

"I know it. But this time he's right. Go down to North Junction with this train, hire back those men we let go yesterday. And round up teams. Get them back here as soon as possible."

"What do we want teams and men for?" Durstine asked.

"To keep the roadbed clear across that marsh. It's going to be cold, after this storm, but the marsh can't freeze unless we keep the snow off it."

Durstine was staring at him, and Ann knew what he was thinking. He was telling himself that Craig must have gone crazy suddenly; but he couldn't bank on that. Men have strange hunches sometimes. He shrugged, said, "All right, then," with an assumed indifference.

Ann did not go aboard until the train was ready to start, and by then her coat and hat were lightly speckled white. One of the town men looked at her as she passed down the coach aisle, then quickly looked out of the window. The three men with him did likewise, and promptly lost interest in their game.

The first man got up and went to the rear platform. He eyed the sky, the ground, the lightly leaning forests roundabout.

"How about it?" one of his fellows asked him casually.

"It might," he said, and suddenly sprang off the moving train. The others followed without hesitation. They had seen the laws of probabilities reversed before, like this, in a twinkling.

THE snow was coming faster, and the wind was vicious, when Ann got off at Lakehead. By next morning the storm was moderating, but snow was everywhere; drifted up to the window sills, piled high against the storm doors on the north and west sides of the house, though spread more evenly on the lake road: about two feet deep, just as the old cook had predicted.

Uptown, everybody was talking weather. The air and sky were clear, but the wind was steadily rising, growing colder. Before morning, men said, it would be below zero; cold enough to freeze a marsh solid, if it could be kept free of snow.

About noon a locomotive went north behind a huge plank snowplow. In midafternoon it was back, and Hauck dropped off it to ask for more men and teams to work the horse plows and scoops—all he could get, for the night was going to be a howler.

Most of the immigrants responded promptly, glad to have a chance to pick up wages and at the same time have a look at the land they had come to settle.

Late that evening the locomotive was back again bound for Junction City to attach a passenger coach and go on to Madison to pick up the railroad commissioners. Everyone drew a breath that mingled relief and anxiety, at hearing that. The die, then, was cast; the run was going to be attempted.

More town men came up next day, by stage from Madison, and with them a more formidable visitor: the dour iron man, Gavin Stevenson. By evening everyone knew he was there, and had guessed that he had come to make sure Craig would not elude him if the inspection train got through and he came down to receive his land grant. People put their feeling for him into three manevolent words:

"The old hangman!"

Most of that night Ann sat awake in a chair before a great pitch-pine fire in her living room; but in fancy she was up in the marshes where men and horses were laboring to keep the right of way clear.

The wind was strong against the windows, the cold so intense that it bit through even the sturdy old walls of the house; and she could picture all too vividly what was going on in that flat patch of desolate wilderness.

There would be great fires flaring against the stunted jackpines and tamaracks well back from the right of way—but to give light, not heat. The men and horses toiling with scoops and plows could not stop for warmth and rest. The wind, that kept filling up the troughs they made, would not let them stop.

By now the surface water would all have frozen over, the ground grown brittle. Yet here and there they would strike upon a soft spot, where a hoof would break through.

Such soft spots tonight were bad enough. They meant wet feet, a half hour's discomfort. But tomorrow a soft spot would mean a wrecked train, perhaps lost lives.

THERE was an illogical blend of grandeur and folly in that spectacle, she thought, of men laboring heroically to such an unheroic end. It was a fitting climax to the blend of heroism and folly that was the story of the railroad.

It had been built at preposterous cost. Not all the cost was in money. Her uncle had paid with his life for his part in it; its builder would pay with many years in jail, and others had paid with anxiety, despair, broken faiths.

But even in money, the cost had been too great. Enough had gone into it to raze flat every hill in its path, straighten every curve and grade, shape the soundest straightest cross ties from the forests around it, mould iron heavy enough to stand firm against the greatest loads an expanding country would speed across it.

But all they had now was an outline for a road. As much more would have to be put into it to make a real railroad of it.

There was the folly. But there was grandeur, too, in the fact that it could have been conceived at all.

Perhaps, she thought, grandeur and folly were very close of kin, perhaps they had to go together: twin essentials of a royal, lavish technique for conquering a land royal and lavish beyond all the dreams of those living in more niggardly latitudes.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CONQUEROR

NEXT morning the wind had died, but the air held its whetted edge. The sun shone coldly as a moon upon a crowd, so heavily bundled up as to be almost unrecognizable, watching from the depot platform the plume of smoke above the oak forests southward that signaled the approach of the inspection train.

Durstine was off as soon as the train had stopped, to hand down the commissioners. His concern for them seemed exaggerated until their condition became apparent.

Two, in top coats, light shoes and rubbers and hats with no ear muffs, went straight for the depot and the stove, walking none too steadily; and the air in there quickly became rank with the fumes of whiskey.

The third man, wearing a fur coat and cap and lumber man's rubbers, wandered off up the track in more conscientious fashion; but he tottered and blinked painfully in a way that could not have been wholly ascribed to the pale glimmer of the sun on snow. Durstine chuckled happily, watching him through a depot window.

"Drunk as a lord," he confided to Ann.

"They all are." She sniffed suspiciously. "I believe you are, too."

"Maybe. But it's in a good cause. Davis and Jackson—the two in here—were no problem. They came dressed light, and quite soon resigned themselves to inspecting nothing but depots that have stoves. But Becker, the man with the coat and boots, was a nuisance until he contracted chilblains and I started doctoring them with Doc Durstine's Favorite Prescription. Now he still meanders around, but he can't tell a rail from a sleeper."

He remembered something suddenly: "Oh, yes. Jeff said to ask you to arrange a dance here tonight. There'll be a lot of people waiting, I suppose, to see whether this train's going to come back. I got the idea, too, that he'd like to have you save a waltz for him."

"Did he say that?"

"No. Of course not. He wouldn't ask you for anything now, you know."

She looked at him with such stricken eyes that he amended hastily: "No, not because he holds anything against you. He understands—we've all always understood—why you did what you did. It was a mistake, like the mistakes all of us have made often, since this railroad was started. The reason he'd not ask you for anything is that he feels he couldn't, under the circumstances. The next five or ten years of his life may not be his own to dispose of as he pleases, you know."

"Oh," she said; and all the anxiety and uncertainty of months was gone in a rush of joy. She said: "Five years or fifty—it's all the same, I'd wait for him. I'd have to, whether he wanted me or not. No one else—"

"I thought you'd say something like that," said Durstine. "You can look for us back about ten, I'd say—if we get back at all."

"But you will be back—you and he—even if you don't get through, won't you?" she asked.

He grew suddenly very grave. "I don't know. You see Jeff's taking over the cab himself, at the county line."

"At the line?" She stared at him stricken. "But he'll not drive it over that marsh—where the engine is likely to go down at any moment?"

"Yes," said Durstine. "He has to. It's his railroad, you know."

"Yes, he has to," she agreed slowly. The captain had to stay with his ship, the colonel with his regiment; all men had to stay with the things they made, commanded. But for all that, she could not subdue a dreadful apprehension, watching the train pull out, rolling toward that marsh.

THEN she tried to keep herself so occupied that she would have no time to think. But she was helpless to the vagaries of her mind, that seemed split into two entities, each carrying on a life of its own.

A part busied itself with getting together a few town women and settlers' wives to sweep and scrub the depot, make ready for the dance; but another part was riding the train northward on the hands of a big wall clock that checked its progress.

Two o'clock: the train would be at Mena Creek by now and stopped for Craig. He would go aboard the inspection car first, she supposed, for a word and a drink with the commissioners—by now, most likely, quite drunk, and blissfully unaware of the perils that lay ahead.

Then he would go forward to the cab and take over the controls from a protesting engineer, who probably would salve the wound to his pride by displacing his fireman. Through the new towns of Dags Corners and Rail Head the train would go triumphantly.

Up Maple Ridge, with its reverse curve and three-and-one-half-percent grade it would strain, painfully, but still in comparative safety. But across that it would drop down to the marsh.

Perhaps Craig would try to race it across, hoping the train's speed would carry it over the danger spots, as a skater would race across sagging ice. But no, more likely he would go slowly; so that disaster, if it came, would be less likely to involve the coach.

No amount of caution or vigilance, however, could save the railroad if anywhere along that treacherous fifteen-mile expanse the rails buckled; and only a miracle could save the men inside it from a trapped, flaming death. . . .

Ann trimmed all the oil lamps, made shades for them; plugged the new windows even tighter against the cold, which was increasing with the approach of evening. Men came to fuel the fires and erect a platform for the orchestra. But all of them were nervous, anxious as she.

The trouble was that there could be no end to the suspense for many hours yet. No telegraph line ran that far north. If the train had gone safely across, they would not know it until it had gone to the end of the line and returned—at around ten, Durstine had said. If it had not, they wouldn't know until much later—until someone could sleigh out from North Junction with the news.

AT DUSK the lamps were lighted, supplemented with candles to brighten the cavernous freight room, still unpartitioned from the passenger and telegraph rooms. Not long after, the place began to fill with people.

Toward eight, the news that some of the immigrants were back with their teams from Pupen Marsh caused a wild exodus of men from depot to town, but they returned disappointed. The immigrants had left, to walk their teams back, long before the train had reached there. They knew no better than anyone else what had happened to it.

They came into the depot presently to get thawed out at the stoves: big-bodied Swedes and Norwegians, for the most part, in pea jackets and mackinaws, wearing in their inflamed eyes and mottled faces the marks of battle with the marsh.

A corner of the telegraph room, by one of the big stoves, was curtained off with quilts and blankets strung on wires, so that they could spread their bedrolls and sleep; and then to relieve the tension, the orchestra—fiddles, mandolin, mouth organs again—struck up a lively quadrille, and the dancing started.

Not many joined in. They were all too intent upon the clock, waiting for the hour of ten.

A few minutes before that time, Stevenson came in.

"The old hangman!" people muttered. But then they forgot him in watching the two hands of the clock overlap at ten.

Most of the men went outside then. They stayed out a long time, returned with faces red from cold, looking

glum, though trying not to. Until almost twelve everyone kept up the pretense of gayety; but by then the heart had gone out of them.

One of the musicians came down to speak to Ann. "Guess we may's well pack an' go, 'fore the New Year ketches us. Ain't nobody got no hankerin' fer dancin' any more; we ain't got no hankerin' fer playin'," he said. Ann nodded wordless assent, and he was returning to the platform when the door burst open, a man bawled:

"She's a-comin'!"

INSTANTLY everyone was rushing to the door. A few thought to scurry back for wraps as the icy air of out of doors smote them, but most went on, huddling in a breathless, shivering group on the plank platform.

At first the summons seemed a hoax. Nothing could be seen to northward except a wall of picket-pointed pines and the cold, hard stars above them. Then a shaft of light moved like a pale, probing finger across the sky. It faded, but reappeared soon, stronger, brighter; and now they could hear it too, first in a low humming of the rails, then in a screech of its whistle that grew louder, deeper in pitch until it filled the night.

That whistle brought out hundreds more; flushed, unsteady men from the saloons, townspeople routed from their beds and brought running, wrapped in quilts, rugs, all manner of makeshift garments.

They watched the light strengthen, spread like an opening fan, all in a paralysis of unbelief that persisted even yet, that did not down until the locomotive had swept around the last concealing bend and was swaggering toward them.

Then they went mad, and broke and rushed to meet it; so recklessly that some of them would have been run down if it had not shuddered to a stop far short of the depot.

Ann was swept on with the others. Once beyond the blinding glare of the headlight she had a glimpse of Craig, leaning far out of the cab, waiting anxiously for the track to clear so that he could go on.

He seemed obsessed by that determination—to go on, to bring his train in—and to him these people on the track were only another of the day's thousands obstacles. But they would not let him go on. They swarmed into the cab from flanks and rear, and retreated bearing him with them, in whooping triumph to the depot.

Far behind, ignored by everyone but the conscientious Durstine, plodded the commissioners. No one was concerned about them or their verdict. The train had gone through, and that was a verdict written so large upon the conscience of the land that they could do nothing but confirm it.

The musicians, on a happy thought, had rushed back into the depot ahead of everyone else, and resumed their instruments. They yearned for mighty music, some thunderous great rhapsody to this victory over flood and forest and the dark machinations of men; but all they could think of was that lively favorite *Money Musk*.

But that was good enough. It gave the crowd a vent for their enthusiasm, and soon the floor was filled with dancers who would continue on till morning, stop then only for breakfast and a little sleep, resume to dance straight through to the next morning.

Brought in on the crest of the crowd, Craig had some difficulty in accustoming himself to the lights and warmth and music. Someone took his fur coat and cap, someone else gave him thick sandwiches that he ate hungrily, and coffee to warm him.

By then the pulse and throb of the locomotive was fading from his brain, and his vision clearing, and he saw Ann. She had withdrawn to another part of the room, but her eyes were on him with a shy importunity.

He started toward her, then stopped as his glance fell on Stevenson, by the door.

Craig went to him. He said: "Let's not mince words, Mr. Stevenson. I know what you're here for, and I'm ready for it. My road is as good as finished now. Nothing you or anyone else can do can stop it."

"I'M NOT here to stop it," said Stevenson. "I am a just man, and I want no more than the law allows me. The court of the second circuit of your state, sitting in law, ordered that you be apprehended and held to answer for grand larceny in wrongfully appropriating my rail iron, and a bench warrant to that effect issued to the sheriff of this county.

"It was also the judgment of the same court, sitting in equity, that you should make full restitution for the theft by transferring to me either a block of shares in your railroad or an equivalent block of land, should you complete the road and be awarded the land grant.

"At the going price of two dollars and a half an acre, that would amount to some two hundred sections."

"You'll have it as soon as the grant has been officially turned over to me," Craig said. "You're also entitled, I suppose, to have me arrested immediately; but if you don't mind, I'd like an hour or two of liberty. I want to dance with a girl."

"You may do anything you like, so far as I'm concerned," said Stevenson. "The charge in law no longer stands against you. On appeal, the supreme court of this state upheld the judgment in equity, but vacated the warrant. Their decision was handed down only yesterday."

While Craig stared at him in dazed unbelief, he went on glumly: "They held, in the light of several precedents adduced by your lawyers, that holding you to trial by law as well as in equity would be placing you in double jeopardy.

"They completely ignored my own lawyers' adduction of several precedents to the contrary, as well as their contention that a bench warrant could be vacated only by the court issuing it. The whole proceeding seemed to me slightly irregular, and I can only ascribe it to the fact that the judges may have been swayed by hearing that you had completed your railroad."

Craig said dazedly: "But I don't understand. I never hired any lawyers, or appealed the case. Someone else—"

"I hired them. I appealed your case for you," said Stevenson. "I am a righteous man, Mr. Craig, and I hold with the law of God and man which prescribes that everyone is entitled to his day in court, and to adequate counsel. Though understand me, Mr. Craig—I'd not have lifted a hand to save you if the decision had gone the other way."

"I believe that," said Craig. "But you did enough. Those must have been pretty good lawyers you hired for me."

"They must have been better than the lawyers I hired for myself," Stevenson buttoned his fur coat.

"If you don't mind, I'll take that train down to Junction City. You needn't bother to see me off. There's a young lady across the room who seems much interested in what we've had to say. You'll want to tell her, before she faints."

Craig looked across the room at Ann. She was white and taut, staring at them; but her face brightened, as she saw his own, with a glad premonition of what he was to say.

"I will," he said to Stevenson. "But that isn't all I have to tell her. It will take a long time to finish that. . ."

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE are constantly reading on the back page of the newspaper that the current week is dedicated to somebody or something. It is Be Kind to Animals Week, or Men's Shirts and Neckties Week, or Jumbo Hotdog Week, or what have you. As far as we can see, anybody can declare one of these occasions, and so we're going to. Starting this Sunday, for seven days it will be Be Kind to Editors Week.

It's hard to tell just what will happen, but we hope for the best. If animals and men's haberdashery can get a break, why shouldn't we? Accordingly, we expect that authors will take us to lunch every day next week, and will make no mention whatever of plots. They will simply sit and will admire us and pay the check, which will be big. Then, back at the office, we will nap for a while, fanned by three or four attractive girls who have no desire to sell fiction.

We don't expect to do very much work during the week, but we will collect the rewards of our years of toil. For one thing, the circulation will skyrocket to improbable heights. Then we will be awarded several generous cash prizes for something or other; and it's just possible that we may get into the Hall of Fame. Then, too, of course. . . But it's up to you folks, not us. We'll just be sitting here, waiting for kindness.

Here is a letter that pleased us deeply. It's from a gentleman down in South America, and it is the sort of thing an editor wants to see framed over his desk.

MIGUEL IBANEZ

For many years I have been a reader of your excellent magazine, the ARGOSY, and I write now to convey my gratitude for the pleasure it has brought me. More than once, certain among my friends who are well acquainted with English and American literature have deprecated my fondness for ARGOSY and its stories; but I tell them that pure entertainment is what I seek and find in ARGOSY. It is the very entertainment that these same friends find in the cinema.

It is harmless and healthful entertainment, which no one need be ashamed to enjoy. My profession has for many years brought me into contact with Americans, and my interest has led me to read the great works of the English language. When I turn to the pages of ARGOSY, I do not expect or indeed want great literature, for every person must sometimes relax the mind as well as the body. To enjoy the action and colorfulness of an ARGOSY story is to relax, for me at least.

So I write to you to offer my thanks. I have nothing more than that to say, no particular story to praise or condemn. But I thought that it might be interesting to you and your readers to learn that a citizen of a neighbor country has long been loyal to your magazine.
Rio de Janiero, Brazil

Come to think of it, there's a start for B. K. T. E. week.

NOW a word from an army man, who finds Crawford Sullivan unsound on the subject of coastal defense. The important thing is, however, that our correspondent likes Mr. Sullivan's stories.

We happily make way for the corrections and appreciation of

CORPORAL COURTLAND P. MORGAN

In "Pandemonium Goes to Sea", appearing in your April 26 issue, it is plain to see that Mr. Sullivan doesn't know his C.A.H.D. (Coast Artillery Harbor Defense).

I have been in the C.A.H.D. and fired the big guns, and we don't just turn a target loose and fire at random. We use every safety method known and if a vessel is in the field of fire, we wait until it has passed before firing.

Now of course Mr. Sullivan may understand all this, but he should make a notation, so the public won't think the Army and Navy are as careless as the story makes them seem.

As for Virgil Clinker being on the target, that gave us a big laugh, for it would be impossible to get anyone on without being seen, and the target goes out just before practice. But I did enjoy the yarn while lying here in the hospital. Yours for more of them.
Camp Wallace, Texas

THE reader below clamors for Cleve and d'Entreville, a request which we started to fulfill several weeks ago.

ETHEL LESSAK

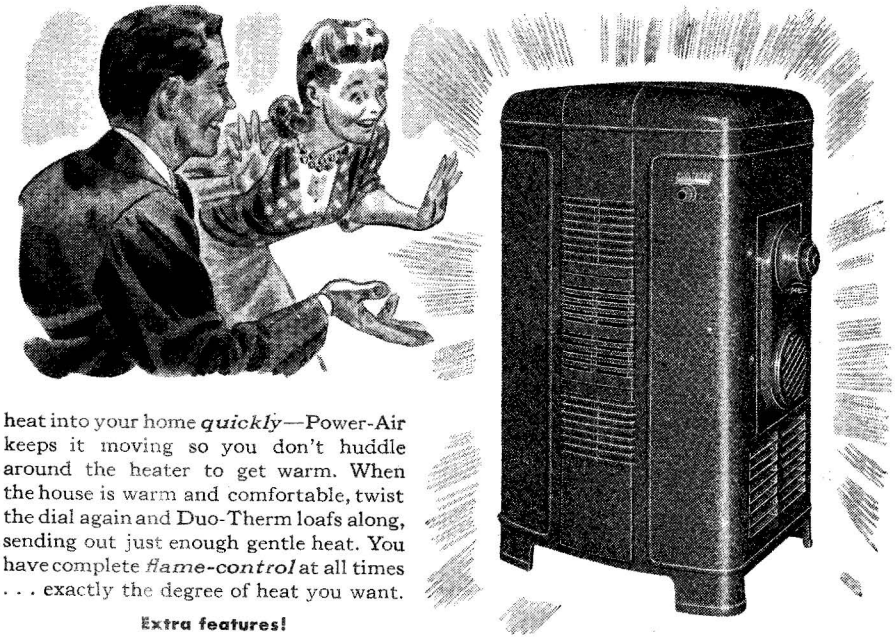
I wish you would ask Allan R. Bosworth to write another story using the same principal characters he used in "Murder Goes to Sea."

What has happened to the Cardinal's Guards, Cleve and d'Entreville? To me, Montgomery's stories are the best next to Bosworth's sea stories.
Akron, Ohio

LOOK WHAT AMERICA'S LEADING FUEL-OIL HEATER OFFERS YOU FOR 1942!

NOW! Amazing new 1942 Duo-Therms *offer new streamlined beauty!... new miracle burner!... new Power-Air blower!... new savings on fuel oil!*

DUO-THERM, the biggest-selling fuel-oil heater in America, outdoes itself again! Duo-Therm gives you new beauty that surpasses anything you've ever seen in heaters! Duo-Therm gives you *an amazing new Dual-Chamber Burner with complete flame-control* that turns cheap fuel oil into waves of comforting heat! And Duo-Therm gives you a new, adjustable, patented *Power-Air* blower!



Only Duo-Therm has Power-Air!

Power-Air—exclusive with Duo-Therm—starts where ordinary heaters leave off. As Duo-Therm's patented Dual-Chamber Burner generates clean, odorless heat, *Power-Air* distributes it quickly, *evenly* to every corner. Healthful warmth is kept *circulating—on the move*. And *Power-Air* is adjustable, to give you just the amount of circulation desired. Floors are no longer cold . . . hard-to-heat spots are flooded with warmth. Duo-Therm's power-driven heat is the secret of *lower* fuel bills. *You save up to 25% on fuel costs* over a heater without *Power-Air*.

This year's beautiful new *streamlined* models give you *more* heat, at *less cost* than ever! No work, no ashes, no coal, no wood!

Twist the Handy Front Dial—perfect heat control!

When you get up in the morning simply twist the Handy Front Dial—Duo-Therm floods heat into your home *quickly*—Power-Air keeps it moving so you don't huddle around the heater to get warm. When the house is warm and comfortable, twist the dial again and Duo-Therm loafs along, sending out just enough gentle heat. You have complete *flame-control* at all times . . . exactly the degree of heat you want.

Extra features!

Duo-Therm's *Radiant Doors* open to give floods of "fireplace" warmth! Special *Waste-Stopper* saves fuel. *Coordinated Control* insures proper draft for perfect combustion. *Safe!* Duo-Therms are listed as standard by the Underwriters' Laboratories.

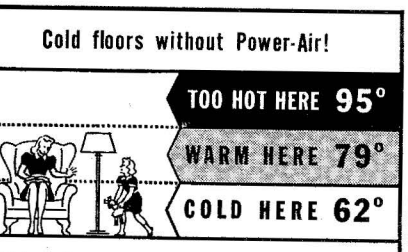
Beautiful new streamlined models!

Your friends will rave about the beauty of the new models—as beautiful as any piece of fine furniture. And *you'll* rave about the precision engineering that means years of heating comfort at a big saving in fuel costs! You'll know you've bought a bargain in quality!

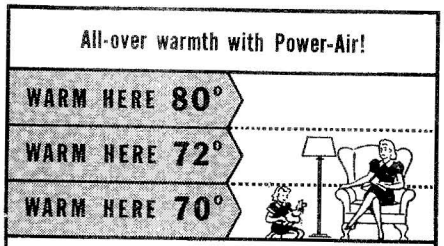
Small down payments!

Duo-Therm makes many styles of heaters, capacities of from 1 to 6 rooms. *And Duo-Therms cost no more than other heaters of the same capacities!* Easy payments are made *easier still* because of savings on fuel oil! See the beautiful new Duo-Therms at your dealer's and ask about attractive terms.

Meanwhile, send the coupon below *today* for complete information!



Without Power-Air—test figures show floors 33° colder than ceilings. Result: *discomfort* for you and your family.



With Power-Air—ceiling heat is *driven* to floors! Only 10° difference! Result: *comfort* for you and yours!

RADIANT-CIRCULATOR
Only $39.95
MODEL 575-2

Model 575-2 Duo-Therm is the perfect answer for room heating comfort. Radiates *and* circulates.

New All-Weather

DUO-THERM

The Most Popular Fuel-Oil Heater in America

TEAR OUT AND MAIL—TODAY!

DUO-THERM DIVISION
Dept. MC-3, Motor Wheel Corporation, Lansing, Michigan
Send me, without obligation, complete information about Duo-Therm heaters. I am also interested in Duo-Therm *Furnaces* ☐ . . . *Water Heaters* ☐ . . . *Trailer Heaters* ☐ . . . *Ranges* ☐

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