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CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 23, 1941

Number 2

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They have put him behind iron bars, bound him with terrible living ropes—this giant of the jungle who is stronger, more cunning than the beasts. Now let them beware!

NO TICKET TO NIPPON—*Short Novel* Sinclair Gluck 17

Here's jeopardy harbor, where the Japs slip in silently by night—to grasp the riches of America

WITH WORK TO DO—*Short Story* Elmer Ransom 31

Red Decker learned from the wilderness the keenness of his own tragedy

COLONEL COOLIE—*Short Story* Hal G. Evarts 36

I am a tea carrier and a man of peace. But there is invasion now, and it is my duty to instruct the Great Ones in the warrior's science

SWORDS IN EXILE—*Fifth of six parts* . . . Murray R. Montgomery 41

Reach for the rapier, gallants, and fight to avoid the rack. Two conspiracies boil to make a devil's brew

BUNNY RABBITS—*Short Story* Don Tracy 51

It's Easter, and the Courier has turned into a rabbit machine for its newsies. Easter? It's pandemonium! The funniest story of the year

TOWN MARSHAL—*Conclusion* Walt Coburn 56

Big party tonight at Five Mile House: gunpowder served free, and entertainment by, Senorita Stiletto

ARGONOTES 66

LOOKING AHEAD! 4

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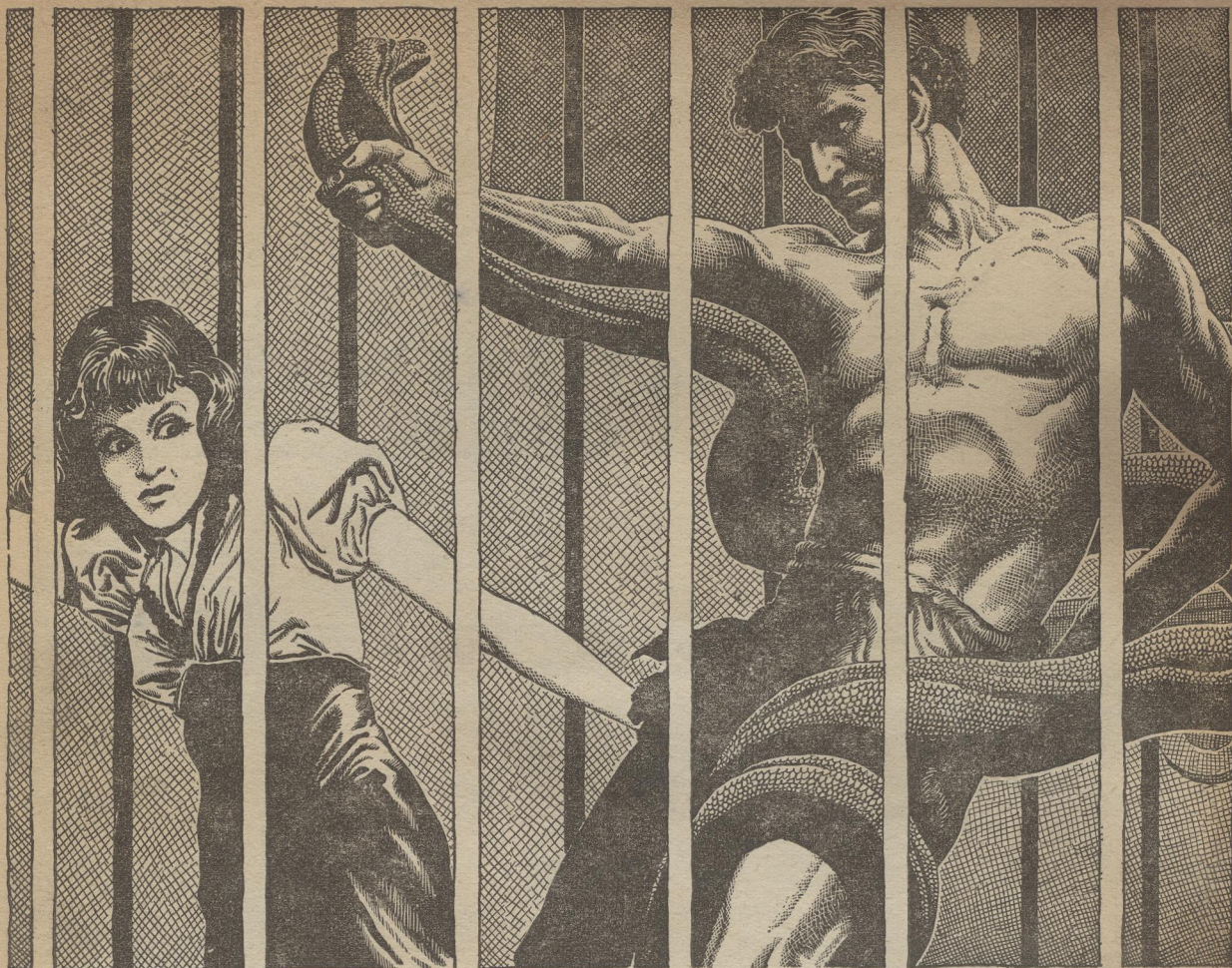
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CHAPTER I

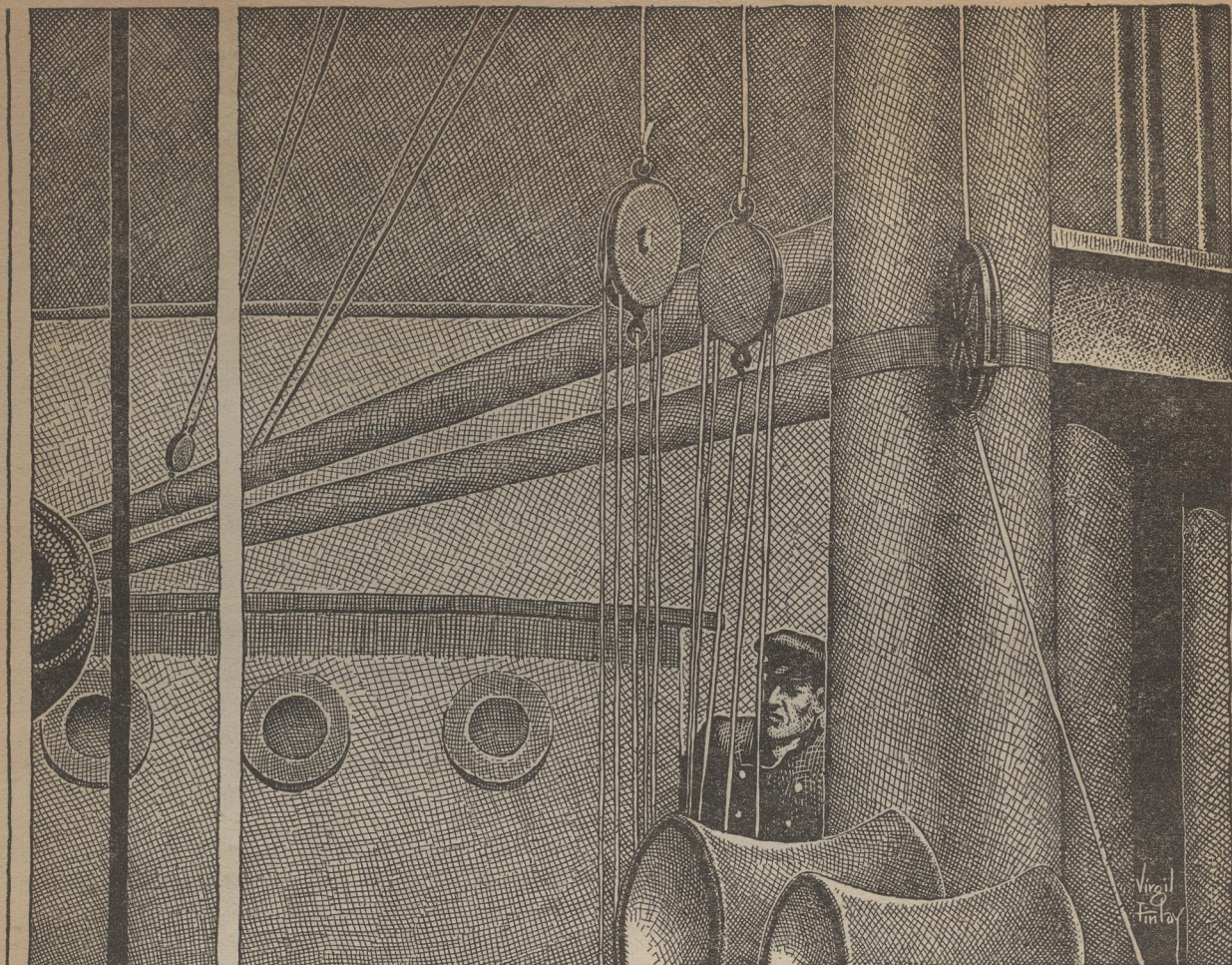
WILD MAN IN A CAGE

IT IS sometimes difficult to know just where to begin a story. In the present instance, I might go back to Ah Cuitok Tutul Xiu, the Mayan, who founded Uxmal in Yucatan in 1004 A. D.; and from him to Chac Xib Chac, the Red Man, who destroyed Mayapan in 1451 and murdered the entire Cocom family of tyrants. But I shall not.

I shall simply mention that Chac Tutul Xiu, a descendant

of Ah Cuitok Tutul Xiu, motivated by that willful migratory urge of the Maya as well as by the advice of his chief priest, left Uxmal with his followers and went to the coast, where he constructed many double dugout canoes and embarked upon the broad Pacific, never to be heard of again in his homeland.

That was in 1452 or 1453. Of course, from there I might very well make a neat leap across some four hundred and eighty-five years to arrive on today's island of Uxmal in the South Pacific, where Cit Coh Xiu is king. But that would be getting ahead of myself and my story. So I shall



Silently the titanic struggle took shape, muscles of iron against writhing coils of steel. The girl watched in horrified fascination

warn you only to remember Uxmal and Cit Coh Xiu, and pass on to the deck of the *Saigon*, a battered old tramp waiting at Mombasa for a load of wild animals for shipment to the States.

From the crude cages stored in the hold or lashed on deck comes the restless yammer of jungle beasts; raw-edged lion-rumblings, shrieks of hyena laughter, trumpeting of elephants and the cat-howl of tigers; and for tireless counterpoint, the shrill chatter of the monkeys. . . .

Bull-necked, bullet-headed, Kraus stood by the rail, his massive shoulders thrust forward in an attitude of stubborn resistance, his piggish eyes unconvinced. Only money talked to Kraus, and money was speaking the wrong language now.

"I won't do it, Abdullah!" he barked at his mahogany-faced companion. "In a week, we are ready to sail. Chartering this tub isn't costing pennies but good hard dollars. And it might take a month to bring in this wild man—if you get him at all."

The Arab smiled patiently. "I cannot fail, *sahib*," he insisted. "Have I not told you the wild man is hurt? To capture him will be nothing. And only think—a real wild man, the playfellow of elephants and the king of lions. *Wellah!* He will bring you more money than you have dreamed."

Like water dripping on stone, Abdullah was wearing down the Teuton's stubborn resistance. And he must succeed; for the Teuton was an instrument, a means, and Abdullah's bright eyes dreamed revenge.

Many times had this "wild man" cheated him of the rightful profits of his poached-ivory trade; many times had he broken up Abdullah's slaving expedition. For these out-

rages, he must pay. And to be taken from his beloved jungles, to be sent in a cage halfway across the world for other white men to stare at, to be exhibited as an imprisoned freak—Abdullah's clever brain could think of no more savage punishment for that hard, proud body and unfettered spirit.

"He speaks English, you said," Kraus reminded him. "From a cage he should recite Kipling—a fine wild man! Or call the cops and have me put in jail. *Ja, herrlich!*"

"But I have told you," the Arab went on. "This injury has robbed him of speech and of all knowledge of speech. He could complain no more than your other beasts."

Kraus nodded. Some kind of brain lesion . . . aphasia. It might be possible, and it would mean much, much money.

Abdullah saw how little would weigh the balance against Kraus' last hesitation. He murmured gently, "And, *sahib*, the man is English-born." He waited, his bright eyes watching Kraus' face.

The beefy fist thudded the rail again. "What would you want for bringing him in?"

"My expenses—and the price of one lion. My price is cheap, for the wild man is my enemy, *sahib*. From this, I will gain more than money. I shall sleep at nights and my dreams will be pleasant."

"How long will it take?" Except in himself, Kraus despised sentimentality, even the sentimentality of revenge.

"Less than a month."

"Very well. I'll wait thirty days. Then I sail, whether you are back or not."

The two men joined their hands in brief agreement, a

handshake worth less than a plugged copper coin in the open market.

THE DRUMS had been beating for more than a moon.

Every once in a while, the bronzed giant would stop his aimless wanderings and lean against a creeper-clad tree-trunk to listen to them. Then he would press an angry hand to his forehead, scowl fiercely, and move on. For the drums seemed to come from all around him, but he somehow knew that they were only in his own head. Even with both massive fists pressed tight against his eardrums, he could still hear them. They bothered him, clogging his brain, making it impossible for him to think at all. Or remember.

He ate and slept and moved about with feet that seemed to carry him of their own volition. He was not going anywhere, because he did not know where he was nor where he belonged. Once he passed two black men on his aimless wanderings: great tall fellows with painted faces and bright feathers in their hair. At sight of him they had screeched and fled. He called after them, chased them a little way, but they would not stop.

Since then there had been nobody. Nothing. Only the terrible drums thudding in his throbbing skull, and the feel of cautious eyes watching him everywhere he went. Following him.

That feeling had grown worse since this sun-rise. Several times faint, siffling noises, like the cautious movement of a hand upon the heavy bush, had come to his ears even through the drum-rumble. But when he had wheeled and peered into the damp, steaming green, there had been nobody.

Then a minute ago, as suddenly as the drums had begun, they stopped. An abrupt wall of utter silence covered him. No, not quite silence. From somewhere, far away, came the slow drip of water against a rock; a bird, closer, set up a tocsin of alarm that made the bronze-man's flesh creep. Danger whispered in a hundred suddenly perceived noises around him. And then, closer still, the muted shuffle of a bare foot, the masked sound of a breath—

Something crashed out of the jungle, and the giant flung himself out of its path with a defensive cunning whose secret still lingered in his bones and nerves and muscle, even though it had been forgotten by his brain.

Two black bodies hurtled past and landed asprawl on the trail before him. Two black faces opened wide with terror as the wild man, with a roar of terrible anger, flung himself upon them. One black body did not move again; the other writhed in the grip of the powerful hands that settled in a noose of bone and sinew around his throat.

Then other black men, many of them, came howling at him, their bodies shining and slippery with oil and sweat. Half-crouching, the wild man spun to face them. He crashed his fist into one ebony face and heard the yielding crunch of bone. His knee found a black belly, his mighty arms wound around a slithering dark torso; he leaped to full height and flung the limp body into the faces of his charging black brothers.

He threw back his head and a great shout roared up out of his throat. The blacks halted in their tracks. Then another man appeared—not a black man this time, but one with leathery skin, beaked nose and jet eyes, a man whose unlovely face the wild man instantly recognized. The sight of it charged him with an overpowering surge of displeasure—an instant recognition of enmity.

Heedless of the still disorganized blacks, the wild man

plowed toward the newcomer, spilling the natives casually on either side, disregarding the pinioning arms of those with skill enough and courage enough to get a grip on his gigantic, naked frame.

A whip-lash whistled out and the blow caught him full in the face, bringing blood to his eyes and ripping his cheek. He reeled on, hampered by the black men clinging to him, weighted by the pull of their wriggling bodies.

Arms entangled his legs; he pitched forward, balance gone, and lay twisting on the ground, fighting to get back on his feet. The Arab leaped in quickly and brought the heavy butt-end of the whip down on the wild man's head in swift dully thumping blows.

The wild man quivered. Then he lay still.

CHAPTER II

MADMAN'S CARGO

FOR THE GREEDY, a thirty-day wait can be torture if on the outcome of waiting depends the possibility of sudden, dazzling wealth. Long before Abdullah's month was up, Kraus was on tenterhooks. By the twenty-ninth day, the bull-necked Teuton, endlessly pacing the *Saigon's* deck, would not have been fit company for a cageful of hyenas.

The dark-haired girl curled up by the rail eyed him wearily, her sleek head bent over the buffer with which she was industriously shining her well-groomed nails. Fuming, Kraus wheeled toward her and slapped the buffer out of her hands.

"Pig," she murmured, stooping to retrieve it. Her dark, steady eyes regarded him cynically. "Abdullah must be bringing you rubies to put you in such a state."

"Not rubies," Kraus said. "A real, jungle-bred wild man."

The girl stifled a yawn. "In America once I saw a wild man. He was in a circus. His real name was Burton Philbert Washington and he ate Harlem-fried pork chops."

Kraus did not like to see his pet dream made fun of. "You have no brains," he said scornfully. "Why did I bring you?"

Janette grinned at him wickedly and said nothing. If a girl is clever, and of course, beautiful, transportation from the wilds of Africa can frequently be managed at no cost whatever. And Janette was certain of her cleverness. To her, Kraus was just what she had called him—a pig. And one that she could manage very well. She picked up the buffer and started again with her nails.

Suddenly there was a swift movement across the dock and in a twinkling Abdullah had appeared like a streak out of nowhere and skinned up oversides. He stood facing them, his face blank except for the tantalizing mockery of his Arabian eyes.

"Well?" Kraus demanded heavily.

Abdullah broke into a smile remarkable for its varying shades of brown and for the engaging irregularity of the stubby teeth it displayed. "The best of tidings," said he. "I have the wild man just outside of town in a wooden cage covered with matting. But, *billah!* what a time we had in the taking of him! He killed three warriors before they could take him. *Aiee*, the man-beast is strong. To tear the wooden cage to splinters would take him but seconds were not his hands tied. I tell you he is a devil—and he speaks not! Mark you, keep his hands bound."

Comedians, both of them, Janette thought sourly. The Arab, whose scrawny frame could hold only hatred and fear; the German, who thought himself such a giant of intellect and was only rather stupid, after all. She watched them scornfully.

"He just sits and looks," the Arab went on, "speaking no word. Truly, he resembles *el adrea*. One feeds him raw meat and when he eats he growls. Like *el adrea*. It is a marvel to see."

Kraus began shouting orders to his crew, then he turned back to Abdullah. "We must ship him aboard secretly," he cautioned. "I shall clear port this afternoon and stand up the coast. After dark, load the cage on a dhow on the beach below the town and wait until you pick up my signal. I'll blink my running lights three times in rapid succession at one-minute intervals. You will then come alongside with your wild man. Understand?"

Abdullah smiled. "It is already done."

WITH nightfall the wind rose; and as the dhow nosed out into the heavy sea beyond the breakers, it pitched and rolled like a thing possessed. At intervals, low-pitched cries went up from the mat-covered cage. Then Abdullah would lurch over beside it, pull out his long-bladed knife and spitefully jab the point through the matting. It was very amusing.

When the Arab finally caught the *Saigon's* signal, it took almost twenty minutes to maneuver the frail craft into position along the lee side of the tramp and to make fast to the cage the tackle lowered from her heaving deck.

Kraus yelled orders from above; Abdullah shrilled curses at his men. Both boats bobbed crazily on the rising swells. Finally there came a screech from the tackle's gear; the cage jerked into the air and rose unsteadily.

A sudden, gigantic comber sent the *Saigon* pitching away from the smaller boat, and Abdullah, shrieking his terror, jumped up to catch and cling to the mat-covered bars of the rising cage.

It bumped and jarred and scraped paint from the *Saigon's* rusty sides. A heavy body thudded around inside of it, and from its interior a savage, powerful voice raised a ferocious outcry.

For a moment Abdullah played with the panic-struck idea of relinquishing his hold, but a glance at the black moil of water and the half-sunken, splintered hulk of the battered dhow below him changed his mind. He clung tight with numb and battered fingers until the cage was heaved over the *Saigon's* rail.

Abdullah drifted soggily to the deck-planks and lay there, breathing hard. Kraus prodded him with his boot toe and laughed at him.

"You are lucky to be alive, my brown-skinned friend. Maybe when we get to America I'll exhibit you, too. Could you lie like that on a bed of nails, do you think?" Kraus laughed again, doubled over.

Abdullah did not move, but into the splintered, salt-soaked planking he whispered his curse. "Dog of a *nasrany*—may the lions eat his eyes!"

DAWN brought clear skies, and a steady following wind that seemed to lift the tramp across the ruffled waters of the Indian Ocean. The animals on deck had quieted; and no sound came from the wooden cage that was lashed amidships, still covered with matting.

Janette Laon followed Kraus on deck, her lithe body

loosely encased in a white sports dress, her black hair free in the wind. The breeze snapped a glow to her cheeks; and excitement or curiosity, possibly both, lent a wild sparkle to her dark eyes.

At the rail, Schmidt, the second mate, watched her approvingly.

"I want to see the wild man," she said, and added, "Now," with a peremptory firmness that she had picked up from Kraus himself.

"Hope he's still alive," Kraus grunted. "The way that damned Arab was batting the cage around last night, it's a wonder he wasn't slammed to pieces. Come on, we'll have a look." He ordered a Lascar sailor to uncover the cage, and Schmidt strolled over to join them.

The matting fell away. With a yowl of terror, the Lascar leaped back.

Kraus stooped for a nearer look, and Schmidt made a sort of surprised grunting sound. Janette Laon didn't move. Only her nostrils flared ever so slightly, and the dark eyes grew big and very round.

WITHIN THE cage, half-crouched, half-squatting, was a brown-skinned giant. Naked except for a brief breechclout of leopard's pelt, the huge body was relaxed, apathetic, half-slumbrous. The sunlight struck shadowed bars across the tawny, rugged flesh; the head, with its lion-mane of heavy hair, was sunk on the magnificent chest. One cheek was blood stained, and there were bruises on the throat.

Slowly the muscles in the shoulder bunched; one arm was lifted, groping toward the light. The head came up.

Schmidt cursed and leaped back; Kraus stood transfixed, his piggish eyes sparkling.

Through the bars, Janette could feel the intelligent force of the wild-man's clear-eyed gaze. "Why," she whispered, "he's white!"

Kraus faced her with a grin. "Of course, *Liebchen*. As white as you are. Maybe"—he chuckled—"a little whiter."

"But you can't," the girl protested. "You can't keep a white man penned up in a cage like that!"

"His skin is white," Kraus said. "But he's English."

For a moment, the girl's eyes blazed with anger; her whole body seemed to tremble. Then she regained her control. "I've often thought," she said casually, "that your cages are mixed up. Sometimes the wrong animals get *inside* of them—"

Kraus slapped her with playful strength across the mouth. He went on smiling. "You talk so much, *Liebchen*."

The girl stepped back, trembling with outrage. "Don't ever do that again," she said, very evenly. "Don't ever touch me again."

The silence between them was broken by the ship's bell; and Schmidt, who had watched the little scene with considerable interest, left to relieve the first mate, Hans de Groote, a well set-up young Hollander with a firm, boyish mouth and Delft-blue eyes. He came down to join them by the cage, ignoring Schmidt's truculent stare.

Like Janette, he had come aboard at Mombasa; but whereas Janette's arrival had filled the second mate with pleasure, Schmidt had been bitterly disappointed at the appearance of de Groote. What was the use of arranging so cleverly that the other first mate should tumble overboard during a storm if his own position was not to be improved thereby?

But aboard the *Saigon*, such bad blood as Schmidt bore de Groote was scarcely noticeable. Captain Larsen, now confined with a fever to his cabin, refused to speak to Kraus, who had the boat on charter. And the knives of the Lascar segment of the crew were continuously sharpened for the Chinese sailors. Schmidt's outspoken hatred of de Groote merely made part of the general picture. De Groote scarcely thought about it any more.

He was far more interested, for instance, in the wild man in the cage. He studied the huge shaggy-haired creature for a moment, then he turned to Kraus, echoing Janette's protest. A white man should not be caged; and there was no possible doubt that this wild man was white.

Kraus fumed that he would do as he liked in the matter; and Janette laughed softly to herself. "Somehow," she said, staring at the wild man in absorption, "I think he will get out of that cage. And when he does, I think he will remember you, Kraus—and Abdullah."

"At least untie his hands," de Groote persevered.

"I'll untie his hands," Kraus promised, "as soon as I can get an iron cage up from below. It's too much of a job feeding him this way."

"Poor thing," the girl said. "He's had nothing to eat or drink since yesterday. How can you stand having him look at you like that? You ought to be ashamed. I wouldn't treat a dog the way you're treating him!"

Kraus laughed heavily, making the noise of the hyenas seem almost pleasant by contrast. "Neither," said he, "would I."

"He is less than a dog," said the voice of Abdullah behind them. He padded close to the cage, cursed in Arabic, and spat through the bars at the captive wild man.

The man-beast lowered his gaze to the spittle running down his brawny, naked chest. He shook himself fastidiously, like a dog whipping rain water from his fur. Then he raised his eyes quickly to the group that surrounded his cage, his glance attracted by the sound of a palm striking flesh.

Abdullah's dagger flashed in the sunlight and his catlike lunge toward the girl who had struck him was arrested only by de Groote's burly arms whipping around his chest.

"You shouldn't have done that, Janette," Kraus said angrily, grabbing her wrist. "I tell you, you have no brains!"

"You're hurting my arm," the girl said evenly; there was a deep-throated growl from the cage. Kraus dropped her wrist.

"Maybe it's none of my business if you keep him caged up," young de Groote went on, his theme recognizing no interruption, "but I'll make it my business if you don't treat him decently."

"What will you do about it?" Kraus demanded.

"Beat you to a pulp first," de Groote said flatly; "then report you to the authorities."

That last threat touched Kraus where it hurt. He grumbled angrily, and was silent.

Janette looked suddenly at the cage. She had the feeling that the wild man's eyes had been upon all of them, all of the time. How much had he understood? Did he guess that he was the object of their quarreling? Did he know that she and de Groote had taken his part? Even with his crouched position diminishing his size, it was plain to see how strong he was; a flutter of fear touched her spine. She smiled at the giant, as if placatingly.

A BIG iron cage was swung up from below and placed next to the wooden one, the two doors together. Cautiously, Kraus drew his gun and both doors were opened. The wild man did not budge.

"Idiot! Get in there!" Kraus roared, brandishing his gun. "Get a bar, somebody. Poke him from behind!"

"Wait," said Janette quickly. "Let me try." She walked to the other side of the iron cage and beckoned, smiling. The wild man stared at her stolidly and did not move.

What did they want of him, all these jabbering little people? His head ached and he knew he was very hungry. His arms felt numb from the shoulders down to the tips of his fingers. His brain tried to beat against the blackness that imprisoned him, and he was sure that somehow his present misery was connected with that shrouding darkness. All this had happened to him because he couldn't remember—because he didn't know who he was. He tolerated being here in this stinking cage, being jabbed at and spat upon, because he had no identity, no self. Perhaps he belonged like this, with man-monkeys jabbering and cursing and pushing at him. He was very tired. He would not move. His jaw set firmly on that.

Janette wished that the wild man wouldn't be so stubborn. Somehow, she had the feeling that if she could establish an alliance between the caged man and herself, it would be a sort of protection for her.

An idea struck her and she asked de Groote for his knife. "There—put your hands behind you," she directed him. She made a pantomime of sawing imaginary bonds from de Groote's wrists. Then she went back to the far end of the iron cage and held out the knife to the wild man.

Slowly he rose, stooping because he could not stand his full height in the cage, and started toward her. His cramped muscles gave his gait a curiously unsteady lurch, but that did not completely hide his innate and rhythmic grace.

Janette held her breath. The wild man entered the iron cage; one of the sailors dropped the gate behind him. The wild man appeared not to notice; his attention was completely absorbed in the promised freedom of his arms. Turning his back to her, he stood patiently while Janette's hands guided the knife-blade through the fibre strands.

With his arms free, the wild man seemed to expand. He regarded the girl thoughtfully, marking her on his blankly receptive mind. Then finding his cramped posture awkward, he let himself lithely down to a crouch and began to chafe at his wrists, bringing the blood back into them.

The girl flashed a triumphant look at Kraus, enjoying his chagrin. "Put up that gun. He's all right now."

"You be his nursemaid," Kraus said, heavily facetious. "Since you get on so well together." *Dummkopf*, to be jealous of a hulking, stupid brute who couldn't even talk sensibly. And yet, there when Janette had been freeing the wild man's hands, there had been a moment of something that made Kraus uneasy. The girl had been almost tender with the giant—there had been a kind of current between them. A strength, an understanding that somehow threatened him. *Ach*, it was nonsense. He was seeing things that did not exist.

Kraus shrugged and sent to the galley for water and raw meat.

The wild man's eyes raised from his wrists and met Abdullah's hawkish, pock-marked face. He gazed at it steadily for a long time, finding it apparently a very interesting object. His lids narrowed slowly. The Arab spat on the deck and turned away.

"He knows Abdullah," Janette realized. "Hates him. And Abdullah is afraid. Dangerous."

She was to remember that.

A sailor came with the food—a basin of water and great bloody chunks of meat. He tossed them gingerly through the bars, and the wild man fell on them hungrily, tearing the raw flesh with strong white teeth. Rumbling, ravenous sounds rose from his throat.

"He—he really *is* a wild man, isn't he?" Janette said, as if she hadn't really been convinced before. She turned to Abdullah, who stood a dozen paces away. "You said you knew him. By what name do the natives call him?"

Abdullah spat once more on the deck. "Tarzan," he said. "Tarzan of the Apes."

CHAPTER III

MEN ARE DEVILS

THE *Saigon* crossed the Indian Ocean to Sumatra. There Kraus added to his cargo two elephants, a rhinoceros, three orang-utans, two tigers, a panther, and a tapir.

Still a little fearful of what de Groote might report to the authorities at Batavia, Kraus skipped that port and made directly for Singapore. More animals, more cages, were taken aboard, including several boa constrictors upon whom Janette could not look without a shudder. Their writhing coils made her think a little of Kraus' outstretched arms; their narrowed eyes were bright with wisdom. And there was the difference: the boas were dangerous because they were so very intelligent and subtle; like Abdullah. Kraus was dangerous because he thought he was clever and really was not. Janette did not know which was worse.

After Singapore, the *Saigon* made for Manila, its last port of call before the Canal.

All this time, the wild man stayed in his cage, his powerful body as vibrantly restless as his brain, which vainly sought to break loose from its prison of blankness.

Janette, without appearing to, watched him carefully, trying to learn what was going on inside of him. She noticed the strained tensi in his movements; his palpable uneasiness worried her.

"He scents trouble," she said to de Groote. "There's something wrong on this boat and he knows it. I'm worried."

The young Dutchman patted her clumsily. "You're dreaming," he said cheerfully. "What trouble could there be? Our beloved Kraus is triumphant—the barometer is good—soon the captain will recover. Everything is splendid."

"For one thing," Janette mused, "Schmidt hates you, you know. I think he's up to something, and so does what's-his-name. The wild man. He makes that awful lion-noise every time Schmidt comes near him."

As it turned out, the wild man and Janette were right. Schmidt *was* up to something, stirring up trouble among the Lascars, preaching mutiny, planning, planning, planning.

In Schmidt's brain, the future of the *Saigon* had been pretty well settled. The ship, flying the English flag, would be seized as a prize, for word had come that war had broken out between England and Germany. The animals, including the caged wild man on the deck, would be flung into the sea; the *Saigon* sailed to a German port. Abdullah was easily won over. There would be money for all.

The scheme was discussed quite openly before the de-

tested Chinese sailors, since the Lascars were confident that their talk would not be understood. But one of the Chinese, Lum Kip, had been a captive aboard a Lascar pirate and he had learned both to understand their speech and to hate them with all his heart. He listened intently to their jabbered whisperings, a thin smile spreading across his saffron face. . . .

DAILY, the wild man's restlessness grew; he paced his cage for hours at a time. He would stand clutching the bars, alternately pulling himself toward them and pushing himself back, the waving cords of muscle rippling and bulging up and down his arms and across his powerful chest. Then he would leap upward, catch the bars overhead and swing lightly hand over hand from one end of his prison to the other.

Janette watched these ceaseless maneuvers uncomfortably, and when the realization of what he was doing came to her, she felt cold all over. "He's not just having fun—like a monkey," she whispered, her dark eyes wide. "He's doing that to get his strength back. He's going to try to get loose—I know he is!"

She ran to tell de Groote what she had found out. She located him finally in Kraus' cabin, and Janette saw from both their faces that something had gone very, very wrong.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

Swiftly, concisely de Groote repeated to her what Lum Kip had just whispered to him.

Kraus banged the table with his balled fist. "They wouldn't dare," he roared, as if he was trying to shout out the mutineers. "They'd never dare! The Chink is lying."

De Groote shook his head. "I don't think so," he said, with a frown. "Lum Kip is a good boy. I'm afraid it's true, all right."

Looking at de Groote's sober face, Kraus found himself coming to believe in this report of treachery. Because it was the kind of treachery he might have thought of himself, he saw with increasing clarity and discomfort how very real their danger might be. This made him thump the table with renewed vigor until Janette commanded him to stop.

"The thing to do," she said, "is to decide how we're going to defend ourselves against them."

"You!" Kraus wheeled on her. "*You're* in no danger. That Schmidt—he's had his eyes on you—don't think I haven't seen! *You'll* be safe enough. . . . I'll turn your wild man loose on them—that's what I'll do. He can knock a few of their dirty skulls together for them. And de Groote can take care of Schmidt—I'll show them!"

Shadowlike, Abdullah slipped out of the companionway. He had heard enough.

In Kraus' cabin, Janette turned toward Kraus, her eyes flaming. "You can't turn that wild man loose on them! It's dangerous—they'd shoot him down. I won't let you!"

She ran to the door. Kraus, yelling angrily, tried to pull her out of the way. De Groote stepped between them, and shoved Kraus back. He eyed the girl wonderingly for a moment, a little at a loss to comprehend the ferocity of her protectiveness where the wild man was concerned. Then he faced Kraus grimly.

"The first thing to do," he said, "is to put Schmidt in irons. I'll attend to it right now."

Behind him the cabin door swung open; Schmidt stood in the doorway, the light gleaming on his straw-colored hair, an automatic in his hand, the Lascars behind him. "Like hell," he said, "you'll put me under arrest. I'm taking

over. Next time remember not to talk so loud, Kraus." He turned to the Lascars. "Tie 'em up," he said.

DE GROOTE lunged at the gun. Schmidt sidestepped, righted the weapon, and beckoned the Lascars into the cabin. One of them grabbed Janette's arm and de Groote, throwing himself forward, roared at the Lascar to let the girl alone. Unobeyed, de Groote grabbed the sailor by the shoulder, swung him around, and floored him with an expert, vicious uppercut.

Instantly there was a free-for-all; but one which Kraus refused discreetly to have anything to do with. He cowered in a corner and tamely submitted to being bound, even as Janette was snatching up a pair of heavy binoculars and cracking a Lascar over the head. The sailor reeled back and collided with a fellow mutineer who was bouncing off de Groote's flailing fist.

That was the last Janette-de Groote victory. The tussle was brief, if bloody, and when it was over, Janette had been thoroughly trussed up and de Groote lay senseless on the floor.

"This is mutiny," Kraus howled. "You'll hang for it!"

Schmidt slowly shook his head. "Not mutiny. I am taking over the ship in the name of our country."

"But it's a German ship. And I'm German."

Schmidt banged him across the mouth with the back of his hand. "The ship is registered in England. She flies an English flag. If you're a German, then you're a traitor. And in Germany, we know what to do with traitors."

CHAPTER IV

BOA, BOA

THE WILD MAN knew that something had happened aboard the ship. There were cries in the night, shouts, and the thump and turmoil of combat. Violence hung in the air like the low-lying mist from a jungle bog. A Chinese sailor was dragged out on the deck and strung up by the thumbs. He screeched until the sun reddened the Eastern sky; then his screech became a low steady moan, slowly dying under the blazing heat of daylight. At last he hung limp, and silent. . . .

Two days passed. The wild man was not fed; no one brought him water. Lascars swaggered about the ship and the Chinese who had not been killed or tortured performed most of the work. The burly yellow-haired man came occasionally to his cage and cursed at him. Whenever Abdullah passed he was careful to stay well away from the bars; and the wild man knew that the hawk-nosed one feared him. He would not always be behind bars; the wild man knew this; he sensed that Hawk-nose knew it too and was afraid.

Once both Yellow-hair and Hawk-nose approached the cage together; the wild man stood and watched them disdainfully, his great body relaxed, his lower lip curled. Yellow-hair had a harpoon in his hand and jabbed it spitefully through the bars, while Hawk-nose nodded approval.

With a motion as flowing and swift as light, the wild man seized the haft and twisted the weapon from Yellow-hair's hands, using no more apparent effort than as if he had taken it from a baby.

"Fool!" Abdullah shrieked. "Now you have armed him! He will destroy us all. Kill him—kill him before it is too late."

Yellow-hair cuffed the Arab into silence and backed away cursing.

Now that the wild man had a weapon, he no longer saw much of his two most sedulous visitors.

The next day the wild man observed that the wooden cage in which he had been brought aboard was being hoisted from the hold. A larger iron cage followed. The wild man watched with interest as another yellow-haired man, but much younger and more pleasant-faced than the other, and the man with the cropped head were shoved into the iron cage. Then the girl was brought on deck. She entered the wooden cage, and the door was shut after her.

The wild man felt sorry for her. He wanted to help her, and the younger yellow-haired man. But it was good that Cropped-head should see what being caged felt like.

Schmidt eyed his prisoners with satisfaction. "You complained about being locked up below," he taunted. "Smothering, you said, didn't you? You'll get plenty of air up here—as long as I decide to let you go on breathing, Mr. First Mate."

"All right, all right," de Groote muttered. "But you can't mean you're going to keep Janette—Miss Laon—penned up like that. Before those filthy Lascars. You must be mad!"

"Miss Laon has already refused my offer to share the captain's cabin with me. I have had Larsen taken elsewhere."

"Miss Laon prefers the cage of a wild animal," the girl said sharply, and meant it.

"Or perhaps the cage of a wild *man*," Schmidt retorted. "From what Abdullah tells me, he is probably a cannibal. I shall not feed him after I put you in with him. Think a little of that, Miss Laon." Schmidt was laughing boisterously as he swaggered away. De Groote cursed in a low, steady voice.

"Save your breath," Janette advised him. "He's only trying to frighten me, the nasty goat." She wished she could be entirely sure of that. She wasn't afraid of the wild man—exactly—but she didn't particularly yearn to share his cage. If he was not entirely sure that she was his friend, there was no telling what he might do. She knew the terrific power of those great hands and the force that lay in the muscle-armored back and shoulders. If for some unpredictable reason, he should turn on her—She shuddered.

In a few moments Schmidt returned with a handful of Lascar sailors, two of whom were armed with guns. Schmidt also carried a gun, a powerful Mauser. The sailors unlashed Janette's cage and pushed it against the wild man's, door-to-door fashion. The doors were raised.

"All right," Schmidt said, a smile splitting his mouth as a knife would have done. "You asked for it. So get in there with your wild man."

Janette crouched in the far corner of her cage, her body bent and frozen with terror. From the larger iron cage, de Groote, his hands clenched tightly on the bars, raged in his helplessness.

The unarmed Lascars, at Schmidt's orders, began prodding Janette with the long pointed poles that Kraus used on his animals. The wild man, watching with slitted, dangerous eyes, growled and started toward the opening. Schmidt fired one shot warningly at his bare feet; it splintered the flooring of his cage. Prods barred his way.

The wild man's growl had terrified Janette, but with a

proud and abrupt resignation, she made herself stand up, very slim and straight, and walk into the other cage. The iron gate dropped behind her. She stood facing the wild man, her tightly compressed lips drawn white and fine, her fists clenched at her sides. She must not let her eyes show fear. Krause had told her that many times. Never let anything savage see that you are afraid.

The deck was silent; even de Groote's sobbed, raging curses had ceased. They were all watching, watching. . .

Janette remained where she was, just within the doorway of the cage, waiting; she looked at the wild man, he looked at her.

HE COULD sense the girl's terror; he frowned. If he could only show her that she need not be afraid; that his strength would never be used against her. An idea struck him. For the first time, Janette saw him smile. She wanted to believe that it was a reassuring smile, a friendly smile; but she had heard such fearful stories about his ferocity that she could not entirely believe that it was.

The wild man saw from her gelid stiffness that her fear had not lessened. He bent down and picked up the harpoon he had taken from Schmidt. He picked it up slowly and placed the iron barb against his own chest. Holding it that way, the haft toward the girl, he took slow steps toward the opposite end of the cage. With his free hand, he gestured to her to take the weapon. Her numb arms raised; with both trembling hands she grasped the weapon, expecting at any moment that it would be snatched out of her hands. Instead, the wild man let her have the harpoon, and went back and sat down against the far wall.

The gesture was unmistakable. Janette felt her knees give. Something like a sob of relief broke from her throat and she slid down to the floor.

Schmidt bellowed rage. "Wild man," he shrieked. "You're a cheat, Abdullah! You and that Kraus—liars, dirty liars!"

The Arab permitted himself a thin smile. "If you don't think he's wild, *nasrany*, go yourself into his cage."

The wild man observed Schmidt carefully; he understood nothing of what had been said, but Yellow-hair's gestures, his expression, everything he had done made an unmistakable picture. Another score was chalked up against him in the wild man's brain. He let his gaze fall on the Arab. A lean brown hand leapt to Abdullah's throat—there was death in those eyes—death for him! With a sobbing gasp, he wheeled and fled.

THE WILD MAN and the girl, still on opposite sides of their cage, slept soundly. Janette's was the sleep of utter exhaustion; she lay relaxed and safe, the harpoon lightly clutched in her fingers.

Neither of them heard the soft approach of three dark figures, coming catfoot toward the cage, noiselessly struggling with a heavy, burlap-muffled burden that writhed and thrashed in their grip. They opened the burlap sack and handed its uncoiling contents through the bars. Something fell with a slithering thump to the floor of the cage. Two green pinpoints of light pricked the dark with a baleful glitter. A heavy body slithered forward across the cage, twisting its speedy way toward the sleeping wild man.

In passing, it brushed against the harpoon in the girl's

relaxed hand. Instantly she was awake. It took her a moment to see what had disturbed her, then she screamed.

"Look out! Boa—boa constrictor!"

In the same second that the girl's piercing cry reached the wild man's ears, the great serpent reared against his ribs and threw a looping coil around him.

Abdullah nodded in satisfaction and slipped away, the two Lascars noiseless shadows at his heels.

The wild man's brain surged to split-second wakefulness. He felt the great rope circling his chest and leaped to his knees, managing to jerk his right arm away from the crushing grip. Immediately he knew his danger, and a great roar of anger burst from his throat. He half rose, tugging at that dully glistening, living noose with his free arm; then the boa whipped a second loop around his legs and the wild man pitched forward helplessly.

Janette had stopped screaming; her throat frozen, her whole body paralyzed, she leaned forward to watch the hideous struggle. After that one roar, the wild man fought in desperate silence against the hideous thing that had secured the crippling advantage of first attack.

The two great bodies threshed in slow agony across the floor, the serpent testing each bone-crushing hold, quick to feel out a new, more deadly grip, its glittering coils writhing over the big brown body, which it was drawing every second more terribly, more destroyingly into its unyielding grasp.

The wild man knew that once that ribbon of muscle had twisted around his throat, he was finished. The pressure on his ribs was viselike. His other arm, by a swift shift of the coils, was pinioned to his sides. Tighter and tighter the serpent squeezed; so crushingly that he could no longer drag much air down into his body, only meager, unrelieving gulps of oxygen going shallowly into his throat. The great, green-eyed head was working slowly up across his breast. Sweat streamed down his back; his limbs were clammy with the moisture of his tortured exertions. What little strength was left in him he must hoard for the final, supreme moment.

The mighty body relaxed inward, lay so still that the girl thought it already lifeless. He let the boa twine spirally until its oblong head had touched the base of the throat. There would be a sliver of a second when the snake would loosen its twists ever so slightly in preparation for whipping that last crushing ring around his neck. He must wait for that.

His flesh felt as if it had been scrubbed with sandpaper, so exquisitely sensitive it was to every small tentative wriggle of the killer-snake. He shoved a deep sobbing breath down into his chest—now!

The snake's body reared—the wild man threw himself over on his back. The shoulders rose and heaved and strained, pushing outward, the elbows bent for leverage, the lifted collarbone making great shadowy pits of flesh at the base of his throat. Muscles swelled and trembled with the superhuman effort demanded of them. White teeth showed in a grin of death as his throbbing blood mottled the sun-bronzed face.

For an eternity, the two bodies remained in almost exact balance—muscle against flesh, sinew against coiling power. Neither yielded the least fraction of an inch. But the deep breath was growing stale in the wild man's lungs. Recklessly he threw out his last bit of reserve power—there was a swift vital surge of movement. The coils were torn loose.

Faster than lightning, the suddenly freed hands seized the boa's coiled-spring shape and dragged it slowly away from his body. The wild man leaped to his feet, shook the twisting form and raised it high above his head. There was a dreadful snapping sound and a loud crashing thud as the boa fell to the wooden floor. It writhed convulsively for a moment, then was still.

The wild man watched it intently for a moment. Then he put one bare foot on it, threw back his head and thumped his chest with his fist; and Tarzan's bull-throated cry of triumph resounded magnificently through the night, bringing everyone on board the *Saigon* instantly and tremblingly awake.

Disdainfully, the wild man shoved the lifeless thing out of the cage. He smiled reassuringly at the girl who still cowered in her corner of the cage, then dropped down, curled for instant sleep.

CHAPTER V

THE LONELY SEA

STRANGE DREAMS came to the wild man after he had fallen asleep. Black men were dancing about him, jabbering and screaming. One, he saw, held a huge stone poised for the throw. The stone hurtled toward him. And there was a shattering of instant blinding pain and blackness. Only the blackness wasn't still: it rocked gently and slowly lightened from utter darkness to grayish mist. Beyond this mist, there was light. Freedom. He knew he must reach that light if he could. But something entangled and held him and the mist grew thicker and thicker. He could not delay very much longer or the mist would be black again. He groped forward with his hands, feeling his whole body moving sluggishly, answering an almost impossible command.

Suddenly the mist brightened and blazed to blue and yellow. There was water and sunlight about him cut by transverse black lines that held him prisoner. Bars. The bars of a cage. The thought maddened him—he, Tarzan, to be imprisoned in a cage!

His eyes opened suddenly. Tarzan—the name had flashed to his brain out of nowhere. He sat up and rubbed his head dazedly. He was Tarzan—Tarzan of the Apes. With that knowledge, came everything else, complete memory of all that had happened to him both before and after that blow. A great, roaring gladness filled him. He knew who he was.

He knew too that he had not been able to talk or to understand speech; he was almost afraid to try to, now. But the girl at the other end of the cage had opened her eyes and was smiling at him confidently.

"Good morning," she said, trying to make the cheerfulness of her voice convey what her words could not. To her surprise, the wild man answered her.

"Good morning," he said, in a voice that was only slightly hesitant from its long disuse. "I am called Tarzan."

"But you—you can't talk. They all said so."

One of his rare smiles flashed across Tarzan's face. "They were right. I was hurt. My memory and my speech left me. But this morning when I woke—I was well once more."

"I'm glad," the girl said honestly. She glanced at the

carcass of the great boa, lying inert with clouds of flies buzzing hungrily about it. "Last night—I cannot describe it—you were magnificent."

Tarzan frowned. "I wonder who put the snake in here—and who was meant to be its victim—you or I?"

The girl shivered. "It seems silly now, but I—"

"I know," interrupted Tarzan; "you were afraid of me. You need not be."

"They said terrible things about you. That you were very ferocious and that you—you ate—people."

Again came one of Tarzan's unfrequent smiles. "And they hoped I would eat you? Who did that—why?"

Swiftly the girl told him about Kraus and Schmidt and the mutiny. At the mention of Abdullah, a low growling sound came from Tarzan's throat. He did remind one, Janette thought, of a lion. There was still a good deal of the primitive in him, bred by his jungle years, never to be effaced. But she was afraid of him no longer.

JUST AS the girl finished her narrative, de Groote awoke in the next cage. "I didn't mean to sleep," he muttered shamefacedly. "I meant to stay awake in case you needed help. Although I don't see that I could have done you much good caged up like this." His eyes traveled to the boa's body; his straw-colored brows went sharply up; he whistled.

Janette nodded. "Tarzan did that," she said. "With his bare hands. I had the harpoon, but I was much too scared to do anything but sit and howl."

"It must have been horrible—to see those two—" he hesitated—"two wild beasts fighting each other. Somehow I've got to make Schmidt let you out of there. He may not have harmed you yet, but there's no telling—"

Kraus woke now and he came over and stood beside de Groote. He, too, saw the dead boa. "My God, what happened?"

"He killed it," said Janette.

"That boa was worth a fortune!" Kraus exploded. "That damned savage—I'd like to get my hands on him!"

Janette laughed. "I'm sure you would," she said sarcastically. "But you'd better be careful. He might get out and give you your chance."

"Schmidt will see that he never gets out of there alive," Kraus said, sneering. "Schmidt knows what he'd get if he did—"

Janette glanced at Tarzan to see how he was taking all this. To her surprise she saw that he had lain down close to the bars and was either asleep or pretending to be. Maybe, for reasons of his own, he didn't want the others to know that now he could speak and understand what was said.

She raised her eyes to see Schmidt standing there, his piggy eyes narrowed, his boot tentatively kicking at the boa's carcass.

"I see you had a busy night. I thought Abdullah'd try something like this. Here, you." He summoned two Lascars. "Heave this oversides." He turned back to the cage. "Is he dead, or asleep?"

For answer, Tarzan pushed his hand between the bars and seized Schmidt by the ankle. The ape-man jerked the leg into the cage, and Schmidt went heavily down on his back. He howled; Tarzan's other hand shot out and grabbed the mutineer's pistol from its holster.

Schmidt's cries brought Abdullah and a handful of Lascars running to his aid. They stopped short as they

saw that the wild man had them covered with Schmidt's gun.

"I am hungry," Tarzan said, giving Schmidt's leg an angry twist. "Bring food and water at once."

"Bring him—what—he—wants," Schmidt gasped.

Under cover of the excitement, Abdullah pulled a pistol from his belt, raised it and fired at the ape-man. De Groote's last-minute warning came too late, and Tarzan tumbled to the floor. As Schmidt scrambled madly out of reach, Janette grabbed the gun from Tarzan's fingers and shot Abdullah through the palm. Then, as if in a trance, she fired straight before her until the chamber was empty. When she had stopped and flung the gun to the deck, Abdullah was screeching with anger and one of the Lascars was crawling over the deck, leaving behind him a thin, red trail.

"A ship!" came the cry. "A ship!"

CHAPTER VI

CANNIBAL!

THE VESSEL proved to be an English yacht. Schmidt ordered the English flag ran up, then he radioed across, asking for medical aid. As soon as the yacht hove to, Schmidt and eight Lascars, armed with whatever they could find—pistols, rifles, boathooks, knives and prods—entered a small boat and rowed over to her.

Schmidt's technic in the seizure of shipping exhibited the skill he had acquired from taking over the *Saigon*. As soon as he and his pirate crew were aboard the yacht, they brought out their weapons; and in less than eight minutes it was all over. A few English sailors had been shot down; the yacht's owner and passengers had been transferred to the *Saigon*, still bewildered and protesting; and a skeleton Lascar crew had been left aboard the yacht.

As more iron cages were hoisted on deck to house the new prisoners, they stood as if struck dumb, unable to believe this outrage that had exploded athwart their placid and well-ordered lives.

Schmidt stood before them, bellowing curses and insults like a madman, making the wildest threats of what he would do to them when he had brought them to the nearest German port. As he finished his unbelievable tirade, he gestured toward the cages. "I'm sorry we have no proper brig—the hold is filled with animals. You'll get more air and sun in these cages, on deck, anyway. I shall allow you to choose your own cage-mates."

A chorus of outraged protest rose from the appalled prisoners, led by a slim young man with ruddy cheeks and crinkled russet hair. He was Brice Wright-Smith, the fiancé of Patricia Leigh, who was the niece of the yacht's owner, Sir William Leigh. Wright-Smith was ably seconded, and at times surpassed, by Sir William's wife—a silly, florid-faced woman whose life up to this moment had been sheltered as if by the King's command. Lady Penelope threatened to clap everybody in irons if she and her party were not released at once; failing that, she would have a heart attack and die, rather than enter one of those "appalling, smelly bins!" From the mottled color of her sagging cheeks, the second possibility seemed the likelier.

But enter the cages they did. Sir William, his lady, and their niece, into one. Wright-Smith, Captain Bolton, Dr. Curdy, who had been attending to Abdullah's injured hand, and Tibbet, the yacht's second mate, into the other.

After her half-hysterical reproaches had been more or less coped with by her niece and husband, Lady Penelope's eyes fell on the next cage, in which Janette Laon was doing what she could for the ape-man's scalp wound.

"Revolt!" was the verdict of Lady Penelope. "But revolting!" She seemed to make moral comfort from the word. "A savage—and his mate. For I don't suppose one of them have ever heard of the word marriage. . . . What did you say, William?" she demanded, turning on her husband thinking she had detected some bitter comment on her last words.

"He didn't say anything, Aunt Pen," Patricia interposed, with the practice of one who for many years had stood between majestic wrath and its nearest victim. Sir William flashed his niece a grateful glance.

"He's practically naked," Lady Penelope was saying. "Cover yourself, my man," she commanded through the bars. "There are ladies present—*now*."

Janette glared angrily over her shoulder. "I suppose that's for me," she said. "I don't mind, but do stop howling at Tarzan. He's hurt."

AS IF roused by the sound of his name, Tarzan stirred and opened his eyes. In swift whispers, Janette explained the new cargo of captives. "Schmidt *must* be mad," she finished, "if he thinks the *Saigon* can sweep the seas of all British shipping between here and Hamburg." There was an interruption as Chinese sailors brought water and food—in the shape of stew of dubious origin—to the captives. Into Tarzan's cage was thrust a hunk of raw red meat. He took it in both hands and tore at it with his teeth.

To Lady Penelope the contemplation of her own food was only slightly less nauseous than watching the ape-man's table manners. She moaned faintly. "Raw," she murmured. "He's eating it raw. And—and growling. I shall be ill," she added firmly.

From Tarzan's cage, voices were sharply, distressingly audible; what she heard caused Lady Penelope to turn brightly green.

"Do you find the captain palatable?" Janette was inquiring in a tone of tender solicitude.

"Not," Tarzan grunted between mouthfuls, "as good as the Swedish sailor I had last week."

Patricia Leigh grinned. "I wish you'd try Wright-Smith sometime," she said, smiling at the incredible wild man. She winked at her Uncle William over her shoulder.

"I might be quite delicious at that," yelled her fiancé from the third cage. "At any rate, if I was et, I shouldn't have to marry a foul-tempered, snub-nosed brat like you."

"Make them stop," Lady Penelope begged. "It's horrid to hear them squabble like that."

As Sir William began to explain that they didn't really mean it and all young people ragged one another that way, a hungry bellow went up from the animals belowdecks, unmistakably demanding to be fed.

"What's that?" shrieked Lady Penelope, turning from jade to ash, as the blood-curdling diapason of savagery billowed up from below: the rumbling roars of lions, the growl of tigers, the laughter of hyenas, the trumpeting of elephants mingled with a medley of shrill cries from the lesser beasts. "I have never been on such a perfectly dreadful boat in my life. It's all your fault and that wretched doctor's—scientific expedition, indeed!"

As the ultimate blow to Lady Penelope's composure,

sounding clear and full above the roar of the animals, came the sound of the ape-man's unrestrained laughter. . . .

As night drew on, the sky became overcast and the wind increased. The heaving roll of the ship made the animals restless again. A Lascar came along, making his nightly round, depositing a bucket of water in every cage but Tarzan's. The cage doors were briefly opened and the bucket passed through, followed by a broom with which the occupants were supposed to clean their cages. But even the two armed sailors who followed the Lascar with rifles did not make Schmidt feel that opening Tarzan's cage would be safe.

The Lascar made one last round of inspection, Tarzan knew, at about four bells of the second night watch. Then, because he did not have to open the cages, no guard was with him.

Prodded by Lady Penelope, Sir William passed a five-pound note to the Lascar—who pocketed it blandly—and demanded to be taken at once to the captain. "Sahib Schmidt captain now," the Lascar answered. "Captain Larsen sick; no see three, four, five days. Maybe dead." He moved on.

Lady Penelope was staring with sick fascination at the clean-gnawed bone in Tarzan's cage. "It *was*," she said faintly, "the captain."

CHAPTER VII

STORM WARNING

RAIN FELL in torrents and the wind whistled through the cages, driving myriad needle points against the unprotected inmates. The sea rose, and the *Saigon* rolled and pitched heavily. Lightning flashes tore across the angry sky, heralding the crash of thunder which drowned out the complaining roar from the animals belowdecks.

Tarzan stood upright in his cage, his body welcoming the clean, hard lash of the driving rain. In the lightning flashes, he could see into the next cage where Lady Penelope sat wakeful and shivering, wrapped in her husband's coat. The blond girl, like Tarzan, was standing erect, her lips parted, her eyes wide and exultant, her head thrown back to the storm. Tarzan approved of her; and of the little gray-haired man, too.

The storm's fury increased; the *Saigon* was running before it with great following seas always threatening to crash over her stern. The wind howled in anguish and hurled spume over the cages.

The English girl looked over from her cage, and smiled. "Did you enjoy the captain?" she shouted against the wind's howling.

"Too salty," Tarzan roared back.

"Look here," the girl said. "My aunt was rude, I know. But she was upset. Everything happened so fast—it was all so frightful. She didn't really mean to hurt your feelings."

Tarzan grunted and nodded his head to show that he bore no grudge.

"This man Schmidt," the girl said. "He must be mad."

Tarzan nodded. "We won't be his prisoners long. Don't be frightened."

"We certainly won't be anybody's prisoners long, if this storm gets any worse." She was clinging manfully to the bars now, as the ship dove into a deep trough, rolling

and wallowing as it lifted heavily to the following crest.

Janette fought to her feet and came to join them. "The *Saigon* is stouter than she looks. We'll weather this all right, unless Schmidt's a poorer sailor than I think him."

The *Saigon*, as if dubious of such praise, swung suddenly, quartering to the sea, slithered down into another trough, and heeled over on her beam ends. There was a frightened scream as Lady Penelope was thrown heavily against the bars of the cage.

Her husband and Patricia helped her to a more normal position. "I cannot stand much more of this," she gasped. "Every bone in my body is shattered. I know it." As her breath returned, she warmed to the tirade and threatened to outblast the storm itself.

"Hereafter, William, I wish you stick to the *Times* or to Macaulay and Gibbon. The moment you read anything else you go quite off your head. If you hadn't read that disgusting book, we would undoubtedly be safe at home this minute. Just because some Beebe person fished up a lot of hideous creatures monstrously equipped with electric lights, you thought you must try to do the same."

Suddenly her face screwed up woefully and she clung helplessly to her husband. "Oh, William," she sobbed, "I'm so frightened—and so miserable."

THE STORM CONTINUED in unabated fury through the night and all of the next day. No one approached the cages to bring any of them any food. The washed, heaving deck offered too treacherous a footing for any of the crew to trust himself upon it merely for the purpose of contributing to the comfort of the captives.

Lady Penelope had lapsed into a silence broken only by occasional whimpers of distress. The other prisoners had fallen into a similar apathy, with no fight left in them except for an occasional despairing outburst of blasphemy from one of the men. Only Tarzan seemed to be motivated by any purpose stronger than a woebegone desire to cling to whatever life was left, miserable as it was.

Janette watched her cage-mate admiringly. There was strength in him still, and unbroken will. If there was any help for them at all, it would come from him. And although he had not taken her into his confidence, his attitude of watchful power told her plainly that he was waiting only for the moment to act.

Early that evening, the storm seemed to die down, but it was an ominous lull, filled with a brooding tenseness, as if the storm had relaxed its grip only to take a better hold for the killing attack.

"We have only reached the storm's center," Janette said, when Patricia Leigh said gladly that she believed they were out of it.

Tarzan nodded. "Soon it will be bad again," he said.

The ape-man stood grasping two of the bars of his cage as the Lascar passed. Janette was beside Tarzan, and she sensed that the moment for which he had been waiting had come at last.

She watched him closely, and presently, although apparently he had made no move, she saw the muscles of his shoulders and arms tense and bunch and ripple as he exerted all their tremendous power upon the bars of their cage.

And then, her eyes wide, she saw the bars slowly spread, and Tarzan step through to freedom. . . .



In the beam of Bill's flashlight, Yin Lang held the two men, hanging their heads together

No Ticket to Nippon

The chain began sixteen hours ago, two hundred miles away, in a peaceful moonlight ride. But its links led Bill Williams to the point of a gun on a dirty Japanese fishing boat, bound for Davy Jones's locker

By Sinclair Gluck

Author of "Skies on Fire", "Honorable Mr. Death", etc.

CHAPTER I

CHAIN OF JEOPARDY

SUNLIGHT bathed the dock, flashing rainbow glints from the oil-filmed water. Alongside one of the wharves lay a small, black Japanese freighter. Her waste ports were bearded with dirty rust, but up on her decks all was neat, precise activity. San Pedro was her last foreign port of call. At midnight she sailed for Nippon and her home port of Kobe.

Most of her cargo was stowed, the few remaining bales swinging inboard now. On the wharf, U. S. Government agents still lingered; quiet, grave-faced men who did their job without bluster.

America had stopped almost all war supplies to Japan. The Japs badly needed war material for their souring Chinese venture. Hence the watchful government agents.

A catboat rounded the point of the vacant wharf, her sail flapping gently, an outboard motor chugging on her stern. The lone man handling her tiller wore a paint-daubed sweat shirt, faded blue denim pants and dirty sneakers, also well speckled with paint. Sprawled half out of the tiny cockpit, he looked about seven feet long. He was a lazy, freckled, raw-boned blond of thirty or so, who signed himself William Williams.

Bill Williams and his catboat, the *Bill-Bill*, were known all over the harbors of Wilmington and San Pedro: Bill for his slow, profane good nature and his laziness; the *Bill-Bill* for her neat and gaudy paint. Bill liked to poke around the docks and talk; and he was a good listener. If no one had time for him, he made *Bill-Bill* fast in a sunny corner and went to sleep.

Some declared him too lazy to sail outside the harbor. Others granted him the cut of a sailor, and hinted beerily at woman trouble. Still others, with more lung-power

than medical knowledge, insisted that Bill had sleeping sickness—a view not generally accepted.

Nobody knew where he came from or what he did with himself at night. And, after the tolerant fashion of sailormen, nobody inquired.

As the *Bill-Bill* nosed into the vacant slip, one long, hairy arm cut the motor while the other steered for the steps at the head of the dock. At the right moment a long leg fended her off the steps. Then her blue-eyed skipper found the energy to look up and crook a finger at the sole lounge above him.

"Come down here," he called. "Got an errand for ya."

"Aye, aye, mate!" The lounge descended, grinning.

Bill held out a nickel and a dime. "Get me a pack of Luckies. There's two bits in it when you bring 'em. Honesty pays—" Bill's protracted yawn seemed to weaken him, for his next words did not carry a dozen feet in the echoing dock: "Make it an hour. I gotta have a nap. Stow the gab and beat it."

Still grinning, the lounge mounted the steps. Bill over-handed his catboat along the dock wall and made her fast to a pitted ring-bolt. Then he stretched out in her sun-drenched cockpit, yawned luxuriously and closed his eyes.

NOT two minutes later a big, deep-sea fishing boat poked her lofty harpoon platform into sight and came muttering into the dock. The letters along her bow read *Seamew*; but her skipper, perched on her harpoon platform, was a sturdy, heavy-browed Jap.

Her reversed engine, and a clumsy hand at the wheel, swung her stern toward the freighter. Shrill orders in Japanese lanced from her harpoon platform, but these came too late. Her starboard quarter ground along the freighter's side, scraping a six-foot gash in the paint.

From the steamer's bridge, a Jap officer addressed his fellow countryman on the harpoon platform as the son of a nameless father, and inquired what he thought he was doing.

The *Seamew's* captain shouted an apology and passed the compliment along to his helmsman. He added that a great school of fish was running ten knots south of Anacapa and his crew were excited. They would be fishing all night.

The merchant officer bowed. "Thank you. We sail for Nippon at midnight. We shall hope to run down and sink your stinking fish tub as we pass." With another bow he turned away.

Neither the mild collision nor the dialogue roused the skipper of the *Bill-Bill*. At the Jap mate's last sentence, however, his eyelids twitched. Bill had spent several years in Manchuria and Japan and spoke Japanese fluently. The merchant officer had used an expression never employed in the merchant service, but limited to the Imperial Navy—a sort of royal "We."

The *Seamew's* helmsman must have recovered from his excitement, for he brought the lofty platform within a foot of the dock wall and held it there. His skipper leaped ashore, muttering sullenly. The *Seamew* went astern and began to back neatly out of the dock, churning well clear of the freighter.

Up on the dock wall, two men had strolled forward to intercept the fishing-boat skipper. Both were white men, heavy set and well dressed. One had a broken nose. The other was a more dangerous type: big-nosed, dom-

ineering, with very black eyes. Under half-closed lids Bill could see only their heads and shoulders over the lip of the wall. He could not hear a guarded word of what they said to the fishing skipper, but he got the impression that the Jap had come here to meet them.

After a moment all three moved away together.

Bill stirred, yawned and sat up, rubbing his eyes. He looked up and frowned. Then he cast off, worked the *Bill-Bill* along to the steps and made fast. His long legs jack-knifed him up the dockhead, where he looked around and swore mildly.

The lounge who had gone for his cigarettes was nowhere in sight. The Jap and his white companions were heading for a distant café. It had private booths, as Bill knew, and many a waterfront deal was closed there.

Bill leaned disconsolately on the dock rail, as if too lazy to go in search of his cigarettes. Following the trio to that café would draw their attention to himself. He was more than interested in what they might have to say to each other; but they would have to speak English and would, therefore, keep their voices down. The low-backed booths made eavesdropping obvious, too obvious to risk betraying his interest just yet.

He padded loosely down to his boat, cast off and yanked the starter cord. When the outboard caught, he steered out of the dock and away, ignoring the Japanese freighter and the steady, following gaze of her mate.

An hour later he was driving toward Los Angeles in a sleek, fast coupé. He now wore an expensive but unobtrusive business suit and his calm eyes had lost their sleepiness. Neither of the Jap's white companions had struck any chord in his memory. To judge by their looks, however, he should be able to get a line on the black-eyed guy and his broken-nosed pal.

Bill was fairly well satisfied, and in no great rush. His presence in the dock had been no accident. What he had seen and heard appeared to be definite links in a chain the existence of which he had suspected. Tonight or another night they should lead him to the rest of the chain.

Unluckily he knew nothing of the linked events which had begun sixteen hours earlier and some two hundred miles away.

CHAPTER II

LOS ANGELES RUNAROUND

ONE of the richest mines of the American Vanadium Company is near the little town of Pocket, Arizona. The mine bores into one wall of a narrow valley. In a half-circle below it rise a mountain of slag, the plant itself, and the warehouses where the concentrate is stored for shipment by truck.

Under the rimrock across the valley runs a dirt road to Pocket to the north, and to Posas to the south. The paved road connecting these towns runs through a parallel valley.

Tonight Lin Davis, one of the younger plant executives, had taken his fiancée to a dance at Pocket and was driving her back to her home at Posas. To prolong their drive he had chosen the mine road. It was close on midnight and the full moon was high. The beetling rimrock shadowed the road, but across the narrow valley the plant buildings were like silvery ghosts.

When Nancy Wallace saw them she laughed softly "You must love your work to drive me home *this* roundabout way!" She moved nearer and sighed. "Look at that moon!"

"Yeah. Wish it was a honeymoon—" Lin broke off and jerked his arm from around her shoulders.

"Lin! Put your lights on again! You'll wreck us— Why, what are you stopping for?"

"Look! Pulling away from Warehouse Three. See 'em?"

"Well, what of it? They're only trucks."

"Yeah, four—five of 'em, running without lights; and look at 'em go! I don't like this. It could be a Government order going out on the quiet; but Number Three's dark. Listen. Run over to the plant and bang for the watchman. Phone Hoyt and tell him. Don't twist your ankle. Ask him—"

"But why can't we *both* go?"

"Ask him if it is a shipment," Davis interrupted. "I'm going to follow those trucks. Tell Hoyt I won't bother 'em, in case it's a genuine shipment. I'll just trail 'em. Go on, Nancy! I'll phone or wire you when I get a chance—tell you where they are. Vanadium costs money. Not scared to go alone?"

"Of course not!" She jumped out of the car and turned. "You be careful, you hear?" She leaned in for a kiss.

Davis started his car. "'By, darling. Hoyt'll run you home. Tell him I'll get word to *you* where the trucks go."

Nancy waved goodbye, picked a diagonal course over the rough ground, then ran to the plant. She banged until the dozing watchman heard her. He was dubious and slow-witted about letting her in, although she had worked here for Hoyt a year ago.

Once admitted, she dialed Hoyt's local number and listened to the ring, but nobody answered. It was Saturday night. The Hoyts might be anywhere. She tried the homes of two other executives with no better luck. It was after one o'clock when Hoyt himself finally answered.

Nancy explained quickly and fully. "No shipment tonight? Then it *is* robbery! All right, I'll wait. G'by."

HOYT was a quiet, dark giant whom everyone liked. As soon as he arrived he made for Number Three. Nancy followed.

The lock had been smashed with a crowbar. The doors were closed. Hoyt went in, switching on the lights. He came out frowning and rubbing his jaw. "There's a lot of concentrate missing, Nancy. I'd say about twenty thousand dollars' worth. Thing is, it's Government stuff. Good job Lin saw 'em. Come on."

Nancy made her slim legs keep up with him. "Oh, that's awful!" she panted. "What if—they see Lin trailing them?"

"He's too smart. What did those trucks look like?"

"Open bodies—with low sides. That's all I noticed."

At the plant phone, Hoyt called the sheriff at Yuma to report the robbery. The sheriff agreed to ring the state police and have them watch for the trucks. Then Hoyt called the Federal Bureau at Phoenix, the stolen vanadium being a Government order.

On the way to Posas he was glum. "It's not your fault, Nancy, but we've lost too much time. Those trucks could go south to Dome or Yuma, west around Phoenix,

northeast to Prescott—or north into Kingman and Nevada. We'll have to count on Lin."

When they reached Nancy's home, her mother reported no phone call. Hoyt phoned his wife, sent the Wallaces to bed and lay down on their couch to wait. There was no call. Just after sunrise Mrs. Wallace got him breakfast and he left for the mine.

Ten minutes later the Wallace phone rang: The local postmistress relaying a telegram phoned from Yuma. The wire originated in San Bernardino, California. Nancy took it down in pencil and a flurry of haste. It read:

MISS NANCY WALLACE
POSAS ARIZONA

DRIVERS GRABBING BITE HERE; THINK HEAD-
ING FOR LOS ANGELES. WILL FOLLOW. WIRE
ME BILTMORE HOTEL LOS ANGELES WHETHER
SHIPMENT OKAY

LIN

"Wait!" Nancy told the postmistress. "Get this right back: 'Shipment not okay. Hoyt acting. Wire me immediately you get this. Anxious. Nancy'."

She had this read back to her. Then she called the mine, caught Hoyt arriving and read him both wires.

"Good for Lin," came his deep voice. "I'll get the California cops on the job. What time was his wire sent?"

"Oh, Lord, I didn't ask! I'll find out quick."

"Do that, Nancy, and call me right back, will you?"

Nancy called Yuma again. The wire had been phoned from a San Bernardino hotel at six A. M. Yuma had waited to phone it on until the Posas post office opened at nine.

With a cold lump in her middle, Nancy phoned Hoyt.

"Yes," he answered the dismay in her voice—"another three hours lost. It's about sixty miles from San Bernardino to Los Angeles. Even if the drivers waited till seven, they'd get to L. A. by nine. It's almost ten now. Never mind. Stay there and phone me as soon as you hear from Lin again, will you?"

Nancy stayed—and stayed. The morning passed with no wire. At one o'clock, cold with anxiety, she called Hoyt.

"Listen, Mr. Hoyt, I'm going to Los Angeles."

"Now, I wouldn't do that—"

"I've got to! Something's happened to Lin, or he would have answered my wire. He's got to be found, and the Los Angeles police don't even know what he looks like. Mother's promised to phone you at once if Lin does answer. Goodbye."

NANCY'S best friend was Kathleen More. Kathleen was no mental giant, but she owned a two-seater plane, a warm heart, a student pilot's license; and she had the nerve to take a chance.

Kathleen landed her at a small taxi flying field south-east of Pasadena, and took off again at once. Nancy phoned Pasadena for a taxi, and when it had arrived she leaned back in it with an anxious sigh. This would cost a lot, but it was worth a lot.

There were miles and miles of Pasadena, but she had actually reached Los Angeles when the incredible thing happened. Nancy squealed at the driver to stop. There were thousands of cars like Lin's, but only one with just that pleat in the fender. She had crumpled it herself.

She got out, dodged across the street and looked into

the car. Lin's name was in the folder on the steering column.

Nancy looked around. It was a wholesale neighborhood and not inviting. There was no policeman in sight. Then it occurred to her that Lin might have his own reasons for leaving his car here. Her interference might wreck his plans.

She returned to her taxi and waited. The meter ticked up steadily while no one showed any interest in Lin's car; and finally she told the driver to go head. She memorized the name of the street they were on, and that of the next cross street—about all she could do for now.

Of course she couldn't have guessed that Lin was a prisoner half a block away. Nor did she notice the small delivery truck that followed her taxi now: followed it all the way to the Biltmore.

AT THE hotel desk she learned that her wire was still there: no one had called for it. She caught a full lower lip under white teeth for a moment. Then she clicked out to her taxi on sharp, determined heels, jumped in and slammed the door.

"The police," she told her driver, "as fast as you can."

Captain Glover, Missing Persons Bureau, interviewed her himself. Glover was methodical and cautious, but a good party man. Now, looking into brilliant blue eyes, he shook his big head. "I get it, Miss Wallace. Trouble is, we wouldn't call Mr. Davis missing, see? He just didn't stop at the Biltmore."

Nancy was indignant. "I don't know what you *call* missing! Have you got to—find his body or something?"

"If he got here to L. A., maybe he went to another hotel."

"But he *wired* me to wire him at the Biltmore!"

"Yeah, I know, but those trucks could of led him anywhere, see? You wanna give him time to get to the Biltmore."

"He's had ever since six o'clock this morning. Almost ten hours! It doesn't take long to—murder a person."

Glover smiled tolerantly. "Now don't get excited. There's no evidence of foul play. You wait at the Biltmore—"

"There's evidence of *something* wrong! I saw his car on the way here—on Mission Road just beyond San Nicolas Street. And it was headed the *other* way—out of town!"

"I guess you thought you saw it, eh?" Glover's chair creaked as he leaned back. "How do you know it was his car?"

"Because I got out and looked! His name's in the folder. I waited, but nobody came near it. I was afraid of upsetting his plans, so I came on to the Biltmore. He never got my wire. It's still there. Mr. Hoyt said he was getting the Los Angeles police on the job. Haven't you done *anything*?"

Glover reached for his phone, called another department and spoke cryptically. He leaned forward and gripped the instrument tighter as he listened. Then he mentioned Lin's car, gave its location, hung up and turned back to Nancy.

"All right, Miss Wallace." He nodded heavily. "We'll bring in that car and do what we can. Meanwhile I'd like to put you in touch with a man who sometimes helps us. This is more in his line. Shall I ring him for you?"

"I wish you would! Maybe *he'll* believe me."

"Now, now—" Glover pulled up his phone. This time he dialed with a stubby finger. "Hello, Ruth? Williams

there? Swell. Lemme talk to him. Bill? Glover, here. Got a case for you. Young lady. Missing boy friend. Wa-ait a minute. This has to do with twenty grand worth of missing vanadium. Arizona somewhere, traced here. Hell, no, or I wouldn't be—Your office? Okay, I'll send her along."

Glover hung up and wrote on a scratch pad. He tore off the top sheet and passed it to Nancy. "William Williams, Miss Wallace. That's his address. You got a car, haven't you?"

"No, Captain, a taxi. The meter's ticking up across the street. There must be about eight dollars on it now."

"Too bad. Well, your driver'll find Williams easy." Glover stood up and shook hands. "Good luck. Better try the Biltmore again. Davis is most likely there by now."

Nancy freed her hand. "You try it, Captain. I'm going straight to Mr. Williams!" She walked out and shut the door.

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTAIN TAKES ORDERS

THE only colorful thing about Bill's small, dingy offices was his secretary. Ruth Kim had been born in America, of Korean parents. Twenty now, she was poised, dark-eyed, quick-witted and pretty. Moreover, she spoke Chinese.

Returning from the harbor, Bill had phoned Police Records at once. The cards he wanted to see always took a little time and red tape to collect. When Glover phoned about Nancy, there was a cop in the outer office. Ruth had just laid the identity cards on Bill's desk.

While he waited for Nancy, Bill leafed slowly through the cards, studying the front and side view police photographs. He found the black-eyed man almost at once: a man known to the police as Harry (Slick) Walters. Often a suspect in serious crimes, he had been arrested and mugged only once. To date he had never been convicted. He called himself a promoter.

Bill gave that card to Ruth. While she typed out the legend on it, he went through the others again. At length he decided on one, with less certainty, as the broken-nosed punk of the dock wall. The card described its subject as Benjamin (Knuckles) Grant, two-time loser for assault, twice paroled. That, too, went to Ruth.

When he had returned the cards to the cop who was waiting for them, Bill looked at his watch. His blond eyebrows went up and he uncoiled himself. He followed Ruth out to her desk.

"I'm leaving now." He stared absently. "Call Wan Chang at Wilmington right away. Keep at it until you get him. Ask him to round up Yin Ling. I'll need 'em both tonight, and I'd like 'em to stick close to home down there. Will you do that?"

Ruth smiled up at him. Her mischievous, smooth-lidded eyes packed a devastating wallop. "Don't I always do as you ask?"

He studied her pretty mouth. "In a business way, yes."

"Why *Mister* Williams!" She forgot to lower her face.

Bill stooped and kissed her. "I don't expect to come back tonight, so don't hang around here late. You hear me?"

"You take care of yourself." She frowned. "You hear me? The hours you keep, Bill Williams. I pity your wife."

"That's why I'm single." Bill twitched his hat into place and went out, smiling a little. He would have been lost without Ruth, and he suspected that she knew it.

Five minutes later he strolled into Glover's office.

The captain looked up and rolled his cigar. "Hullo. How'd you get on with the blonde honey I sent you?"

"Not so good." Bill sat down. "She never arrived."

"Yeah?" said Glover, one eye on his work. He looked up. "Huh? What's that? Didn't she go to your office?"

"We-ell—she didn't *get* to my office." Bill tipped his chair back and removed a fleck of paint from under his nail.

"The hell!" Glover stared. Then he chuckled. "Most likely she went to the Biltmore. S'funny, though. Last thing she said was, she was going straight to you. Looked like she meant it. Guess I'll just ring the Biltmore—"

"Wait a minute, Cap. Gimme her story first."

Glover complied, prodding the air with two thick fingers as he talked. "We've had wires from everybody but Hitler about those damn' trucks," he concluded. "No trace of 'em yet. But the wires kinda bear out her statements."

"She found his car. So Davis didn't trail the trucks out of L. A.—at least, not in his own car. Say the trucks are here. Then where's Davis? And where's the girl?"

"Aw, she's found him at the Biltmore by now. Either that or he picked up another blonde to show him the town, not expecting her. We get a lotta scares here that turn out like that."

BILL stood up, hauled the phone to him and dialed from memory. Getting the Biltmore desk, he asked whether a Miss Wallace had asked there for a Mr. Davis within the last half hour—her second visit on that errand. He listened, asked another question and hung up. "Well, Cap, she didn't go to the Biltmore. Davis hasn't been there. It doesn't look so hot, does it?"

Glover rubbed his jaw irritably. "I don't get you."

"Sure you do. Davis and his girl witness that robbery. Davis disappears. His girl comes to find him—and disappears. So here we are at the Missing Persons Bureau. It's your move."

"Yeah? Say those babies in the trucks spotted Davis tailing 'em and put the snatch on him. So it's a snatch. That and the vanadium make it an FBI case. So it's *your* move. Or should I report it direct?" He reached for the telephone.

"Hold it!" Bill lost his smile. "I've got some ideas about this case. Stolen vanadium and Japanese fit together like honey and bees. Damn' if that isn't poetry!"

Glover grunted. "Japs, huh? Then we gotta report it to the FBI sure. You gonna do that or shall I?"

"Neither of us. You say the Wallace girl saw Davis's car, got out to make sure and then waited a while. If they saw her look into the car, she gave 'em plenty of time to plant a tail on her—tail her clear to your office. She starts for my office and disappears. You guess what's happened to her."

"Hell, it could be like that." Glover reddened. "So we call in the FBI officially. We gotta *find* that girl."

"Yeah, but there may be Japs in this, and the Japs are smart. Report all this officially and they'll know it. They don't miss much. We'll never see the vanadium *or* that girl and her boy friend again. They know too much."

"There'll be hell to pay if we *don't* report it."

"Nix!" Bill made the word snap. "I'll take the rap if

there is one. The head of the mine has reported to the Feds, and that's his business. Yours is missing persons. I told you I've got some ideas about this case. Suppose you and I handle it."

The phone rang. Glover answered, listened and hung up. "Prowl cars found nothing like Davis's car near Mission and San Nicolas. Either Miss Wallace got mixed up where she saw it—which I don't think she did—or the gang have moved it. Well, I better circulate her and Davis's descriptions—hers anyway. Dunno what Davis looks like. I shoulda asked her."

"That might get us somewhere—in a couple of weeks. We've got to act quick. If we knew where she parked her car out in front, or what it looked like. . ."

"Say," Glover rumbled, "maybe you've got something! She left her taxi right across the street. Pasadena taxi. Chances are the traffic officer took the number. If not, we'll phone the Pasadena police and taxi companies: Let's go."

IT WAS Bill who spotted the Pasadena taxi opposite the entrance and still waiting. He and Glover crossed the street to it. The flag was down, the meter ticking, the driver dozing.

"Hay, you!" growled the captain. "Did you bring a good looking blonde here 'bout forty minutes ago?"

The driver sat up, saw two men in ordinary clothes and looked them over pugnaciously. "Well, now, who wants to know?"

"I do!" Glover flashed his gold badge.

"Police, huh? Oh. Well, yeah, I brought a young lady here. A blonde. Wanted the police."

"Where'd you pick her up in the first place?"

"Flying field way the other side of Pasadena."

"You took her to the Biltmore. Stop on the way?"

"Yeah, once. I hadda wait while she got out and looked in somebody's car. She came back and waited a while. She looked all upset. Then she told me to go on to the Biltmore."

"Well, park your taxi around in the police parking lot. You may be needed. Tell 'em I sent you. Captain Glover."

"Okay, Captain; but look, I got seven bucks on the clock now. She ain't skipped out on me, huh?"

"Nothing like that. She'll pay you. Get going."

"Wait a minute," said Bill. "Listen, buddy. After your fare looked in that car, did you notice anybody tailing you? Think back carefully now. Take your time."

"Well—Well, say, there was a delivery truck behind us after that, yeah. A closed body job."

Bill nodded lazily. "Name on the side of it? License number? Man driving it? Anything you happened to notice—"

"They was two men in the driving seat. Couldn't see the side of the truck, nor I never noticed the license number. Guess it was a commercial, or I would of noticed—"

"What about the men?" asked Bill casually.

"Well—seems to me they was big fellas. They wasn't in uniform—like delivery uniform, see? That's all I noticed."

"That'll help," nodded Bill. "Much obliged."

Recrossing the street, Glover chewed on his shredded cigar. "Heluva note!" he growled. "She never even reached her taxi. A swell girl like that! We'll take this place apart."

Bill said nothing. He had never seen either Davis or Nancy, but his human sympathies were quick and deep. Guessing the type of men who had kidnapped the young couple—if they had been kidnaped—he saw little hope of finding them alive unless they were found within the next few hours. That conviction made him feel responsible for them in a way.

GLOVER'S questioning of the staff ended with one of the colored elevator men in his office. "You're sure a young lady like that got into your elevator less than an hour ago, Sam?" he insisted heavily.

"That's right, Cap'n. I took special notice, on accounta her faintin' lak she did. Yes, suh!"

"Fainted, did she? What did you do with her, Sam?"

"Me, Cap'n? I di'n do *nothin'* with her! Them two men with her, they say she often took lak that, 'count'a she got a weak haht. Say she be all right in the fresh air. They kinda help her out an' carry her out between 'em, lak. Yessuh."

"But she was alone when she got *on* your elevator!"

"No suh! The ge'men got on with *her*—right behind."

"Hell!" snapped Glover. "They picked her up right outside my door! Well, which way did they take her, Sam?"

"Towa'd the west entrance, Cap'n! Wasn't they *with*—"

"What did they look like? Say, were they Japs?"

"No, suh, Cap'n, they was white men. One of 'em look kinda lak trash, but they was dressed real nice. Lemme see now. They was both *big* men. Carried her real easy. Don't just recall how they was dressed, more'n real fash'nable."

"Notice their eyes, Sam?" asked Bill, smiling.

Sam looked him over shrewdly, and decided to answer. "Seems lak one of 'em had mighty *black* eyes, as I recalls."

"Thanks." Bill lost interest and studied his nails.

"All right, Sam." Glover nodded. "Go in there and dictate the best description you can of those two men. That's all."

BILL left the office and rang for the elevator, Glover at his heels. Downstairs, they made for the west entrance. On its wide steps a newsboy ran up with a folded paper.

"Egg-zamina? Here y'are, Captain! Late extry." He traded the paper for a nickel, dodged what he mistook for a slap and grinned. "Read all about the big police shake-up."

Without apparent haste Bill reached for the youngster, caught him and planted him, squirming, in front of Glover.

"Listen." Glover scowled. "Did you see a pretty blonde come out this way a while back with two men—a sick girl?"

The boy stopped squirming. "Sure, I did, Cap'n."

"Well, what happened? Which way did they go?"

"They guys helped her into a li'l truck, Cap'n. Closed delivery truck, black. They was dressed okay an' she didn't put up no beef or I'd of yelled copper. Say, was she—"

"Get the name on the side of the truck?" asked Bill.

"Couldn't, mister. There wasn't no name on it."

"Get the license number?" Glover demanded.

"Nix, Cap'n. Heck, how'd I know they was wanted—?"

"Notice the men?" asked Bill mildly.

The boy thought a moment. "Yeah! Yeah, 'at's right. One had awful black eyes. He didn't get slugged. I mean, like his *eyes*. And say, the other could'a been a ex-pug. His ears or something. Naw, I remember! He had a busted nose."

Glover stared around. "Anybody else here see 'em?"

The boy followed his eyes. "Nobody that was here then."

Bill turned the youngster about and spanked him out of hearing. "We've got enough," he told Glover softly. "I'll need your help. Where's your car? Rather not use mine."

"Over there," Glover pointed. "Whadda you mean, we got enough? Enough what?"

"Facts. Who one of those birds is, maybe both. Thing is *where* they are. Maybe we can make a stab at that, too."

"You know who they are! Hell's fire, *who*?"

"Black-eyes is Harry 'Slick' Walters. I *think* the other is Ben 'Knuckles' Grant. Records has their mugs."

"Good enough! I'll get out pick-ups on 'em quick!"

"Hold it! We can't wait two or three days for routine pick-ups. I saw those punks this morning, at Wilmington. If you want to see that girl again, alive, drive me down there now. It'll be dark when we get there. I'll need your help, too."

"Wilmington, huh? You figure they'll load that vanadium aboard a Jap freighter tonight?"

"Not exactly. But we're wasting time."

"Hell with the vanadium! What about that girl?"

"The vanadium's our lead to the girl," explained Bill patiently. "Don't forget, the easiest way to get rid of people who know too much is to weigh 'em and sink 'em at sea."

Glover reddened. "Come up to my office then! We'll get quicker action by phone. I'll call San Pedro and get 'em *all* on the jump down there."

"No, Cap! They'll go charging around down there, and tip off the Japs. Then we'll never find the vanadium *or* that young couple. I've got a plan that I think'll work. Are you coming—or going up to your office?"

"I gotta leave somebody in charge, ain't I?" Glover snarled. "Wait here, if you want—"

WITHIN ten minutes the police car had rocked through the worst of the downtown traffic and was boring southward, its siren clearing a path. At Bill's suggestion, Glover had dismissed his police driver and taken the wheel himself. Bill sat in front with him, silent and thoughtful.

When the needle trembled around seventy, Glover relaxed. "Well," he grumbled, hard eyes on the road, "what's your plan?"

"If you'll drop me at the Wilmington bridge," said Bill, "that'll do fine. Then you locate a Coast Guard cutter and get her skipper to stand by. They dock in the Watchorn Basin, right against San Pedro. There's always an emergency cutter there, fast and ready to put to sea. When you've fixed that, you might drop in at San Pedro police headquarters—it's quite close—and wait for a call. I'll phone you as soon as I can."

"Is that all?" Glover sneered. "Let's have your *plan*."

"There's a lot of strictly hush angles to this thing," said Bill mildly. "That's why I'd like you and the Coast Guard to get all the credit tonight. Don't think there won't be any, even if the papers never hear of it. I've been working on this quite a while. Your blonde and her boy friend are incidental in a way. But I guess they'd

just as soon go on living, at that." He frowned a little.

"I don't like it!" Glover snorted. "Suppose you don't phone—suppose they bump you. Where does that leave me?"

Bill grinned and looked at his watch. "It's seven now and getting dark. If I don't call you by ten o'clock, you phone the Customs. Find out whether a shipment of sacks of *any* kind has been delivered at any Jap freight line dock within the last fourteen hours.

"I think you'll draw a blank, though. Vanadium's shipped in hundred-pound sacks. Even if these were disguised, our inspectors would open a couple and confiscate the lot. I think the Japs will get the sacks aboard a freighter, but not that way. Not direct. They're too damn' smart."

"You're pretty smart, too, huh? Quit giving me the runaround! Quit talking, and *say* something! You know which freighter, huh? Come on, what's the name of it?"

"I might know the name," Bill chuckled, "but she's got to be left alone—for several reasons. If I don't phone by ten, have the Coast Guard skipper stop and search any deep-sea fishing craft that tries to slip out of harbor around midnight. But I think I'll phone. Anyhow, don't start anything *before* ten."

"All right, I won't. Got any more orders for me?"

"Nope. And you're a great guy, Cap. Right now, lay off your siren in Wilmington and San Pedro, huh? Make it look like a friendly call on the San Pedro cops. The Japs have eyes and ears all over the place. They're in this. Don't think they aren't."

"So you're gonna tackle the lot of 'em alone, huh?"

"Well, not quite. And by the way," added Bill craftily, "be sure to come along aboard the cutter when you get my phone call, if I forget to mention it. That'll be the payoff, and we'll need your experience and quick thinking tonight."

"Don't worry; I'm coming along," said Glover, mollified in spite of his better judgment.

"Swell! You—er—turn left here for Wilmington."

CHAPTER IV

THE DOCKS ARE BLACK

WHEN Nancy left Glover's office that afternoon, there were two men waiting for the down elevator. She joined them, but was too angry and worried to notice them until one of them spoke to her. He was holding out a clean, but damp and rumpled handkerchief and his black eyes regarded her with interest.

"Say, miss," he smiled respectfully, "you look like a lady who'd appreciate something new in perfume. Just smell it."

Nancy frowned. "No, thank you. Not now."

"Aw, sure!" The handkerchief was suddenly pressed over her nose and mouth. Indignation made her draw a quick breath.

After that she was vaguely aware of being supported, of being assured that she would be all right. Somebody helped her out of brightness and guided her wobbling legs through a huge, echoing cave. She knew dimly that something was wrong. Beyond that, her mind refused to function.

She was outdoors now, being pushed and pulled into something. The familiar way she was being handled roused

her a little, and she tried to hold back. Somebody wiped her face with a handkerchief. She relaxed, feeling utterly exhausted. They lifted her into darkness, held her upright against something that hurt her chest. It was cruel, when all she wanted was to lie down and sleep. There was a handkerchief against her face again. . .

The next time Nancy knew anything, she was lying on hard boards in the dark and being painfully jolted. Still befuddled, she called aloud before she thought: "What is this? Why, I must have passed out! Who—" Sudden fear closed her mouth. She tried to sit up.

A heavy hand closed on her shoulder and thrust her down. A hard, amused voice rasped in her ears above the whine of tires. "You're all right now, sister, How do you feel?"

There was a gloating note in the voice that scared her down to her toes. Something white moved in the semi-darkness.

"I'm all right," she gasped, dry-lipped. "Please let go of me. I'd like to get out of here. My head aches."

"Yeah? Well, now I'll tell you, sweet stuff. You just keep your mouth shut, or"—the voice roughened—"I'll slap you bug-eyed! Get the idea? Here's your medicine."

A handkerchief was clapped over her mouth and nose once more. She writhed and tried to scream, but strong hands clamped her head. She tried not to breathe, but she *had* to. . .

IT SEEMED hours later when she found herself conscious again. Bare boards were still beneath her huddled body, but now there was a dim light and a horrible reek of fish. Her head ached like mad, and the stench was nauseating. She closed her eyes and fought her swimming senses, breathing through her mouth.

When she opened her eyes again, her sickness conquered, she was looking straight into Lin's pale, battered face. He too, lay on his side, facing her, his arms dragged tightly behind him.

"Lin!" she whispered. "Oh, what happened to you?"

"I'm all right. But when they flung *you* in here—" He strained savagely. "If I could only get *loose*."

"Oh, Lin!" Nancy tried to help him, and found that her own wrists were crossed and tied behind her back, and fastened to something. She looked wildly around, momentarily in a panic. They had been thrust into a small storeroom, their legs doubled under the shelves at the end, their heads against the door. The light came from a small electric bulb set high on one wall.

"I can't help you," she wailed softly, "I'm tied, too. Where are we? Lin, what *have* they done to you?"

"I'm okay, dear. We're aboard some kind of a fishing boat. You can smell that. The crew are Japs, I think, but it was two white thugs who lugged you in here. Are you all right, kid?"

"Oh, yes." Nancy shuddered. "White *slugs*, you mean! Lin! Shall I scream for help? I can make a lot of noise."

"Nix, darling. They'd only get tough with you."

"Listen! What's that regular thump at intervals?"

"Our vanadium sacks coming aboard, for my guess." Lin was tugging at his bonds, his face white. "It's been going on quite a while. Hello! It's stopped."

"Yes. Oh, I can hardly *wiggle*, the brutes! What was that? Did you hear those two, different thumps? Overhead?"

"Shore lines hitting the deck. There's the engine—"

"Then we're sailing!" Nancy caught her breath. "Lin, do you suppose— Oh, Lin, what'll the Japs do with us?" "Hold us a while and let us go," he muttered harshly.

"Darling!" Nancy's voice was awestruck. "You don't believe that! I can tell. Are we going to die tonight?"

"Of course not!" said Davis roughly. "What—"

"We're moving." Nancy tugged at her bonds, then lay still. "Lin, do you think they'll drown us? I'd hate that."

Davis stifled a groan. "Hush, kid, will you? My God, I got you into this!"

"No, you didn't. I got myself into it. But, Lin, I *do* wish I'd screamed, now it's too late. . ."

DROPPED at the Wilmington bridge by Captain Glover, Bill watched the police car's headlight's stab their way toward San Pedro. Seen across open ground, the vivid shafts of light made him frown. They revealed only a thin ground mist as yet, but fog would mean new plans and haphazard timing.

He crossed the bridge and walked toward the docks, more alert than he seemed. After following the sweep of road to the left, he entered a landward side road. This was dark, with only a misty gleam of light from a general store at the far end.

Halfway to the store he swung quietly off the road and approached a tumbledown shack. After listening and probing the shadows with his eyes for unfamiliar outlines, he fitted a key to the rusted but well-oiled padlock and lifted the sagging door inward. The oiled hinges made almost no sound.

Ten minutes later he emerged in a replica of his usual harbor outfit: paint-daubed sweatshirt and pants, sneakers, plus a dark, baggy sweater that was out at the elbows but heavy and warm. Knowing the Japs pretty well, he did not believe that his pose of lazy, sail-boat idler had fooled them very long. That made his harbor clothes worse than useless as a disguise.

The Japs, however, would spot him through any disguise. He hoped that wearing these duds would make them think him a fool, and therefore not dangerous. Also, in line with another plan he had in mind, they might prove useful as a decoy.

As he locked the shack and sauntered back to the road a faint, warm breeze played on his face. He sniffed the scent of grass and dusty earth with satisfaction. While it lasted, a land breeze meant no fog.

Treading casually but noiselessly on rubber soles, he made for the dim, looming docks. It was no use trying to rush matters. It was a pity to leave the girl in danger, but her chances of final escape seemed better if he stuck to the schedule he had planned, based on guesswork though it was.

Most of the big steamship company piers were dark and deserted. There were lights and activity alongside and aboard the Jap freighter, which sailed at midnight. He swung wide of that pier and continued south.

There was no black, closed delivery truck anywhere near the Japanese wharf. He had not expected to find it there, but it would have helped locate the blonde and her friend.

Ten minutes later Bill scratched at the door of a neat little house, then stepped aside. The door opened, letting out and unbroken shaft of light. This almost disappeared as a large Chinese filled the opening. Bill spoke briefly from the shadows. The Chinese drew back and closed the door.

Bill set off southward again. In a moment the same door opened, this time with no shaft of light. The big Chinese emerged and faded into the darkness with the eerie, ponderous silence of a drifting balloon.

Meanwhile Bill veered farther away from the waterfront into a straggling settlement behind the docks. He was moving southeastward across a neck of land. Some distance ahead, where the shore line curved east, lay the smaller berths used by most of the Japanese deep-water fishing fleet.

A misty glow of light ahead promised a cluster of little stores. He turned off the road into a field and approached the nearer buildings from the rear. Lines of ghostly washings led him to the one he wanted.

He stepped over a low fence into soft sand. A dog exploded into furious barking; but the barks died to a grumble when Bill spoke. He ducked through the wet laundry and plowed his way to the back door. It was open on the latch. He soft-footed in without knocking.

The back room was a dizzy mixture of kitchen, bedroom, office and storeroom. Shelves full of bundles of laundry lined one wall. The other walls flaunted pictorial calendars, some of the moon-visaged Chinese girls in satin trousers and tunics, some of the long-legged white girls who had not bothered to dress.

ALITTLE Cantonese rose from behind a desk where he had been writing laundry lists. He had rumpled hair, worried eyes and a pointed face, and looked like a starving Chinese faun.

"Hello, Wan Chang," said Bill, smiling. "No time for courtesies. Ruth phoned you, did she? What's the news?"

The Chinese looked annoyed. "Humble house belong you," he insisted. "All Americans in big, damn hully! Luth phoned. We *all* wait. Sam Chew just lepo't. *Seamew* loading quick, now time. I can show same. Othah boy watchee now time. So good?" Wan Chang did not speak Mandarin, and preferred his own English to Bill's stumbling Cantonese.

"Where's Sam Chew?" asked Bill. "Glad you waited."

"Flont loom. You wannee make talk him? I get."

Wan Chang went out and returned with a young, low-browed Chinese. Sam grinned and extended a slim, wiry hand. Bill shook it and then questioned him tersely. Sam was American born.

Oh yes, Sam had been watching the *Seamew* at her wharf ever since noon. Well, not the boat, the dock. The *Seamew* had come in at dusk, but unloaded no fish.

Just about dark her Jap crew had left her. Two of them had entered the cleaning shed on the wharf. They had switched on one light in the shed, but not the string of bare lights along the wharf. The other two lousy Japs had come ashore and hung around the entrance to the wharf.

Sam had retreated, but kept on watching. The Japs in the shed had begun carrying heavy articles from the shed to the hatch of the *Seamew*: the after hatch. The things *looked* heavy. It was too dark to tell what they were.

One of the Jap's at the wharf entrance had heard Sam move and had started for his hiding place. Sam had slipped away and come back to report.

"How big were the things they carried?" asked Bill.

"Maybe a foot wide, too foot long. Pretty dark to see."

"Anything as big as a person—a man's body, Sam?"

"Don't think so. Maybe so. Pretty dark to see."

"See any trucks near that wharf, any time since noon?"

"Trucks? Some big trucks standing near the wharf when I got there. But they were empty. I was above 'em at a window, so I could see down into 'em. They drove away just after that."

"What trucking company did they belong to?"

"Wasn't any firm name on 'em, that I could see."

"Did you notice a black, closed truck near that wharf any time since dusk—or maybe earlier, about sunset?"

"Wasn't any closed truck around there. Wasn't any traffic there at all after those big open trucks pulled away. It's kind of a dead end, that wharf."

"Oh, that one!" Bill nodded, frowning. "Well, see any white men—two big fellows—on or near that wharf?"

"Didn't see any white men. Only those Japs."

Bill hid his disappointment, thanked Sam and waited until he had gone. After thinking a moment he faced Wan Chang.

"I'm having a look at that wharf, Wan. I know where it is, but not where to find your boy. Like to question him, too, if you don't mind showing me. . ."

THEY went out the back way together, circled the stores and headed southeast. Bill was uneasy, a familiar phrase running through his head: "It is later than you think." From Glover's description of her, that pretty blonde who had disappeared meant a lot to somebody, somewhere—not just her boy friend.

Wan Chang wound silently and confidently past junk yards, scattered houses and ghostly ships a-building and looming high on their trestles. The moon had risen behind clouds and it was still quite dark. As they passed a lighted window, Bill peered at his watch. Nine-ten. It was later than he thought. If the Japs had begun loading the *Seamew* at dark, they'd soon finish—

A thin hand on his arm checked him. Wan Chang took the lead. They were skirting a long, low warehouse. Bill could smell harbor water and the reek of fish. Wan Chang whispered to someone. From ahead came a startled whisper in reply.

Advancing, Bill found Wan and his "boy" huddled in shadow at the front corner of the shed. It was so dark that he bumped into them.

"Ask question," sighed Wan Chang. "Hoo Fat answer."

Bill asked and was answered in whispers by the invisible Chinese watcher. Hoo Fat had seen no truck. Yes, Sam Chew had left some time before Hoo Fat got here. Hoo Fat had seen no big figures, like maybe white men; only two Japs at short end of wharf, and two more loading ship from wharf.

Bill swore under his breath. Still no evidence that he had guessed right. If he had guessed wrong, there was little chance of life for that pretty blonde and her friend.

He moved from cover and peered through the dark. Lights across the basin twinkled on the water. Against these he spotted the two motionless Japs at the entrance to the wharf. No getting past them unseen. An alarm would mean a getaway, the vanadium dumped in deep water and the *Seamew's* skipper all bland insolence.

A faint light gleamed through the open side door of the wharf-shed. The *Seamew* lay warped to the wharf opposite this door and on Bill's right. Her bows pointed toward shore, but her high harpoon platform loomed far above this dockhead. A little light came through her forward ports, but her deck was in darkness.

As Bill studied her, the two Japs loading her stepped from her rail to the wharf. One of them turned and called guardedly in Japanese: "Two more loads! Start covering the hatch."

The Japs at the wharf entrance became bobbing shadows as they ran and jumped aboard. The others entered the shed.

"Wan!" muttered Bill sharply. "Get your launch warmed up. Cast off and wait. I'll join you as quick as I can. Hoo Fat better leave here now. Get started, both of you."

Not waiting for an answer, Bill ran across to the sea wall, his rubber soles making no noise. The near end of the wharf-shed was close to shore. He gained the left corner unseen and raced along the side away from the *Seamew*.

There was another wide door on this side. It was not quite closed, letting out a fan of light. He reached it and looked into the shed. The two Japs were just going out, each with a heavy burden on his shoulder.

As they vanished Bill wormed through the opening and lay flat, to see under the long, bare cleaning tables. There were no bound figures as he hoped. Two loosely-filled burlap sacks stood near the opposite door. Otherwise the long floor was bare.

It was at this instant, only a few yards away, that Lin advised Nancy not to scream for help.

PUZZLED and anxious, Bill heard the Japs returning, and waited. One of them swung up a sack. The other switched off the light, found the last sack and stumbled out with it. Bill wormed out the other door and made for land.

As he gained the wharf entrance, he was so intent on watching the *Seamew* that he missed the two big men coming along the waterfront. His own figure showed for a moment against the *Seamew's* ports.

He was in the shadow across the waterfront when he heard the *Seamew's* first hawser slap her deck. Knowing where he was now, he ran west at a dog-trot, skirting the waterfront, making for the little basin where Wan Chang's launch rode in her slip. He had done all he could to locate that blonde and her boy friend before it was too late. His own job had to be done.

Beyond the basin, where the shore line turned north, rose a big steamship pier. There was a public phone booth in the entrance to that pier, and the entrance was never locked.

The moon had almost topped a bank of clouds. The dock came in sight, its facade dimly moonlit, its entrance a yawning black mouth. The watchman would be out on the wharf, behind the locked doors which admitted passengers and luggage.

Bill raced into the darkness, panting with exertion. One hand extended, the other diving for a nickel, he high-stepped blindly toward the booth.

His breathless rasp got him San Pedro Police Headquarters at once. While he waited for Glover, habitual caution made him reach up and switch off the light. His eyes were getting used to the darkness when a shadow flitting in the moonlit entrance caught his attention. Then Glover came on the wire.

"This is Williams," Bill announced softly. "There's no time to lose, Cap. Get aboard that cutter and start for the harbor mouth right now, will you? Ask her skipper to pick

me up there, abreast of the lighthouse. I'll be in a launch—"

The booth door was yanked open and a light flashed in Bill's eyes. At the same instant a gun jarred his ribs.

"Hang up that receiver!" ordered a low, savage voice.

Bill hung up slowly, trying to see past the light. He was armed, but had no leaning toward suicide.

"Now, Federal dick, hoist 'em and come out of there!" This time the voice sounded less assured and thus more dangerous. "Try any tricks and you get it!"

CHAPTER V

NO MASTHEAD LIGHT

IN the San Pedro Police Headquarters, Glover called Bill's name twice. Then he pronged the receiver with a bang and got to his feet. "Hung up on me," he growled to the night captain. "That guy's always in a hurry. Well, I gotta go."

Glover drove to the nearby Coast Guard wharf. After locking his car methodically, he strode out on the wharf and hailed the waiting Coast Guard cutter, *Petrel*. The instant reply invited him aboard.

He was conducted to the bridge where he found Captain Trask. The skipper was a hard-eyed redhead in his thirties.

"Williams just phoned," announced Glover. "Not a word about the girl. Hung up before I could ask. In a rush as usual. Said there was no time to lose. Guess we better start, huh?"

Trask gave the order to cast off. As the shore lines whacked the deck, he signaled the engineroom for quarter speed ahead. One eye on the channel as they began to move, he looked inquiringly at Glover. "What's the rest, Captain?"

Glover was looking around the bridge. "Oh. Williams wants you to pick him up in the harbor mouth. Said he'd be in a launch, facing the lighthouse."

"Facing the lighthouse?"

"Yeah. Abreast of the lighthouse is what he said."

One of the signalmen coughed. Trask glanced at him coldly. "What's Williams doing out there, Captain?"

"Well, he was clear over in Wilmington and had no car." Glover sensed ridicule and his tone was gruff. "Guess he figured meeting you by launch was the quickest way to join you."

"It was," said Trask politely, "in this big harbor."

The *Petrel* slid out of the Watchorn Basin and veered to port. Off to the right, dim gray cruisers and supply ships rode at anchor, but the channel ahead was clear of lights.

Trask signaled the engineroom. The vessel quivered, lifted her bows and began to knife the water toward the distant lighthouse. Wind whipped over her dodger. Glover clung to a stanchion with one hand, to his hat with the other. He felt distinctly out of his element, and just as pleased that Williams would soon take over their end of this job.

WHEN Bill was ordered out of the phone booth, he tried no tricks, but he did not obey at once either. He was thinking, and thinking fast. The gun in his ribs at least implied that he had guessed right about that pretty blonde.

He sensed more than one big lug facing him. They were white men, not Japs. It was a hundred to one that they had picked him up near the *Seamew* and tailed him here.

Perhaps their kidnap victims *were* aboard her right now.

He grinned amiably into the light. Had to play for time, little as there was to spare; get that gun from his ribs.

"Hiya, Slick?" he nodded easily. "That you, Knuckles?"

The man with the gun stepped back. "Come out, or you take it right here and now," he warned in a shaken snarl.

"Walk to my grave so you don't have to carry me, eh?"

Bill's tone hardened. "Boy, you two are in deep! The order's out to get you for snatching that blonde. If the Japs kill her and her boy friend, you'll hang. Shoot me, and what my pals'll do to you *before* you hang—that'll be something else again."

Surprised rage made the flashlight quiver. Its beam hit the open glass door of the booth. Reflected light showed the faces of Walters and Grant; and behind them a third face.

The light steadied in Bill's eyes and Walters demanded thinly: "For the last time, nosey, you coming out of there?"

"Nix, pal—" Bill dropped swiftly on all fours.

There came a gasp, the flame and brief crack of a shot, then a loud, hollow thud. The clatter of flashlight and revolver hitting the ground was followed by a slight shuffling noise.

Bill dove for the rolling flashlight, sprang erect and played the beam on the kidnapers. Yin Ling, the giant Chinese, gripped the two men by their necks and held them dangling. He had banged their heads together so hard that Grant was dazed and groggy, and Walters had passed out cold.

Locating the fallen gun, Bill shoved it in Yin Ling's pocket. "Nice work, Yin!" Where did they start tailing me?"

"When you go from fishing wharf," said Yin Ling in a surprisingly high voice. "You go, they follow. I follow them, oah, yess." He giggled mischievously. "Now I shut hands, they die, yess? No more follow you. Like so-o—"

Knuckles Grant writhed helplessly, big as he was, clawing at the huge fingers that shut off his breath.

"Stop that!" Bill warned. "Frisk them and throw them in the booth. Don't let them escape. I'll be back."

"Hoo!" piped the giant. "I guard you some more, yess?"

"No, Yin. I'll be all right now. Got to hurry."

"Oah, too bad. These boys try to go, I kill, yess?"

"No, you don't! Just quiet 'em a little. 'By."

Bill darted out of the entrance into the brightening moonlight and raced for the small yacht basin where Wan Chang kept his launch. The basin seemed deserted, though still lighted. He trotted out on the floating walk to Wan Chang's slip. The small, fast launch floated free, Wan's figure crouched over the controls of the smoothly beating engine.

Dropping lightly into the cockpit, Bill straddled the wheel backward and sat down. "Let's go," he panted comfortably. "I've lost time, but gimme half speed till we're clear."

THE launch backed out of her slip, went ahead and skittered around in a half arc with the whispering water sounds that were music to Bill. He threaded her through anchored craft, cleared them and aimed her stem for the distant harbor mouth.

"Now let her out," he directed, "and switch on your lights. I'd have been lost without you tonight, Wan."

Wan Chang obeyed. The launch settled on her beating screw, the little waves slapping her forefoot like castanets.

"You shakee Yin Ling?" asked the Chinese abruptly.

"If like so him losing you, I going bleak his leg."

"Nope. He's guarding a couple of bad boys right now."

"So? I think eve'y thing go all light yes?"

"So far. We're meeting a Coast Guard cutter out here. She's faster than we are, but she's got twice as far to go."

Wan Chang was placidly silent. The lighthouse at the end of the breakwater grew from suspended light to a slim, dark finger. The black line of the breakwater thickened and paled in the moonlight. The launch began to lift to the long, easy swells from the harbor mouth. With her earlier start, the fishing craft *Seamew* was nowhere in sight and must have cleared the harbor.

"This'll do," said Bill at last. "Cut your engine."

The launch slowed. Bill got to his feet, balanced to the uneasy roll and stared north. At length he pointed. "There she comes, Wan. Show her your flashlight."

The Chinese scrambled to a locker and began painting loops with his light-beam. "Oh, Coasting Gua'd tlavel all same gleasy lightning!" he stared. "Hoping not lun into launch."

The slowing cutter hailed, was answered and churned the water astern. "Thanks, Wan," chuckled Bill. "That's all you can do tonight. I'll square it with you one of these days."

The *Petrel* towered alongside so neatly that the rocking launch shipped almost no water. Bill jumped and grabbed the cutter's rail, muscled up and swung aboard. Wan Chang scrambled behind his wheel and the launch putted away toward Wilmington.

Bill followed a deckhand to the bridge. There, with some relief, Glover introduced him to Captain Trask.

"Glad to know you, Captain," Bill smiled, "and damn glad to see you just now. If you'll give her full speed around Point Firmin, I'll explain as we go. Speed is important."

Trask gave an order, and the *Petrel* surged forward. After calling the westerly course to the quartermaster at the wheel, he studied Bill impassively. "What are we looking for, Mr. Williams?" He pulled the indicator to full speed ahead.

"The *Seamew*, Captain," said Bill politely. "Deep sea fishing craft. Maybe you know her. Platform bowsprit. I think she cleared the harbor about fifteen minutes ago, or a bit more. It's quite possible that she's running without lights tonight."

"The hell she is!" Trask sounded grimly scandalized, but not altogether convinced. "What's she been up to?"

"Suspected of running stolen vanadium. I'm just about sure of it, and I'd like you to catch her red-handed at sea."

"Say," Glover intervened, "have they got that blonde?"

"I think the girl and her boy friend were put aboard," nodded Bill soberly. "We can just hope they're still aboard."

Trask eyed him sharply. "You mean—murder? I know that Jap craft. Her record's clean; has been for years."

"It would be. The Japs are smart. The girl and Davis know too much. I have reason to think they were put aboard her. Bodies weighted and sunk in deep water—Well, they're gone."

the moonlight and flew at the bridge, spattering canvas and glass. The horizon was dimly visible, the sea empty of lights.

Glover clung to his stanchion as to a drunken friend. He gulped and set his teeth. "S-ay, this boat can travel."

Trask glanced at Bill. "There's a lot of ocean out yonder. If the *Seamew*'s running without lights, she'll be quite a job to find. Not so tough if we knew her course."

"A point north of west, I think, beyond Point Firmin."

"That'll help, but how do you figure it as her course?"

"I speak Japanese, Captain. The *Seamew* scraped a Jap freighter this morning, in dock. The Japs aren't that clumsy. The *Seamew*'s skipper apologized, said his men were excited over a big school of fish running ten knots south of Anacapa light. Said he'd be out there all night. The mate of the freighter said they were sailing at midnight and he hoped to run down and sink the *Seamew* for a stinking fish tub.

"The freighter's course would take her south of Anacapa light. I figure it was a date: where they'll transship the vanadium at sea. From here, ten miles south of Anacapa would lie at a point north of west, wouldn't it?"

"It would," Trask agreed, a hint of approval in his tone.

The cutter lifted high and crunched into the next swell with a twisting jar that made something clang below decks.

"Say, Bill," muttered Glover hoarsely, "where'd you dig up the launch back there?" He sounded preoccupied.

"Oh, it belongs to a Chinese friend of mine." Bill glanced at the crimson glow on the water to his left. "By the way, Captain Trask, how about dousing *our* lights?"

"What would be the idea? We'll overtake her anyway."

"I'm thinking of her prisoners. If the Japs see us first, they may not wait a minute to get rid of those two. We ought to sight her before long, I think."

Point Firmin was wheeling past. Trask called through the open charthouse door: "West and a point north!" The *Petrel* altered course. She began to add a lurching roll to her pitch.

Trask studied Bill with a half smile. "Do the Japs aboard the *Seamew* know we're after them?"

"I don't think they know it. They're wise to my interest in them this morning, but they didn't spot me tonight."

"Then I think you're wrong about our lights." Trask glanced aft. "Sailing west, this high bridge will show up well against the moon. Unless the Japs are asleep they ought to sight us before we sight them. With our lights doused they'd know we were after them, and dump those two before we caught them.

"There's a Coast Guard station at Anacapa. With our lights, we could just be making for that port—until we close with the *Seamew*."

"You're right," Bill nodded. "No argument. If you don't mind the suggestion, though, you might have a man stand by your searchlight, Captain. With the light on them, they'll hardly dare to dump anyone or anything overboard."

Trask ordered a signalman to man the light on the bridge. Then he blew into the speaking tube and issued more orders. Men in oilskins popped out on deck, reappeared on the foredeck and stripped the tarpaulin off the long, gleaming quick-firer. Two more ran forward with shells.

Bill advanced to the dodger and stared into the wet wind. If they had missed the *Seamew*, it meant a long sail to the rendezvous with the freighter. They should recover

THE *Petrel* had cleared the land and was crashing into the swells, quivering, rolling a little. Spray leaped in

the vanadium, but he saw little hope for the kidnaped pair.

The *Petrel* lifted to a bigger wave, rolled, pitched and shook herself. Glover swore thickly, wove around the starboard, glassed-in end of the bridge and gave his all to the fishes. The wind, luckily, was southwest, on the port bow.

"Keep him aboard!" Trask warned the other signalman.

The sailor embraced the police captain's sturdy, heaving middle in resigned silence, and kept him from a watery grave.

On the horizon to port Bill thought he saw a dark speck that did not melt as a wave melts. He found it again.

From overhead came a wind-whipped cry: "Boat ahead, two points off the port bow! No masthead light or stern light."

CHAPTER VI

OUTRAGE TO CARGO, PLEASE!

WITH a sharp word Trask warned the quartermaster to hold a steady course. He stood beside Bill, peering ahead. The dark blob showed at intervals against the pale horizon, growing more distinct, crawling slowly aft along the rail from the *Petrel's* glistening bows.

"Port your helm a bit," called Trask.

There was a dim, momentary gleam ahead. Bill knew it for moonlight reflected from the after wall of the fishing boat's deckhouse as that unlighted vessel yawed to a wave. It showed nearer the cutter's bows again with her change of course.

"How about your searchlight now, Captain?" muttered Bill. "Your lookout couldn't miss her at this distance, even running without her lights. And you'd investigate her anyway."

"She's running up a light!" Trask pointed. "Spotted our change of course. And there's her sternlight." Turning, he ordered: "Give her the light now. Hold her in it."

The bright beam sputtered and shot like a sword over the cutter's bows, netting diamonds of spray. It flicked the distant target, then kept finding it as the signalman adjusted his aim to the *Petrel's* motion. Again and again the fishing boat sprang into sharp relief, nearer than Bill had thought.

"Hold straight on her! Then overhaul to windward," Trask called through the charthouse door. He blew into the speaking tube. "Ask Mr. Larson to prepare to board—with sidearms." To Bill he added: "Look after your friend, will you? I'll need both signalmen."

Glover stumbled back to them, shaken and pallid. "I'm okay," he snarled. "Touch of—'ulp'—indigestion is all."

Trask nodded without looking at him. "You, Peters, tell Sparks to give her the heave to until she obeys."

Glover's signalman dropped down the port companionway. The cutter was overhauling the other vessel fast. Bill could see almost every inch of the chugging fishing craft as she dipped and rolled and sat on her tail. When the light first caught her, he thought he had seen men aft near her port rail, but her decks were deserted now. "She's the *Seamew* all right," he told Trask.

There was a steady crackle of wireless above his head, but the fishing boat chugged on. The *Petrel* closed in, veered to the weather side of her quarry, began to draw abreast.

One hand on the engine telegraph lever, Trask began to

operate the searchlight blinker with his thumb, sending the Morse 'L' again and again. The beam winked steadily the signal to heave to; but the fishing boat held her course and speed with blind unconcern. Bathed as she was in the winking searchlight, she must have seen it.

Bill's good-natured lips thinned, but he said nothing.

The cutter was just abaft her beam now, and he caught the red glow of her port light. Trask leaned over the dodger and shouted down: "Put a shell across her bows!" Scowling, he stepped sideways and signaled the engineroom for half speed.

THE forward gun flashed with a roar and a glinting recoil. The shell lifted a spout of swift, white water beyond the *Seamew's* harpoon platform. Two men popped out on her deck like rabbits, and popped in again. She began to slow and roll sluggishly, her masthead light weaving dizzy patterns.

Trask blew into the tube. "Tumble up! With grapples!" He rang the engineroom for dead slow, and barked at the quartermaster: "Lay alongside! Easy, now—"

There was a pound of feet as men lined the starboard rail below. Bill heard the clink and thud of grappling irons.

The *Petrel's* motion had eased as she slowed. The sea was not as rough as her speed had made it seem. Trask moved to the starboard L of the bridge and called down: "Come up here and take over, Mr. Larson. I'm boarding her myself."

A tall, dark, youngish man ran up the companionway. Trask gave his brisk instructions, then clattered down to the starboard rail. Bill and Glover followed with more care.

The two vessels drifted together with an increasing slap of waves. The signalman depressed the searchlight, holding the *Seamew's* deckhouse in a stark glare that made all her deck visible by reflected light.

They bumped with a jar and the slipping grind of rope fenders. Grapples clanked and lines were made fast. Trask and two of his men dropped aboard the *Seamew*. Bill followed easily, but the luckless police captain sprawled on all fours.

Three Japs had run out of the deckhouse. They watched sullenly, shading their eyes from the glare. Bill looked back. The black muzzle of a machine gun pointed down at him from atop the cutter's deckhouse, two dark figures visible behind it.

Trask advanced on the Japanese. "All right," he said evenly, "who's the skipper—the captain—aboard here?"

One of them stepped forward. Bill recognized the Jap he had seen with Grant and Walters on the dockhead.

"I being captain, please," he announced with a polite hiss. "Why are you shoot like pirate toward innocent fish ship?"

"Why didn't you obey our wireless signal to stop?"

"Oh, so sorry, please. Wireless out of working now."

"Then what about our searchlight signal, Captain? Your eyes out of working, too?"

"Notta see light signal from backside, please."

"But you know it came from astern, eh? Well, why were you running without lights? By the way, what's your name?"

"I being Captain Tokado. So sorry lights notta bright. Stupid Osati here, pulling wrong switch. Oh, too bad. And forgetting to fill masthead light burning out, so sorry."

"I see. Osati made a mess of it, didn't he?" Trask's voice was too amiable. "Where are you bound, Captain?"

"We going deep sea fishing, Captain Coastta Guard."

"I said *where*, Captain?" purred Trask.

Tokado's black eyes flickered at Bill. "West of Anacapa, I think so. Plenty fish tonight. Notta must lose time."

BILL'S face did not change by the twitch of an eyelash. The rendezvous was south, not west of Anacapa, but he did not care to let these Japs know that he spoke their language.

Trask turned away as if satisfied, then spoke over his shoulder: "If you are outward bound, deep sea fishing," he asked casually, "your holds are empty now, eh, Captain?"

Tokado hesitated an instant. "Oh, yess, please. All empty now. Pretty soon hoping fill up top biggest fish."

Trask wheeled. "Now we're aboard, Captain, we'll have a look at your empty holds, I think. Any objection?"

"Notta objection, please!" Tokado was angry. "Butta take time. Only small cargo aboard this time. Fish notta wait."

"Oh, you have a cargo, have you? What is it, Captain?"

"This time, you know, hiring for special run," grinned the Jap. "Loading small cargo cement to Anacapa—save fuel cost. Now losing time. That costing money, please, I think so."

"You may be right. Cement for the Anacapa breakwater?"

"Notta breakwater, please!" Tokado showed more teeth. "Maybe new fuel dock for fish boats, but notta know, yes."

"You don't say. Well, show us the cement, please."

"Ah! Ah! Why show cargo?" Tokado's voice was shrill with anger. "You costing time honorable fish ship, I say so."

"You refuse, Captain?" asked Trask smoothly.

"Notta refuse! You demand looking, all right, but see nothing to cost such time. Cement in sacks to protecting that."

"Good. They must want it in a hurry, for you to make the run at night with it." Trask began calling orders.

More of his men dropped aboard, trotting to the fore and after hatches. A searchlight on the cutter's stern and one amidship added their beams to the bridge light, flooding the *Seamew* in a pitiless glare.

Irons clanged, canvas rasped and planks boomed as the Coast Guard men stripped the hatches. They swung over the combings and dropped. Two more Japs appeared on deck. The four Jap seamen chattered together belligerently, flanking their skipper.

A yell aft started Trask moving that way. He jerked his head at Tokado. "Come on, Captain. Show me your cargo."

The two skippers straddled the after hatch combing and dropped a few feet. Bill and Glover joined them. The cutter's stern searchlight slanted through the hatch, its beam a solid white column in the uprush of dust. The hold stank of fish, but was half full of loosely packed and wrinkled burlap sacks.

Easing behind Tokado, Bill opened his clasp knife and dropped to one knee. The Jap skipper was facing Trask.

"Here are cement in sacks, as are telling it," he waved. Then he heard the rip of burlap and wheeled nimbly. "Ah! Notta cut sacking, please! Ha! Outrage to cargo, I saying it!"

Bill had cut a long rent in the burlap. He widened the edges until light played on the smaller canvas sack inside.

"Here's our cement, Captain Trask!" he pointed.

Letters printed in black on the white canvas read:

AMERICAN VANADIUM COMPANY

Pocket, Arizona

100 lbs. Net.

CHAPTER VII

BAIT FOR THE CAPTAIN'S HOOK

BILL plunged his knife into the tough canvas. A fine, brown powder seeped out. He fingered it and looked up. Tokado seemed overcome by surprise. Glover had moved close to him.

"Vanadium concentrate," said Bill. "Not cement."

Trask nodded, his eyes hard. "Is that stuff valuable?"

"About twenty-eight bucks a hundredweight, I think. Refined vanadium's worth a lot more, but it looks like silver BB shot. However, this stuff is worth plenty to anyone making—armaments, for example. It's used in the hardening of steel."

When Bill had opened another sack at random, Trask was convinced. "Al right, Captain Tokado," he said. "On deck."

Tokado began to move and protest at the same time.

"Ah ha! Big, dirty trick on me, please, Captain Coast Guard! I not knowing thatta stuff! White man fooling Japanese skipper, please. Telling that cement! Ah ha! Dirty work, I think so."

"Yeah, I think so, too," said Trask as they gained the deck. "Who told you that was cement, Captain?"

"Ah, dirty female hound! Notta knowing name. Paying in advance. Saying to leave cement on dock, Anacapa, please! I say yes. Ah! Dirty, low, coward, stinky, white man—"

"That's enough of that," purred Trask ominously. "Have you any passengers aboard, Captain Tokado?"

The Jap shook his head violently.

"Notta passengers, please! This fish boat, you know?"

"Tell your men to stand where they are, Captain."

With a swift, ugly glance at Bill, Tokado repeated the order correctly in Japanese. Trask stared at the crew for an instant and turned away.

"Search this craft from stem to stern," he said coldly.

"I'm looking for prisoners." He looked up at the machine gun and indicated the Jap crew. "Keep these men covered."

"Ah, ha! Outrage!" snarled Tokado. "Notta prisoners! I report sea pirating to Japanese Consul. Plenty trouble for you, Captain Coastta Guard, I say so!"

Trask glanced at him and spoke sharply: "You, Captain. If there's anyone under those vanadium sacks, God help you."

One group of men completed their search of the forward hold and tramped below. Bill sauntered after them, restless and thoughtful. He watched them search the cramped sleeping quarters, the main cabin and galley, even examine and sound the floors.

It was he who found the storeroom where Nancy had returned to her senses. The flush, narrow door was unlocked. He opened it and looked in. The small electric bulb still burned high on the wall. Except for supplies on the shelves, the place was empty.

A hunch made him drop on his hands and sniff at the floor. Above the all-pervading smell of fish, it seemed to him that he detected a hint of perfume. He studied the

floor and lower walls closely for a possible message, but there was nothing.

His group had joined the men working from aft, and both were searching the engineroom. Bill watched them absently for a moment. Then he went on deck and joined Trask.

The two search parties reappeared as one group. Their leader saluted Trask. "No prisoners below, sir, unless they're in the after hold, under those sacks. Shall we shift them?"

Trask hesitated. Bill spoke to him softly: "If they're under the sacks, they're dead. A girl usually wears *some* jewelry, Captain. How about searching the crew—and Tokado? By the way, there's a trace of perfume in a storeroom below. Nothing else."

"Hell. That means they're overboard. Well—"

"And disarm them?" muttered Bill, eyes on the crew.

Trask frowned, but gave both orders. The Japs understood and surged together, their black eyes glinting.

ONE and then a second were searched and disarmed, one of an automatic, the other of a knife. The next Jap put up a sudden fight. He threw one Coast Guard sailor heavily before he was overpowered and searched. His inner pocket yielded a small, platinum ring. It was set with alternate diamonds and emeralds all the way around.

"Ah ha!" shrieked Tokado. "First pirate shot! Then robbery my crew!" He peered up at the machine gun for a second.

The last member of the crew was searched and disarmed.

"Watch 'em," ordered Trask harshly. He showed the ring to Bill. "Ever see it before? Did it belong to that blonde?"

"Ask Captain Glover." Bill stepped back casually.

Glover let go of the rail and wove nearer, for the two vessels were surging and grinding together uneasily. He caught Trask's arm and studied the ring. "It's hers," he growled, "or one like it. I saw it on her third finger."

Trask turned. "Brooks! Dunn! Shafter! Take these four seamen aboard the *Petrel* and lock them in the brig."

As Trask's men drew their holstered revolvers, Tokado began a swift movement. Bill's gun jabbed his spine and Bill's cold voice warned in his ear: "Don't try it, Captain."

Tokado stood motionless, all but his tongue. "Oh! Oh! Where American justice, please telling it? Ah ha! Big freedom! Notta steal ring! Dirty plant! Dirty, crooked business—" He broke off with a hissing intake of breath as Trask faced him.

"Now, Tokado, where's the girl who owned this ring?"

Tokado saw his men being driven aboard the *Petrel*, and his face twisted with rage. "Notta steal ring! Belong Japanese girl! Notta see other girl! Dirty frame-up, I say so!"

Trask's face hardened. "You'll talk! Where is she?"

"Aha ha! Know nothing. Notta talk. All finish!"

Bill intervened smoothly: "With your permission, Captain Trask, I'd like to march this gentleman aft."

Trask studied him. "All right. Go ahead."

They formed a procession to the stern deck, where Bill thought he had seen figures when the light first hit the *Seamew*. Bill prodded Tokado toward the big live-bait boxes, one to port and one to starboard. He chose the port box, stepped aside and heaved the lid partly off. The *Petrel's* stern searchlight followed and shone through the

opening. The box was half-filled by the webbing of a huge, brown net.

Bill eyed Tokado. "Thought you were going fishing! Where's your live bait, Captain?"

"Bait in other box, please," said Tokado, suddenly polite. His eyes flickered just a little.

"Captain Trask," said Bill, "I'd like to see what's under this net—Whup! Watch him."

THIS time Tokado tried it. He swerved, drew and fired in one swift movement. Three converging shots stabbed in reply, echoing a yelp of pain from one of the Coast Guard men. Tokado sprang into the air and fell heavily, dropping his gun. After an instant he curled in a ball, muttered something and relaxed.

Trask swore harshly. "You get it bad, Jennings?"

"No, sir. Nicked my wrist bone and stung a bit."

Glover looked up from his knees. "This bird's dead!"

"Lend a hand here, will you?" Bill was hauling at the net. "There's a chance they hadn't time—"

The heavy net was tumbled out at last, and a flashlight trained into the bait box. With a shout, one of the men climbed over and lowered himself carefully into the box. In a moment he was passing Nancy and then Davis into waiting hands.

The two were bound wrist and ankle, shoeless and cruelly gagged. Davis had a lump on his head and was out cold. Nancy was just conscious. When she was freed and had gagged over a shot of straight brandy, she was able to talk a little.

"They'd brought us up to drown us, when your light came," she whispered. "They *told* us so. They sent a man for irons to tie to us. Then your light came and there wasn't time. Thank God, you found us!"

"They took our shoes off, so we couldn't kick and make a noise. They dropped us in that box. That awful, heavy net fell on us, crushing and smothering—Ugh!"

"Take them below and make them comfortable," Trask ordered his men. Then he answered Bill's surprised glance. "I'm putting a prize crew aboard the *Seamew*, to run her back to port. You four better go back aboard her, Mr. Williams.

"I'm keeping that date with the Japanese freighter. We don't want any other Jap fishing boats transshipping stolen goods out there tonight. This has been an eye-opener to me. You've done a swell job."

"Same to you, Captain," said Bill, and meant it.

THE return to San Pedro was uneventful. By the time the *Seamew* docked at the Coast Guard station, Nancy and Davis had recovered. Glover was his confident self again.

Helping Davis along the wharf to his car, he was also characteristic. "All I've got to do now," he growled at Bill, "is to round up those two kidnapers, Grant and Walters."

"That won't be tough," Bill chuckled. "They held me up while I was phoning you. I left them in the booth."

"You—what? They'll be loose by now!"

"I don't think so. I left a husky pal guarding them."

"Hell's fire!" Glover stared. "You've got friends all over the place down here."

Nancy's cold fingers slid down Bill's arm and squeezed his hand. "Well," she assured him fervently, "you've got two more friends now—for life!"

The suddenly released current carried him against a rock, as the beavers swam about in confusion



With Work to Do

It is true for beavers and for men: the world will drive you out and keep you out, until you are willing to return to the job it is given you to do

By Elmer Ransom

RED DECKER smiled and shook his head. He couldn't quite agree with Gilda. It was all right for her to forgive him but could he forgive himself? It was good of her to stay with him here in the wilderness. Gilda had been bright and vital. She had loved people. She had never liked the solitude of the big woods. And yet she had come with him here.

He listened to the splashing of the beavers and he hoped that the wizened trapper—Pierre Gilet was his name—wouldn't put traps out for them because Red Decker would never stand for that.

Red had explained patiently to Gilet about the beavers. They were his friends, and Gilda's. The little man had looked around the leanto, quite puzzled, and Red Decker had smiled his wise, wistful smile. Gilet wouldn't see Gilda. Even Red Decker would see her again only in his mind's eye. And only Red Decker could hear her.

"Why Red, Red, you mustn't grieve. It doesn't matter. Hold my hand." As if he could!

Or when watching the beavers by moonlight: "See, there's old Orange-tooth and Goolap. They are like us, Red; mated forever." It would have sounded silly and sentimental coming from anyone but Gilda.

Sometimes, though, Gilda worried him, just as a man might be worried by the constant drip of water. Dunwoodie had muffed an operation. Dunwoodie, they both knew, was an ass and a bungler. The Westview Hospital for Crippled Children would be better off without him but the hospital was short-handed. Hard now to get good men.

Vague little suggestions thrown out to tempt him back to his work. Red Decker knew better than Gilda that he could never return. Gilda hadn't heard what her father, Dr. Rogers, had said to him:

"You killed her, Decker. You murdered her."

Red Decker remembered his own dumb misery. If he hadn't been drunk he would never have run the fast coupé into the back of an oil truck. But that wasn't all. If he had been sober he might still have saved her. Dr. Rogers was right. That was what made it so hard.

"Shock," Dr. Rogers said bitterly, "and you lying stupefied in the road, unhurt, while Gilda died. Oh, my God, a second-year medical student could have saved her."

Dr. Rogers had insisted on the prosecution, and Red Decker had refused to defend himself. There was no defense. But all through it Gilda had whispered to him. And when it was over and he had been convicted—involuntary

manslaughter they called it—and sentenced, she whispered to him: "Torment Brook. Torment Brook."

The judge spoke to him sternly but suspended the sentence. And Gilda had urged him again. She must have known that his coming to Torment Brook would be like a homing pigeon returning, battered and baffled by a storm, to the refuge of its loft.

Small noises lulled him now. A cow moose with her calf fed in the knee-deep water of the pond. The squeal of a rabbit distressed him until Gilda reminded him that even the lynx must eat. And tomorrow morning he would feed his chipmunks and his squirrels, and the mother partridge would come with her brood, scolding for crumbs.

The wild things had taken Red Decker back, just as they had in his boyhood. All but the beavers. They learned that he would not harm them but they were too busy preparing for the winter to pay him any mind. He couldn't tempt them with bread or nuts.

It bothered Red Decker because, of all the wild life, he loved and admired the busy little people best. Humble and thrifty and minding their own business, they never harmed a living creature. Lying on his blanket, his fire only a small mass of embers, he pondered this. He marveled at the canals they dug to float their supplies to the dam and lodge house.

He mentioned it to Gilda. And then he slept.

ORANGE-TOOTH parted the lance-shaped leaves of Indian arrowhead, the tenuous underwater stems brushing the sleek brown fur of his body. He dived, propelling himself downward by the powerful thrusts of his webbed hind feet. His front paws were held crooked and close to his body.

He twisted the long stems together and tore a bunch of bulbous roots from the mucky bottom. Rising, he crushed the bitter-sweet bulbs with his teeth. Turning to the center of the stream he dived again, sculling his body swiftly with his broad, flat tail. When Orange-tooth came up, the dam stretched across in front of him, and to his left the dome-shaped lodge house was washed white by the moonlight.

He swam along the shore to the mouth of the narrow, shallow canal he and Goolap had dug. Goolap was already busy near its upper end, gnawing her hour-glass pattern into a birch. The sharp crack of her tail against the earth announced the falling tree. Orange-tooth swam up the canal and cut a length of birch. Goolap followed him down to the pond.

He peeled the bark and dived, first with the bark. He anchored it securely, well below the winter ice line, on the pond side of the underwater entrance to the lodge house.

When the pond and lodge house froze, and the beavers began their winter life beneath the ice, timber wolves and wolverines and lynxes might worry it all they would. Orange-tooth and Goolap would be safe; their home impregnable against the winter lust of flat-bellied hunters. And this anchored storehouse would provide them and the colony with ample food.

Orange-tooth swam across in front of the dam to the far shore. As he reached it, his nose caught the unmistakable odor of bark-stone. He raised his body half out of the water, spinning as a top spins on its axis. His gloating cry was a weird mixture of excitement and desire—not sexual, not anything that man understands or even that Orange-tooth himself could entirely comprehend. He knew only that he couldn't resist the lure of the musk.

With his head stretched forward on his short, stout neck he swam furiously down the pond, angling toward the shore. The musk filled his nostrils, it seeped into his blood stream. The root ends of his fine underfur tingled with excitement.

And as he plunged into it, the water muted the deadly click of a steel trap, and the teeth bit savagely into his right front leg just above the first joint. He paddled furiously with his hind paws. His cry now was full of panic. There was no understanding. Only fear, blind and desperate.

Every thrust of his hind paws drove the pointed jaws tighter into his flesh until they ground into the bone. Goolap appeared at his side. She swam against him. She circled around, excited by the bark-stone and unable to comprehend the plight of her mate.

Orange-tooth quieted. He sank beneath the surface. The heat of his heart slowed until it all but stopped. The burning pain lessened to a dull throb.

It was five minutes before the need for air forced him again to the surface. He found it hard to sustain himself until he could build up a reserve sufficient to allow him to rest again. It took all his mighty strength to hold the trap off the bottom, secured as it was by its short chain. Only the blind, fighting instinct to live sustained him until he might sink and rest again.

RED DECKER rubbed the light sleep out of his eyes. He cocked his head to one side, puzzled at the disturbance near the dam. Then he heard the cry of a beaver in distress. It was this, and not Gilda calling, which had awakened him.

His canoe was almost to the dam when he spotted Goolap, swimming in a small circle. He drove the stern of his boat in close to her but she did not dive. Orange-tooth rose, paddling feebly, gasping for air. Red Decker swung overboard into the shallow water.

He held the beaver momentarily. Then he released the animal and, fumbling under the surface, he found the trap. He forced the jaws apart and, catching Orange-tooth in his arms, lifted the half-dead animal into the boat. The beaver's right front paw dangled—torn, crooked and bloody.

... Red Decker built up his fire and put a pot of water on to boil. The instruments gleamed against the white towel. First the hypodermic. Morphine for shock. Shock! Red Decker winced. He ought to know about shock.

Crude, such surgery. There should be a white room and quiet, sterilizers, nurses, assistants, sponges, glucose solution. But he must make the best of it. What was it Dr. Perrin had told the class in Decker's student days? "Do the best you can with what you have. My first Halstead was done on a kitchen table by the light of a kerosene lamp."

Well, this operation must be accomplished by lantern and firelight, on the flat half of a log, raised and pegged for the convenience of Red Decker's simple meals.

He focused his electric flash on the torn and broken leg. Orange-tooth's small eyes were closed. He breathed with slow rhythm. Red Decker nodded his satisfaction. It made a surgeon's task infinitely easier when the patient was a good surgical risk.

His long, sensitive fingers manipulated the leg, estimating the extent of shattered bone. He shook his head sadly. If he only had the facility of a first-class hospital, he might save that foot.

But not here, not under such primitive conditions. No skilled orthopedic surgeon liked an amputation but it was the only sensible course.

Orange-Tooth, steeped in morphia, only whimpered as Red Decker deftly peeled the skin back and snipped away the damaged muscle. The small saw cut above the ragged ends of bone. Red Decker whipped the skin into place over the stump.

It was bad to lose a foot but it would be infinitely worse if the patient had to bear bungling, inept surgery. Like Dunwoodie practiced for instance. This stitch was Decker's own cunning secret. Not that he wished to keep it a secret; but like the magic that had guided Donatello's gifted hands, Dr. Winton Decker's surgery was something difficult to imitate. Perrin had told him so.

Decker cocked his head and smiled. He had known that Gilda would like this job. Simple enough, of course; out of all proportion to the satisfaction he was getting out of doing it, but one must remember that months away from the surgical atmosphere and practice might blunt the brain ends in a man's fingers.

Completing the bandage, he shook his head impatiently.

No, Gilda, you simply don't understand. They don't want me back.

The pen that he contrived for his patient was entirely inadequate. Overnight, Orange-tooth almost gnawed his way through it. Decker carried small rocks and lined the pen, cementing them together with sand and mud.

He offered Orange-tooth an apple. The beaver held it with his good paw and peeled it neatly with his teeth. Decker nodded approval. His patient was doing better than expected, thank you. No evidence of shock and he'd stake his reputation that the wound would heal by first intention.

A CANOE grounded and Red Decker turned. It was Pierre Gilet. Red Decker dwarfed the Arcadian trapper.

Pierre Gilet looked at Orange-tooth, and said: "That's my beaver."

Decker ran his hands through his shock of red hair and answered impatiently: "There is no fee. Go away."

Pierre Gilet grinned at him, a little crooked grin.

"The Mounties won't be through here for another three weeks. We can clean up this colony and nobody will be any wiser."

Pierre took a small, stoppered horn from his pocket and opened it. "Bark-stone," he explained. Orange-tooth raised himself in his pen and gave a wild, exultant cry.

The old choking was in Red Decker's throat, and the hammers knocked in his head. He hated the little man for bringing them back, just as he had hated the sneering district attorney and his hirelings, just as he had hated the suffocating, unfriendly courtroom, just as he had hated Dunwoodie when Dunwoodie had bungled a dressing and infected a child. Pierre Gilet and his traps. The world was full of traps.

He took a step forward and knocked the horn of bark-stone from Gilet's hand. He ran his lips over his tongue to control the froth of his excitement. He reached out his long, powerful arms and closed his fingers around Gilet's throat.

"No! No! Stop it, Red!"

His fingers fell away and his shoulders sagged. Why should Gilda interfere?

Gilet scrambled to his boat, rubbing his throat. "I take up my traps," he babbled. "I take up my traps." He looked just once over his shoulder as he plied his paddle. Red Decker passed his hand over his face. He was shaken. Everything was so confusing.

He gave Orange-tooth some bread. Then he pulled on his gloves, to protect his hands, and took his axe into the forest. He must cut birch and willow for Orange-tooth. The beaver's beveled teeth grew a little every day and they must be worn down and sharpened with hard food; otherwise they would grow so long that Orange-tooth couldn't close his mouth and the beaver would starve.

It reminded Red Decker of what Dr. Perrin had told him once:

"To the really gifted physician, diagnosis is confined not to the symptoms, or therapy to the disease, but both are measured in terms of the patient as an individual."

RED DECKER found very little time in the next three weeks to listen to Gilda. Not that he didn't still love her voice; but it didn't seem so real. It was faint, often indistinguishable from the rustle of the spruce trees in the breeze.

There was so much to do for his patient. It took no little ingenuity to strap Orange-tooth's leg so that the beaver might not worry the bandage off and injure himself. Orange-tooth was like a child who couldn't understand why he was being hurt. He was like. . . .

Red shook his head to clear it. Orange-tooth was like little Mike Perrin. Dr. Perrin had said: "We're counting on you, Winton." Dr. Perrin always called Red Winton. "We're counting on you in October. Mike and I."

October. Dear God, he hoped that they wouldn't turn Mike over to Dunwoodie. This was the first time since Decker had been in the big woods that he had thought of Mike's twisted body. Infantile paralysis—a deadly thing; but there were helps that a cunning hand could contrive—a surgeon like Dr. Winton Decker. And Mike was a good kid. He'd stood what he had to stand even better than Orange-tooth.

He mustn't think of Mike. What if Gilda began to remind him? And of Dr. Perrin who had encouraged Red Decker. The fourth and final operation on Mike would determine whether Mike would walk or spend the rest of his life in a wheel chair.

"We're counting on you, Winton."

Red Decker made the long canoe trip to the post store. He didn't need supplies but he did need apples. Orange-tooth had developed a passion for apples. When Decker strode into the long room, with the shelves on each side behind counters, polished from much trading, he spied Pierre Gilet. He heard Gilet whisper to the store-keeper.

"Paresseux."

Decker finished making up his pack. He slipped his arms into the shoulder straps and rested the tumpline over his forehead. He stopped before the trapper and looked down at him, wondering that all his anger was gone. Pierre seemed to shrink within himself. Decker smiled and strode out of the store. Behind him he heard the post keeper say:

"I think maybe you bite the wrong tail, yes! I think maybe Red Decker is not lazy, but dangerous. I bet you he is not our business."

LATE one afternoon, nearly a month after he had found Orange-tooth in the steel trap, Red opened the pen. The beaver eyed him curiously and waddled to the water's edge. There was a splash far down the pond and Orange-tooth sat erect, balancing with his flat tail, and listened.

He wouldn't forget the caress of the man's hands on his fur; but Goolap called. The wild was in his blood.

He slipped into the water, swam to the center of the brook and dived. Red Decker turned away, an aching loneliness in his heart. He cocked his head: "Now!" Gilda said to him. "Now!" It was very faint. He shook his head irritably. Would Gilda never understand that there would never again be a now?

Goolap nosed Orange-tooth with ecstasy. The other beavers sniffed him curiously, wondering at the man taint on his fur. Orange-tooth swam through the underwater opening that led to the galleries of the lodge. Here the musty beaver smell was sweet in his nostrils.

That night Orange-tooth took no part in readying up for the winter. He swam from beaver to beaver, indifferent to their busy preparations, willing that they should do his work for him.

Goolap bumped him violently time after time. Once he snapped at her. She couldn't understand his injury or his indolent recovery. The Man had saved Orange-tooth but The Man had made him soft.

Orange-tooth swam to Red Decker's canoe the following night. Red Decker gave him an apple and stroked the fur of his head. The beaver ate the apple and whimpered for more.

When Orange-tooth returned to the dam, two of the older beavers met him, closing in from opposite sides. They snapped at his tail. Orange-tooth tried to meet them with his one forepaw and his teeth, but the other beavers joined these two and swarmed over him. Even Goolap did not offer to help but swam around, outside of the general melee.

It was too late when understanding came. He had known beavers before who refused to work. He had joined with the colony in driving them off and now this had happened to him.

His broad, tongue-shaped tail, that was his pride and joy, was bleeding in a dozen places. His own kind had branded him. He would not be accepted beneath the ice. The storehouse of bark and twigs was closed to him. He might not rest in the snug sanctuary of the galleries of the lodge. He was an outcast, a *parasseux*, a terrier; fit prey for any winter-starved flesh-eater of the wilderness.

Goolap might mourn him. Even more, she might never mate again; but, while the judgment stood, she would never seek or comfort him.

AND so Orange-tooth returned to his only friend. Red Decker was happy to have the beaver swim in front of the leanto, evenings. It damned the cascade of memory which had threatened to overwhelm him of late. Orange-tooth's devotion offered a small escape from the returning reality of his own isolation. It softened the depression of his aloneness in the big woods. It offered companionship.

Red Decker examined the wounds on Orange-tooth's body and tail. Night after night he watched Orange-tooth swim timidly toward the dam, only to be driven back by the colony. A dull resentment mounted in Red

Decker, and the unity between him and the beaver became a small anodyne for Red Decker's awakening misery.

These days, the face of Mike Perrin stared at him accusingly out of deep-set, brown, childish eyes. Then Red Decker thought of the lad's twisted limbs, and looked at his own long, sensitive fingers and his rather stubby thumbs. And he would recall Dr. Perrin's: "Built for surgery, Winton."

He examined the calendar and then tore it savagely into small pieces. That was the fifteenth of September. It had been when Red Decker was leaving for Torment Brook that Dr. Perrin had said: "We're counting on you in October. Mike and I." Dr. Perrin's had been the only understanding voice in all the rabid pack.

These were things that were not good to think. It was not good to think at all. Gilda rarely spoke to him now and when she did her voice no longer offered the misty and pleasant escape but it rather chided him. He had run away. *And, so what?* he asked himself defiantly. He would stay away.

During these last few days he recalled, with a clearness blessedly denied to him at first, the bitterness of Gilda's father.

"Whether we convict you or not, there will be no place for you at Westview. There will be no place for you in the whole professional world. You are finished."

How much of it was inherent in the distraught old man who had loved Gilda and how much might be charged to the vindictiveness of Dunwoodie, irritating the raw sore of the doctor's tragic hurt, Red Decker had not paused to discover. Nothing that anyone could have said to him then would have been as bad as the desperate remorse in his own heart.

But now Red Decker brooded over Dunwoodie with a slowly mounting anger. His amazing cheek, his ego-centric, pig-headed incompetence, his small-time, frustrated professional jealousies. Dunwoodie had seen to it that Red Decker would never return. And Dunwoodie would operate on little Mike Perrin, come October.

From his canoe, held in the Indian Arrowhead near the dam, Red Decker brooded on these things while the bronzed northern twilight flooded the pond and turned the black water to cold copper. The beavers disported themselves, waiting for full dark to begin their evening chores.

Orange-tooth swam slowly, hesitantly, down the pond toward them in his futile evening gesture of appeasement. The other animals took no notice of him until he was within two boat-lengths of the lodge. Then two of them rose behind him, cutting off his retreat, and two others flanked him. All four attacked. Orange-tooth fought back but they blocked him in, snapping at him without mercy.

RED DECKER sent the light canoe shooting into the pond. Before the beavers realized what was happening the sharp prow cut between them. Decker laid about with his paddle. A beaver's tail cracked its alarm on the surface, and in a moment only Orange-tooth was in sight, swimming frantically up the pond.

A cold, deliberate fury gripped Decker. Orange-tooth's lonely plight assumed fabulous proportions in his mind. He felt within him the desperate need for release.

He drove his canoe to the dam and, crawling out, inspected its V-shaped top from shore to shore. Just off

the point of the V he found a section obviously damaged by the ice and floods of the previous spring. The repairs had been made with the beaver's customary thorough ingenuity; but here the dam was not so stout.

He tore away the smaller twigs that laced the narrow top. He hacked with his axe at the mud used to cement the under material together. The water surged through with a sort of pleased surprise at release which found an echo in Decker's tortured heart.

He forced himself to work with cold precision because, granting all of his tough strength, Red Decker knew that it was no easy job for a man to destroy the carefully planned and perfectly executed work.

The water swiftened until he could not stand in the breach and he dropped back and widened it. Not content with this, he swung himself down to the off side of the dam and searched for key spots where he might attack the structure.

This was not so easy; but working with his axe and his fingers he managed to force an opening some two feet below the upper breach and to one side. It now remained to tear out the material between these two points.

The beavers left the lodge house, alarmed at the dropping water level. They swam around the pond in frightened confusion. Red Decker rested and appraised his work grimly. The rounded underwater belly of the lodge house, with its outer plastering of hard mud, began to show under the risen moon.

In another hour the entrance to the house should be uncovered; and tomorrow he would complete his work by destruction of the lodge itself.

He cut and trimmed a stout sapling and, standing on a boulder below and to one side of the rushing water, he used it as a lever. He worked for half an hour before he felt the structure begin to weaken. The pole broke. He cast it aside and caught one of the larger logs in his hands and rocked it from side to side.

Suddenly the mass disintegrated. Before he could save himself the heavy debris swept into him. His feet, insecure at best on the moss-covered rock, shot out from under him and his head hit the rock.

Oddly enough, instead of stunning him it brought a wave of blinding clarity. His body slid slowly toward the tumbling water. He threw out his arms and managed to hold for seconds while the water and debris tumbled by in a mighty torrent.

Then painfully he edged himself upright, climbed to the top of the dam to the left of the breach, and sank down utterly exhausted.

ORANGE-TOOTH, in common with every beaver in the pond, sensed the first small drop in the level of the water. He paddled lightly with his hind feet and searched the pond. As it dropped farther he shared the common panic. He swam toward the beavers and all of them milled around the pond together.

Every few minutes one of their number swam toward the dam; but the menace of the wild, destroying figure of the man drove each of them back. The water swiftened perceptibly as the center of the dam went out.

Orange-tooth had no fear of Red Decker. The beaver allowed the swift current to bear him down. Near the break he pulled to one side and waited until the pond had dropped away and only the normal current of Torment Brook remained.

He swam to the storehouse of limbs and twigs. Selecting one of the larger pieces, he anchored its end at the edge of the break. Another beaver joined him and together they worked small material in, laying it parallel to the sweep of the current.

Red Decker counted nine working beavers. He heard the falling of small timber. Without any apparent leadership, there was no confusion. They were like some working troupe that had thoroughly rehearsed the busy scene they now enacted.

They plugged the break, working inward and upward until it was reduced to a point where it might be latticed entirely across. When this was accomplished, all of the animals turned to closing it with smaller material, held in with mud.

The water level rose inch by inch. The moon paled and the eastern sky began to gray. Orange-tooth and Goolap were left alone in the pond. Orange-tooth swam the length of the dam, inspecting every inch of it. Just in front of the lodge house he slapped the water sharply with his tail and dived. Goolap followed him.

Red Decker rose to his feet. The bitter taste of his own tragedy again galled his soul but he knew that for him there could be no forgetfulness. Escape had been a fantasy, a drowsing delusion. Whether or not he had been desperately hurt in the wreck, neither he nor anyone else would ever know.

He looked down at his hands. They were torn and raw but they would mend before the fortnight was over; and the trek out of the woods was long and arduous, but not so long as the road which lay ahead.

And at the beginning of that road was Dr. Perrin and little Mike who would never be turned over to the clumsy ministrations of Dunwoodie. Red Decker, like Orange-tooth, was returning to his kind with work to do.

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign Of Tired Kidneys—How To Get Happy Relief

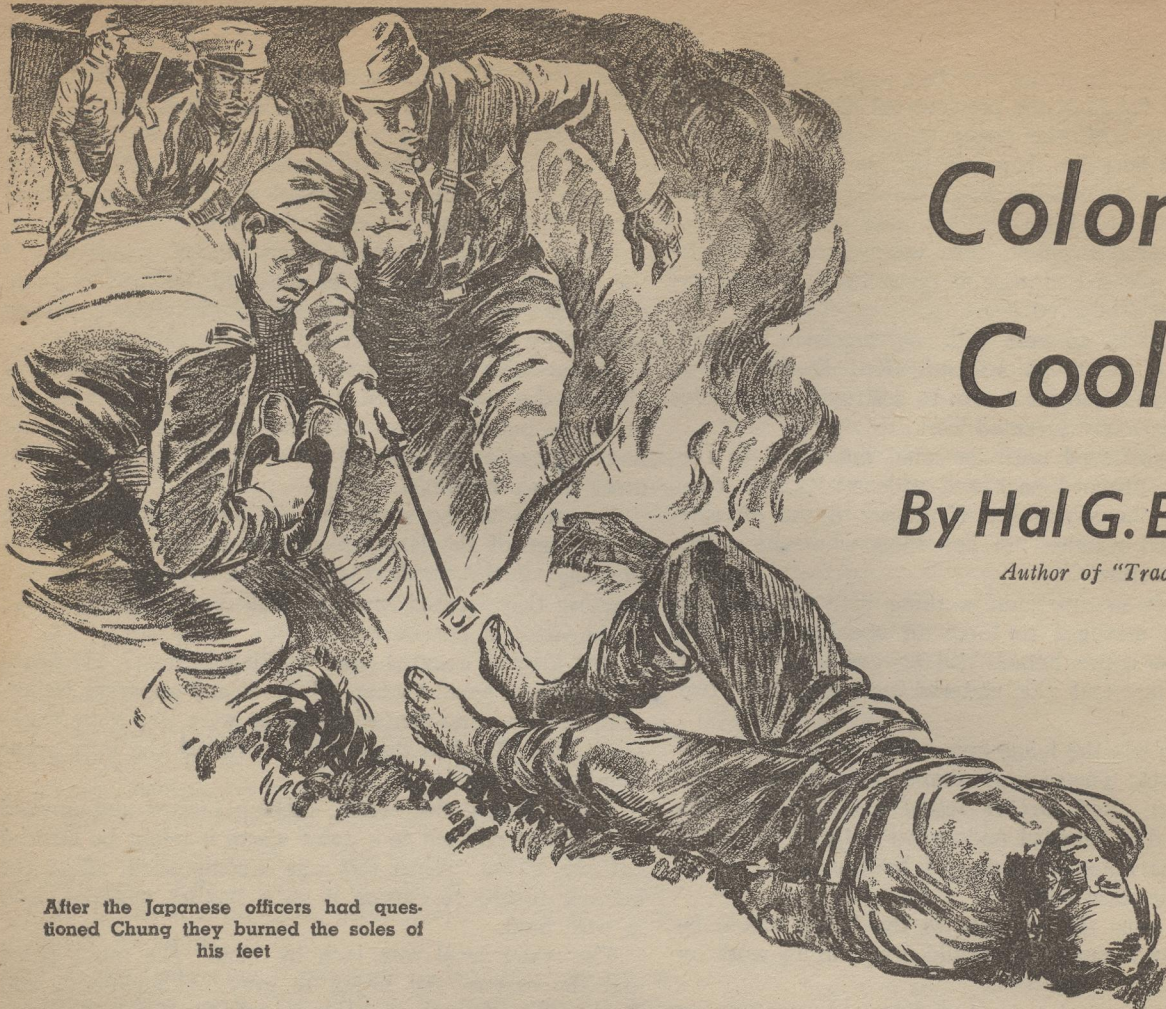
If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg

pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)



Colonel Coolie

By Hal G. Evarts

Author of "Tracks"

After the Japanese officers had questioned Chung they burned the soles of his feet

Consider the case of Chung Yon, a simple carrier of tea. True, he cannot master the high-sounding phrases of military tactics; but he has an imagination that will put generals to shame

CHUNG YON, tea carrier, crouched in the sand, smiling to himself. Colonel Han, of the Twenty-third Route Army, stood beside him, peering out into the South China Sea. The colonel was frowning.

It was a fine night, Chung thought, a beautiful night. There was no moon and one could see all the constellations of heaven. A wisp of breeze curled waves up on the beach. It was auspicious that on such a night Chung Yon, carrier, should become Chung Yon, *futow*.

Colonel Han thought it a fine night too, but for different reasons. He had chosen it for the dark of the moon. To chance he was indebted for an offshore breeze that would enable the junk to work in close without being observed. His frown was habitual. "You understand your job now?" he demanded.

The crisp voice broke in on Chung's reverie, recalling him to the stern realities of the moment. "Yes," he stammered. "Oh, yes." He didn't understand at all. He supposed the undertaking was important if it brought such a personage as Colonel Han clear across the hills. He didn't understand military affairs and didn't want to. All he knew was that Colonel Han needed someone to guide coolies through the Japanese lines.

He jumped as something splashed. The colonel lowered his voice. "We will take the route you described—the long

one. Traveling only at night and hiding by day. We must get through at all cost, old one!"

"At all cost," Chung mumbled. The colonel had called him an old one! Admittedly, he was old enough to be his father, but then the colonel was a downy-cheeked youth. Despite his scrawny body and wrinkled face, he was the best carrier in the district. Yes, and he would be the best headman beyond question.

"Where can that tortoise be?" Colonel Han fumed. He checked his watch in the rays of a blue flashlight. The colonel was a member of New China's younger generation. He was a man of education, a graduate of Whampoa Military Academy and wore a smart uniform. When he barked imperious orders Chung was painfully aware of his own humble attainments.

"Perhaps he comes now." Chung pointed to a gray hulk swelling the horizon not far off. He was pleased to have seen the vessel first; he wanted to prove he was alert and fit for responsibility.

"Fiends of darkest Hell!" the colonel groaned. "Will you never get it through your skull? That's a Japanese warship. It convoyed the troop transports."

Mortified, Chung turned around to hide his ignorance. Colonel Han had told him that before, to be sure, but he'd forgotten. Transport? Convoy? How could a simple

country man grasp words like that—military words? There was too much already in the world to confuse one.

“—the Burma Road’s bombed to bits,” the Colonel was repeating. “The French closed the Kuming railway; only this strip of south coast left open for supplies—our life-and-death line. Munitions imperative . . . blockade . . .”

“Yes, yes,” Chung agreed. “Oh, yes.” The staccato phrases were coming at him like knives. These matters were not for him, a poor unlettered carrier. He had nothing to do with armies and war. He was a man of peace.

SOMETHING splashed again, nearer this time, followed by muffled squeaks. A vague shape loomed in the blackness and maneuvered toward the beach, its bow scraping white shavings from the sea’s obsidian surface. A sail slithered down the mast and the junk hove about.

A bumboat swung over the side, loaded with men, and poled off. A minute later it crunched gravel. “Your late,” Colonel Han snapped.

“And why not?” The captain spat. “I had to follow the coast. Their cursed patrol boats are darting around like greedy sharks.”

Chung sucked in his breath at the man’s insolence. Colonel Han was a hard one to please and a bad one to anger. But apparently he was satisfied at the reply, for he said, “All right, unload. And no noise!”

The coolies jumped out and waited at the water’s edge for cargo. Chung watched them with an impassive expression, but inside he flamed with pride. These were his men. They would go where he led at the pace he set. This night! Now!

“No noise!” he growled in his throat, asserting his authority. From behind his ear he pulled a cigarette stub and struck a match. He would show who was master at once.

“Fool!” Colonel Han swore and leaped for his hand, striking at the light. The match described an arc into a mound of refuse. A piece of kelp blazed into brilliant flame, then guttered out.

The colonel raised his arm. He turned toward the warship and leaned forward listening. There was only the lapping of waves. Chung knew he had blundered again; but why should one not smoke while he worked? This he could not understand either. They stood silently until the bumboat returned.

It was almost awash under a box. Chung gaped at its size; the box was the height of a tall man and the width of two fat ones. The coolies staggered, deposited it on the shore. “Farther,” Colonel Han said. “Farther. Don’t let the water touch it!”

As befitted his position, Chung refrained from lifting. He merely pushed the box. His jaw sagged with amazement. It was heavy, heavy as a widow’s grief. To carry such a thing over hidden trails at night would be difficult. “Be careful,” the colonel warned. “That’s precious as gold.”

Chung had never seen gold. He pretended to read the foreign words stenciled on the box’s side. It could not be tea or silk, or even opium, so carefully packed in wood. “So,” he said, and wagged his head.

Deftly he slid a bight of rope under each side and knotted the four ends on top into a sort of sling. Through this he pushed two of his strongest fifteen-foot bamboo carrying poles. By the time he finished testing his rig another box had been unloaded beside the first. And then

another, and still another, until there were five in all.

He was completing his last sling when a white shaft suddenly stabbed from out on the water. With admiration he watched the beam sweep back and forth. Truly, it was an object of beauty, he thought. “Down!” Colonel Han hissed, and gave him a shove. “Flat!”

BETWEEN his fingers Chung saw the light marching up the beach toward them, illuminating every shell and driftwood fragment. It probed a depression and came on faster. Then it flooded over him, blinding him like a helpless bug.

The exhaust of a motorboat roared on the water, and a wake fanned out as it churned forward. Above even that Chung could hear the other sounds: a hideous, stuttering rattle that put fear into his bowels. Bullets skimmed his head with a whistling *ziiing*. Sand spurted into his face.

He wanted to leap up and run, run away from the noise and trouble, but his legs were too weak. One coolie tried. Chung watched his blue-clad body topple into the sand and twitch as the machine gunner gave a final burst.

The boat was a glaring one-eyed dragon, riding the seas and spewing death. It was so close he could feel the gory breath hot on his neck. He shut his eyes and uttered a prayer. He would burn joss at the temple; he would make an offering. He was afraid to peek and see if the others were dead yet.

A rifle cracked from the junk. Chung clapped his hands over his ears. There was a tinkle of glass and the searchlight went off as abruptly as it had come on. “Get those crates back in the dunes!” the colonel shouted. “Fast! Run!”

“Fast! Fast!” echoed Chung, trying to give his voice the proper martial snap. He was ashamed of his cowardice. He would lose much face.

The patrol boat veered to within a few lengths of the beach and swerved out, firing wilding in the dark. A chain clanked upwind and the junk glided slowly out to sea with the second craft in pursuit.

“A nice decoy,” the colonel chuckled, “while the prize gets away.” Tersely, he told the man they were on a vital mission of great risk. They would have no escort, carry no weapons. To reach the Chinese forces they would rely solely on their courage and their brains.

Chung inspected his carriers. They were big tall men from the north, eaters of grain. In their midst he was as a dwarf. Well, they would need their bigness to carry such loads. He paused before the tallest. The man had a crooked grin and a mocking glint in his eyes. “And why do you smirk?” he said. “Because you had the wit to not stop a bit of lead?”

“Aye, because I live by my wits, and because of my wits I live.” He guffawed and the others joined in at the sally.

It was good; the fellow had a shrewd tongue and thereby commanded respect. His name was Wong. “I make you assistant headman, always to hold the rear,” Chung said. He glanced at the colonel. “To beat any laggards, to keep watch for the enemy.” The colonel would approve that.

A PIERCING blast shrieked from the warship, sending echoes across the bay. Chung’s teeth clicked in his head. The siren repeated its hideous wail, like a haunted and evil spirit. “Get your caravan moving, old one.”

Colonel Han's face tightened. "That's a signal. The whole Kwangtung Army will be after us now."

Old one again, was he? Chung bit his tongue. He was not a warlike man, true, nor accustomed to hostile deeds, but he was no graybeard yet.

He ran to the number one position at the head of the column. There were four bearers to a box—two in front and two behind—but one bearer was missing; he was a riddled heap on the sand.

Chung braced his feet and carefully arranged the carrying pad on his left shoulder. He cricked his neck to the right and raised up against the pole with a grunt. To reach it he had to stand on tiptoe. A thousand *cattis* of metal cleared the ground. "Ho!" he shouted, and brandished his staff. "Forward! F-o-r-w-a-r-d!"

"Forward! Ho!" Wong took up the retort from behind.

"Quiet, you idiot!" Colonel Han whispered. "They're all around us!"

Chung found the right balance and started off at a jogging shuffle. In his moment of glory he had forgotten the enemy. But surely the *futow* could call to his own men just once. His heart lifted up with happiness.

"They have us located now. We must change our plan." Colonel Han was striding beside him, talking rapidly. "We can't take the long way. We have to reach the guerilla stronghold in one night—tonight!"

Chung struggled with his words of high strategy picking at their significance. "Tonight?" he gasped. "But it is one hundred *li* even by the short route, and all barren country! With these mighty loads—" Already his shoulder ached from the pressure.

"It's our only chance. They're disembarking another full division tomorrow. We may not get through as it is. They'll be on the lookout ahead, and behind—" He peered anxiously back at the shore.

They were out of the dunes, trotting with a gentle rhythm on springy surf, their feet padding in unison. The great boxes swung evenly from twenty shoulders. They were good men. Chung eyed the mass of Bite-Taken-Out-Of Mountain. "You wish to follow the short route then?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yes, yes, of course. You're sure you know the country?"

Did he not know the country? What a question. Did not a man know the land where he was born? Especially if he had smuggled to the inland towns. He knew every path and trail, every gully, ditch and tree, every place of concealment. Other local men, younger men, knew too, but they were off to the wars. Only Chung Yon was left behind.

"Change over," he called in a soft mournful singsong. "Change over, change over." It went from mouth to mouth down the line. The boxes came to a stop. "No rest, forward." There would be no rest at all. One hundred *li*.

He slid under the pole, forming a crotch with his neck, and boosted with his right shoulder. Underneath the pad his shoulder was hard with callous and flat muscle.

HE ANGLED to the north of the mountain. On the far side lay the Chinese guerilla hideout, and in between a division of the enemy, however many that might be. They climbed through thin red soil, scuffing up dust. Chung felt his new *tsao-hai* grip and hold with each step. He had squandered his last copper for the sandals, but this was an occasion for extravagance.

To be sure, his first trip as headman was not quite as he'd imagined. He would have preferred to swing down the main street of his village at high noon so everyone could see. He wanted to shout commands, clear the street of children and dogs with a swipe of his staff, so people would say, "Ah now, there's Chung the *futow*." It seemed that he had never wanted anything so much in all his life; and here he was instead, plodding through the dark, unseen, carrying like an ordinary coolie.

A shadow loomed beside the path. Chung saw it was a boulder and dodged. "Strength on the left," he chanted in warning.

"And weakness in thy head," Wong rejoined loudly from the rear. The coolies snickered. The fellow Wong had a wit indeed; he knew the banter of the road.

"You clowns!" Colonel Han raged. "Do you want a Japanese bayonet in your middle?"

Chung did not. The mere thought of cold steel made him quaver. He would remember not to sing out again.

They passed from the red lowlands into rolling farm country, pocked with rice fields, dikes and irrigation channels. Their silhouettes moved brazenly across the treeless land. They hugged the hills where possible, took advantage of hollows in the open. Hour after hour they hurried on with no sound but the *sluff-sluff* of straw on stone and the creak of straining bamboo.

Ninety *li*, eighty *li*, and still no sign of the enemy. He'd given them the slip: he, Chung Yon. He set down the crate and eased his cramped back.

It was then he heard a faint persistent pounding. It rose and fell in steady cadence, growing in volume. The colonel said, "They're right behind us." Chung recognized the clomp of hob-nailed boots.

His head was an exploding firecracker. He was untrained for emergency. He was afraid. Colonel Han yanked his sleeve and they were running across a field. They plunged into a buffalo wallow and lay there.

The clomp was loud as thunder. The whole earth trembled under its impact. He had never seen an enemy, so he buried his face in the mud. He never wanted to see one. Something cold and sharp crawled into his stomach and stayed there.

THE after hush was terrifying. All he could hear was his own hoarse breathing. "Only twenty yards," Colonel Han said. "If they had sent out covering scouts we'd be dead men by now."

They stepped forth into the scarred countryside, heading west. The regular pathways and lanes were too dangerous so Chung led over a ridge into the next valley. It was risky, exposed travel, where they might blunder onto the enemy any second; but it was better than lying on one's belly in a wallow.

At the eroded baldlands they were halfway. Fifty *li* and no time for rest.

From that point on the enemy was everywhere. They saw lights flashing, heard the nicker of horses. Once an artillery column clanked over a dry stream bed while they huddled under the bridge.

"Gnats, gnats," the colonel said contemptuously. "One day we will crush them. Of tactical science they knew nothing. See, they are deployed too thinly here, their flanks exposed to a simple pincer."

"Yes," said Chung. The words buzzed round and round

in his skull. He must try to understand the colonel's explanations. He must know those things to be a man leader.

His whole body was in torment, as if devils were tearing it apart at the joints. The black band around his forehead was soaked with sweat, and more kept dripping into his eyes. They had reached the hills, the stands of scrub juniper, and every step was an effort. Perhaps another thirty *li*.

Behind him the tall strong northmen, the grain eaters, came on with undiminished speed. Only Chung Yon was tired and panting. To jog all night, a quarter of a thousand *cattis* riding your back, was a young man's job. "You can last, old one?" the colonel asked.

The summit was not far. On the other side it was downhill. He must last to the summit. If he failed the others would fail also. Only he knew the secret way up—a tortuous ravine through boulders and brush. Any other route would be blocked. Haughtily he said, "The house of Chung is noted for endurance." He was still headman.

He turned into the ravine and trudged up several steep turns. A log partially blocked its course. "Ho!" he yelled. "A new coffin ahead."

"Take it along for firewood!" Wong cried in glee.

There was no more repartee. A gun cracked near at hand. The coolies flung themselves down and the bullet whined overhead. Shots began lobbing in from all directions, pattering in the undergrowth. Colonel Han cursed to himself.

From the slope above drifted incomprehensible shouts. The cold thing in Chung's stomach swelled till it threatened to burst. Tears of self-blame trembled under his eyelids. This was his doing, the result of his shameful pride. If he hadn't sung out—

A slug ricocheted and one of the coolies groaned. "Well, we're trapped," the colonel said. He spoke with no emotion, as if he were prepared to die.

Chung desired very much to go on living, but the colonel's example of fortitude and calm compelled him to act. It had gone beyond face now; it was a matter of ancestral honor. Without any idea of what to do, he whispered, "Wait," and wriggled from his hiding place.

Cautiously he worked toward the sound of the shooting, creeping on his hands and knees through a tangle of vines. He could hear much thrashing of brush and shouting. Someone blew a whistle. Then he tripped over a root and sprawled.

FOR a eternity he rolled through the dark, crashing downhill and howling. For his sinful pride he was being punished with a trip to the lower abodes. There demons would beat his feet with fagots. Such would be the fate of Chung Yon.

He came to a stop and opened his eyes. A flashlight glared into his face. He was surrounded by a ring of men in brown. He examined them fearfully. They were not Chinese. They were not demons. They had no horns or tufted ears. So they must be the enemy.

A soldier kicked him. Chung scrambled to his feet. They were all jabbering excitedly. It was their manner of speech, he supposed, but he could make no sense from it. A stocky man in spectacles pushed through the crowd and they fell silent.

In Chung's village only scholars wore spectacles, but this man was an officer. He knew from the decorations on the shoulder. "So our net brought in a minnow at last?"

the man said in Chinese. "And what is your destination?" He beamed and bared his teeth.

"I—I am a poor farmer," Chung managed to bleat. "On my way to market."

The officer squeezed a scowl to his face. "You lie!" His fist shot out and caught Chung on the nose. Chung staggered back and someone kicked him again.

The officers clapped a hand to his shirt and ripped it from his back. The carrying cloth fell out. "Red welts on the shoulders too! You're a carrier for the Chinese pigs, sneaking munitions through our lines!" He hissed like an angry snake. "Where are the others hiding? Tell me. Quick!"

Chung rubbed the blood from his face. He needed time to think. He must be cunning. "I'm a poor farmer—"

Again the fist on his nose. "We'll soon unlatch that stubborn mouth of yours!" His hands were lashed behind his back. Two soldiers seized his arms and gave him a push. A heavy guard conducted him to a clearing.

Never had he beheld so many soldiers at one time. They slept on the ground under tents, they washed their clothes and ate; they were as numerous as ants.

He was thrown on the ground beside an open fire. "Now," said the officer, "tell me where the other coolies are hidden. How many are there? I know they're somewhere about." Chung said nothing.

"So?" The officer's teeth gleamed. He crooked a finger and someone removed Chung's *tsao-hai*, the lovely new *tsao-hai* that had cost his last copper.

After that came the pain. It was not the pain of fatigue. It was pain that flashed through his body, pulverizing and destroying. It was like nothing he had known before. He had now not the wit to fool the enemy, to be cunning. A military man, perhaps, might know how.

He tried isolating the agony in one corner of his brain, but it kept spilling over. There was a brief respite. Chung shook his head and again it began. This time he did not howl or kick. It was useless. His surrender would have dignity, at least. "Yes," he gasped. "Yes, I will speak."

THE torment subsided a voice babbled questions at him. "Where? When? How many, how many?" "A division," murmured Chung. His mind was a cloud in the sky. "A full division."

When his eyes focused three men were peering at him. There were the first officer and two others, with larger decorations on their shoulders. "A full division, are you sure?" they were saying.

Whatever else he must speak the truth. Truth was a cardinal virtue. "Yes, from the lips of Colonel Han himself. Not one hour since. And another division tomorrow, at dawn."

"Colonel Han, eh, of the Twenty-third? What is he doing down at the coast? What else did he say?"

Chung considered. Truth was its own reward, the scholars taught. "The enemy is deployed too thinly," he said slowly. "Both his flanks are exposed. He is vulnerable to a simple pincer movement."

"Colonel Han said that?"

"The enemy's artillery is too heavy for rough terrain, and he lacks mortars." Chung hesitated over the colonel's precise words. "The enemy will be led into a trap, surrounded on three sides, and enfiladed. In a war of movement surprise is essential."

"The von Kulpe theory," the bespectacled officer said,

and bent over a map. "Feint with skirmish patrols first, then attack with massed infantry at an oblique angle."

"Obviously this Chinese swine is a distinguished officer," the second one said. "He knows too much for a coolie."

The third one, the fat one with yellow metal on his collar, jabbed at the map with his finger. "It must be a thrust at General Hamari's right wing. Without our support he might be annihilated. Two divisions and who knows how much guerilla scum!" The conversation reverted to Japanese and Chung heard no more.

Shortly thereafter the camp went into action. Orderlies scurried around with orders. A bugler sounded assembly. Weary and sullen-eyed little soldiers rolled out of their blankets, fell into ranks with their packs and marched off toward the coast on the double quick, one column after another.

"Our boys are well turned out," the first officer said to Chung. "Not like your scarecrow mob of looters." He fingered a revolver holster. "And where is Colonel Han's headquarters?"

"It is near here," Chung fidgeted. "He waits there for my return. He and five boxes of gold."

"Gold! You say gold? Five boxes? So the yellow cur flees our advance with his loot. And how is he protected?"

"By twenty miserable unarmed coolies like myself."

The officer barked at a passing squad. They swung out of line and fixed bayonets. Two unstrapped automatic rifles. "We are not through with you yet," he said. "You will conduct me to Colonel Han."

Chung limped ahead on his mutilated feet. The camp, a city of canvas only a few minutes before, was an empty clearing now. The clump of boots receded in the distance. At his heels tramped the officer and eight soldiers. "If I were brave," he thought, "I would run and they would kill me; if I were artful I would deceive them. But alas, I am neither."

HE LOOKED back. They had removed their boots. They were treading softly, like shadows, scarcely making a sound. They would take Colonel Han, Wong and the coolies by surprise. They would shoot them all and seize the boxes of gold. Last of all would they shoot Chung Yon.

He tugged at his knotted hands; they were tight. He circled aimlessly in the brush to consume time; he hoped they might tire of following him. "If you don't find him soon," the officer said, "we'll build a fire and give your feet further treatment. And if that's not enough—" He laughed and rammed something against Chung's back.

Chung led them toward the summit until he crossed his own trail. Escape was impossible; in a short while it would be dawn. He turned into a narrow gully that twisted up steeply. The men strung out single file, stooping to avoid overhanging branches.

"Ho!" he shrieked. "Here is a corpse!"

The officer knelt down, his pistol clutched in one hand. "You stupid dolt!" he snorted. "It's only a log. Another noise like that and I'll brain you. Proceed!"

They rounded a turn and bumped into the crates, sitting upright on the floor of the ravine. Five, side by side, just as he had left them. But Colonel Han and the coolies were gone.

The officer darted forward and thumped one. He spelled out the lettering. "So! This is your gold?" He wheeled on Chung with a triumphant sneer. "Airplane engines from America!"

The butt end of a fifteen-foot bamboo pole poked from the undergrowth and bore him down. His automatic crackled from the ground, spitting white. Chung smelled the powder, felt the wind, yet he was unafraid. Straight for the last white flash he lunged, throwing his body in a dive.

He was scarcely aware that his hands were bound. In a fury he butted with his head, swung with his knees and rolled clear. The officer was on top, clawing for his throat. He gasped for air; sparks and pinwheels formed against a black background inside his head. He opened his mouth and bit—something.

There was a yelp. Chung heaved his body and the Japanese slid off. He kicked once and collapsed.

Angry northmen charged into the gully from both sides, flailing grimly with poles and stones and sticks. Colonel Han rushed at their head swinging a club. It was over in a few seconds. The soldiers, outnumbered and surprised, had no chance to use their guns or knives. They went down under silent savage blows.

IT WAS Chung's first battle. Unbelieving, he stared around him—at the slain officer, at his grinning coolies, at the colonel. This was the work of Chung Yon, man of peace.

"Ho!" Wong boomed. "First you find us a coffin and then you bring us the corpses. Nine corpses!"

Colonel Han stepped up briskly. "Good work, head-man, good work." And then he did a strange foreign thing. He took Chung's right hand in his own and shook it.

"F-o-r-w-a-r-d!" Chung called and pushed up on his carrying pole. It was still twenty *li* to the guerilla post. The train moved up toward the summit.

Colonel Han paced beside him, no longer frowning. "A clever maneuver," he said. "You deceived the enemy as to our strength, decoyed him into ambush and warned us by signals without arousing his suspicions. You have done the Republic a great service this night."

Chung felt his old pride resurging. He felt also strangely superior to the colonel. The colonel was but a youth and had much to learn; he did not properly venerate age and therefore needed chastening.

"It was a nothing," he said, "undeserving of mention. Even a *futow* has more imagination than a military man."



Swords in Exile



Standing over their table, Antone said to Cleve: "My salutations, Gardier"

By

Murray R. Montgomery

CARDINAL RICHELIEU'S two rakehell guardsmen, RICHARD CLEVE and GUY d'ENTREVILLE, are faced with a perilous and baffling threat of treason in the Duchy of Montferrat. A protectorate of France, Montferrat is a prize eagerly sought by Austria, Spain and the neighboring Duchy of Savoy.

An Austrian agent, BARON VON ERLA, has set moving a complicated plot against the life of DUKE VINCENT of Montferrat. Von Erla, however, has been momentarily frustrated, for Cleve killed his hired assassin, one MAZO GARDIER. The fact that Cleve is now wearing the killer's ruby-hilted sword has led several of the *intrigants* to believe that the Englishman is Gardier. Another blow to Von Erla's intrigue was the mysterious death of the beautiful CATHERINE CORDOBA; this ally of the Austrian's held complete power over COUNT HENRI, the dissipated son of Duke Vincent of Montferrat; and now Henri is implicated in her sordid death.

RICHARD CLEVE'S primary purpose in Montferrat is not to serve the cause of France. He has come to the duchy in pursuit of SIR HARRY WINTHROP, who possesses Cleve's pardon from the King of England. But while staying at the palace of Duke Vincent, Sir Harry is robbed of certain vitally important state papers, and with these is Cleve's pardon.

Shortly thereafter Cleve and d'Entreville learn who the thief was, for DOCTOR DESPARTES, the palace physician, is found murdered, with a written confession of guilt in front of him. In this document he states that he sold the English state papers to one JUAN CASTRO, whom Cleve and d'Entreville know to be a master intrigant in the service of Spain.

One curious factor in the puzzle of Montferrat is COLONEL DE BOUSSEY, the *commandant*. Cleve cannot understand why de Boussey is deliberately attempting to place the blame for the murder of Catherine Cordoba on Count Henri, heir to the Duchy of Montferrat; he cannot understand, either, the colonel's deliberately brutal treatment of the people of Montferrat, who are sullen to the point of open revolt. Another problem for Cleve and d'Entreville is the presence in Montferrat of MARGARET, grand-daughter of the DUKE OF SAVOY; her attendant, a lowering fellow named ENRICO, has hinted that he had a hand in the death of Catherine Cordoba.

GUY d'ENTREVILLE, at least, finds some pleasure in Montferrat, for the ward of Duke Vincent is a love-

This story began in the Argosy for July 26

ly girl named MARY DE SARASNAC, whom Guy fell in love with in Paris. Cleve is less whole-heartedly devoted to her, since the girl keeps turning up unexpectedly in the devious affairs of the duchy.

But Mary de Sarasnac saves the lives of the two rakehellies. When they are summoned to a tryst by a mysterious note, she follows them and manages to warn them in time of the ambush planned for them. The ambush is laid not far from the Golden Crowns Inn, and after the assassins have fled Cleve and d'Entreville recall that another attempt on their lives was made at that tavern. They strongly suspect that their enemies—whoever they are—have their headquarters in a house just behind the inn. They decide to investigate at once. . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

TRAITORS' PARLOR

THE house behind the Golden Crowns Tavern was a dilapidated structure, weather-whipped, and silent now. The first evening shadows were closing in, and in the translucent purple of early night Cleve felt the sinister challenge of the place. His slim strong fingers curled reassuringly about his swordhilt.

The deserted building was old, the type men built when each house needed also to be a fort. At one time it had apparently faced upon a broad courtyard, but now the tavern was occupying the space, and so the house was well secluded.

The lower windows were high from the ground and deep-sunk in their thick walls. Uneven strips of wood boarded them over. A cracked stone terrace lay under the iron-studded gray door, and beyond there stood an unused stable, its doors gaping open.

"It seems too innocent; too deserted, Kitten," Cleve warned softly. "Take no risks. There may be men lurking in the dark."

The sibilant whisper of the French rakehell's rapier sliding from its sheath answered him, and he grinned. He drew his own blade. Then they stole cautiously into the shadow of the house.

D'Entreville jerked tentatively on one of the boards barring a window. He was forced to stretch his full six feet one to do it. "Solid," he muttered, relaxing. "Peste! How are we to enter?"

Using his rapier as a pointer, Cleve indicated a rusted iron trellis on the wall between the terrace and the stable. Above the trellis was a window free of boarding. Guy caught his companion's intent and nodded.

"Bien."

Then, sheathing their blades, they swarmed up with silent agility. Happily the window was unlatched. They pushed it open. Cleve was first to scramble quietly through it.

He found himself in a small room, black, except where lights from the adjacent tavern cut swaths across it. In their dim illumination he found a table with a tinder-box atop.

"When I strike a spark glance quick to see if there are any tapers about," he ordered softly.

From his position on the window-ledge Guy nodded. The Englishman's hands moved and a spit of light brightened the scene.

"Well?"

Guy chuckled and stood up. "Corbac. There is a full box of them at your elbow."

In the darkness Cleve cursed sheepishly, fumbled, found and lit one.

THE room proved remarkably habitable for a part of a seemingly deserted house. It contained a bed, two chairs and a table, and a wall-cabinet, open and lined

with bottles. Flanking the chamber's narrow door was a row of pegs upon which were hung a plumed hat, a Spanish cape, a sword and baldric.

"A poor weapon," Guy adjudged inspecting the blade and rehangng it. "Sandiou! I wouldn't carry it."

"Yet it proves a contention, Kitten," Cleve said. "We've walked into somebody's nest." He selected a handful of candles and gave half to d'Entreville. "Interesting, isn't it? Suppose we explore further."

He sneaked open the door and stepped into a long narrow corridor with Guy creeping after him, fingers clutched to a flame-tipped candle.

Their room was the first of many. Opposite it was a worn staircase leading down to the stygian regions of the first floor. Cleve eyed the corridor with its many flanking doors; Guy regarded the staircase.

"This way, Kitten."

"Don't be stupid. Our host is downstairs."

"I hope so. I want to investigate this hallway unhampered."

"Sangodemi! A soldier reconnoiters first before acting."

"Very well. You be a good soldier."

"Pecaire! Then we'll split!"

Cleve chuckled. "Some day we are going to view the same thing alike, and I'm going to faint." Then he slapped the other lightly on the shoulder. "Keep your eyes open, Kitten."

Guy nodded.

Cleve moved to the first door down the hall. Blade held ready, with his candle wedged upright in the cross-bar of its hilt, he slowly turned the knob.

The chamber was vacant, but it had been used recently, for upon the table were two empty wine-bottles and a few plates. Cleve was preparing to leave when a slip of paper lying on the dirty floor caught his eye. He picked it up.

There wasn't much to it—a cryptic message consisting of three lines:

Richelieu's Devils are in Montferrat. D'Entreville has just stopped at the Red Tassel, and Richard Cleve was here at the dawning. You know what to do, my friend. J. C.

"He did, true enough," the Englishman murmured. "A musket from the darkness, and then a five-man ambushade."

He tucked the note into the cuff of his left gauntlet and smiled. At least he knew who the sender was: J. C.—Juan Castro! The mention of the Red Tassel indicated the possibility of the wayside tavern being his headquarters. But more than that, the message proved Cleve's previous deduction correct. Castro was in Montferrat for a darker reason than the mere filching of a dispatch case.

THE adjoining room was locked and after a few hurried tests of its door, he proceeded to the next. This door swung easily. He stood on its sill for a moment, candle held high, staring; and then he whistled softly and closed it again.

"Ye Gods!"

He opened the next, muttered: "Shades of Guy Fawkes!" and almost slammed it shut. He stood for a moment frowning, and then turned and crossed to the opposite side of the corridor. He selected a door, opened it, nodded grimly and closed it again.

Thus he visited three more rooms; each with less caution and more haste. The purpose of Castro's presence in the duchy was rapidly growing apparent. Almost every chamber on the hallway was similar in content; crammed to the rafters. Without doubt the Spaniard's design was

great in scope—great and deady. But who in the devil was his accomplice?

Cleve was asking himself this question as his hand gripped the knob of the last door. But then his attention shifted. For the past minute his subconscious mind had been aware that the great house was no longer held in a thick stillness. Things were stirring below. And now suddenly there was a crash downstairs, quickly followed by the clash of steel, the sodden thumping of feet, and sharp scraping sounds.

He scowled, and in that instant a voice rang out: *Hola! Cleve, I've found our hosts. A moi!*"

The Englishman grinned. He left the door and started down the corridor. The vague throb of the lump on his head reminded him of their most recent adventure. As he descended the narrow staircase he sighed. This time he'd remember to duck! A moment later, he paused before an open door through which light poured in a brilliant flow. He lifted his blade.

"Well, here we go again," he muttered and stepped over the sill.

ENTERING the large high-ceilinged room—it proved to be the building's scullery—he stood a moment on the landing leading down to it.

"Damme," he laughed. "What have we here?"

The view which greeted him was rare. D'Entreville, his dark eyes a-light, was facing four angry gentlemen. The Frenchman was standing beside a flour-bin in the corner, and he held a pewter scuttle in one hand—a sword in the other. Each of his cursing opponents appeared to be frosted. They boiled around him amid white billows of flour. Whenever their four rapiers converged too close to the French rakehelly, the hand-scuttle would dip back into the bin, come out loaded and swish blinding flour-clouds into their faces.

The four gentlemen would then withdraw, coughing, and Guy would press home four nipping thrusts further to dismay them. Two of them were bleeding freely, but they were stubborn fellows. Yet, given sufficient time and enough flour, the Frenchman would soon wear them all down.

"'Tis a shame to break it up," Cleve chuckled.

He took the two steps leading down from the landing in a single stride. As the backs of the four were toward him, he approached unnoticed. A wooden meat-mallet was lying on a thick wall-table, and he picked it up as he passed.

In the meantime, Guy had cast another spray of flour. One of his opponents stumbled away, coughing and cursing and rubbing at his eyes. He banged into Cleve; Cleve banged back promptly with the meat-mallet, cracking the fellow neatly on the crown. The man went down. "One."

Another man began to hurl wild invectives at d'Entreville. He did not consider the French rakehelly's conduct of the battle gentlemanly. Only a churl would fight with flour. Cleve tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Four to one is not gentlemanly either," he told him. "I suggest you retire!" And he used the mallet. The objector regarded him with glazed eyes, appeared to nod agreement, and then slid peacefully to the floor.

"Two," said Cleve.

But his next victim was awaiting him. Cleve caught the fellow's murderous lunge, turned it aside and countered in kind. They fenced for a moment, each feeling the other out, cautious and alert. The man was an expert, Cleve decided. He possessed a pretty *sixte* counter and a dazzling *riposte*.

"Damme! I'd like to play, bucko," the English cavalier said. "Yet time presses." Then he stepped back and

snapped the heavy mallet in a short arc toward the other's head. It struck alongside the fellow's jaw.

"Three!" Cleve said.

"Four!" added d'Entreville as his blade skewered the last man. "*Corbac!* 'Tis done!"

He stood for a second, panting. The slashed sleeve of his maroon doublet was caked to the shoulder with dough. He was perspiring freely. Finally, he bent and picked up the hem of his late opponent's cape. He cleaned his blade and sheathed it with a snap.

"Stumbled upon them after searching the rest of the house," he said by way of explanation. "I doubt that any more are about."

Cleve nodded. Then he commenced to drag one of his victims toward a warped trap-door. "As soon as we have locked our friends below," he said, "we had best quit this place, quickly."

Guy had been attempting to bat flour free of his hat but he stopped. He frowned.

"Why?"

"No reason in particular, Kitten." The Englishman paused, one gloved hand still gripping the spurred heel of his charge. "Except that there is sufficient gun-powder stored in the rooms upstairs to blast this mansion to Hades and back again!"

CHAPTER XXIV

SIGNOR POOH

THE grog-room of the Golden Crowns was brisk and loud with revelry. A troop of players, passing south toward Piedmont, had put up at the inn overnight and in lieu of silver were paying with talent.

From their table in the far corner of the low-raftered room, Cleve and d'Entreville observed the proceedings with a pleasant torpor. Between them were the ragged remains of what had once been a succulent leg of mutton. They had repaired to the Golden Crowns for the purpose of conversation, but the savory aroma of cookery had engaged their attention.

Now they strove feebly to shake off their inertia. It was easier to sit, relaxed, with heels aslant on convenient benches. Guy made the first move.

"You mentioned a note," he said.

Cleve pulled the clay pipe the landlord had furnished away from his lips and nodded. He fumbled in his doublet, drew forth Castro's chit and tossed it on the table. "Here it is."

"J. C." Guy muttered after scanning the paper. He cursed. "*Sandiou!* Juan Castro!"

Cleve regarded him obliquely. "Remarkable," he said.

D'Entreville ignored him, frowning. "A house crammed with powder and arms. You did say that there were weapons with the powder-kegs, did you not, Cleve?"

"That's right. One room alone contained fifty halberds."

"But why?"

"Damme. Do you sit there and profess not to know?" The French gallant flushed. "Revolt?"

"Of course." Cleve straightened. "To my way of thinking, Kitten, we've uncovered a fragment of the thing which ails this duchy. Some group, of which Juan Castro is a part, is seeking to raise a rebellion. They are clever lads too. First they create unrest among the soldiery by stealing their pay; next they unsettle the populace."

Guy's eyes began to glisten. "*Sangodemi!*" he exclaimed. "It is becoming clear. If they seek to demoralize the soldiery, then Catherine Cordoba's mysterious Baron X is behind everything. Undoubtedly he is the man to whom Castro sent this message."

"THINK so?" Cleve asked and lifted his tankard from the table and stared into it absently. He took a leisurely sip.

"*Corbac!* Don't you? Has not Antone been in Catherine's hire? Have not his men looted the wage-wagons?"

The Englishman returned the ale-mug to the table. He smiled. "We have no proof of Antone's guilt, Kitten."

"But we have! M. de Boussey has definite information that Antone's men have been seen riding from the looted wagons. Besides, we know that Antone was one of Catherine's hirelings and that she, in turn, belonged to the baron. What more logical conclusion can be drawn?"

Cleve thought a moment, staring at the players who were now taking curtain-bows sans curtain, and then shook his head. "It doesn't make sense."

The Frenchman glared. "No?"

Cleve laughed. "No," he replied. "Faith, in the first instance I doubt that the lootings of the wage-wagons have anything to do with Catherine's plot."

"Eh? What leads to that surmise?"

"The conversations I had with her as Mazo Gardier. I learned that the lady rather fancied herself as the future Duchess of Montferrat, and to gain the desire she and Baron X were proposing to murder Duke Vincent. She admitted as much and Baron X had hired Gardier for the business."

"You have explained that before," Guy snapped.

The English cavalier rambled on unheeding. "Upon Vincent's death, Catherine was to coerce Henri into marriage. She would thus become the Duchess of Montferrat, and of course her comrade Baron X would be on hand to share in the profits."

D'Entreville snorted. "*Sandiou.* I find nothing in your remarks to eliminate Baron X as being the instigator of a rebellion."

"Don't you, Kitten?" Cleve grinned, then sobered. "Well, let us consider the affair we have just uncovered. The house behind this tavern—charged with powder. Damme! If Catherine and the baron wanted to grasp the reins of power then civil strife, insurrection, unrest, would be the last thing she would play for. A new crown must be set peacefully if it is to remain solid. And yet we have reason to believe that the lads who own that houseful of munitions are planning to the contrary. Rebellion."

The Englishman shrugged and relaxed against the wall. "Mark me, Kitten, we are facing two distinct conspiracies and have been wasting most of our attention on the lesser."

D'Entreville frowned. "I doubt it," he stated. "*Mais oui,* I doubt it very much."

"Your privilege," Cleve said and yelled for more ale. While it was being brought, he added: "Castro is our culprit, Guy."

The Frenchman shook his head. "*Non.* He is but an attendant figure. His main purpose has been to filch the papers which Sir Harry was bearing and nothing more"

CLEVE waited until their tankards were refilled, and then chuckled. "Explain the reason for his note being discovered where we found it?" he challenged.

"I said that he was an attendant figure," Guy reiterated sharply. "I did not eliminate him. Undoubtedly he has a part in the plot—but only a small one. Your convictions to the contrary, I still believe that if we ferret out Baron X, we ferret out everything."

"Uh-huh." Cleve nodded wisely.

"*Parbleu!* You needn't appear so cursed superior. I have good reason for my contention. The importance of Antone the Archer in this affair seems to have entirely escaped you. He is an important factor, *mon ami!* It

is his relationship to Catherine and Catherine's relationship to the baron that exposes the complete conspiracy. True, she may have plotted Vincent's death, but behind her was the baron who plots complete domination of this duchy. With Catherine in power, his task would be easier."

"In brief, you doubt that the intrigue ends with her ascending the throne."

"Precisely."

"How do you explain her death?"

Guy frowned. "*Corbac!* How do you explain it?"

Cleve wagged a chiding finger. "Ah now, I asked first."

The other pursed his lips and took a deep breath, frowning. "Henri!" he snapped and glowered. "Well?"

Cleve eyed his finger-tips thoughtfully. Finally he shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted, then grinned. "But I'll wager ten livres that it wasn't Henri, m'lad. Ten livres, even!"

D'Entreville's fist crashed upon the table. "Taken!" he snapped.

They finished their ales. Preparing to leave, Cleve suddenly noticed a high-crowned hat appearing between the shoulders of a cluster of departing guests. He gripped Guy's arm and pulled the French cavalier back upon the bench opposite him.

"Hold a moment, Guy. We have a visitor."

THE prophecy proved accurate. The wearer of the hat wiggled free, threaded his way rapidly toward their corner. He was a small man with a swarthy face, youngish in cast. He approached with a bandy-legged stride. He wore an exceptionally long dark cape beneath which bulged an object which Cleve knew immediately to be a quiver full of arrows. It was Antone, his swarthy face still holding the same fixed grin; his button eyes hard.

"My salutations, Gardier," he said easily and slid onto a stool at the end of the table. He regarded Guy briefly. "I would speak alone with you."

Cleve ignored Guy's questioning glance. He collared a house lackey, ordered another round of ales and turned to the little bandit.

"You may speak freely, bucko," he said easily. "This is a henchman of mine, Anastasias Pooh by name."

"Eh?" frowned the archer. "Anastasias who?"

"Pooh," corrected Cleve calmly. Guy squirmed. He'd settle with Cleve later for this.

"A ridiculous name, I think," Antone said.

The English rakehell nodded, straight-faced. "He is. But entirely trustworthy. Anastasias, Nasty as I call him, is one of the most notorious poisoners in Europe." He turned. "Aren't you, Nasty?"

Guy glowered. "There is one whom I would enjoy to poison right now," he muttered.

"You see," Cleve said with a nod.

Antone shrugged. "Well, if you vouch for him. . . ." Then his voice flattened. "I learned of Signorina Cordoba's death this evening, hence I risked coming here. Tell me Gardier, who did it?"

Cleve shrugged. "They say, Henri—"

The little bandit nodded. "Then the rumor is true." His beady eyes glittered. "I have an arrow for him."

"An arrow?" Guy started. He eyed Antone with sudden recognition. "Is this the famous Archer of Montferat—er—Gardier?" he asked Cleve.

The Englishman inclined his head. "That's right."

"*Mordi!*"

Antone regarded him sharply. "*Sapristi,* is my person so offensive, Nasty, that you must—"

Guy winced at the name but hurriedly interposed a quick disavowal. "It was because I felt surprised that you dare appear in Casale, *monsieur,*" he finished lamely.

THEN the lackey appeared with three foam-capped tankards. The brew did much to ease the situation, although Antone's smiling insistence that he and d'Entreville exchange tankards before drinking caused merriment almost to strangle Cleve. One thing was certain, the small bandit's rascality was exceeded by a deeply suspicious nature.

Greedily gulping his ale, the Archer abruptly stated: "I have sent word to the baron concerning the murder of Signorina Cordoba, Gardier. You will meet him when he arrives."

The Englishman's expression did not alter. "Good enough," he assented and stared thoughtfully. "Where?" "My headquarters. The Old River Chalet."

D'Entreville wanted to know where it was. Antone ignored him, speaking to Cleve. "Ask any peasant," he told him. "The Old River Chalet is well known. It is supposed to be haunted, and of course it is. *Sapristi!* Haunted by the men of Antone the Archer." He laughed shortly.

"I see." Cleve nodded. "Clever, m'lad. Guarded by a reputation. Faith! Small wonder that the soldiery has never found you." He smiled faintly and swished the ale of his tankard into a foam. "At what time will the baron arrive, Antone?"

"Ah. Who knows? Perchance at high noon, but more likely later. Certainly before dusk." And here the bandit shrugged. "Choose your own time, Gardier. I but offer you the facts. I arrange this meeting only because she would have me do it, and for no other reason. The intrigues of the gentry are not my concern. You and the baron need not fear my ears or my tongue." He paused. "Understand?"

Cleve nodded. He understood completely now. With-out a doubt Antone knew very little concerning the plot. He was but a tool—Catherine's slave. Apparently he had obeyed her unquestioningly, almost fanatically, in all things.

On the other side of the table, d'Entreville shifted. One question had been burning in his mind and now he blurted it out: "Just who is this baron, *mon ami*?"

Antone's dark eyes narrowed on him for an instant and then shifted to Cleve. "I deem your friend overly curious, Gardier."

Cleve's gaze pinned Guy with mild censure; and then he smiled. "Not necessarily, Antone. I have hired Nasty to aid in this enterprise. Naturally he is interested in knowing the identity of his true employer."

It was weak and the bandit seemed to sense it. "I dislike people with long snouts. If your friend desires the Baron's name, you speak it, Gardier. Nasty is your responsibility." Then he stood up. "I have loitered in this place long enough. Who knows, the guardsmen may be already on their way. Good evening, until tomorrow."

They watched him until he had disappeared; and then Guy faced about. "*Sangodemi!*" he said. "A careful rogue, isn't he?"

Cleve smiled abstractedly. "Careful is understatement, Kitten." He lifted his mug. "Sheer understatement."

CHAPTER XXV

TWO ROUTES TO PERIL

THE following day came too soon. Lying face down against the pleasant softness of his bed, Richard Cleve dimly recognized its arrival, yet he fought stubbornly to remain in the luxury of warm oblivion. The twenty odd tankards of ale abetted him somewhat, but even they were insufficient to protect him from the clamor of voices, the hand which shook him. He rolled over.

"Noisiest damned place I've ever slept in," he complained. "Damme! Quiet!"

D'Entreville was standing over him, fully dressed. His beard had been freshly trimmed. Behind him a dumpy individual who wore the apron of a barber, stood with laver in hand, a look of estimation in his eyes.

"Arise, Cleve. The duke's barber is here to shave you."

The Englishman allowed the weighted fuzz on his eyelids to pull them closed. He took a deep breath. "I am growing a beard," he announced and snuggled deeper into the bedclothes. He yawned slightly and added: "Beginning now."

"Oh no you don't, *mon ami*. *Parbleu!* We have much to accomplish this day. In half the hour we shall be a-horse."

Cleve felt the coverlet whisked from him, and a rush of cold air.

"Up, *mon ami*. *Sandiou!* Have you forgotten that this day we learn the identity of Baron X and arrest him?"

With a leisurely stretch the English cavalier threw his legs over the side of the bed. He massaged his face vigorously and it seemed to help. Their room in the ducal palace assumed normal portions. There was a warm blaze dancing in the hearth, and with a grunt of satisfaction Cleve walked over to it and pulled up a chair.

"Faith. What is the hour, Kitten? From the nip in the air it must be dawn."

"Half past the hour of eight," the Frenchman informed him. "I deem it necessary that we ride immediately to the Old River Chalet."

The barber approached and unfurled an embroidered linen sheet. Cleve allowed him to tuck it firmly about his neck and accepted the crescent-shaped laver submissively. The fire crackled.

"Why the haste, Kitten? The baron will not arrive until later."

"I plan a trap," Guy replied. "I shall take a troop of guards and surround the locale. When the baron arrives he shall be arrested immediately." He snapped his fingers while pacing cheerfully with one hand held to his rapier. "As simple as that! *Corbac!* Our visit to the Golden Crowns was filled with fortune last evening."

CLEVE inclined his cheek to allow the industrious barber full leeway. "Of course Antone will await docilely as you gallop up to his nest with fifty troopers behind you," he chuckled.

Guy smiled. He was in excellent spirits. "Hah!" he exclaimed. "I have attended that problem, my wise friend. I have been astir for over an hour and while you were still snoring, held council with M. de Boussey. *Monsieur le colonel* will dispatch a troop of horse from Casale promptly at high noon. They shall secrete themselves near the Old River Chalet to await my signal. Upon receiving it, they shall close in. *Pecaire!* That is all there is to it."

"Why not allow the men to close in without our presence?" Cleve asked. "Faith! We know that Antone and the baron will be there. Let the troopers take them. We can interrogate those two when they are brought to the palace."

D'Entreville looked shocked. He stared incredulously at his friend. "*Mordi!* Are you serious?"

"Surely, I'm serious. Why waste time riding to them when they can be brought to us?"

Guy shook his head as though recovering from a blow. "I don't understand it," he told himself. "*Sandiou!* It is beyond comprehension! We engage in a problem; labor desperately upon it; finally contrive its solution; and when the end is in sight, we withdraw to allow others to complete it! *Sangodemi*, Cleve! What manner of man are you?"

"Damme, a nice enough fellow," Cleve replied between strokes of the barber's razor. "Kindly disposed toward old women, children, dogs—I like you too, Kitten. And—"

"Never mind." The French rakehell's dark eyes narrowed with a sudden thought. Whenever Cleve acted this way, there was usually a good reason for it. He frowned slightly and stepped resolutely between the English cavalier and the fire. "All right, *mon ami*," he said, "what is your motive for such a lazy suggestion?"

Cleve waited while the barber put the finishing touches to his face before answering. He handed the laver to the man and sat back chuckling.

"I have more than one motive," he admitted. "It seems foolish to waste our time with minor concerns when the real puzzle still needs solution. For another reason, I don't think my pose as Gardier will—"

D'Entreville interrupted him with a sweet venom. "And pray, what is the *real* concern, *mon ami*?"

Cleve regarded him mockingly. "A visit to the Red Tassel might uncover it," he said.

D'ENTREVILLE saw his point and discarded it immediately. He had lain awake half the night wrestling with the Castro question, only to arrive at the point where he'd begun. Juan Castro was unimportant. Guy was positive of it. He gestured impatiently.

"Castro!" he snorted. "Bah! We have no proof that he is anywhere near the inn."

"It's worth the try," Cleve said.

Guy grew irritable. "*Parbleu!* I told you last evening that Juan Castro is not so important as is the baron. I do not propose losing the main *intrigant* to gain one of his henchmen. We can locate Castro later. *Peste!* The only reason that you are so intent upon his capture is because of Sir Harry's papers and your pardon. Why don't you admit it?"

Cleve shrugged, crossed the room and began to dress. During the night somebody had polished his boots, brushed his black doublet and laundered a fresh collar for him. He thought of de Maupin and mentally thanked the diminutive steward. Then he looked at Guy.

"All right, I admit it," he said. "But mark me, there is more behind Castro than the mere robbery of English documents. He may lead us to the figure behind this filthy business—the man who has been having the wage-wagons looted and powder-stores collected."

"*Pecaire!* Must I repeat for ever that Baron X is that man?"

"No," Cleve denied slowly. He pulled on his high Cordovan boots and stood up. "Look, Kitten, there is no need for us to race immediately to the Old River Chalet."

Guy's chin jutted out stubbornly. He had enthusiastically planned today's business and Cleve's airy dismissal of its importance angered him.

"I say there is. We must arrive in advance of the baron and pump as much information from Antone as possible."

"You'll find that little rogue dry pumping, Kitten. Besides, the Baron knows the real Gardier. I've tried to make that point before. Once he sees me, the jig will be up. He'll know me for an imposter and undoubtedly have Antone's men murder us on the spot. Also consider Catherine's death. We know Antone is searching for her slayer and so it can be no one in the baron's plot. I'm sure she was murdered for a reason, Kitten, and perhaps I can find it at the Red Tassel."

But Guy wasn't in the mood for logic any more. "All right," he snapped. "Go on your futile errand, Cleve. Henri is the man who slew Cordoba and Castro is unimportant. Waste your time. I'm leaving for the Old River Chalet immediately."

The Englishman shrugged. When Guy developed one of these stubborn streaks he knew better than to cross him. "Very well, Kitten." He slapped the Frenchman lightly on the shoulder. "Good luck. If nothing comes of my jaunt to the Red Tassel, I'll join you with fifty of the palace guards. Tell Antone that I was unavoidably delayed and that I sent you in my place."

An hour later he cantered his horse through the main gate of Casale. He didn't follow the ragged yellow road which stretched to the west, but galloped north for almost five minutes before veering gradually into an invisible parallel with the thoroughfare.

He was wearing a new white plume in his hat. The rubies in his rapier-hilt flashed crimson at his thigh. As he rode, he mentally summed up his knowledge of Montferrat's mysteries. That Castro had had Despartes put out of the way was obvious, as was the fact that the fat Spanish spy had something to do with the duchy's threatening rebellion. But who was his accomplice?

Cleve scowled into the wind. By Gad! The man *had* to have an accomplice. The precision of the wage-train lootings, the note cast through the library window—these were evidence enough.

Last night's ambush was definitely Castro's work. Baron X wouldn't be interested in slaying Mazo Gardier, and to all extents and purposes Cleve *was* Gardier. Therefore, it had been Castro, or his fellow conspirator. The English rakehell's eyes narrowed. Faith! Here was a man everyone had overlooked. A man whose government would be as interested in Montferrat's fall as Juan Castro's. The unobtrusive companion of Margaret of Savoy. The elusive man named Enrico!

"Could be so," the cavalier muttered and reined up.

He approached the Red Tassel from the rear. The place was strangely silent. There were horses in its afteryard; and although most of them were saddled, not a groom-boy or a stableman was in sight. The rear door was closed.

Cleve slid from his steed and tethered it loosely to a nearby sapling in a clump of round-leaved bushes. He stood amid them frowning. Suddenly his gloved fingers dove for his hilt. From the quiet of the tavern came a scream! A woman's scream! What the devil did it mean?

CHAPTER XXVI

BARON X

THREE leagues away, Guy d'Entreville sat his saddle atop a craggy hillock and shook his head. After wandering aimlessly for thirty minutes in a brambly forest of gnarled trees and vined underbrush, he had been exasperated to find the object of his search at a point he had previously passed. He cuffed back his plumed hat and mopped his brow. Then he regarded the setting again.

Below him, the Old River Chalet lay decaying amid the ruin of its garden. It faced the River Po from behind a serried rank of rotting stumps. It carried with it the melancholy aspect of a haunted place—bleak gray walls supporting a roof which in part had been chewed bare by the weather; vacant eye-like windows; and a sagging, vine-webbed chimney. Small wonder that the peasant who had directed him here had spoken with a superstitious tremor.

Staring at it, the French gallant dropped his hand to the hilt of his blade. He glanced back up the road toward Casale and wished for a fleeting moment that he had the comforting companionship of Richard Cleve. The road was deserted. It was little more than a cowpath anyway, trailing away from the main highway at a point two leagues distant. He was alone.

Then with a curse, the cavalier put spurs to his mount and descended the hillock. He reached its base without mishap and was preparing to canter toward the distant edifice when two men stepped from behind trees.

"Hold, *signor!*"

D'Entreville reined up. The men had horse-pistols and they were trained unswervingly upon him. He was careful to keep his hands exposed, folded on the pommel and away from his swordhilt.

"Your master is expecting me," he said.

"Antone expects Mazo Gardier," the taller of his captors stated. He shook his head. "I have seen Signor Gardier, and you are not he."

"That's right," d'Entreville accorded. "My name is—" And he bit his lip angrily. "My name is Pooh, *monsieur*. Anastasias Pooh!"

The man frowned. He was a grizzled ruffian wearing a green bandanna in lieu of a hat, a leather jerkin and a knife-laden sash. "Pooh?" he queried.

His smaller companion suddenly nodded. "*Sapristi*, Luigi, I remember now. Our chief mentioned the name to me last night. This man with the funny name is Gardier's friend. He is all right."

But the other was a cautious fellow. He waved his pistol commandingly. "Dismount. Attempt any tricks and I shall blow your brains out." And as Guy obeyed, he turned to the smaller guard. "Back to your post, my friend. I'll take this bravo in."

ANTONE the Archer was not surprised to see d'Entreville. In fact, he seemed rather pleased. The little bandit was seated at a bottle-littered table before the fireplace in the chalet's main hall.

"*Por Bacco!* I am sorry to hear of Signor Gardier's illness," he exclaimed after Guy had laid Cleve's non-appearance to an attack of stomach trouble. "It is probably caused by that rancid brew which the Golden Crowns serves as ale. I have had the pains myself. You drank much after I left?"

Guy dropped into a chair opposite the speaker. He nodded. "Twenty tankards," he admitted and stole a quick glance around.

The room was bare-walled and carpetless, its only furniture consisting of some rickety chairs and the long table at which they sat. Six of the Archer's men were in evidence. Guy wondered how many more of them there were. Then he resumed the conversation.

"Of course Mazo might recover sufficiently to ride here," he said. "He is anxious to receive his orders. Yet if he does not appear, then I am to speak with the baron and relay that gentleman's commands."

There was a strange hard light in Antone's beady eyes although the smile beneath them remained the same. He reached across the table and selected a bottle.

"I'd like to propose a toast, *signor*," he said, filling two convenient goblets. "A toast to which I am sure you will agree." Then he handed one to Guy and stood up. "To the slow death of the man who murdered Signorina Cor-doba."

Guy arose slowly with the slender stem of the goblet between his fingers. He held the glass eye-level. He felt obliged to embellish the toast.

"To Henri de Casale," he said; and then froze with his eyes glued to the goblet's mirroring surface.

The wine which Antone had poured was a crude vintage, and its murkiness formed a perfect basis for reflection. D'Entreville found himself staring at the face of Baron Friederich Carl Von Erla!

"No, Signor Kitten. To you!" said Antone, his voice suddenly vicious.

But Guy didn't hear him. He was too busy attempting

to judge the distance between himself and his old enemy. The face drew nearer. Guy wasted no more time—dashing the glass and its contents over his shoulder. The wine sprayed into the Austrian's face.

Guy spun to see him stagger back, and then the French gallant had his rapier in hand. He accepted the murderous lunge of the saturnine man who had accompanied Von Erla. Guy beat aside the tip of a blade jabbing in from the side, then returned his first opponent's thrust with a deadliness that left the fellow gasping out his life's blood on the floor. A man hurdled the body. Guy served him in turn—a sword in the belly.

The French cavalier tried to retreat. A comforting wall was needed at his back, but the long table denied passage. He reversed; tried to go forward; tried to sword-whip his way through the press. No good! Then the uneven match was ended abruptly. A wine-bottle in the hands of Antone did it.

Having been caught immobile by the unexpectedness of d'Entreville's sudden action, the swarthy little archer was quick to recover. Sweeping up a long-necked flask from the litter on the table, he waited until the rakehelly was comparatively stationary; and then he reached out and struck with shattering violence.

Guy's hat-crown, plus the rippling thickness of his dark hair, saved him his life but not his senses. The room spun crazily in a spark-splashed maelstrom. A clap of thunder seemed to re-echo in his brain. His muscles became liquid. He staggered, dropped to his knees; and then slid slowly forward on his face. Oblivion.

WHEN the lucidity of reason returned, he was still on the floor in the same position in which he had fallen. He could not have been senseless very long. He was listening as Von Erla said:

"*Gott!* I knew he was a devil, but not such fierce one. To call him the Kitten is a jest. He is a veritable tiger. Two deaths in a wink of the eye!"

"*Por Bacco!* Had I not struck with the bottle, Signor Baron, who knows how many we might have lost?"

That was Antone's voice. Guy slowly opened his eyes. The world was confined to that section of the flooring immediately in front of his nose. He attempted to roll over. He found himself incapable of the effort. He did not move. The shock of the blow was still gripping his reflexes, numbing them.

"He still lives, fortunately," came the baron's voice. "We shall see that he is made to pay for many things!" There was the jarring shock of a boot-toe against Guy's side. "The swine shall answer for the ruin that he and his English friend have made of my plans. I vow to slay them both before aught else. Fetch water, Antone. Revive him."

It was peculiar. Guy knew that he was destined for torture if he did not immediately manage to escape, for the vicious edge to the baron's voice was warning enough. Yet the Frenchman couldn't move. He lay paralyzed, listening with all the indifferent detachment of an incurious eavesdropper and feeling only slight surprise that Von Erla should turn up as Baron X. It seemed so simple and logical now.

Then rough hands seized him, jerking him upright. He closed his eyes. An icy cascade deluged him and he opened them again. He was being supported on either side by a pair of garlic-smelling ruffians in greasy surcoats. For the first time he discovered that his wrists had been bound behind his back.

The room came into focus. Before him, like judges at a trial, sat Von Erla and Antone with several of the robber band standing behind. Von Erla was smiling with all the amiability of a wolf.

Guy stared. Gradually his strength was coming back. His head began to throb in thick bulging aches. The side which Von Erla had booted commenced to grow tender. He shook his head to clear it. He was sopping wet. A full bucket of water had been sloshed over him.

Von Erla crossed travel-grimed boots and relaxed easily against the back of his chair. "So we meet once more, Kitten," he said softly. "The fortunes of war and intrigue are sometimes just, are they not? Where once you held me prisoner, now I hold you. Only this time you shall embark upon a longer voyage than did I." He nodded pleasantly. "No return."

Guy bit his lip and glared. He did not say a word, waiting tensely.

"It was a mistake for you and your playful comrade to mix again in my affairs, d'Entreville," the baron continued. "But perchance it might interest you to know that all your work is for naught. Upon disposing of you and the Englishman, I personally shall proceed where my assistant failed."

"Assistant? Do you mean Gardier, or Cordoba?" Guy asked.

The baron's pale eyes narrowed. "It was clever of you to dispose of Gardier, my friend. But it was a mistake to murder La Cordoba."

Beside him Antone cursed, his beady eye fanatical with hate. "A bad mistake, *signor*," he whispered. "You will soon learn that when I start on you!"

LITTLE clusters of muscle bulged at the corners of the Frenchman's jaw. "Neither Cleve nor I slew Mademoiselle Cordoba!" he said.

The baron smiled with his lips, but his eyes grew harder. "Come now, d'Entreville, I am not a fool. I'll admit that when I received word of her death last night, I believed Henri de Casale to be guilty. But that belief vanished when Herr Antone here offered me a description of the men whom he believed to be Mazo Gardier and Anastasias Pooh. Then I knew the devils who had mangled my coup—Cleve and d'Entreville!"

Guy frowned. "You haven't just arrived in Montferrat?"

"No." The speaker shrugged. "Night is an excellent mask for one who is obliged to ride unrecognized through French territory. I reached this hovel in the gray of dawn after an all-night gallop from Turin." He laughed grimly. "In time to set the trap."

"*Pecaire!* You have not yet trapped Cleve!"

The baron sobered. He nodded thoughtfully, a frown creasing his narrow forehead. "Not yet," he admitted. "*Himmel!* Why has he not arrived?"

"*Sapristi!*" Antone exclaimed. "Perchance he has learned your full title and fears recognition."

Von Erla shook his head and stood up. "No. If that were the case, he would not have permitted this French pig to ride into this nest. The English rogue is cunning. There must be another reason."

He snapped his fingers. "But of course! Cleve realizes that I would know the real Gardier even if I were not Von Erla, so he sends d'Entreville, a supposed henchman of Gardier's to learn what he might. *Ja!* And I know what to do about it. We shall send a message in your name, Antone, stating that the baron has left and that d'Entreville has had an accident. *Ach!* That will fetch him to us quickly enough."

The speaker gestured to the men holding Guy. "Lock him in the cellar!" Then he turned to the Archer. "Patience in this game will prove a virtue. When Cleve appears to inquire as to d'Entreville—" He shrugged. "'Twill be easier to work upon two birds instead of one. After we have disposed of them, my friend, then I shall begin to

work upon Duke Vincent and his son in order that Margaret of Savoy—"

But Guy heard no more. His guards had jerked him through the chamber's door and out of earshot. "Parbleu! A nice pot of trouble I've brewed for myself," he muttered as they led him away.

CHAPTER XXVII

SOMEWHERE A SPY

LIKE the sudden turning of a string-peg on a lute, the scream from the depths of the Red Tassel jerked Richard Cleve's nerves to a vibrant tension. He crouched behind his screen of bushes, staring at the building. Nothing stirred.

The pall of silence had once more settled upon the place. He wondered vaguely whether he had actually heard that sharp, faintly indignant outcry, or whether fancy had played his ears a trick.

Then he shook his head, muttered: "Damm! I heard it true enough," and started forward.

He drew his rapier and used the blade to part bushes in his path, moving toward the stable with silent grace.

The interior of the inn's stable only increased his perplexity. Entering through a half-door cut in its side, he immediately discovered that instead of being deserted, it continued a full complement of horses. Every stall was occupied. He frowned and counted the mounts therein. There were twenty of them. A goodly number indeed for a tavern which outwardly appeared unpatronized.

His lips curved into a reckless smile. Something big was afoot and it was an odds-on wager that he'd meet trouble before finishing. With this consideration in mind, he stripped for action, divesting himself of his swirling cape; his sword scabbard and baldric, his spurs.

From his berth behind the last stall, he started down the central aisle, but quickly retreated. Framed in the portals of the stable-entrance was a man. A guard apparently, for he carried a heavy-stocked Spanish musket cradled in his arm. Cleve eyed him narrowly.

"Interesting," he murmured. "A tavern with an armed sentry." Then he started to steal forward. "Well m'lad, it remains for me to make your acquaintance—but without your making mine first."

He advanced, stall to stall, on silent cat-feet. The guard turned. With a start the Englishman slid out of sight. The horse into whose stall he darted stamped the turf restlessly and snorted. The man at the door continued to stare back into the stable.

Pressing breathless against the rough planking of his concealment, Cleve cursed the uneasy mount and waited. Then things became quiet again and the guard relaxed.

There was a broken wheel-spoke at the cavalier's feet, half-buried in the straw. He picked it up, felt the neat balance of it with a crooked smile. He loathed using steel upon an unsuspecting man. Yet wisdom told him that he was not engaging in an adventure which would permit the niceties of open warfare.

HE RESUMED his journey up the straw-padded center aisle. The guard did not turn again. He didn't receive the opportunity, for upon reaching him Cleve used the wheel-spoke with neatness and dispatch. There was a satisfying *thwack* and the guard dropped.

Ten minutes later, the Englishman swung lithely through an open casement on the second floor of the inn. His reasons for thus entering were obvious. All of the tavern's lower rear windows were shuttered; its kitchen door bolted. To risk forcing them would be to invite discovery. Therefore, Cleve had thrust his improvised

club into his sash and, gripping his rapier buccaneer-fashion between his teeth, had cautiously ascended the thick-stemmed ivy dressing the tavern's northern corner.

Blade held tense, he crossed to the room's single door and eased it open a crack. The tramp of feet rewarded the effort and he started to close the door again. He paused. The slitted view showed him a portion of a red-rugged corridor and doors along the opposite wall. Stepping into his line of vision appeared a pair of hard-faced gentlemen carrying bared blades aslant on their shoulders. Cleve paid them scant heed. His eye was focussed upon the two prisoners. A man and a woman.

His gauntleted fingers flexed on his hilt. His heart did a peculiar little squirm. The man was le Sieur de Maupin, his froth of lace askew at his throat, a trickle of blood seeping from a wound in his sword arm. The woman was Mary de Sarasnac!

Cleve shifted. The hard-faced gentlemen stopped before a door and opened it. The taller of the two ushered the captives inside and reappeared a moment later with a key in his hand. He locked the door and nodded to his companion.

"I'll stand the first guard, Leon. Return for my relief within the hour."

Leon left quietly and silence fell over the corridor again. From his concealment Cleve measured the possibilities of jumping the remaining guard unexpectedly, but saw immediately that they were dismally slim. Ten paces separated him from the man. He'd not get two steps without being seen. Then suddenly he grinned and loosened the wheel-spoke in his sash.

Directly opposite his position beside the door stood a small corner table, a squat glass vase atop it. Shifting the rapier to his left hand, Cleve tapped the vase lightly with its tip. A melodious little chime rang through the stillness.

OUTSIDE, the guard frowned curiously, so Cleve tapped the vase once more. This time, the lilting ring definitely interested the fellow. He left his post in front of Mary's door and approached. He was more curious than suspicious. Again the Englishman's blade struck the bowl.

Slowly the door opened. Cleve shrank against the wall and slid free his improvised baton. The guard's hatted head poked into the room.

"Won't you step into my parlor, lad?" Cleve asked and whipped the spoke in a sharp descending arc against the base of the fellow's scull. He caught the body in the crook of his left arm as it slumped forward.

Cords from the window drapes made admirable bonds, a discarded kerchief served as a gag. Upon completing the trussing of his victim, Cleve quickly located the key, flipped it cheerfully in his palm; and with a wave to the senseless man he quit the room.

It didn't take him long to break into Mary's improvised cell. A twist of the key and he was stepping smilingly into her presence. Her back was to him. Le Sieur de Maupin was sitting in a chair, suffering her administration to his wounded arm. The little fop's face was grey with pain. He was first to see Cleve and his mouth gaped in an astounded O.

The girl leaped up. The crude bandage she had been trying to apply to de Maupin's wound spiraled from her fingers.

"M. Cleve! What are you doing here?"

The English cavalier grinned cheerfully. "I could ask the same question of you, *mademoiselle*," he said, "In fact, I shall ask it. What are you and our diminutive friend doing at the Red Tassel?"

De Maupin answered for her. His brilliant purple doublet had been torn at the shoulder so that Mary could attend the wound. It was a clean wound, not dangerous.

"*Ma foi!*" he chirped. "As you see, *monsieur*, we are being held against our wishes—that is what we are doing in this cursed place!"

THEY both ignored him. Mary looked at the Englishman's naked blade and the hope which had first gleamed in her dark eyes faded away.

"You are alone, *monsieur*. The furtive manner in which you have come to us, the rapier which you hold so tensely tells me that—"

"Faith!" he interrupted. "You underrate me, Mary." He cocked an eyebrow and chuckled. "You are address-

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did — Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 909, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939. Frank B. Robinson.

ing Lord Cleve, your dashing rescuer; the hero of more tavern-brawls than you can shake a finger at; the knight who cares not for odds if only to serve your beauty." He nodded. "And you are most beautiful, you know." Then he bit his lower lip uncertainly. "Incidentally, how many rogues are there?"

"Nearly thirty," she replied.

"And a murderer," added de Maupin from his chair. "Remember, *mademoiselle*, it was after a murderer that we came to this miserable tavern."

Cleve eyed him sharply; and then turned to her. "What is he babbling about?"

Mary's face quickly tightened then. "Monsieur le Sieur de Maupin speaks of *Monsieur le docteur's* assassin," she said. "The brute whom I witnessed leaving the physician's chambers at the palace."

"I remember you spoke of him." Cleve nodded. "A large fellow with apelike arms. Is he in this place?"

"*Oui*. While M. de Maupin and I were engaged in our morning canter along the river bank early in the day, we chanced upon this churl. He was watering his mount, but when I called for him to stay, he bolted into his saddle and raced away.

"Knowing that the duke wanted to interrogate him, I urged Monsieur de Maupin to accompany me in a pursuit. We trailed the fugitive to this tavern, *monsieur*, and I foolishly insisted upon entering it."

"**M**AIS NON," protested de Maupin from the corner. "I very foolishly agreed. I knew that we should have sent for the soldiery! *Sacre nom*, Monsieur Cleve!

We entered into a company of cutthroats and villains who laughed at *mademoiselle* when she requested their assistance to arrest the assassin. Nor would they permit us to leave. One of the ruffians laughingly seized *mademoiselle*, saying that she was a pretty wench and foully pawed her. Being a chevalier of France, *monsieur*, and her protector, I drew my blade."

Cleve stared at the wound in the speaker's arm and nodded. "And he drew his blade, eh?"

Mary bit her lip. "I screamed; and then a large fat man entered the grog-room. 'Twas his servant, Beppo, who murdered *Monsieur le docteur*. He admitted as much before sending us under guard to this room." She shook her head puzzledly. "What does it all mean, *monsieur*?"

Cleve flicked the tip of his rapier thoughtfully. "It means, my sweet, that your willfulness has dropped you willy-nilly into the center of a major conspiracy against your God-father, Duke Vincent, and France. The reason that I am at this tavern is because I suspected it as a meeting place for the plotters. From what you have told me, I was apparently right. That fat man you saw was undoubtedly Juan Castro, a Spanish agent."

Outside a hoarse shout of alarm stopped his words. Cleve stepped quickly to the window. He noted absently as he peered through it that it was barred with thick iron rods. Then he whirled. Three men had dashed past on the ground below. They were headed toward the stable.

"Quitting this place is the wisest advice in the world right now," he said. "If I am not mistaken, they have just discovered the bucko I left slumbering in the manger. Come on!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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15c

It began to rain little furry animals, and I managed to get hold of a couple of 'em



Bunny Rabbits

Take three hundred and fourteen rabbits, one mayor, one maniac truck-driver, and assorted school children; mix together and shake furiously; and you've got a million-dollar publicity scheme—or maybe chaos

By Don Tracy

Author of "I Got No Sword"

"BOSS," I said to McGuirk. "I got a swell idea." He looked at me the way he always does; as if he was noticing for the first time that I've got three eyes or something.

"I," he told me, "also got an idea, but it ain't so swell. It's got something to do with circulation falling off and whether the employment boom is big enough to take care of both of us."

McGuirk is circulation manager of the *Courier* and a tough baby. He came from some place out on the West Coast. I never found out exactly where it was, but out there they must believe that to murder somebody ain't nice and arson's naughty but to lose newspaper circulation is a dastardly crime.

I've worked on circulation since I was a truck helper and the headlines talked about President Taft but I never saw a guy who loved circulation figures like McGuirk. If they go up, he's happy. If they go down, he's happier because then he can chew his cigar and throw the hooks into everybody in the department, down to the bundlers.

"This idea," I told McGuirk, "is going to fix everything up. If we work it right, we'll have every street punk and home-delivery kid eating maybe fifty papers apiece of his own accord, just because he likes us."

Maybe newspaper circulation lingo don't make sense unless you've been around the places where they scheme and fight and suffer, trying to get those daily paid figures

a little while. For instance, to eat a paper is to do something with it except sell it to a reader. In the old days we could give a punk maybe ten papers and tell him to eat them—throw them in the river, bale them for old paper, cut them up for paper dolls—anything he wanted to do with them, but eat them. It used to work all right until the wise guys over on the *Star* got to feeding the punks too rich a diet and the kids squawked. The ABC—Audit Bureau of Circulation—walked in and we held tight to our chairs during the hurricane.

That's why McGuirk winced when I mentioned the kids eating papers because they liked the *Courier*.

"This idea," I repeated, firmly, "is fool-proof."

"Mmph," grunted McGuirk. "With the editorial side getting beat from an hour to three days on every decent story, maybe you're figuring on wrapping up a ten-buck bill with every paper we shove."

I laughed, because McGuirk seemed to expect it.

"Listen," I asked him, "while I tell you my new circulation promotion idea that I thought up last night."

He lit the frazzled butt of the cigar he always wears in his big face and flared at me.

"Maybe," he said, and his voice got tip-toe, "you're thinking about importing another cowboy movie star for a Saturday morning party for the punks."

It was my turn to wince.

"That ain't exactly fair," I said, dignified. "Was it me that took that guy out on a party the night before our newsboys' affair and fed him something that must've been twelve-year-old laudanum? Was it me that poured him out on the stage of the Bijou Theater in a full dress suit, walking on his ankles? Was it me that made him think he was back in old-time burleycue, singing them songs?"

McGuirk twisted the cigar around in his face.

"I wouldn't know," he said, coolly. "All I know is that every punk's mother thought it was me that done it all and wanted to throw me in the goose."

"This," I told McGuirk, "hasn't got anything to do with cowboys. It's about Easter."

McGuirk looked sort of sad.

"Easter," he said, heavily. "I remember last Easter. Them chocolate eggs with cream, nut and fruit centers we gave to the punks that got their quota increases. I remember."

I didn't say anything. What was the use?

"And every punk we got, practically, gobbled chocolate eggs with cream, nut and fruit centers until there is an epidemic like the black plague. And we got no carriers or street punks and I, personally, had to hustle the bulldog edition at State House Square."

"No chocolate eggs," I said. "This is better."

"What is it," asked McGuirk, giving the frazzled cigar a double-roll and a cut-back, "this time?"

"Bunny rabbits," I said.

HIS mouth opened and the cigar landed on the desk with a wet plop. "What did you say?" McGuirk asked, curiously.

"Bunny rabbits," I told him, again.

He looked at me for a second and then he got up and walked over to the water cooler. He might have been muttering to himself, it was hard to say. He finished his drink, crumpled the paper cup in his big fist and then turned back to me.

"Once more," he told me.

"I said bunny rabbits," I told McGuirk for the third time. "You know. Them white fuzzy things that go hippety-hop, hippety-hop, hippety—"

"Stop!" McGuirk screamed.

He came back across the office and dropped into his old, lopsided chair. He looked as downright tired as though he'd been handling election extras for a week with plenty of truck breakdowns.

"Go ahead," he told me. "Let's hear the worst."

I took the chair opposite him and gave him the talk I'd thought up the night before.

"Look, boss," I said. "Kids are nuts about bunny rabbits. They raise them in back yards and places and then they sell them for something, the fur, I think. Anyway, we're always slinging the stuff about our punks being little merchants and things like that. Now, get the tie-in."

"We give bunny rabbits to the punks that make the best showing for, say, the month before Easter. We give the winners a pair of bunny rabbits each. The promotion department can shoot the works about how we're helpin' these punks get started in another business besides hustling papers. While they're our little merchants during the day, them rabbits are back home, running up the count. So pretty soon the punk has a coop full of rabbits which he sells to buy more rabbits and before you know it they're coining dough, hand over fist, and all because the *Courier* gave them their start."

"Uh-huh," said McGuirk, "and I suppose they're going to keep on hustling papers when they got this rabbit mine at home?"

I waved a careless hand.

"Don't be silly," I said. "You know them punks as well as I do. They'll get all hepped up about being rabbit farmers and they get their bunny rabbits and they feed them maybe a week and then they get hepped up about something else. So the punk's old man or his mother has to take care of the bunny rabbits and they get sick of that, pretty quick, so then it's kitty-bar-the-door with the bunny rabbits and—"

"Look," McGuirk interrupted. "Maybe your idea has got something to it and maybe it ain't. But call these things something besides bunny rabbits. It sounds like you were going to bust into a Maypole dance any minute."

JUST then the bell rang for the press run of the Final Stocks and we got busy. For the next day or so, I didn't hear anything from McGuirk about my bunny-rabbit scheme, pro or con, but I knew better than ask him about it.

It was the next day that Tony One-eye, one of the maniacs that drive our trucks, argued with a fire engine and there was quite a splatter of red paint and busted ladders and firemen and seven star finals when it was over. Me, I can take those things in my stride, but McGuirk is more sensitive than me. He worries about things like that and it was no time to be asking him about bunny rabbits.

Then, when I'd about thought he'd forgotten my idea, he called me into his office.

"Them rabbits," he said, "might not be as dizzy as most of the ideas you get. Anyway, promotion is after me for something to beat the show the *Star's* giving their punks, with that big-shot flyer. So I told them about the rabbits and they thought it was all right."

"I hope," I reminded the boss, "that you gave me credit for thinking up the idea."

McGuirk leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling.

"There was a guy I remember," he said, dreamily, "that shipped off sixty-three bundles of Sundays, way upstate, and forgot to stuff the comics and the sports in them. I remember he was in a little jam, but his boss took credit for it, instead."

"All right," I told McGuirk. "So the bunny rabbit idea is yours."

McGuirk righted himself in a hurry. "Will you stop calling them bunny rabbits?" he asked me, through his teeth.

"What's wrong with—" I began, but he cut me off.

"Never mind," he said. "Now, listen. We're going to do this right or we ain't going to do it at all. First, where do we get the rabbits?"

"I know a place," I said.

McGuirk looked at me for a second. Then he scratched a match and held it halfway up to the frazzled cigar butt.

"What's your brother-in-law doing these days?" he asked me, casually.

That's McGuirk for you. He don't trust anybody, not even me, and I've been his assistant ever since the Coste and Bellonte flight—and that was a good many years ago. I didn't even answer him, I was so burned up.

"I asked you what that brother-in-law of yours was doing," McGuirk said. "He couldn't be running a rabbit mine, could he?"

"Look," I said. "What difference does it make where we get the bun—the rabbits? We want the best price we can get, don't we, and if we get the best price from a guy that happens to be related to me by marriage, what's that got to do with it?"

McGuirk waved out the match without touching the cigar. He sighed.

"Last year," he said, "he was in the candy business, especially chocolate eggs with cream, nut and fruit centers. Before that—oh, well. They already okayed the idea in promotion and I guess we got to go through with it."

He scowled. "But if that patsy ruins everything—"

He left the words hanging. It's funny that even though he'd never met Ronald—that's my wife Aggie's brother—he hated him worse than he did a truck driver.

"Okay," he said, after awhile. "And what ideas you got on how we're going to hand out these rabbits? Promotion says we've got to make a splash and you know them

deserted-brains up there. They couldn't think up anything if they had the king of England to promote. We got to do all the work, as usual."

I started to say that "we" meant "me", but I kept my mouth shut. I didn't want this bunny-rabbit idea to get thrown in the can which it would have been if McGuirk got really sore. If we put over this idea, my brother-in-law, Ronald, figured to make a few bucks and maybe I could squeeze a cut out of him if I trained for the battle real hard.

"I got it all figured out," I told the boss. "I figured them guys in promotion would kiss the job off on us, so I doped it out."

"Give," said McGuirk.

SO I TOLD him about how I'd figured it would make a splash for the mayor to hand out the rabbits to the kids. The mayor was Old Man Deeever and he'd been in the city hall so long they must have built the place around him, but he still hadn't been in so long that he wouldn't trample three little boys and their baby sister to get in front of a camera.

"Him!" said McGuirk, real scornful. "He looks like a bunny rabbit himself!"

He stopped like he'd bit his tongue and then glared at me worse than usual. "You got me saying it now," he complained. "I'm like to get as wacky as you if I stick around this stuff long. From now on, you handle it and keep away from me unless you want to ask me something about getting a paper out on the streets. I'm leaving it all up to you."

He got up and started to walk away. Then he turned and looked at me. "And it better be all right," he said. "It just better be all right."

"Leave it to me, boss," I told him. "This is fool-proof."

The first thing I did was pick up the telephone, after McGuirk left, and call the city editor, a guy named Williams.

"Mr. Williams," I asked him, "who do I get in touch with at city hall when I want to get the mayor to do something?"

"Why, you ask for—" he began, and then he stopped. His voice changed. "Who is this?"

"This is Moog, in Circulation," I said. "You see, we've got a new circulation promotion idea and—"

"No!" yelled Williams. "Listen. The mayor's a sick man, Moog! He's got doctor's orders to take everything easy. He can't go for any da—any circulation promotion stunt. It would kill him. He's got a bad heart. He's got high blood pressure. Remember what happened to the president of the city council last time."

"That was a mistake," I said.

"You can't call the mayor," said Williams. "Listen, Moog, please don't call the mayor!"

"Okay," I said, dignified. "You don't have to holler at me."

I hung up. I waited a few minutes and then I got on the phone again. I called the mayor's office in the city hall and I asked for Deeever.

"Who's calling," somebody wanted to know.

"Williams, city editor of the *Courier*," I said.

I got Old Man Deeever in the time it takes to leap for a telephone. "Yes, Mr. Williams," he said, sounding eager. "What can I do for you?"

"Your Honor," I told him, "we're having a party for our street punks and home carriers and we want you to hand out bunny rabbits. Good stunt. Plenty of pictures."

I could hear him groan.

"I—I don't know whether I could possibly make it or not," he said. "If I can't, I'll send somebody in my stead.

The police commissioner, for instance."

"Nothing doing," I told the mayor. "Not that guy. He never got over his flatfoot days when he made his record shacking newsboys. We don't want that bullhead."

"Well, really, Mr. Williams," the mayor said. "I don't think you have reason to speak of the commissioner in that manner."

He sounded a little sore. I knew I wasn't putting it over so I decided I'd have to get tough with the mayor, like a big-shot would.

"Listen, Deeever," I said, making my voice growl, "I don't want no run-around from you. Either you hand out bunny rabbits to our punks or you'll have the *Courier* on your neck so hard you won't be able to swallow a string of spaghetti. Now, what is it, yes or no?"

There was plenty of spluttering but I got a yes in the end. I banged up the phone, after I told him I'd let him know the details later. I wished McGuirk could have heard me giving Deeever what I gave him—maybe the boss wouldn't be so tough on me after that.

SO THEN I got busy lining everything up. I figured the mayor's office would be the best place to hand out the bunny rabbits and I fixed the time for the Saturday before Easter, in the morning before the bulldog rolled. I figured out the punks' quotas and I made them plenty easy on account of the more kids that won rabbits, the more Ronald would sell and the easier it would be to strangle a cut out of him.

I fixed everything up and we managed to get some space from editorial, about how the little merchants were going to get embarked on a new business career and everything. The way they wrote it, it sounded like those kids were going to have to ride a horse to get around their rabbit farm, after a couple of years.

"How are you coming?" McGuirk asked me, on the Good Friday before we were going to hand out the bunny rabbits.

"I got everything fixed," I told him. "The punks are murdering them quotas, the mayor's all set to give away the—the rabbits and Ronald's all ready to give us the bun—rabbits in the morning. The kids went for that rabbit idea just like I said they would."

I threw over the day's figures and there was an increase all along the line. McGuirk almost smiled, so help me.

"I suppose the quotas are plenty high," he said. "We don't want to be giving rabbits to every punk that sells his family and the people next door a week's subscription."

"Plenty high," I said. "We got those kiddies playing hookey to go out and hustle the *Courier*. I wouldn't be surprised the *Star* and the *Globe* go out of business by the time our punks get through copping all their customers so's they'll win a pair of them rabbits."

McGuirk patted me on the shoulder. "You're getting good," he said. "You been talking about this thing for five minutes and you ain't once said bunny rabbits. Now, what time does the mayor start handing them out?"

"Ten fifteen," I said. "Sharp."

"Okay," He said. "I can make that okay. All you'll have to do is get the rabbits there at the city hall and the mayor and I will do the rest. You can come back here and get some work out to make up for all the time you been wasting on this dizzy idea."

I started to say something, but I swallowed, instead. I might have known McGuirk would walk in to take the bows after I did all the work. The punks would think he was the one being Santa Claus. If they ever heard of Moog, it was only when they got bawled out for something.

"Look," I said. "I'll need a truck to get them rabbits. Ronald, he had a truck but it broke down or something, so he told me we'd have to haul them."

"Take Tony One-eye," McGuirk told me. "And see if

you can find out how he can rip the transmission out of a new truck while he's standing still."

"Aw, boss," I said. "Give me somebody besides Tony One-eye. You know how he drives. Taking corners the way he does is like to hurt some of them bunny—"

I stopped when he started toward me. I went outside and told Tony One-eye that he was going to drive me out to Ronald's rabbit farm early the next morning.

"And you're going to drive slow," I told him.

"Sure. Sure," he said. I didn't like the way he said it. I remembered that Tony One-eye never liked me much since the time I let him stay in the can overnight instead of bailing him out on a reckless-driving charge that happened out in the suburbs. And that was McGuirk's fault, too, because he had told me to let the maniac stay in jail. But, like everything, it was Moog who pulled the dirty tricks.

NEXT morning we drove out to Ronald's farm. It was further than I'd thought, but I'd told my brother-in-law over the phone how many bunny rabbits I wanted—three hundred and fourteen—and he said he'd have them ready for us, so we had plenty of time to get back to the city hall by ten fifteen.

When we got there, I like to died. That dope, Ronald, hadn't crated them bunny rabbits or anything. There they were, the whole three hundred and fourteen of them, hopping around in a big coop. Three hundred and fourteen rabbits is a lot of bunny rabbits when they're hopping around like that.

"This is fine," I told Ronald. "This is swell. How we going to get them into the truck? You think we're going to pick up each bunny rabbit and put it in the truck?"

"I don't know no other way," said Ronald.

I couldn't dope any other way, either, so we started heaving bunny rabbits into the truck, only it turns out that Tony One-eye is scared to pick one up. He claimed that somebody he knew lost an arm once on account of rabbit fever and he wouldn't take any chances.

I argued with him and cussed him out but he was a bull head. So, by the time Ronald and me loaded them bunny rabbits into the truck, it was close to ten-fifteen already and we were out in the country. I could see McGuirk, all dressed up in his best clothes, waiting for us to arrive with them rabbits so he could begin big-shooting.

"High-ball," I told Tony One-eye. "We're late."

I should have known better, I admit. Tony One-eye was maniac enough without anybody telling him to high-ball and when he got a word like that, he was something that a test pilot wouldn't believe was true. We went away from Ronald's farm and we went down the road. Leastwise, we were on the road part of the time. The rest of the time we were up in the air, jumping from bump to bump. Like a bunny rabbit.

I yelled at him to slow down but it didn't do any good. We hit the outskirts of the city and we went through traffic like a snake gone nuts. We went through red lights and we went through stop streets. We went over a little park, with benches flying this way and that, because Tony One-eye saw a traffic jam ahead and decided to take a short cut.

After a while, I shut my eyes. They were still shut when we hit.

LATER, Tony One-eye said the lady signaled for a left turn and then cut right, from the middle of the street. I wouldn't know about that. All I know is that we side-swiped the lady's car, jumped the curb and smacked into a big signboard that had concrete pillars.

It was lucky for me that the window beside me was down when we hit. I went right through it and landed on some soft mud. I slid a ways and then lay still, waiting for the

harps to begin tuning up. There weren't any harps. Instead, there were bunny rabbits.

It began to rain bunny rabbits. That truck had split up the middle like somebody had pulled a zipper and them rabbits had come out through the crack in the ceiling of the truck and scattered like a load of bird shot. You throw three hundred and fourteen bunny rabbits up into the air and you got something.

Nearly everyone of them rabbits hit the ground running and kept on running. There were a couple, of course, that didn't land right and they stayed where they were, but they weren't going to be any good for the mayor to hand over to the punks for Easter. The good ones kept moving. They were scared they were going to be put back in that truck, I guess, and have to go through some more of Tony One-eye's driving. Anyway, every bunny rabbit in the load that had landed right started to get out of there.

I made a jump and managed to get one, but I dropped him when I made a grab for another. There was a terrible racket going around us. Auto brakes were screeching as guys tried to keep from hitting rabbits. The lady we had hit was having hysterics. Somebody was blowing a police whistle and there were some guys yelling while they tried to catch some bunny rabbits.

Then Tony One-eye climbed out of the cab, just as one guy grabbed three or four rabbits.

"Don't touch them!" yelled Tony One-eye. "You'll get rabbit fever!"

That was the end of that. The people who had caught a couple of rabbits dropped them like they were red hot and the bunny rabbits started where they'd left off. I watched them go out of sight and I thought about McGuirk and the mayor and those punks waiting at the city hall.

I ducked around a corner and I hailed a cab that was stopped in the middle of the street while the driver watched bunny rabbits gallop past. I climbed into the cab.

"You know any pet stores?" I asked the hacker. "Any big pet stores?"

"I know a couple," he said.

"Look," I told him. "I'm in a jam. I'm supposed to deliver three hundred and fourteen bunny rabbits at the city hall in the next couple of minutes. There goes one of them now. I got to get some more. Where can I get three hundred and fourteen bunny rabbits?"

"Nowhere," said the cabbie, like he knew what he was talking about.

All of a sudden, I was awful tired. I leaned back on the cushions and closed my eyes.

"I'll give them three hundred and fourteen Easter eggs," I said, talking goofy. "I'll give them three hundred and fourteen movie cowboys."

"Look," said the cabbie. "My kid hustles *Couriers* and he told me about them rabbits."

I waved my hand. "Tell your kid you saw them going down East Boulevard," I told the hacker. "Tell him to come back next Easter."

The hacker didn't say anything for awhile. Then he got an idea. "How about baby chicks?" he asked me. "They're Easter and kids like them. You ought to be able to get three hundred and fourteen baby chicks."

It was like getting a big slug of lick. I opened my eyes and sat up. "Get going," I told the cab driver. "The poultry market."

THAT hacker was almost as fast as Tony One-eye, but he wasn't too fast for me. We went into the poultry market like a tank and we managed to stop in front of the biggest joint in the market. I jumped out and collared the first guy I saw.

He was dumb, that guy. It took him at least a minute to find out I wanted three hundred and fourteen baby chicks

and it took him another minute to tell me there wasn't a baby chick in the joint.

"We can't sell them," he told me. "They passed an ordinance against selling them. Said it was cruel."

That was that guy Deever, for you. Always working behind your back, passing ordinances against baby chicks which might have saved my life.

"What you got," I asked the guy, "that's like baby chicks. What you got three hundred and fourteen of?"

He waved his hand at his big store.

"Ducks, chickens, guineas, turkeys—" he began.

"Gimme them!" I yelled, and I don't care who says I was nuts. "Give me three hundred and fourteen of them. I don't care what they are!"

So that was why there was nearly a riot in front of the city hall on the Saturday before Easter. Them dumb cops in city hall square tried to keep us from getting them crates up into the mayor's office where McGuirk and the mayor and the punks were waiting.

There was the hacker and me and the poultry guy and

four or five helpers he'd picked up around the market and a *Courier* truck driver I happened to see passing by and flagged. That was our gang and on the other side were about a dozen cops. It was quite a tangle while it lasted, but we made it. We all busted into the mayor's office at the same time, with the chickens screeching and the ducks quacking and the guinea hens sounding off like a cross-cut saw going through a spike.

I still maintain that if they'd let me explain, I could have straightened everything out. But with McGuirk yelling and the mayor hollering for the police commissioner and the livestock making all that racket and the punks yapping for bunny rabbits and nothing but bunny rabbits, I didn't have a chance to explain. I still haven't.

Sure, I got fired but McGuirk's fired me before this. He'll take me back after things cool off. I think, personally, he's all over being sore already. Anyway, he sent me an Easter present, all wrapped up in white paper, with purple ribbon.

And my kid, Eulalie, is nuts about that bunny rabbit.

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OCTOBER ISSUE OF

DOUBLE DETECTIVE

ON SALE AUGUST 13TH



Town Marshal

By Walt Coburn

From a brush clump a carbine cracked twice. Jeff Kettle's horse went down with him, as a bullet tore Jeff's shoulder

JEFF KETTLE, Texas outlaw, knows it was a frame-up that broke him out of the Sacatone jail with a pardon from Arizona's territorial governor. He'd been scheduled to hang as a horse thief—for swapping mounts with a sheep man he'd killed in a cattle war some time previously.

Then suddenly came the pardon—on condition that he'd become town marshal of Hackberry and take over the Double Link outfit belonging to the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company.

The job is almost worse than the hanging. The last two marshals have been bushwhacked; and Kettle's first job on taking over is to kill three men who try to bushwhack him as well. **PORKY MACMAHON**, the local saloon-keeper, makes a second attempt to get him, and is rewarded with a face-full of bird shot from Kettle's carbine.

But the man back of the trouble in Hackberry is **CABEZON CARTER**, ramrod of the Double Link; and it is after Carter that Kettle rides with a chosen gang of outlaw gunslingers. Siding him is **PETE (Cotton Top) COTTON**, whose older brother Sam was one of the bushwhacked marshals.

Arriving at the Double Link headquarters while Carter is out on roundup, Kettle is worried. For one thing, young **GENE (Curly) DENIFF**—a likeable cowpuncher when sober, a trouble-maker when drunk—has broken out of jail. In itself this isn't serious; but it means that somebody else besides the marshal has a key to that lockup; and the question is—who?

Another thing: Cotton Top hasn't returned from the Deniff spread, after riding there to see Gene's sister Lou. And he should have come back by this time. Kettle is worried about him and about Lou as well. She's only a kid; she's scornful of him because she believes

him to be a bushwhacker; but he can't get her out of his mind.

It's the woman **LOLITA**, though, who has dealt out the poker hands for this game: a pair of deuces for Jeff Kettle, a full house for Cabezon—and four aces for herself. Or so she says, bitter because Kettle refuses to throw in with her.

Kettle has good reason for staying clear. There'd been a night when he'd found her in El Paso, dancing with Cabezon. He'd told them to get a Mexican license and marry—and promised that they would get to hate each other:

"I got her weddin' ring here in my pocket, Cabezon. Now let's take a little pasear back across the Line to Juarez. Try to back up on this deal and I will kill you both." . . .

CHAPTER VI

MAVERICK TRAIL

JEFF KETTLE and Lolita had planned to be married the next week. It was the wedding ring he had bought her that he gave to Cabezon to put on her finger that night in Juarez. And that was the last he had seen of either of them until he had walked into that town marshal's office at Hackberry and found Lolita sitting there in the lamp-light playing solitaire. She no longer wore her wedding ring. He remembered now.

Nobody but Jeff Kettle, Cabezon Carter and Lolita knew

This two-part serial began in last week's Argosy

of that marriage in Juarez, Mexico five years ago. They had both disappeared.

Now Cabezon Carter was ramrodding the Double Link outfit and stealing the bulk of every year's calf crop. And Lolita was running a gambling place and honkeytonk she called the Five Mile House. She had dealt Jeff Kettle a pair of dirty deuces. Dealt Cabezon a full house. But Lolita was still playing aces—with the joker to fill out her hand.

"Is that Five Mile House on the Double Link range?" Jeff Kettle had asked Cotton Top.

"Yeah. Why?"

"I was just askin' to make talk. Just drop it, Cotton."

When he had taken over the Double Link and taken proper care of Cabezon, Jeff Kettle would pay Lolita a visit at her Five Mile House. His orders were to clean up the Double Link range. He carried that thought along with him tonight.

But he couldn't keep his mind on it. The memory of a girl with black curly hair and eyes the color of black smoke and a short freckled nose kept intruding.

Jeff Kettle was not yet thirty. Hard, tough, bitter years made him look and act more like forty. And Lou Deniff was in her early twenties: just a kid. A tomboy kid. And she hated him and hated everything he stood for.

They made camp in Manzanita Canyon. The remuda was thrown up into the head of the high-walled box canyon. Jeff Kettle was posting the first two men on guard when a rider loomed up in the moonlight. It was Cotton Top.

Cotton Top's horse was leg-weary and covered with dried sweat. Blood had dried and crusted on his lean face from a bullet rip below his cheekbone. The rest of his face was bone white and there was a stark, haunted look in his blue eyes.

"I killed Gene Deniff!" Cotton's voice was hardly more than a croaking whisper. "There was two of 'em tried to bushwhack me between the Deniff place and the Five Mile House. I shot one of 'em. The other 'un got away. Gawdamighty help me, Kettle, it was Gene that I shot and killed. Lou's twin brother. My best friend. Gene and me was pardners."

Jeff found a bottle and made Cotton take a couple of stiff drinks.

"I told you to ride clear of the Five Mile House," he said bluntly.

"I know. But when I got to the Deniff ranch I found Lou a-cryin'. She said that Gene had showed up and they'd had a hell of a row. And he had a bottle. He told her he was sellin' the outfit to Lolita. He'd give Lou her half of the money. He told her he was goin' to marry Lolita.

"I told Lou I'd ride back to the Five Mile House, git Gene and fetch him home if I had to whip him and tie him on his horse. I was within a quarter of a mile of the place when I got bushwhacked. It was Gene I killed. I didn't have the guts to go back to Lou. I headed into the hills.

"I had a quart I taken back at Porky's place. Hadn't broke the seal and didn't aim to. But after I seen it was Gene I'd shot I hit for the hills. I pulled the cork and drank till I passed out. I killed that whole quart, hopin' I'd wake up in Hell from whiskey poison.

"It was dark when I come alive but I wasn't in Hell like I'd hoped. I trailed you fellers here. I ain't got the guts to shoot myself. I ain't got guts enough to face Lou. And right now she's plumb alone. She needs somebody. Gene sold her out. Gawdamighty, man, I wish I was dead!"

DRY sobs racked the young cowpuncher's slim frame. It made Jeff Kettle sort of sick inside. Cotton Top was no weakling and that made it worse. Or was he a weakling? He talked and acted like it right now. And

he had called himself a coward because he lacked the courage to take up a fight for his dead brother.

But Cotton Top didn't have the eyes of a coward. There were plenty of brave men in the world who weren't gun fighters and tough hands. And who was Jeff Kettle to judge any other man?

"You ain't the only man, Cotton, that's wanted to kill hisself and didn't have the nerve to swallow the barrel of his six-shooter and pull the trigger. Go easy on that bottle. Go on horse guard with the boys and stay on guard till I git back. I'll ride on back to the Deniff place and see how the little Lou lady is gittin' along. Git shut of that notion about killin' yourself. Things will work out; they always do."

"Lou would rather see me dead. Her and Gene was twins. She just about worshipped him, for all his faults and no-good ways. She should have been the boy and Gene should have been the girl. She'll hate me. She won't never want to look at me again. You don't know her like I do."

"Quit that snivelin'. If you got any guts, use 'em to git a tail-holt on yourself. Quit actin' like a bald-faced kid."

Jeff Kettle cursed Cotton into a white-lipped fury and left him. He turned the outfit over to a short stockily built man called Stub; then he headed for the Deniff ranch, cussing the luck in general and all women; not daring to admit to himself that he was secretly glad of this chance to see Lou Deniff again.

He swung wide of the Double Link ranch and reached the Deniff place a little after midnight. He saw a light burning at the house. As he rode up out of the night a gun cracked and a steel-nosed bullet whined past his head. He jumped his horse in behind an adobe leanto shed and quit his saddle with a quick, smooth movement, his carbine in his hand.

"Who the hell's shootin'?" he barked. "And who the hell you think you're tryin' to kill?"

"You killed my brother and I'm killing you, you hired murderer! I won't miss the next time, Jeff Kettle!"

"Somebody's been lyin' to you, Lou. I never saw your brother after we locked him up. I got my faults but I'm not a liar. I'm here to help you. I didn't shoot your brother."

Jeff Kettle walked out from behind the shed, leading his horse. He heard the girl give a little sob. Then he found her in a crumpled heap behind a row of cordwood mesquite. He picked her limp form up in his arms and carried her into the house.

There was a pine board coffin in the front room, partly covered with a blanket. He carried her into her bedroom beyond and laid her on her bed.

When he got back from the kitchen with a dipper full of water he found her sitting on the edge of the bed. Her face was pale and drawn and tear-stained, her dark hair hanging in a thick mane that came to her waist. The freckles across her nose and cheekbones stood out like lumps. Her dark eyes were red-rimmed, glazed with grief. She looked small and bewildered and helpless and alone.

"While I make some coffee and cook you some hot grub, you wash up, Lou. Who fetched Gene home?"

"A Mexican from the Five Mile House. In a buckboard. In that pine board box. There was a note. It said that you and your outlaws and Cotton Top killed Gene. Cotton—he hired out to you. He and Gene had had a fight the other night. It was Cotton that gave him that black eye and—"

Jeff Kettle found one of Gene Deniff's bottles and made the girl take a drink of raw whiskey. She choked and sputtered but got the stuff down and in a little while some of the color came back into her white cheeks.

"What you need," he told her, "is a hot bait of grub and coffee. Then you'll have sense enough to figger out that Cabezon Carter is the man to go gunnin' for. Where's that note the Mexican fetched?"

Lou pulled the crumpled paper from the pocket of her faded overalls. Jeff Kettle smoothed it out, scowled at the handwriting, sniffed the sheet of heavy note paper. It smelled of gardenia perfume. Lolita used gardenia perfume.

HE READ the postscript to the unsigned note. "Gene Deniff sold your Lazy D outfit to the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company. The money is waiting for you at the Five Mile House. Cash."

He shoved the note into his chaps pocket and went into the kitchen.

"Cold water," he called back over his shoulder to her, "will make your face feel better."

As he made a fire in the stove and started the coffee and supper, Jeff Kettle told himself that he had ridden into one hell of a mess.

Women always meant trouble. He had this orphaned girl on his hands now. What would he do with her? She couldn't stay here alone. The town of Hackberry was no place for her. Lolita had her pretty claws sharpened and she knew how to claw. Lolita and Cabezon were stealing this Deniff outfit.

Cotton Top had killed her drunken, no-good brother and the towheaded young cowpuncher would tell her so sooner or later. That would rob her of her only real friend.

"But it still beats hangin'," he said aloud. And when he heard a little noise behind him he turned to find Lou Deniff staring at him, her eyes dry, black coals in white ashes.

She had washed her face and done her hair in two heavy braids. Around her slim waist was a filled cartridge belt and a pearl-handled .38 pistol in a fancy carved holster.

"I paid that Mexican to dig a grave next to where my mother and father are buried. You'll help me bury Gene?" Lou Deniff's voice was low-toned, quiet. But there was a queer look in her eyes. It puzzled him.

"After you're had supper. Yeah. You're braver than a lot of men I've knowed that bragged how tough they was. You'll do to take along, Lou."

"That's what I was going to ask you. I'll make a hand. I won't be in your way. Your outfit needs a cook and horse wrangler. Cotton told me you were short-handed. You've got to take me along. I've got my own string of horses. I'll throw the Lazy D cavvy in with your remuda. I'll make a hand.

"You'll take me? You have to take me! I have no other place to go. You just said I'd do to take along."

"I wasn't meanin' it thataway. But I reckon that's it."

"Then let me get at that stove. You're not so good in a kitchen."

She was dead game and she was making a desperate attempt to hide her grief. Her grief and something else that he was trying to understand. It would do her good now to get busy at the stove.

"You throw the supper together," he told her, "I'll tend to—to everything else."

HE WENT into the front room where the dead body of Gene Deniff lay in its pine board coffin, and closed the door behind him. He made a hasty but careful examination of the dead cowboy. Gene Deniff had been shot in the back; shot at such close range that the flannel shirt was powder-burned around the bullet hole. The powder burns showed through the dried blood. Jeff Kettle fastened the lid on the coffin.

He hauled a buckboard to the front door, using his saddle horse, his catch-rope looped to the buckboard tongue and the other end tied to his saddle horn. He loaded the pine board coffin and its dead on the buck-

board and hauled it to the open grave beside the graves of Ike Deniff and his wife. He lowered the coffined body into the grave. Then he went back to the house.

He made the girl eat; made her drink a lot of strong black coffee. Then they walked together to the open grave and he stood there, his hat in his hand, while Lou Deniff knelt there beside the grave and prayed. When she got to her feet she swayed a little; Jeff Kettle was afraid she was going to keel over. He put his arm around her shoulders.

He felt her go tense and would have let go of her, remembering how she had once recoiled from his touch. But she turned and buried her dark head against his shoulder and he put both arms around her and held her like that until she had quit sobbing. Then she looked up at him and there was a pitiful sort of smile on her quivering lips.

"You're being mighty patient and kind, Jeff Kettle." Her voice was no more than a broken whisper.

His face reddened and she eased herself from his arms and took hold of his hand, clinging to it tightly. Then he filled the grave and she watched, dry-eyed. And when they went back down the little hill she took hold of his hand again.

Half an hour later they rode away from the Deniff ranch, driving about fifty head of saddle horses. A little before sunrise they threw their horses into the Double Link cavy.

"This is Lou Deniff, boys," Jeff Kettle told his renegade outfit, "She's throwin' in with us. She'll jingle the horses and do the cookin'. Where's Cotton Top?"

"He sighted you two a-comin' and pulled out like he'd sighted the sheriff," said one of the men. "That feller shore spooks easy."

Jeff Kettle cursed under his breath. That tow-headed young cowpuncher hadn't much warp to him. The big Texan had a contempt for weaklings. Besides, he needed Cotton Top right now. Cotton had told him that he knew where Cabezon Carter was holding a big bunch of Double Link cows with big unbranded calves. And he wanted to get those calves branded right now.

"What made Cotton rabbit like that?" asked the girl.

"Scared of you, I reckon." He told her how Cotton had been waylaid and shot at; how he had shot one of the bushwhackers.

"He thinks he killed your brother. But he didn't. Your brother was shot in the back by some feller that shoved a six-shooter ag'in' his spine and pulled the trigger. Cotton's scared to face you. It leaves us in a tight. He knows where Cabezon is holdin' a big bunch of Double Link cows with unbranded calves."

"I can take you there," Lou Deniff told him. "It's twenty miles or further to Brushy Basin where the weaning corrals are located. Better move the outfit there."

"You're makin' a hand, Lou," he grinned at her. "Load them pack-mules, boys. We're movin' camp."

CHAPTER VII

HYDROPHOBIA WOLF

THEY camped at Brushy Basin. There were big weaning corrals and a fenced-in pasture-trap. The outfit rounded up all the cattle in the Basin and threw the cows and calves and a lot of big unbranded maverick stuff into the trap-pasture where the feed was good and there was plenty of water.

And while the other cowpunchers roped and branded the calves and mavericks, Lou tending the branding fire, Jeff Kettle and Stub rode the high points with Winchester.

The branding went on all that afternoon, lasting until

dusk. Now and then, back a mile or so in the hills a carbine would crack. Or there would be more than one gun cracking. The branding would stop while the ropers and calf rasslers listened. When the shooting would stop they would carry on with the branding once more.

Lou Deniff, tending the branding fire that kept half a dozen stamp Double Link branding irons and half a dozen running irons hot, asked no questions. She was dripping with perspiration, her face red from the heat of the fire and her skin and clothes thick with corral dust. When one of the men would call "Hot iron!" she was there with a cherry red branding iron. They grinned their approval.

"Cuss whenever you feel like it," she told them. "I'm used to it."

But they got along without much cussing. When dusk fell they emptied the corral of all cows with branded calves and hazed them out of Brushy Basin.

Jeff Kettle and Stub rode up out of the twilight. Stub had a crude bandage knotted around a bullet-ripped thigh. He handed Jeff Kettle four burned matches. The big Texan fished three burned matches from his shirt pocket and grinned, then put the seven burned matches carefully away in the pocket of his short denim brush-jacket.

"There was some feller sidin' us, Jeff," said Stub. "But I never did ketch sight of him."

Jeff grinned faintly and nodded. "He saved my bacon. Six of them Double Link fellers come through that saddle where I was bushed-up. I was tryin' to remember my prayers when he helped whittle down the odds. He was up in a bunch of boulders that overlooked the trail through the saddle. When the ruckus was over I hollered at him to ride on down. But he slipped away. I never caught sight of him."

"Reckon it was the Cotton Top gent, Jeff?"

"I reckon. Couldn't be nobody else. Don't tell Lou. And don't let on about what them burnt matches tally."

"Hell, no," said Stub.

Every man in the outfit tried to help Lou get supper. She waved them off with a long handled pot-hook. Hers was the best Dutch oven bread they had ever tasted and her coffee was plenty strong. It had whiskers, Jeff told her. They washed their own dishes and Jeff spread her tarp-covered blankets a way from camp, picking a level spot where the heavy grass made a cushion for her bed.

The renegade cowpunchers who had at first resented her company now were for her a hundred percent. She'd do, they agreed, to take along.

She was worried about Cotton Top. "He's wild, Jeff. There's no telling what he'll do. I'm scared for him."

"You think a heap of Cotton, don't you, Lou?"

"We grew up together. He's been more of a brother to me than Gene was. Gene and I quarreled a lot. Never got along. And they claim that twins should be closer to one another than just ordinary brother and sister. Yes, I think a lot of Cotton Top."

"He's shore head over heels in love with you."

"I never thought of him like that. Never. He was just a big brother. Always will be."

They were sitting together on a flat rimrock a hundred yards above camp. Sitting there alone watching the moon come up over the mountains.

"You still hate me and all that I stand for, Lou?"

She shook her head, looking up into his eyes, a faint smile on her mouth. She reached out her hand and he took it.

"No, Jeff. That's gone. I think that feeling I had toward you left me when I took that shot at you and missed. I nerved myself to kill you. At the last second I swung the gun barrel to one side. I couldn't kill you,

though I hated you just a second before. Hated and despised you. It wasn't poor shooting that saved you. I'm a better shot with a carbine or six-shooter than most men are."

Afterward Jeff Kettle told himself that he had taken advantage of a little orphaned girl whose heart had been twisted by grief. He took her roughly, clumsily in his arms and kissed her mouth. She lay passively in his arms; then her arms went around his neck and she kissed him.

Suddenly she pulled away with a startled gasp. Her eyes, partly closed a moment before, were now wide and dark with alarm.

"What's the matter?" Jeff Kettle's voice was tight, husky with the emotion that had shaken him and sent his blood pounding.

"Somebody was watching us. Up there behind that brush patch. He's gone now. I'm scared, Jeff!"

They heard a man ride off into the night, spurring his horse to a run. They both knew who that rider was: Cotton Top.

"I'm tuckered out, Jeff." Lou broke a long and awkward silence that had fallen over them both. "I'm going to bed."

Jeff Kettle nodded. He sat there on the flat rimrock and rolled a cigarette with hands that were unsteady. Long after she had crawled beneath tarp and blankets and slept, the big Texan sat there on the rimrock, his carbine beside him, wrapped in brooding, bitter, hard-eyed thoughts.

That girl was not for him. She was young and clean and fresh and wholesome. He was no more than a hired killer, a renegade drifter, an outlaw with a bloodstained law badge pinned to his shirt. Hiding behind that law badge to kill men who were no worse, no better than he was.

He had made his deal with the governor's rep, back at Sacatone: driven a bloody bounty-hunter bargain. The burnt matches in his jumper pocket tallied his payoff. And he was planning on double-crossing that man who represented the governor and the syndicate who owned the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company.

He had, until now, justified himself in his own mind and heart. Now he saw himself for what he really was: a cold-blooded killer; a double-crossing bounty hunter. A wolf on the prowl, with a wolf pack taking his orders.

THE man who had fetched that pardon to Sacatone had shown Jeff Kettle a land map that showed the boundaries of the Double Link range. On that map had been marked several other ranges, small outfits that fringed on the big Double Link range. The Lazy D. The T Up and Down. Other outfits.

The Lazy D was the Deniff place. The T Up and Down iron belonged to Cotton Top.

"Those," said the man who had reprieved Jeff Kettle from a hangman's noose, "are rustler outfits. We'll expect you to wipe them out, rub 'em off the map. Buy them off at our price or get rid of them in your own way. Rustler outfits that have lived for years off the Double Link herds. We expect the right results, Kettle."

"Who," Jeff had asked, "is we?"

"The Hackberry Land and Cattle Company. I represent them. For a man just saved from the scaffold, Kettle, you are far too inquisitive."

Jeff rubbed out the coal of his cigarette stub on the rimrock and got to his feet, picking up his carbine. There was a twisted grin on his tight-lipped mouth. His eyes were hard and seared with self-contempt.

Cotton Top had saved his life today. But he knew that tomorrow that same tow-headed Cotton Top would be fighting on the side of the Double Link outfit. Because

Cotton knew only what his eyes had told him; what his ears had heard in the silence of the moonlit night.

Cotton Top would kill him on sight if he could get that quick-triggered job done before Jeff Kettle's gun blasted the life out of his young body. And Jeff Kettle had no stomach for the job of shooting a lovesick young cowboy who was not as weak and chicken-hearted as he seemed to be.

Though Cotton Top's opinion of Jeff Kettle right now must be something that was almighty vile and bad-smelling. And Jeff liked the tow-headed young cowpuncher as he liked few men. Cotton Top had youth and ideals and he was clean-minded and on the level.

Fighting to hold his little two-bit cow outfit against all odds. Fighting desperately and without hope for the love of Lou Deniff. Burdened with the hellish torturing conviction that he had shot down her brother and could hope for nothing now but her loathing and hatred.

And what he had witnessed tonight had convinced him that the girl he loved was throwing herself away on a hired killer whose reputation was as ugly as that of a hydrophobia wolf.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WOMAN LOLITA

"HOW long will it take," Jeff Kettle asked Stub at daybreak the next morning, "to brand out that stuff?"

"Short handed like we are, Jeff, it'll take all day, barrin' bad luck."

"Such as a gun scrap with Cabezon Carter and what's left of his Double Link outfit," nodded Jeff Kettle, fingering his law badge.

"Yeah. He's got plenty more men."

The two men on last guard rode into camp for breakfast. One of them handed Jeff Kettle a folded note.

"Cotton Top showed up just before daybreak and give me this, Jeff. He was half drunk and acted locoed as hell. He said he was killin' you where he cut your sign and you'd savvy why."

Jeff Kettle scowled and unfolded the note. He read it aloud to the outfit. Only Lou Deniff, busy at her Dutch ovens, was beyond earshot.

"If you've got the guts, Jeff Kettle," he read aloud, "fetch your curly wolves to the Five Mile House and we'll fight this out in the open. Fight to a finish. Winner take all. Lolita and her girls has gone to Hackberry. You better send Lou Deniff there where she will be safe. We don't want no women hurt."

"I'm onto your game. I'll play you card for card and chip for chip. I got my fighting men with me. Fetch yours. Anything goes and the winner take all. Or have you got the guts to fight fair for the Double Link outfit?"

"Cotton Top is taking this note to your camp. He swears he is going to kill you on sight. But that is my right. Come and get it, Jeff Kettle. Cabezon Carter."

Jeff Kettle grinned faintly and shoved the note in his chaps pocket.

"Cabezon has made his war talk, boys. I reckon we'll take a paezar to the Five Mile House and call his bet. But we'll brand out these calves before we pull out. That fight might throw us kinda short handed."

Jeff Kettle posted one man on guard. They worked until dark at the branding corrals, changing horses every couple of hours. Jeff Kettle and Stub doing the roping. Sweat and dust and bawling cattle. Working on empty bellies, until dark found the last of the calves branded, the mavericks wearing Lou Deniff's Lazy D iron, the cattle turned loose to scatter on feed and water.

"Ketch your town horses. We're eatin' a late supper at Hackberry. And some time between midnight and daybreak we'll ride out to that Five Mile House and do a little gun augerin' with Cabezon Carter and his Double Link tough hands. Ketch your top horses, cowhands."

"Sweat all day and fight all night. A burglar keeps sweeter hours," said one of the renegades. He grinned widely.

Lou Deniff jumped Jeff Kettle about the note he had gotten from Cabezon Carter. Somehow she had found out about it.

"Cotton Top brought it, didn't he, Jeff?"

Jeff Kettle nodded and handed her the note. "Don't fret your head about Cotton Top. We'll draw his fangs without hurtin' him, Lou. We'll hogtie 'im and fetch him to you at Hackberry. You kin talk sense back into that tow head of his."

On the long ride to town Jeff asked her if there was a preacher at Hackberry and she said there was. Her face flushed in the moonlight.

"Why, Jeff?"

He gave her hand a hard squeeze and dropped it, grinning. They rode on in silence.

IT WAS not yet midnight when they rode down the main street of Hackberry and stabled their horses. The town looked deserted. The only light that showed came from the Chinaman's.

Lolita sat alone at one of the oilcloth-covered tables drinking black coffee. She wore a dark green flannel blouse and a leather divided skirt and boots with silver-mounted spurs buckled on. Her cream-colored Stetson lay on an empty chair.

She nodded to Jeff Kettle; gave his men a long, hard, calculating scrutiny; and rising, held out her hand toward Lou Deniff. She was smiling, but there was no warmth in her eyes.

"We've never met," she said in her throaty voice. "Just seen one another on the street and passed like ships in the night. I brought the money that Cabezon paid Gene for the Lazy D ranch. And I also brought along the bill of sale Gene signed. I made Cabezon pay Gene what the outfit is worth. Ten thousand dollars. In case you don't want it, I brought along the bill of sale. Take your choice."

"Hand over the bill of sale." Lou's voice was brittle. Her eyes flashed like red-black sparks.

Lolita handed over the signed bill of sale with a faint shrug of her shoulders. Her eyes were flinty.

"If you were older and not handicapped by the advice of Jeff Kettle, child, you'd take the money and thank me for driving a handsome bargain for you with Cabezon Carter."

"I'm twenty-one and that's not exactly being an infant. Jeff has nothing to do with it. Or if he has, it's none of your business. Who murdered my brother at your road house dive?"

"Don't be theatrical, child. Gene was killed on the wagon road. Ask Jeff Kettle who did it. Or has he thought up the right answer and handed it to you already? I'm sorry about Gene. I liked him."

"You were going to marry him!" Lou's voice was getting unsteady.

Lolita laughed, shaking her mop of coppery hair. She looked at Jeff Kettle obliquely.

"Haven't you told her that I'm already married? Married in Juarez, Mexico, to Cabezon Carter?" She turned to Lou, smiling.

"Jeff was best man at the wedding. Furnished the ring and gave us the proper sort of sendoff. Sit down, all of you. You look like you'd had a tough day of it."

Stub was the last man to come in. He was scowling. "Some feller just slipped out of town, Jeff. Ridin' like hell. Headed for the Five Mile House."

"Saves me the trouble of sendin' Cabezon word that we're on our way. Sit down with Lolita, Stub. She claims to be good company. But don't let her pull a deck of cards on you or she'll poker you outa your guns. And you'll be needin' 'em."

He led Lou over to a far table and put her in a chair, patting her shoulder and grinning down at her. She looked up at him, smiling, red spots of anger still staining her freckled cheeks.

"Simmer down, young 'un. There's tiger blood in Lolita. Tear up that bill of sale. Know any decent folks in town?"

"The store keeper and his wife are my friends."

"Then you go to them and stay with 'em till us boys git back from the Five Mile House. If anything happens to me, take these and head for Prescott. Give 'em to the governor."

Jeff Kettle counted ten burnt matches into her hand. He took a brand tally book from his pocket, a stub of pencil, and scribbled a note; then read the finished note aloud in a low tone that carried no further than Lou's ears.

"To the Governor of Arizona Territory. Dear Sir: Pay to Lou Deniff one thousand dollars apiece for these burnt matches. I'm letting you off easy because there was three-four more I didn't count because I didn't see 'em after the smoke cleared in the hills. Please look after this little lady and oblige Jeff Kettle."

He tore the page from the tally book, wrapped the matches in it, and handed the little package to Lou Deniff.

"That grubstakes you if I lose and that outfit of yourn gits stolen away from you in the shuffle. Now tie into your grub. You look ga'nt and peaked—and purtier than anything I ever saw in my life."

LOLITA, on her way toward the door, paused. She had overheard most of Jeff Kettle's words and her eyes glittered dangerously.

"Still the same clumsy-tongued Romeo, ain't you, Jeff? Well, good luck to you. You'll need it. I'm still banking the game and I'm holding all the aces in the deck. And the joker."

Lolita went out the door, leather skirt swishing. Lou Deniff handed the burnt matches still wrapped in the note, back to Jeff Kettle.

"I can't take 'em, Jeff. I'm sorry, but I just can't."

He nodded slowly, shoving the note and burnt matches back into his denim jumper pocket and buttoning the pocket flap.

"Now eat your supper, Lou."

"That woman used to be your friend, didn't she?" And when Jeff Kettle nodded, the girl smiled at him and finished, "She still loves you, Jeff."

"She hates me worse than a rattlesnake."

Lou shook her head and smiled, then began eating. "Hate and love are twins, Jeff. Men never will understand that."

Jeff Kettle grinned faintly and began eating. Stub and the others were spiking their black coffee with whiskey. Stub came over with the bottle and started pouring some in the big Texan's cup. Jeff shoved the bottle aside.

"I'm workin' on coffee straight, Stub. Likker warps my brain."

They heard a horse hit a lope outside. Jeff Kettle stepped to the door in time to see Lolita riding out of town on a black horse, headed for her Five Mile House. He was scowling when he came back to the table. The thick, rare steak and fried potatoes tasted like sawdust now and

the coffee seemd bitter as gall. Damn the woman. Why didn't she stay here in town where she belonged?

"Cabezon," said Stub, "kicked the hell outa Porky. Only that the Lolita woman took his part, he'd have killed the pot-bellied son. She told me. I wouldn't mind havin' her on our side."

CHAPTER IX

THE KILLING

IN THAT black hour before dawn Jeff Kettle led his crew of fighting cowhands along the trail to the Five Mile House. He figured that Cabezon Carter and his Double Link renegades would be drunk by now.

That all night waiting for Jeff Kettle and his men would have pulled the nerves of Cabezon and his men almighty tight. They would drink to ease the tension. The more they drank, the more apt they would be to make mistakes. They out-numbered Jeff Kettle's outfit two to one or better.

When they sighted the lights at the Five Mile House Jeff Kettle pulled up. His men already had their orders. They knew what to do and how to go about it.

"Here's where we scatter, boys. Cripple Cotton Top if you got to, but don't shoot to kill him. And keep an eye cocked for Lolita. Don't let her git hurt. . . . Listen!"

They heard the sound of shooting at the Five Mile House: half a dozen shots cracking at the same time. They waited, listening, staring out across the flat desert country that was spotted with cactus and mesquite brush.

They were within a mile or so of the roadhouse and the moon had gone behind a big scudding cloud that promised a storm. Heat lightning flared behind the distant mountains. In the faint starlight they could barely make out a man riding toward them on the wagon road, crowding his horse to a run.

They waited, their guns covering him as he rode up. There was no mistaking that huge bulk of a man. It was Porky McMahan. The soiled bandages had slipped and his shot-torn face looked bloody and ghastly. His pig-like eyes glittered and his whiskey voice was hoarse as a crow's. He handed something toward Jeff Kettle.

"Lolita said play 'em."

Four blood-smeared playing cards. Jeff looked at them in the faint light. Four aces and the joker.

"SHE sent me," Porky said. "I had hell makin' a breakaway. Cotton Top and Lolita backed my play. Cotton's shot. Killed, I reckon. Lolita knifed three of 'em before they rapped her acrost the head with a gun. She said to tell you that them Double Link men is hid out in a stockade corral behind the barn. Charge 'em from the barn side and you got 'em trapped."

"She said to tell you that Cabezon is takin' no chances. He's playin' the game safe. He's got his getaway figgered out and he's lettin' his hired hands do his fightin'. His saddle pockets is filled with cash and he's holed up in Lolita's cabin half a mile from the roadhouse. In case the fight goes against his outfit he'll drift hard and fast for the Mexican line."

"He's bin plannin' against a night like this for a long time. Sellin' cattle and keepin' the money instead of bankin' it to the credit of the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company. Double-crossin' Lolita. Lyin' to her. Jugglin' the Company books. Goin' to the hole with cash he got from cattle sales."

"He's bin driftin' double Link cattle outa the country for months. Workin' the brands. Changin' the Double Link iron into the Three Leaf Clover. Sellin' them cattle

with the brands worked to the Three Leaf Clover outfit in New Mexico.

"He sent Lolita and her girls to Hackberry. Told her he didn't want her and the girls to git hurt when the shootin' commenced at the Five Mile House. She took her girls and went to Hackberry like he told her to, but she rode back a while ago. Cabezon was fit to be tied. He'd found out the combination to her big safe and cleaned her out. There was a fat lot of money in it—her money. Then he locked the safe and somehow he changed the combination so it wouldn't open."

"Cabezon is smart thataway," said Jeff Kettle. "Go on, Porky."

"Lolita never even looked at the safe. She called us all up to the bar for a drink. And while we was drinkin' and Cabezon was lookin' ornery and sulky as hell, she commenced talkin' to me, quiet-like. She slipped me this poker hand and told me that when the ruckus started in a few minutes I was to ride like hell till I met you. To give you them cards. And to tell you what I'm tellin' you now.

"Then she called Cotton Top over to where she was standin' at the end of the bar. She told Cotton that Gene Deniff had bin killed by one of Cabezon's gun toters—a feller they call Cutter. Lolita had a second key to the jail. She give it to Cutter and told him to git Gene Deniff outa jail and take him out to the Five Mile House, which he did.

"Then Cabezon got Gene drunk and bought his Lazy D outfit. Ribbed him and Cutter into layin' for you, thinkin' you'd trail Gene to the Five Mile House. Gene was locoed drunk.

"But it was Cotton Top and not you that rode along the trail. When Cutter tried to kill Cotton Top, Gene knocked his gun barrel to one side. And Cutter shoved his gun against Gene's back and pulled the trigger. Then rode like hell.

"Cotton Top sobered quick. Or mebbys he wasn't as drunk as he'd been pretendin' to be. Cotton was playin' a queer game, anyhow. He never aimed to kill you, Kettle, for all his wild whiskey talk. And Cabezon was suspicious of him.

"Lolita pointed down the bar to where Cutter stood drinkin' and talkin' to Cabezon.

"That's the man that killed Gene Deniff!" she tells Cotton, and her voice is loud now.

"Cutter went for his gun but Cotton Top beat him to it. He killed Cutter with his first shot. Lolita grabbed a sawed-off shotgun from behind the bar and tried to shoot out the lights. Cabezon shot Cotton Top. He yelled at his men to knock Lolita down and hogtie her.

"Git goin'!" she told me, and went to work with a dirk she always carries. She stabbed three of 'em while I was gittin' outa the place. Nobody noticed me goin' till I was outa gun range.

"So there's the setup, Kettle. Charge that corral from the barn side and you got your Double Link men trapped. They'll fight like wolves. I wouldn't want no part of that scrap.

"But if you want Cabezon Carter, swing around the Five Mile house. Lolita's cabin is in a grove of big palos verdes trees at the spring. Now kin I take this face of mine back to Hackberry? It needs doctorin'."

Jeff Kettle nodded. "You got any whiskey cached out there?"

"A few barrels."

"Then open up your saloon again. You earned 'er. We're obliged, Porky. Hit your trail."

WHEN the paunchy saloon man had ridden out of sight, Jeff Kettle sat his saddle, his weight in one

stirrup, holding the blood-spattered playing cards. A thin-lipped grin twisted his mouth; his green eyes narrowed. His voice was quiet.

"You all heard what Porky McMahan said. It might be the truth. Or it might be a trap they're settin' for us. I'm not askin' you to believe him. But I'm playin' these aces. I'll play 'em for what they're worth. I'm in favor of chargin' that stockade corral. You boys kin vote on 'er."

"We'll be right at your back, Jeff," said Stub. "How about it, cowboys?"

"Lead us to our bear meat, Jeff." One of them voiced the opinion of the renegade crew. "What are we waitin' for?"

They headed for the Five Mile House at a long trot; scattered. And as they neared the place they saw how the trap was laid for them. Lights showed in the windows of the long, low-roofed adobe roadhouse. Somewhere inside the muslin-curtained windows the 'professor' was pounding out loud tunes on his piano. Men's voices sang and shouted inside. Saddled horses stood at the hitchrack in front. It looked as if Cabezon and his Double Link fighting cowhands were inside the roadhouse celebrating drunkenly.

There was a hundred yards of bare open ground between the barn with its stockade corral at the bank, and the roadhouse. Men riding across that open stretch would make easy targets for any men hiding behind the upright posts that formed the round stockade corral.

But if they swung abruptly to the right and headed straight for the barn they would have the protection of patches of mesquite brush, and the big adobe barn with its solid walls would be between them and the corral.

Jeff swung his horse to the right and headed for the barn at a dead run, the others at his heels. A man crouched in the shadows outside the roadhouse shouted a loud warning. A volley of shots came from the stockade but it came too late to do any good. Jeff Kettle and his men were in the shelter of the barn walls, quitting their horses, running, crouched, carbines in their hands. They charged the stockade corral by way of the wide open barn doors, through the barn with its stalls filled with saddled horses.

The piano playing stopped with a discordant crash. The three or four men who had been making enough drunken noise for five times that many, quit their singing and shouting. Their trick had failed and they were getting out the back door.

Two of Stub's men shot three of them as they mounted. Then Jeff Kettle led them through the dark barn, smashed down the flimsy gate connecting the barn with the corral, and it was every man for himself in the ruckus that broke.

The fighting was swift and brutal and deadly. No quarter given. No quarter asked. Six-shooters spat flame. Carbine barrels swung like clubs.

"Git goin', Jeff!" barked Stub's harsh voice. "Git that Cabezon. This mess is ourn!"

JEFF KETTLE fought his way out of the corral and through the barn, back to where he had left his horse. He swung into the saddle and headed straight across the open clearing, taking the shortest route regardless of the danger of being shot from his saddle.

Rifle slugs whined past his head, coming from the roadhouse. Then he heard the roar of a .45 six-shooter in the house. The rifle shots were silenced. He saw the door flung open and saw Lolita standing there in the doorway, blood on her face and torn blouse, a smoking six-shooter in her hand.

"Play your aces, Jeff. Cabezon's at my cabin. Play the hand I dealt you, Tejano!"

It had been a long, long time since Lolita had called him Tejano. He waved his hat at her as he rode past, a grin on his face that bared his big white teeth.

"I'll play the aces, 'Lita!"

It had been a long time since he had called her 'Lita. He had never dared let himself think that he would ever call her that again.

Years of bitter brooding were swept away forever in that passing moment. She had been the one woman in the world for him. She was that one woman now. They understood one another, knew each other's faults and shortcomings; knew each other's few virtues.

Lolita kept her feet until he had ridden out of sight. Then she leaned heavily against the side of the door jamb and her legs gave way and she went down in a crumpled heap of leather skirt and there was a widening stain of blood on her dark green flannel blouse near one shoulder.

Jeff did not see her crumple. He headed for the adobe cabin in the distance, hidden by the grove of green palos verdes trees. His hat was pulled down across his eyes, his six-shooter gripped in his right hand. He was riding now to kill Cabezon Carter, the range dude, the tin-horn gambler, the blackguard border jumper who had stolen away the woman he had loved.

CHAPTER X

TWENTY-SIX BURNT MATCHES

A LIGHT showed in the small adobe cabin with its wide front porch and Mexican hammock slung between two thick posts. The light showed through heavy curtains made of Mexican serapes. Jeff rode through the palos verdes trees.

From a brush clump a carbine cracked—cracked twice. Jeff Kettle's horse, shot through the head, somersaulted, rolled over. A steel jacket 30-30 bullet tore the big Texan's left shoulder. He went down with the horse, his right leg pinned beneath the dead weight of the horse that kicked spasmodically, then lay still.

Jeff Kettle was stunned for a moment; heavy pain throbbled in his shoulder. He still gripped his six-shooter. His senses cleared slowly.

"You get him, Juarez?" Jeff Kettle heard the voice as if it came from somewhere a long way off. "Did you kill 'im?" That was Cabezon Carter's flat-toned voice. He'd know it if he heard it in Hell.

"I got 'im and his horse both, Cabezon. Me, I play the cinch bets. Juarez don't miss."

Juarez! Juarez! It didn't make sense at first. Then Jeff Kettle remembered Juarez. The half-breed Mexican gun slinger who had run Lolita's gambling house in Juarez, Mexico. Juarez Carter. Cabezon's half brother. He had all but forgotten that mongrel half brother of Cabezon's.

Jeff saw Juarez Carter now. Stepping out from the brush, a tall, lean man who dressed in leather charro suits and big silver-braided sombreros: a renegade killer who had been a member of Kosterlisky's Rurales and would bushwhack his own grandmother if there was enough money in it to pay him for the job.

"Juarez don't shoot to miss, *compadre*. Now we split, fifty-fifty. I'll put another slug in the big Tejano and you pay me off, no?"

Juarez Carter carried his carbine in both hands, ejecting a smoking shell and leveraging a fresh cartridge into the breech. He walked toward the dead horse and motionless man pinned beneath the horse's weight. He had to walk around the horse to get a bead on his man.

Jeff Kettle fought to clear his brain. He lay motionless,

playing possum, watching for the half-breed to come closer. He'd shoot first, then take his uneven chances with Cabezon who was still in the cabin.

Then he saw the door of the little adobe cabin open; saw Cabezon Carter step out, a six-shooter in his hand.

"The payoff, brother!"

The six-shooter in Cabezon Carter's hand spewed fire again and again. The bullet-torn body of Juarez Carter, shot in the back, stumbled and toppled headlong across the dead horse and landed almost on top of Jeff Kettle.

Cabezon's flat, ugly laugh sounded through the echoes of his gun. Drunk on whiskey and his murderous victory, he walked on none too steady legs toward his dead half brother, the dead horse and the supposedly dead Texan. Laughing flatly. Teeth showing whitely against his dark skin with its carefully trimmed black moustache.

"You were always shoving that hand of yours out for more money, my mongrel half brother. You son of a Mexican dance hall wench. Brother? I'd sooner claim a snake for a brother, you—"

"Got ary ca'tridges left in that fancy gun of yourn, Cabezon?" Jeff Kettle's voice brought Cabezon Carter to a jerky halt. "Or do you want time to reload? I counted four shots from your gun. That leaves you two cartridges. Two dirty deuces. I'm holdin' aces, Cabezon. Four aces and the joker. 'Lita dealt 'em from a cold deck. I'm playin' 'em."

JEFF KETTLE, with a heaving jerk, yanked his leg from under the dead weight of his horse. He lurched to his feet. Cabezon's first shot nicked his ear.

Cabezon Carter never lived to fire the second cartridge in his ivory-handled silver-mounted six-shooter. Because the gun in Jeff Kettle's hand was spitting one steady staccato streak of fire. Heavy .45 slugs were thudding into Cabezon Carter's falling body. The big Texan's gun hammer fell on an empty shell before Cabezon's long legs buckled and he sprawled face downward on the ground.

Jeff Kettle sat on his dead horse and reloaded his empty six-shooter. His left arm dangled from a bullet-broken shoulder and he had to work with one hand, the gun held between his knees.

Stub and another man rode up out of the night. Jeff hailed them.

"Tie up this shoulder of mine, Stub. Then find Cabezon's horse and fetch it around to me. The drinks are on the Five Mile House. How many men we lose?"

"Three, Me'n the other boys will live to see South America or stretch rope, one. I got nicked twice but I been bee-stung and it hurt worse." He knotted a clumsy but tight bandage across Jeff Kettle's shoulder. The other man led Cabezon's saddle horse around. The saddle pockets were bulging. Jeff grinned faintly.

"Lolita said if we found you alive to fetch you back there before she died. She's shot bad. I sent to town for the doc. Cotton Top stands a chance to make 'er, mebbby. He's young and tough. But Lolita—"

"Git me on a horse." Jeff Kettle's tone was harsh. "She can't die! Not now! She can't die now!"

He headed back for the Five Mile House on a run. His shoulder bandage was loosened and he was bleeding hard when he pulled up in front of the Five Mile House and slid from his saddle. He was weaving like a drunken man when he lurched into the place.

If he saw Lou Deniff there he failed to recognize her. He had eyes only for the wounded Lolita who was lying on a tarp-covered bed on the floor, her coppery head pillowed high, a faint smile on her lips that had lost their color. Her eyes glowed hotly as Jeff Kettle sat down beside her. His voice was a croaking, scared whisper.

"You can't die now, 'Lita. You can't quit me in a tight. I don't give a damn what you and Cabezon—"

Her white, ringless hand reached up and covered his mouth, pressing hard.

"I won't die, Jeff" she told him, her voice soft and deep-throated. "Not if that's the way you feel about it. And get this one straight. Cabezon was never anything to me. Never. I danced with him that night at El Paso in hopes of getting some information out of him.

"He'd been double-crossing you on cattle sales. I was using what the books call a woman's wiles to get it out of him. When you acted like you did, I knew you were too hot-headed to believe the truth.

"I've hated Cabezon always. But I took him on as a business partner. He hated me but I wouldn't let him coyote on me. I knew that some day our trails would cross. I hoped you'd let me tell you the truth. But you wouldn't.

"I had to nearly get us both killed to prove to you that I was on the level. And there were a couple of times when I was jealous enough to—Both of us old enough to have better sense, Tejano. It's been a long time since you kissed me. . . .

"Now let that little Lou girl with the freckles wrap up your shoulder. She patched me up. No, Tejano, I can't die now." She whispered the words against his mouth, her lips smiling.

THEN her eyes closed and Lou said that what Lolita needed right now was sleep; rest and quiet. The doctor would be along directly. Another bedroll was brought in from somewhere and spread out on the floor. Lou, sleeves rolled above her elbows, gave orders. There were white bandages and plenty of hot water, and whiskey to cleanse the wound of germs. No nonsense about her.

Cotton Top talked around a half-smoked cigarette, a painful but somehow foolish grin on his face:

"I was playin' both ends ag'in the middle, Jeff. Like Lolita, I was seein' kinda green a time or two. Then got a tail-holt on myself. I got the low down snake that killed Gene. Lolita spoiled Cabezon's aim or he'd have got me.

"Lolita saved your life. She shot a Double Link man that was tryin' to pot-shoot you as you rode off. . . . Tell Jeff the news, Lou. Tell him before you change your mind."

"If you'll give me a chance to get in a word. . . . This will hurt a little, Jeff. It's whiskey but it's not going down your throat. Cotton and I are getting married. It must have been love all along but I didn't know it. You don't mind?"

"Why should *he*—"

"Shut up, tow head. It's all right, Jeff?"

"You bet it's all right, young 'un." He looked over at Lolita. She smiled.

"He calls her youn 'un, Cotton," Lolita's throaty voice purred. "He's passin' himself off as the old man with the whiskers. Don't trip over your beard when you get up, Grampa Jeff. He needs some of that ten-year-old rye inside, Lou. He's agein' on us fast."

Stub brought in two bulging saddle pockets. "I taken 'em off Cabezon's saddle. And these was in his pocket." He tossed a pair of blood-spattered deuces on Jeff Kettle's tarp. Lolita smiled.

"I gave them to him," said Lolita. "Told him to better 'em if he could. He said he didn't need to; that he'd copped the big jackpot. Hang onto that money, Jeff. Just in case Vincent tries to doublecross us. He might get coy and bashful and tricky about the payoff."

"Who," asked Jeff Kettle, "is Vincent?"

"The law sharp for the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company. Vincent Connell. The man that sprung you out of the Sacatone jail with a phoney pardon. After we'd had you jailed on a horse stealing charge. . . . *Take it easy, Tejano.*

"I knew Vincent Connell before he got his job with the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company. When he was just out of law school and there was a shine to his serge suit and he ate in one-armed lunch wagons. He was getting slim pickin's as public defender in El Paso. And I helped him get the fat job he holds down now."

"Shouldn't you take it easy?" asked Lou, looking worried.

"When I've given Jeff the lay of it, honey. In case I'm sleepin' when Vincent shows up.

"I knew all about the Double Link outfit. How it was run by some tough hombre who had orders to grab land and rustle cattle from the little outfits. You'd married me off to Cabezon Carter and gave us orders to stick together or else. I hated Cabezon. We never lived to gether. But I was stuck with the swaggering spur jingler and I aimed to make him dig for gold. I got in touch with Vincent Connell. Told him to fire the Double Link ramrod and hire Cabezon for the job. And Vincent obliged.

"THEN Cabezon began to get notions. He went into wholesale cattle rustling. And he was makin' a play for Lou Deniff, using her brother Gene; salving Gene along; feeding him booze and sending him here to the Five Mile House to gamble his outfit away. Then telling Lou he'd get her brother straightened out, tear up his I.O.U.'s and deal her and Gene in later on the Double Link steal—if she'd marry him."

"Cabezon was married to you in Juarez!" said Jeff hotly.

"It wasn't legal, Jeff. Not on this side of the Mexican line. He and I knew it. You didn't. Don't horn in on my speech. I don't make many. When I get the floor I keep it. Lady's privilege.

"Cabezon was gettin' out of control. I'd kept track of you, Jeff. I heard about you bein' mixed up in that sheep and cattle war. I told Vincent to frame you: get you jailed, then spring you out of the jug with a fake pardon. Vincent was only too glad to string his bets with me. The Hackberry Land and Cattle Company have millions back of 'em; but those big boys are the first ones to squeal when they lose a dime. I told him that Jeff Kettle was the one and only man who could put the Double Link back on its legs, run it fair and square.

"Vincent Connell sprung you from the Sacatone jail. And he wrote me that you drove a hard bargain for yourself and your men. The shootin' is all over; he'll show up soon. Hold him to his deal. If he tries to squirm out of it, tell him that you're holding the money that Cabezon has made off his several years cattle thieving. Even when I take back the money he stole out of my safe, you're still holding five times as much money as your deal with Vincent Connell calls for. How many burnt matches you holdin', Tejano?"

"Twenty-six." It was Stub who gave her the correct tally. Jeff grinned at the short, blocky little outlaw.

"Stub's bin keepin' the books," he said grimly.

"Twenty-six burnt matches. Twenty-six thousand dollars. That's a lot of 'em, Stub." Lolita looked sharply at him.

"That tallies the pris'ners, ma'am," grinned Stub, "and the ones that won't quit runnin' till they're outa the country."

"There's better than a hundred thousand dollars in

those saddle pockets when I take mine out," said Lolita. "Vincent will play ball."

CHAPTER XI

A SONG IN SACATONE

VINCENT CONNELL, attorney and representative for the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company, showed up two weeks later. He found Jeff Kettle and Lolita sitting on the long porch of the Five Mile House that had been turned into a hospital.

"Sit down, Vincent," said Lolita. "and take the weight off your number sevens. Help yourself to a drink. I told Porky McMahan to leave a case of rye when I gave him my stock to open up his saloon again at Hackberry. Don't slip on that rice on the floor; the Mexican woman hasn't had time to sweep out. You got here too late for the wedding last night. The new ramrod of the Double Link outfit taken unto himself one bride."

"Congratulations." The attorney smiled uneasily.

"Thanks," grinned Jeff Kettle, "but Lolita didn't mean us. Though we horned in on the deal and made it a double weddin'."

"Pete Cotton, better known as Cotton Top," smiled Lolita, "married Lou Deniff. Jeff gave him that marshal badge as a wedding present. And we gave him the job as general manager of the Hackberry Land and Cattle Company. They want an honest cowman running their outfit. Cotton is the right answer. And that's on the level, Vincent. You've got my word for it."

"That's good enough for me," said Vincent Connell. He helped himself to a drink. "Now about that settlement, Kettle. What's the score?"

The attorney's eyes were sharp and shrewd. He took a check book from his coat pocket.

Jeff Kettle took a package of burnt matches from his pocket and counted them out on the table, one by one, until there were twenty-six. The attorney's eyes narrowed. His mouth thinned to a stiff line. Jeff looked at Lolita. She smiled.

"Let me tell the man, Tezano," she said, rising and going into the house. She opened the big safe and came out with a small leather satchel.

"There was one hundred thousand dollars in this when Jeff and I counted out his twenty-six thousand. Now it holds seventy-four thousand dollars. There's really nothing in the world you can do about it if we want to keep it all. Jeff and his men—there were only three men left out of his outfit when the gun smoke cleared, Vincent—have paid themselves off. Put away that silly check book. And pull up your lower jaw, Vincent. And listen.

"Jeff Kettle and his men cleaned up your Double Link outfit. They made the cow town of Hackberry fit for women and children to live in. The preacher got enough out of last night's deal to build a church and a school there. And the company has at last got an honest man to run the Double Link outfit and maintain peace at Hackberry.

"Some stopped a few bullets but that was part of the

job. Jeff Kettle and I were able and ready to pull out for Mexico two days ago. There was nothing to stop us from takin' all this money with us. There's still nothing to stop us, Vincent. But we're handin' you this much back.

"Mebbyso marriage has softened us, Vincent. Or perhaps we want a couple of kids like Cotton Top and Lou to be able to keep their ideals and high opinion about a tough cowhand and a gamblin' gal.

"Jeff and I are South America bound. We're never comin' back. We're goin' into the cattle business down in the Argentine where there's still free range. Stub and the two boys left out of his outfit are goin' with us. We're gone for keeps, Vincent—unless you try to double-cross Cotton Top and Lou.

"You try to make a crook out of that tow-headed cowboy and Jeff will come back with Stub and the boys and take over this Double Link spread. And I'll be with 'em. What's your answer, Vincent?"

"You're holdin' aces, Lolita. As always. The company's learned a costly lesson. They'll be only too glad to have Cotton run the outfit on the square. Want anything in writing?"

"Just shake on it, Vincent." Lolita shoved the satchel of money across the table. The attorney shook hands.

THEY watched him climb into the hired buckboard that had fetched him from town, deposit the filled satchel between his feet and tell the driver to get going. He turned, lifted his hat, waving a last farewell.

Lolita and Jeff Kettle stood there on the porch, holding hands. Lou and Cotton Top, Stub and his two tough cowpunchers, were camped on lower Hackberry Creek with a pack outfit, waiting for them. Lou and Cotton were going as far as the railroad with them and were fetching the horses and pack outfit back to the ranch. So the Five Mile House was deserted save for Lolita and Jeff Kettle.

She stooped and scraped up some of the rice scattered on the wide porch, and put it in her blouse pocket. Her eyes were a little misted. She twisted the wedding ring on the third finger of her left hand and her smile was soft, quivering at the corners.

"Rice and all the trimmings, Tezano."

"And our own outfit in the Argentine, 'Lita."

"No more gamblin'. When I dealt you those four aces and the joker, I'd dealt my last poker hand."

"And God willin'," said Jeff Kettle solemnly, "when I emptied my gun at Cabezon Carter, I've shot my last man."

They got their horses and rode away, headed south: South America bound. Now and then as they rode along their stirrups touched. Their eyes would meet and they needed no words to tell one another that the happiness they had fought for now rode with them into the sunset.

At a little cow town called Sacatone on the border some Mexicans were tearing down a scaffold. As they worked, they sang. Their little ranchero song had to do with the brave and reckless deeds of the gringo Jeff Kettle.

THE END

If you've enjoyed this story—then don't miss

JACK BYRNE'S

new novel of the roaring West

COWBOY, RIDE YOUR LUCK

Coming in the September 13th ARGOSY



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



THE lead-off letter for this week gave us quite a turn when we first glanced at it. The author had printed at the top of the page in large letters: To the Memory of the Frank A. Munsey Company and the *Golden Argosy*.

That seemed to indicate that he considered us dead and was proposing to erect a suitable headstone over us. It wasn't clear why he was writing us if he thought we were dead, but we decided that he must simply be telling us about our demise, not regarding us as bright enough to realize it.

Well, this was rather disturbing, for after all we have our pride. With mingled emotions we set about reading the letter, and then we discovered that the heading was not meant to be ominous at all. It was a salute to *Argosy*, past and present, from a reader who has been following the magazine, off and on, for a good many years. So naturally we felt all right then.

FREDERICK H. EATON

Last winter, being short of good reading matter, I hunted up some back numbers of *ARGOSY* and *Argosy All-Story* magazine. I discovered a few—said few being almost all the issues from 1920 to 1933, and scattered copies from that date to now. At that time I thought of writing you, but other matters coming up, I put it off till I purchased your July 12, 1941 issue, in order to renew my acquaintance. So here goes.

From 1922 to 1941 is quite a stretch in a man's life, but from 1882 to 1941 is still longer. In fact, I think that as regards the present staff of the magazine this quotation will not be far out: "With never a man of the crew alive, as went to sea with seventy-five," though the crew of the ship may be all gone, there are most likely a few who remember the doings of the ship. I'm one of them. Yes, sir.

I read *The Golden Argosy* and remember some of the illustrations. "A Voyage to the Gold Coast", by Frank H. Converse . . . let me here state that it is my conviction that *ARGOSY* has

never had among its contributors and never will have a writer to compare with Converse, or one who could draw out the thrills and bait the expectation the way he could.

Don't remember, of course, how long I read the magazine, or whether I took it regularly or not. Probably not. Five cents was hard to get for a youngster in those days, let alone \$2.50 for a year's subscription. I commenced to take *ARGOSY* more or less regularly probably about 1896—two years before Mr. Buding started in. Can't say that I have taken it regularly since then, but enough to keep in the running, I think.

To a certain extent I am at one with Mr. Buding as to good and poor or mediocre writers. I hold that there are as many *good* writers as there ever were, but that there are more mediocre and poor pen-pushers and a raft of very cheap periodicals to employ them. In the old days the publications were comparatively few but for the most part good.

Of course I had my favorite authors. Edgar Rice Burroughs for the weird and improbable. Hulbert Footner and Isabelle Ostrander for detective and mystery stories. And by the way, to my mind the series named "The Shadowers", which Isabelle wrote under the name of Fox, were her best stories.

I was amused and sometimes annoyed at some of the kicks. Because I was partial to some writers I saw no reason for requesting the management to chuck those I did not like "out o' the winder." Well, I bought the July 12 number and it looks like I was hooked again. I thought that Burroughs had shot his last bolt and retired, but I see that he has simply been forging a new quarrel for his arbalest. May it go as straight to the butts as the others.

This is a rather long letter, but you're lucky. It's nothing like the draft I drew up. Nowhere near the length, breadth and thickness. Especially the thickness. Gloversville, N. Y.

WE RATHER wish that Mr. Eaton had carried out his original plan and sent us that big letter. We like 'em big. Anyhow, we are grateful for what he did send.

Our next correspondent is a lady who

has been deeply impressed by "Forward into Battle". (By the way, we aren't sure that we have her name right, for the signature was difficult to decipher. If it is wrong—our apologies.)

MRS. E. H. WROE

I have been very much interested in the story now running in your magazine—i.e. "Forward into Battle" by Charles M. Warren.

The story is great and must have taken a lot of research, with much care to detail. I was deeply interested in the description of Mexico. What wretchedness—yet it is true and we all should know about it. The author has done a fine job as far as the story has gone, and I am looking forward to reading the rest as it appears.

Thank you for giving the public such a worth-while serial.
Blowing Rock, North Carolina.

YOU may remember that we described our doubts about Stookie Allen's bulls in a recent "Lady of Darling". Well, according to the correspondent below, neither we nor Mr. Allen know our bulls.

W. B. ENGLER

Anent your comments concerning Stookie and the lady bullfighter in *Argonotes* of July 12th issue, it sort of looks to me as if both you and your Stookie had missed the boat.

In the first place, *banderillas* do not stick up from the bull's shoulder like toothpicks in a cherry. To obtain that decorative effect they would have to be jabbed into the bull so far that it would be dead before the bullfightress had finished her prayers—which might be lucky for the lady.

But the real slip of the brush is in picturing the bull before the horse with its horns bare and murderous. In Portuguese bullfights the bullfighter is mounted—you are right about that—but on a very fine horse which he does not care to have punched full of holes. So the bull wears boxing gloves—no less. It is impossible for a horse always to evade the bull's horns, hence, they are padded. If you don't believe me ask your vegetable man.