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BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE

AUGUST 1940 VOL. 71, NO. 4

A Complete Book-Length Novel

Gambler's Choice By Jackson Gregory 123
Illustrated by Jeremy Cannon and Percy Leason

A Novelette

Under the Crooked Cross By Richard Wormser 2
Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

Seven Short Stories

Misery Bails Out By Peter B. Kyne 23
Illustrated by Hamilton Greene

High Explosive By Fulton Grant 32
Illustrated by Frederic Anderson

Traitors' Harvest By Gordon Keyne 45
Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

Hell's Mouth By H. Bedford-Jones 78
"All the World's a Stage"—No. V. *Illustrated by Peter Kuhlhoff*

The Moon to Play With By Jacland Marmur 90
Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

Spruce Gum By Reg Dinsmore 101
Illustrated by Arthur Jamieson

The Silver Bell By Kenneth Perkins 112
Illustrated by John Richard Flanagan

A Serial Novel

When the Devil Drives By Dornford Yates 54
Illustrated by Austin Briggs

Prize Stories of Real Experience

I was an *Altmark* Prisoner By Thomas Foley 182
This second half of a weird voyage and its climax in the historic rescue by the *Cossack*.

Taken for a Slide By "Cowboy" Carson 192
Very painful then; very funny to remember.

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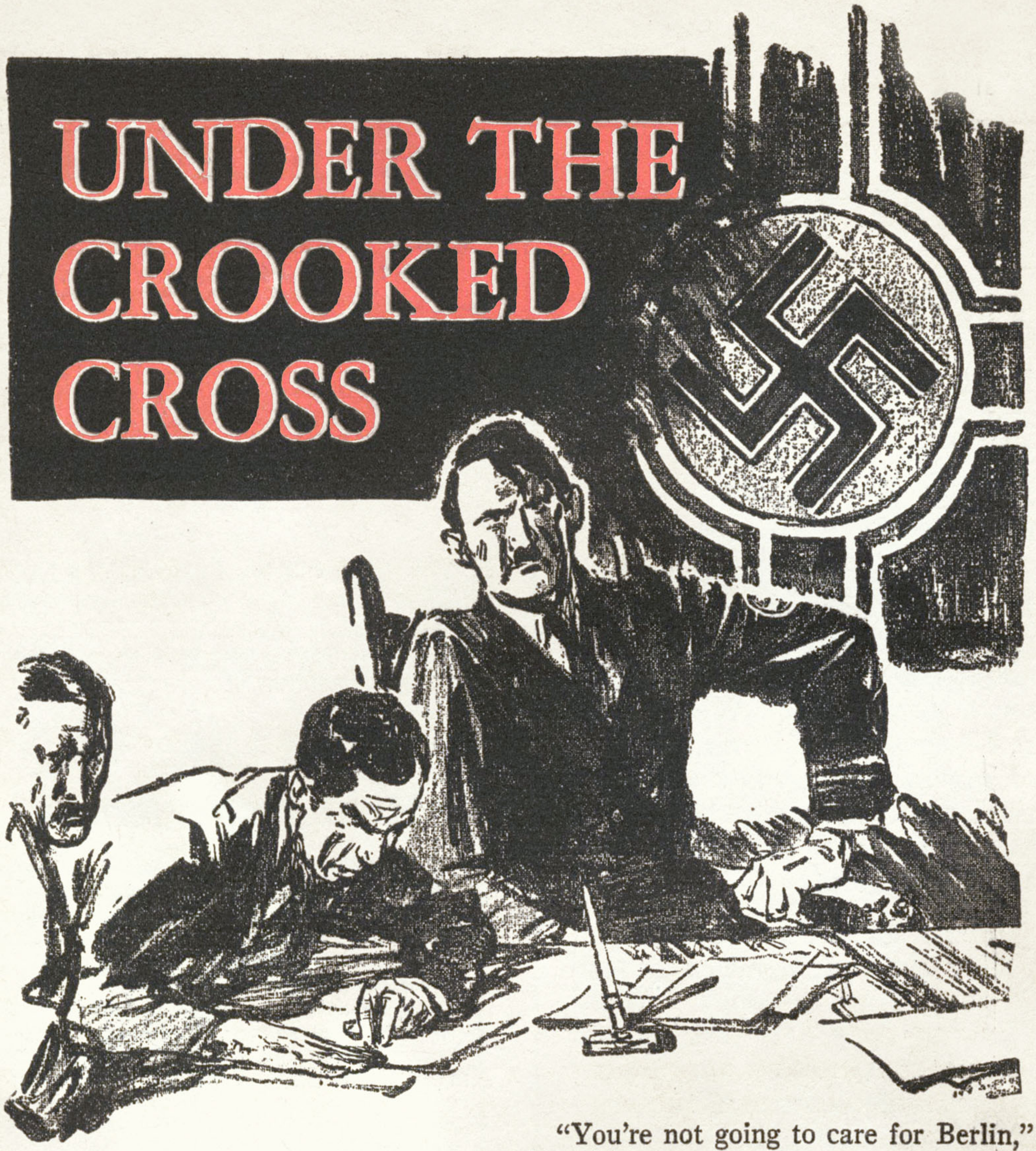
UNDER THE CROOKED CROSS



IT was with a reluctance that had increased with each journey, that I boarded the Mit'ropa for Berlin that spring of 1939. I knew I had no choice in the matter; the roots and stems of Liebelein Brothers were inextricably bound up with the destiny of its Berlin office, and I was the head of the firm, with eleven hundred employees dependent on me to provide jobs.

Still, I had been happy for the last week in Amsterdam, doing satisfactory business with the stolid, shrewd, calm Dutchmen, drinking their excellent beer with them in glass-covered hotel lounges.

Piet Drivjer, the head of our Holland branch and my closest friend in Europe, put me on the train. He had once been purser of a Holland-American liner, and liked to talk the American he had learned from the passengers. "Got everything you need, Carl?"

I said: "Sure."

"You're not going to care for Berlin," he said.

"Business is business."

"Yeah," Piet said. "For goodness' sake, get rid of that warehouse full of latex that we're stuck with."

"I'll barter it off for something," I promised. We were in my compartment now. The bed had already been made up for the night; the little blue night light was burning. I tipped the porter, and he went away. "Liebelein's Swap Shop," I said. "Isn't there any cash in Europe?"

"For guns," Piet said. "For shells. For poison gas and maybe airplanes. Not for stuff to feed babies or clothe people or make anyone happy. Just to kill them." Outside, the station manager was blowing his little warning horn. "I got to go," Piet said. "Look out for yourself, Carl. Those Nazis!" He made a noise like a man spitting.

"Those Dutch," I said, imitating him. "A nation of Gloomy Guses! I'll be all

right, Piet. Wasn't my cousin Franz at the opera with Hitler the other night?"

The horn blew again. Piet grabbed my hand. "You tell Herr Franz to leave the Amsterdam branch alone," he said. "And don't you trust him too far. I'll be seeing you, Carl. Don't take any wooden whistles."

The train was already moving. Piet stepped out on the platform and slammed the compartment door, and I was alone. I was thirty-five years old, and I remembered when these trips had been great fun, when I could not wait to leave New York in the spring for my swing around

A tensely dramatic story of barbarian war plans betrayed in vain . . . A novelette by—

RICHARD WORMSER

the Continental branches—when Piet would have ridden to Berlin with me on some pretext or other, and Jacques Levey, our Paris manager, would have met us there, and the three of us, with Munster, of Berlin, would have painted the town red. Now Piet was getting bald, and wouldn't go to Berlin if he could possibly avoid it. Jacques couldn't go there; not without danger of being spat on or even mobbed in the streets. Munster was dead, more or less naturally; that is, he had had pneumonia, was fifty-six, and there hadn't been the eggs and butter in Berlin to see him through his convalescence. And I—

I rang for the conductor. He was a German, of course. He came in and raised his right hand: *"Heil Hitler!"*

"Good evening," I said in English.

"Goot evening, sir. For a moment, I t'ought you was Cherman."

"No, American. Dig me up a bottle of Rheinwein, will you? Liebfraumilch, 1929."

"Sorry, sir, but 1929 we do not carry on this train. 1932, yes. Is choost as goot from—"

I shook my head. "I said '29." I reached in my pocket, took out my passport. "And I don't want to be waked at the border. Explain to the border guard that I have the freedom of the frontier, will you?"

HIS eyes bugged out. He was a lean, kindly-looking man, with dark hair. "Please, sir, iss necessary for the border guards—"

"Look at the passport."

He looked. The name *Liebelein* had its usual effect; the special visa signed by Goering finished it off.

"You are relation from Franz Liebelein?"

"My first cousin. His family raised me."

"*Ja wohl,* Herr Liebelein. I explain."

He scurried away, and I stood up in the gently swaying express and took off my coat, vest and shoes. In my dressing-gown and slippers I stretched out on the couch.

Unhappiness still gripped me. For a while I had been amused at the present high status of my cousin Franz, the black sheep of the family. I was no longer amused. I was thoroughly convinced that Franz would have killed me, for my half-interest in the firm our fathers had founded, except for the inescapable fact that an import-export house cannot become nationalized. Even Franz knew better than to suppose that he could do business in Paris, or London, or even Amsterdam or New York. And the local

managers would have resigned rather than work for him.

The conductor rapped timidly and scurried in with my wine. He poured the first half-glass and scurried out again. I half raised the bottle out of the bucket and looked at it lazily. The label read *1929*.

I looked at my watch. It was pushing midnight. I finished the bottle of wine while I undressed, and went to bed.

When the train stopped for the border, I awoke. Outside I heard a murmur: "*Liebelein. . . . Ach, Liebelein. Heil Hitler! . . . Heil Hitler!*" They didn't bother me, and I slept some more.

THE man who met me in the morning was as different from Piet Drivjer as new Germany was different from old Holland. Where Piet was bald and somewhat stoop-shouldered, Kurt von Rastau was almost painfully stiff, and young enough to make me feel paternal. His face broke into a wide, cordial and somewhat idiotic stare when he saw me. "*Heil Hitler*, Herr Liebelein!"

I resorted to English. Business, as I have said too often already, is business; but it took me a day or so to get used to Heil Hitlering. In the meantime, you could avoid it by speaking in English. "Hello, Rastau. How goes it?"

"Everything is fine," he said, using English too. "It is too wonderful."

"That's good," I said. "You're looking well."

"Thank you. And how are things in New York? I hear there is great food-shortage there."

"New York was holding out when I left. If worst comes to worst, we can shoot the wolves."

"I hear, too, there is rioting in Paris."

"Oh, the Parisians always riot a little in the spring. It's just like the salmon going upstream."

"It must be a relief for you to get back to Berlin."

I liked Rastau. He was pretty much New Germany and Youth Movement, but that wasn't his fault. He had been born in a difficult, an almost impossible time. I knew. I had been a German youth in the early twenties, when he was just a child. He had been born to know only hate and privation, and a bunch of international politicians starving children for no reason at all, and I could understand him.

I said: "Why, Kurt, people are people all over. I don't think of them as Germans or French or Dutch. You ought to try it. It's essential in our business. We are international goods-movers, and we ought to try to remember it, think internationally."

He said, "Yes, Herr Liebelein," because I was the active head of the firm, and he had been taught to believe that authority knew what it was talking about. But I could see he couldn't swallow it. For all his stiffness, he had a face like a sheet of plate glass, and I could read what was going on in his mind. First he gave the idea a small trial. Then he rejected it, and a horrible thought crossed his mind that I was anti-Hitler. Then he decided that such muddy thinking was pardonable, because I was, of necessity, polluted with democratic contacts, and he decided to be indulgent toward me.

"Is it not fine about Czechoslovakia?" he said, as we were getting into the cab.

"Why fine?" I asked. As I say, it took me a couple of days to get acclimated to Germany again.

"We have released the Southeasterners."

"But you have imprisoned the Czechs."

"They must be taught a lesson."

BUT I skipped that; I looked out the window of the cab, and my unhappiness of the night before came back. Piet, Jacques Levey, Munster and I—how we had loved this town! The nights we had spent, drinking Maiwein or Münchenbrau, shouting at each other, telling each other that at the next election the people of England and France would relent about the Versailles treaty, and the great German Socialist-Democratic experiment would succeed and prove to the world that the better you treat the workers, the better everybody is. Or something. The events of the last few years had muddled my memory, and all that I could recall was that we had been sure the Germans were the ones to lead us to a better world. And now—

My youth was gone, I thought. . . .

Then we were at the office, and the uniformed, bemedaled old porter was helping me out with my bags.

"Go ahead, Rastau," I said. "I want to talk to Maxl."

The doorman and I shook hands. "How goes it, Maxl?"

He had the old soldier's trick of talking without moving his lips. No one passing by could tell what he was saying, or if he was saying anything. "Not

good, Herr Carl. Not good at all. Of late, more than ever, I wish it was I and not Captain Johann that the bullet had hit."

It was in his arms that my cousin Johann had died in the war.

I said: "Your wounds hurt, Maxl?"

"My heart, Herr Carl. Again they go to war. I tell you, this Corporal Hitler, and Dr. Goebbels, and even Captain Goering, they have war in their hearts."

"Czechoslovakia?"

"That was the beginning, the rehearsal, as Ethiopia was the rehearsal for the Italians. They are going to fight again, Herr Carl, and I cannot stand it. How can people be such fools?"

"I know," I said. "I know. It is bad."

"You should know," the old soldier said. "Your brother, your four cousins. Your father, your uncle—*grüss Gott*, what folly!"

"Perhaps someone will stop them this time," I said. I patted his arm, and went in.

The office was decorated with flowers in my honor. Someone had even put crossed American and German flags over the picture of my father and my uncle in the directors' room. I was busy for a while shaking hands with old employees, making jokes with the oldest, when Rastau—who was the partners' private secretary—came up.

"Herr Franz on the phone, Herr Carl."

I hoped that I concealed the look of distaste that had leaped to my face automatically. I took the phone from Rastau. "Hello, Franz."

My cousin said: "*Heil Hitler*, Carl. I am glad you are here. We wish to speak to you."

"Who is *we?* Where are you?"

"In Goering's office. There is a conference. Can you come over?"

"All right," I said. "I'll be there."

I SUPPOSE I ought to explain why I, an American and a loyal one, was so well received in Germany. It all goes back to the early part of this century, around 1900 or 1901.

My father, Ludwig, and his brother Siegfried, had inherited Liebelein's from my grandfather. It had been a small produce house, handling hay and feed and coal and heavy things like that. This was in Berlin, and it was also in the time when Germany's chemists and engineers were inventing new products at a clip never before seen in the world.

They were good business men, and they built the business up, importing raw materials like rubber and coal and wood-pulp, and exporting what the German factories made: Coal-tar dyes, hard-rubber implements, celluloid.

By 1906, when I was two, it became necessary to open a New York branch. The U.S.A. was at once the best source of raw materials and the best outlet for finished goods. So the Ludwig Liebeleins moved to a house on Lexington Avenue in New York. My brother was nine, my sister seven, and I was the baby.

They left behind the Siegfried Liebeleins—five sons.

Father went to Germany every year on business, and my uncle sometimes visited us. I never met my cousins until 1920.

YOU can see what happened to us. I didn't remember Germany at all, and while we spoke German sometimes at home, I was a little ashamed of the fact that my parents had accents. Wilhelm, my big brother, changed his name to Bill, and he would hardly talk *Deutsch* to our parents. My sister was named Ilsa, and changed it to Elsie. She's back to Ilsa now, married to a man in San Francisco, and the mother of a flock of American kids.

In 1914—oh, well, I don't have to tell about that. Fill in the blanks yourself. Except that my father was surprised to learn that business was going on much as usual; Liebelein's New York office boomed, with orders from Scandinavia and France and England, the new Latin-American trade that was coming up.

And in 1917 Bill enlisted in the United States Army. I supposed it must have been an awful blow to my father, but I didn't see anything wrong with it. We weren't fighting the German people—my cousins Johann, Franz, Siegfried, Luther and Hans; we were fighting the Kaiser.

This didn't prevent my father getting arrested once for speaking German on the street, and spending three days on Staten Island until the firm's lawyer got him out.

And it didn't prevent Johann, Siegfried and Hans from getting the life shot out of them. Or Luther getting so badly wounded he was never any good again. Or Bill getting Spanish influenza at Camp Yaphank and dying—before my parents got there.

Or my mother dying six months later. The last thing she said was: "Thank

God, Ilsa didn't see it." Ilsa was my aunt, Siegfried's wife, after whom my sister was named. She had died in 1911.

An art dealer who knew my story once told me that his family had soldiers in four different armies, Polish, French, German, and American. They were Jews; and I've often wondered if that's why dictators don't like Jews; for Jews know the truth about war.

The year 1919 found the Liebelein brothers alive, but broken men, physically and emotionally. One couldn't expect my father to live after what he'd been through; he didn't. When I was sixteen and Ilsa twenty-one, we were orphaned.

Uncle Siegfried came to America at once. I'd been nine when I last saw him, and I didn't remember him. But I probably wouldn't have recognized him in any event. His back was bent like a bow, and his hands shook all the time.

He would take us to Germany, he said. We were very wealthy, and not charity objects, of course; but it was better that we Liebeleins stay together.

Well, the upshot was that I went with him, and Ilsa stayed to finish Wellesley. Before she came to join me, she married Jock, who was and is a doctor.

And I stayed on in the big Liebelein house in Berlin.

UNCLE SIEGFRIED, as kindly a man as I have ever heard of, sent me to a boarding-school; the big house was no place for a sixteen-year-old boy. Luther was dying upstairs, in the big bedroom that had been his parents'; he had no arms, only one leg, and they had had to put a silver pipe in his throat for him to be fed through. Uncle Siegfried slept in the old dressing-room, where he could tend Luther night and day; he never went out, never even left the floor except when I was home from school. Then Maxl would come up from the office and stay with Luther, while Uncle Siegfried came downstairs and was determinedly gay for my benefit.

A boy that age can get used to a dying man in the house, even one as grotesque as poor Luther was. But I never got used to Franz.

He would come and go at all hours, a silent figure, bitter and sardonic. I know that Uncle Siegfried was more than generous to him; but even so, Franz showed up at school twice to borrow my allowance from me.

Later he told me that he didn't remember much of those years; he was usually drunk. But if he was drunk, it wasn't the kind of drunk I had ever seen any other man carry; he never laughed, sang or stumbled, but moved silent as a cat, bitter as poison, through the shadowy streets of post-war Berlin.

School was all right; school was swell. Some of the boys were wealthy, and some were from the old Prussian and Bavarian and Palatinate families that looked on the Hohenzollerns as upstarts. The wealthy merchants' sons shared their pocket money with the poor aristocrats, for we were all Socialists in those days. Lenin in Russia and Bela Kun in Hungary were our gods, and Germany would be next. . . .

My youth, my youth!

LUTHER racked himself to death coughing one night when I had been in Germany a year and a half. Uncle Siegfried did not long survive him; he had kept himself alive just to tend his son, and his duty was now over.

Franz and I were millionaires, and Franz was also my guardian; but where was Franz? He did not show up for Luther's military funeral, or to sit next to his father's deathbed.

Jacques Levey, Piet, and the heads of our London and Copenhagen branches were there for the funeral of their chief, my Uncle Siegfried. It was drizzling. One of those raw Prussian days, and the hole they had dug for the grave looked like a wound in the earth. Munster and Jacques were crying, but I wasn't; standing there with a delegation from my school, I only felt relief that Uncle Siegfried's trouble was over.

A voice behind me said: "Carl, do not look around, but take these roses from me and put them on the grave later."

I didn't look around, though my blood went cold. It was Franz. I reached behind me, and my fingers closed over the bunch of red roses.

Just as the pastor reached the middle of the service, there was shouting near the gate, and later we learned that the detectives had got Franz as he was leaving.

He was wanted for strangling a woman, a common trollop, in a drunken brawl. But neither he nor his war-training had been able to strangle an innate decency in Franz; he had felt a compulsion to put flowers on his father's grave.

So that was the end of my German education. The managers of our main

"Lora von Lehmann, Carl Liebelein," said Willi. . . . "God willed it that we should meet today."

offices voted to send me back to the United States; I finished prep school there, and had one year toward my B.S. when the inflation of '23 threatened to disrupt and ruin Liebelein Brothers.

I had a brainstorm one night in my dormitory at Sheffield, and took the train for New York. Within three weeks I had closed my first big deal: a German coal-tar formula for a shipload of American soap. I have been the head of the firm ever since.

PERHAPS I didn't think all this as I rode on toward Goering's office and my cousin Franz. But it was never far from my thoughts. For the Franz of today was largely my doing. I had used the firm's money to have him transferred from a common prison to a political one, and it was there that he had met the National Socialists, and given his tortured life a goal.

My brain couldn't blame him, but my heart disliked Franz none the less.

Here we were at the famous old building on Unter der Linden. Big S.S. men barred my way until I showed my business card; then I was hurried through echoing corridors, pushed past an S.S. leader into the conference-room.

There they were: Hitler at the head of the table, his face so familiar that I smiled at him, without response. Big, smiling, tough Goering on his left; Goebbels—dark and secretive and bitter—on his right. Rosenberg, Streicher, my cousin Franz. The heads of the army, navy and air forces. The whole gang, if you took one viewpoint; the saviors of Germany, if you took the other.

Franz said: "My little cousin Carl, gentlemen."

I bowed. Only Goering answered me. "How are things in the New World?"

"Well," I said.

"Tell me, is there any possibility—"

Hitler moved restlessly, and Goebbels said: "To business, Marshal, to business."

"Quite so," Goering said.

"Carl," Franz said, "we wish to buy some rubber. You know?"

I waited, watching his dark, thin, intelligent face. One eyelid twitched con-

stantly, a nervous disease he had acquired in prison. I said: "Yes, cousin Franz."

Goebbels said: "There is no use being roundabout. Liebelein Brothers has a great deal of latex in Netherlands warehouses. We need it."

"Latex?" Goering asked. "I thought rubber was what we needed."

I said: "Latex is the smoked sap of the rubber tree from which rubber is made, Herr Field Marshal. This is the finest grade of Javanese latex."

"Interesting," Goering said, yawning.

"We do not wish to pay gold for this," Franz said. I wondered whether he was buying from me or selling to the government—or both. "It is not convenient."

I nodded. "If you will give me a list of the goods Germany can spare, I shall get in touch with our Holland manager, Mijnheer Drivjer. Then we shall see."

"Speed is essential," Goering said. "Without truck-tires, I am powerless. And rubber for gas-masks is—"

From the way he jumped, I am sure that Goebbels had kicked him under the table.

I said: "You are going to war." It was not a question.

At the head of the table, Hitler stirred. Goebbels said, promptly: "We hope it can be avoided." Goering sniffed through his nose at such hypocrisy, but Goebbels went on: "The Nazi way is victory without bloodshed. As in Austria, and in Czechoslovakia."

FRANCE, I wondered, or Belgium, or maybe Holland? It might be Poland, though there was the Russian threat.

Probably Belgium or Alsace.

I was sick. I felt myself grow pale and shiver there in that austere council-room, with its gay swastika banners, the bright uniforms on the men.

Up to now I had never believed it—been unable to believe it. Rebuild the Rhineland, yes. Take in Austria—well, why not? A large proportion of Austrians wanted to be taken in. Maybe, some day, do something about the Polish Corridor. But this was war. I could tell; this time they were going to push France and England to the point of arming.

Goering said: "My planes come down with leaky gas-lines. My mobilized troops bog down when the roads get rough. I must have this latex at any cost. Herr Liebelein will understand. He is German."

"No," my cousin Franz said: "he is American. Not just in passport, but all the way through."

They all stopped what they were doing—cleaning their fingernails or drumming on the table, or rustling papers—and looked at me as though I were a snake.

Hitler got up without a word and walked out of the room before they could scramble to attention.

I looked straight at Goebbels. "I am an American and a pacifist," I said. "But I am also a business man. Over a thousand people depend on me for a living. If you do not buy this latex from me, you will still buy it, somewhere. My firm might as well have the profit."

This was talking his language. He nodded, and his face cleared.

GOERING again wore a puzzled look. "But you lost four cousins in the war—Franz's brothers. Johann was my friend; I know. How then can you not be German?"

"I also lost my brother in the American army," I said. "He thought he was fighting the Kaiser, not Germany. I am not anti-German. I am not anti-anything but war."

I think Goering liked me. He said: "This time we will win."

Of all those men, I felt he was the one I might convince. I said: "Last time, England won. England has been virtually bankrupt ever since."

"Germany has been worse," he said.

I leaned toward him. "Herr Field Marshal," I said, "before the last war, England was the most prosperous country in the history of the world. If it is nearly bankrupt from winning a war, how would a country endure that was nearly bankrupt before it went into that war?"

Goebbels said: "This is beside the point. We did not bring Mr. Liebelein"—the "*Mister*" was in English—"here to discuss politics, but business."

Goering said: "Wait—wait. I— Herr Liebelein, how do you get anything in this world if you do not fight for it?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But I know fighting is not the answer."

He sighed. "For a moment I hoped you knew a way. I am a fighting-man, but I like you; and if you ever learn—"

Goebbels' voice cracked as he roared: "Marshal, please! Mr. Liebelein, if you execute this commission, there will be many others in the next month or so. We can make you very wealthy."

I said: "Danish butter is rising in the market. If you want any, buy now."

"We have no money for food. Sorry. What do you need, to take care of this?"

"A list of the goods you want to export. A list of the goods you would export if you had to. I already have such papers from the Netherlands. I shall arrange a tentative deal, and let you know this evening."

"Yes, yes," Goebbels said. He rose. "Unfortunately, I shall be engaged. So will be Marshal Goering. Your cousin we need here. But it is fitting that you be entertained by a high government official."

I said: "I know Berlin well; I went to school here. It is not necessary."

"Yes. It is essential to our etiquette."

Which, of course, meant that they wanted me busy while they went through my luggage, and my papers, to find first if I was honest with them, and second if I had anything they could use, such as French economic plans.

From the foot of the table a young man stood up. "I am free, Herr Doktor. May I volunteer?"

"Yes—good, good! General von Hesse will be your aide until we see you this evening, Mr. Liebelein."

I bowed, and walked to the door. Von Hesse walked with me, and we turned. Goering was still staring at me wistfully. I suspected the big soldier was going to get hell from little Goebbels when I was out of the way; it was too bad.

DOWNSTAIRS, Von Hesse said: "I have my car; you will ride with me?"

"Certainly."

His car was a big old Daimler, repainted, with two stars on the windshield. I said: "You are very young to be a general."

"I am thirty-five," he said. "I come from one of the oldest professional military families in Germany, or in Europe, for that matter. I am the head of the G-2 branch of the Military Intelligence Service." He said all this without expression. "Where do you wish to go?"

I stole a sidewise look at him. He looked like a good fellow. Still— "Any place where I can have a glass of beer to sip and a table to figure on. I have the Dutch needs inventoried and estimated in my mind; as soon as I get the German figures, I can start to work."

"Very good, sir. Would you honor me by coming to my apartment?"

"Sure." He started the car, and we went along, through the Berlin streets, dappled with spring sunlight. I said: "So you're a commander of the Gestapo, eh? I ought to be afraid."

The General stiffened in his seat behind the wheel. "I am not connected with the Gestapo," he said, "but with the Military Intelligence. You must not mistake the field-gray for the brown. I wear Army uniforms, not that of the National Socialist Party."

I said: "Oh. You are not a Nazi?"

Von Hesse said: "Here is my street. Charming, is it not?"

"Yes, it's pretty." It was one of those old German streets, with uniform four-story houses on both sides, a balcony in front of each story, and window-boxes full of flowers on each balcony.

VON HESSE stopped the car. "In the morning when I awake," he said, "the flowers make it smell like the country. Like it used to smell at Kirstendam in the spring, when all the dormitory windows were open."

"Kirstendam? You were at Kirstendam?"

He turned and stared at me, his eyes as tortured as Franz's. "Don't you remember, Carl; don't you remember me? Willi, your room-mate?"

There had been five of us in that room. Once, as adolescent boys will, we had pricked our fingers with penknives and mingled our blood as an oath of eternal brotherhood. "Willi von Gersto!"

"Yes. *Gersto* is the name of our family seat. Properly speaking, I am now Wilhelm von Hesse, Graf von Gersto."

I said: "My God, Willi, it's good to see you!" I said. I was shaken with an emotion I had not felt in years.

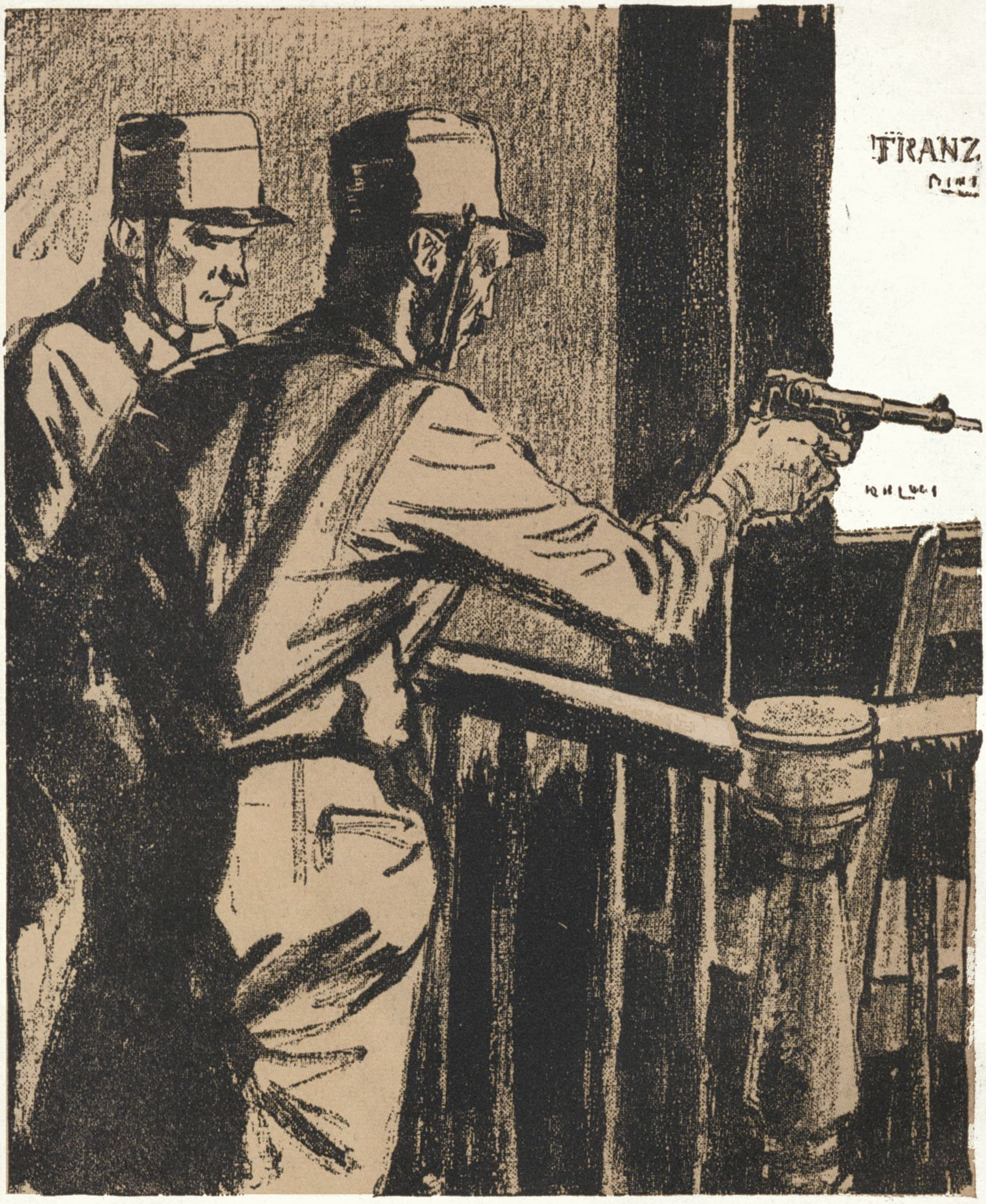
He said: "We cannot talk here. Come upstairs. . . . You must, of course, stay with me, while the Gestapo searches your papers at your office."

"They won't find anything," I said. "I memorize things before I come to Germany."

He said: "Come upstairs."

We walked up the old stone stairs, and it was all coming back to me: My youth, when Willi and my other roommates and I had been Socialists, about to save the world!

He opened the big oak door of his apartment, and stood back for me to go in first. As the door swung back, piano music flooded out, and the scent of the flowers in the box.



"I shot him because four young S. S. men were taking him away. They are

A tall girl, dark-haired and as fine-skinned as a gardenia, stood up from the piano, smiling at us with fine lips and clear brown eyes. I gasped; though the music had been beautiful, the flower-scent lovely, this girl made them both seem flat.

"My mistress," Willi said. "My old school chum. Lora von Lehmann, Carl Liebelein."

I bowed, dumbstruck. The girl didn't look as though she would be anybody's mistress; she looked like a queen. She gave me her hand, and I bowed and kissed it.

Willi went to the phone and called the government office. "Herr Liebelein will be at my flat," he said. "When the conference concludes the paper for him, send it here."

He hung up the phone. He smiled, and said: "Get us wine, Lora. It is not every day that old school friends meet. And two old school friends who have done so well, Lora. Carl is a big business man, a millionaire, in American funds, too. And me, I am a general with a lovely mistress."

"Willi!" she said.

"But this is an occasion," he cried. "Are you married, Carl?"

"No."

"Neither am I. You see, one of Lora's grandparents had the misfortune to be Jewish. Oh, very distinguished Jewish, a member of the Privy Council of one of

tough, those men, and—ingenious. And Maxl would never be discreet."

the minor kings, but still a Jew. So we cannot marry; it's *verboten*. Wine, Lora! God willed it that we should meet today, Carl. For you have not changed, Carl, I can tell. And me, I have not changed either."

I was extremely uncomfortable. "I'm sure you haven't, Willi."

"I still hate pigs and oppressors, and the heavy boot on the head of the people. I still hate dogs who make courtesans of ladies because they had a Jewish grandfather. And Carl, just think: You can come and go in all the capitals of the world. You are lucky."

"Yes."

"While me," said Willi, "I have the German war-plans for the coming Blitzkrieg. Which I shall give you to take to Paris. So we drink wine, Carl, to us and to my mistress Lora von Lehmann, whom I cannot marry." He gulped his wine at a swallow, bowed to Lora, and smiled at me. "They have to have me," he said; "they have to have the professional soldiers. But I do not have to have them. You will take the war-plans to Paris, and you will sell them to the French, and then there will be no war. And with no war, there will be no Nazis."

Willi filled our glasses again, and we drank, silently. I set the glass down, and smiled: "That is not a very funny joke, Willi."

Lora von Lehmann smiled at me. We were all polite. She said: "May I call

you Carl? . . . Carl, Willi is not joking. He is serious about this mad scheme."

Willi gestured toward a still life on the wall. "Behind that painting," he said, "there is a safe. In that safe are papers. I have been a good soldier; I have worked late in the office at nights. It was not very difficult to copy the plans. You know what a Blitzkrieg is?"

"A lightning assault?"

"Precisely," said Willi. "This is a starving country. We cannot long sustain a war. The object is to storm quickly to centers of supply, consolidate our position there, and then blitzkrieg, as it were, off in another direction. So that—"

I felt the blood draining from my face. "It is like what I told Goering, Willi. I am an American, a business man. You have no right to tell me these things."

His long legs carried him off the sofa, twisted him over the painting in a mad, frenzied movement. "My God," he cried, "is this my comrade, my schoolmate? This conservative, respectable ass?" The painting crashed on the floor. Lora rose, picked it up carefully. The fading sun highlighted a line from breast to knee that was pure poetry. She was a woman to do mad, gallant things for. And Willi came from a hot-blooded, swashbuckling family. A family that would strike at an insult, and damn the consequences.

THEN Willi was pushing the papers into my hand. I glanced at them; they were mostly numbers: *Unit 437 will proceed to rendezvous A23. Unit 1243 will use Route 92J to rendezvous A23, where the two units will—*

I handed the papers to Lora. "Put them back in the safe, for goodness' sake. Do you want Willi shot?"

Instead she put them under the sofa-cushion, sat down again.

She said: "You see, Willi? Carl thinks you are mad, too."

"Carl!" Willi turned to me. "I counted on you. I have been waiting for you to come to Berlin. This is not for me. It is for the world, for peace, for—"

"God, Willi, I'm no spy. I wouldn't know how to sell these things."

"All right, then," Willi said. "If you are afraid—"

"You know I'm not," I said. "But you will be sorry later. You cannot betray Germany. Generations of Gerstos would rise up to haunt you. I do not love the Nazis either, Willi, but—"

Willi said: "Listen: The tyrant cannot live without a war. You remember your history? Already the people of Germany twist under the knot. Those *Schweinhunden* must keep raising the ogre of a foreign enemy to blind the people to the enemy at home. I am not betraying Germany, Carl—I am saving it. I could not betray Germany. My blood— I could not be a man, and a Count Gersto, if I failed in my duty. And my duty is plain: I must do this thing, not for me, not for Lora, but for a million of me, a million Loras—for Germany. You see?"

I bowed my head. "I see, Willi."

He dropped his hand on my shoulder. "It is a terrible thing I ask you. But if you succeed, you may save the world. You say you are an American. Lincoln and Washington did nothing greater than what I ask you to do, my friend, my blood-brother—"

I stood up. "I'll try, Willi."

His hand clasped my shoulder tightly. "Brother," he said.

Lora put her hand on my other shoulder, and we drank a second glass of wine, standing. . . .

I do not know, now, what is going to happen in the world. Men come and go and shoot each other and disappear, like characters in an old-time cowboy picture. So I cannot tell you where I went when I left Paris, and whom I saw. I have written it all down elsewhere; and when I am dead, and those men—those fine foreign diplomats and generals—are dead, the vault in the bank in New York will be opened, and the manuscript can be published. But it is too soon now. Those bitter enemies, those opposing generals and patriotic diplomats may be shuffled up in the next flicker of the crazy cinema that is Europe, and come out allies and partners, and I do not wish to say anything that will cause anyone to die. There has been enough death. I had learned what few Americans know—fear. For I learned in that time what it is to be spied upon, constantly, night and day.

IT was August when the Lufthansa plane set me down at Templehof. Again young Von Rastau met me. But now he was in uniform, the blue uniform of one of the fancy Berlin militia regiments. Instead of shaking hands, or Heil Hitlering, he saluted. I was glad. I had read those plans, and I did not want to shake hands with any Nazis.

I asked him how things went in Berlin.

He smiled his funny little-boy smile, and said: "Swimmingly, yes, wonderfully. Soon the day comes."

I didn't know what he meant.

At the office a new man guarded the door. He had nearly as many medals as Maxl, but he was new; I had never seen him before. I sat in the car, and said: "Rastau, where is Maxl?"

"Herr Franz knows all, Herr Carl."

My voice was sharp: "I am interested to hear that you believe that; but where is Maxl?"

"Please, Herr Carl, come into the office. A crowd collects."

SWALLOWING whatever emotion I was feeling—anger, or fear, I couldn't be sure which—I went into Liebelein Brothers. And now my new feelings caused me to look at the office in a way I had never done before.

"Why," I murmured to myself, "they're almost all gone. Only a half dozen of them left!" I had never noticed before, it had been so gradual; but one by one, the old clerks of Liebelein Brothers had been replaced. Every year there had been a few less of my men, a few more strangers—Franz's men, Hitler's men.

I shoved Rastau aside, and went into the partners' room. My cousin Franz was sitting at the head of the directors' table, a cigar held between his thin lips.

"Franz!" I cried.

He looked up. He was in black, the uniform of a *Hauptmann* of Schutz-staffel men; there was a swastika on his arm. "Carl," he said. "American Carl."

I said: "Franz, what became of Maxl? Where is he?"

Franz raised his eyebrows. He stared at me a moment. "Surely," he said smoothly, "a partner in a firm does not concern himself with a doorman? Cousin Carl, I want your advice on a matter—"

As he spoke, his voice steady and level, he raised one hand for silence. He got up from behind the table, and moved around me, his walk that old, lithe, panther step that I remembered from his criminal days. He shut the door to the outer office, put his back against it, his left hand flat over the keyhole.

"Discretion, Carl," he said, his voice soft, purring. "It would be better if the clerks did not hear you. No?"

"Maxl, Franz. Maxl is—"

"He is dead, Carl," Franz said. "There was no pain. He never knew it." Franz's voice was absolutely flat.

"Dead?" I think I turned white.

Franz sneered: "You damn' democrat! You American! I shot him. Me, Franz Liebelein, the brother of the man who died in old Maxl's arms. I shot him because four young S.S. men"—Franz touched the insignia on his collar—"had him and were taking him away. They are tough, those young men, and—ingenious. And Maxl would never be quiet or discreet. You know that, Carl."

For just a moment I thought I detected a pleading note in his voice. My cousin Franz was asking me to believe that he had done right, asking me to understand him.

I felt myself shaking all over. I sat down in one of the heavy old chairs that had belonged to our grandfather—mine, and the murderer with me—and sank my head in my hands. Franz left me alone for a minute; then I felt his hand on my shoulder, and he put a glass of kümmel into my other hand.

I drank it, felt the warmth come back through me. I shoved myself away from the table, stood facing him. "Franz," I said, "I can't go on with you. I want to make that clear. You can have the Berlin branch, and—"

He laughed—God, how he laughed! "You Americans," he said finally. "Business as usual! Liebelein Brothers is through, Carl. Through! The world is over for you damned business men."

"Yes?"

"It is the day," Franz said. "It comes soon. We rule the world, Carl."

BUT I stuck to what I knew. "Then you have no objections to liquidating our affairs?"

He waved that aside. "If you knew what I knew! You damned peddler! That latex deal was satisfactory. You have the cotton for us?"

"Yes. Good Birmingham cotton cloth. It left England a week ago; I paid for it with a shipment of French wine. I paid for that with the Danish butter your people rejected. I paid for the Danish butter with the Czechoslovakian glass you had in your warehouse here, and—"

"Goebbels will want to know. Come on."

On the way to the palace, I felt as though a terrific load had been lifted off my back. I was free from any obligation to the Berlin office. I was through with Germany. I would come back some day, but it would be to the Ger-

Illustrated by
L. R. Gustavson

"We cannot stop now," Franz said. "With what France and England know, they won't want to stop."

many I had once known, or to a Germany not yet dreamed of. Not to this charnel-house of Nazis and spies. Not to this land of lying and murder. I was through. Or was this a trap? Was I being taken to Wilhelmstrasse to be shot in a cellar? Where was Willi? Had they learned? If so—then I was finished.

Through with this damned barter business, too, I thought. In January I would go south, to Rio and B.A., and work north from there. Building up that business, and good-by to Europe.

I had made my last barter in Germany. But I had been a fool to come back. Except that Willi had to know. . . .

The government building was jammed with those serious young Germans, who look like confidential clerks in uniforms, and army officers in plain-clothes. They scurried around, each with an attaché case under his arm, busy. Busy working for "the day"—the day that I hoped I had prevented.

The incredulous face of the French general, the bland distaste expressed by the English diplomat, came back to me. But I had convinced them. I was a business man, a salesman if you like, and I had been able to convince them of the authenticity of my plans, where a soldier would have failed.

We waited in the anteroom of Goebbels' office. Generals and admirals and marshals came and went, and we waited; we were given no chairs. This was Spartan Germany, where a man could stand.

And then the door from the hall opened, and Willi von Gersto came in; and relief flooded me. He gave some papers to one of the field marshals waiting, and turned to go out; but I was sure he had seen me. Just as he had the door half-closed, he stopped, came back in. He walked up to me. "It is the American Herr Liebelein, is it not?"

I bowed: "General von Hesse."

"What a pleasant day we had last spring!" he said. "It is too bad that I am busy now, and we cannot repeat it. You will be in Berlin long?"

"Not long," I said.

"Too bad," said Willi, and put out his hand. I shook it, and a tiny square of cardboard was pressed into my palm. I worked it up so it caught under the bezel of my school ring; we had more than once exchanged notes that way when we were boys.

"Heil Hitler," said Willi.

"Heil Hitler," I rejoined; as I raised my hand, I dropped the card into my sleeve. Willi went out. I put my hands in my pockets, and the note was safe.

WE waited some more, and then Goebbels could see us. We went in.

He was alone this time, a little man in a frock coat and wearing a bitter expression. He asked the details of the deal I had closed for the German government—when could they expect the cotton cloth, how it was coming, and so on. I told him it was already on the Continent, could be expected at any time.

"Good, good," he said. "Leather," he went on; "you don't have any leather, do you?"

I said: "There is a shipload of Argentine hides expected in Liverpool in a week that I have not contracted for. Perhaps—"

An aide came in with a telegram. Goebbels was, of course, above excusing himself. He simply opened the telegram, took a code-book from his inner pocket, and translated it.

Then he swooped for the phone. "Goering," he barked. After a moment: "Ribbentrop has reported. It is set; get into action." He snapped the phone back on the hook, leaned back.

Franz said: "The—er—Eastern matter?"

"Yes." Goebbels looked at me. "The whole world will know soon enough. We have concluded an anti-aggression pact with Russia."

"I see," I said. But in my new mood, I had no concern for European politics. "Now, about this leather."

Goebbels, I think, cannot laugh. But he came close to it. "Let the English have it. Let them chew on it. Now, go. I am busy."

Franz took my arm, and we went out. It was beginning to seep in to me. Russia, the control-valve to the Nazis—the left weight on the needle balance of Europe was gone. There was nothing to stop the Nazis any more, that they knew of. But I knew of something.

"It is wonderful," Franz said. "But perhaps you do not think so."

I said: "It—somehow—does not bother me. Franz, this is good-by. I shall be in Berlin a day or so longer, but it is better we do not meet."

He said: "All right. But do not stay any longer than you have to."

"No? You are threatening me?"

"Do not stay in Germany more than forty-eight hours," Franz said. "There is a favor or so I can do for the Gestapo; I can get you that much time. But—You are no longer useful or necessary to Germany; and you have never learned to hold your tongue. Like Maxl." He stared at the ground. "I killed so many once," he said. "They gave me a medal for killing so many. And it was better for Maxl that he died at once!"

He raised his eyes, stared at me a moment, then turned on his heel and left.

I stood there, watching him go. He didn't know that I knew as much as Goebbels; because in the plans I had carried to Paris, it had said that an attack was to be started on Poland the moment a pact could be concluded with Russia.

Later, riding in a taxi, I began to feel what everyone else in Germany had felt always since the Nazis took over. Fear. An all-pervading fear, as though the earth might, at any moment, open up and swallow me.

I had Willi's card in my pocket, but I was afraid to read it. The taxi-driver might be a spy. And my protection, my immunity, was gone. I was no longer a business man essential to the National State, I was just a foreigner known to be unfriendly to the Nazis and their war-machine. A foreigner who traveled a good deal, and who could disappear without anyone knowing where it happened.

The broad back of the stout cab-driver, so solid, so reassuring, was a menace. His mirror—

But I had to read the card. I worked it inside my cigarette-case, and then took the case out, pretending that I wanted to smoke, though my throat was dry.

There was just an address on the card: *Bayernstrasse 14, 2nd Floor.*

I shut the cigarette-case and leaned forward. "Driver, I have changed my mind. Let me out here."

I STOOD on a corner near a magazine kiosk, and finished my cigarette. I hailed another cab, and had it take me to a restaurant I remembered, a restaurant that had entrances on two streets. I drank a cup of coffee, went out the door I had not used, and only then gave a driver the name of Westestrasse, which backed up on Bavaria Street.

I smoked another cigarette there, until I was sure the cab was gone. Then went around the block, and tried the door of No. 14. It was one of the modern blocks in Berlin, that do not have

janitors at the front door; it was unlocked, and I walked up a flight of stairs.

There was one bell on that second floor, and a card: *Frau L. Luckow.*

I rang the bell.

Before the door was opened, I knew whom I should see, and my heart was glad. She was Willi's love, his wife in the eyes of God, but it did my heart good just to know that I was going to see Lora again.

She opened the door, and stood back, as though she had been expecting me all the three months I had been gone. I went in and laid my hat and gloves on the little hall table, followed Lora into the living-room.

There was a mahogany grand piano in one corner, but otherwise the furnishings were cheap, squalid. Light came through a slatted blind and laid horizontal lines across Lora's face, and I saw that she looked tired, older than she had in May.

"So you are back. You have seen Willi?"

"Just to get this address. Not to talk to."

"You have destroyed the card with the address on it?"

"I still have it." I handed it over, and she tossed it on a desk. It could do no harm here.

"When you were here before," she said, "you looked like an American. Now you look German. You have learned to know fear."

"Just a few minutes ago. I have been ordered out of Germany. The pact with Russia has been signed."

She shrugged. "Now the people of Germany will know what the Nazis mean. The Nazis who were to protect them from the Communists and Jews. Except Stalin and a Jewish banker or so who can help them."

"You had to move?" I said.

LORA looked at the floor. "The order is that army officers and citizens can no longer even seduce Jewesses. Formerly this applied only to members of the Party."

I raised my right hand as though to touch hers. Then I dropped it again. She was above pity or sympathy.

She smiled. "I forget I am your hostess, Mr. Liebelein. A glass of wine? Coffee?"

"Anything. Nothing."

"But I have made you sad," Lora said. "Willi would not like this. Mr. Liebelein—"

"Carl."

"Carl, tell me, tell Lora about Willi when he was a boy. When you were *Blut-brüderschaft.*"

Outside, the newsboys had begun to cry the news: the pact with Russia. Soon it would be the insult from Poland, then the border incident, then the march on Lemberg. It was all written down on the plans I had sold. England, France could not get to Poland; there was no way to move troops there. But if they believed my plans—and inasmuch as they could follow the Polish campaign and compare it, they must believe my plans, —then they would be ready to forestall the next move: Alsace, Belgium, then around into France, and—

BUT in this dingy room, I sat on an old-fashioned horsehair divan, and told a beautiful lady stories of my youth. The afternoon faded, and still we sat there, I on the divan and she on a little Viennese footstool. I don't know when I took her hand in mine, but it was thus we were sitting when Willi came quietly in from the back room. He was dressed in the uniform of a private in the army.

"Don't move," he said softly. "Do not move. My wife, and the friend of my youth. It is a lovely tableau. It i: —a marvelous finale."

"Finale?"

"Tomorrow I leave," said General von Hesse, "for the Polish frontier. Tonight I call on my love in the uniform of my orderly. As in the old operettas. The general dressed as a private." He sat down next to me, laid his hand over ours. He smiled a little. "Have you a penknife, Carl?"

"*Blut-brüderschaft?* I was just telling Lora about our childish oath."

"I have told her often. But now, tell me. You sold the—the plans?"

"Yes." I told the long story. The disbelief of the French general staff. The contempt of the British War Office. The final acceptance. "They call you the Avenger, Willi. You knew about that? About the German general who sold France the plans for the march through Belgium in 1914? The man known only as the Avenger?"

"Yes," Willi said. "I knew. It was a true story. But the French suspected some trick. This time—"

"This time," I said, "they can test the plans. There isn't anything they can do for Poland. They could not get troops there quickly. They can watch the cam-

paign, and see that your plans were the true ones. Step for step, battle for battle."

"Perhaps," Lora said, "if they declare war at once—when they realize the Alsatian campaign is next—the Nazis will back down. Stop the war."

"No fear of that," Willi said. "They cannot stop. They must give the German people an excuse for this continued starvation. There is no further excuse but war."

"Why do you say *They?*" I asked. "Abroad people say *he*—Hitler."

"I don't think there is any Hitler," Willi said. . . . "Yes, I know you saw a man. With a little mustache and a lock of hair. But I think Hitler is an idea. An idea of betraying a great nation for power and glory. Alive or dead, the man does not matter. It is the idea. . . . But now let us talk of other things. Lora, wine. I must soon go back to my office. A Von Hesse von Gersto must do the dirty work of the politicians. . . . Carl, tell us about New York. Always I wanted to see New York."

The day faded, with the long, lingering twilight you get in Berlin. But we sat there, and no one thought to turn on the light. Looking back on it, it seems queer to me that we talked no more of our betrayal of Germany; nor did we talk of the war that was about to start. We talked of little things; our preferences in food, in wine, in music. At last we turned on the lights.

WILLI finished the story of what had happened at a music festival, and rose. "I must go," he said, smoothing his private's uniform. "This is good-by, Carl. I have saved the big thing for the end. The favor I wish to ask you."

I had known it was coming. But I said: "Anything, Willi."

"Take Lora with you. Out of Germany. Any place."

"Of course," I said. There wasn't any drama in it. "But how?"

"She has a passport," Willi said. "They are always glad to let Jews go. Of course she can take no money. But she can work."

"I have plenty of money," I said.

Lora cried: "Willi, *no*. I shall stay here. I shall wait for you. This war, these people, they will not last forever."

Willi smiled at her as one smiles at a child. "Don't you know," he said, "what Carl and I did? The war-plans?"

"Yes, but—"

"The war will not go as They wish it. Not a fast march to victory, but a slow starvation."

I said: "Goebbels told me Germany has no money for food. They expect the war to open their way to food-markets, to granaries and herds of cattle."

"I can starve," Lora said. She stood facing Willi, tall, imperious. "I can starve—and wait."

"You will not be given the choice," Willi said. "You know what They do when things go against them. They strike out at the Enemy Within—at the Jews."

"I do not care," Lora said. "I am a German. I am your lover, Willi. I—"

Willi said: "Bad days are ahead of us, Lora. Worse days than we have ever dreamed of or seen. I do not think I can abide those days if you are not safe. And it is necessary that I—Wilhelm von Hesse, Graf von Gersto—abide them. To many people, peasants and farmers and little people, the sight of one of my family still leading will give courage." Then he laughed, destroying the awesome dignity of his speech. "Anyway, I would be shot if I tried to leave. I am an officer."

"The Von Lehmanns too—" she cried.

"No," he said. "No. Forget that. Don't you see, Lora, my courage is all I have left? I cannot die like a man if I am worried about you. You must go."

She was still standing as straight as an arrow; but something inside her relaxed. As though the body had gone out of a suit of armor. She said: "Yes, Willi."

"All right, then."

For the next ten minutes he was brisk, businesslike. What she must do, what she must take, and wear. Now I must call up Goebbels and my cousin Franz and tell them I was leaving now. "They are grateful to you, for the moment," Willi said. "They are jubilant over the pact. They will view with indulgence your wish to have a feminine companion to while away the tedium of your journey. Especially a Jewish one.

Lora and I were just tools in his hands. When he left, all was arranged.

NO one saw us off from the station that midnight as we started for Holland; no one from the office, not a soul. We were too tired to talk; we sat in the compartment quietly.

The conductor came in, and he said: "Wine, *mein Herr?*"

I said: "A small brandy."

He turned to Lora: "And for thee?" —using the *du* form that is a deadly insult when applied to a lady; I saw her gasp.

In English I said quickly: "Order anything you like, kid."

Her eyelids drooped. "Champagne," she said.

The conductor went out.

"They don't take much on credit, do they?" I asked. "That conductor has been told all about us. I'm traveling with a—a—"

"A daughter of joy," Lora whispered. She smiled a little. "All right. Willi wanted us to get away. The conductor is a spy; they are all spies. A nation of spies," she murmured. "So let us be gay."

SO we were gay. Oh, God, we were so gay! For all we knew, they had a dictograph in the compartment; so we drank wine and laughed and sang. I had the curtains drawn, and they could not see our eyes; but if they wanted to hear gayety, we gave it to them.

I think I would rather be killed outright than again to go through that orgy of forced laughter that Lora and I endured on the trip to the frontier.

And then the train was stopping, and there was Heil Hitlering in the corridors, and we were at the border. I whispered: "Not much longer. Oh, Lora darling, not much longer."

"I do not think I could have stood it much longer," she said. She let out a wild peal of laughter, as a hand rattled the doorknob.

A customs guard and one of those Gestapo men—the kind who wear a skull and crossbones—came in.

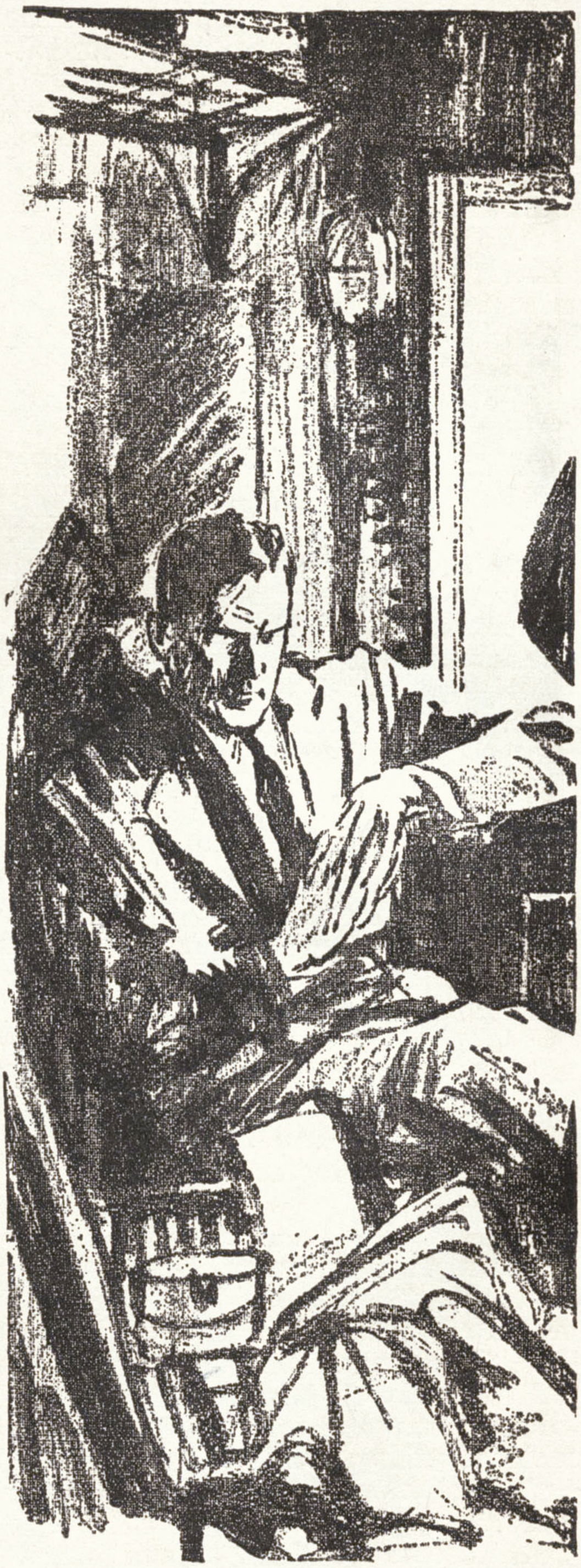
"Attention," they cried. *"Heil Hitler."*

"Heil Hitler," Lora said promptly. She winked at the Gestapo man.

I said: "I am an American."

I handed over my passport. The Goering special visa was still on it, but I knew that that no longer counted for much; the March to World Glory had begun, and foreigners who had been useful to Them were no longer anything but foreigners. The customs man took me on. He went through my luggage for money, went through my pockets. I had less than I had entered with, and he passed me.

The Gestapo man pointed at Lora. "It is forbidden to leave Germany. There is an emergency. The Poles have affronted our national honor."



I said: "Look—you speak English?" He nodded. "I have a special letter from Herr Goering," I said. "I'm to be allowed to take this woman to Holland with me."

"There are women in Holland!"

"They are flat," I told him. "Anyway, I want this woman."

Lora had taken her passport out of her little purse, was waving it. He took it from her. As he opened the leather case, his face changed; it was the special

She laughed, reached for the hem of her dress, pulled it off.

color that Germany uses for the passports of non-Aryans.

"Verboten," he said.

I LOOKED at the customs guard man, then at the money he had handed back to me, then at the Gestapo agent. I smiled a little.

The Gestapo man gave a curt order to the customs guard, and then the three of us were alone. I said: "I don't want to get in trouble with the Reich. Perhaps, Herr Agent, you had better keep this money for me—in case it is illegal for me to take it out. If, later, you find I should have had it, send it to me."

"Ja wohl," he said gravely. He took the money—about forty dollars altogether, and gestured to Lora. "Strip," he said. "If you have no contraband on you, you may pass."

"Really," I said, "is that necessary? This woman—"

"Is a German citizen. For German citizens, the order is plain. They must be searched."

"Don't you have matrons?" I asked.

"For ladies. Not for the traveling-companions of American business men. Anyway, I have held up the train too long. This is the last train to go through. The border is closing. We—"

"All right," Lora said. "It is nothing, Herr Liebelein. Nothing."

"I'll wait outside," I said.

"Oh, no," she said. She was playing it out. She then did a most courageous thing: she laughed and made a joke about being there all night if I left her alone with the Gestapo man.

Standing tall and straight in that little compartment, she slipped out of her fur coat, reached for the hem of her dress, pulled it off. I don't know what that Gestapo man thought of the whole thing, whether he knew the truth or not; but something in Lora's face stopped him. He said curtly, "Good enough!" picked up the dress, felt its seams. He prodded her lingerie almost gingerly to make sure nothing was sewed in it, and said: "You may pass." He stamped both passports. "Take your luggage," he said, "and walk down the track."

"Walk?" I asked stupidly.

"The Dutch train is waiting." He turned around and went out, and I busied myself with the luggage while Lora put her dress and jacket on again.

I had just two suitcases; Lora had nothing. We walked through the night, down the length of the train. The locomotives were standing nose to nose, like an old-time lithograph of the Joining of the Tracks. Dutch and German border guards ignored each other, there in the headlights.

THE bags were heavy; Lora helped me with one, her fingers pressing mine in the handle.

I said: "You were wonderful."

She said: "It is almost over."

We were fifty feet from the border. Our Gestapo man hurried past us as though he had never seen us before, and joined the guards. The bags were heavy, and we couldn't hurry.

A voice beside me said: "Faster, Carl!"

"Franz!"

My cousin had materialized from nowhere. He said: "Hurry! They have arrested General von Hesse. He committed suicide."

Lora gasped, and stumbled.

"Do not look around," Franz said. "Keep going. I flew up here. Get across that border."

I said: "I'll be all right. Lora, go ahead—you have your own passport." Still stumbling on with the luggage, I saw her forge ahead of me, stand in the light, show her papers, and move over the line. She passed on, beyond the Dutch border guards.

"Drivjer expects you," Franz said; "he will meet you at Enschiep." My cousin made no effort to help me with the luggage. "Hurry, you fool!"

"I was at school with Willi," I said.

"I know. He was standing by you at the cemetery, that day. I remembered him. Good-by, Carl."

I said: "But what will happen? What did they shoot Willi for?"

FRANZ stopped; I did too. He said: "I am not a complete fool. Carl, the government has spies in the Paris War Office. I suppose Paris has spies in ours too. The Reich has just learned that Paris has complete plans of the campaign in Poland. Only Hesse could have sold them. But Paris can do nothing. They cannot get to Poland."

"And after," I said, "what next?"

"We cannot stop now," Franz said. "With what France and England know, they won't want to stop. So—checkmate. Stalemate. A thirty-year war, perhaps. We cannot bomb Paris and London, because the instant we do, they know where our planes are from, what they have left unprotected. Hesse did his work well. You carried the plans?"

I did not answer. We were only twenty-five feet from the border; the Dutch engineer blew his whistle impatiently.

I said: "Franz, why did you come? To kill me?"

In the dim light we looked at each other—the last of the Liebeleins. Franz gave that sort of look a German gives when he is about to say something he did not read in "Mein Kampf" or the newspapers of Julius Streicher.

"Once I had to go to a cemetery," he said, "and so I went to prison. This time I had to come here. . . . We are all gone, Carl—Johann, Luther, Hans, Siegfried. Your brother Wilhelm is gone too. War took them all; it took our fathers, and perhaps I am dead too. You must marry, Carl."

I said: "You risked shooting to come tell me that?"

He had a touch of the old bluster. "I am a major of S.S. men. They will not shoot me. . . . The German blood is good blood, Carl. I cannot believe that is not so. You must marry, Carl. In America, in New York, or in that city in the West where Ilsa lives—I cannot pronounce it."

"San Francisco."

"No matter. I must go now, before matters get worse, and you must cross the line. I would not come back to Europe, Carl."

"No."

"So good-by," Franz said. "We might have been brothers, if times had been different. Good-by, Carl, before it is too late."

I hurried over the border, showed my passport, was shoved aboard. I looked back, but Franz had melted away in his catlike way—a silent man, a sinister, indirect man.

I went down the corridor of the train, looking for Lora, and the train started to move, and we were in Holland. . . .

There is not much more. As the train rumbled and rattled through Holland, Lora clung to my hand and wept. Not as a woman cries, but deep down inside her, as strong men sob.

WE were slowing for Enschiep when she stopped. She said: "Willi would not have wanted me to weep."

"Willi would have understood. Lora —there is nothing I can say. Except that Willi died as all the Counts of Gersto have died—fighting for what they considered right. There was no other course for Willi."

"But why, Carl? Why? Why must such things be?"

"I do not know. Perhaps because Willi died, such things will not be much longer." The train had nearly halted. "I must go now and meet my friend."

She smiled through her tears. "When you come back, I will be repaired. I will not disgrace you."

I kissed her, not as a lover, but as a brother, as Willi's brother. And then, walking down the corridor, I knew that some day I would kiss her that other way; and I knew, too, that Willi—wise, brave Willi—had known this. . . . Well, life goes on.

Bald Piet was a wonderful sight. He saw me, and ran toward me in his clumsy way; and we got back on the train just as it started again. It was fine to hear his Americanisms. "So those two bums finally got together! Hitler and Stalin: What a pair!"

"Piet, I've got a lady with me."

"Why, you old dog!"

"Not like that, Piet. I've got a story to tell you."

So he joined us in our compartment. And as the train rattled toward Amsterdam, Lora and I told him what I had done, what Willi had done.

HIS reaction was characteristic of Piet. When I finished, he gravely shook hands with me. "You old hound, you! I never knew there was that much life in you. So you sold Hitler out, huh?"

And he said: "Baby, this is good-by to Liebelein Brothers. You're through in Europe. Listen, Carl. If you ever go back to England and France, they'll fill you so full of lead you'll sink through the ground."

"But he is the friend of the Allies," Lora said. "He helped them."

"Sure, lady. As a spy. They don't trust spies. They'll never know whether you aren't working the trick in reverse. Me, if I were you, I wouldn't even stay in Holland very long. Collijn has his secret service too. Nobody, my boy, likes a spy."

"I thought I'd go home, then to South America, build up that business."

Piet took a battered old pipe out of his pocket, sucked on it dry. "Yeah. Good idea. There's a boat sailing from Rotterdam pretty soon; you better take it." He looked straight at me. "I'll see the lady aboard it too."

"Thanks, Piet. How about you? We can use you in New York, and there's always Curaçao, and Dutch Guiana and—"

"Not me, baby," Piet said slowly. "I gotta stay home. I'm a reserve captain of bicycle troops." He chuckled slowly. "Imagine me leading my *Boers* into action, mounted on a prancing bicycle. Won't I wow the ladies?"

For the first time since I had known her, Lora laughed. She put back her head, and long lovely ripples of laughter poured out of her shapely throat.

Piet clowned it through: "Well, some of the older ladies, anyhow."

That good Piet Drivjer took Lora home with him, home to thin, acrid Mrs. Drivjer. He dropped me at the hotel, and once in my room, I slept and slept. You can have no idea of what it is to sleep until you come out of Nazi Germany,

where no one sleeps soundly, for fear he may talk in his sleep. . . .

I ate in my room the next day; I didn't see anybody. Lora was better off with another woman for the time being.

AND gradually my sadness began to leave me. I was no longer regretful at leaving Europe; it wasn't a place that I knew any more.

Good-by, good-by to dictators and power politicians, and old men sending young men to war. Good-by to lying and intrigue; who can shed a tear over farewells like those?

I did not even turn on the radio in my room; I knew what was happening in Poland. But sometimes the sound of other radios drifted in; England and France were going to war. . . . No, they weren't; yes, they were.

It didn't matter. I knew that all they were waiting on was to see if I had sold them true plans; when the march through Poland had confirmed that, they would fight.

But not such a fight as the world had ever seen before.

I seemed to see Willi, tall, handsome Willi, dressed in his general's uniform, laughing at them, saying: "Checkmate!"

For, knowing each move that Germany was going to make—and Willi had been sure that Germany could not make new plans in time to save itself from revolution—France and England would move to meet each plan. And the armies of the world would come to a standstill on the Western Front and all other fronts, like two cars meeting nose to nose on a one-car road.

I was wrong, of course; Germany could and did make new plans. . . .

It would have been Labor Day at home when Piet came for me. "You sail tonight," he said. His face was gaunt; he was wearing his uniform. He said: "If you knew what I've been through on account of you! The government's glad to get you out of the country; that's the best I can say for you."

"Lora?"

Piet made his favorite spitting noise. "Thinking of a dame at a time like this! Your Lora's on the boat; my wife took her there. Got any schnapps?"

I produced gin and the bitters-shaker. Piet took a strong one. "Better, Carl. Hurry up now."

He rushed me out, and into his car; that crazy man drove like mad through the flat countryside up to Rotterdam. I leaned back, exhausted, gazing out at my last look at Europe. Everywhere pink-cheeked Netherlanders had donned their uniforms; Holland was standing by.

"Think your country'll get into it?"

"I don't know. The Dutch always get it in the neck. Ever hear about the time the Dutch fought the English?"

"Yeah. The Dutch won."

"You're a cheerful cuss." Piet reached out and snapped on the radio. It spoke German, French, then Dutch. It was going too fast for me. Piet snapped it off.

"They'd declared war," he said. "Now it comes."

"Now it doesn't come," I said.

"*You* say! I think that maybe you're wrong, and it'll be like the last time, only worse."

"No."

We were coming into the outskirts of Rotterdam now, passing the junk-yards. Rotterdam is not pretty, not Dutch at all; it is a shipyard town, and not much neater than shipyard towns any place else in the world.

"Ten minutes more," Piet said. "I guess I don't want to say good-by in front of people. So—"

I put my hand on the wheel, over his hand. "So long, boy. We've had some good times."

"You're darn' tooting. If you write to Jacques, give him my love. I'll be writing, myself, but I don't know whether it'll ever reach him."

He parked opposite the liner's pier, gave my bags to a porter. The porter saluted; he wore army uniform.

We went through the pier shed.

I squeezed Piet's arm, and he dropped away from me, my last friend in Europe. I started up the gangplank; at the top I saw Lora. And I saw in her eyes what I had been hoping for; what maybe Willi had hoped for. She was more than just glad to see me; some day—

BUT we just shook hands as we met; and then, still holding hands, we went below, out of sight of the pier, out of sight of Europe—a Europe braced for a shock that I hoped we had prevented; a Europe, I thought, doomed to slow starvation and misery, but not to great battles.

We had prevented it, I believed then; but we weren't thinking about that; we were thinking about each other, and about a new day and a new world. . . .

After a while the ship sailed.

Misery Bails Out

KERWIN came into my office and laid a radiogram on my desk. "Here," he said, "is a particularly early bird. I'll be surprised if he doesn't get the worm."

KERWIN AIRCRAFT CORPORATION,
EAST OAKLAND, CALIF.
JUST LEARNED VIA RADIO NEWS BROADCAST YOUR TEST PILOT KILLED TODAY STOP THUS FAR I HAVE ALWAYS MANAGED TO PULL OUT OF MY DIVES SO PLEASE HOLD THAT JOB FOR ME STOP ARRIVE TOMORROW MORNING.
E. S. MORGAN

"This," I said, "is from old Misery Morgan—and he gets the job."

Kerwin grinned. "And who is E. S. Misery Morgan?"

"No. 1 pilot. American. Our generation. Went over with the Canadian Royal Flying Corps in 1916, when he was

"There was nothing I could do. So I bailed out."

seventeen, but transferred to the United States Service as soon as he heard we had an active squadron at the front. His record is seven German planes and nine balloons, and he must have more hours than any other citizen of this country."

"What's he look like?" Kerwin asked.

"I don't know," I replied, "never having seen him. But I have heard all about him. In the service they called him Misery Morgan because he was a crape-hanger. He never went out on a patrol without announcing, before climbing into his ship, that he wasn't coming back. He just knew it. Then he'd shake hands with all of the squadron present and give his mechanics some francs to drink peace to his ashes when he was gone."

About four-thirty next day a big man, accompanied by a little boy who wore a round black mandarin cap with a red marble on top of it, came into the general office.

"Familiarly known as Misery Morgan?" I greeted him as we shook hands. He nodded. "The job's yours," I said. "Who's this? A cadet?"

"This is the General," Misery said, and the General bowed low, thrice, gravely, in conformity with the rule in the Book of Proper Behavior. "I picked him up under tragic circumstances, so that sort of made us pals."

"Tell us about it," Kerwin urged.

"Not much to tell," said Misery Morgan. "There was a town up in the Yangtze Valley. A local war-lord was attacking in force from the south and east, and the garrison was evacuating out the north gate. The mission staff had left a week before, but the doctor's wife had been too sick to be moved. In the interim she'd died, and now he was begging over an amateur wireless set to have a plane sent up to rescue him and his small son before they were captured and held for ransom, if not killed.

"Of course, the buck was up to me. I flew a bomber because of its long cruising range. Well, the doctor and the kid were there, and started running out on the field to meet me just as a light battery opened on the plane. The kid stumbled and fell on his face two seconds before the first shell—a long over—landed, so the fragmentation went over him; but his dad—"

Misery Morgan fished a loose cigarette out of his side pocket and lighted it, and the General trotted over to our private exchange desk and fraternized with the operator. "Well, I took him to my digs in Nanking," Misery resumed. "My houseboy was out hell-raising, so I had to heat water and wash the little fellow and put him to bed with the top of one of my pajamas for a night-gown. And just before he hopped in, he dropped on his little knees and laid his arms across my right thigh and said his regular prayers. Then he said we ought to pray for his father and mother. That meant ad-libbing a prayer, and as the General wasn't up to it I had to volunteer. Gosh, what a performance!"

"God had you by the hand, you old fool," said Kerwin. "Go on."

"Well, here we are. I had a swell job in China—chief instructor at the Nationalist flying-field near Nanking—out

there ten years and learned the language. But the General is growing up, so I quit to bring him home for an education."

THE General used to come over to the factory after school, and he always spent his Saturdays around the works. Planes fascinated him. That summer Misery ferried two planes back East for delivery and took the General with him. *En route* he let the kid have the wheel, although of course Misery was set to grab the other control if anything happened. He explained the functions of all the gadgets on the instrument-board, and instructed the General in the theory of take-off and landing; when they got back home, he gave him a long written examination to see how the kid had absorbed it. The General got such a high mark that old Misery talked of nothing else for a week. Frequently he'd rent a little two-place cabin all-metal job, an aërial flivver, and they'd go away over week-ends on hunting and fishing trips, and in that little ship the kid was taught to fly. It was a great day when the General made his first perfect three-point landing.

The day following, however, wasn't so good. The General came down ill; and when his temperature ran up, Misery had a good child-specialist in. He took five days off; and when he reported at the factory again, his face was that of a man who has just received his death-sentence. "The General has infantile paralysis," he said sort of husky, and sat down and looked at the floor and shook a little.

"Strange," he mumbled, "how a man can learn to love a kid not his own flesh and blood!"

It wasn't strange at all to me. The General was lovable, and he had taken up the slack in Misery's lonely life.

He went on: "I wish I could pray—I mean I wished I believed in prayer. But I never was a praying man. Even when I was a young fellow and went out on patrol and was terribly frightened, it never occurred to me to be mealy-mouthed and pray to God to save me, and in return I'd be so good God would be proud of me. . . . But I've been so happy with the General—I wish I could pray and ask God not to visit this sorrow on him. He's so young—such a—"

And then old Misery broke down and cried, and it was pitiful. But it did him good, because it relaxed his nerves; and before you could say scat he had his arms outspread on my desk and his hard face in them and was sleeping like a child.

Fortunately the General didn't have a severe attack. No iron-lung business. It did settle in his right leg below the knee, however; and when he tried to walk, the leg buckled under him. So he had to wear a steel brace; and when he walked, he swung his leg wide from the hip where he still had power.

For a while Misery seemed to be going crazy. The doctors to whom he took the boy were the best in the business, and it was their opinion that if the General could have special treatments over a long period, at some place like Warm Springs, Georgia, they were pretty sure he'd lose the brace by the time he was twenty-one.

You'd think that verdict would have bucked Misery up. But it didn't. It submerged him in grief, because he'd lived hard and had never saved his money; and now, when money was needed to save the General, the General couldn't be saved!

Well, about this time we turned out the first of a new design of light bomber. We hadn't any orders for it; Kerwin just had some ideas of his own he was willing to spend a lot of money on; he had such faith in the design he couldn't visualize it as a loss; if nobody wanted it for a light bomber, it could be made over into a passenger plane for private use. It was a beautifully stream-lined job, and fast enough for any man's army. Misery Morgan gave it every test a plane can have, including a dive at five hundred M.P.H. It was structurally right.

ON the day after Misery completed his last test, a middle-aged Frenchman showed up at the works. He'd heard about our K-31 and wanted to test it himself. He'd been a test pilot in France and had the documents to prove it; also he had a transport pilot's license from Civil Aëronautics; he stated that if the plane passed the tests, he'd give an order for fifty, cash on the barrel-head. So we let him take her up—every day for three days; and when he finished he went away without saying anything. Misery Morgan had the ship carefully checked, and decided to take her up again and stunt her, to see if she'd developed any weakness under the severe pounding the Frenchman had given her.

There was a high fog over San Francisco bay that morning; I imagine the ceiling was about three thousand. Misery disappeared in the murk almost at once, and Kerwin and I went back to the office and found the Frenchman wait-

ing for us, and with him a middle-aged Chinese gentleman whom he introduced as Colonel Wong Him. And Colonel Wong Him got down to business, dickering for fifty planes of the K-31 type; within the hour we had the order, and an advance payment of one million dollars to clinch the deal. They were to be shipped to Rangoon and trucked in through China's back door.

When the buyers were gone, Kerwin telephoned over to the hangar for Misery Morgan to report to him, for we had a feeling we had him to thank for this fat order. But he hadn't come in yet, and immediately we commenced to worry; he hadn't intended being up more than three-quarters of an hour, and he'd been gone two hours.

Our worry increased when a waterfront reporter on a San Francisco paper called up and wanted to know if we had lost a ship and/or a pilot. He said a man had parachuted into San Francisco bay an hour and a half previous, narrowly missing landing in the launch of an Italian crab-fisherman inward bound. The man had been hauled aboard, taken to Fisherman's Wharf, and thence by ambulance to the Harbor Receiving Hospital to be treated for submersion and shock. He had refused to give his name and tell his story, and had left without disclosing his destination. An examination of his parachute, which had been left with the fisherman, had disclosed a small stencil in one corner, bearing our company name and address.

KERWIN is a man who never admits anything until he has to. If the K-31 had been lost, it was probably due to a structural weakness which had developed under the strenuous testing; if this was so, we couldn't afford to advertise it. So Kerwin said we hadn't missed a pilot or a ship as yet, and suggested the 'chute may have been stolen from our hangar.

We sat there waiting for Misery to report, and we were morally certain he was the lad whom the crab-fisherman had picked up and that the K-31 was at the bottom of San Francisco bay. Well, Misery would be able to tell us what went wrong so we could guard against that weakness in the fifty ships we were going to build for the Chinese army.

Presently the operations officer of Amalgamated Air Lines called up, to report that the pilot on their Trip Four, Los Angeles to San Francisco, had radiophoned in to the operations office that he saw a plane land in a field in the San Joaquin Valley about ten miles due west of Madera. It was flying below him, and he saw the pilot was a green hand; suddenly he set her down, and she jumped like a greyhound twice, and ground-looped over a couple of acres, but managed to stay right-side up. The Amalgamated pilot was flying low to escape a strong headwind, so he dipped lower to get this other plane's license number and general description. He saw a twin-motored cabin job with yellow wings and green fuselage, and alternate bars of green and yellow on her elevators. He read the license number on top of the right wing—and it was NX 8297. The San Francisco office of the Civil Aëronautics Authority had informed him that this experimental license had been issued to us, so now he was calling up to report.

"Well," said Kerwin, "it's Saturday afternoon, and we haven't a thing to do but fly down there, locate our K-31 and investigate. I knew the ship can land itself under perfect weather conditions, but I didn't know it was so smart it would fly down into the San Joaquin valley and pick out a nice level pasture to land in."

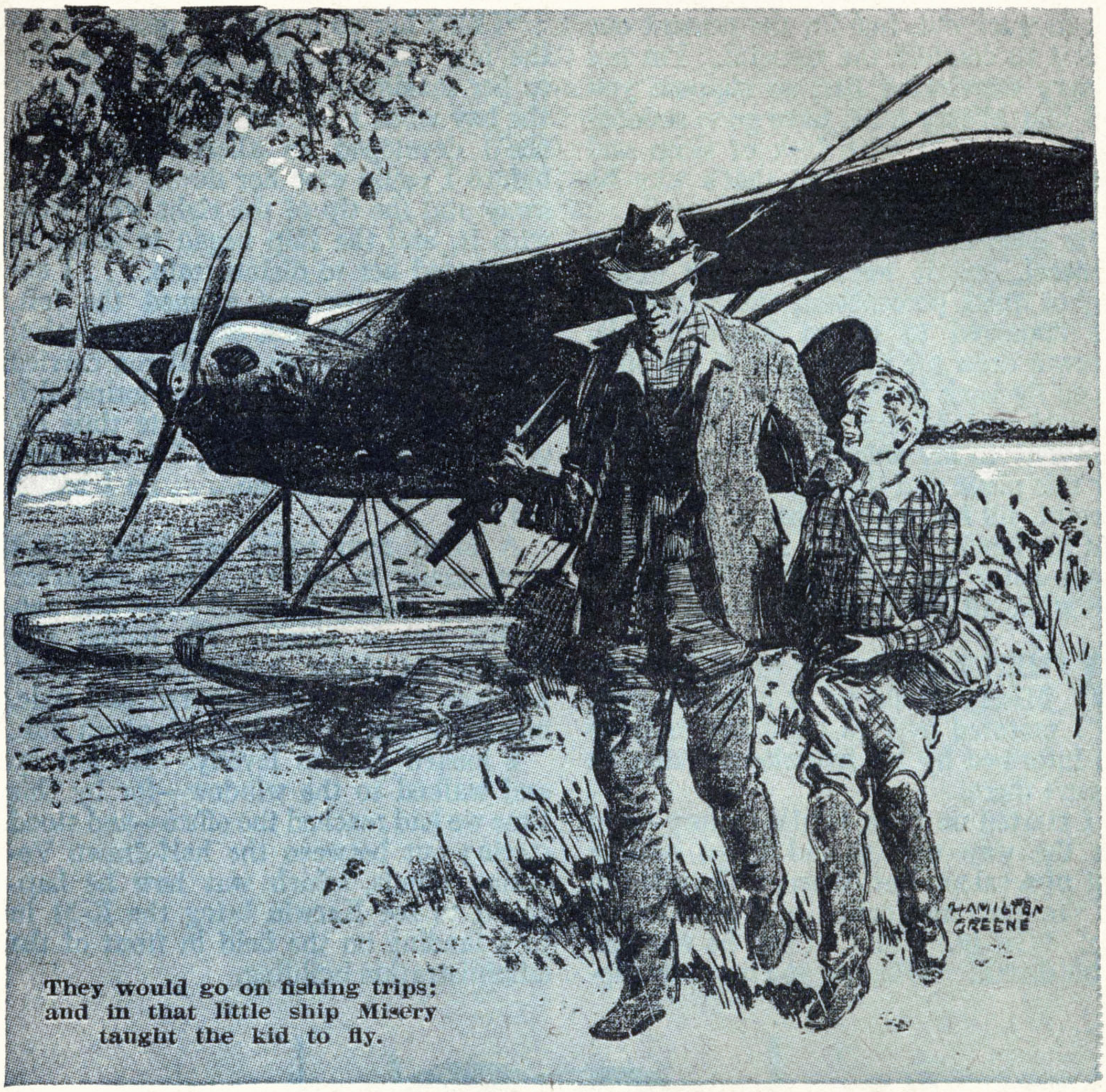
We had a thirty-five-mile tailwind, and were down there in an hour. The plane was easy to locate in that brown pasture. We dragged the field, landed and taxied up to it—and suddenly Kerwin killed the motor. "It's our ship," he said. "There's the General waving to us out of the cockpit window. Quick! What's the score?"

Sometimes I can think pretty fast. "The General was a stowaway when Misery took the ship up, and Misery didn't know it. If he had, there aren't enough devils in hell to have induced him to bail out and abandon the General. That plane is intact—"

The General shouted as we got out and walked toward him: "I landed her, Mr. Kerwin, and I didn't wash her up, either! She ground-looped something awful, but I shut off the ignition because I was afraid she might nose over and catch fire. Misery always told me to cut the ignition just before a crash."

"General," the chief said, "you're the eighth wonder of the world. And ever since, you've been sitting there waiting for some one to come and get you?"

Said the General: "Well, I had to sit here until help came, because I can't climb down; and if I did, I couldn't climb back."



They would go on fishing trips; and in that little ship Misery taught the kid to fly.

"Too bad about you," Kerwin answered. He was smart. He knew it's not good mental therapy to sympathize with a cripple. "You could have managed if it had been really necessary. Nobody has to worry about you!"

"Did somebody fish Misery out of the bay?" The General was trying hard to be brave, but his voice cracked a little.

To my astonishment, Kerwin lied. "I don't know, General," he answered. "Did his 'chute open?"

"I don't know either," the General wailed. "I—I—looked, but—he'd disdisappeared in—in the fog."

"Well, don't start crying about him until you have to, General." Kerwin reached up and patted the boy's head. "The chances are the 'chute opened; and if it did, Misery will be home when you get there. He always wore one of those life-jackets with the gas cartridge down in one corner; in case he bailed out into the bay, he'd pull the string, and the gas flowing up between the double rubber lining would make a nice life-preserver."

"But he wasn't wearing that jacket this morning." There was terror in the General's voice. "He bailed out at eight thousand. I looked at the altimeter."

"Then, General, you'll have to make up your mind to get along without Misery; but you mustn't worry, because if Misery is gone, you can be my boy."

The General went to pieces. "Why did he bail out?" he sobbed. "Why—did he throw a perfectly good ship away?"

WELL, Kerwin didn't answer—for the reason that he didn't have an answer ready. We inspected the ship, and it was O. K. Standing back of her where the General couldn't hear us, Kerwin said to me fiercely: "Don't stand there like a goof, with your big mouth wide open. Give me a line. The General's been sitting here thinking, and he thinks old thoughts. He's man-raised and doesn't reason like a boy. . . . He's the odd number that can't be fooled."

"It will be up to Misery Morgan eventually, Chief," I said. "The details are

his to work out, but for the present our job is to comfort the General. I'm not a very convincing liar, so suppose you tell him Misery must have gone suddenly insane, what with lack of sleep and worry over his boy, and that's why he bailed out—to die and have peace."

So Kerwin unloaded that one on the General, and it went over. He was a boy of quick perceptions, and he noticed we appeared to be on Misery's side. Kerwin drew me to the rear of the ship. "You fly back in the ship we came down in, and find Misery Morgan, and bring him over to my office," he ordered. "I'll fly this plane and the boy over to Fresno airport, fill her up, test her and give the kid his lunch. I'll be at the factory two hours after you get there. Then we'll see what all the mystery's about."

WHEN I got back to town, I figured Misery would be at home by now, so I motored over to his house, only to be informed by his housekeeper that he wasn't there.

I started on back to the factory—and on the way who should I see coming out of a saloon but Misery! I pulled in to the curb and called him over to the car. "Get in," I said. I saw he was just a bit drunk. "What do you mean by dipping your wick into hard liquor? If the General saw you, he'd feel dreadful. It's bad enough to have me catch you."

Misery tried to laugh that one off. "First time I've slipped since the General and I hooked up together," he apologized. "I have to report that I bailed out into the drink, and my clothes are still wet."

"So you thought you'd hoist a few to ward off pneumonia?"

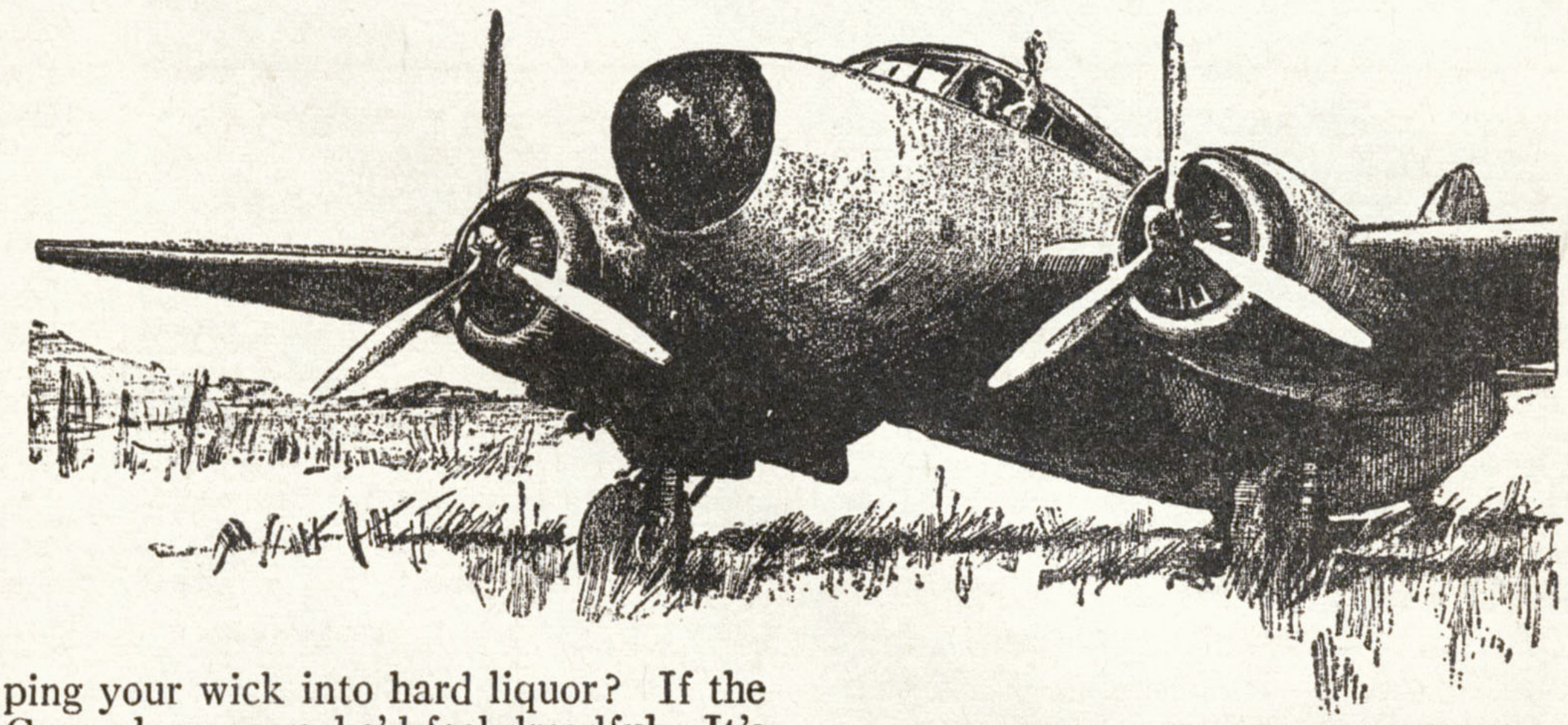
"Sure," said Misery Morgan.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I took her up to eight thousand above the fog," he reported, "and gunned her to her maximum speed. I was out over the bay when I felt her quiver. . . . I saw she'd developed an aileron-flutter, but before I could ease her down, it carried away and the tip of the right wing went with it, and the ship began to shake so I expected her to disintegrate. . . . I cut the right motor and gunned the left, hoping to pull her out of the tight spiral she'd gone into when the aileron carried away. No can do! She was losing altitude too fast for me to waste time experimenting. . . . Anyhow, I knew there was nothing I could do. . . . So I bailed out."

A blind man could see lying didn't come easily to Misery. He'd rehearsed his story hoping it would come out naturally, but it didn't. He halted and cleared his throat a number of times, his face went alternately red and pale, and there was a hangdog look about him.

I looked at him levelly. He got up and walked to the window—for by this time we had reached the office—and stood staring out between the half-drawn Venetian blinds, which was how he happened to see Kerwin bring the K-31 in to a landing on the field in front of the administration building.



He swung around to me, and his eyes asked the question.

"No, Misery, you're not balmy. That's the ship you threw away this morning," I answered.

"How—how—" he cried—a sort of shrill bleat.

"The General was aboard with you as a stowaway. He saved her."

"Then he saw me put her into that tight spiral and bail out?"

I nodded, and Misery staggered to a chair and sat down, because he couldn't stand up under that news, I imagine. After a long silence, he almost whispered: "The boy begged me to take him up with me when I stunted her, but I reminded him she had an NX license, under which passengers may not be carried; that he'd have to wait until she got her commercial license. I—guess—he just couldn't wait; so he sneaked into the hangar, rolled the landing-stage over to the ship, climbed in and hid back in her tail. Probably planned to come forward when I got her well up. . . . He knew I'd forgive him anything. . . . Well, boys will be boys. . . . Of course I'd have strapped him in the other seat and stunted her for him. . . . And now—oh, God, I've proved myself a rotter to the kid who thinks I'm the grandest thing on two legs."

His homely face was twisted in agony. Misery was one of those men who can weep aloud in sympathy; but in the face of real tragedy he wept inside. I said: "When you trimmed the ship's nose down and then put her into that tight spiral while you bailed out, he thought you had started stunting; but when you dropped through the emergency hatch, and he realized he was alone in a ship that would crash in a few minutes, he knew what to do. You hadn't taught him things to be forgotten. He limped forward and threw on the ignition of the right motor, and it caught. Then he shoved the throttle forward, synchronized both motors and kicked her out of the spin."

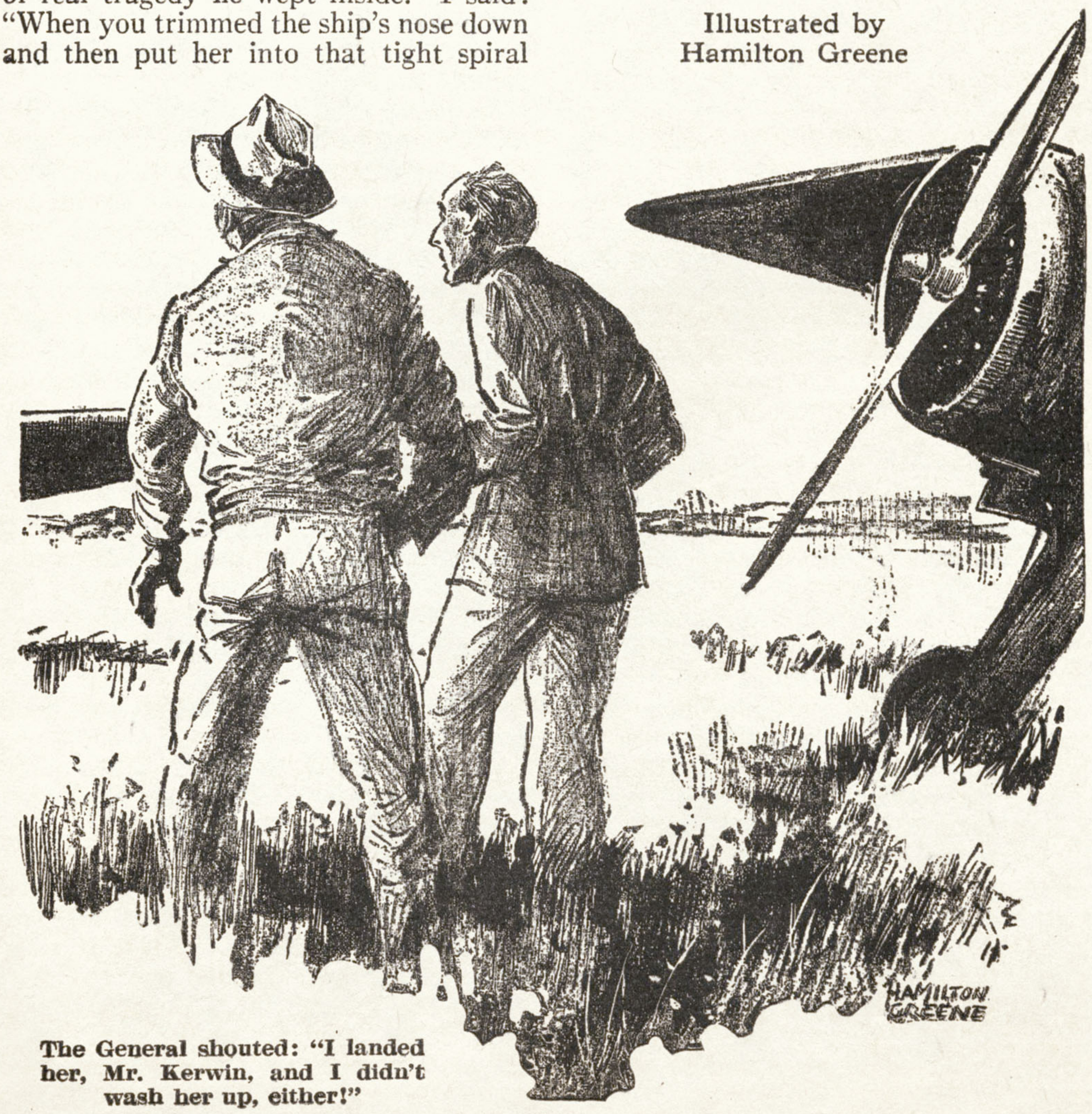
Misery Morgan nodded. "So that's why I didn't see her following me down; that's why the Italian crab-fisherman didn't see her crash. The General took her up over the fog."

"And flew southeast, looking for a place to set her down. He found a huge pasture-field down in the San Joaquin valley, and—"

"But she has a landing-speed of sixty-five miles an hour."

"She had plenty of room to ground-loop without striking anything. The

Illustrated by
Hamilton Greene



The General shouted: "I landed her, Mr. Kerwin, and I didn't wash her up, either!"

General got her down somehow. One of those miracles."

"No," said Misery, "he's just a good boy, and God had him by the hand." His bleak eyes lighted with a vast pride. "A great kid," he declared, "and smart as they come."

I noticed then Misery wasn't wearing his jacket with the gas-cartridge down in the corner—and he'd never missed wearing it before when his tests took him out over the bay. So, I thought, he planned to commit suicide; that's why he left his jacket home—probably, also, he was afraid if he wore it, he'd lack the courage to refrain from using it as a life-preserver after he'd hit the water—cold water reminds many a would-be suicide that life isn't so bad, after all. Apparently Misery had figured on making a complete job of it by drowning under the wide enveloping folds of his chute, which would make it look like an accident if his body was found.

I WATCHED Kerwin taxi the ship across the field, swing it in front of the administration office, get out and hand the General down on the wing; then he climbed down and lifted the boy to the ground, carried him over to his car parked close by, and drove off with him.

I couldn't bear to sit there looking at Misery's bleak face, so I went out and taxied the K-31 over to the hangar and put it up, and waited until Kerwin returned and we went into the office together.

"Well," Kerwin demanded, "what's the score?"

"Misery tried to commit suicide and made a complete bust of it," I reported.

"I supposed he had. —Misery, explain yourself before I take you apart and see what makes you act that way."

"When I took my physical examination six months ago, Mr. Kerwin, the doctors discovered a slight hypertrophy of my heart, and a faint murmur. Yesterday they took more pictures, and the flight surgeon said it was a hundred to one I'd be grounded as soon as his report got to headquarters. I told him I had to know the worst, on account of the necessity for making provision for the future of my small son; so he told me I had a year, possibly eighteen months to live, if the hypertrophy continued at the same speed it had shown during the past three months. He told me that in six or eight months I'll be an invalid, unable to get around without great distress."

"One of those big-hearted guys, aren't you?"

"Heart as big as a bucket—too big for my chest. So presently it would start crowding my lungs and spleen and things, Mr. Kerwin."

"And you didn't have the guts to wait for the old party with the hour-glass and the scythe? I'm ashamed of you, Misery."

"You flew in France," Misery charged without animus; "and if a German had set you afire, and you knew you'd burn to a crisp in midair unless you bailed out, why—you bailed out. A quicker and less horrible death awaited you if you beat the plane down."

"No other reason?"

"Yes sir. Every night when he'd say his prayers at my knee, the General used to pray: 'Dear God, make me a strong, brave, fine man like Misery. Make me able to face anything; make me strong when things happen to make me weak. Give me the strength, when I'm afraid, not to show it.'"

"You thought up that prayer, Misery," Kerwin charged.

"All but that part about asking the Lord to make him like me. That was the General's own idea. I was his hero—and how could I continue to be his hero if I lay in bed and suffered, and maybe in weak moments gave evidence of the hurt. Still, it wasn't that so much as the idea that it would be terribly selfish for me to hang on. Most unfair to the General. I had to get him back to Warm Springs for special treatments. He had to have his chance, no matter what happened to me. Don't you understand, Kerwin?"

"I do, you ass," Kerwin growled. "I have two boys of my own, and the General is with them now. I thought he could stand company and comforting—and my wife is a rare hand at comforting."

"What limit would you go for your boys?"

"I don't know, Misery. I wouldn't want to be tested. Probably robbing a bank wouldn't be beyond me."

MISERY nodded. Then he said: "My old man went the limit for me, and I wasn't worth it. When I came home from France, he had my worthless young life insured for a hundred thousand dollars, and the policy didn't prohibit me from flying. The old man said it was a good investment, because I'd

probably get killed before long. So he paid the premiums until he died, and I kept the policy in force thereafter.

"But until I forgathered with the General, I was never a hand to save money; so I paid the premiums by borrowing against the loan value of the policy.

"Last week, I paid the annual premium —in cash I'd saved—and there is still enough borrowing margin left to pay a few more annual premiums. If I died, the kid would have money—he'd have his chance to get well and play like other boys. . . . It wasn't as if I was cheating the life-insurance company—they're stuck anyhow, so they might as well be stuck now as a year hence."

"AND what have you done about that policy?" Kerwin asked.

"It's in an envelope in the company's safe, and I've changed the beneficiary from my estate to the Kerwin Aircraft Corporation, as its interest may appear; and in order to give you an interest to appear, I've mailed you my promissory note for the K-31. I wouldn't throw your ship away without reimbursing you."

"But why did you have to do that? You could have jumped off Golden Gate bridge."

Misery said patiently:

"I had to die in a plane accident. Don't you see? I couldn't disappoint the General, destroy his faith in me. I am his hero. In order to make good on the accident theory, I had to take your ship with me. And I had to die so he could get the money. He must have treatments now—while he is a growing boy. . . . I—I—well, damn it, Mr. Kerwin, maybe I was thinking cockeyed thoughts but they seemed reasonable to me—and still do."

"Well, I'll destroy your note when it arrives. Where do we go from here?"

"I'll know promptly," Misery replied —and took the receiver of my telephone out of its cradle and called a Chinatown number in San Francisco. For about ten minutes he talked in Chinese; when he hung his up, his face had lost the hunted look. "Everything's jake," he announced. "That was the Chinese consul I talked with, and he will arrange transportation for me to Manila on the Clipper, which takes off at four P.M. tomorrow. The Japs let me out of Shanghai, but they'd have something to say if I tried to get back into the interior via Shanghai, so I'll take a steamer to Rangoon and fly in the back way."

"You don't have to have a pilot's license to fly, out East, do you?" Kerwin grinned.

"No. The Generalissimo knows I can fly and fight, and he'll be glad to have me pay special attention to the Jap bombers, which is something I've always wanted to do. I've seen too many women and children killed by them for no military purpose."

Kerwin said he supposed the old tactics of climbing quite high and hiding in the sun would still work, and Misery said it would; that he'd have a combat plane of American make, one that could outfly and outmaneuver the best Japanese planes, and dive at better than five hundred miles an hour without shearing its wings off. He would, he said, employ guerrilla tactics—pop down on the last bomber in the formation, down him and be gone before the accompanying Jap combat planes could make reprisal. He said he'd never fight a combat plane if he could avoid it. Bombers were to be his meat. Finally he said that since he was going to remain dead, he had better write a suicide note to the General and leave it with me to deliver. He'd say that for some time he'd been worrying because he thought he was going crazy; he had been having mad impulses to commit suicide, and he wasn't so sure he could resist them indefinitely, so if anything happened to him, and so forth. It was a good letter and very convincing and Kerwin, and I read copy on it and approved it.

I then went home and sneaked a complete outfit of clothing out without being discovered by my wife. Misery and I are about the same size, so he shed his still moist garments in the office and dressed in my dry ones. Then Kerwin gave him some money for expenses out East, and we sat around the office until dark, with the blinds drawn, talking about men we'd known, and old times when we were young and rode the skies with death, and sort of wished we hadn't any responsibilities and could take a hack at the Jap bombers with old Misery. I think we envied him a little.

WELL, nobody had seen him return to the factory, for everybody quit at noon on Saturday, except the day watchman, and he hadn't been around. We waited until we knew the night watchman would be over in the shop punching the clock, before we sneaked out to Kerwin's car and drove over to

San Francisco. On the way we threw Misery's old garments into the bay as we crossed on the bridge. We had a swell farewell dinner for Misery at Pierre's, and made plans for the General's future; and when we parted, he was abandoning the one sweet thing he'd found in his helter-skelter existence. . . .

After Kerwin and I had driven back to Oakland, he took me to his house and upstairs for a look at the General. The kid was lying there with his eyes wide open, and tears still stained his cheeks. "Well, son," Kerwin said to him, "Misery's gone. He left a note for you at the office, and one for me. His poor old brain had conked, and it seemed reasonable for him to bail out, so you're my boy now."

The General put his arms up around Kerwin's neck. "And now," Kerwin said, "suppose you say your prayers, just as you used to do when Misery was living. You needn't get out of bed to kneel. God will assume you're kneeling."

So the General said his prayer that was so human it hurt, and suddenly he seemed to realize he had to be strong, if he was to live up to his hero. "I'll not cry any more," he promised. "Misery wouldn't like me to be weak."

What about Misery? Well, he got on the job, and the last we heard of him he complained he couldn't stand altitude any more, and it was time to quit. He had a record of eight Jap bombers by this time, so he said he was going out in the morning to down another and then fly his combat plane into still another and make it an even ten. He said he'd made arrangements to have his body brought in, and to have official attestation of his death sent to Kerwin so there would be no hitch about the life-insurance. His letter was actually cheerful—and why not?

He was still a hero to the General.

INCIDENTALLY, we discovered Misery was a modest man. We had him to thank for that order for fifty ships for the Chinese army. When he knew what we had, he'd communicated with the local Chinese consul, who got word to the Generalissimo, who sent the Frenchman and Colonel Wong Him over immediately on the Chinese Clipper. So even if poor, harassed Misery had thrown our ship away, we could have afforded the loss, considering the gain we had to thank him for.

He was hell-bent on paying his way!

The story of another Black Tom plot in this fateful year 1940.

By FULTON GRANT

THAT day I hired a man.

Now, if there is any one thing in the world for which I had less need than a "hired man," I cannot imagine it. I am not a farmer, but a chemist. My tiny four-room cottage and its miniature lot require no more attention than I can give it, barring an occasional job of carpentry or such; the greater part of my days are spent at the plant of the Ultrachemical Corporation whose broad acres adjoin my own little place.

I live alone. I prepare and cook my own food. I seek no companionship in or out of the laboratory, having arrived at an age where I prefer my own company to most others. An able-bodied bachelor of nearly sixty, I am still competent to look out for myself. Also, Mrs. Lummadge, worthy soul, comes to scour on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Yet in spite of this, I hired a man.

He rang my doorbell that morning at seven o'clock, just as I was clearing the breakfast-table.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "You'll be needing a man, I hope."

HIGH EXPLOSIVE

He stood there, a great giant of a lad; a boy's face but the torso of a Hercules. His voice was soft, his speech correct, though a trifle stilted, I thought, as though he were a foreigner. Yet he did not look foreign. I was surprised at the sudden evidence of disappointment which showed in his face when I told him that I had neither work for a man, nor money to hire one. But he insisted:

"I do wish you would take me, sir. It is because you are new here, that I—I hoped I might have a chance."

Now, that was a queer thing to say. True, of course. I had only recently been transferred to the experimental works of Ultrachemical.

"Why do you say that?" I inquired.

"I have just come from—the reformatory," he said.

That rather startled me, and yet I have strong convictions concerning the right of those whom social laws have punished, to demand—and get—work or rehabilitation from the society which has judged them. Perhaps I have a lingering love for the underdog. Perhaps it was the effect of the boy's fine eyes, the straight, decent face of him, the patrician carriage, and the frank, blunt way he spoke that ugly confession. Something, at any rate, prompted me to invite him in.

"They do not like me much in the town," he said without emotion. "I live with the Jacks—on the Houvenkopf."

I scarcely understood the allusion. Houvenkopf, I knew, was the name of a small mountain not far from the town, but the other puzzled me.

"The Jacks?" I repeated. "You work for them?"

He grinned at my ignorance.

"The Jackson Whites, sir," he said. "They're poor people who live up in the hills. They're mostly black or brown. I was raised up there."

"But you seem—"

"I'm white, sir," he supplied. "But the Jacks are my folks. I thought you might have heard of me. I'm Tor Vaughan."

I was forced to explain that since I had no acquaintances in the town, I had heard nothing. In a single sentence he gave me a tragic picture.

"My father," he told me, "killed a man here."

That quality in his tone was not defiance; yet there was an evident lack of humility, a touch of something almost challenging. It made me feel that behind that brutal, bald statement lay a still deeper tragedy which, for some reason he wished me to understand. I said:

"Would you care to tell me?"

He nodded, but while I poured a cup of coffee for him, he did not speak. Then he said through compressed lips:

"My father worked at the factory." I sensed that he meant the Ultrachemical plant. "They said he was a sabotage agent, sir. But he wasn't. Oh, believe me, he was not, sir. They couldn't convict him. They had to let him go. But then they—they tortured him. They drove him mad, sir. Killing mad." He stopped there, as though he had said enough, and I did not press him.

Then the factory whistle moaned, and I was forced to leave him and go to my work. I made a feeble attempt to convince him that if I did not give him work, it was because I had none to give, and for no other reason. As I left, he said:

"I am very sorry. Thank you, sir."

A RATHER different light on the boy's story was shed almost as soon as I got to the laboratory. Mr. Lunn, my immediate superior in the division, called me aside and said in a hushed voice:

"See here, Althorp, you're new. Just now I saw you talking with that damned young Vaughan. I hope you didn't give him work at your place."

"I did not," I said. "But why do—"

He gave me a queer look. "There is war in Europe," he said. "There was war in Europe when this place was blown up in 1915. A matter of mere common sense, Althorp," he said, and he made the observation in such a way that I felt it better not to make further inquiries.

"Oh—well, thank you," I said. And that seemed to satisfy him. . . .

I did not go home for my lunch as was my habit. We were working on a new formula which some of the younger men in the laboratory had christened "Aunty Boom," an explosive petroleum derivative of which only a part was handled in each division. While no actual information was given out, naturally we all were aware that "Aunty Boom" would play a considerable part in the European war if the experiments continued to prove satisfactory; and we were instructed that work was to be rushed as fast as safety permitted. Hence I found it advisable to remain in the laboratory all day.

When I returned to my house that evening, however, I had a surprise waiting for me. A great mound of earth was piled on my front lawn, and a large hole three feet or more in diameter gaped at me from under my eavespouts. From the hole came sounds of a pick; and when I stopped to investigate, I saw the great half-naked body of this same Tor Vaughan, down in the hole filling a bucket of earth.

"I stayed on, sir," he told me in a matter-of-fact voice. "I thought I'd dig your dry-well. I noticed your lawn is being spoiled because of the eavespouts; and so I—well, it's nearly finished now, sir."

It was no more than true. Floods of water poured down across my lawn every time it rained, and had completely killed the grass for a space of some feet from the house to the street. I had intended to make a dry-well, but I had not yet found time—or inclination—to dig it.

I could scarcely reprimand the boy for his work, although I warned him that I had no money to pay for labor.

"It's not the money at all, sir," he said. "It's more—well, pride, you can call it."

Let me make this brief: I had the boy to dinner. I enjoyed his company. I liked his comfortable silences and his remarkable politeness. His stilted, almost awkward speech amused me a little. He aroused my curiosity. We talked late into the night. It ended by his taking an army cot and sleeping in my kitchen.

In the morning my coffee was already made when I awoke. He had concocted a kind of pancake, quite palatable, which he called "scuds," and which made a perfect breakfast.

And over the cakes and coffee, while I was making an effort to send him away with a five-dollar bill for the dry-well, he told me the rest of his story.

IT was a bitter, cruel story. A great deal of it had come to him many years after the events themselves, but he felt fire as he told it. It harked back to the days of war hysteria in America, which began in 1915 and grew to a tremendous intensity before our own men went over.

Tor Vaughan had been born, he said, in 1915, right there in Eastredge. His father, a German-born young immigrant of excellent ancestry, had changed his name from Albrecht von Lassef to Albert

Vaughan when he had been naturalized. As Vaughan he held an excellent position with Ultrachemical. One day, however, the change of name became known, somehow, and he was discharged at once.

THAT night—the night of August 12, 1916, a month after the Black Tom explosion—the Ultrachemical plant was blown up. Fortunately the area of the place is great, and the explosives were stored in underground sheds with considerable distance between them; otherwise the entire community would have been wiped out. None the less, twelve lives were lost and a damage of four million dollars was done.

Vaughan was arrested and charged with sabotage. After an investigation which amounted to a trial, he was acquitted and given a clean bill by the Government; but this did not satisfy local feeling. To the town, to the employees of Ultrachemical, he was still the black-handed *saboteur*, a criminal. He and his young wife were ostracised and insulted—even stoned in the streets by boys. And despite Vaughan's high reputation as a chemist, the door of every firm employing research men, from New York to San Francisco, was closed to him.

Fortunately, the Vaughans had an excellent garden and lived at some distance from the town proper. Tor, christened Thor von Lassef, nearly died of a fever, yet the local doctor was too "busy" to treat him. This persecution became an obsession, a mania with Albert Vaughan. It drove him slowly mad. And when, one day, a super-patriotic fool of the town, one Evan Jones, appointed himself a committee of one to tell Vaughan to take his unwelcome presence out of town, the persecuted man's mind had snapped—and he had strangled the fellow with his hands.

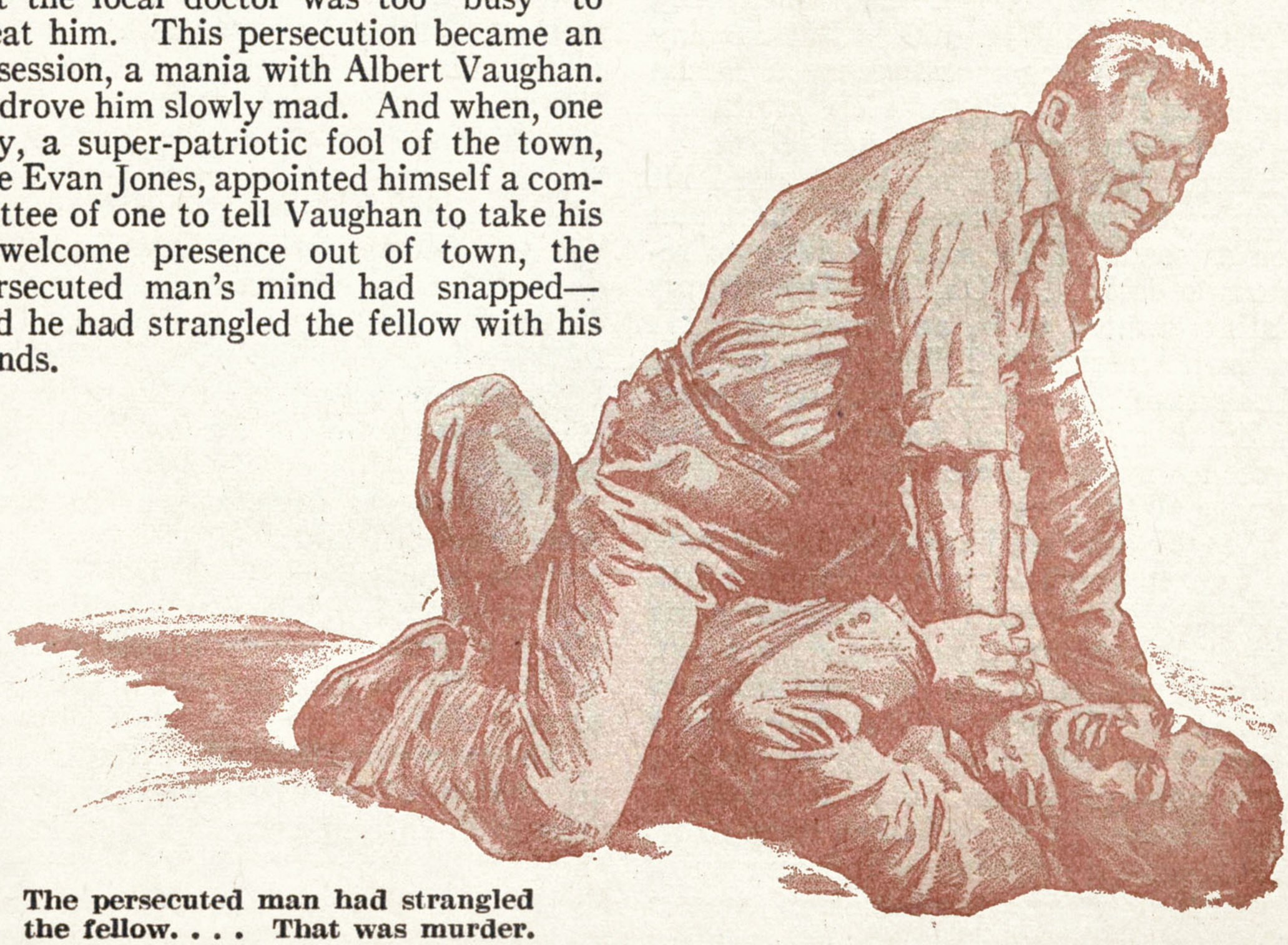
That was murder. A posse of townsmen tried to take the poor madman, but he held them off while his frail young wife and year-old child fled into the hills. In a mad gun-battle—one man against twenty or more—Vaughan had been badly wounded but managed to crawl to the Jackson White colony on the Houvenkopf, where he found a sort of sanctuary among the half-breed primitives who had no laws but their own. He died there; and his wife died a few hours later. The boy Tor was brought up among those strange, incredible little people who are the descendants of slaves, Hessian mercenaries of the Revolution, and unfortunate women shanghaied from London's streets in 1776 and sent over as playthings for the British army.

"It is a hard thing that I did not know my father, sir," said the boy, when he had finished. "But I've got his book; I know how he felt."

"His book," I soon learned, was a private journal or diary, which had been preserved by the ancient hillman, Papa Fetch, in whose care the boy had been reared.

"You said you had come from the reformatory," I recalled. "Why did they send you there?"

It was an discomfiting question; I could see that plainly as he told me the story. He had first come down into the valley town with some of the young



The persecuted man had strangled the fellow. . . . That was murder.

Suddenly I had a consciousness that someone was looking at me. I glanced up; for an instant I thought I was dreaming.

Jackson White boys to the mission school, but quickly he had found an appetite for more learning, and had come to the junior high-school. Partly because he lived with the hill people, and partly because of the bitter recollection of his father's sad story, he had had a hard time of it there.

"I tried not to get mad when they treated me bad," he said. "But one day one of the teachers called me a Boche and said I'd grow up to be like my father —everybody knew what he meant, of course. Well, I lost my head, and I hit him. I'm pretty strong, and I hurt him pretty bad. They sent me away to reform school. . . . Oh, Mr. Althorp, my father wanted to be an American! He *was* an American! I didn't have to come back here, but—well, I wanted to show folks that I'm a real American too. I've got to make people know they were wrong all the time."

It was then that I engaged a hired man.

Call it knight-errantry; call it blind, foolish sentimentality; call it an aging bachelor's subconscious desire for a son. Give it any name you like, but somehow I felt the fineness in that boy, and I wanted to help him. I agreed to give him employment and to let him stay at my cottage. It was a foolish thing to do. It brought me trouble within the week.

Since I made no attempt to conceal the fact that young Tor was living in my place and working about my house, the fact became quickly known in town and in the factory. I received a call to the administrative office.

"Mr. Althorp," said the chief executive, "your record with Ultrachemical goes back fifteen years and more. At the New Jersey plant where you have worked for some time, your work was more than satisfactory, and your recommendation from there is of the best. Therefore I feel it my duty to be more lenient with you than I would with a younger, less proven man. Mr. Lunn tells me he has already warned you against association with this Vaughan boy. With his background, and in view of the fact that his father was involved in the sabotage of the plant, it ought to be self-evident that his living with you is—ah—dangerous to the welfare of the company."

I have never been a man to backwater easily. I said:

"That's nonsense. The boy's father was acquitted of all blame. True, he killed a man; but why punish the boy for it? He's a good lad and ought to be given a chance."

The vice-president of Ultrachemical in charge of experimental production was an intelligent man; his was no bigoted small-town mind. He nodded slowly.

"I believe you, Althorp," he said. "And yet it is my duty, not to say my

intention, to protect both the name and property of Ultrachemical from any and every menace. We are manufacturing munitions. These munitions are being supplied to combatant nations. A boy with a grievance, a boy whose father's name, however unjustly, is a local by-word for treachery, a boy who has already shown that he is capable of resentment, Althorp, is fair game for clever foreign agents. Your association with such a boy may be—and I don't doubt is—entirely innocent. He may be a pathetically misjudged and handicapped young man, suffering from prejudice and popular superstition. But he *could* be, I say, reached by the secret agents of nations hostile to those we supply. He *could,* by some means, obtain advantage over you through your very desire to give him the decent, human treatment you feel he deserves. Look at it how you will, that boy's contact with you is a constant menace to Ultrachemical—perhaps to the United States of America. I think I need say no more, Althorp."

And there I was at a most delicate *impasse.* The simple fact was, of course, that our vice-president had spoken the exact truth. By implication he meant that either young Tor must leave my house and the proximity of Ultrachemical, or else the company would dispense with my services. Simply that.

Now, it was not so much a matter of my position. I had been frugal; I had saved enough money over several years to give me a modest income for the rest of my life. Where the matter touched me to the quick was the second implication—my own loyalty, my own patriotism, in short, my own Americanism. Tor Vaughan was young; his mind was not proof against the subtle weapons of trained agents. He did have a grievance. He was of foreign blood. He had tasted the bitterness of hatred. His mind might easily be poisoned.

I have never been a professional flag-waver, and yet I fancy that I am a good citizen. I remembered with horror the Black Tom explosion, the Kingsland explosion and the succession of sabotaged plants which preceded our entry into the last war. It came over to me clearly that my duty as an American was of broader scope than any quasi-sentimental feeling I might have for any individual. And when I returned to my house that night, my mind had been made up. It was a bitter decision, which, had it been possible, I would have avoided.

I am aware that I hesitated, postponed, equivocated. I would gladly have suffered physical torture rather than tell the boy that he must go away; and my emotions must have been revealed in my face. For the boy said, as we got up from the dinner-table:

"I've made trouble for you, Mr. Althorp. I can tell right enough. I'll go back to the Houvenkopf tonight."

In vain I tried to find words with which to soften the disappointment I read in his eyes; but Tor's own strong nature would brook no sop of minced words.

"I know how it is," he said. "They're saying, 'Like father, like son.' They think I'd do—harm through you. Sooner or later it was bound to be that way. It would have been better to stay in the reform school." And when we shook hands, he said:

"Thank you for believing me—about my father, sir. Some day—I'll be able to show them all—some day, somehow."

And then he went away, and I knew something of myself had gone with him.

THE winter was sudden, severe, and hard on a man of my years; yet one December morning when the snows of night had drifted deep and I was all but snowbound, I found a fine path had been shoveled for me, leading from my back door to the very gate of the Ultrachemical company's fence. It was a job which, to be done in a brief time, must have required the work of ten men or more. I could not be sure who had done it, but I knew better than to mention it in the laboratory.

At Christmas-time a freshly dressed carcass of a deer, decorated with crude but kindly Christmas wreaths made of pine branches, lay upon my doorstep.

Again early one morning I was awakened by faint thuddings to the rear of my house. Through the flickering snowfall I saw half a dozen figures engaged in some operation at or near the old barn which I used as a garage. By the time I had got on my coat and overshoes and could investigate, the men had disappeared; but a great pile of cordwood, neatly stacked, rested against the barn wall, while foot-tracks and the ruts of wabbly wagon-wheels led down the narrow lane which bends toward the Houvenkopf mountain road.

NOR was this all. A hundred little things were done unobtrusively about my place—things of which I had not thought. In a sense it all puzzled me, for although I felt certain that Tor Vaughan was responsible for them, there was evidence that more than one person was watching over me and caring for me. There was a certain mystery about it.

As to Tor himself, I heard little or nothing of him. In March, however, I had a visit from a Mr. Sessons, a probation officer attached to the Millington Farm School. He was an abstract sort of fellow—very official, very direct.

"Now about this boy Vaughan, Mr. Althorp," he said. "I understand that he worked for you awhile last fall. It is my job to check on these things."

I gave him such information as I could, and asked him questions about the boy.

"A queer mixture, that boy," said Sessons. "His record at the school is one of the best ever made. When he came to Millington we all realized that his was a special and an unfortunate case. That school-teacher he hit, for instance, is notorious for his sarcasm, his high-handed way with the pupils, especially the poorer ones of town. Yet obviously discipline requires that boys must not strike their teachers, and his commitment was an impersonal, automatic thing. He did well there. He was smart, industrious, quiet and likable. He was paroled for good behavior. He tried hard to find work. We regret the prejudice that follows a man who has been punished by law, and we have tried for some time to persuade him to cross over into another county, where antagonism would be less. We were glad when we learned that he had found congenial employment with you, and sorry when he had to leave. But—" He hesitated.

"But what?"

"He seems to have reverted to—well, to type."

"How so?"

"He is in serious trouble again—drunk, disorderly, fighting, attacking an officer of the law. And what is even worse, in the face of his—er—father's—er—trouble, he is mingling with a rather objectionable element."

"You mean the Jackson Whites?" I wondered, remembering the many favors I had received.

He shook his head.

"No, the Jacks are primitive and half-savage, but they're not bad people. The boy has taken up with a lot of Communist riffraff, trouble-makers from some of the mills across the State line. The authorities have had their eye on them for some time. He gets drunk with them at a cheap dive near Chanford. There was a brawl the other night, and he all but killed one of them, and would have strangled a deputy who tried to take him away. Drink is fatal to his kind. I'm sorry to report all this, because I see you liked the boy. But—well, I'm afraid your sympathy is wasted. Anyhow, he's in jail now, and this time it's likely to be prison, not reform school."

I COULD hardly believe it. I drove my rattle-trap of a car down to the city where they had taken the boy, and made inquiries. After some persuasion they allowed me to see him in the county jail. He looked bad. A sullenness had grown on him. Hard lines had formed around his mouth. He showed signs of dissipation. He was somehow changed, somehow wary. And yet when I talked with him, there was a ring of sincerity in his voice which made me doubt some of the accusations against him—despite what he himself told me.

"It's true, sir," he said. "It's true I was drinking, and that I hit a man. About the officer—well, I guess I was out of my head. I'm sorry, sir, but it's all true—only—well, there's some of it I can't tell you, sir—not yet."

It had been my intention to engage a lawyer for him and to try to get him paroled again—in my custody, regardless of the consequences at the plant. But since he admitted his guilt, and since he refused to give me his entire confidence, I could do nothing. I went away a saddened man.

Two days later I learned that Tor Vaughan had been released. Just how

and why no one seemed to know, but he was released, by some almost miraculous decision from the higher authorities. I expected he would try to see me some night, but he did not appear. Nearly a month went by, and I neither saw him nor heard of him. I was a little hurt. I felt that, since I had been the only person to interest myself in him, he might have made some effort to—not thank me, but show mere recognition. My feeling was that of a father whose son has drifted away from his influence.

ONE night, however, I got news of Tor Vaughan from a most unexpected source. I was sitting in my study quite late and enjoying a book by a crackling hearth-fire. Suddenly I had a consciousness that some one was looking at me. I felt a presence near me. I glanced up from my book, and my eyes caught an irregularity at the window. I was startled to see a face there, framed in the sash and pressed against the pane. It was a queer face. It looked like nothing human I had ever seen. The skin was black or dark brown. The eyes were wild and staring. The mouth was open, as though uttering a silent yell. Snow-white hair frosted the lower part of the face, and a wispy mustache dribbled about the lips. For an instant I thought I was dreaming, having visions. I was, frankly, frightened.

And then a lean, bony hand crept up under the face, and a finger beckoned to me.

Fascinated and yet still frightened, I went to the window. The hand made a sign to open. I did so, not knowing why, feeling of a sudden the solitude and seclusion of my lonely little house far out of town by the Ultrachemical plant.

The man outside the window was very old, very tattered, dirty, black, but he had no menace about him.

"Ut's me, Papa Fetch, aht here," came a soft voice. "De boy Tor, he sint me."

Then I understood. This was my first close-up view of any of the little people of the hills, the Jackson Whites. I remembered the name, Papa Fetch, as being that of Tor's foster-father up on the mountain. I motioned him to come in.

He brought a message as odd as its bearer. I had some difficulty in understanding the man's quaint, unworldly speech at first—a curious mixture of Eighteenth Century German-English with a touch of the African darky's slow drawl. But I managed to get the gist of it before the fellow, bent over with age, obviously self-conscious in my house and very ill-at-ease, made a sudden break for the door and ran out into the night.

What he told me was that I should see Tor soon, but that I must pay no attention to him. And especially that, no matter what happened, I must believe Tor is a "goot poy jussa same." When I tried to ask questions, the man broke away.

I did see Tor soon, and it was a shock to me. One morning, when I reported to the laboratory as usual, I found the place in some excitement. One of the guards—paid ex-soldiers whose duty it is to stand on duty at hundred-foot intervals along the wire fence of the Ultrachemical area and to patrol the yards and buildings in shifts—had found what he thought were prowlers on the company premises before daylight that morning. He had challenged, and getting no answer, had fired into the air. The shadowy figures had run toward the fence. Out of the blackness another one, hitherto unseen by the guard, had rushed into him and upset him, while the first two had escaped over the woven wire. When the guard recovered, when the other guards had arrived on the scene, they found that the supposed assailant was a reeling, staggering drunk who made no attempt to escape or put up a struggle. That drunken man was young Tor Vaughan.

Questioned, he did not know just how he came there. He had been reveling with some of his friends, he said, and there had been a bet that they could get over the company wall in spite of the guards, but he did not remember actually climbing over; nor could he explain anything further. While suspicion ran high, the only charge that could be brought against him was that of trespassing, for which he was arraigned in the local court and sentenced to a week in jail.

THUS I saw him—sodden, begrimed, in disarray, reeking of stale whisky, looking anything but the clear-eyed boy who had come to my house some months earlier. Two of the armed guards held him between them before they took him away. Because of my known liking for the boy, they asked me to try to get something out of him. I could not. He looked up at me with no sign of recognition at all, giving me only a foolish grin.

But just as they led him away to jail, I thought he glanced back at me for an instant. I had a distinct impression that one eye winked slightly.

There was an aftermath to that incident. I was called to the vice-president's office again, and behind carefully shut doors I was given some disturbing news.

"There was a little more to that break-in than we have let be known, Althorp," he said. "With our previous—ah—conversation about young Vaughan in mind, I think I should tell you. We have reason to believe that the lock on the door of Number 12 warehouse has been tampered with. There are tons of picric acid in Number 12—if you get what I mean."

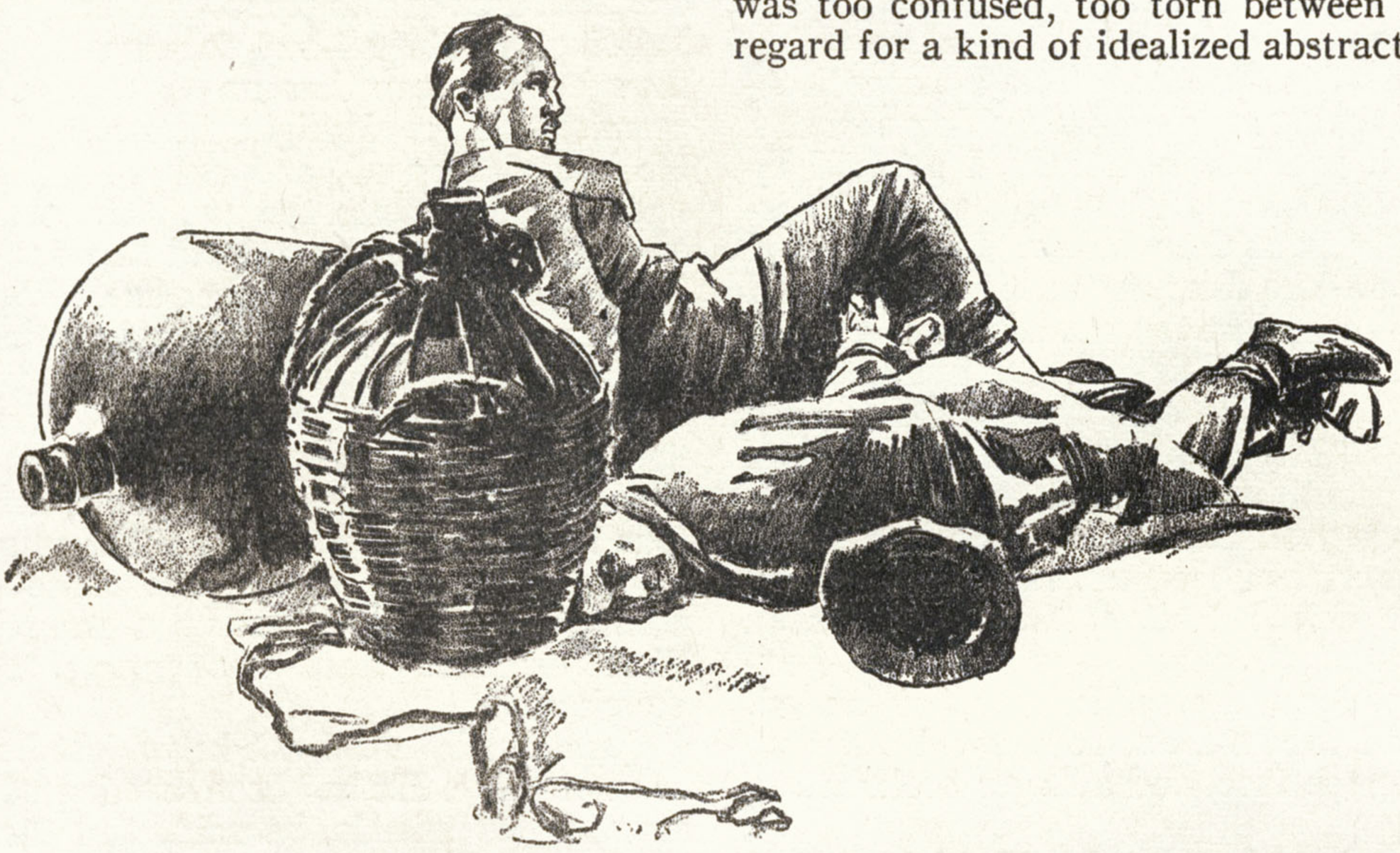
I got what he meant, but I did not quite understand how he meant it and said so frankly.

The vice-president had more information, in confidence. There had been an epidemic of petty losses of material, little but important things had broken or had vanished, delicate experimental apparatus had gotten out of order, a small fire had started in a wing of the laboratory building and had been found in time to prevent unthinkable damage.

"All this can be coincidental, I admit," he said, "But—well, it should make you think seriously about our last talk, Althorp."

And it did, God knows. . . .

I had not gone, this time, to see Tor Vaughan at the jail. I confess that I was too confused, too torn between my regard for a kind of idealized abstraction



"We can't prove it, and if we could it might not be advisable to act on it—yet," he said. "But it looks as though your young friend was in bad company. The electric control-wires on top of the fence were shorted very cleverly last night, which explains how they got over without an alarm. Now the boy was drunk, but that doesn't prove that his—that the others were. My guess is that some smart agents have got to him, worked up his grievances with the help of drink, and are using him as a deadhead tool in some kind of a plot to—well, 'sabotage' is a broad word, Althorp!"

I could not make myself admit that I believed him—and yet perhaps I believed something even more serious than he implied. I remembered that wink. If Tor *had* winked at me as they led him away, then perhaps he had not been quite so drunk as he pretended. In that case—

I drove the thought from my mind.

of the boy as I wanted him to be, as I had created him in my heart, and the brutal realities which had shaken those thoughts in me. I remembered his manner at the county jail when I visited him there, and the stubbornness with which he had refused any legal aid. I remembered, too, the visit of old Papa Fetch and the cryptic message, which was the more confusing, now. Again I had that incredible feeling of a father whose own son has gone wrong. Vainly I tried to tell myself that this boy was nothing to me. Why should I care, why should I, a sane, normal, ordinary commonplace man, Charles Althorp,—with, I hoped, enough knowledge of life and experience of humanity to expect no more than ordinary behavior of humans—why should I trammel my life with the unfortunate and sordid affairs of a waif and a jailbird who had gone maudlin with drink and an exaggerated ideal of a father whom he had never known?

I had a picture, in silhouette, of a huge form—arms lifting another form high over his head, dashing that form against the masonry—

Illustrated by
Frederic Anderson

But all that was no good. I was unhappy. I suffered from feelings too complex to explain, until the boy was released from jail.

Then, one night, he came to me.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning. I heard a downstairs window opened softly and I got from my bed to investigate.

"Mr. Althorp?" —I knew that voice.

TOR VAUGHAN was in my kitchen. There was no trace of drunkenness on him. His eyes were clear, blue, frank, haughty. His face was alight. He showed signs of excitement.

"You must get dressed, sir, and—and get away from here as fast as you can," he said. I demanded to know why.

"Because there is—well, the Ultra-chemical plant, sir, it may go up tonight."

"Go up?"

"Explode. This is the night, sir," he said, and I caught the gleam of his eyes.

"Good God! You don't mean—"

"There is just time to get away, sir, he said. "Less than twenty minutes."

I still could not grasp it. I cried out at him. I upbraided him. I pleaded with him.

"You must be mad, Tor," I told him, "even to think of such a crime! There is enough explosive material at the plant . . . even in one small laboratory, just now, to scatter death for ten miles around. You will murder hundreds of innocent people . . . even your own people, the Jacks. It would be a disaster worse than anything in history. There is a new explosive just developed which—"

He stopped me.

"For God's sake, sir, don't think that *I'm* doing it! Not that, sir. It's *them*—they've been after me for months, now. They think I'm a drunken fool, a half-wit boy from over with the Jacks. They think I want to avenge my father, sir. They've been trying to keep me drunk since before last Christmas. Oh, I thought you would understand, sir—I

prayed you would. I didn't dare to come to you and tell you. This is the one chance there will be to catch them, sir—all of them. I had to do it this way. For my father's sake, I had to. Hurry, sir, and get away—in case—in case I can't do it."

And then it was clear to me at last. "They" would be some foreign agents, perhaps. Or paid *saboteurs* hired by agents. All that our vice-president had suspected had actually happened. They had counted on the anti-social resentment of a pride-wounded boy whose father had been a victim of persecution—but they had misjudged their dupe.

BREATHLESSLY now he gave me details as I dressed. "They," as he still called them, had been working for months on a plan of destruction that would leave nothing but a crater where once had been a factory and a village of living humans. They had tunneled under the wire fence and a sap led from the thick brushwood at the north end of the plant's enclosure for a distance of more than one hundred feet, dug with mathematical precision and by modern engineering methods. It had its opening against the underground wall of the very laboratory building in which I worked—and where the stores of experimental "Aunty Boom" were kept. By skillful, slow probing, the cinder blocks which formed that wall had been loosened to form a crude door by which access to this most vital point of the plant could be reached.

"It hurt me bad to tell them things you told me, just talking, sir," he said, and the statement made me wince. I was not aware that I had told him anything; yet in unguarded conversation who could say what might have slipped out? "I had to tell them things, sir, if I was going to do anything. But when they wanted me to make you carry a time-charge into the place—that was when I couldn't stand it. That was when I hit that feller. They thought I was drunk, but I wasn't drunk, Mr. Althorp."

He told me, too, that "they" had apparently a lot of influence in high places. It was "they" who had obtained his release from the county jail.

Urgently he said:

"I had to let 'em think I was impressed, sir. After that they began to trust me a lot more. Please hurry, sir, it's almost time, now. Take your car."

But I did not take my car. I formed a quick, reckless plan.

Tor Vaughan was to meet the sabotage agents at three precisely. He rubbed raw whisky on his hands and face and begrimed himself until the appearance—and odor—of drunkenness was complete in masterful detail. And then he climbed back through my darkened kitchen window into the night, accepting my promise to drive my car like mad into the safer region around the foot of Mount Torne where the concussion of the blast—if a blast there should be—would be minimized. He did not tell me his own private plan, fearing, no doubt, that I might take some action that would jeopardize it.

I very nearly did, anyway.

There is a direct-line private telephone from my house to the laboratory, and I rang it, hoping that one of the night guards would be attracted to the unusual sound. When a surprised voice came on the wire, I said:

"Are you one of the guards? This is Althorp. Now listen carefully and don't talk. There will be an attempt to blow up the plant this morning; I don't know the exact time, but it's very soon now. You've got to take my word for it. You've got to do as I say. Send a man to unlock my gate and let me into the yard. Call Mr. Lunn and get the combination of the safe where the new formula stuff is kept. He's got to give it to you. Frighten him, threaten him, do anything—but get that combination in five minutes, or we'll all be dead, that's all! Take out the six big beakers that are on the upper shelf and pour them slowly out into the snow. And then get down and pray, man. Don't talk, act. Get that gate open!"

I hung up without waiting for a reply. If we could only get rid of "Aunty Boom" there was a chance to save the place. The buildings were so widely separated that nothing short of a detonation could discharge the nitrocellulose and other explosive stocks, but if my division laboratory were fired—

I HAVE never been a religious man in the sense of external or symbolic devotion, and yet no Christian martyr's prayers have been more fervent, or more deeplying than those which poured from my heart as I ran out to the gate:

"Dear God! May that man believe me! For the lives of innocent people, give him faith in that telephone call!"

Arriving at the gate, I found no one; the padlock still ominously in place. But

the sound of running feet came to me and my prayers redoubled. In an instant the dark shadow of a man loomed out of the darkness. A voice called:

"Mr. Althorp?" I knew my voice cracked as I answered.

The gate opened. The uniformed guard, round-eyed and gaping behind his flashlight, stared at me in wonder.

"For God's sake, sir, what the—"

I pushed past him, crying, "Hurry! Don't talk!"

We ran for the cement structure that houses the laboratory. I saw a shadow kneeling in the snow outside and I knew my prayer had been answered. It was another guard in uniform, and the glass of the beakers gleamed in his hands.

THERE was still a chance, now. They could burn the laboratory, if that was their plan. Most of the other types of explosives would require detonation—but would burn like gasoline or oil without harm. If a serious conflagration swept the place the tanks of picric acid would go and the other explosives would detonate. The damage would be terrible, the loss of life beyond one's comprehension of horror. But with "Aunty Boom" in liquid form neutralized by air and snow, there was one chance in a hundred that the plant would be saved.

I stood there rooted, for an instant, as these things went through my head. The guard with the beakers had looked up and was speaking to me. Through the fog of my panic and terror and paralysis I heard sounds but no words. Then came a sharp voice:

"Don't move!"

It froze me solid. From a corner of my eye I could see a dark form. A faint glint on something metallic told me of a gun.

"Drop those gats, you tin soldiers!" came the same voice.

I heard the *plop* of the guards' weapons onto the crusted snow.

Then there was a sharp order in a foreign tongue. More shapes materialized out of nowhere. Hands seized me roughly. A snap of metal clicked some kind of crude fastenings on my wrists. A rope encircled my legs. With a jerk I was tripped and sprawled in the snow. Sounds told me that the two guards suffered a similar fate.

Another sentence in that guttural language; then a new voice said:

"*Ach!* Leave them here. They won't be able to talk . . . . after!" I could guess the meaning of that grim statement.

What had happened, I wondered inwardly. Where had these men come from? Where was Tor? These had not come from the laboratory. They had not entered the yard through any tunnel. Had Tor lied to me? Had he purposely betrayed me into playing into the hands of *saboteurs?*

Tied to the two guards, I was dragged to my feet and herded with them to the laboratory building's wall. I heard a voice say a sentence that ended: "Take no chances, in case it goes wrong." Then the same commanding voice said:

"Push your faces into that wall . . . go on, you." One of the guards flung himself backward in an attempt—feeble and foolhardy—to butt into the speaker. I heard a thud of a weapon against his head. He dropped into the snow.

Then the commanding voice began counting. The language was foreign, but I knew the fatal meaning:

"*One—two—*"

The count was never finished. Something burst like mad from the low door of the lab. A body literally hurtled through the air and I heard a thud, the explosion of a shot, a choked cry. There was commotion in the snow. Another shot. A body fell across me, sending me staggering because my hands and feet were helpless. I had a picture, in silhouette, of a huge form that was more than human, arms lifting another form high over his head and dashing that form against the masonry of the laboratory wall with a crunching sound. I heard running footsteps, and I saw men's bodies, black against the blue-black of the night, in a terrific struggle. There were sounds of bone striking flesh, the gasp of a dying man—and then a terrible, searing flare that blinded me and lighted the heavens to the white heat of hell.

WHEN I opened my eyes again it was daylight. Mr. Archibald, our vice-president, and Mr. Lunn, my division head, were standing over me. Hands were holding a flask to my lips. A sea of faces peered down at me from above.

"Easy, Mr. Althorp," said Mr. Archibald's voice. "Don't try to sit up if you're hurt."

But I sat up. Physically, at least, I was not hurt.

"It was a close thing," Lunn was saying. "Thank God that stuff had been spread out in the snow."

And the vice-president was saying:

"Let our thanks go to—a hero, Mr. Lunn. Are you able to get up, Althorp? If you are I think the boy will want to talk to you."

I got up. My face and hair were singed and my skin raw, but otherwise I was quite able. We were in the laboratory. Men in uniform of the State police were in the long, low room. Two of them were bending over a table upon which lay the figure of a man—a boy, I should say. It was Tor Vaughan.

He smiled up at me. His voice was faint and broken:

"Almost missed it, sir—they didn't—trust me after all—"

Then it faded away until, after a tremendous effort of will, he fumbled in his torn, bloodstained shirt and pulled out a leather-bound notebook.

"It's his book—the diary of a good American, sir. Please keep it for me—"

And then he died.

WHEN the investigation was completed the sheer facts were simple, although in the distorted moments of that night I had not understood them at all.

Tor Vaughan, as I still call him in my memory, had been a far less simple young man than I had supposed. When first he had been released from the Millington reform school he had been approached by persons in a fashion which was covert and indirect but which he had recognized as meaning only one thing—to utilize him for the sabotage of Ultrachemical. He had showed his quick intellect then by dispatching old Papa Fetch, his primitive benefactor, to the head of the school at Millington. That worthy official, perceiving that the boy had stumbled upon something that might have national scope, had communicated with the proper authorities. Counter-espionage agents had found the boy up in the Houvenkopf colony and instructed him to play directly into the hands of the foreign agents.

It was then that he had come to my door in an endeavor to get a place close to the plant. Failing to keep this, he let them imagine that he was getting drunk on the little money they gave him, and little by little he worked into their confidence. The incident in the saloon in which he struck one of the subordinates of the plotting group, then fought with an officer, was a bit of realism.

However, it was the influence of the Government agents, and not any "pull" of the plotters which had secured his release from jail—a fact which even Tor himself did not know.

The plot itself was of a more delicate nature than Tor or any of the subordinates were informed. The real prize was the formula known as "Aunty Boom." Only the leaders of the *saboteurs* knew of this precious formula, and they acted independently of the poor "drunken" boy whom they had bribed to set an incendiary bomb in the laboratory.

Not trusting him with this valuable commission, they had timed themselves carefully to reach the plant before he should enter. They came over the wall at a place where alarm-wires had been rigged in advance. There were four of them, their names important. They held high commissions with their government.

But they did not know that Tor had visited me before his rendezvous with death. They did not know that, as much by good fortune as through any effort of mine, all of the experimental "Aunty Boom" was in its liquid form and could quickly be neutralized into comparative harmlessness.

Tor had surprised them at the moment they were about to shoot the guards, and me. His charge had caught them unaware, but that first shot had pierced his chest. The wound was slow but fatal. The second shot, quite by chance, had ignited the remnants of the liquid explosive still fresh in the snow. That was the flash—not a real explosion but a violent flame such as might be given off by a magnesium flare.

Mr. Lunn, receiving the incomprehensible demand of a guard for the combination to that safe, had telephoned the State police. When they arrived two of the four principal foreign agents were dead—killed by the hands of Tor Vaughan—and the other two were crippled beyond escape.

I READ the diary of Albert Vaughan. It was a pathetic, heart-rending account of a man predestined by a name to bear the brunt of the hatred of nations.

It was by Mr. Archibald's thoughtfulness that this book was buried with Tor. A simple grave was given him on the property of the Ultrachemical Corporation. The inscription was taken, in part, from the content of that book. It read:

Here Lies an American
Thor Albrecht Rudolph Franz-Josef von Lassef
The son of an American

Traitors' Harvest

An American in war-harried England shares in the tragic climax of a deadly international plot.

By GORDON KEYNE

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

ON the afternoon before London was bombed, Hugh Gower started for Liverpool in his car, taking two fat Gladstone bags. They contained the cancer-research records; he had to get them on the steamer before morning, for home. Europe was through with research, temporarily; and so was Gower. He was going to France with a medical unit.

These records were important, and connections were going to be close; so he took the Surrey lanes, thin with misty fog, at the best possible speed. He sadly missed the R.A.C. men at intersections, with their brisk salute for the club insignia. The fog grew worse as he went on; but motor-cars and army lorries roared along, regardless of safety. Car lights were but dim blurs. Everywhere were uniforms, punctuated like his own gray tweeds by the black gas-mask strap.

Before he saw anything of it, he heard the crash—that horrible wrenching crash of cars in impact. It was somewhere past the Croydon turn. He nosed carefully along, then halted as a running figure loomed; a shop-woman, her face contorted with horror.

"It's them!" she was screaming. "They've come! It's them!" Meaning bombers, no doubt. Shrilling the panic words, she vanished in the mist. Gower cautiously nosed ahead. Voices and misty shapes halted him again. Before a shopfront at the edge of some village, two cars were upreared in tangled wreckage, and a crowd was assembling.

A young woman, slim, dark, bare-headed, came striding to his car.

"Can you give us a lift?" she demanded briskly. "To Verne Regis, three miles on. Two women from the other car, and me. Our men can straighten out the mess. It's a bit important that I should get there at once."

"Of course." Gower wondered at her casual air. "Can I be of any service here? I'm a doctor."

"Thanks, no. The chauffeur of the other car is dead; you can't help him. No one else hurt, to mention. A few bruises; we can attend to them at Verne Regis. Stay put, like a good chap, will you? I'll bring them over."

She hurried away toward the vague clamor, leaving an impression of quiet poise and hungry beauty. Why hungry? Gower could not say; this was his impression. An eager, avid girl with dark hair and bright gray eyes. English? He took this for granted; still, he had only been over here a year, and was not up to the finer distinctions as yet.

Verne Regis! Now and later, he was absolutely sure of that name.

A group of figures approached; Gower alighted and opened the car doors. The girl and two other women, two constables assisting them—this struck him at the moment as rather singular; but a muttered, "Yes, my lady," hinted at nobility. One older woman, babbling and complaining, a fussy sort; a younger one holding a cloth against her face.

"How could you, how could you!" this younger one said, with muffled voice, to the girl. Then she and the older woman climbed into the back seat. The girl got in beside Gower, spoke briefly with the constables, and slammed the door.

"YOU'LL have to direct me," said Gower. "Once off the main route, I'm lost."

"Through the village and then turn right," she said crisply. "You're not in khaki?"

"No reason for it, so far."

"Oh! American?"

At his nod, she relaxed, as though from tension. Gower snapped open the compartment in the dash, and pointed.

"Whisky-flask and cup. Take a stiff one. Give 'em some."

He ended with an oath and a wrench at the wheel, barely missing a bicycle-delivery. Not taking his gaze from the fog, he was conscious that the girl obeyed him. Grateful voices came from the two women behind, who seemed to know the girl well.

"I hope we're not causing you trouble?" she asked with utter lack of concern.

"You are," said Gower. "I must get these bags aboard a boat sailing tonight from Liverpool. They're research records, and important—to science, if not to you."

"How gallant!" she said sneeringly. "But you'll make the boat. You must."

"Sorry if it sounded brusque," he apologized. "Boats don't wait, these days."

"Mind the turn here," came the reply, and he dodged into a lane between box hedges. "You'll make her, all right; you must make her! Lord Colding should be waiting for us. I'll have him phone Liverpool, and they'll hold the ship."

Gower swallowed hard, not at her evident anxiety to see him make the boat, but at her means. Lord Colding waiting for her! Lord Colding, banker, industrialist, multi-millionaire, one of the most powerful figures in British finance!

"Too bad about your accident," said Gower, and caught her mirthless laugh.

"Oh, it wasn't—" The girl checked herself sharply. He had one incredible mental flash; it was no accident? Then she went on: "It wasn't my fault, thank goodness. That chauffeur was on the wrong side of the road, and paid for it. Luckily my cousin was in my car and knows the man was wrong. The police will accept his testimony."

Again the incredulity. Gower found no conviction in her words; she had started to say one thing, and had said another. He could have sworn that she had been about to say it was no accident. Her mention of the dead chauffeur was callous, since she had evidently been driving the second car.

"Left turn ahead," she said calmly. He stole a sidelong glance. She was lovely; her wide gray eyes, contrasting vividly with her dark brows and hair, had a rapt, visionary quality.

"You don't look like an English girl," Gower said, smiling.

She gave him a surprised and even startled look. "I suppose you mean that as a compliment, being an American. However, I am half French—" She broke off, and turned at a voice from behind:

"Sylvia, dear! Are we going to Verne Regis?"

"Yes. It's quite all right," responded Sylvia rather casually. She flung a quick word at Gower. "Careful, now! The lodge and the gates just ahead on the right. Thank heaven there are no evacuated Londoners here! The house is small, and Cousin Ralph being in the Ministry—"

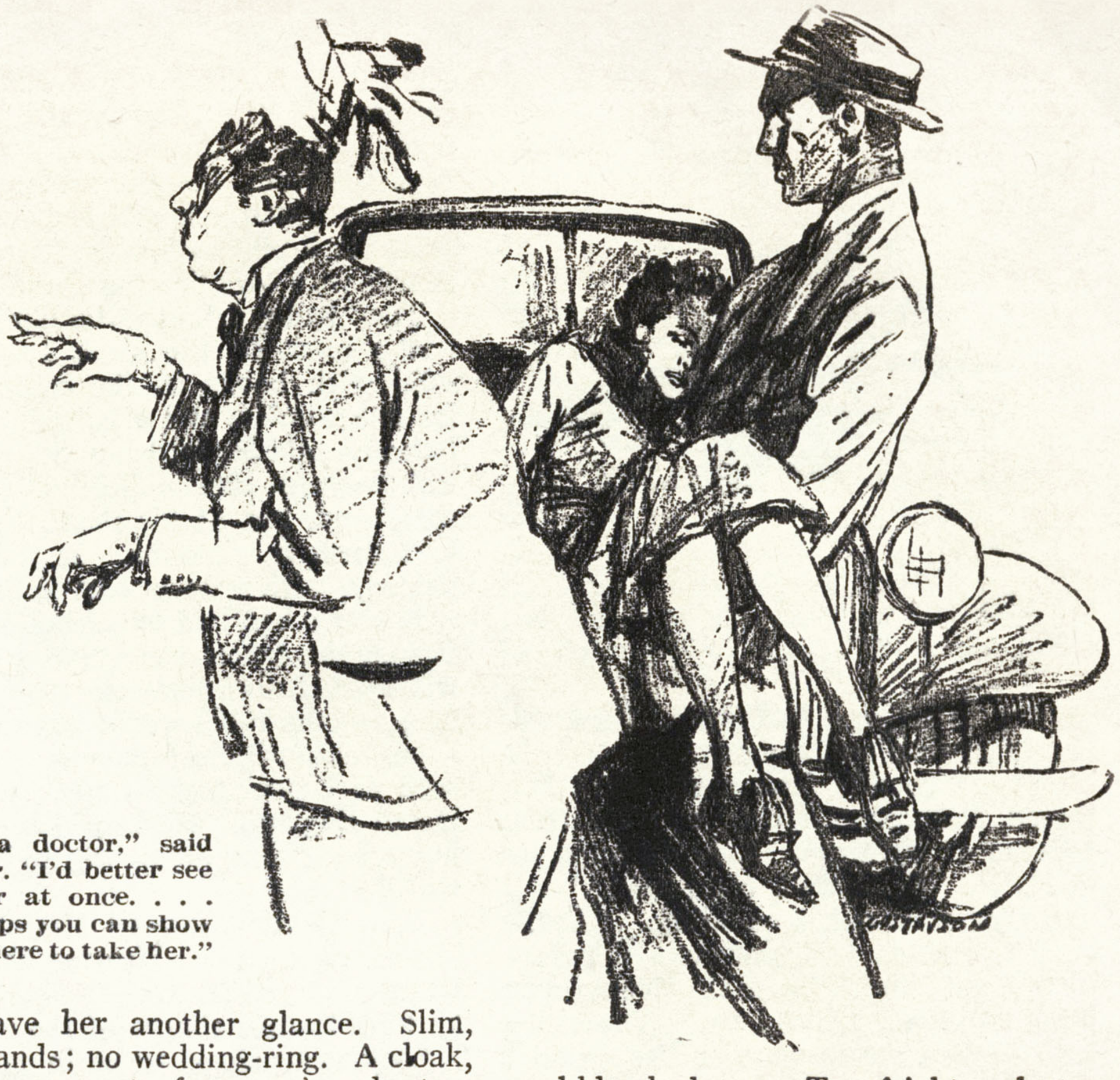
Again she checked herself and carried one hand to her head. Gower saw gates to the right, and braked the car; he also saw a red smear appear on her hand.

"Hurt?" he exclaimed sharply.

"Of course not, stupid!" She fairly spat the words at him, then wrenched at the window. Iron estate gates stood open, a man beside them scrutinizing the car. She spoke to him cheerfully:

"Quite all right, Charles! Leave them open. Sir Ralph will be along soon."

GOWER drove on, past the lodge, under tall trees wreathed in mist. Sir Ralph! That, and mention of a Ministry, told him who the girl's cousin was: Sir Ralph Darsley, the City banker, head of the Schrader Bank and a director in Overseas Chemicals.... Gower whistled softly to himself. Sylvia, eh? Probably she had a title too.



"I'm a doctor," said Gower. "I'd better see to her at once. . . . Perhaps you can show me where to take her."

He gave her another glance. Slim, strong hands; no wedding-ring. A cloak, bearing some sort of women's volunteer corps insignia, enfolding her. Her face again—ah! Alarm shot through him. Face pallid, eyes closed, a tiny trickle of blood like a scarlet thread winding down on her cheek. So she *was* hurt!

Then it had been no accident, and she had been driving—did the girl know what she was saying? Perhaps not. She had quietly fainted now.

Gower tooled the car along into swift confusion. A house, an entry, another car standing there; servants, dogs, a beefy man with beetling features, the two women in the rear seat suddenly vociferous. Gower halted the car, got out, came around to the other side and opened the door at Sylvia's elbow. She quietly toppled, and he caught her.

The beefy man came close, with curt demands. Gower turned, lifting Sylvia out.

"There's been an accident," he said. "Luckily, I'm a doctor. I'd better see to her at once, then I'll have a look at the other ladies. Nothing serious, I believe. Perhaps you can show me where to take her."

He knew the beefy man, of course; he had seen many pictures of Lord Colding. The confusion quieted. Gower entered the house with his burden, was led up broad stairs and into a charming gold-and-blue bedroom. Two frightened, staring maids were with him. As he laid Sylvia on the bed, Gower felt something hard—a pistol, belted at her waist beneath the cloak.

"A first-aid kit, if you have one," he said. "Warm water. Cloths. Quickly!"

The two scurried away. He leaned over her and examined the scalp-cut. It was nothing of consequence. He stooped lower, as her lips opened; he caught the fluttering words:

"You scoundrel—you utter blackguard! I've learned . . . . chauffeur, Karl? Not you! I know the truth—"

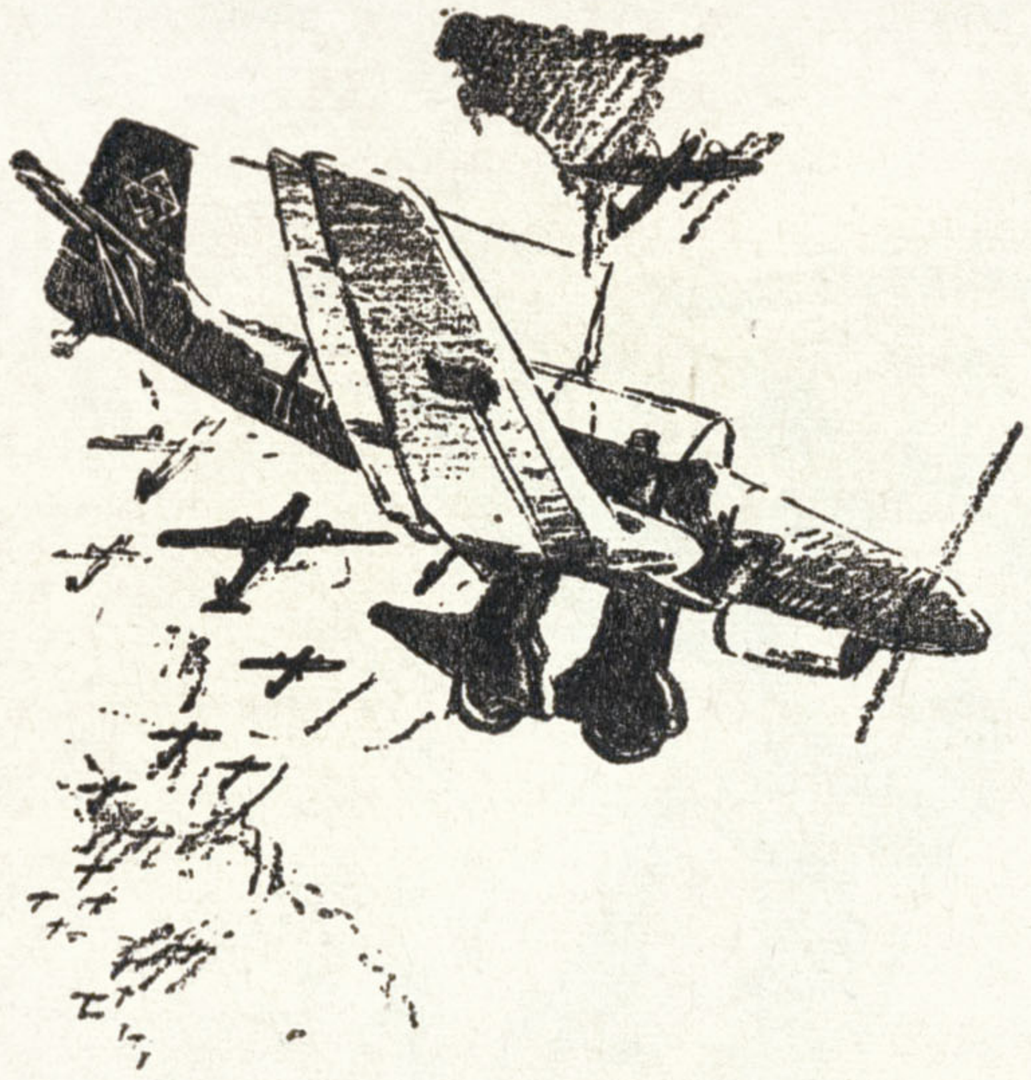
Her lips closed. The maids returned. Gower worked swiftly and silently, until—conscious of a presence—he looked up to see the beefy man there, watching.

"I'm Lord Colding. I think you'd best have a look at the others. How is she?"

"Quite all right; a bruise and a slight cut—and of course the shock. No need of a bandage, even." Gower stood up, and nodded to one of the maids. "You needn't put her to bed. Bring everything along to where the others are."

Colding took his arm. "They've told me about it. Great stroke of luck that you turned up. I don't believe I know you?"

"No. Gower is the name; American, doing some post-graduate here. I'm ex-



pecting to get over to France with a volunteer medical unit any day."

"That's good." The words were flat, forced, insincere. "Just had word from London of warnings. Raid expected tonight. . . . Well, well, come along."

Gower followed, wondering. "That's good." So flat, so insincere! Why?

"By the way," he said, "would you mind telling me where I am? The young lady flagged me down, and I'm afraid I don't know—"

Lord Colding laughed. "Oh, of course! Verne Regis. This is her place, you know. Sylvia Bendret. Her cousin is Sir Ralph Darsley—she was driving him down from London. The other ladies—here, in this room—are the wife and daughter of Sir Gerald Hopeford. The other car was his. He'll be along with Ralph."

The older woman was hysterical but unhurt. The younger, a waspish, disagreeable woman of thirty, was badly bruised about the face and arms. Again Gower fell to work; his brain was busy.

Hopeford? Another bigwig, director of half a dozen huge enterprises, president of the big soap and margarine trust. Hopeford, Colding, Darsley—what the devil drew these three to a lonely Surrey house?

"Better get this young lady to bed," said Gower, finishing. "Lady Hopeford will be all right when the sedative takes effect."

"Jolly good work," approved Lord Colding. "I admire efficiency. Come along, and we'll look up a drink. Your car's been taken care of. The name is Gower, you said?"

Gower appreciated the drink, also the house. It was no huge baronial hall, but a rather small, cramped old mansion redolent of the elder years, and built upon a slope so that part of it was higher than the rest. He glimpsed a big main room in which a fire blazed—not a tiny grate for a pinch of coals, but a monster hearth with logs flaming cheerily.

They had a drink in the library. This was a room on the lower level; it was solid with books to the ceiling, except for one window and a balcony. On this balcony, said his lordship, Sylvia's father had kept a rare collection of Shakespeareana, but at his death Sylvia had sold them in America. It was quite a balcony, with a finely carved oak screen.

A butler had laid out drinking necessities on the center table, and a high electric-light cluster made the room brilliant. Also, on the table was a box of matches—big old-fashioned American matches, such as Gower had not seen since coming to England. He helped himself to a few; the trifling detail was to bulk large hereafter.

Lord Colding showed himself affable, interested, hearty. Hearing that Gower wanted to make Liverpool, and why, he took instant charge of the matter.

"My dear chap, we're in your debt; permit me to handle this. My man can leave immediately; we've spare cars here. Before he reaches Liverpool with your bags, I'll get a call put through to the ship and hold it if necessary. Aside from saving you the trip," he added gravely, "we may need you here to keep an eye on Lady Hopeford. Dev'lish bad heart and all that."

His Lordship certainly got things done. His man, a capable fellow, got instructions and departed with Gower's bags. Barely was he gone, when a terrified maid burst in upon the two men: Lady Hopeford was blue in the lips, she reported, and gasping.

IT was her heart, and a near thing too. Luckily, Gower's medicine-case was in his car. He had Lady Hopeford moved to a separate room, and settled down to real work. . . . An hour passed, and another. The daylight died, and a maid brought in a candle.

Blackout, said she. Someone had just phoned from London that sirens were warning; enemy planes had been sighted far over the Channel. The only room in the house that could use electricity was the library; its one window could be covered completely. Miss Sylvia? Yes, she was quite all right. She was talking with Sir Ralph and Sir Gerald, who had

just arrived. No, they were not hurt at all.

Gower took it for granted that Sylvia knew he was remaining.

Presently Sir Gerald came in, a thin, stiffly formal dyspeptic of fifty, whispering a word, touching his wife's cheek with his lips, and a tear on his thin cheeks as he went out. Gower liked him for his emotion.

GRADUALLY the battle was won, and Gower relaxed. Odd, he thought, that he should be sitting here beside an elderly woman, when hundreds might be needing desperate attention in London! Odd, too, that Sylvia should have wanted to hurry him on his way. Everything about her, about what she had said, was odd.

"Perhaps that clip over the head knocked her a bit silly," thought Gower.

Sylvia Bendret, eh? And this was her house. Obviously she had no relatives except Darsley. The others must be her guests here—why? She had rammed the Hopefords' car deliberately. Those words about the chauffeur—could the girl be a bit gone in the head? Damned queer, all of it!

A maid came in. He asked where he could wash; the third door down the hall was the room assigned him, said she, and offered to lead the way. A candle was lighted there. Gower refused, and stepped briskly down the hall. He was just opening the door of his room when the opposite door opened, and Sylvia came face to face with him.

Even in the dim candlelight he saw her shocked recognition. She still wore her cape; he wondered if the pistol was still under it.

"You—you—still here!" Sylvia stammered in obvious anger. "How dare you? How dare you?"

"Aren't you forgetting yourself, Miss Bendret?" he said quietly. "Lord Colding asked me to remain. Lady Hopeford has been very close to death—her heart—thanks to that blasted accident of yours."

"Oh!" She stared, her eyes wide upon him. Then all the life went out of her, and she drooped against the doorway. "I'm sorry, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Doctor Hugh Gower," he said.

"Yes, yes. You'll have to forgive me. It was you who fixed my head? Come in, please." She flung open her room door. "I need a drink. You'll join me?"

"With pleasure."

Gower entered. It was the same gold-and-azure bedroom; bottles and glasses stood on a table near the lone candle.

"Dinner's nearly ready," she said in a dull and lifeless voice. Her back to him, she was at the table, mixing drinks, squirting a siphon. Then she turned, smiling a forced smile. "Do, please, make allowances. You see, I didn't know you'd stayed on. It was most kind of you."

He accepted the glass she handed him, clinked it against her own, and smiled into her eyes. "How!" He put down the drink at one draught, anxious to get cleaned up a bit. Damned poor whisky, he thought, as he set the glass on the table.

"Thanks very much. I'll have a bit of a wash, and be down presently."

"There's no hurry," she said gently, and nodded. "You'll find a bath in that opposite room. We're really up to date here, if not quite American."

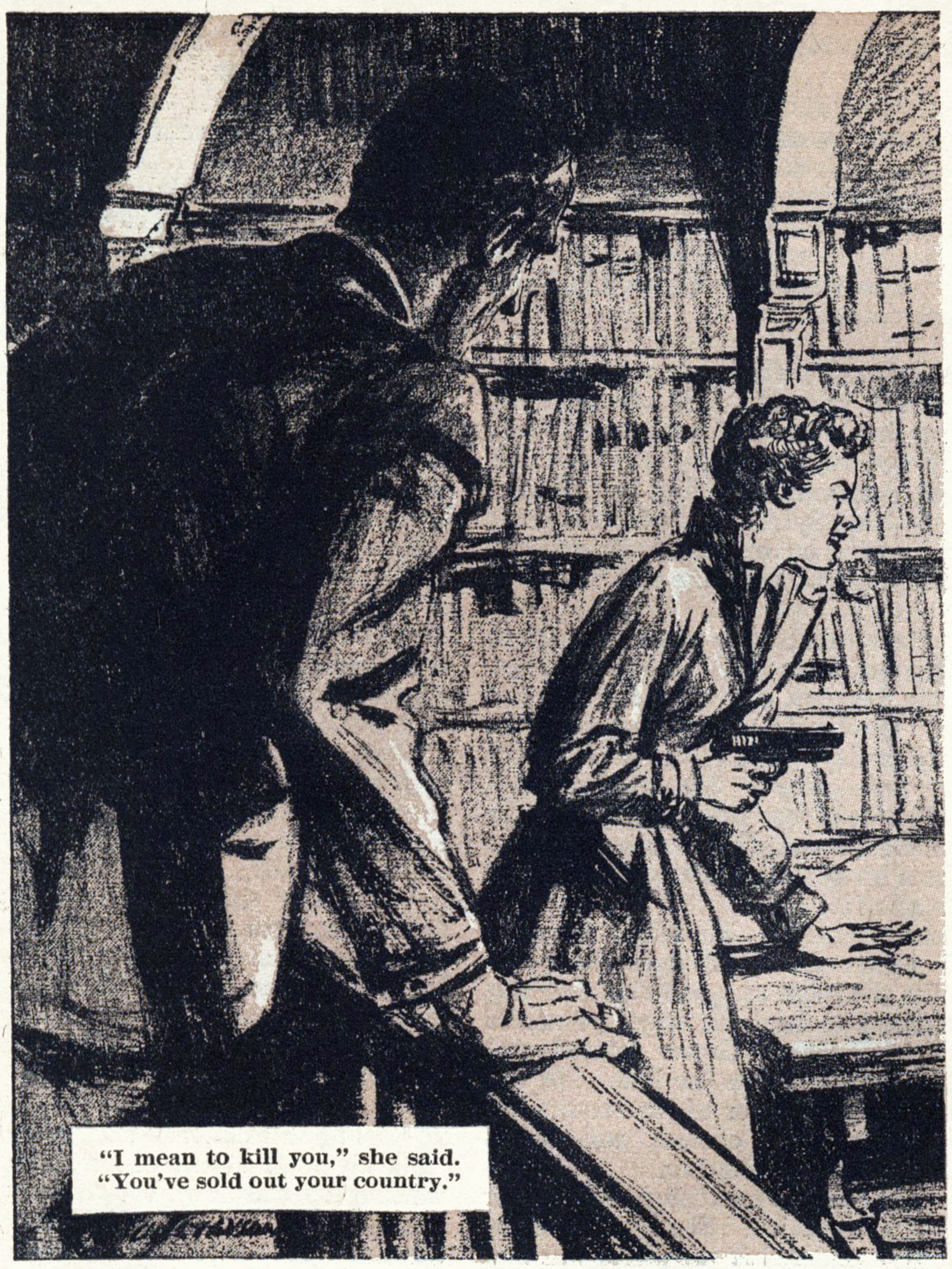
Now, why the devil would she say such a thing? Did he look as though in need of a bath? Gower shut the door of his own room, went to a long mirror, examined himself. . . . No. Not particularly. Queer thing for her to suggest. Queer, too, that she would ask him into her room for a drink. And that whisky had a most foul taste— What the devil! Drugged!

With a plunge, Gower flung himself at the bathroom.

TEN minutes later he staggered out, lit a cigarette at the candle, and began walking up and down the room, rapidly. His brain was swimming; he was rid of the drug, but there was a certain effect none the less. He paced the room desperately, opened a window, smoked afresh. When he glanced at his watch, he found it had stopped at seven o'clock.

Drugged! Why, in heaven's name? His brain was fogged and uncertain, but he tried to reason it out and got nowhere. There was no reason in it—yet that girl was no lunatic. Had he adopted her suggestion and drawn a bath, he would probably have slept into the next morning. A thin, indefinable sensation of horror began to creep into his mind. Numb though his thoughts were, he felt something uncanny and ominous and sinister encircling him.

Nausea came and passed again. He had definitely conquered the drug; yet he was badly shaken, cloudy, not himself at all. A far, shrill noise pierced to his



"I mean to kill you," she said. "You've sold out your country."

senses. Radio? No, all radio stations closed down during a blackout, lest the beam guide the enemy. The open window brought this. From the distant blackness, sirens, barely heard. Warnings. Colding had mentioned it, earlier. It must be that London was being bombed at last, or some other city.

The impulse to get out of this damned house seized him. He went to the door; his steps were uncertain like his brain. He had to fumble to find the knob. This drew an ironic laugh to his lips. How often had he detailed that very symptom of a drug-addict! He opened the door and passed into dense blackness. Not a light anywhere. He paused, then felt for the wall and went on, toward the stairs. He could remember his way and get out.

Yet there should have been some sound in the house! There was nothing. Blackness and emptiness. He paused at the stairhead and listened. A droning snore —perhaps from the Hopefords. At least, it broke the tension. Had Sylvia drugged those two women also? No matter now. Get downstairs, get out of the place! Spurred by this urge, he felt his way down the stairs, cautiously.

CLOSE to the bottom, he paused. Sylvia's voice came from somewhere.

"Thanks very much," she said. "You don't know what damage? Bombs definitely falling in the city? Right. I'll call again later."

He heard her brisk step, then the slam of a door.

London? Bombs at last? The fact hardly stirred him, hardly came to realization, so foggy was his thought. Apparently there was not a soul downstairs, not a candle, not a servant. Gower stumbled over a chair, lost all sense of direction, and paused, irresolute. Where were they all? He must find someone, announce his departure. The library would have light, of course—the sunken library with the odd little balcony. How the devil had he and Colding come to it?

He tried to remember, fumbled at a door, swore, and got out a match-box. He struck a match and was lost for an instant, trying to remember. Down from the big living-room—where were those steps? The light flickered and went out. The box was empty. He swore again. Destiny seemed dead against him in this accursed place! But he kept on. Something caught his eye at last—a thin, slight sliver of light—but not downward; upward! He headed for it, and found steps. Not downward, but upward. Thoroughly fuddled by this, he mounted the steps —there were only four. The indistinct sound of a voice reached him. His extended hand found a door, struck the knob, and turned it. The door opened away from him. What seemed a blaze of light hit him; he stepped through, closed the door, and stood blinking.

"Quiet, now! Don't move. . . . Don't dare move! Sit down!"

Sylvia's voice. He thought it was meant for him, until his eyes gained focus. He was alone in space. Ah, the bal-

cony, of course! A step, two steps, and he was at the balustrade, looking down at the room with its books and central table. And what he saw held him frozen: Chairs were scraping; three men were sitting down at one end of the table, but not to the glasses and wine decanter. No—to a pistol, held by Sylvia, who stood at the other end of the table and faced them.

Lord Colding, not so ruddy as before. The thin Hopeford. A younger man, his face black with anger, an oath on his lips: evidently Darsley, her cousin.

"You damned vixen!" he was saying. "What d'ye mean by this?"

"Why, London's being bombed, gentlemen!" she rejoined.

"SYLVIA, are you gone mad?" cried Lord Colding.

"Certainly," she replied. "I've been anticipating this day, gentlemen. What Gov'ment won't do, can't do, daren't do, I shall do. It's too bad you can't hear the bombs bursting as your friends drop them, isn't it? Too bad you can't hear those German planes you helped build and finance. —Careful, Ralph! Reach for that decanter, and I'll kill you!"

Sir Ralph withdrew his hand. Her voice crackled with chill warning; she meant her words. Colding was nervously mopping his face. Sir Gerald sat staring at her and biting his lip.

"You all belonged to the Anglo-German Fellowship," she went on. "You promoted it. You helped organize it. Ralph, you're an under-secretary in the Ministry—very nice! Also, your bank connections with the heavy industry of western Germany are nice, and Overseas Chemicals—partner of the I. G. Farben!"

"Don't be a silly fool," snapped Sir Ralph. "You know all that's over with now."

"I know you lie," she said coolly, calmly. "Dear Lord Colding, how nice of you to make sure Germany got those millions belonging to the Czech bank—those millions in gold, left here in London! But you cracked the whip. Even though the British cabinet issued a decree forbidding that gold to go to Germany—you cracked the whip. It went. It was spent for cotton and nickel in New York even before Germany got it. Hitler knew you'd not fail him, Lord Colding."

The beefy man squirmed, swore, blustered angrily. Sylvia ignored him and smiled at Sir Gerald.

"And you, dear Sir Gerald! The Schicht brothers in Germany are partners in your soap and margarine business. Oh, don't bother to deny it! The facts are on record. Why, your own offices were the headquarters of the Anglo-German Fellowship! Of course, the war has put an end to the Fellowship, much to your sorrow; however, you've worked well for the Nazis in other directions. You three gentlemen are the finest examples of traitors in all Britain—traitors the law can't touch."

The three sat stunned, staring, finally finding tongue.

Gower, clinging to the oaken screen, could not believe he witnessed reality. The scene swam before his eyes. The clamorous voices arose in unison and he shook his head, trying to get his fogged brain clear.

Then her words stilled the clamor and rose over it like strokes of a clear silver bell.

"You three have business ties and family ties with the Nazi Reich. You have deceived the country and hamstrung the Government. You have fooled some of the public, but you've not fooled me. When I asked you to meet me here tonight—"

"You lied, you lied!" Sir Ralph burst in furiously. "You said it was to meet messengers—from the Continent! And you've been one of us, you've belonged to the Fellowship!"

"Yes, but my eyes are open now." The girl smiled, and the scorn in her face was terrible to see. "Messengers from Berlin? Yes. That's why you came, wasn't it? You, Sir Gerald, with your chauffeur Karl—Karl the spy, Karl the Gestapo agent, whom you saved from internment with your lies! Well, I got Karl on the way here, didn't I? Though I did think you and he were alone in the car when I smashed into it."

"LOOK here, Sylvia!" spoke up Lord Colding, authoritative and decisive. "What d'you mean by all this nonsense, eh? What d'you mean by it?"

"Why, I mean to kill you," she said calmly. The quiet words shocked them. "I've had this in mind for some time. I've waited until the moment came, and this is the moment. The messengers from Berlin have come; it was no lie. They're bombing London now. *You're bombing London—you three men!* That's why I shall kill you. You've sold out your country—and you're not the only ones

either, but you're the ones whom I can reach—"

A distant jarring smash brought silence on the room. Somewhere, a bomb—another sounded, and the house rattled to it. A laugh broke from Sylvia.

"Ha! Sounds like business, doesn't it? If you three hadn't paralyzed the Government these weeks and months, if you hadn't played the Nazi game for them—"

Her words were drowned in a terrific roar close by. The entire house reeled and groaned as though in earthquake grip; the beams swayed; the balcony rocked under Gower's feet. He turned and stumbled out in panic. As he went, he heard the sharp crack of pistol-shots in the room behind.

Another frightful concussion burst like the crack of doom. Window-glass filled the darkness with edged shrapnel. Earth and air quivered beneath the shock. Gower somehow found himself in open air—and this was the last thing he remembered.

HE wakened to daylight, to hospital smells and sounds, to a nurse sitting beside his bed. She leaned over, her hand touching his forehead gently.

"Poor dear, don't talk now," she said. "You'll be all right in a day or two. You were brought in from the road; one of those bombs must have landed close to you."

"Verne Regis?" he murmured. "Do you know that place?"

"Why, yes!" she said brightly. "I'm from the village there myself."

"Was it badly damaged? The house? The people?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I'll go and find out for you. Meantime, you just go off to sleep and don't worry. I'll be back."

But she never came back. And Gower never could trace her. When he wakened again, another nurse was beside him. To his questions, she merely shook her head dourly, saying she had never heard of such a place as Verne Regis.

Nor had anyone else.

Gower was slow, naturally, to comprehend it. Other nurses, attendants, doctors, even the patients with whom he could speak—all the same story. There was no Verne Regis. When he blurted out names and facts, they pityingly showed him the newspapers.

Sir Ralph Darsley had been killed in the wreck of his car, crushed by a truck. It was no secret that Lord Colding had died from a heart-seizure following that first bombing raid on London; or that pneumonia had recently carried off Sir Gerald Hopeford.

When Gower left the hospital, he was dazed, bewildered, doubting his own senses. Then, that same day, he found three American matches in his vest pocket! He remembered having put them there, that afternoon with Lord Colding.

He drove his car from the hospital; it had been picked up near the scene of the bombing. With it, he scoured the Surrey countryside. More than once, he was certain that he was being followed, but dismissed the suspicion with an oath of disdain.

He learned little. Some bombs had fallen hereabouts, yes; but there was no such house as Verne Regis. The name was unknown. He could not discover the village in which those cars had crashed, three miles from Verne Regis. He could get no traces of any such accident.

It was maddening. He drove back to London and went to work from that end, with the research records as an excuse. He found there was a Sylvia Bendret, but she had gone to France weeks ago with some hospital unit; he could learn nothing more. It was quite impossible, they said, that he should have seen her recently—quite impossible. But a wireless from the ship brought word that the cancer-research records were aboard safely; he had delivered them himself at Liverpool, said the message. This was even more maddening, and Gower made an appointment by telephone with the United States ambassador.

TELEPHONING was, perhaps, a mistake. Thirty minutes after he made the appointment, he received a call from a Ministry official, who evasively but firmly warned Gower that persistence in his extraordinarily singular hallucination would entail most serious consequences. Instead of going to France, he might be deported to America. At this, he saw the light.

He ended his efforts, wisely. But he could not end the mystic chords of memory: the picture of a girl, pistol in hand—the barking shots of that pistol, between the thunderous concussions of bombs in the night....

When he went to France with his medical unit, Gower carried the hope that some day he might meet her there, or get trace of her. But he never did.

When the Devil

The Story Thus Far:

THAT fateful summer of 1939 I—Jeremy Solan—set out for a long holiday with my friend George Laking in a motor-trip across France. But it so happened I was able to rescue a pretty girl from the minor peril of an empty petrol tank, and was greatly taken with her. We were to meet next morning after the Channel crossing, at Calais; but she walked out on me by an early departure, leaving a strange note of farewell. And then to make it perfect, I found a message from George that he had been delayed about meeting me. That evening I wandered into a strange café in a queer part of town, and there was Katharine sitting at a table with a group of men whom only one word can describe: *sinister*.

I went over and spoke to her by name; she pretended not to recognize me; I insisted; and presently a first-class row was in the making. Somehow Katharine slipped away. An instant later the lights went out; then a small hand caught my elbow, and Katharine hurried me down a passage, and out to my car.

I drove away with her—drove all night, fast and far, for she expected close and deadly pursuit. Next morning we breakfasted in a little glade two hundred miles away, and she told me her story:

Her father was an artist, a simple man of fine character and high ideals who had lived since his wife's death at Cardinal, a quaint and lovely chateau in the heart of France. Calamity had befallen a few years before: he had gone blind. Yet he bore up under this well enough; and he remained ignorant of the later disaster: the loss of his fortune. For Katharine, going to London to sell her jewels in order to support him in ignorance as long as possible, fell in with a gang of jewel-thieves; before she was aware of their true character, she had innocently aided them in transporting stolen gems. Now she was forced to continue this career under threat of death or worse. And for her father's sake she had carried on.... We drove on to Cardinal, knowing that pursuit was close, and that death now threatened us both. *(The story continues in detail:)*

"ON foot?" I protested at Katharine's suggestion that we leave Cardinal that same evening.

"On foot. It will never occur to them that we've dropped the car. No one—

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Drives

By DORNFORD YATES

"Do we go or stay?" I asked. "It's up to—my future wife."

not even my father—will know that the car is still here; and Conrad will see that the village hears that we've gone. So when they come back, as they will, they'll leave again to try and pick up the car. If you're as careful as I am—"

"One moment," said I. "Are you proposing that we should separate?"

"Of course I am. I want you to leave tonight."

"Why shouldn't you leave with me?"

Katharine leaned forward.

"Because I'm too young to die! Alone, we may escape notice. Together, wherever we went, we should take a risk."

"A man and a girl?" I said. "That combination is surely common enough."

"Esau, I don't want to be too brutal—I know you mean well. But frankly, I'm safer without you. I am extremely expert at lying low; but if you're to be round my neck—"

I sat very still. I had not believed that she would have spoken like that.

"Talk about a *volte-face!*" I said. "Four hours ago—"

"I know. But I've—thought things over. If you disappear for three months—well, after all, they've got their living to earn. You are not very dangerous really, because you cannot betray them without betraying me. And when they cool down, they'll see that. And when they see that, I think they'll throw in their hand and let you go."

"I see," I said slowly. "And you?"

Katharine shrugged. "I shall come through. Cardinal's safe for two years—I've saved enough money for that. And two years is quite a long time. Formosa will be forgotten; the Shepherd may even be dead."

I regarded the palms of my hands.

"I'm not persuaded," I said. "I still believe that we should do better to stay and to have things out. In fact, I had worked out a plan; but it's no good telling it to you, if you're determined to go. But I make one stipulation—that we go together. I will not leave you alone."

Katharine stared. "But I've told you—"

"I know you have," I said quietly, and looked her full in the eyes. "But I don't think you've told me the truth."

"What on earth d'you mean?"

I rose to my feet.

"That if I go tonight, you're not going to leave this house. You're going to wait here till they come, and then *you're going to meet them and try to make some arrangement by which they will spare my life.*"

Katharine had gone very pale. I saw her moisten her lips.

"You flatter yourself," she said coldly. "In fact, to be perfectly honest, I think that I've done my bit. Two nights ago I literally saved your life—"

"I've tried to say I'm grateful," I said.

"Wait a minute. Yesterday, because I was shaken—because I was out of my mind, I made a damned fool of myself and told you all about me and what I was. God knows why I did it, but let that pass. And now—" She broke off, laid a finger to her lip.

"WHERE are you, Kate?"

The pleasant voice came down the winding stair.

Katharine flashed to the doorway.

"Here. On the terrace," she said.

With her words, the speaker appeared—a man like a Viking, with magnificent eyes, and a pointed beard that was glowing with gray and gold.

Katharine was speaking.

"Jeremy, this is my father, Sir Valentine Scrope. Father, here's Mr. Solan, who's come miles out of his way to give your daughter a lift."

I took the outstretched hand, and I met the great gray eyes; I found it most hard to believe that they could not see.

"Any man who brings me my daughter is welcome here. There was a fellow of Merton who bore your name."

"That was my grandfather, sir."

"I'm glad of that. He was my classical tutor a good many years ago. And I

used to sit at his feet, for he made the dead languages live."

"I was at Merton, sir."

A hand came to rest on my shoulder.

"What fun!" he said. "Did you row?"

For five minutes we strolled and talked, while Katharine moved beside us, but said no word. Then Sir Valentine cocked his ear, and I heard the church clock striking ten.

"You must excuse me," he said, "for a quarter of an hour. I want to prepare a stall for a mare that is coming to stay. And when I get back, we'll go on. I must make the most of your time, as you're leaving tonight. I'd have liked to keep you here; but you mustn't let down the man you're joining at Carcassonne."

With a nod and a smile he stepped to a second stairway that gave to the court below. And when I turned to Katharine, my lady was gone.

FEW guests can have passed a more distracting day.

No one could have been nicer than was Sir Valentine. On his return, he took me all over the castle and showed me every detail of all its loveliness. And then we talked of Oxford, until it was time for lunch. And I had to play up somehow—take and display an interest in all he said.

Katharine appeared at lunch: but the moment the meal was over, she said she was going to rest. I tried—and failed—to do likewise, until it was time for tea; but though I then left my room, she did not reappear, and I had to talk to her father till half-past six.

At last he rose to his feet.

"I wish you weren't going," he said. "I'd like to have kept you here. However, it can't be helped. You'll dine with us first, won't you?"

I stammered my thanks.

"That's right. I've said dinner at eight. No changing, of course. I expect you're very wise to travel by night. Kate says it's the only way, and she ought to know. And now I must have my stroll." He threw up his head. "I love the meadows at sundown. To every kind of country, its special hour. Dawn on the uplands; noon in the heart of a forest; night on a river's breast."

I made some feeble reply, and he smiled and was gone.

For a quarter of an hour I sought Katharine, in vain. Then I withdrew to my chamber and wrote her a note.

My dear,

Unless you go with me, I will not leave here tonight. How to break this to your father, I do not know. I never was very quick, and after the day I've spent, my brain is about as much use as a cough in a hurricane. But unless you come to my help, I shall have to do it alone. I'm going to sit on the ramparts till eight o'clock.

I signed it *Esau,* her nickname for me; and when I had sealed it up, I called the butler and asked him to see that she had it at once. And then I went up to the ramparts, as I had said. It was a beautiful evening; before and below me lay a landscape which some great painter might have dreamed of and then recorded on canvas a hundred years ago.

I did not hear Katharine coming; but something made me look round, and there she was.

"Did you get my letter?" I said.

She nodded. "And I've come to beg you, Esau, to do as I say."

"That's out of the question," I said.

"But my father is sure to suspect—"

"I don't see why he should. More than once he has said that he wished I could stay. What I propose to do is to ask if George can come here—and to do my best to get him as quick as ever I can. But if he does suspect something, it won't be my fault. Who, as the poet says, who tipped me into the muck?"

"Esau, listen: This morning I tried my utmost to force your hand. Perhaps I should have known better; but let that pass. Tonight I am going to implore you not to discard the only chance we have. I've told you that the Shepherd means business, and so he does. To stand and fight, is hopeless: against such a man, you haven't the ghost of a chance. To run is equally hopeless; he'll simply bide his time and get us both in the end."

I FOLDED my arms. "And so you propose to see him?"

She nodded. "We've only one card, Esau—and that is Formosa's value, as one of the Shepherd's Crooks. He can't replace her—he knows that as well as I. And if, when he comes, you are really out of his ken, I think I can make your health a condition of my return."

"My dear—"

"One moment, Esau: I know what you're going to say. But what would become of my father, if anything happened to me? And unless I go back—unless I am taken back, whether I live

or die, I shall be as good as dead. A fugitive can't earn money; and I shall never dare to return to Cardinal. Your life, my life and his welfare—all depend on your leaving alone tonight. If you do that, I believe I can bring it off."

"And I," said I, "should never see you again."

With the now familiar gesture, she pushed back her lovely hair.

"Don't make it so hard, Esau. I'm—out of court, my dear: and you know it as well as I. What is the good of pretending—of picking the Dead Sea apples, when both of us know they'll be dust and ashes to eat?"

I took her two hands in mine. "Do you really think," said I, "that I'm going to leave you now?"

The fine gray eyes looked away. "I hoped that you would—for my sake. I —don't want you to die. That is the most I can hope for—that you should live. Formosa will carry on, and Cardinal too. In fact, we'll be back as we were—if only you'll do as I say."

"I've looked in your eyes," I said; "and I am not content for us to be back as we were."

She lifted her eyes to mine. "Esau, dear, listen to me: We've had a great time together. Let's always remember that. Sixty precious hours, which no one—not even the Shepherd—can take

Illustrated by
Austin Briggs

George gave no warning of his approach; then he kicked the fellow. With a screech, Satan crashed down the mountain-side.

away. I think—I have a feeling, that if you will only fade out, I can pull things round. For God's sake, realize this—that that is the best we can hope for. To go for anything else, is to court the most awful crash. You and I and my father—we'd all go down."

"You must always have known," said I, "that sooner or later some end was bound to come. Don't think I'm trying to save you—I never had that idea. But I do know what I want. And I'm not going to be ridden off by one of the filthiest blackguards that ever made use of a lady to save his creeping skin."

I put my arms about her and held her close.

I loved you the moment I saw you," I said, "and after the note that you sent me, I never should have rested until I had found you again. You see, it meant that you cared. Well, now I know more than that—that no matter what it costs you, your one idea is to save me from possible harm. That can only mean that you love me—for that's how I feel about you."

She took my face in her hands.

"Yes," she breathed, "I love you. How could I do anything else? And it is because I love you, that even if a miracle happened to bring us out of this jam, nothing on earth would make me become your wife. You see, Formosa is spoiled goods."

"Not in my eyes, my darling."

"I know. That's because you love me. The police would be less—broad-minded. And that is why I never could take your name. So you see, we've no future, my darling. Our little love-affair is bound never to—grow up. And that being so, why won't you do as I say? You've been so sweet to me, and if I can straighten things out, I should be so very thankful to think that—no harm had been done; if you stand and fight, you'll only be killed, my darling, and that'll be the end of Formosa and so of Cardinal."

I looked at my reflection in her eyes.

"I've told you, sweetheart," I said, "that if you insist on my going, I'll leave with you."

"Go alone, darling, for my sake; and spare us both. You've turned a muck-heap over and pulled an idyl out. Don't

take it away from me, Esau—I've never had one before. Kiss me and go, beloved, before my father comes back. I'll tell him something—make some sort of excuse. And I'll let you out by the window which gives to the path in the woods. But go, if you love me, Esau; for even if we come through—and I know we can't—the day will come when you'll have to go alone."

"So much the worse!" I said—and I kissed her beautiful mouth. Then I let her go and stood back and away.

"Do we go or stay?" I asked. "It's up to—my future wife."

"Esau, you're mad. We've life and death before us. Which do we choose?"

"Life—and love," said I. "I just won't leave you. I'll run with you if you like; but I'd rather we stood our ground."

KATHARINE regarded me dumbly, as one who has shot her bolt. Then a tear rolled down her cheek, and she put up an arm to her eyes, like a weeping child.

She was in my arms in an instant, and her face was pressed close against mine.

"Don't cry," I whispered. "It tears my heart, my darling, to see you cry."

With an effort, she mastered her voice.

"I—don't want you to be—hurt. I couldn't bear—that. My life—doesn't matter. I've messed it up so much—it's only fit to be smashed. But I'd like to think—you were all right."

"I shall be, my blessed," I breathed. "Both of us will be—all right."

I felt her take a deep breath. Then—

"The stuffing's gone out of me, Esau. Things are too much for me, and I'm not going to fight any more. I'll do all you say, of course. But you have taken charge, and you'll have to play the hand. I dare say it's better so. I've not been myself since Rouen; Formosa went into that café, but Katharine came out." She sighed. "And now you must let me go. I don't know much about tears, but I think I should bathe my face."

I watched her cross the ramparts and take the winding stair that led to the terrace below. And then I made haste to follow, because I had more to say. As I began to go down, I heard her descending below me, just out of sight.

"Listen, Katharine," I said, and quickened my pace. "We haven't arranged—"

And there I missed my footing. . . . After all, it was easy enough.

The ramparts had been full of light, but the stair was dim, and the steps were steep and worn; and I, who did not know them, was moving fast. Be that as it may, I stumbled and put a foot wrong, and because there was no handhold, I fell down the rest of the flight.

It was not far to fall, and happily, she was clear; I came to a stop on the terrace, right on her heels. Although I sat up, I did not attempt to rise, but leaned forward to nurse my left foot, which was hurting me very much.

Katharine was kneeling beside me; her face was cupped in her hands.

"Esau, you're hurt! What is it?"

"Give me a hand," I said, smiling.

She did as I said, and I got to my other foot.

"But Esau—"

"Cold running water," I said. "That's all I need. And a bandage, later. But first the way to a tap."

"Lean on my shoulder, dear."

So we came to a tiny bathroom, which I afterward found was hers. . . .

As the water streamed over my ankle:

"Does it still hurt terribly, Esau?"

I picked up her hand and kissed it.

"It's nothing at all," I said, "except a perfect excuse for not leaving for Carcassonne."

SIR VALENTINE made things easy. Before the words were out of his daughter's mouth, he had issued the invitation I wished to hear.

"Since you cannot go to Laking, ask Laking to come to you. Kate will drive you to Cruise—we have no telephone here; and from there you can speak to him and tell him how you are placed. We shall be delighted to have him—to have you both: and as you lived together at Oxford, I daresay, for once in a way, you won't mind sharing a room."

I thanked him suitably: and he left me to bathe my foot. But I sat still, with a hand to my mouth. It had never entered my head that the nearest telephone was actually twelve miles off.

I confess that for two or three minutes I did not know what to do. It was madness to leave the castle and take again to the road; yet if I could possibly get George I had to have him.

And then, all at once, I saw that if we were to stand and fight, we simply must be able to come and go; and that if we were to be able to come and go, the very first thing to do was to get the car out of the castle and lodge it in some safe place to which we could walk when we pleased without being seen.

There and then I went off to find my lady and ask for a large-scale map; but I might have known that she knew the country by heart, and before we had talked for two minutes, I had the trick in my hand.

The castle hung in the woods on the spur of a mountainside, and all of its walls could be seen, except that which rose to the north. This wall looked onto the mountain and could not be seen from below or from either side, because of the foliage in which the castle was sunk.

Though there was no gate in this wall, there was a window, and one of its bars could be dropped; since this was but six feet up, a man who meant to do it could easily pass either way; but the bar could not be moved, except by somebody standing within the walls. (This was, of course, the window, by which Katharine had wished me to leave.)

Once afoot in the forest, you had a choice of two ways; for thirty yards off, lay a path which could not be seen. If, when you came to this, you turned to the right, six minutes' walk would bring you down into the valley, beyond and below the castle and east of the village itself. But if you turned to the left, a walk of an hour would carry you up and over the mountainside, and so to the village of Ousse, which was, if anything, smaller than that of Cardinal.

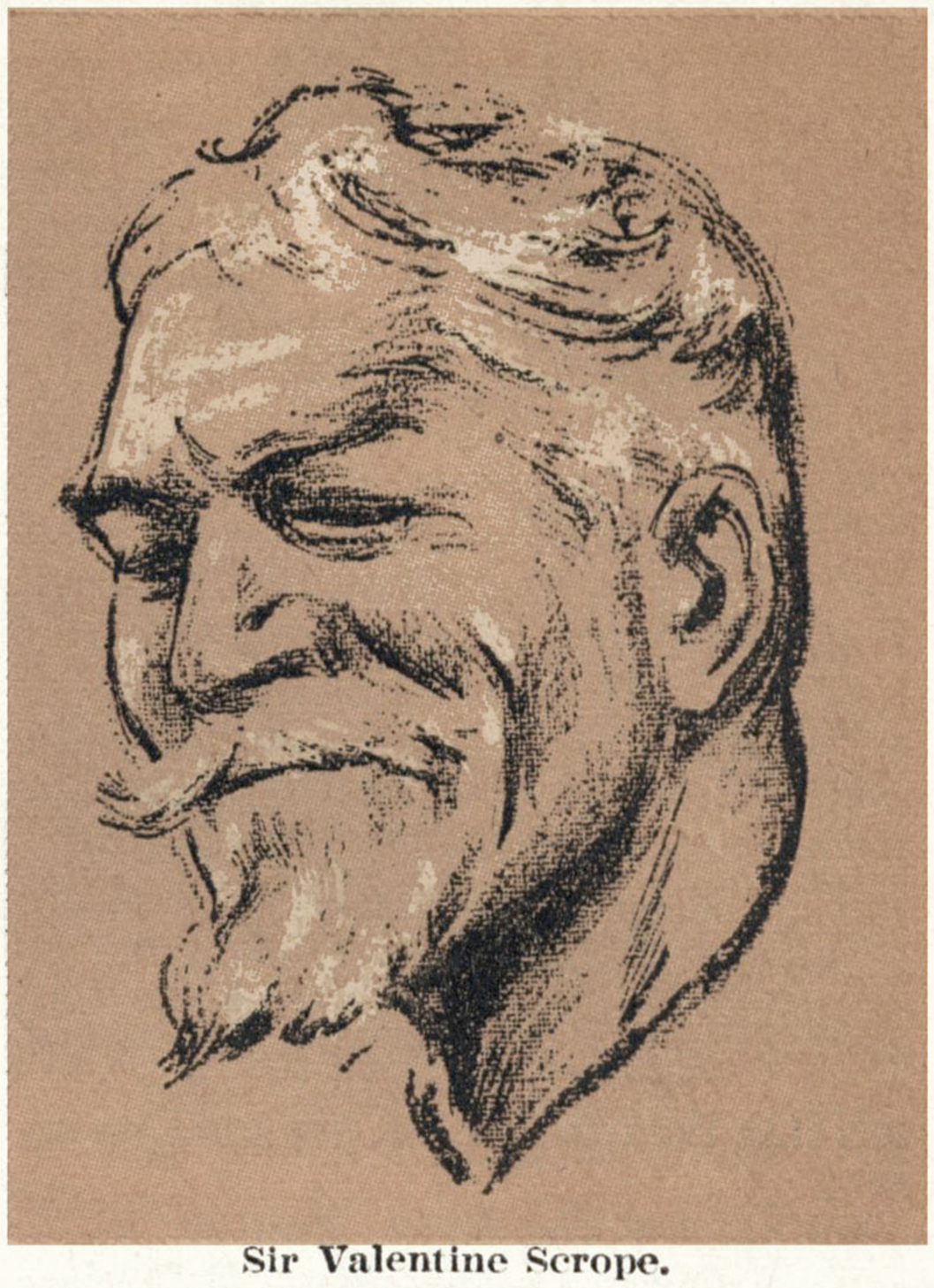
Such was her information.

It was therefore perfectly clear that Ousse was the place at which to conceal the car, and that since we had to drive out, the time at which to conceal it was after our visit to Cruise.

IT follows that when, after dinner, we took our seats in the car, Conrad had been instructed that we should return on foot, and that he must be ready to admit us by the window that gave to the woods. Could I have done so, I would have left Katharine behind; but for one thing, she would not have stayed, and for another, I could not have done without her the things I was going to do.

So I sat still by her side, with my foot strapped up and a hammer close to my hand, while she drove out of the courtyard and down to the sleeping hamlet and over the miniature bridge. We severed the sweet-smelling meadows and bore to the right. Then we entered the hanging forest, which might have been the cloak of darkness itself.

If I had been shaken before, it was the forest that brought my fears to a



Sir Valentine Scrope.

head. The place was the lair of Ambush; and the roof and curtains of leaves magnified the sound of our engine.

As we left the serpentine hill—

"How far are the crossroads?" said I.

"About two miles and a quarter from where we are now."

"No turning till then?"

"No."

"They're clear of the forest, you said?"

"Yes, they're in open country. We don't have to turn for Cruise, so I might be able to take them without any lights."

"Speed's more important," said I. "I don't want to loiter just there. But don't go too fast till then; and tell me when we're approaching the end of these—beautiful woods."

I saw her nod.

By now I had a definite feeling that some watch had been set. But we had this much in our favor—whoever was there would not be expecting us to be coming *from* Cardinal; for had the enemy dreamed we had reached the castle, he would have appeared at its gates.

Perhaps four minutes slid by. Then—

"We're nearly there," said Katharine. "We're coming to the last of the forest. You see, it's lighter ahead."

I took a sudden decision.

"Then slow up and stop your engine and put out your lights."

She did as I said. Straining our eyes and our ears, we sat very still. Then I opened the door by my side and let my-

My lady, Katharine.

self into the road. I felt her hand on my arm.

"What are you doing, Esau?"

"I'm going to reconnoiter. This place is made for an ambush: and I'm afraid to go on until I have looked at the crossroads and seen—what there is to be seen."

In a flash, she was out of the car. "I'm coming with you," she breathed.

I bit my lip. "I trust you," I said, "to keep ten paces behind me—no less than that."

"Very well."

"And now tell me this: I think that's a bend ahead?"

"That's right. It's the first of two bends, about fifty paces apart. That's the end of the forest, and there are the crossroads before you, two hundred paces away."

"I see. Keep directly behind me. I want to know where you are."

Our shoes were soled with rubber and made no sound, and though I was going short, my foot hardly hurt me at all. But I knew that I should not be able to hasten for three or four days.

I was growing accustomed to the darkness, thick as it was, and I marked with satisfaction the definite glow that argued the starlight ahead; for if there was anyone there, since we were coming from darkness, we ought to be able to see him before he saw us. He might have heard the Lowland, the night was so still; but between the car and the crossroads a spur of the mountain ran down, and that should have been enough to blanket what sound we had made.

As I approached the first bend, I passed to the side of the way; then I stole round very slowly, to see the road empty before me, but now less dark than dim, while the second bend was outlined against the light of the stars. For any kind of ambush, this reach would have been ideal, and I had felt so strongly that danger lay in our path that I was almost surprised to see the way was clear. Still, though it seemed that my fancy was running away, I determined to view the crossroads before going back, and after a glance behind, I began to pad on more quickly toward the last bend.

I had very nearly made it before I was brought up sharp. My instinct had been right, after all. A fine wire cable, waist-high, was across the road; but in the darkness it was almost invisible.

I was breathing in Katharine's ear.

"If there's anyone here, I think they'll be at the crossroads—I'll tell you why. They can see much more from there, and they are expecting us to be going the opposite way; and if there should be a smash, they can be on the spot within fifty seconds of time: yet they won't be on the scene of the outrage—in case of accidents. I'm almost sure I'm right, because it's such common sense; but I'd like to be quite sure before I have a go at that cable—I don't suppose it's very hard to undo."

Together we rounded the bend. Then I bade her wait until I was again ten paces ahead. Since the higher ground made for darkness, I kept to the right of the road, with my lady moving behind me, but making no sound at all.

WE had covered perhaps a hundred and seventy yards, and the actual cross of the roads was clear to be seen, when without any warning at all, a figure strolled into my view from the road on my right.

For a moment he stood, I think, with his back toward me: then he struck a match and lighted a cigarette.

The sight of him made me so angry that had I been ten paces nearer, I would have chanced a pistol and laid him out with a weapon which could not miss; indeed, I was hesitating whether or not to advance, when he settled the matter for me by sauntering on his way and out of my sight.

At once I turned back. . . .

While Katharine watched, I fought with the cable until I could cast it loose. Then I coiled it up and dropped it into

the ditch. And then we went back to the car, and *I* took the wheel, for I meant to run the man down, if he gave me a chance.

"Put out the clutch for me."

She did as I said; I changed into second; between us, we changed into top.

With our headlights on, we went for the crossroads at sixty—and gathering speed.

But I never saw the ghoul who was waiting to give us the *coup de grâce*. Perhaps he was safe in the bracken. After all, he was there to take life, not to lose it by playing the fool. And I had this consolation—that now he would report to his master that we had been going *away* from Cardinal. That accurate information would stand us in good stead.

THEN Katharine was speaking—with her eyes on the road behind.

"I take off my hat to you, Esau. You know how to use an instinct I've never had."

I shot her a glance; for her words and her manner of speaking had taken me by surprise. But though I think she saw me, she gave no sign.

"I don't know about that," I said.

"I do. And it's done me good. I knew that you had no fear; but I saw no reason to think that you had resource. . . . Bear to the left in a minute, and up and over a ridge."

As we swam over the crest, her head came round.

"All clear," she said. "D'you think that Laking will come?"

"He will," I said, "if he's in when the telephone goes."

"Mr. Laking—Formosa, one of the Shepherd's Crooks."

"My dear," I said, "he'll have to be told the truth."

"Of course. It doesn't matter—as long as he holds his tongue. You need a faithful Achates very badly—tonight's shown that. I'll pull my weight, and more; but I know where a girl gets off, and I'm not going to cramp your style. But please never move without me—I may be able to help. I know my late confederates. I know their habits and outlook, and pretty ways they've got that you'd never guess. Judas, for instance, is left-handed—that's worth remembering."

"The relief," I said, "of hearing you talk like this!"

Katharine laughed. "Meet Formosa," she said. "Katharine was soppy. But I warn you, Formosa's a tough." Before I could deal with this statement, "Here is Cruise," she said. "First to the right, and then the third to the left. We're going to visit a plumber. His wife used to be our cook. They have a telephone, and I'd rather not try a hotel."

Two or three minutes later, we entered a builder's yard.

My lady was warmly received, and Monsieur Legrand made haste to open his office and turn up George's address. While we were awaiting the connection, a fine-looking youth appeared—to be introduced as a nephew, whose military service had ended a few days before.

"A little holiday, madame, before he begins to seek work. He was to have been a footman. But now—what will you? His master-to-be is dead, and—"

Here the telephone-call came through. Mercifully, George was at home.

"Yes, you're a good one," he said. "Rouen may have its charm, but—"

"Listen, George," I said: "I'm in a damned tight place."

"I'm glad to hear it," said George. "The heat at Rouen—"

"Damn Rouen!" I said. "I couldn't help myself. Three days ago I wanted you very much. But now I damned well need you—in a matter of life and death. And it's more than a one-man job."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm speaking from Cruise. That's ninety miles from Le Puy. Get leave somehow, George—on urgent private affairs."

"I've got it," cried George. "Six weeks. That's why I stayed on, on Thursday—to clear things up."

I could hardly believe my ears.

"Fate again," I said, without thinking.

"What d'you mean?"

"Never mind. Can you come at once?"

"I imagine so," said George. "The special idea was to spend such leave as your guest."

KATHARINE was touching my arm. "Tell him to come tomorrow by the train that gets to Cruise at nine at night," she directed. "Joseph, the nephew, will meet him and bring him here. And here a car will be waiting, to bring him on."

I passed the instructions on.

"O.K.," said George. "But let's be clear about this: I haven't got over Rouen. And if, when I get to Cruise, Joseph the nephew is not there—"

"That'll do," said I. "I swear he'll be there."

"Very well. Till tomorrow evening. Leave someone for me to kill."

I put the receiver back and turned to Katharine.

"He's coming—to stay," I told her. "He's got his leave."

"Very good indeed."

I fingered my chin.

"I don't think we'd better meet him: you see, he won't be suspect until he's been seen with us. But I'd like a man we can trust to drive him to Cardinal. And now, because of your father, I'd like to leave George a note."

Monsieur Legrand made me free of his writing-desk.

I kept the letter as short as I could. Then I gave it to Katharine to read.

"That's all right," she said. "Is there anything else?"

"One thing," I said. "I like the look of Joseph the nephew. Why shouldn't he enter my service tomorrow night? He might be—valuable. And if you could find room for him, he could spare your people the business of waiting on George and me."

"That's a good idea," said Katharine.

Before five minutes were past, the deal was done.

Joseph was to enter my service the following night—for three months certain, at one thousand francs a month. There and then I gave him money with which to fit himself out. And then I gave him his orders—with Katharine's help. These were to be at the station in plenty of time, to bring George back to the plumber's and there let him read my note, and then to come on with George, as fast as he could; but above everything else, to hold his tongue.

As we returned to the Lowland—

"A taxi from the station," I said; "but a man he can trust to drive them to Cardinal."

Katharine translated my words, and Joseph inclined his head.

"It is understood, madame."

HALF an hour later we reached the village of Ousse—this, without incident. And a quarter of an hour after that, the Lowland was lodged in a barn of which I had the key. And then we took the path by the forest, to bring us to Cardinal. Tired and lame though I was, that walk was over too soon.

The moon was rising now, and our way was not pitch dark, as had been the Cardinal road; and because we were not in the Lowland, the silence was absolute. The grandeur of the timber about us, the perfume of cool rich earth, a shaft of moonlight across a glade of bracken, a star that hung like a jewel between two shadowy spires—these things and all they stood for were better than meat and drink. For the first time since leaving Rouen, I felt at peace—for here was sanctuary such as no castle could give.

TWENTY-FOUR hours had gone by. My ankle was very much better, in spite of my two-mile walk. And Katharine looked quite different after a good night's rest.

As I had expected, the day had passed quietly enough; and so far as we saw, no stranger had entered Cardinal's gates. And now the evening was over and night had come in—with a mutter of thunder rolling over the hills, and summer lightning playing over the topless trees.

My lady and I were sitting upon the terrace, watching the gap in the woods for the headlights of George's car.

Sir Valentine had retired.

"I think it better," he said, "that you should greet Laking alone. Make my excuses, of course; but we don't want to overwhelm an innocent man. He's been more or less pitchforked here, and I want him to feel at home. So I'll make his acquaintance tomorrow."

This most understanding outlook suited us down to the ground; for now we had nothing to fear, and George could be primed at leisure by Katharine as well as by me. And so a cold meal had been set in the vaulted dining-room, and Katharine and I were waiting for the flash of his car's lights in the woods.

"I'm getting nervous," said Katharine. "You and I jumped in together, and that was that. But to strip your soul in cold blood to a man that you've never seen—"

"George," said I, "is no fool. He'll—"

"Fool or no, he's coming." She raised an arm and pointed. "Look at the gap."

On the opposite side of the valley the break in the trees was full of a curious radiance which rapidly grew more bright. Three minutes later a car crawled over the bridge....

We greeted George in the courtyard. Then we led him into the house, and Conrad took charge of Joseph and sent the driver away.

"The position is this," said Katharine. "You have not dined, but we have; and

we have a tale to tell. So you shall eat and listen, and we will talk."

"And drink," said George. "You know. For the look of the thing."

Behind closed doors and over the old oak table, I told him what had occurred, and we had things out. I will not repeat what we said; but we did not leave anything out, and Katharine told him plainly what she had been and why.

When she had finished, George looked from her to me.

"There's a brave lady," he said. "How simple it would have been to tell some tale! But no. No false pretences. She's bound she'll fly her flag. It may be the Jolly Roger, but what of that? If I'm to come in with her, I've got to be told the truth." He stood up and lifted his glass. "Miss Scrope," he said, "your most obedient servant, who thanks you for letting him be your guest."

Katharine colored with pleasure.

"What did I tell you?" I said.

"Formosa is touched," said Katharine. "I can't put it higher than that."

Then she gave us her hands to kiss, and told him to call her "Katharine" and called him "George"; and we all three drank together to the doom of a man we knew.

"And now," said George, sitting down, "for a nasty jar: You've got me here, and I mean to pull my weight. But I've brought the enemy with me as far as Cruise, for a wallah I noticed at Rouen got out of the Paris train."

Chapter Six

A TEMPEST raged that night. For hours the wind blew and the rain fell; but while the wrath of the gale passed over the castle's head, the long roar of the forests, bearing the brunt of the onslaught, was unforgettable. And then, when I woke the next morning, the heaven was blue again, and the sun was out, and a dripping world was gleaming with green and silver and smelling sweeter than any perfumer's shop.

But though this transfiguration was truly magical, it was not that which brought me to the ramparts by seven o'clock. I wished to observe the village; for unless I was much mistaken, the enemy's coming was now but a matter of hours. This was, of course, our own fault; and Katharine had blamed herself hotly for failing to make me warn George to cover his tracks.

"I'm losing my mind, or something. George was the clearest link! Where was the Lowland that night, when we beat them to Pont-de-l'Arche? Outside a hotel. Well, the obvious thing to do was to ask the hotel for your name. Before they've finished asking, in comes George red-hot, and plasters his engagement with you all over the place. Laking is looking for Solan, who can't be found. All within earshot know this—including, of course, the 'wallah,' who's much obliged. And when George leaves Rouen for Paris, the 'wallah' goes too. Really, the thing's too easy!"

BUT if I am to tell the truth, I was not altogether sorry for what had occurred. I felt that, now George was with us, the sooner we came to grips, the better for all concerned.

As I looked at the village below, one thing was immediately clear—that unless, between us, we kept a continual look-out, the enemy could be upon us before we knew he was there.

So, after a little discussion of it, Conrad and Joseph were summoned and told a part of the truth; and before they left, it was settled that Conrad should arrange with the landlord of Cardinal's only inn to send his boy up to the castle if any stranger appeared. We should thus be given the notice we wished to have, yet be spared the great inconvenience of keeping the watch ourselves.

Except that my ankle failed me if I tried to run, it was well again; but for what it was worth, I rested it all that morning, while my host showed George the castle, and Katharine studied the files which the butler kept. I had plenty to think about: but what concerned me most was the tale which would have to be told to Sir Valentine.

The position was odious.

Here was a great-hearted man, who took his world for granted, and was content. His love for and pride in his daughter was touching; his sense of beauty was such as I had never conceived—he would sit by the hour by the fountain which played in the cool courtyard, listening to the lisp of the water and the whisper of the leaves overhead. He walked with nature. He was most generous-minded; and his honesty burned like a flame.

To lie to such a being cost one one's self-respect; to tell him the truth, would be to commit a crime; that he should suspect for an instant that he was being deceived was unthinkable; yet it would

be hopeless to try to hide the fact that we were about some business of which he had not been told; and I could not face the prospect of destroying that which a gallant lady had sold her soul to preserve.

AS the day wore on, but the enemy did not appear, I became even more convinced that he had been misled by our sortie on Monday night. (Later I was to learn that this was actually so, and that he had left the district before he received the report that George was at Cardinal.) If I was right, he would return full tilt, when he learned the truth, because his one idea would be to stop the mouth of our hiding-place. I therefore decided to take a leaf out of his book and to use the excellent post which the crossroads made.

I had no thought of an ambush, because he would, of course, be more than ready for that: then again, the fellows were armed. But if, when we saw them go by, we followed them up, we stood a very fair chance of taking them unawares, for their eyes would be upon the castle, and it would not enter their heads to look behind.

"That's very wily," said George. "Very wily indeed. We go on foot, of course."

"Yes," said I, "there's a path. I want us to leave by the window and give the village a miss. Then no one outside the castle will know that we're not at home."

"Oh, the Napoleon!" said George. "Do we touch the Cardinal road?"

"We cross it—that's all. We cross it close to the gap." I pointed to the break in the woods. "It's really a continuation of the path from Ousse, which runs up over that shoulder, while the road, of course, has to go round."

"I see. We take the path, while the enemy keeps to the road. How shall we know that he hasn't passed us *en route?*"

"I've thought of that," said I. "When we come to the road, we go to the gap and look back. If Conrad is still on the ramparts, we know that all's clear so far, and so we go on. But Joseph remains behind, to keep an eye on the road. It will take us twenty minutes to get to the crossroads; so Joseph waits half an hour before coming on."

"You won't be beat, will you?" said George. "But somehow or other I don't think they'll come today."

He was perfectly right; and the sun went down in splendor on utter peace.

That night we dined in state, and I shall remember forever the quiet hour

and a quarter for which we sat to the board.

The dining-room was vaulted, and was paneled in old black oak, and four five-candled sconces were shedding a steady light. Silver and glass and wood were giving this back in their immemorial way, and the fare was plain and old-fashioned, as fare should be. George told me afterward that the wine was extremely rare—no doubt by Sir Valentine's orders, for he seemed delighted to honor his two young guests; but I had no need of wine, for father and daughter together went to my head. I will not say much of the latter, except that she looked so lovely that I could hardly believe she cared for me. She had chosen to put on black, which showed to perfection the exquisite skin she had; and her high-backed chair made a setting fit for a queen: her grace was so compelling and her address was so fine that I sometimes had the feeling that I had been translated into another age; and when I turned to look at her father, this strange illusion was only magnified. There sat the embodiment of chivalry. Strong and gentle, as his daughter herself had said; proud, though he did not know it; as natural as the day; thinking ill of no man. The two were worshipful—I can think of no other word. . . .

By seven the next morning Katharine and George and I were nearing the edge of the forest which hung above the crossroads. As I have shown, the timber gave way to bracken about two hundred yards from the cross itself, while the spur upon which we were moving ran down and

The mighty fist caught the man square—to send him reeling.

came to an end at that very spot. It follows that on leaving the woods we should have a commanding view not only of where the roads met, but of their approach; and since the bracken was tall and immensely thick, unless we were very careless, we could not be seen.

IT seemed unlikely there would be a sentinel there, but in case there was, I bade the other two wait at the edge of the trees and then crawled on alone to where there seemed to be a dip in the ground. This was well down the slope: and when at last I reached it, I found it more convenient than I had hoped; for here the descent was checked by a random ridge, after which, to make up for this check, the ground fell away more sharply for ten or twelve feet, before resuming the gradient which had prevailed above. Lying behind this ridge and peering between the stems which grew on its crest, I was able to look clean over the bracken which grew below; and yet a man six feet off would never have known I was there. But the crossroads were more than fifty yards distant.

After a careful survey, I made my way back to the forest, to bring the others along, to find George up in an oak-tree with my field-glasses held to his eyes. From there he could see the Cruise and the Danders roads, and could follow the line they took for two or three miles; so since the fork he was in made a very fair seat, we decided to put Joseph there as soon as he came. As he was not due for some time, Katharine and I went down to take charge of the ridge, while George stayed up in his oak until his relief should arrive.

As I gained the ridge, I looked around and beckoned my lady up. She made her way to my side and knelt very still for a moment, regarding the scene.

"You've an eye to country, Esau."

I smiled. "I don't know about that. But I'm probably better than the Shepherd at this sort of game."

"You mean him to play it, don't you?"

"That, my darling, is at the back of my mind. I'm well aware that he may have other ideas. Still, as long as we stick to the country, if he really wants to get us, he'll have to stick to it too."

She regarded me thoughtfully. "Somehow or other I can't see him doing that."

"You think he'll try and lure us onto his ground?"

"I don't know. But he is the masterful type that always calls the tune."

"I know," said I; "but this is clean out of his line."

"It isn't exactly in yours."

I laughed. "I'll give Formosa that. Still, it does make the odds more even—you can't get away from that."

She turned and looked at me—with the softest look in her eyes.

"I can, my dear: but I won't. Do you remember our walk at Newhaven—one summer night?"

"I remember it very well."

"And how I ventured to hint that the world should be your oyster?"

"I do," said I.

"Good fairy Katharine, advising a nice young man. That's less than a week ago. And now Formosa is sitting at Esau's feet."

"It would be strange," I said, "if it happened to be the truth. And now please tell me this: When we met at Newhaven, I think you were carrying stuff."

"That's right. The Rochester diamonds."

"My God!" said I.

"It's true. The port was stiff with police, and I didn't like the look in their eyes; and so I suggested that walk. I thought if I gave them a chance to go through the stuff in the car, they might wash out little Katharine and think about somebody else."

"Which proves my case," said I. "For three years you've played Formosa—against your will; but though you've played her damned well, the moment you leave the stage, you revert to type. Formosa, who knows her world, advises a callow youth; but Katharine and Jeremy Solan are just a girl and a man; and as there's a rough-house coming, the girl naturally does as the man suggests."

"You won't believe ill of me, will you?"

I knelt beside her and gathered her into my arms.

"We love each other," I said; "and love can break anything down."

A warm arm slid round my neck.

"It's broken me down, my darling. I thought I could stand anything. But my resolution has crumbled before the look in your face. And now I must tell you something, before George comes. I've made up my mind at last to tell my father the truth."

I STARTED, at that; but she went on: "He must be told something—I think that's clear. And I'm simply not prepared to lie to him any more. I don't believe I could do it. The fountain of lies has dried up. And so tonight, my darling, I'm going to tell him the truth."

"Won't you wait a little?" I said.

She shook her head.

"I'm going to do it tonight! It's bound to hit him hard: but that is my fault. I've turned it over and over, and it's the lesser evil, Esau. I know I'm right. It's better that he should be told the unsavory truth than that it should enter his head that his daughter would turn his blindness to her account. As you said the other day, I might have known that sometime or other the end was bound to come. Well, now it's here, my dear; and you know, it might have been worse."

"You mean, if you had been taken carrying stuff?"

"Yes, I mean that. At least, I've been spared that—that agony. And I shall be rid of a nightmare that's put five years on my age."

There was a little silence—while I went frantically over the ground I had covered already again and again. It was, of course, entirely hopeless; we were skating on ice that was far too thin.

"This is my fault," I said. "If I had gone, as you wished—"

"I didn't wish it. How could I? I thought it was better so. But I dare say I was mistaken, and you were right. And I am so thankful to have you. I'd run out of courage. But now, with your arms about me, it's coming back."

I met the smile in her eyes.

"When you run out of courage," I said, "the world will come to an end!"

BETWEEN the ridge and the forest we spent the heat of that day: but though the hours went by, the enemy did not come.

As I had thought, there was no sentinel; this fact and Joseph's devotion gave us an easy time, for once he was up in the oak, he could hardly be persuaded to leave his post. I think he coveted the honor of being the first to descry the enemy's car: so, though more than once I simply ordered him down for an odd half-hour, for the most part he did our duty with all his might. He gave the alarm by whistling, after the note of some bird—once for a van or a lorry, and twice for a private car. Then we sat up and took notice and watched it go by: but when it had passed, we relaxed, talking and musing and dozing, and generally taking our ease. The traffic was very slight, and more than once a full half-hour would go by in which nothing would pass. Except for two bullock-wagons, nothing at all had taken the Cardinal road.

The afternoon was waning, when I saw George glance at his wrist.

"Ten minutes to four," he said. "I somehow feel that the gents aren't coming today."

"If they don't," said I, "it shows that their staff-work's bad. Of course we misled them badly on Sunday night."

"Ah," said George, "that cable across the road. I cannot get over that. It argues sheer ruthlessness which I had thought was extinct. I mean, it's a public road—not a private drive."

"That," said Katharine, "is the Shepherd. It was waiting for us, of course. But if somebody else had been killed, he would have cursed their soul for spoiling the trap he had set."

"How," said George, "does such a monster survive?"

"By fear," said Katharine. "A great many people would like to give him away. But they are afraid to do it, because unless he went down for a proper stretch, they would only pay with their lives for what they had done. And he's not the sort of man who goes down. Information's not evidence."

"Well, I don't know," said George. "I've always heard—"

And there Joseph whistled twice, and we turned to the ridge.

For more than a minute we waited, before the drone of an engine came to our ears. It was very faint, and it faded almost at once, by which we knew that the car was coming from Cruise and was taking a dip in the road a mile and a quarter away. Then the drone flared up again, louder. In an instant now the car would sail into our view.

WE lay still as death, with our eyes on the distant curve; for the car was a powerful car and was traveling fast.

As we saw her rounding the bend—

"She's gray," I breathed. "She melts right into the road."

I heard Katharine catch her breath.

Then—

"It's they, all right," she said quietly. "No doubt about that."

The car swooped into a hollow four hundred yards off. Then she spurted out of the dip and scudded directly toward us, up to the four crossroads.

As though to consult our convenience, she stopped just short of the cross, and the Shepherd and Judas together regarded some map, while the tough in the dickey behind stared dully before him.

The two for whom they were searching were fifty yards off, calmly surveying their efforts, and only waiting to see which road they decided to take: and they, unaware of such attention, were making no secret of their discomfiture, for Judas pushed back his hat and wiped the sweat from his face, and the Shepherd struck at an insect and hit his hand on the screen. I fancy it needed but this to set his impatience alight, for he snatched the map from Judas and pitched it out of the car. Then with a shaking finger he pointed to the Cardinal road; and when Judas attempted to argue, he shouted him down.

LOOKING blacker than ever, Judas let in his clutch; the car went off with a bang down the Cardinal road, and all that was left was the map, lying on the edge of the tarmac, where two ways met.

As we leaped to our feet—

"We're off," said I. "George, get off with Joseph as quick as ever you can. For God's sake, be careful where the path comes down to the road. If you go farther than that, you'd better leave Joseph there, to say where you've gone." I turned to Katharine. "You and I will come on together; but first will you get that map?"

Without a word, my lady set off through the bracken to do as I said.

By the time she had caught me up, the others were out of sight.

I made the best pace I could, but twenty minutes went by before I saw Joseph ahead. He was crouching behind a beech and was looking over his shoulder, finger to lip. Fifty feet beyond and below him was lying the Cardinal road.

At once I perceived the truth, and my heart leaped up: The "racing Merk" had stopped at the gap in the trees.

With Katharine directly behind me, I stole to where Joseph was.

And then indeed I rejoiced, for the Shepherd had left the car with his servant, and had walked on with Judas, to enter the village on foot.

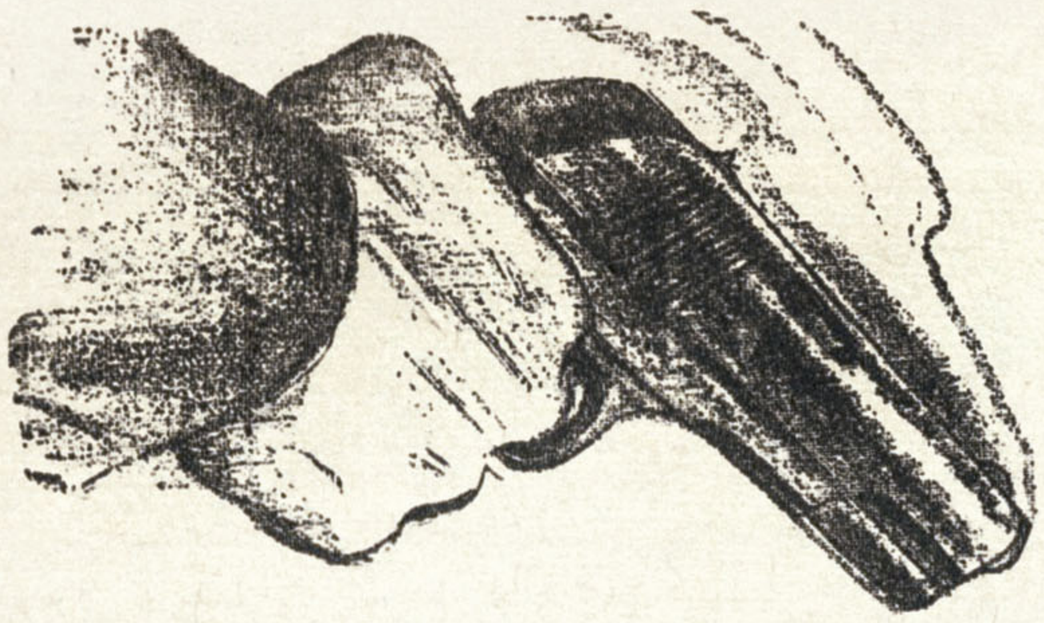
I turned to Katharine.

"Stay here with Joseph," I whispered.

"Esau," she breathed, "that's Satan. Please remember that he has earned his name."

I crept on down to George, who was lying behind some brambles, six feet from the road itself.

"The position is this," he whispered: "I got here just in time to see the two Willies marking the castle's bulwarks and telling her elegant towers. Their backs were, of course, toward me, so I couldn't hear what they said. But twice



I caught the word 'postern,' and I think the Shepherd said 'trap.' Two minutes after I'd come, they sauntered off down the hill, like a couple of chorus-boys on a Saturday night. Their unattractive accomplice is going to stay where he is until they signal to him to bring down the car. There you are, you see. He's getting his glasses out."

Peering between the briers, I saw Satan take binoculars out of the car. Then he walked up to the gap, and after some slight adjustment, began to peer about.

"Now's your chance," I said. "His name is Satan, and I commit him to you. Beat him down under your feet. Put your heel in the small of his back and help him over the edge."

"What, now?" said George.

"Right away. As quick as you can. And put him down good and proper."

The Assyrian may have come down like the wolf on the fold, but George's descent upon Satan was even better. Satan stood full in the gap, his thick-set back toward us and the glasses up to his eyes, intent upon watching his master, and George was wearing rubber-soled shoes, so that he gave no warning of his approach.

In less time than it takes to record, he had gained the road and was standing behind his victim, judging his distance exactly as though the man were a ball and both were upon some field. And then he kicked the fellow—but not in the small of the back; and as George played full-back for Oxford, I could not but feel that Satan had paid his debt.

Be that as it may, Satan rose up in the air with a startled screech and then crashed down the mountain-side which here was extremely steep, while George slipped behind a bush to the side of the gap and stood peering through its cover, to watch how his victim did.

That was as much as I saw, for I was in the Mercedes and was searching her pockets and hood. I found two automatics and pocketed both; one was in each of the pouches that graced the doors. In the hood lay two or three maps and a bottle of mineral water, but nothing else.

"Go through the dickey," said George. "You've time to burn. Satan has only just stopped—fully sixty feet down."

But the dickey bore no fruit.

I went through the pockets again and found a spare clip I had missed. I slid this into my pocket; and then I turned the key which was still in the switch.

True to type, the car started—the contact was more than enough.

I stepped down into the roadway.

Then I leaned forward and took the hand-brake off.

I confess that it went to my heart to see the car gathering speed. She was too fair a production to send to her doom. But some things have to be done.

Her engine steadily idling, she flung down that breakneck hill—failed, of course, to take the first of the bends—and met a gigantic fir-tree not quite head on.

Between them, her weight and her impetus carried her round and over on to her side; and because her engine was running, she burst into flames at once.

I touched George's arm.

"Back into cover," I said. "We've done our job."

As I rejoined my lady, who was kneeling behind a bush—

"My God, Esau," she breathed, "your score's mounting up. That car was the very apple of Judas' eye."

"I'm glad of that," said I. "Did you see George kick into touch?"

Katharine sighed.

"You're hopeless," she said. Then: "I'm thankful you've got those guns; but remember, they're only spares. They may leave their car about: but never their—magic wands."

A FULL minute must have gone by before we saw Satan's head appear at the foot of the gap.

It was not an agreeable vision. His face was scratched and filthy; his hat was gone; and I never saw fury so rampant in all my life. His mouth was working; his eyes were rolling with rage; and as he looked cautiously round, I confess I was more than glad to be out of his sight. He was so intent on discovering his assailant, that two or three moments went by before he observed that his charge was no longer there. In fact, he had hauled himself up and onto the road and was standing, crouching and peering, ready to rush, when I saw him start and

stare at the spot where the car had stood. Then he looked down the hill and let out a yell.

The next instant he was running like a madman toward the flames.

"Now's our chance," I said. "Over the road, and down to the valley below."

IT was really too easy, for Satan never looked back; we all had crossed over the roadway before he had come to a standstill at the scene of the crash.

Three minutes later we reached the meadows below.

"I'm sorry," said I, "that we can't be in at the death. But Joseph must represent us. As soon as we're over the water, he will stroll into the village, and when he learns what has happened, will make his way over the bridge and help to swell the crowd which will be regarding the crash. As a late-comer, he will naturally ask for details and note the answers he gets, and if he uses his eyes as well as his mouth and his ears, he ought to be able to learn what the Shepherd and Master Judas are now proposing to do."

George translated my orders—which Joseph received with a pleasure he could not conceal; and then we skirted the village as fast as ever we could.

When we had used a foot-bridge to cross the stream, Joseph made for a lane which led to the little *place;* but we went on up to the castle and round to the stern-faced window from which we had made our exit ten hours before. As though he was anxious to see us, Conrad was waiting there, and when he had lowered the bar, I lifted Katharine up and he helped her in.

"Two strangers are here, sir," said Conrad. "The innkeeper's boy came up twenty minutes ago."

"Conrad," said I, "our news is later than that."

"What's that, sir?"—eagerly.

"Joseph will tell you," I said. "He's coming back by the postern: he shouldn't be long."

For what it was worth, we all made straight for the ramparts to see what we could; but the hamlet seemed to be deserted, and all that rewarded our gaze was a sinister wisp of smoke which was rising out of the forest, beyond the roofs.

"Oh, I can't bear it," said George, and covered his eyes. "We ought to have stayed on, Thunder, and witnessed the epilogue. I do hope they let Satan explain before he died."

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I think we were wise to withdraw. You see, they'll be all eyes for the next two hours. But as soon as the dusk comes in, I think we might try again. It really all depends on what Joseph says."

"You think they'll stay on?" said Katharine.

"I'm inclined to think," said I, "that they'll send for a car. Well, that won't be here for ages. What would be best of all—"

The sentence was never finished.

Someone was running — stumbling — making his way to the ramparts as fast as ever he could.

As we all swung about, Joseph burst out of a turret; he was breathing hard.

"What is it?" cried George. "What's the matter?"

Somehow Joseph gasped his answer:

"I did—as Monsieur bade me. I went —to the scene of the fire. But I did not stay—*for Madame's father was there.* He was—in talk with the strangers. I think—but I cannot be sure—that he has invited them here—until a car can be fetched to take them to Cruise."

Chapter Seven

TO say that I felt sick at heart, means nothing at all. Never was budding tactician so hoist on his own petard. I had taken charge, and the others had let me do so: and now I had fairly lifted the enemy onto our back.

Still, something had to be done. . . .

In ten minutes' time we were ready—to do what we could.

Two staircase-turrets rose out of the small courtyard. These were lit by embrasures, from which a man could see, though he could not be seen. One turret made an observatory for Katharine and me; and George and Joseph stood on the other's stair. Conrad stood at the wicket which hung in one of the leaves of the castle's door, watching the road of approach through the wrought-iron grille.

Though George and I were both armed with the enemy's automatics, we were not to use them except in the last resort; we hoped that it would not come to that.

We had next to no plan of action, except to conceal our presence and overhear all we could. But Conrad had been instructed to try to lure Sir Valentine away from his dangerous guests. I doubted that they would permit this. . . . In fact, the plain truth is that on what they said and did was depending what action we took.

So the five of us stood there waiting.

I shot a glance at my lady, whose face was four inches from mine. Though all she had was at stake, I never saw her look cooler, more self-possessed. Her eye was not excited; she was not breathing quickly; her hand on the jamb of the embrasure was as steady as was the stone against which it was laid.

Feeling my glance upon her, she turned and smiled.

"For nearly a week, Esau, I've never known what to expect: but now—well, there's no doubt left. We're in the ring, all right; and the seconds are out."

"Thanks to me," said I. "Yet you throw no stones."

"Why should I? You've done your best. And your best was terribly good. Who could have dreamed that my father would go to the fire? He must have heard some outcry and have gone to see what it meant. It's fate again, Esau—not you. Fate has a way of taking matters out of one's hands. And now stand by. Conrad has seen them coming."

Perhaps three minutes went by—no doubt Sir Valentine walked slowly, because the men beside him were not accustomed to climbing a hill so steep. Then Conrad threw open the wicket; and the Shepherd, followed by Judas, stepped carefully over the threshold and into the cool courtyard.

THOUGH the former appeared at his ease, the latter did not—which is putting it mildly. While the Shepherd looked casually round, Judas' behavior was that of a startled snake. His left hand fast in his pocket, he darted his venomous glances from side to side, as though seeking a chance of striking before he himself was stuck.

Sir Valentine passed through the wicket behind his guests.

"Has Miss Katharine returned?" he said.

"Not yet, sir," Conrad replied—with the Shepherd's eyes on his face.

"Beg her to join us, as soon as she does come in. And bring some refreshment, Conrad."

"To the dining-room, sir?"

"No. The terrace." He addressed himself to his guests. "Let's go on up there, shall we? I'll lead the way."

The Shepherd hung on his heel.

"I find this charming," he said. "An antique jewel-case: a strong-box—by Benvenuto Cellini of Brobdingnag. Some very beautiful lady should be enshrined and cherished within these walls. Is there only this one way in?"

"No," said his host. "There's a postern. That's on the other side."

The Shepherd regarded the turrets; I held my breath as I saw his eyes.

"But once within," he drawled, "ways without number, of course. Those turrets give to the ramparts?"

"To the terrace, too. But I shouldn't advise that way."

"No, no. I was marking your bulwarks." He moved toward Sir Valentine, who was standing with a foot on the step of the great front door. "And I like the grille in the wicket. Everything as it's laid down in the fairy-tales."

He threw another look around. Then he and Judas followed Sir Valentine in, and out of our sight.

IT was clear from the Shepherd's words that he was by no means certain that Katharine had not returned, and that all he had said was really directed to Judas, that the latter might observe and consider the manifold chances of surveillance afforded by such a place. And there he can hardly be blamed, for we were commanding the terrace before the three stepped onto its sunlit flags.

George and Joseph were still in their staircase-turret; but Katharine and I were in Sir Valentine's study—a very private room, which I had not entered before. This had a miniature oriel, hanging over the terrace, a little way up; and anyone kneeling there could hear—and see, if he pleased—what happened below.

We heard them coming, of course, before they appeared. Sir Valentine and Judas were silent; but the Shepherd was still commending all that he saw.

Their entrance was interesting. Sir Valentine's brow was clouded, and a hand was up to his beard. Perhaps because he was blind, his instinct was keener than that of another man. But I was ready to swear that he was regretting the impulse on which he had offered his hospitality.

"Ideal," murmured the Shepherd, and let himself into a chair. "From every point of view, entirely ideal."

Sir Valentine answered shortly:

"It makes a pleasant retreat."

"A belvedere," said the other, "commanding all ways of approach. I take it that break in the woods is the gap by which we ventured to leave our car."

"From what you have told me, that's so. It's just below the crest of the hill."

"Quite so. I take it the postern you mentioned is down on the left."

I saw Judas' head come round.

"That's right," said Sir Valentine. "A flight of seventy steps leads down to the village below."

"And an oriel window, too—most beautifully placed. And then our old friends the turrets—embrasures and all. Most entertaining. We shall hold you to your promise to show us the rest of the house."

Sir Valentine frowned.

"Did I say that?" he said quietly. "Oh, well, if you care to see it—before you go."

There was a little silence, which would have been awkward for any ordinary guests. But Judas ignored the others, only taking his eyes from the landscape to strike a match, and the Shepherd sat back, smiling, as though contemplating with pleasure the excellent hand which he held.

His complacency made me feel desperate. It rammed home the bitter truth that he had us—*and knew that he had us*—where we belonged; with Sir Valentine at his mercy, he could dictate his terms.

It may be argued that George and I were both armed. But the brutal answer is this—that so were the Shepherd and Judas. I began to regret very much that we had not taken our chance and closed with the two as they came in at the gate.

AS though aware of my thoughts, the Shepherd lifted his voice:

"I think I'm right in saying that one of your guests has a car. I was told so in the village, before you appeared."

Sir Valentine nodded. "He has."

"Perhaps he could be persuaded to be so kind as to give us a lift back to Cruise."

"I'm afraid he's abroad at the moment."

"Quite so," purred the Shepherd. "Quite so. But when he comes in. It's only a suggestion, of course. And my servant has gone for a car. . . . But he's not very good on his feet, and a twelve-mile walk will take him some time to do." He glanced at his watch. "He ought to be back in five hours; but I can't help feeling that we oughtn't to stay quite so long."

Sir Valentine moistened his lips.

"In those circumstances, I think we may count upon him."

With the tail of my eye, I saw Katharine bite her lip. Having been shown the way, Sir Valentine would invoke my assistance to speed the lingering guest.

Conrad appeared with refreshment—wine and water, and cake and fruit.

"Delicious," drawled the Shepherd. "The kindly fruits of the earth."

SIR VALENTINE looked away. That the other grated upon him was perfectly clear. Such fulsome appreciation would have made anyone sick. Conrad served the Shepherd and then stepped to Judas' side.

The latter stared at the tray.

"Got any whisky?" he snapped.

"I'm sorry," said Sir Valentine quickly. "There's none in the house. If you would like some brandy—"

"Brandy will do."

Conrad left the terrace, to reappear with the spirit and serve the man. Then he poured some wine for his master, and set the decanter down.

"Excuse me, sir," he said quietly, "but Poey is waiting to see you about the headstone for Madame Poey's grave."

Judas swung about, staring; and Sir Valentine set down his glass and rose to his feet. Then he addressed the Shepherd, half out of his chair.

"I must ask you to excuse me," he said, "for five or ten minutes—no more. This poor man—"

"Pray let us come with you," said the Shepherd, exchanging glances with Judas, two paces away.

Sir Valentine stood very still.

"That," he said, "I cannot invite you to do. It's a very personal matter. The man worked with me on this house; and I promised to allow him to copy—"

"Perhaps," said the Shepherd, slowly, "perhaps he could call again."

Sir Valentine drew himself up.

"I must beg you," he said, "to excuse me. I—"

"And that," said the other, "I must decline to do."

Sir Valentine measured the man, as though he could see.

"But this is unheard-of!"

"The fact remains," said the Shepherd.

There was an electric silence.

The four men stood still as death—Judas with his hand in his pocket, the Shepherd regarding his nails, Conrad with his eyes on his master, and the latter with a face like a mask.

Then Sir Valentine gave a short laugh.

"Perhaps you're right," he said, resuming his seat. "Tell him to call again, Conrad; and when Miss Katharine re-

turns, request her not to disturb me—say I'm engaged."

"Very good, sir," said Conrad quietly.

He bowed and withdrew.

The Shepherd sat down, smiling, and Judas turned again to the balustrade.

I COULD not think what to do. Our only card had been trumped, and the sole good we had done was to force the Shepherd to show his unpleasant hand. Not to do something, was intolerable: but whatever move we made was certain to lose us the game. I could, of course, have shot him. But before I could shoot again, Judas would surely have taken Sir Valentine's life.

The Shepherd cleared his throat.

"I should like to meet your daughter."

"She is hardly accustomed to such an exacting guest."

The Shepherd raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, well— Perhaps later on. Is this the wine of the country? I find it extremely good."

Sir Valentine smiled.

"It is of the country," he said. "We don't ask much hereabouts, and we keep some things to ourselves."

"I felicitate you," said the Shepherd. "If I may venture to say so, you've done remarkably well to keep the secret of Cardinal all this time."

"I have no secrets to keep. I live and let live, and though you may not believe it, I am content with my lot."

"A perfect existence," mused the Shepherd, "in an imperfect world. Still, talking of secrets, I think that the world believes that Sir Valentine Scrope is dead. I mean, if one looked at Burke, I think one would read that the title was now extinct."

"That may or may not be so. I know that four years ago the papers announced my death. Whence the mistake arose, I have no idea. But I never corrected a statement which you have found to be wrong."

"A curious outlook," drawled the Shepherd. "'The world forgetting, by the world forgot.' Of course it's very convenient—from some points of view."

"It has saved a blind man correspondence, if that's what you mean."

"No," said the Shepherd, "I wasn't thinking of that."

As though to disappoint him, Sir Valentine made no reply.

There was another silence.

Judas was getting restless. Although he had not spoken, the man had heard all that was said: and the falseness of the position was playing hell with his nerves. He had left the balustrade now and was standing, regarding Sir Valentine with a malevolent stare.

Sir Valentine forced his hand.

"Yes," he said quietly. "What is it?"

Judas started. He had not known the blind man could be thus percipient.

"I'm sick of this," he blurted. "Let's have a look at the house."

The Shepherd regarded him straitly.

"I'm inclined to think," he drawled, "that it might be a good idea." He rose to his feet. "I—er—hate to be so insistent, but if you would lead the way—"

Sir Valentine hesitated. Then he laughed and stood up.

"You have the advantage of me, my dear sir. . . . . Which way shall we go?"

"Supposing we begin with the ramparts," the Shepherd suggested. . . .

My lady knew the castle so well that, though we were not able to keep in touch all the time, we always knew where the three were, and were able sometimes to be in position before they appeared.

AS before, the Shepherd did the talking, while Judas, bringing up the rear, missed nothing. As for Sir Valentine, his pride of possession gradually took control, and by the time they reached the chapel, he was directing attention to the beauty they passed.

"I think that's the smallest wheel-window you've ever seen. . . And that is a double pulpit. There may be another somewhere: if it is, it's not in the books."

"A 'double pulpit'?" said the Shepherd.

"Yes. Its back is really a panel which disappears into the wall. Draw that aside, and you step into an open-air pulpit, commanding the courtyard you saw."

As they left the chapel—

"And where does that lead?" said the Shepherd.

"Are you pointing to a passage on the left?"

"I am. It seems to end in a winding stair."

"I don't think that would interest you. If we go straight on—"

"I think it might," said the Shepherd. "Where does it lead?"

"It only leads to the guard-room commanding the postern-door."

Judas' eyes, and the Shepherd's, met.

"Is that all? Never mind. I want to see everything."

With obvious reluctance, Sir Valentine turned to the left.

Without more ado, he leaped for the stair . . . . but he did not move fast enough.

Katharine touched my arm, and I followed her down a gallery, and under an archway into a big paneled chamber.

"Close the shutters," she breathed.

When I had done as she said, the room was dark: but a tiny circular window admitted a bit of daylight.

Katharine caught my wrist and pulled me down to my knees.

"Look through, and you'll see the guard-room. I thought I heard them coming a moment ago."

With my head against hers, I peered through the aperture.

Twenty-odd feet below me I saw a fair-sized chamber, whose walls and floor were of stone. Two windows, high up and barred, were admitting light; midway between these was the postern-door itself. In the opposite wall, a second door, now open, gave to the house and made the chamber into a vestibule. One of the other walls I could not see, for we were kneeling above it, and so it was out of our view; but sunk in the one I could see was a little flight of worn steps which rose very sharply and seemed to bear to one side. The sun, which was low, was slanting through the two windows onto the cold gray stone.

(I afterward found that the room in which we were kneeling was that which used to belong to the officer commanding the guard. In fact, we were using his peephole.)

We certainly heard them coming, before they appeared, for Sir Valentine's voice was raised, as though to give audible warning of their approach. Remembering his obvious reluctance to bring the Shepherd this way, I guessed that he was afraid of encountering Katharine and us; and that both his guests shared this view was perfectly clear, for when they came into sight, the Shepherd's casual demeanor was gone.

Their host preceded them in; but as he stopped, they passed him, one upon either side. Each had a hand in his pocket, ready to fire.

"AS I told you," said Sir Valentine slowly, "there's little enough to be seen. The traces of—"

"Is that the postern?" said the Shepherd.

"That's right. We use it now as a—"

"Never mind how you use it. Where does that short stairway go?"

"It goes to the watchman's seat, commanding the seventy steps and the village below."

I saw Judas glance at the Shepherd, who nodded; then the former turned to the stairway, and bent his head at the lintel to pass upward.

Sir Valentine lifted an arm.

"To the left of the fireplace," he said, "there's a peephole."

The word was more than enough.

As the Shepherd whipped around to look up, Sir Valentine's hand shot out.

The mighty fist caught the man square at the base of the shoulder-blades—to send him reeling almost out of our sight.

In that same instant Sir Valentine leaped for the doorway through which they had come, and catching its edge as he passed, brought the oak to behind him with an almighty crash.

There was the roar of a pistol. . . .

But the scoundrel had fired too late. Five inches of iron-studded oak were barring the bullet's way.

KATHARINE was gone, I perceived. My job, however, was plainly to stay where I was, and do my best to continue Sir Valentine's brilliant work.

Until he had struck the Shepherd, it had not entered my head that he had been playing a part, but now I realized his apparent reluctance had been assumed in order to lure the enemy out of the house; for now, of course, they had only one way to take.

But I did not mean them to take it.

If we could only manage to hold the postern-door, the two would be our prisoners—a shining thought. Though I could not see how we could do it, I felt that somehow or other it must be done.

I drew my pistol and slid back the safety-catch—and prayed with all my might that George or someone would come, for I dared not leave my post, but the postern had to be held if we were to win the trick.

At the time when he fired, the Shepherd was out of my sight, but as Judas flung into the guard-room, he reappeared, pistol in hand, with his eyes on the door which Sir Valentine had shut. Though he must have been inwardly raging, he showed no sign of wrath, but only stood still while Judas, for what it was worth, laid hands on the door. This was, of course, locked or bolted; and when he saw Judas turn, the Shepherd put up his pistol and took his eyeglass out. He polished this carefully. Then he put it back in his eye and took a look round.

I afterward found that except when the sun was high and the guard-room was

full of light, the officer's squint or peephole could not be seen from below, so though the man looked straight at me, his glance passed on. I watched him survey the postern, and then the stair which led to the watchman's seat. Then he beckoned Judas to his side.

For a moment they spoke together. Then Judas turned and made once more for the stair. It was easy to see what was coming. The two were about to leave; and Judas had gone to make sure that the seventy steps were clear.

Cautiously I leveled my pistol, aiming for all I was worth at the latch of the postern-door.

I saw Judas reappear, saw him nod.

At once the Shepherd stepped to the postern—and I let fly.

I shall always believe that the bullet went by the man's ear, for he clapped a hand to that member and started aside. And then without more ado he leaped for the watchman's stair, to take it two steps at a time, with Judas on his heels.

A precipitate exit is seldom dignified, but theirs would have made the fortune of any camera-man; for fast as the Shepherd moved, he did not move fast enough for Judas, coming behind—with the happy result that he trod on the Shepherd's heel. This brought the two of them down—the Shepherd halfway up and Judas full on his back, and deaf as I was, I heard the screech of fury the former let out. Still, they were up in an instant and round and out of my sight.

THEN I saw how to deny them the postern-door.

We could not do this from without, for the watchman's window was commanding the postern steps. But if we could force the two blackguards to stay in the watchman's seat, the job could be done from within with the acme of ease.

There was very little risk—provided that they did not suspect we should make the attempt. The great key was there in the lock. And if George took over my post and fired at the stairway the instant he saw their feet, they would not dare to come down: meanwhile I could enter the guard-room, steal to the postern, and draw the key from its lock, and then whip back into safety before our friends were aware of what had been done. To make assurance quite sure, Joseph could demonstrate at the foot of the seventy steps, displaying a hammer and timber as though we were actually thinking of barring the door from without. Distracted by his activity, perhaps the two would even stay where they were.

At least, that was how I saw it. But what I also saw was that if we were to succeed, we must act at once. Delay was dangerous. Some cloud had obscured the sun, and every minute now the guard-room was growing more dim.

I GLANCED at the door of the chamber in which I knelt. This was shut; but had it been open, I should have been no better off. I dared not leave my peephole: I dared not shout; I could only stay still where I was, until somebody came. And God knew when that would be! For the others, the danger was past; and I had no doubt at all that Katharine and George were listening to Sir Valentine's story, and doing the latter the honor he richly deserved.

At last I could bear it no longer.

I was, in fact, in the very act of rising, in order to gain the passage and shout for George, when the postern-door was opened and two little maids appeared, bearing between them the milk-can which they had lugged up from below.

When he had let Joseph in, Conrad had failed to re-lock the postern-door.

Of such is the luck of battles!

To make matters worse, the Shepherd had seen the children mounting the steps; but I was completely surprised.

I heard him speaking in French from the watchman's stair, and I saw and heard the coins which he pitched to the foot of the steps. I saw the children approach, and I saw him come down with Judas, and the two of them stoop and speak with their little friends. And then the four together made for the postern-door.

I did not see them leave, for I was out of my chamber before they had gained the steps. The chance of a lifetime was gone; but the two were twelve miles from their base, and they had no car. If the village was roused against them—

And then I heard George calling.

"Thunder, where are you? Thunder!"

He was trying to make me hear, without raising his voice.

"Where have you been?" I cried. "We'd got them cold, and you and Conrad, between you—"

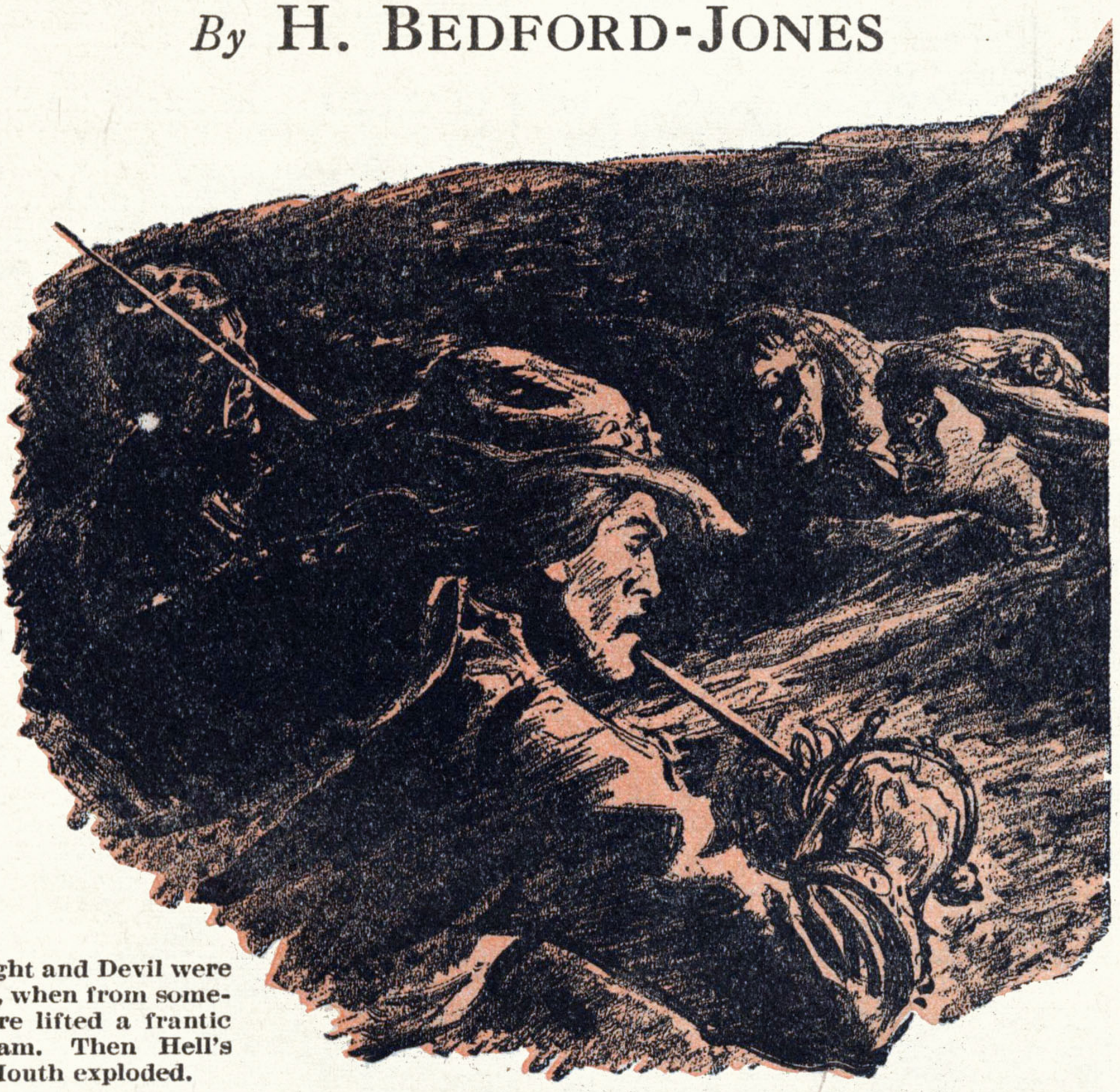
With that, I swung round some corner, to see him three paces away.

"Hush," he said, raising a hand. "Sir Valentine's dead."

This story continues with mounting interest in the forthcoming September issue.

Hell's Mouth

By H. BEDFORD-JONES



Knight and Devil were at it, when from somewhere lifted a frantic scream. Then Hell's Mouth exploded.

IT was sheer fatality that when Hilary rode into London, a group of court gentlemen were talking at the gate. Chief among them was Sir John Dymoke, king's champion and commander of the guards. A cousin of the powerful Derbyshire Dymokes, Sir John was a great man at Henry Tudor's court, and ever loved to push himself forward.

Hilary was a merry heart, had a lean face with laughing eyes, a long arm, and a sword that slapped his nag's barrel. His old and mended boots bore polished golden spurs that went ill with his shabby costume, so obviously of foreign cut. He bestrode a sorry barebones nag he had picked up when he landed at Calais, but the old lean-shanks was gayly decked out with green leaves and garlands of primroses; April was in by this time.

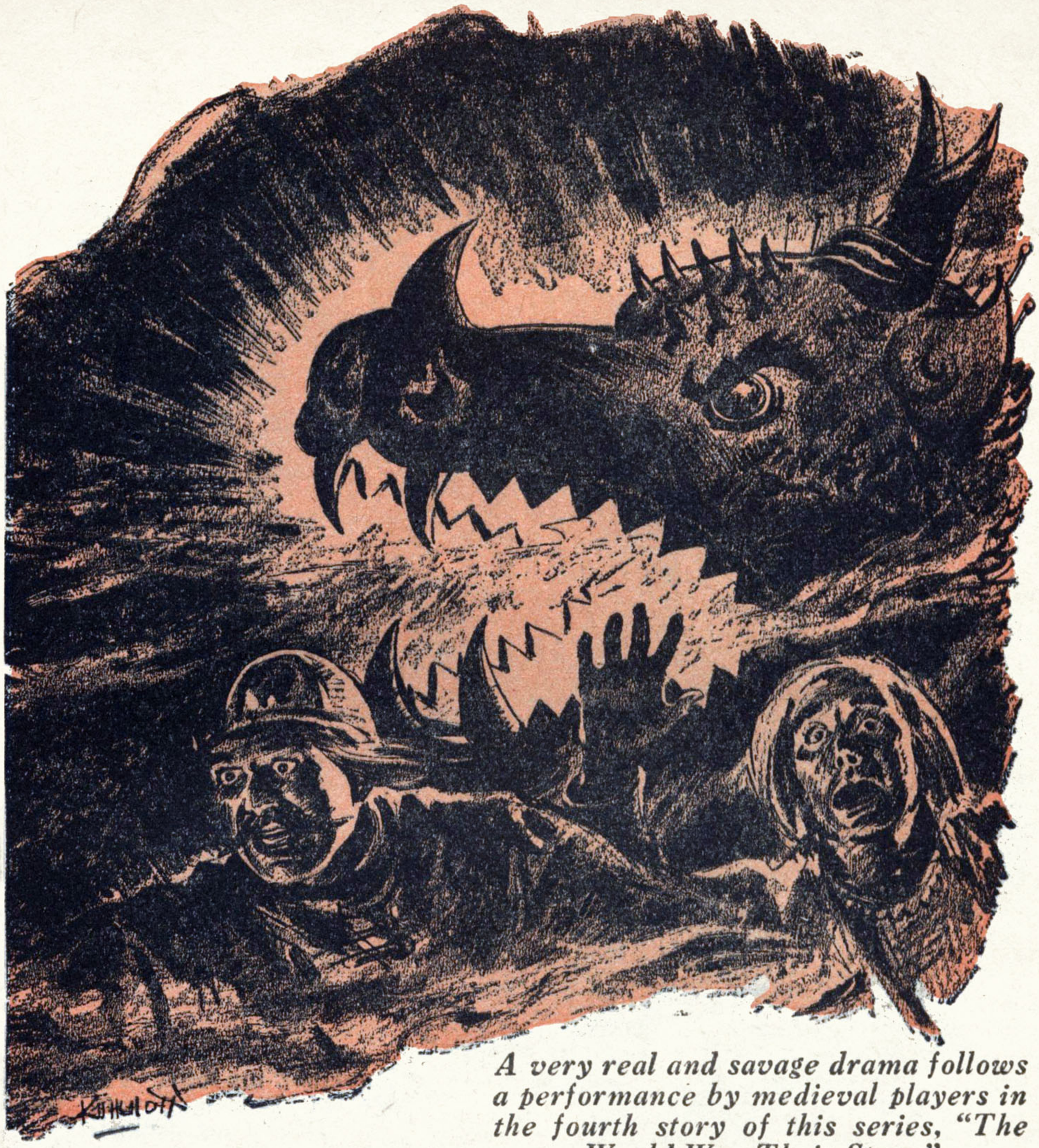
The golden spurs caught the eye of Sir John Dymoke, who beckoned guards and stepped forth to halt Hilary.

"Sirrah foreigner," he exclaimed, "how dare a rascal like you wear a knight's spurs?"

The cheerful Hilary drew rein, and produced a number of ragged parchments.

"Foreigner, my lord? Faith, I was born in England, though I'm just from abroad," said he. "Here's my passport, issued by Count Baldwin of Flanders. Another bearing the seal of Prince Jehan of Orange, who dubbed me knight. Another from the lord of Augsberg in Germany, certifying Hilary of Derby to be a free student of the university there; another from the University of Milan—"

Dymoke, who could read, scanned the parchments and the seals, handed them



A very real and savage drama follows a performance by medieval players in the fourth story of this series, "The World Was Their Stage."

back, and grudgingly waved Hilary on. Learning who this lord was, Hilary spurred the old nag hastily ahead and cursed the mischance that brought his name to this man's attention. No help for it, however; the damage had been done. He could only hope that Dymoke would forget the whole thing.

After eight years on the Continent, Sir Hilary in this year of our Lord 1498 brought back to England a surname he dared not use, a crowbait horse, the shabby clothes on his back, and parchments attesting his scholarship and knighthood as Hilary of Derby. If he carried a fat purse hidden away, he said nothing of it, but hastened into the broil of London town. There he lost himself in the immense throngs of merchants, Flemish and Dutch and French and Hanseatic, who swarmed on the hither edge of Cheapside. He sold his old barebones nag for a trifle, and took lodgings at the sign of the Saracen's Head.

Before noon he was shaven and shorn, and had paid with broad Flemish silver for a new surcoat of Lincoln green, clean linen and new cordovan boots. Thus changed, he began inquiries for one Jehan Bodel, prying into every nook and corner. The name was known but not the man, and he had no luck until evening drew on.

THEN, as Hilary was slaking his thirst in a Thames-side tavern, a huge hand clapped him on the shoulder, and a sonorous voice boomed out in Latin:

"Hilarius, the eighth wonder of the world! Hilarius himself, or his ghost afoot!"

Hilary turned. Beside him was a tall, swarthy, monstrous lean man with dancing black eyes and long black mustaches. Hilarius embraced him, incredulous and joyous.

"The Devil himself! Master Satan, well met, well met! I didn't know you

"Foreigner, my lord? Faith, I was born in England," said Hilary. "Here's my passport."

were in England. Why, I haven't seen you since we parted at Beauvais a year ago and more!"

Master Satan grinned widely. "I came over two months ago, Hilarius, to take a place with my lord of Somerset's company. *Diavolo!* I speak no English; they speak no Italian. What, say they, a devil who speaks Italian only? We compromise on Latin, but Lord Somerset likes it not and seeks to oust me from the company."

"I'm seeking Jehan Bodel. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Ha! The Devil knows everything!" said Master Satan complacently. "He's to meet me here, and is due at any moment. Poor Jehan has had ill luck. He put on his big miracle-play in some accursed town called Nottingham, and when Hell's Mouth was opened, the booths all around caught fire, the shopmen pursued him at law, and he was ruined. He needs luck, I can tell you! Look—I think I see him at the door now!"

"Careful, Sathanas!" Hilary caught his arm. "We'll have some fun. Introduce me as a mummer just arrived from Italy —say, Petruccio, of Milan."

As he spoke, Hilary changed. He hunched one shoulder, became stooped and round-backed, and drew up the hood of his surcoat over head and face. Even his voice altered and was a whining Italian. Master Satan exploded in laughter, and then sent a bellow of greeting at the man who was pushing through the crowd around the door.

Jehan Bodel was a powerful but gloomy man with saturnine eye and scarred features, a famous writer and player, and producer of miracles and mysteries—that is, he was famed in other lands, but here in England it was different. Here he was buffeted by rude insular ignorance; here a player or mummer was classed with grooms and barber-surgeons and lackeys, by the folk at large. So racked and torn and bloodied was all England by the wars of Lancaster and York that now, in the slow years of recovery under Henry Tudor, a juggler or acrobat won more renown than the cleverest writer or mummer of miracle-plays and pageantry.

HILARY, in his assumed whine, acknowledged the introduction.

"Bodel, Bodel?" said he, shaking his head. "I never heard of you."

"Never heard of Jehan Bodel?" The Frenchman stiffened. "Never heard of my great miracle of St. Nicholas, which comprises everything from tavern revels and the Crusades to the story of the good saint himself?"

"Never," said Hilary. "And you speak abominable Italian, Messer Bodel. Come! I'm hungry, and have money to buy food and drink for us all. Let's to a table."

They settled down in a corner, Hilary keeping his hooded features out of the light, the lank Satan grinning and chortling, and Jehan Bodel a picture of offended dignity. Meat pies and wine were brought. Hilary flung down a gold-piece, to the amazement of the entire tavern; enough groats could scarcely be found in the place to make change. The crowd eyed these three, two of whom spoke a chattering foreign tongue, with eyes of dislike and suspicion.

"Come, Messer Bodel," said Hilary. "I've just landed in England, and have been for some years a slave to the Egyptian mamelukes. Formerly I was a player and writer of miracles and passions, but now I know little of how the profession goes. In this country, for example—"

"It goes sadly, sadly, in the whole world!" Bodel shook his head mournfully. "Alas, that we could not have lived in the glorious days of old! Here in England, chivalry perished with the Black Prince; the Tudor king is upbuilding a land swept by war and pestilence. The Black Death has depopulated the whole realm of earth. The troubadours of the south are only a memory, and Provence is a desert of gray stone. Everywhere war and pestilence and famine, with the profession fallen upon evil days. We're living in an age of depression, of debased money, of art reduced to a commercial level; moneylenders and swordsmen are become princes, and artists like ourselves are no better than swineherds, lucky to feast on the husks!"

"But Satan still finds work to do?" Hilary cast a twinkling eye at the lean Italian, who chuckled:

"Jehan tells the truth, comrade. Faith, poor Satan hasn't had a square meal for a week, till he sat down to this mutton pasty! Your health, lord, your health!"

Hilary took the hint and ordered more wine.

"Did you ever hear," he asked, "of an English writer and player named Hilary of Derby? By all accounts an arrant rogue, a rascal who would cut a throat or—"

"Stop!" burst out Jehan Bodel. He fingered his dagger. "Stop! He is no such thing; speak ill of him, and I'll have your ears! I knew him well, in France. A man of marvelous parts, of infinite ingenuity, with the voice of an angel! I remember, at Beauvais, he made an arrangement of the Festa Asinaria, the New Year's Eve farce that we presented before the cathedral doors—"

"Ha! I've heard of it!" Hilary caught up his pewter spoon and began to clink it against his winecup. "I remember a refrain. It went like this."

His voice rose, a full, ringing baritone:

"Say Amen, most reverend Ass,
Now your belly's full of grass,
Say Amen again and pray
Like a chorister at play!
Hey va! Hey va! Hey va! Hey!
Open your lovely mouth and bray!
A fistful of hay and the Devil to pay,
And oats aplenty for you today!"

A roar of delight and approbation and laughter came from the throng in the tavern. Jehan Bodel leaned back and crossed himself, and stared affrightedly.

"The very words! The very voice of Hilarius himself!" he gasped.

WITH a shout of laughter, Hilary straightened up, flung back his hood, and embraced the big Frenchman. Master Satan held his sides with mirth. Bodel was pouring out a volley of questions, but Hilary silenced them.

"Careful, comrade! There are reasons for not talking here. Have you a safe place?"

Bodel grimaced. "Only the van, and little Tumbler the dwarf. Six months ago the company was rolling in money; now I've nothing left except Tumbler and the van—bad luck, evil times! It used to be that all Englishmen spoke French. Now they don't, and few of us speak this barbarous language well, so there y'are. The old families, the great lords, were ruined by the wars and a new crop has risen; everyone out for loot, and plague take the rascals of players! If you want privacy, we can find it at the van."

Hilary nodded. "Good! Satan, here's money—buy food and wine to take along. Never mind staring and questioning, man! Either fortune's waiting for us all, or our necks will hang askew on a gallows, and that very soon! Where's your wagon, Jehan?"

"In the fields behind the Temple and Lincoln's Inn."

Laden with flagons and parcels, the three sallied forth, talking in an excited medley of French, Italian and Latin—a tongue known to all players, who still used it in the majority of their performances. Blazing stars and a high white moon lit the narrow streets. Two of the three, at least, were what they seemed.

Hilary, the wandering scholar-player-writer, known everywhere on the continent. Master Satan, famed if not fat by reason of his marvelous portrayal of the foul fiend in all miracles and mysteries; and the great, if momentarily "resting" Jehan Bodel, author and player and producer of many a storied spectacle. Great names, these, from Italy to the German marches, but in England unknown and unsung.

Not that players were unpopular; far from it. The land had been soaked in the agony of merciless civil war these many years. Now, recovering under Henry Tudor, men turned eagerly to spectacles, to miracles and farces, to anything that would divert and entertain; but they were not critical in the matter. To them, the profession was one of wastrels, loose women, looser men, on a level with thieving vagabonds. The Tower and Temple Gate still dripped with the blood from severed heads, and life was too grisly a scramble for any appreciation of art.

THE three strode along. Houses were scarcer now, and in the fields they came upon homeless folk encamped. Presently loomed an enormous covered wagon with horses grazing near by. Beside red embers was a queer little figure who leaped up eagerly to greet them. This was Tumbler, the shrewd dwarf, who stored in his tiny body the devotion and kindliness of an angel.

"Here's meat and drink, Tumbler!" cried Jehan Bodel, unburdening himself. "And look who's here! The great Hilarius—remember how he played with us in Beauvais?"

Tumbler seized Hilary's hand and kissed it, with shrill joyous chatterings. All four now settled about the tiny fire. Bodel and Master Satan waited in somewhat anxious perplexity. Hilary could comprehend this; the life of a player might be silks and satins today, and scourging and chains tomorrow.

"Friends, here's a bid for great fortune at one blow," he said quietly. "As you must know, the King's gone from London, visiting in the north and the midlands. I hear he's to be in Nottingham and Derby soon. Well, if we can get away and catch Henry Tudor's eyes, this company of strollers is made for life! We're the best, the very top of the profession; I've money and will venture the last groat. What say you, Jehan?"

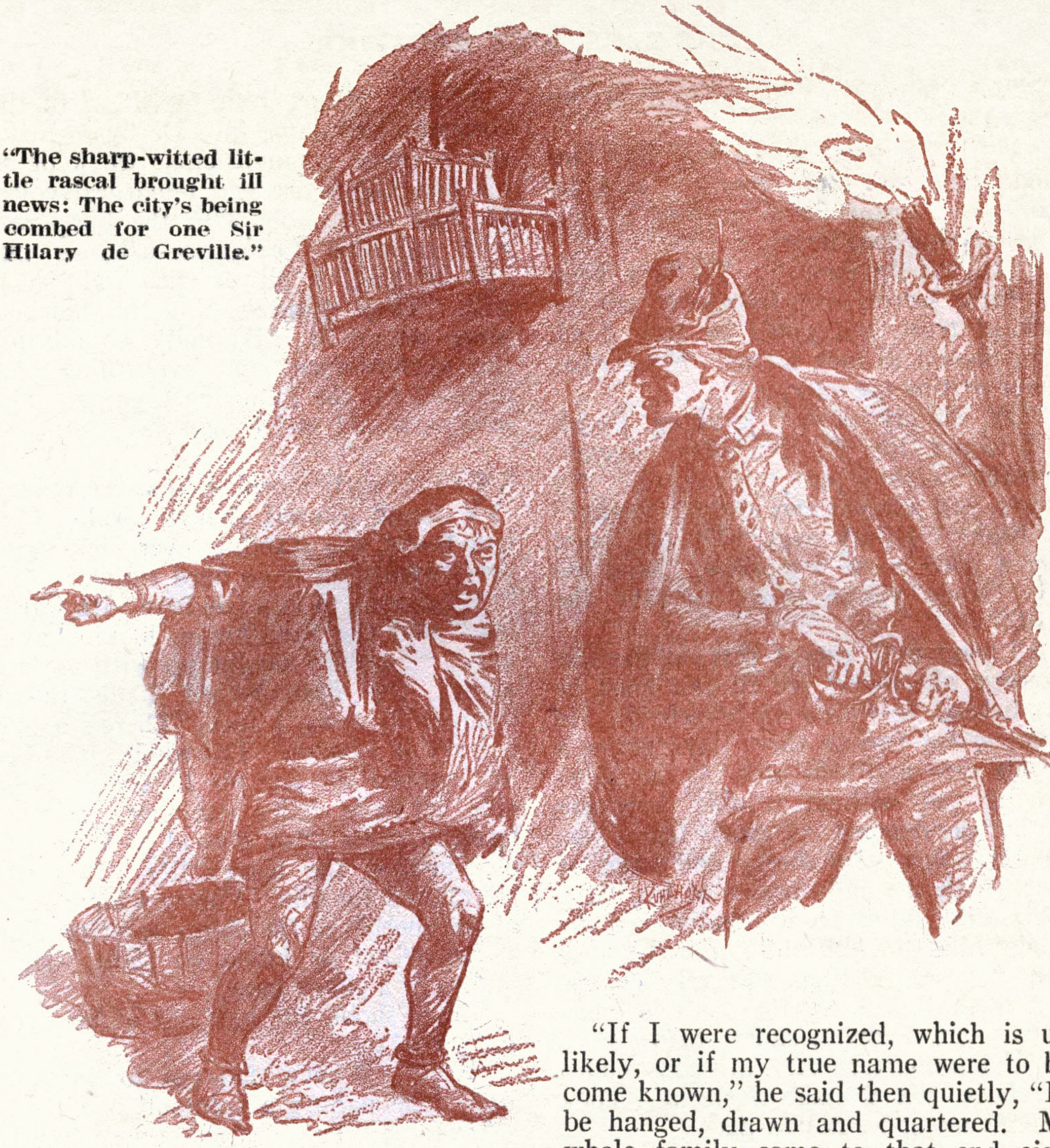
JEHAN BODEL caught his breath. "Glorious—if true! I can't believe it."

"Have faith, you rascal! However, there's much to settle." Hilary lost his gay air and spoke on gravely. "First, Jehan, what would be the best vehicle to carry us a-traveling? I've been eight years out of England, remember. A farce, perhaps? Or the good old morality?"

"Miracles are always safe, but are out of fashion," rejoined Bodel. "Moralities are on the make, somewhat, in the form of guild pageants; but only at certain seasons. Just now, masques are greatly favored. Masques in the Italian manner, a mixture of morality and farce, with juggling and mummers on the side and a bit of swordplay to catch a soldier's eye. We'd need two vans and a dozen players; most of them would have to double in music."

"You shall have them." Hilary produced a purse, clinked it, and handed it over. "My fortune, or most of it, gambled on destiny! Sign up Master Satan, here, for he's a master hand with sword and dagger. He and I can answer for your swordplay."

"Are you an angel from heaven?" exclaimed the amazed Bodel.



"The sharp-witted little rascal brought ill news: The city's being combed for one Sir Hilary de Greville."

"More likely from the other place." Hilary laughed curtly. "You've not heard all. When can we take the road for the center of England?"

"In three days. Broken remnants of the profession are all around London; I'll get another van and the proper troupe in no time. But we must have a license."

"I can get a license from Milor Somerset," put in Master Satan. "His steward would give one only too gladly, to get rid of me. Count it done. We go on the road, then?"

"To Derby, and a day's travel beyond," Hilary rejoined, "where the venture awaits me. If I win, I win greatly. If I lose, then it may mean the gallows for us all."

The others remained silent. They divined something more than play-acting ahead, and Hilary sensed the unuttered question. In all fairness, he must answer it with plain words. He could trust these three absolutely.

"If I were recognized, which is unlikely, or if my true name were to become known," he said then quietly, "I'd be hanged, drawn and quartered. My whole family came to that end eight years ago. I escaped, a stripling, and got to France and safety, hiding under the guise in which you now see me."

"I always felt you were no common man," said Jehan Bodel in a low voice. "Treason?"

"So charged, at least. Another family wanted what mine had—and got it. There's the whole thing in a nutshell." With a change of manner, he turned to the Frenchman. "Sathanas tells me you had bad luck in Nottingham."

"Terrible," said Bodel.

"Then we'll avoid that place and go direct to Derby, giving our first performance there and picking up news of the King. On our way to meet him, we'll play at Edgekill Castle, just north of Derby. It's now held by the Dymoke family, which is none of mine."

"Oh! And there?" queried Jehan Bodel thoughtfully.

"There I pick up what belongs to me. It's safely hidden, and has awaited me eight years. That's all. Do you risk the

venture, Jehan? Your silence argues hesitation."

"Bah! I was wondering how we might help you more greatly," said Jehan, and Master Satan grunted assent.

Hilary laughed lightly.

"That's help enough. I'd best keep my name secret, even from you; not for lack of trust, but you'd be that much safer should ill luck hit us. Now, what about writing the masque?"

"Oh, simply done!" grunted Bodel. "I'll adapt my St. Nicholas pageant. A noble knight's part for you, eh? No armor, just surcoat and sword. Right?"

"Right." Hilary rose. "I'm off; must buy a good horse tomorrow. Send me word when you're ready to take the road."

All went well, except that, at the last moment, the dwarf fell ill and must be left behind, to follow on horseback. He could spend two or three days under a leech's care and still pick up the slow-moving van without trouble, long ere Derby was reached. A gentle fellow was this Tumbler, very merry and stout of heart, with the agile brains of his ilk.

Six-score miles from London lay the craggy hills of Derbyshire, and the Derwent beyond, in England's very center. It was slow progress for the two enormous vans, double-deckers; below were the living-quarters and dressing-rooms, up above was a stage-platform. They creaked along at snail's pace.

ON the way north, Hilary worked on the script of the piece with Bodel, getting it fashioned to suit his purpose and the persons of the company. These were a dozen in all, chiefly French or Italians. If the three females included were not precisely blessed damozels, at least they could play a full dozen rôles and be thrust into Hell's Mouth at the end of the show with loud repentant cries, to a good conscience. The great feature of Jehan Bodel's production was this Hell's Mouth, an old bit of stage property which he had elaborated into a wonderful affair.

"English Hilary and his company out of Italy—there's our title," said Hilary. "An Englishman at the head of it; that will raise curiosity and down all prejudice against foreigners! Better make it a two-hour show at Derby, Jehan, cutting out all the *St. John Baptist* incidents. At Edgekill, we'll make it full three hours; the extra hour while I'm offstage will give me the time I need."

Finally, Hilary rode on ahead of the company and came into Derby to make the advance arrangements; he kept to his hunched figure and unnatural voice. He had no trouble with the burgesses, who regarded foreigners askance but met an English player with right good will. They granted him the market-place before St. Alkmund's church for the performance, and everything was planned for the following evening. The wagons would arrive next day.

WITH early morning, however, Hilary found himself shaken awake. Jehan Bodel was standing over him, spattered with mud from hard riding.

"I came on to join you here with warning," said the Frenchman, looking anxious. "Tumbler caught up with us last night; the sharp-witted little rascal brought ill news, I fear. There's a hue and cry in London. The whole city's being combed for one Sir Hilary de Greville, an exile under attainder. He has recently come from abroad to foment a plot against the King's life. Rewards are offered for him. Couriers have gone to the sheriffs of the shires ordering that he be seized or killed on sight. He's said to be a young man."

Hilary shook the hair out of his eyes and stared up.

"Well? What's that got to do with me? The name's a common one."

"*Diable!* Tumbler made sure it was you!" said the other blankly. "They have a description. The golden spurs, passports from Orange and Flanders—"

"Come, listen to me." Hilary drew Bodel down beside him on the bed. "I've no more need of those passports. All this is the doing of the Dymoke family. I met Sir John Dymoke when I entered London. He's put two and two together. Now the whole tribe are out like dogs on a boar. If they get me out of the way, ye see, no one could ever contest their ownership of Edgekill Castle. Bah! Let 'em seek Hilary de Greville and be damned! They'll not find their man in English Hilary the mummer!"

"Then it is you?"

"Aye."

"And the plot? This plot against the King's life?"

"A lie, upon my honor! My only plot is to get what belongs to me; gold, the family papers, the bills of exchange that are hidden away in that castle. Upon my honor, Jehan!"

Bodel nodded, and drew a long breath. "Then all's well. Now, we'll help you to get away from here—"

"Get away?" Hilary burst into a laugh. "Don't you see, I'm safely hidden already? No better could be asked. So no more of it. Now, I've great news for you, Jehan! We're to play before the King himself."

"The King! Henry Tudor here?"

"No. He's spending a fortnight hunting and amusing himself—where, think you? Why, at Edgekill Castle, of all places, with his friend Sir Hugo Dymoke! Think of it, think how luck plays into our hands! Tonight we give the show here tomorrow night, at Edgekill. I've sent word there to let 'em know. They'll seize such a chance to divert the King, never fear!"

Jehan Bodel shook his head gravely. "My friend, think of the risk for you! According to Tumbler's news, the King is determined to root you out; you're supposed to be plotting his death—"

"The King knows nothing about it," broke in Hilary. "Besides, Henry Tudor doesn't cherish old grudges, from what I hear of him. It's the Dymoke family who want to root me out and end the house of Greville once and for all! Even if the Dymoke who saw me at London gate were to be here in Edgekill, he could look at me and never recognize me in Hilary the mummer. It was those accursed passports, with their mention of Hilary of Derby, which started all this hue and cry. Well, when do the vans arrive?"

"In three hours, or less."

"Then let's get the day started, and I'll show you around."

Since Hilary, here in Derby town, was a limping, hunched, humble rascal with lines of age etched in his lean face, Jehan Bodel was soon convinced there was little or no danger. By the time the vans creaked into town, he was in high spirits; and when afternoon brought a courier from Edgekill with word that the company would be highly welcome there and would be expected next day, the mercurial Frenchman was soaring.

As for the dwarf Tumbler, he grinned and kept his tongue between his teeth.

THUS, that same evening, the first performance of the masque went off uproariously; it was part miracle, part masque, part juggling show. *Satan* and the *Knight*, behind vizors, did their swordplay. *Satan* was finally driven into the fiery mouth of the huge paper dragon-head that represented Hell, and the poor lost ladies were shoved in by lesser devils —for whom the jugglers doubled. With Virtue thus triumphant, a rich harvest was reaped from the town and country folk and the burgesses and the clerics, who highly complimented English Hilary upon the moral tone of his Italian company.

LONG before dawn, the vans were off, creaking northward toward Edgekill. Hilary jogged along with Master Satan and Bodel, on horseback.

"No wonder you had bad luck in Nottingham," said Hilary, "if you handled your sulphur and gunpowder and brimstone with reckless hand like you did last night, Jehan!"

"Eh? It was necessary, man! Hell's Mouth must look the part!"

"But we're not due for hell yet, I trust!" Hilary retorted with a chuckle. "Last night I removed some of your tarred tow and shavings. As it was, that paper dragon near went up in flames."

"Ha! So it was you! I thought the effect fell rather flat." Jehan Bodel laughed and shrugged. "Very well, my friend, I'll have a care. But remember, for the King himself, Hell's Mouth must look better than a child's bonfire!"

In midmorning, a company of horsemen overtook the vans, and drew rein. Here were a pair of knights with attendant squires, a dozen men-at-arms, and as many archers. In one of the knights, Hilary recognized that same Sir John Dymoke who had admitted him to London town. But Sir John did not give him so much as a second glance.

Learning that the mummers were bound for Edgekill, as were they, the two knights rode on again in high good humor, after a trifle of jesting with the Italian damozels and the shrill-voiced, impudent dwarf.

Tumbler's shrewd little eyes missed nothing. Later, asking for a ride behind Hilary's saddle, Tumbler spoke softly.

"Good Brother Hilarius, you looked very hard at those knights! Danger?"

"None," said Hilary, smiling, "provided you keep your mouth shut."

"Oh, trust me! But never trust the plaguey jade called Fate!"

"After eight years, Fate's on my side this day."

"On your side, aye, and ready to drive a knife into your armpit! That's her way; so have a care!"

Illustrated by
Peter Kuhlhoff

"What I chiefly want," said Hilary, "are the bills of exchange. There's gold too; take what you can, and so will I."

Hilary shrugged, but kept the warning in mind. It was well meant. . . .

Toward noon they came to Edgekill and found the castle nearly empty, everyone being off at the hunt. The bailiff welcomed them and placed everything at their disposal. Their coming was a distinct event, and the King was eagerly looking forward to the night's diversion, so they could do whatever they desired.

DURING the troubles following the Wars of the Roses, Edgekill had suffered great damage, the outer walls being breached and ruined. This served to enlarge the courtyard, very happily, and Jehan Bodel took charge of the preparations. Hilary remained inconspicuous in the extreme. He had not even advertised the name of English Hilary here, and the company were, presumably, all Italians.

The huge dragon-head which served as Hell's Mouth was erected and covered from sight. It connected with the lower part of one van. The second van was across the courtyard, with various other stage settings between. The choicest part of the whole show, it was reckoned, came when *Satan* and his hapless dupes were sent to their doom amid fire and brimstone. Therefore, two country wagons were obtained and set up beside the dragon-head, with a platform built upon them to hold the seats of honor.

Late in the afternoon came Henry, with him was Sir Hugo Dymoke, and all the royal suite—not too many, since the King was no lover of show and fancy trappings. A few of the local gentry had assembled, so the castle was well crowded; archers and servants were everywhere, cooks and servers scurried about, and the place was a bedlam.

The performance was to begin late, after everyone had supped, so that all the world would be free to look on.

The sun was sinking when Hilary drew Master Satan apart and fell into low-voiced discussion. The lean, powerful Italian was to be his helper this night, in his private business, and Hilary had figured every detail accurately.

"When the *John Baptist* episodes begin and we're offstage," said he, "follow my lead. Every soul will be crammed in and about the courtyard. There'll be no one inside the castle, and we'll have the best part of an hour to work."

"But how to get in without being seen?" queried Sathanas.

"Go in openly by the side door yonder. It's to be kept clear all evening.

They'll take us for part of the show, good devil!"

So the sun sank down, and Jehan Bodel made ready his fire and brimstone, and men fell to work at the trenchers and broached the ale-casks. The time was drawing close, since King Henry was no hand to sit over the winecups.

Lamps were lit in the vans and the dressing-rooms were readied. In the courtyard, torches and flambeaux were ablaze, with fresh fuel piled on all sides. The ranks of onlookers began to swell, crowding into every nook and corner, even perching on the ruined walls.

AT length Sir Hugo, and his cousin Sir John from London, came forth with their guests, and the crowding ranks cheered the King lustily. Henry, with those of highest degree, took station on the platform over the wagons, beside and above Hell's Mouth; although for the moment this remained shrouded and dark. A great clacking of tongues arose, trumpets sounded, Sir Hugo gave the word, and the show was on.

Jehan Bodel read his prologue in Latin, his exquisitely modulated voice charming all those who could understand, while Tumbler the dwarf echoed the words in squeaking English for the benefit of those below the salt. Then the first episodes of this gayly jumbled miracle-masque went forward.

Hilary made a marvelous *St. Nicholas; Master Satan* roared and ranted at his best, decked out in flaming red hood with horns, his tail shaking like a monstrous viper, and one boot shaped like a cloven hoof. Bodel became first a merry jongleur, later a turbaned Saracen. Time and place were entirely abolished, so that *St. Nicholas* and the Saracen sultan were cheek by jowl when necessary, and everything was very merry.

The fair Italians played their part and doubled in other parts. Amid frantic applause the first portion came to an end. While the dwarf tumbled about the courtyard like a mad thing and the jugglers drew gasps from the watchers, Jehan Bodel made haste to change into the simple garb of *John Baptist*.

Hilary emerged from the van in his knightly surcoat of flamboyant satin, gold spurs agleam, the peak of his long cap falling athwart his face. He touched the arm of *Master Satan* and headed for the side entrance, where the archers in leather cap and jerkin were massed about an ale-cask. Thinking it all part of the show, the archers made way with laugh and jest. The two figures passed into the castle, and were lost to sight.

Along the corridors strode Hilary, who had not seen these rooms since he was a young fellow of eighteen. He came at last into a long, empty hall where torches spluttered along the walls, and glanced around as he went toward the wide fireplace, where no fires blazed in this warm spring weather.

Formerly, the stones above the great hearth had been carven into the cross of the Grevilles, the square scarlet cross with its five golden bosses. Now that was gone, broken away with hammers, and only the scar remained. Hilary went to one side of the fireplace and put his weight upon a stone there, and the stone swung. A narrow but high opening was disclosed.

"A torch, Sathanas!"

Satan snatched a torch from the wall and followed into the opening. The stone swung shut again. Here was a high and narrow passage through which wide shoulders could scarcely scrape, and at the end a little room piled with musty hampers and boxes.

"All the Greville goods and gear piled here, in the hour of peril," said Hilary, looking around. "Clothes, goods of all sorts—let 'em go! The two chests are what we want. They're not locked. Locks were of no avail if the Dymokes had found the secret of this chamber!"

There were two small chests of iron-bound oak, thick with dust like everything in the place. Under the torchlight, they got the lids thrown back, to lay bare parcels of all sizes and shapes, some heavy, some light.

"Here's a jumble—garments, jewels, everything!" said Hilary. "What I chiefly want are the parchments and the bills of exchange on Antwerp and Ghent merchants, still waiting to be presented and honored. There's gold, too; that will be in the heavier packets. Take what you can, and so will I. —Ha! My father's shirt of fine Milan steel links! That's not to be passed up. It fits my rôle, too."

THE finely woven mesh slithered through his hands. Laying surcoat aside, he donned the light steel shirt, then slipped the surcoat on again, over it. In his haste, in the semi-darkness, he could not observe that when the shirt was spread across his chest, over the wide front of it blazed the scarlet cross

with its five bosses, the cross of the Grevilles. His surcoat covered it from sight at once.

Little packets of jewels, wads of vellum, rouleaux of gold—these vanished into pockets and were stuffed under belts until both men were strangely swollen figures. In the musty room, sweat gathered upon them. The torch was flickering its last when Hilary turned once more to the secret entrance.

"Go first," said Hilary, laughing. "If we meet anyone, you'll draw a scream from them! At the courtyard, I'll chase you over to the van with my sword whirling. Ready?"

They came out into the great empty room, still empty. Upon Hilary fell relief as the stone swung shut. Relief, and a vast, triumphant exultation. Here was the best of his patrimony regained, wealth eight years hidden away and lost, now his own, to hold all the future assured.

When they sighted the courtyard, one glance showed there was not a moment to lose. *John Baptist* was beheaded, the crowd was roaring applause, and it would soon be time for both *Knight* and *Satan* to take the scene.

THEY took it now, in the midst of the tumult—*Satan* roaring and galloping along, the *Knight* after him with sword glittering. Yells of delight went up, and the two of them disappeared in the farther van. Here, hastily, they tumbled the loot from their persons, while Jehan Bodel took charge of it all and stowed it safely away.

"Quick!" he panted at them. "Out and to work, while I get Hell's Mouth ablaze!"

Donning their visors, they hurried out, *Satan* capering through his lines and the *Knight* following. A proper knight he looked, from head to golden spurs, being no longer a hunched and whining figure. When he seized a lute from one of the damsels, and his lilting baritone lifted joyously in the ballad Jehan had written, stark silence fell upon the entire courtyard. For this was the ballad of the Tudor Rose, in honor of the King, and it was deftly done and royally sung.

The song ended, and the *Knight* saluted. Grave Henry rose from his seat in impulsive delight. Down at the masked figure he tossed his gloves, fine embroidered gauntlets sewn with seed-pearls.

"My thanks, sir knight!" he said, and sat back again while applause roared.

Hilary donned the gauntlets. *Master Satan* spoke his cue line about the mouth of hell. Abruptly, Hell's Mouth came into view as the fusees were fired. On all sides arose murmurs of awe and amazement. That enormous dragon's head, into which a man could vanish at one leap, was suddenly ablaze inside and out, with scarlet fire and brimstone at the bottom, and the painted paper outlines of the dragon hideously distinct.

Steel clashed. Knight and Devil were at it now, slap-dash, in a display of swordsmanship that fetched rolling tributes of wild applause from archers and men-at-arms. But, in the midst, from somewhere lifted a strange scream—one frantic scream of terror.

Then Hell's Mouth exploded.

It was appalling, soul-wrenching. On the instant, a tremendous flash of flame was everywhere; flame that clung to garments and wagons and blazed up luridly. At the same time, a huge billowing cloud of smoke rolled everything into murky chaos. Men shouted, women shrieked like mad things. The platform crashed under simultaneous movement of its heavy load. Fire was streaming up from the wagons, bedded with old straw.

Hilary, aghast, dropped his sword. He hesitated, swung around, and went into the blazing hell with one leap, hurling himself up to the wagons, straight into the midmost terror. He stumbled over frantic figures, over up-ended planks from the platform. The thick smoke was lurid with leaping flame on all sides.

Choking, Hilary found what he sought—the King's tall shape in its furred gown, blazing spots of scattered tar and brimstone licking at the garments, the obscure shapes around in panic flight or all asprawl. He got his arms about that tall figure and slapped at the tongues of flame with desperate effort, beating them out and out.

"Steady, Your Majesty!" he coughed. "Hold tight, now!"

A SUDDEN burst from the straw below leaped up all around them. His thin surcoat was afire, the furred mantle was ablaze. Hilary slapped and fought the flames away; through it all, the King remained cool, unhurried, alert. Hilary guided him to the looming van, to the ground, and around behind the van to cool night air.

"Safe, Sire, safe!" he gasped, and frantically rid himself of the burning

surcoat. The gay satin shredded away at last. "There! All's well, and no great harm done, I trust."

"Well enough," echoed the King, with a cough. "Ah, water! It's high time."

Water was being flung. Steam hissed, and choking fumes rolled afresh as the fire died. Through it, Hilary guided the King into the open, and into a new hubbub. Men were rushing about, torches were dancing, and at sight of the King a quick yell pealed up. He was surrounded and borne away amid cheers.

HILARY turned aside, led by the voice of Jehan Bodel. He came upon the Frenchman, frantically cursing and lamenting the frightful thing. Something had gone amiss, a twist of burning straw had fallen into a tub of gunpowder and tarred cloth. Others of the company gathered around, with a ding-dong of frantic voices.

And then came the men-at-arms, trampling and seizing, with furious storming oaths. Jehan was knocked over, Master Satan was dragged to the stones and bound. Hilary's mask was stripped off and his arms were twisted together with cords. The Italian women fled shrieking to the nearer van. The others of the company were haled out into midmost courtyard and lumped together. Fury quivered and shook in the air. No one had died, but the fury rose louder and more vehement. A plot, a plot!

The fire was all gone now, the smoke vanished, and the cressets blazed brightly. New yells went up. Hands pointed. Sir Hugo Dymoke came hastily; his cousin Sir John vented torrential oaths.

Upon Hilary's bared mail-shirt stood out the scarlet cross of the Grevilles!

Furious voices shook the air. Knights and squires, all the King's suite, came pouring around with flash of weapons and excited shouts. Here was the man, the man himself, Hilary de Greville! A plot, a conspiracy to kill the King! Hang every one of these scurvy knaves, and first of all this rascal under attainder!

"You have the right of justice here!" Sir John turned vehemently to his cousin. "Hang him with short shrift, Hugo, or none at all!"

"With all my heart, and the quicker the better," said Sir Hugo, and beckoned forth a brace of men-at-arms.

They came, and he ordered Hilary hanged at the castle gate, instantly. Against that roaring tide of fury, Hilary could do nothing, say nothing. Tumbler the dwarf flew at the two men, scratching and screaming. They kicked him aside, and were dragging Hilary off when a calm, steady voice made itself heard. Every move stopped. The voices died. The King came striding forward. Cheers for him arose, and hearty plaudits, and these died likewise.

"Why punishment, Hugo?" said he.

Sir Hugo broke forth hotly:

"Look, my lord King! This rascal is no other than Hilary de Greville, of whom my cousin John has brought news from London. Here's proof of the whole affair—this damnable business was a conspiracy to murder you! Here's Greville himself, a traitorous dog like all his family, plotting this treason! By God, I'll hang him at the gate yonder!"

"But," said the King quietly, "no one was hurt. A few people trampled, a leg or two broken—no more. True, the fire was all around me, but one man slapped down the flames and saved me from injury. So, my good gentles, why a hanging?"

A dozen voices broke forth, wild imaginings became sworn facts. Hilary had been caught sword in hand, his treason proven, traitorous murder in the very act! A dozen had seen him prowling in the smoke, a dozen had heard him shouting death to the King!

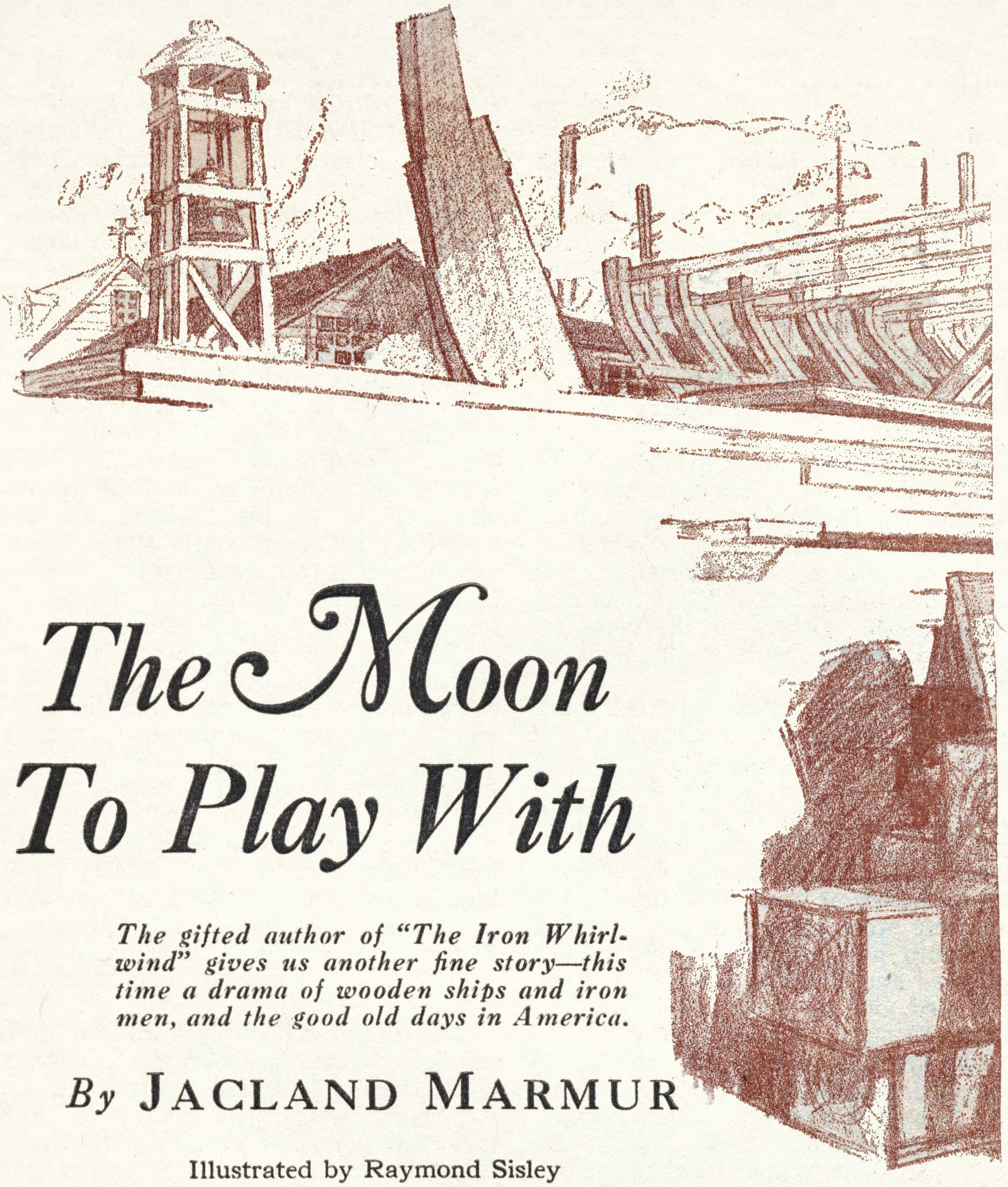
But Henry stepped forward and the voices died away once more, as he looked Hilary in the face, and reached out to the bound arms. He pointed to the royal gauntlets, now wrinkled and shriveled, the embroidery gone, the seed-pearls now only brown burnt dots.

"There's the answer; here's the man who brought me out of the fire," he said in his calm way. "Sir Hilary de Greville, I thank you for having saved me this night. Go your way in peace; you shall be eased of your attainder as quickly as my word can reach London."

UPON the sudden dismayed silence rose the shrill voice of Tumbler the dwarf, who flung himself blubbering with joy upon Hilary and Jehan, while Master Satan, when he understood, fell upon his knees before the King.

And this, as Henry was wont to affirm made the merriest miracle-play of all—that Master Satan went on his knees to a Tudor, before the very mouth of hell!

Another story in this series, "The World Was Their Stage," will appear in the next issue.



The Moon To Play With

The gifted author of "The Iron Whirlwind" gives us another fine story—this time a drama of wooden ships and iron men, and the good old days in America.

By JACLAND MARMUR

Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

THEY were building wooden ships down at Burling Slip when the Port of New York was young. You could hear the ringing sounds of adz and calking-maul for half a mile around; and you could see the riggers in their bosuns' chairs, swinging high aloft, spinning webs of hempen rope. There was no mistaking the ocean at the shipyard of Quaid and McKay. From there you could see the mouth of Buttermilk Channel, flecked with the leaning sail of the inbound fleet if the wind was in the east or south; and you could see the spar rafts coming down from Corlear's Hook with a boy to fend the tide. You could hear the heavy drays, too, rumbling like thunder down the John Street cobblestones, sparks striking from the hoofs of the Percherons. Sea stores and Yankee cargo to the quays of the outward bounders, where every shipbroker with neat clipped sideburns and high top-hat would be asking a Cape Horn master to find out for certain this time about all that gold on the banks of the Sacramento. And once in a while, down at Burling Slip, you would hear Jack Gresham's homemade flute gayly piping while he watched the ships men built to send across the seas.

There was crisp frost in the November sunshine, with the pristine clarity of the atmosphere that only northeast weather brings, as sixteen-year-old Lydia McKay came out of the blueprint shed, leaving a pot of hot soup to help her father fashion a clipper ship. That's when she

"Why, don't you know, Lydia McKay, that you're telling an awful fib?"

heard Jack Gresham fluting over the rise of the ground before he came into sight himself.

It was like no music you have ever known. It just lifted and trilled like a lark in the sky, falling in graceful spirals of sound to earth where it happily purled and then soared free again. Sometimes it broke from its merriment, hinting at something wild and untamed, not fully understood by any man—like the spirit of the young land that bred the lad who made sweet music such as that. It caught at Lydia the way it always did; but she tried to quench the shining in her eyes; she put her small white hands deeper in her beaver muff; and she frowned sedately when Jack Gresham came over the hill with a logwood ax on his shoulder and a homemade flute at his lips.

He came swinging to his rhythm, long-legged in the Yankee strain, freckle-faced, with twinkling eyes of amazing blue and a shock of wild brown hair. He saw her

at once—for who could miss the small yellow head of Lydia, or the fine grace of movement when she walked? That's why he didn't stop. He came along with laughing eyes, giving a final flourish to his melody before he dropped the ax-head at his feet.

"Hello," he said. "Hello, Lydia, my darling."

"I am certainly not your darling!" She tossed her head. "You are a very insolent boy."

"Why, of course I am," he instantly agreed. "And whose fault would it be but yours, being so lovely?"

A tingling started deliciously up Lydia's spine and she hoped he would never know how hard she tried not to blush, frowning darkly the way she did. "Whatever are you doing here, Jack Gresham?"

"It's the ax. Mother sent me to grind it and have it whetted good so the wood can be cut before full winter comes."

"Well, this is certainly no place to grind an ax. Why didn't you take it with you to Bulkley's smithy shop over on Cherry Street?"

"Because you can't see the ocean at all from there, and you can't smell the running tide. So what good is a place like that to me?"

She looked at him with sharp severity. "Jack Gresham," she said, "you have lost your employment again."

He grinned sheepishly, and nodded. "Yes," he confessed, "that I have. It's no work at all for me but just a waste of time; counting dollars and mares and horses' iron shoes till I get to own a smithy shop myself."

"Well, I never! What's wrong with owning a smithy shop? It's almost as good as owning a ship, my father says."

"Then your father is wrong. And besides, I don't wish to own the things I love. It makes them go sour all at once."

"Well, I never!"

HE grinned, thoughtfully kicking the earth with his boot. "It's a much finer thing to sail a ship than ever it is to own one. Look how many your father has built—but how many does he own? Still he couldn't take a single one anywhere, and he could never bring one home. The ocean's mine, just as much as his, though I own no single bit of it. Isn't it, now? The clouds pour over it for me just as much as for anyone. I can guess how blue and how wide and how wild it is. And what I don't know I can soon find out."

The girl frowned that funny little frown. "No wonder they say Jackstraw Gresham won't ever amount to much. Your talk gets more pixilated every day. Like that wild sweet music you always play. Wherever do you get it from?"

"Oh, I just make it up."

"Like your crazy talk?"

"Well, yes; in a way. It's all hiding inside of me somewhere. Not really hiding: just living there. Like quail in the brush or larks in a meadow of grain. You don't really know they're there, until along comes something, making a sound. Then up they go! Whirring their wings or trilling. Whenever I look out where the tall ships go to get lost in wide sunshine, I feel like that. Like talking crazy talk or making music with my flute." He brought his head around so that his bright blue eyes were looking into hers. "Mostly whenever I see you, the music starts bubbling like a well inside of me."

"WELL, Jack Gresham!" began Lydia. "I never heard such—"

"It's no use at all to get angry, Lydia. You can't stop me from seeing how beautiful your yellow hair is, any more than you can stop me from smelling the brine when the tide flows in. And one of these days—"

"And one of these days," she interrupted with hasty anger, "your father will be hearing about your throwing away every chance for honest work while—"

"My father would understand," the lad cut in quietly. He drew himself very erect, his shining eyes easily spanning the distance to that outer blinding void where he was so sure the sea would be: and his voice was very proud. "My father is collaring the Cape of Good Hope in a Quaid and McKay ship called *Colleen*. They own her—but my father is her master. Today at noon he was approximately in latitude 35 degrees south; longitude 17:30 east. That's by my mother's calculations on the front parlor pilot charts. She's been keeping his voyages that way ever since she stopped going to sea with him: and she's never very far from wrong, checking with his logbook when he gets home. My father was privateer master, too, of the armed brig *Yankee Joke* in the war of 1812. He captured four sloops-of-war, and he sent twenty British merchant prizes home right out of the chops of their own channel in those days. Yes!" Jack Gresham said with firmness. "I think my father would understand."

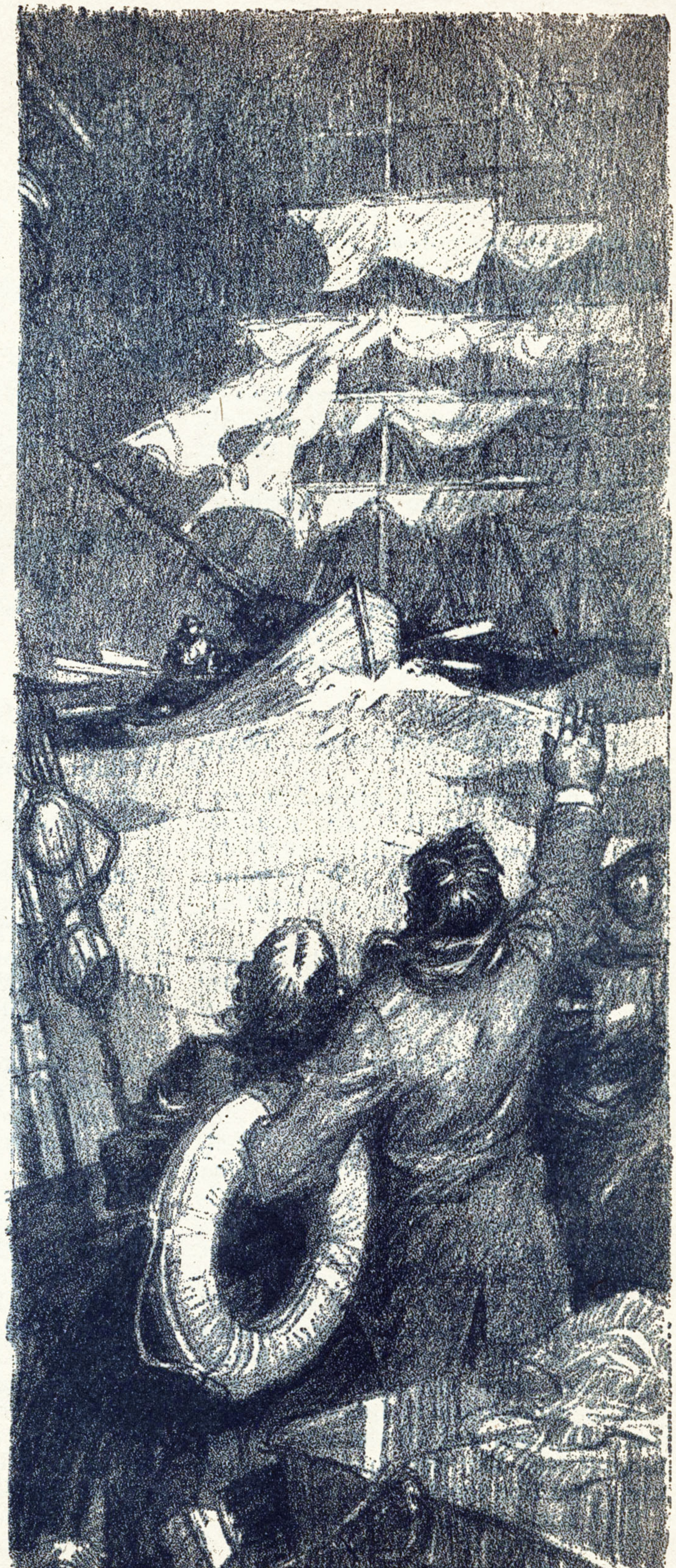
"That mate," she heard her father say, "handling that boat there, shall have a ship of mine to command!"

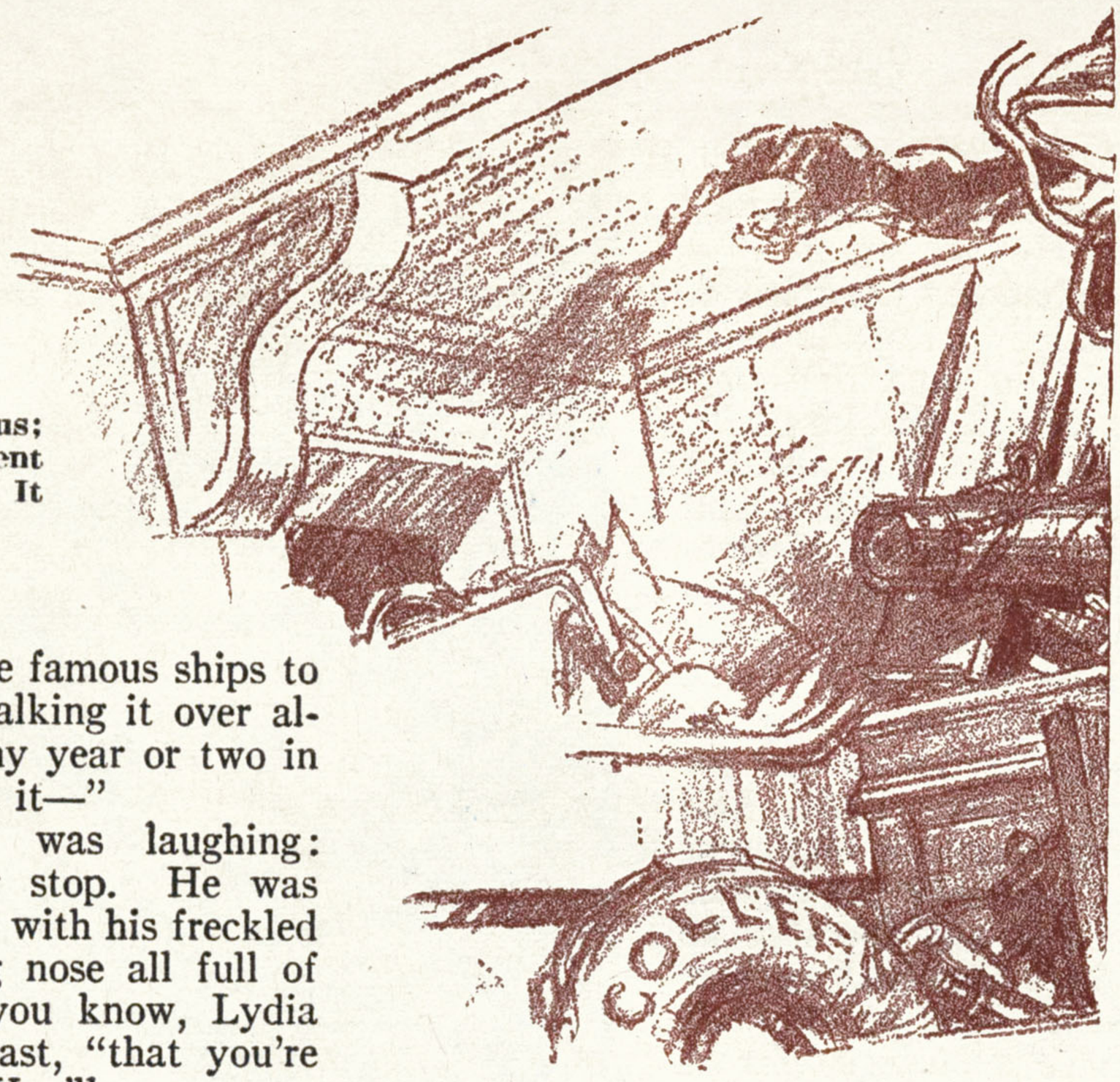
That was the spirit of the lad and of the fruitful new land that nurtured him, speaking with pride that way about a man he knew who had the wild honey of freedom on his lips and who gladly paid its bitter price, knowing its value and its dignity and the great need men had for it. Maybe Lydia McKay had some inkling of it, too. For the way he said it and the way he stood, lean and angular with bursting growth, made a strange stirring in her heart. But because they were both so young, she thought it would never do to let him know it at all. So she tossed her head instead.

"That's all very well for you," she said with dainty scorn, "to be talking wild that way. But it is certainly not for me. For I shall have a big house in the City of Brooklyn over there." She made a delicate gesture across the river with her little beaver muff. "It will have a high stone fence around it for maybe a half a mile. There will be dogs and cattle and hayfields and horses for me to ride. And a carriage-and-pair besides, when I wish to go to town. That's what *I* shall have."

"Indeed!" Jack Gresham's eyes were wide with smiling mockery. "And when shall all of this fall right out of the sky for you?"

"Why, when I am married to Donald Quaid, of course, and his father and mine retire, to leave





At first Lydia was curious; then terrified when it went on and on for ever. . . . It would never stop!

the shipyard and all the famous ships to us. They have been talking it over already. After I have my year or two in London finishing-school it—"

Jackstraw Gresham was laughing: that's what made her stop. He was laughing straight at her with his freckled face and his wrinkling nose all full of mirth. "Why, don't you know, Lydia McKay," he said at last, "that you're telling an awful fib? You'll never marry Donald Quaid."

"Won't I, though?"

"Why, of course you won't. You're going to marry *me!*"

She turned sharply on her heel at that. "Jackstraw Gresham!" she snapped. "You aren't nearly as smart as you think! Just because we made silly promises when we were children playing together, you imagine—"

"I don't imagine anything, Lydia." Mirth fell from him. Towering over her with his head a little bent, there was a rumor of thunder on his brow. His blue eyes glowed, and his voice was clear and firm. "I am very sure of it. You will never marry Donald Quaid."

The girl tossed her head again. "Well, then you are wrong. And I'm not going to stand here, listening to your impertinence, any longer. Why don't you get along and grind that ax? That's what your mother sent you for."

"And that's exactly what I shall do!" he burst out with sudden anger. "That's the trouble with all you girls," he flared. "You and your carriage-and-pair and your big stone house in Brooklyn! You want the moon and all the stars to fall in your laps like ripe apples out of a tree. Just like that! You want—"

With equal vigor, Lydia broke in:

"Yes; why not? If a man loved a girl enough and she wanted the moon to play with, he would at least go out and try. That's what I think, Jack Gresham. It wouldn't matter a bit to me if he brought nothing back but a big green cheese. Just so long as he went and tried! Just—"

"Bah! Good-by!"

He turned, slinging the ax carelessly to his shoulder, marching off in a rage.

LYDIA MCKAY stood watching him, no anger in her at all the moment his back was turned. His shoulders went swinging in sunshine down toward the toolshed on the quay where the shadows of spars and lofty cordage ranged. She even smiled a little with a delicate puckering of her arched brows to see his leanness and the strength of him. Because how could you be angry in a place like that? Not with all that water shining in your eyes. Not with the sound of adz and calking-maul ringing loudly in your ears. The world was brave and wonderful, she thought, walking slowly toward the distant gate. But long before she got there she heard his voice again, crying out to her.

"Lydia! Lydia!" She turned. He was coming back. He was racing across the broken ground like a stag, leaping over timbers with a wildness in his shining eyes. "Lydia!" he cried. "The barque *Nautilus!* She is lying at the quay, fully laden and stored. She sails for the Jamaicas in half an hour with the ebb! She—"

"Why, of course! She has been posted for a month. What on earth's the matter with you?"

The rest was nightmare; it was dark when old Caleb McKay and Lydia staggered aloft.

"You don't understand!" He flailed his arms. "She's needing a boy! Captain Browning told me so. And he asked me how would I like to go! So—"

"Jack Gresham! Are you gone insane?"

"No! No! But you must go and tell my mother so she'll know no harm has come to me. You must tell her, Lydia. Please, for me."

"You're mad indeed, Jack Gresham! You have no clothes or—"

"Captain Browning will fit me out with all I need from his chest of slops. I cannot miss the tide."

He spun about, rushed off; then stopped and came back. "Lydia," he said gravely, "you must tell my mother not to worry for her ax. I will put it in the toolshed, oiled and wrapped. And when I get back I'll grind it good and bring it home to her. Because that's what she sent me out to do. You will tell her, Lydia?"

"I will tell her."

Reassured, he dashed off once more. But again he halted, wheeled, and came running back, that high flame of excitement in his eyes. "It's the moon I'm thinking about," he blurted, grinning for

the sheer joy of what high fortune now was his. "I have noticed how it rises in the east each night and how when first it does it is sluggish and slow, whether it's yellow or whether it's red. That would be the time for a man to grab hold of it. Wouldn't it now? I'll be going that way, and so I'll see what can be done. It—Lydia—it might be worth while waiting for. Well, for a little while at least."

For a moment they looked deeply into each other's eyes, standing in that place where fine, tall, wooden Yankee ships were built.

Then Lydia said, impelled by some unknown force: "Yes, Jack Gresham. So it might." This time he was gone for good, the girl watching him as long as he remained in sight. . . .

That way Jack Gresham went all at once to face the ocean and the brawling gales, since his instinct told him it would never do for a man to miss his tide. His one concern was that ax, which should have been ground and whetted against the winter wood. Because he was a dutiful son, and he knew it was wrong to leave a chore unfinished. Other than that he went gayly, armed with nothing but what clothes he wore—and a homemade flute. And when Lydia McKay could see him no more, she went to do what he had asked.

She thought surely Mother Gresham would be angry or alarmed. But, oddly enough, she wasn't. It almost seemed she had daily been expecting this. Mother Gresham's hair was snowy and her eyes were twinkling blue, just like the eyes of her eldest son. And she only sighed when she heard that news.

"Well, Lydia, my dear," she said with gravity, "there's no use at all in angrily setting yourself against the rain from heaven, the wind from the sea, or the natural growth of a boy. Only now I shall have to get down another pilot chart and guess the tracks of two ships instead of the track of only one. I can keep my Jonathan's much truer, though. I seldom miss his arrivals by more than a day or two; because before the children came I always sailed right with him, don't you see—so I know most of his little tricks cracking on canvas, and most of his habits in the courses he makes."

LYDIA nodded solemnly. "What is it like," she asked, "being married to a shipmaster all your life?"

"You would think it terribly lonely, Lydia. Well, so it is. But I was always with him when we both were young." Bessie Gresham smiled. "Once you have seen what your man must face, what he must know, and what he must do to win his manhood and his dignity, you will understand a lot of things. Don't you worry about it at all."

That's what Mother Gresham said. What a funny way for her to talk, thought Lydia McKay. Just as though *she* had any intention of ever in all her life marrying a man who went to sea. Not she! She would have a fine house in the City of Brooklyn when she married Donald Quaid, with a high stone fence, a carriage-and-pair, and a broad terrace to sit on in the summertime when the moon came up. The moon. . . . It made her think of a boy with a freckled face and a shock of wild brown hair—a boy who made strange sweet music on a flute. And his name wasn't Donald Quaid at all.

IT took Jack Gresham a long time to get home from the Leeward Isles. He sent letters back by a northbound brig, telling how the barque *Nautilus* was lading sugar and rum to cross the western ocean for the River Thames. Then she took British coal, and by way of Cape Verde blew down to Mossel Bay. She went in ballast for Sunda Strait across the cobalt Indian Ocean blue before at last she found casked whale oil to make a precious freight for home by way of the bitter westerly gales that roar around Cape Horn. It was almost two years before Lydia heard the music of Jack's flute once more in the shipyard of Quaid and McKay.

There was in it that same troubling sweetness, sad and merry all at once, the tune trilling up and up and then tipping suddenly to tumble back to earth in cascades and spirals of melody. The wildness was in it, too, but a strong wildness that was different now. It was still untamed, but it seemed purposeful; it rumored restraint and control. When Lydia heard it, she knew at once who it was coming over the rise of the ground. So she waited, surprised that it still could bring that excited shining to her eyes: and when Jack saw her, slim and erect, her yellow hair glinting in the sun, he came on swinging to the rhythm of his song. Till he stopped in front of her and, taking the flute from his lips, he said, as he always used to say:

"Hello, Lydia, my darling."

"Jack Gresham! Goodness, how you have grown!"

He looked down at her from his angular height. "That comes of reaching up and up," he said, grinning, "every time I was on the royal yard. But would you believe it? Even from that lofty place it was no closer at all, though I chased it round the world."

"YOUR talk is just as pixilated as ever." The girl frowned. "Whatever are you speaking about?"

"Why, the moon, of course! I tried and I tried," he murmured ruefully. "But I couldn't bring home so much as a big green cheese. I haven't given up, though. I shall try again for you."

It brought the color rushing to her face, to think he could remember that. "I'd forgotten all about it, Jack," she lied.

"Had you? Not I. There are some things, Lydia, I could never forget."

"And do you know now how wide the ocean is, how blue, and how wild?"

"Yes," he said at once with gravity. "Now I know."

Walking with her, back to her father's carriage at the shipyard gate, he tried to tell her about what majesty and terrible beauty he knew. How sweet the deep-sea rain could smell, threshing the ocean in the lonely latitudes of the line while he stood in darkness at the fife rail, remembering a yellow-headed girl. How the trade winds blow, steady and strong, to make a tall ship easily race the mile-long rollers with their tossing plumes of white. How Diego Ramirez looks, grim and desolate in the iron Cape Horn gales with the storm scud dizzy overhead. How men could give back yell for yell to those howling westerlies, fisting ice-stiff canvas along a lofty, drunken yard. And his eyes were steely blue when he spoke about what terrible music he had heard down there. Lydia wasn't really surprised: there had always been that strangeness in this boy. Except she knew he wasn't a boy any more. The power and strength of manhood was in him now. It frightened her a little, but she didn't dare let on.

"Maybe I shall hear that music too," she said carelessly. "I am crossing for my schooling in London, come next spring."

"Why, by then I shall have a ship of my own command." And Jack Gresham grinned, helping her into her carriage. "So I'll be coming up London River with all my pennants burst; and I'll bring my own bride home."

"Well, I never! Jack Gresham, you—"

She would have said a good deal more, but the horses started clopping off. So all she could do was look back, angrily. The hot sun was on his bare head and she saw that his brown hair still was wild. But he was lean and tough as an ash. If there still were freckles on his face you couldn't see them at all for the brown and weathered look of him, standing so tall against the background of masts and cockbilled spars in the shipyard of Quaid and McKay—with his homemade flute lying easily on the palm of one big hand.

Three weeks later he sailed again on an East Indian voyage by way of Good Hope in the full-rigged ship called the *Yankee Blade*.

Some letters came back by a homeward-bounder, and a note by a brigantine in whose company they were becalmed for three days on the line. For the Yankee ensign flew over every ocean, and in every harbor of the world. They spoke about places Lydia never heard of; places with throat-catching names: Sarawak, Sourabaya, Semarang, and the Islands called Spermonde. Mother Gresham seemed to know, though, for she calmly pricked those pin-points off on her pilot charts, still guessing the tracks of her husband and her son across the wide waters of the earth. His last message reached her from Funchal, just before Lydia went south to sail for London in a flash Baltimore packet-ship. He said he thought he would sit for chief mate if he could, in the City of New Orleans.

THE eastward crossing Lydia made was smooth: it was not till two years later that she heard the wild majestic music Jack Gresham had talked about. She heard it, homeward bound with her father, in the Quaid and McKay ship called *Colleen*—Captain, Jonathan Gresham. And by that time old Caleb McKay had all his plans arranged. Lydia and his partner's son, Donald Quaid, would be married in New York, and the shipyard and all the famous ships would soon be theirs. Lydia wondered, hearing that final announcement, about a boy she once had known who had the wide blue ocean in his eyes and strange wild music in his heart. She didn't know it at all, but while the ship *Colleen* stood south for her crossing by way of the trades, the *Yankee Blade* was boiling up the South Atlantic, homeward bound from California with Cape Horn miles and miles astern. That was by the little pencil-crosses Mother Gresham made

on her charts. And as the days went by and she watched those fanciful tracks slowly converge, one sweeping up northwestward from Cape St. Rocque and the other curving east and then northward out of the trades, Mother Gresham began to think that maybe her husband and her son would make a landfall in company, and perhaps come to anchorage in the Port of New York not more than a tide or two apart. And she was not, so it developed, far wrong.

WESTWARD of Bermuda, slanting in toward Cape Hatteras, that great hurricane came roaring up to strangle the ship *Colleen*. It came at first as a sultry oppression of the atmosphere, while a long oily swell from as far as the eye could see rolled first one rail under and then the other, the canvas slamming and slatting aloft. Then the cirrus haze thickened and the true hurricane clouds began to mass: black, ominous, terrifying. The last thing Lydia saw before she was ordered below was the master, old Jonathan Gresham, at the mizzen fife rail in his weatherproof coat, his eyes grimly to windward in the drenching rain, standing ready for conflict with a black sea and a blacker sky; an officer was at his side. Old Caleb McKay also went below; and that's when Lydia remembered what Jackstraw Gresham had said. How many ships did her father build, and how many did he own? Still he couldn't take a single one anywhere, and he could never bring one home. And then the first wild blast came howling out of the east.

Lydia could never remember, later, for how long those banshees wailed while the thunder boomed and blue lightning tongued the sky. At first she was curious; then terrified; then when it went on and on for ever, she huddled in the flooded cabin, seeming to see and hear things from apart, objectively. Almost as if a blue-eyed boy with a freckled face and a shock of wild brown hair were telling her about this thing. Outside, the screaming gale was the shrill crescendoing of a thousand throaty violins giving a weird overtone to a dreadful symphony. There were reeds, brasses, the mad skirl of a hundred flutes, insane in the tortured rigging of the ship. There was the bassoon, too, and the deep smash of the monstrous percussion drums each time the North Atlantic swept the deck above. It went on and on; seemingly it would never stop.

But now and then she caught a wild untamed note she dimly seemed to recall, a vague hinting of the music Jackstraw Gresham often used to play. This was what he meant. That was what he tried to celebrate! There was some glory in it, Lydia guessed; some nourishment for the spirit of such men as he. For they could face it. She knew they could. Because once in a while old Jonathan came down to look around with his swollen eyes, dripping sea-water on the flooded deck where a chair, two neckless cruets, and odds and ends of furniture banged against his seabooted legs. Then he went out again calmly, to face desolation: to take up once more his endless and silent contention with a thing he surely knew he could never own or master or overpower, but could only either elude or outlive. That, Lydia knew at last, was what Jackstraw Gresham meant. And suddenly, like a stabbing pain, she wanted him. Because if he were there she knew she could stand erectly at his side, knowing what he had to face and what he had to do to win his manhood and his dignity.

The rest was nightmare. She remembered the rending crash when the foremast went, carrying the maintopgallant with it in the wreckage while the ship lay over on her beam ends. In that mad wilderness of noise she couldn't hear the sound of the axes cutting the mizzen away in ultimate desperation. It wasn't till they were called on deck that Caleb McKay and Lydia saw what carnage the hurricane had wrought with the sturdy ship *Colleen*.

IT was dark when they staggered aloft, but whether it was the second night or the third, she didn't know. In the comparative quiet after that brutality of sound she had difficulty in hearing, but what she saw was plain. The ship was gutted. Nothing remained of her galley or the halfdeck house. Great jagged holes showed in the bulwarks, the sea boiling noisily across while the men, lashed to the pump brakes, moved with weary monotony to keep the vessel afloat a little longer. Forward, the carpenter and the mate were supervising the construction of a raft out of spare spars, casks, and broken timber. The hurrying ocean was very close; the ship rode it soddenly, an unmanageable, helmless hulk under a sky full of the racing leaden clouds of passing storm. To that sky Captain Jonathan Gresham was sending

"Lydia, I've got the moon for you, at last —right in this instrument."

rockets. He lit them with calm regularity, watching till they burst in feeble color high aloft above his head. Then his haggard eyes went out to windward where a dim answer glimmered between the heaven and the sea.

That ship out there came rushing up out of the south and east just as the fragment of a moon began to redden the sky. Lydia heard the men at the pumps send up a hoarse cracked cheer. But she didn't turn: she kept her eyes on that advancing ship. It rushed toward them with three royals set, shattering the lumpy sea to foam. Till, close aboard to windward, her upper canvas fell together in the gear, smart as a man-o'-war: and with her maintopsail laid to the mast she swung darkly on the flood. They wasted no time over there: the longboat took the water almost before her way was checked—and Lydia watched it.

It came bow on, to meet the black, swollen seas, the long sweeps in perfect rhythm, a tall, lean man gauntly erect in the sternsheets with the steering-oar in his fists. That man held her attention: her eyes were glued on his indistinct face. There was something vaguely familiar about him: about the way he stood; about the way he swung to the ocean's urge; about the quiet confidence of his bearing each time he reappeared to sight out of a steep hollow of the sea. She felt a sudden wild excitement. She knew there was a shining in her eyes. She had been waiting for something: this was it! For the moon rose through tattered rags of cloud: and when the smallboat scended aloft, that man seemed to be coming to her straight from the blood-red heart of it.

"That mate," she heard her father say at her side in a quavering voice of heart-

felt relief, "that mate handling that boat there shall have a ship of mine to command. On my oath I promise it!"

Then she was certain. For she saw his amazingly blue eyes now. A still, quiet strength was in them. Jack Gresham had a sovereign look. And in broken moonlight Lydia went to him over the sinking *Colleen's* side with wild gladness in her heart.

Then she lost consciousness.

SHE remembered no more until she awoke the following day on board the *Yankee Blade,* cutting the Gulf Stream angularly on a slant for the Port of New York with studding sails set alow and aloft and the blue Atlantic curling in sunshine across the vessel's broad wake. There was something she had to tell that man, and she knew it could no longer wait. So she dressed hurriedly, climbing the ladderway to the poop. And that's where she found him, pacing the lee rail fore and aft with a quadrant in his fist, waiting for his noonday sight. She went toward him with a calm serenity she had never before known; and when she saw how he looked at her with the hungry eagerness in his eyes, something inside of her began to sing. Because he hadn't forgotten. Not Jack Gresham. And there was no use fibbing any longer: neither had she.

"Hello," he said, grinning just the way he always used to do in the shipyard of Quaid and McKay. "Hello, Lydia, my darling."

This time she made no pretense at anger. What was the use? When womanhood is on you and the man who is yours stands face to face, you had best quietly take what is offered and let the gods decide the rest. So she just smiled at Jackstraw Gresham, chief officer of the *Yankee Blade,* gravely saying: "Hello, Jack. Hello, my dear."

He knew what she meant, for his eyes began to glow.

"You were correct about one thing, Jack," she went on. "I shall never marry Donald Quaid."

"Of course not, Lydia." He was smiling broadly, raising his quadrant so she would see what it was. "And I've got the moon for you at last. So I have! Right here in this instrument. The moon and all the stars. Just as I told you I would. Only I'll have to buy you the big green cheese to make up for the house in the City of Brooklyn with the big stone fence and the carriage-and-pair. Will you miss it terribly?"

"What good to me is a carriage-and-pair, Jack, when we'll both be at sea in the Quaid and McKay ship you're going to command?" Her eyes bubbled. "But I must warn you! When I send you on an errand I shall expect you to do it, Jack. You didn't sharpen Mother Gresham's ax, and you never brought it home to her. I think that was very wrong."

"We'll take care of it together," he promised solemnly, "the minute we warp against the quay." And they did.

They came home together: old Jonathan Gresham, mourning for the first ship he had lost in forty-odd years of command; his sailor son who was called Jackstraw; and the girl with the yellow hair. Jack Gresham had his homemade flute in one great hand and his mother's ax in the other. He found it where he had hurriedly left it, carefully oiled and wrapped in the toolshed at Quaid and McKay's, because he couldn't miss his tide fully five years before. It was an old ax by now, but he had it free of rust, sharpened and whetted like a razor-blade. And that way he finished his chore, the way a dutiful son should.

MOTHER GRESHAM was amazed, how true her calculations on the parlor pilot charts came out.

"Gracious!" she cried joyously when they all came in together. "I reckoned you would be home in company, Jonathan, but not on the selfsame tide!"

Then her shipmaster husband told her, and she went to comfort him. That's when Jackstraw Gresham told her about Lydia McKay. "I've brought your ax, Mother," he said first. "I am sorry it took so long."

"And high time, too!" Mother Gresham smiled, because how could you be severe with a son who was fully grown? "I've often wondered where it was."

"I've brought you home a daughter-in-law, too. This is Lydia McKay, who will be my bride."

"Now there's a thing I never wondered about at all." Mother Gresham nodded quietly. "I was always certain of that!"

"Well," said Jackstraw Gresham, chief mate of the *Yankee Blade,* who couldn't get to London town to bring his own bride home, "so was I!" Because he'd brought her just the same.

Another story by Jacland Marmur will appear in an early issue.

Spruce Gum

A professional woodsman here gives us a deeply interesting story of forest men against invaders from the city.

By REG DINSMORE

Illustrated by Arthur Jameson

SOMEWHERE in the brain of Lee Kirby a big bell boomed. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* Why wouldn't they quit it, so a fellow could sleep? *Boom! Boom!*

No, the bell wasn't in his brain—it was in his shoulder. He could feel the heavy tongue bang against him with each reverberation. And now the tone of the bell had changed—it sounded more like a human voice than it did like a bell—a voice yelling, over and over again:

"Wake up! Git up! Hey, wake *up!*"

"Lemme alone!" Kirby thought that he shouted the protest. In reality his stiff lips barely whispered the words; but the steady hammering at his shoulder continued. Again and again came that insistent command: "Wake *up!*"

By a mighty effort Kirby lifted his head and opened his eyes. A yellow light swam dizzily before him—a lantern swinging beside a pair of snow-covered legs. Slowly Lee Kirby's confused gaze lifted, following those legs upward. . . . A checkered mackinaw. Gray, frost-rimmed whiskers framing a seamed face. A lean arm swinging rhythmically, its bony mittened fist jarring Kirby's shoulder with measured impact.

Kirby squirmed stiffly away from the falling fist.

"Lay off!" he mumbled. "Sleepy!"—and again relaxed into an inert lump.

The stranger's strong hands seized him by the shoulders and rolled him from the log on which he was sitting. Rough mittens rubbed cold snow into his face, and moccasined feet shoved at his ribs, rolling him over and over in the snow.

With sluggish reluctance Kirby's temper crept out of its shell and asserted

itself. He struggled to his knees. "What the hell you trying to do?" he muttered.

"Tryin' to keep ye from freezin' as stiff as a railroad tie!" His bewhiskered tormentor grinned. "Git onto yer feet now, an' come along with me!"

Dimly Lee Kirby realized that he had been saved from death. He struggled to his feet, swayed uncertainly, tried to take a step, and fell headlong.

Instantly the old man was at his side. Wiry arms lifted him, and with their help he stood erect again.

"Now hook an arm around my neck, youngster, an' let's go."

The first ten rods were slow torture for Kirby; then some of the stiffness left his muscles and he managed with the old man's help to stagger along at a fairly good pace.

The glow of a lighted window shone through the whirl and drive of the storm . . . the sudden warmth of a cabin—the appetizing taste and aroma of hot mulligan that the old man held to his lips—these things Kirby sensed but numbly, for his mind as well as his body was nearly paralyzed by the stress of the past five hours. He staggered to a bunk and fell asleep.

WHEN Kirby awoke it was daylight. Outside the cabin the forest still twisted and groaned under the last of the nor'easter. Dry snow rasped at the panes of the single cabin window with the grating hiss of fine sand. For a moment he was at a loss to account for his surroundings, but as he lay wide-eyed, listening to the roar of the snow-laden gale, his experience of the night before came back to him with startling vividness.

Kirby's gaze left the window and wonderingly roved about the cabin. . . . Shelves of canned goods and other provisions; a rifle hanging on wooden pegs above the door; snowshoes leaning in a corner. And on the far side of a huge box stove that radiated a comfortable warmth, sat the gray-bearded man who had found him out there in the swirling, frozen maze and had piloted him to warmth and safety.

Kirby lay quietly and watched him.

Unconscious of the fact that Kirby was awake, the old fellow was intent upon some kind of task, industriously chipping with a worn pocket-knife at some small object which he held between thumb and finger. Kirby wondered what the object was that he was whittling.

As Kirby watched, the old man lifted the object and held it between his eyes and the light of the window, and in the better light Kirby perceived that it was a small globule of amber-colored substance, translucent in the light from the frosted panes. He recognized the substance as gum—spruce gum. The old man was cleaning it, chipping away the particles of bark that adhered to its surface.

The old man held the lump of gum against the light and examined it as carefully as a lapidarist might a gem he was cutting. He painstakingly scraped away another small blemish of bark, and then, with a satisfied sigh, he placed it in a small birch-bark box. From an ash-splint basket beside his chair he took another piece of rough gum and began work upon it.

"Good morning!" said Kirby.

INSTANTLY the old man was on his feet, his wrinkled face alight with solicitous interest.

"Mornin' yerself, lad! How ye feelin'?"

"Rocky!" admitted Kirby, ruefully trying his stiffened muscles. "But mighty appreciative for what you did for me last night!"

"Thar, thar, youngster! Ye don't need to mention it. I jist happened to hear yer signal-shots up thar on the ridge. Kind of calkilated 'twas some city feller that had lost his bearin's! Yer from the city, aint ye?"

"Yes—from the city," nodded Kirby. "And so green to the big timber that I walked three complete circles and burned my only dry match to light my pipe before I discovered that I was lost. Four of us fellows are up here on a vacation deer-hunt, camped on Porcupine Stream—wherever that is. Yesterday morning I scratched a spike-horn buck with a bullet and followed him all day. It came dark almost before I knew it, and the storm hit me. After I discovered that I was circling, lost, and with no dry matches, I tried to keep warm by walking—kind of a sentry-go between two trees—but I got so tired that I had to sit down and rest. I knew I oughtn't to sit down, but once I was down I couldn't drive myself to get up and walk again. I fired my last cartridge and then I guess I went to sleep. You found me there on that log, I suppose?"

The old man nodded. "Porcupine Stream is eleven miles from here," he told Kirby.

"My name's Kirby—Lee Kirby. I'd like to shake hands with the man who saved my life."

The old man came around the stove and met Kirby's hearty grip with one just as firm.

"I'm McLaren—Sandy McLaren, folks call me. Kin ye eat, Mr. Kirby?"

"*Can* I! I've had nothing but a pocket lunch since yesterday morning. Try me!"

McLaren grinned, put the coffee-pot on the stove, and going outside for a moment, returned with a haunch of venison, from which he began cutting a thick steak. Kirby rolled out of the bunk and dressed.

Other than the stiffness of his muscles and a slight tenderness of skin where the frost had begun its deadly work on some of his toes and fingers, he felt as well as ever. The delectable aroma of brewing coffee and broiling venison made him ravenously hungry. He could hardly wait until McLaren had placed the meal on the rough slab table.

"Oh, boy!" he mumbled past a huge mouthful of juicy steak. "I never knew what grub tasted like, before! If it wasn't for the boys back at camp worrying their heads off about me, I'd be glad I got lost."

Old McLaren grinned understandingly and returned to his gum-cleaning. "You'll 'scuse me, I hope," he apologized. "But I've got to keep at this here gum."

"Sure, Mr. McLaren! You go right ahead with your work. I'll wash the dishes when I've finished this feast. Do you gather much spruce gum?"

"Yeah," sighed the old man. "That's the way I make my livin'—an' I'm gittin' powerful sick an' tired of it! This gummin's all work. 'Taint like runnin' a good trap-line—not by a long shot! What's purtier now than the fresh-primed pelt of a mink, or the glossy hide of a good dark fisher? But I guess, with my rheumatics an' everything, my trappin' days air about over, an' I ought ter be oncommon thankful I kin earn my salt at this here gummin'."

THE old man relapsed into silence, and as Kirby watched him, seemed to lose himself in his work. His old hands manipulated the small, irregular lumps of gum with a dexterity born of long practice. His knife scraped and chipped with short, deft strokes. Apparently he was driving himself to greater speed with each movement.

Kirby finished his breakfast and washed the dishes. Then, with nothing to do, he strolled to the window and peered disgustedly out at the storm. It was plainly evident that no man could stay in the woods in such weather. This meant another day of hunting wiped out of his all-too-short vacation. Just his devilish luck! Aloud he cursed the weather, the no-account spike-horn buck that had led him into trouble, and himself, for not possessing the necessary woodcraft to pull him out of last night's dilemma. Savagely he crammed tobacco into his pipe, and threw himself onto a soap-box seat by the stove.

McLaren lifted tired old eyes from his work in mild surprise. He shook his head in reproof until his long ragged locks tossed like whitecaps on a windswept lake.

"Don't cuss, lad, don't cuss!" he admonished. "'Twon't do the least mite o' good—an' besides, ye ought to be mighty thankful ye aint out in that ragin' smother, froze as stiff as a hornbeam sledstake. I know jist how ye feel. Used to be the same way myself when I was young; used to fight my head about every little thing that went wrong. But I got all over that kind o' foolishment when I grew older. Nothin' like years in the woods to teach a man patience, Mr. Kirby."

Kirby, slightly ashamed of his outburst, apologized with instant frankness.

"I'm sorry, Mr. McLaren. I did sound like a kid, then, didn't I? Might as well sit tight and take it easy, I suppose, but this weather does get my goat."

"That's the stuff—take it easy an' let 'er blow. We've got grub enough here in this camp to go us even if that howler lasts a week. It's something ye've got to l'arn if ye fool 'round in the big timber much—to be patient, I mean. Aint a successful hunter, trapper, or woodsman of any kind atween here and Hudson's Bay but what has to cater to Ol' Lady Patience."

KIRBY, a keen student of human nature, ever eager to get behind the talk-screen of a man's everyday conversation and listen to the inner workings of his mind, asked:

"For example, Mr. McLaren?"

The old man's blue eyes widened in astonishment. "For example, ye say? Why, *me!* I'm a livin' example if there ever was one."

"Yes?" inquired Kirby, scenting a tale that might help pass a few dull moments.

"Sure I am!" old McLaren affirmed vehemently. "Don't ye suppose that I, who was onct the best trapper on Swift Diamond waters, who could sling a four-pound ax with the best of 'em, who could ride a log through the whitest water that ever roared down the Ammonoosuc, have to exercise considerable patience to git out here day after day an' jist pick spruce gum?"

"Must be rather tough," admitted Kirby. "But age comes to all of us, Mr. McLaren, and we have to make the best of it."

"That's jist what I am doin'—makin' the best of it," nodded McLaren grimly; "but ag'in I'm tellin' ye that it takes patience!"

Kirby fished again. "Well, they say that patience has its reward."

Old McLaren brightened visibly. "Yes sir, Mr. Kirby, them words air true! Sometimes when I'm back there on the ridges with my long-handled picker, a-chippin' gum off'n a frost-crack high up on a big spruce, an' my fingers air numb with the cold, an' the wind is whippin' fallin' bark-chips inter my eyes, nigh blindin' me, it helps a lot to think I'm gittin' a dollar a pound more fer my gum than ary other gummer in this end o' the State.

"Fer three years now I've been gittin' that dollar a pound bonus. If I kin have the patience to keep it up fer a couple more years, old Sandy McLaren wont have to worry about endin' his days in a poorhouse. No sir! Two years more, an' I'll quit the gummin' game, build me a snug little cabin nigh a big muskrat marsh I know about over on the head-

waters of the Magalloway, an' end my days as I've always lived—under the open sky."

"But—a dollar a pound over the market price!" exclaimed Kirby, slightly surprised. "Isn't that unusual?"

"Suttinly is!" agreed McLaren with a pleased grin. "But the people I ship to in Portland seem glad ter pay it. They seem to think that the gum from this particular locality is a better grade gum than they git from other parts, or somethin'. And then the pains I take cleanin' it, an' the way I pack it—in pound birch-bark boxes, with a sprig of spruce spills an' two-three spruce cones glued on the cover of each box—makes it kind of an eye-catchin' package to put in the show winder of a store, I guess.

"Fer most three years now I've shipped them people two twenty-four-pound cases o' gum every month. Pack it up, haul it out to the main road—on a hand-sled in winter, or on my back in a pack-sack in summer—an' leave it at the old Tidswell place. Bill Larabee, the stage-driver, picks it up an' hauls it down to the express office at Bethel fer me. Sent a case day afore yesterday, an' this case I'm workin' on here is due to go the twentieth.

"My money comes by mail, as regular as the sun, the fust of every month. Yeah, I'm doin' fairly well at gummin'—but, Lord, it takes heaps o' patience, an' it's all hard work!"

Kirby nodded. Subconsciously he was wondering what his fellow-hunters, in the camp ten miles across the ridge were thinking about him. He wished there was some way he might let them know he was all right—not lost and wandering in the storm, as no doubt they pictured him to be. But it was impossible for him to do this; so, shaking off the vague uneasiness which the knowledge of his friends' worry caused him, he prodded McLaren with another question.

"So, in your case, Mr. McLaren, the reward of your patience and perseverance will be the privilege of ending your days in the open. That's all you ask, is it?"

"Jist that—jist that! A cabin on the Magalloway marshes, a good canoe, so I kin git 'round to some traps, spite o' the rheumatics in my ole laigs—an' that'll be plenty! Ol' Sandy McLaren was never born to die in city smoke—I hope!"

IN the night the storm subsided. Next morning McLaren took Kirby to the ridge-top behind his camp and pointed out to him a distant, spruce-covered hill. "Go straight fer that hill," he told the younger man. "Cut across the left-hand shoulder of it an' ye'll hit a brook in the valley beyond. Foller the brook an' it'll take ye plumb to yer camp. So-long—an' good luck to ye!"

Kirby gripped McLaren's gnarled hand. "Good-by, Mr. McLaren! I'll never be able to repay you for what you've done for me, perhaps, but neither will I forget it. If the time ever comes when—"

"Thar, thar, lad! I told ye not to mention that again. Hustle along now, an' relieve yer pardners' worry as soon as ye kin."

WEIGHTY events sometimes hinge upon trivial happenings—in this instance, a rawhide thong.

Before going a hundred yards Kirby was tripped and slammed flat into the snow. When he had regained his feet and brushed off his rifle and clothing, he found that he had been thrown by a short stub which had caught in his moccasin lacing. The force of his fall had broken the lacing. He knelt to mend it.

As Kirby spliced the broken thong he glanced back to where he had parted with McLaren. The old man was hobbling among the dark trunks of the spruces, patiently searching their rough-barked boles for gum seams. His head was tipped back as he scanned the upper reaches of the trunks, and his white beard lifted toward the sky. His feet carried him automatically from tree to tree. He moved without conscious thought; every sense seemed centered in his eyes, which roved and searched for the small, resinous excrescences that meant so much to him.

"The old boy is surely going after his spruce gum as if he meant business," thought Kirby. "I hope he makes it too! It must be a terrible thing for a man who has always lived in the open as he has, to have to end his days cooped up in some old men's home—or worse yet, a poorhouse."

From behind a thick clump of firs two men suddenly stepped into the picture. In the softness of the new snow they came up without a sound behind old McLaren. A hand of each fell on the old man's shoulders.

Kirby saw McLaren's body cringe at the unexpected touch, saw the frightened twist of his head as he cast apprehensive glances at the men behind him, noted the expression of utter puzzlement that swept his seamed face. Then through the dead

silence of the winter woods the voice of one of the strangers reached Kirby.

"McLaren," the man said, "you're under arrest for drug-smuggling. We have suspected something of the sort for some time. Yesterday we opened one of your gum cases in the express-office at Bethel. Not an ounce of gum in it—but every birch-bark box was filled with opium! How long you've been at the game we don't know; but we do know that those gum shipments have been going through to Portland for nearly three years. Come along with us now—and come peaceably!"

THOUGHTS of self-preservation are mighty apt to be the first thoughts that jump into a man's head when he finds himself unwittingly mixed in a bad jam. Kirby remembered the plain trail that he had left from McLaren's cabin that morning. Doubtless the officers had come to the cabin soon after he and McLaren had left, and finding their tracks in the new snow had followed them to the top of the ridge. Now that they had taken McLaren, it was only reasonable to suppose that they would think Kirby an accomplice, and follow him down also. Kirby decided that the time to straighten out this tangle was here and now. He stood up and started toward the men.

The officers saw him coming. One of them walked rapidly toward him. As he came a blue automatic suddenly appeared in the man's hand. Kirby, seeing the pistol, coolly leaned his rifle against a tree and went forward to meet him.

In a voice that did not reach McLaren he told the officer: "I heard what you just said to McLaren, and I realize what I'm up against. I think, though, I can satisfy you as to my identity."

In Kirby's pockets were letters from the law firm in Springfield in whose office he worked. These he showed the officer. Swiftly, concisely, he told the man his story. He could see that the officer was half inclined to believe him, yet on the man's broad, good-natured face there still remained a shadow of doubt.

"Tell you what I'll do," he told Kirby after some hesitation. "I'll go to your camp with you and if the stories of your friends check up with yours, why—it's all right. I don't care to lose sight of you, though, until I've made sure. We've been working too long on this case to overlook a good bet now. It's a mighty short way to the Canadian line from here—perhaps eight miles. You might easily be the bird who's bringing the stuff across through the woods to old McLaren."

He called the other officer to him and in a low voice explained the situation. "You take McLaren out and throw him in the hoosegow, Jim. I'll go with this young man and make sure he's what he says he is. I want to be fair in this deal."

The officers finished their confab, and as McLaren hobbled slowly down the ridge before his captor, something about the dejected stoop of those old shoulders got under Kirby's skin. Devil of a mess for a man of McLaren's age to be tangled in! He'd like to see the old fellow cleared—darned if he wouldn't!

"And now," Kirby told Murray, the Federal agent,—after the warm welcome of his friends had satisfied the officer that Kirby's present occupation was deer-hunting, rather than the smuggling of dope, and the two were alone outside the deer-hunters' camp,—"there are two or three questions I'd like to ask you, if you don't mind. You see I naturally feel mightily interested in McLaren's difficulty. There isn't any doubt but what the old fellow saved my life, and if there is any way I can help him, I'd—"

"Time wasted, Mr. Kirby!" Murray protested. "I can understand that you feel your obligation to the old man, but with the evidence we've got on him there isn't a chance in the world but what he'll get the limit."

"And he ought to get it," agreed Kirby. "That is, if he's guilty. But isn't there a chance that the old man—"

"If there is a chance I can't see it," interrupted Murray. "There was his gum-case in the express-office. It was filled with the drug. The stage-driver was the only other man who handled that case, from the time it was left by McLaren at that old deserted farmhouse—the Tidswell place, I believe they call it—until it reached Bethel. We opened it as soon as it was unloaded there, and we've satisfied ourselves that the stage-driver's not mixed in the deal. No sir! It looks to me as if we'd got the goods on old McLaren good and proper!"

"I'll admit that it looks that way, Mr. Murray. But I'd still like to ask you a question or two, if you don't mind. This drug-loaded gum-case—I'd like mighty well to know what you did with it."

FOR a long moment the officer eyed Kirby speculatively. "Might know by your red hair and that square jaw that you're a persistent cuss,"—and he

grinned,—"but I guess you're O. K. It's against the code of the Service to talk over this stuff with an outsider, and I'd lose my job with Uncle Sam mighty quick if it ever leaked that I told you anything; but—we put a spotter after that case of dope and let it go through. Thought by so doing that we might nail the Portland end of the gang."

"And of course, if that's your plan, there will be no publicity about McLaren's arrest for a time," said Kirby thoughtfully.

"Not if we can help it."

"Thanks, Mr. Murray! And I'll see to it that nothing leaks. Now, one more question—where can I find you a week from today?"

"I have a room at the Lafayette, in Portland. It will be my headquarters for a month. But I can't say just where I'll be a week from today. We fellows of the narcotic squad never know where the next hour will find us."

"Thanks again," said Kirby, holding out his hand. "I'm mighty sorry to put you to the trouble of wallowing over here to camp. I appreciate your consideration."

"That's all right, Mr. Kirby. To tell you the truth, I'm rather glad of the opportunity to look this country over a bit. Now that I've seen the lay of the land I'm more convinced than ever that old McLaren was the whole thing to this end of the dope deal. Good day, Mr. Kirby!"

"WELL, fellows," Kirby told his hunting pals, "I guess my deer-hunt is over. Sorry, but there's something else on my mind that's got to be attended to."

"Aw, Lee!" they protested. "As soon as we get you back from what we felt sure was a snowy grave you're ready to pull out and leave us again. What about that whopping big ten-point buck we saw the other day? Going away and let some of us fellows take home his head?"

"G'wan!" Kirby grinned. "That buck will be here next year—unless some of you fellows scare him out of the woods with your rotten shooting. But this other deal won't wait."

And that afternoon Kirby rolled his blankets and back-trailed himself to McLaren's cabin. When he reached the gum camp the big box stove still radiated a comfortable warmth from the huge chunk of rock maple McLaren had stoked it with before leaving camp that morning. Kirby lighted the kerosene lamp and in its soft yellow light prepared his supper.

Solitude, warmth, a well-filled stomach and a sweet-drawing pipe—no condition could be more conducive of coherent thought, and Kirby, comfortably relaxed in McLaren's well-worn chair, gave himself entirely to the problem that confronted him.

Why, he pondered, must a man whose wants and aspirations were as simple as McLaren claimed his to be, desire to run drugs for another two years after having successfully got by with three years of the supposedly big-paying enterprise? "Two years more of this gummin'," the old man had said, "an' then the Magalloway marshes an' the little cabin."

Why, great Scott, if McLaren had slipped forty-eight pounds of opium past the customs officials each month for the past three years, and if a drug-smuggler's profits were as large as they were purported to be, Sandy McLaren should have money enough to build a villa on the Italian Riviera, rather than a log cabin on a muskrat marsh!

Yet, Kirby reasoned, the old man had exhibited unmistakable pride because of the fact that he received a dollar a pound bonus for his gum—he had said that one of the reasons he got that dollar bonus was because of the pains he took in cleaning and packing the stuff. How much of a job was it to clean gum, anyhow?

Kirby reached idly into the ash-splint basket partially filled with rough gum that stood by his chair, took out a sizable lump and began whittling the bark from it with his hunting-knife. He got a cramp in his hand from gripping the irregular lump, cut a finger until it bled, and drove the sharp point of his knife under a thumb-nail. Gosh, he guessed old McLaren earned his dollar bonus all right! No wonder the old fellow bore down on the fact that it required unlimited patience!

Forty-eight pounds of gum to be gathered from the woods, cleaned, boxed, crated, and hauled or carried six miles to the main road each month. Forty-eight pounds times twelve months was over five hundred pounds a year. And three years—why, that would be more than fifteen hundred pounds of gum!

AS Kirby tied a rag about his bleeding finger, he tried to visualize fifteen hundred pounds of gum all in one pile. The more he thought about it the more the enormity of the task was borne in upon him. Bosh, and piffle! Kirby

guessed he had let sentimentality run away with his judgment. There must be something fishy about old McLaren after all; he had been blinded by the old man's smooth talk. Well, he had the poor consolation of knowing that he was not the only person that had fallen for McLaren's line. Other people must have been taken in by the old man's clever patter or he couldn't have got away with drug-smuggling for three years.

Kirby cursed himself for a foolish meddler, and rolled into a bunk. In the morning, he reflected, he would return to his own camp, admit his mistake to his companions, laugh off their inevitable joshing as best he could, and finish his deer-hunt. He extinguished the lamp and composed himself for a night's sleep.

BUT Kirby, who generally sank into restful oblivion the instant his head hit the pillow, could not sleep. A picture of winter woods, of towering, snow-draped spruces beneath which a little old man hobbled, persisted in flashing across his mental vision—a picture of an old man who circled each tree, scanning its rugged trunk with patient intentness, his face ever lifted to the clear blue sky; an old man who had told Kirby, in all seriousness and with the longing of his heart shining in his tired blue eyes, that all he asked for in this world was the privilege of ending his days as he had always lived—under this wonderful turquoise canopy of the great outdoors.

"And now, with what they've got on the old fellow," mused Kirby half aloud, "it's mighty improbable that he'll ever see the open sky again—a man of his age. But he shouldn't—if he's guilty of bringing dope into the country!"

Morning found Lee Kirby out of his bunk before daylight. To the devil with deer-hunting—he was going to see this deal through, now he'd started! In the first grayness of the winter dawn he was hitting a lively clip down the old bush-grown logging road leading to the main road of the farming community to the east. Somewhere out there was the Tidswell place that McLaren and the Federal officer had spoken of. He wanted to have a look at it. The tracks made the day before by the Federal men and McLaren lay plain in the snow of the old woods-road, and with these to assure him that he was traveling in the right direction, Kirby made good time. It was still early in the day when he broke out of the forest into the cut-over back-pastures of farm land. Beyond, across broad spaces, he could see a line of telephone poles that presumably followed the main road, and off to his left, near the line of poles, was a farmhouse. Even at a distance Kirby could easily tell that the place was deserted. It must be this was the place for which he was looking.

As Kirby drew near the buildings he was impressed by the depressing aspect of the place. At one time, he thought, the house must have been somewhat pretentious as farmhouses go, but now the windows had been removed from the rambling old structure, the chimney had been torn down, and the front door flapped dismally from a single, twisted hinge with every vagrant breeze that sucked through the building. Desolation and neglect seemed to stare from the eyeless socket of every window opening. For a lugubrious moment, Kirby surveyed the ruin; then, kicking the door wider askew, he stepped inside.

The interior of the house bore the same stamp of chaos and disintegration as the outside. The woodwork of some of the rooms had been torn out—no doubt to be hauled away and used in other buildings. The plastering of the ceilings had fallen; it grated harshly under Kirby's moccasins as he explored the premises. Kirby was obsessed by a feeling of depression as he hurriedly looked through the ramshackle place in search of some clue that might shed light on Sandy McLaren's dilemma. He decided to take a look upstairs, and then get out of there; in its decay the old house was almost spooky!

Kirby made his way back to the front hall and started up the broad old stairs at a run. Part way up he paused. . . .

Ten minutes later he was out in the main road, hotfooting it toward Bethel and the railroad.

At the first farmhouse he came to he engaged the farmer to hitch up a team and carry him to Bethel. He reached there in time to catch the forenoon train into Portland. In Portland he made straight for the Lafayette.

FEDERAL AGENT Murray was not in his room—he was not in the hotel. In fact, now that the clerk recollected it, Mr. Murray had left word at the desk yesterday morning that he was going out of town for a week, perhaps longer. Was there any word that the gentleman would like to leave for Mr. Murray? Very well, the clerk would see to it personally

that Mr. Murray received it immediately upon his return.

Kirby scribbled a hurried note and left the envelope at the desk—with a two-dollar bill to speed its delivery. As he went out to the street again he thought: "Got to take a chance, that's all. If those agents were successful in tracing that dope shipment and have pinched the receiving end of the gang here in Portland, I'm just throwing my time away. Otherwise— Oh, banana oil! I've got a hunch and I'm going to play it!"

THE next day found Lee Kirby back at Sandy McLaren's cabin. With his square jaw set in grim determination he set himself to cleaning gum. Twenty-four pounds of gum must be ready to ship on the twentieth—the date McLaren had told him that he was to send his next shipment. That meant that there were but six days for him to prepare it in.

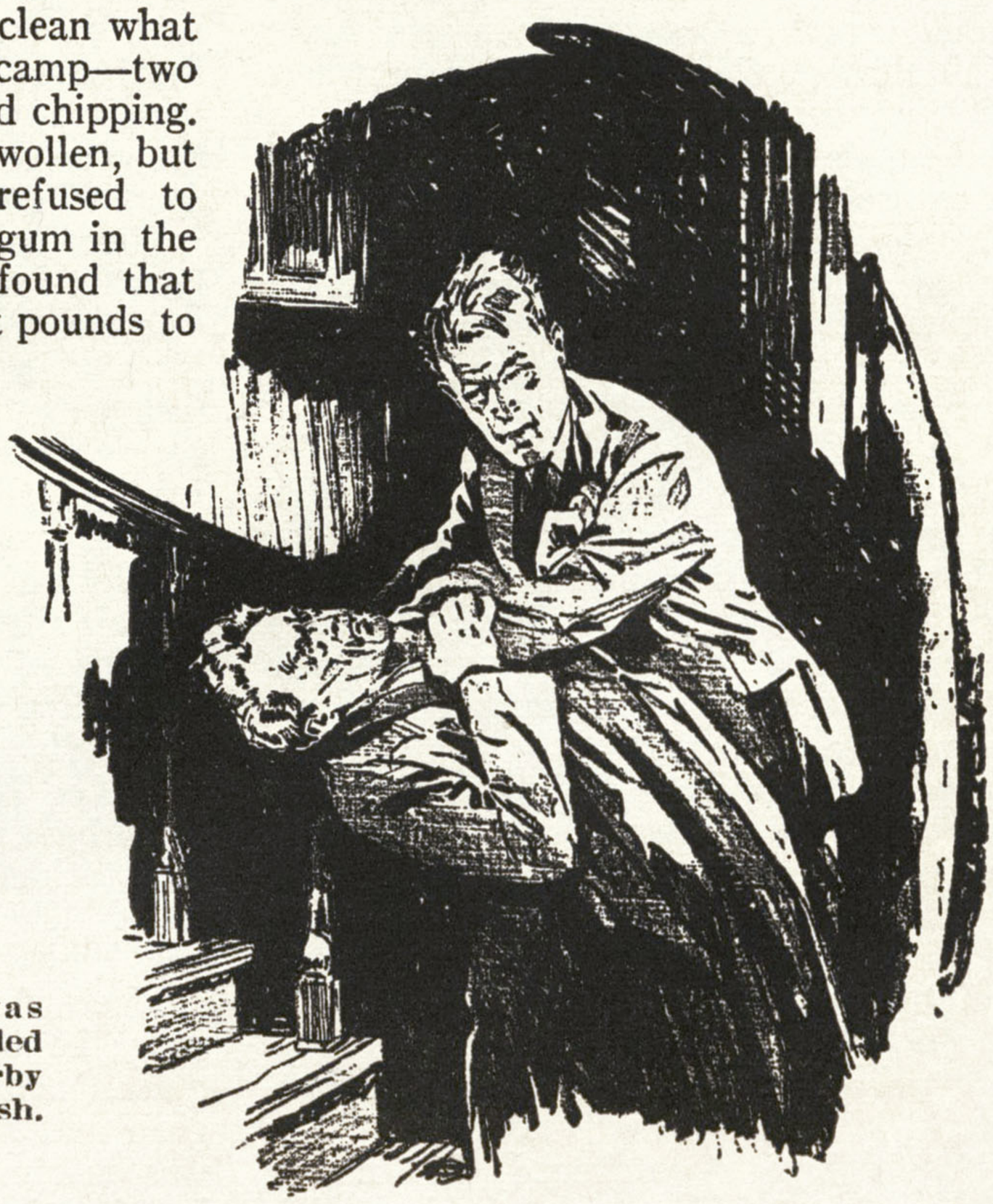
Luckily McLaren had made quite a start on the case. The wooden case itself had been shaved out of cedar splits and nailed together. All the birch-bark boxes had been made, and nine of them were already filled with cleaned gum and packed in the case. Perhaps five or six pounds of rough, uncleaned gum remained in the ash-splint basket.

It took Kirby two days to clean what rough gum there was in the camp—two days of whittling, scraping and chipping. His fingers became sore and swollen, but despite his discomfort he refused to quit. When the last piece of gum in the basket had been cleaned he found that the case still lacked over eight pounds to complete it. He shouldered McLaren's long-handled picker and the ash-splint basket and climbed back onto the ridges.

It was slow work, this gum-picking! In the first place Kirby wasted much time and effort in searching for gum in territory that McLaren had already worked over. When he did get back far enough to get into new ground and went to work, he found that the picker was an awkward tool in his unskilled hands, and that he dropped and lost more gum in the loose snow than fell into the cone-shaped catcher on the picker handle. Nevertheless eight pounds of gum he must have, so Kirby, swinging his arms to restore the circulation in his numbed fingers, and kicking his feet against the trees to keep his toes from freezing, worked from dawn till dusk. Evenings, after hearty suppers, he cleaned gum until he went to sleep over his work.

But he filled the case; with it lashed on McLaren's hand-sled, together with a roll of blankets and a lunch, he pulled away from the cabin at noon of the twentieth.

A small fall of snow had come the day before, blotting Kirby's tracks of the previous week, and when he reached the Tidswell farm the surface of its dooryard was as trackless as an Arctic waste. This



The dope-runner was picked up and hurled across the hall. . . . Kirby was on him like a flash.

suited his plans to a T. He drew his sled to the front door, carried in the case of gum, and placed it on the floor in the old hall. Coming out, he picked up the pull-rope of his sled and started back with it by the path he had come.

Once again in the edge of the woods he picked up the sled, tossed it behind a clump of brush away from the trail, and taking his blankets, rifle and lunch, retraced his steps toward the old farmhouse, taking care to step exactly in the tracks he had made when approaching it with his load a few minutes before.

At a short distance from the house his path passed through a gap in a tumbledown stone wall that had at one time formed a barrier around a garden patch behind the house. Here he took a six-foot jump from the path and landed on the bare, wind-swept rocks of the wall. He walked on the wall around to the back of the house, pulled himself from it to the roof of a lean-to shed on the back of the house, and entered a chamber window of the place without leaving a single telltale track.

When darkness came to the north country an hour later, it found Kirby prepared for a long vigil. He had eaten the lunch he had brought with him and now lay wrapped in his blankets on the chamber floor in such a position that he could watch the gum-case in the lower hall through the hole in the floor where the chimney had been torn away.

Outside the chill night wind whined disconsolately in the bare branches of the dooryard elms. Back on a spruce ridge a horned owl boomed his hollow hunting-cry. Kirby shivered in his blankets and wondered if his hunch was going to work.

IT was near midnight when the cold aroused Kirby from a semi-doze. He glanced at the phosphorescent dial of his wrist-watch, drew his blankets closer about his shoulders, and settled down to finish what he was beginning to fear was to prove a futile night.

Another hour passed, an hour during which Kirby shivered and fought with sleep. He was about to give up the watch and go down and build an outdoor fire to warm himself by when a faint sound reached his ears.

Pluff—pluff—pluff—

Surely that could be nothing but footsteps in the soft snow outside! Lee Kirby's breath quickened, his nerves twanged to fiddle-string tension. He slipped out of his blankets and knelt with his face directly over the chimney-hole, watching.

The pluffing footsteps came directly to the front door, paused there for a moment, then some one stepped inside. Kirby heard the rustle of clothing, a relieved grunt, as of a man who lowers a heavy load from his shoulders, the soft thud of a pack as it was placed on the floor. The brilliant ray of a flashlight slashed the downstairs darkness, swept the room and came to rest on the gum-case.

It seemed to Kirby that whoever was below there must hear the thump of his heart as it pounded against his ribs in his excitement. Here was the realization of his hunch! He must see it through; and coolness of nerve would be a big asset. He took a grip on his emotions and watched the man downstairs.

From the pocket of his mackinaw the man took a small claw-hammer. Inserting the hammer claws under a board of the gum-case cover he pried it loose; then, one by one, he lifted out the birch-bark boxes.

WITH intense satisfaction Kirby saw the man dispose of the gum, saw him substitute sealed tins from his pack for the gum,—tins that fitted the birch-bark boxes to a nicety,—saw him replace the boxes in the gum-case and start to renail the cover. . . . And then, through the wide chimney-hole in the floor, Kirby dropped on him.

Silent as a lynx he dropped, and with lynx-like ferocity he fought. The man was knocked down when Kirby's knees hit him in the back, but he was on his feet with the agility of a weasel and swung a wicked hook to Kirby's ear. The force of the blow swept Kirby into a corner, and as he leaped back he saw by the light of the flashlight lying on a lower stair that the fellow was tearing at the buttons of his coat, presumably trying to reach a weapon beneath the garment. Kirby dived at his legs.

If Lee Kirby's former football coach could have witnessed the cold ferocity of that tackle he would have grinned gleefully. The dope-runner was picked up, and hurled across the hall. His head cracked violently against the end of a stair; he sank in an inert heap and lay quiet. Kirby, breathing hard, his cap gone and his red hair standing on end, was on him like a flash, his hands groping frenziedly for that hidden weapon.

He found it—a wicked automatic in a shoulder-holster beneath the heavy coat, —and grabbed up the flashlight. A moment later when the fellow's head cleared, Kirby had the pistol rammed against his ribs and was speaking sternly to him.

"Take it easy now and do what I tell you, if you don't want your breakfast to fall out through your ribs! Get that case of dope onto your shoulder and go on down the road ahead of me. Remember this gun isn't going to be a foot from your back at any time, so don't waste your time figuring any brilliant getaways. Get going!"

The prisoner, a hard-looking border pirate, glowered sourly at Kirby, but he shouldered the gum-case. "Didn't suppose I'd ever be took by a red-headed kid like you!" he growled. . . .

The farmer down the road—the same one who had carried Kirby to the railroad the week before—was awakened by a pounding on his door. He dug out of his warm bed and shoved his head out his chamber window into the cold darkness. "Who air ye, and what yer disturbin' peaceable folks fer, at this time o' night?" he wanted to know.

A laughing voice came up to him. "Sorry, but this is Kirby, the fellow you took to Bethel last week. I've got a bird here that's been monkeying with Uncle Sam's customs regulations, and I'd like to use your telephone. May I?"

"Humpin' Hannibal!" the farmer told his wide-eyed wife, as he slid into his clothes. "Smugglin' goin' on right under our noses! Guess I'll have an earful fer the boys at the store tomorrer night!"

KIRBY got his message through to Murray, and the morning train from Portland brought the officer to Bethel; Kirby was on the station platform when the Federal man swung off the car steps.

"Just got back from Philly last night," Murray explained. "Never got your letter until then, of course, and as yesterday was the twentieth I knew I couldn't get there in time to do any good. Your wire, which reached me while I was still in bed this morning, sounded interesting. Where's your man?"

"Over here in the town lock-up. Come over and have a look at him."

The local deputy sheriff let them into the small building that served as a lock-up. Murray examined the gum-case of opium that stood in the outer room; then he and Kirby went to the man's cell.

"This is Mr. Murray," Kirby told the prisoner, "one of Uncle Sam's watch-dogs of the customs. He'll take you off my hands now. But while the three of us are together I'd like to hear you talk a little. Come on, loosen up!"

"Nuttin' to say," snarled the prisoner.

"Oh, yes, you have!" persisted Kirby. "It isn't going to help nor harm you a bit to tell us whether old Sandy McLaren was knowingly mixed in this deal, or whether you and your gang simply used him as a dupe—a means of getting your drug through to Portland."

The prisoner's eyes remained glued to the floor for a long time. He shifted his feet uneasily and finally came through.

"Well, years ago Sandy McLaren pulled me outa the thin ice of a freezin' lake—saved my life, I reckon. I'm gonna come clean fer Sandy. He aint in on the deal, an' never was; all he knows is't he's gittin' a dollar a pound more fer his fool gum than he kin git any other place."

"That helps. Thanks!" Kirby smiled.

MURRAY lost no time in releasing Sandy McLaren from the jail at the county seat, to go back to his cabin in the spruce ridges.

Kirby was awaiting him there. On McLaren's cabin table were baked potatoes, a fluffy cornmeal johnnycake, and venison steak.

McLaren hobbled into the yellow lamplight of the cabin as Kirby was taking the coffee-pot off the stove.

"Mr. Kirby," he quavered, "Murray told me something about what you did for me. All that ol' Sandy McLaren kin say is that he's much obliged. Sometime maybe—"

"Forget it! Forget it!" urged Kirby, gently pushing the old man toward the table. "You saved me from freezing to death, didn't you? Don't you suppose I'm mighty glad to even the score? Now pull a chair up to the table and let's hit that grub while she's hot! There's something I want to talk to you about too."

As they ate, Kirby asked jokingly:

"After your trip to town, do you still think you'd like that cabin on the Magalloway, Mr. McLaren?"

"Town!" snorted McLaren. "Jail! Prison! Why, youngster, if they'd fastened that dope business onto me an' railroaded me through, I'd 'a' been a gone gosling inside o' six months! I jist can't stand to be cooped up! But about that cabin on the Magalloway—I—I'm afraid, now that my steady gummin' job's done

fer, that I kin never make it. Guess I'll have to grub along here as long as I kin, an' then—an' then—"

The old man's voice trailed away in a half-whisper as he visualized the bleak existence of his last years. Kirby, watching him, read the hopelessness in his old face.

"But you should do well gumming right here for a time, Mr. McLaren, even at the regular market price. Now look here!" Kirby pulled a folded paper from the pocket of his shirt. "When I was in Portland last week to see Mr. Murray, I ran around to some of the wholesale drug-houses, grocery-houses, and even some of the confectionery-stores; and I picked up enough orders for spruce gum to keep you busy for some time. Yes sir, I took orders for mighty near fifteen hundred pounds of cleaned gum!"

Slowly Sandy McLaren's weary old eyes lifted to meet Kirby's.

"I'm powerful obliged to ye, lad; but I can't git that much gum. There aint that much gum left on this whole watershed."

"You don't have to get it—you've already *got* it, Sandy McLaren!"

"What?"

"Yes sir, you've got it! For three years, now, the dope-runner who's been sending drugs in your boxes has been dumping your gum under the stairs, down there at the Tidswell farm. The space beneath those stairs, as you probably know, was never utilized. It was partitioned in tight when the house was built, I think. Every pound of the gum that you thought you shipped to Portland is there under those stairs tonight—dry, clean, and in perfect condition. I noticed a loose stair-tread under my foot when I was down there scouting around, and I pulled it up and discovered the gum. That's what put me wise to the dope-smuggler's racket."

FOR a long moment Sandy McLaren's mind wrestled with the overwhelming news of his good fortune. When the meaning of it finally penetrated his tired brain, he leaped to his feet with the energy of a man of half his years, and shoved a gnarled hand across the table.

"Shake, lad! Shake! Me an' you air gonna have the most slamgorgeous cabin on the Magalloway marshes that was ever built o' spruce logs! You air gonna make it yer headquarters fer yer annual deer-hunt; an' me—I'm makin' it my home!"

The Silver Bell

By KENNETH PERKINS

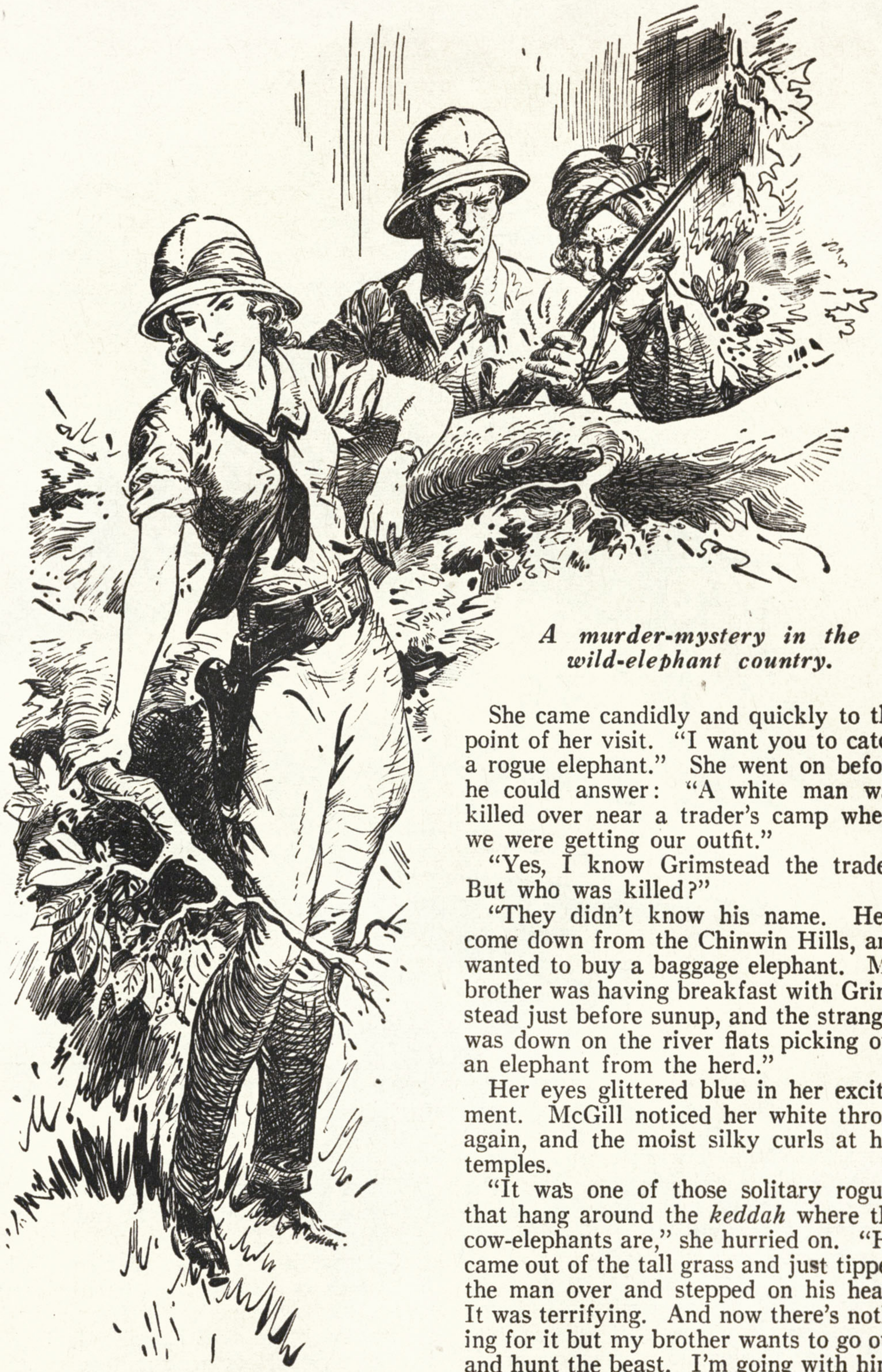
A GIRL came into the office tent, interrupting Terry McGill at his work. He was glad; for the day was muggy, the work miserable. His desk was piled high—letters from the Forest Department, lists and dates of the girdling of trees, computations of the teak to be rafted down to Mandalay, bills of sale for elephants.

This last item was a cause for worry, for he had disposed of some of his best elephants merely because they were troublemakers. Any that was bad enough to wear a metal bell, he sold at a loss. There were complaints right there on his desk in the form of politely inquiring letters from the Rangoon office. Between the lines he imagined that they were accusing him of losing his grip. It was the truth. But he would not admit it to himself, much less to the Company.

All he would admit was that he did not want any metal bells tolling off there in the *keddah* or on the river flats. The sound jangled. If he heard the *tonk-tonk* of a metal bell on a troublemaker, the echo of it stayed with him as if his skull were a sea-shell in which sound never dies.

But this was hard to put in a letter. Hence he was glad to delay the matter because of this girl entering his tent.

He knew who she was. She had come up with her brother for some big-game hunting. McGill had met them both in the Rangoon office, where their father was head man. They were fresh from



A murder-mystery in the wild-elephant country.

England, blithe wholesome youngsters, fearless in their hunt for a good time.

The tent heat turned fresher with her entrance. She reminded him of his little niece back home as she might look grown up. Or perhaps it was just that she reminded him of home. The tropics hadn't yet turned her sallow. Her throat was as white as the muslin on her pith helmet.

She came candidly and quickly to the point of her visit. "I want you to catch a rogue elephant." She went on before he could answer: "A white man was killed over near a trader's camp where we were getting our outfit."

"Yes, I know Grimstead the trader. But who was killed?"

"They didn't know his name. He'd come down from the Chinwin Hills, and wanted to buy a baggage elephant. My brother was having breakfast with Grimstead just before sunup, and the stranger was down on the river flats picking out an elephant from the herd."

Her eyes glittered blue in her excitement. McGill noticed her white throat again, and the moist silky curls at her temples.

"It was one of those solitary rogues that hang around the *keddah* where the cow-elephants are," she hurried on. "He came out of the tall grass and just tipped the man over and stepped on his head. It was terrifying. And now there's nothing for it but my brother wants to go out and hunt the beast. I'm going with him, of course. The young idiot!"

"Grimstead going?"

"I didn't ask him. I'm asking you." She seemed surprised at his question. "I've heard them talk about you at Rangoon. They say that you know elephants better than any other man in the Company. You'll go, won't you? Really, I'm scared out of my wits."

McGill was on his feet looking down at her straight slim shoulders. He was a lanky fellow with mournful eyes and a scarred chin. The girl seemed to be measuring him with her gaze. His little niece in England had always looked at him just like that—as if he could do everything.

Her blue eyes shone through what Terry McGill saw as a mist. He heard her soft eager voice as if it were a silver bell. The illusion, of course, was in his head. But he heard it distinctly. And he had the vision of a ragged-eared, tuskless bull that had worked teak for him two years ago: the beast's forehead was bruised by years of shoving logs; his father had trained him when Terry was at school in England; just before he died, his father ordered a silver bell hung on the elephant, so Terry would remember.

But Terry had no fear of the big fellows, good or bad, except that he knew enough to stay out of their way if their foreheads steamed when they came out of the river. He alone of his three hundred men dared to syringe the wounds on this bull's forehead, or lance the sores made by the drag saddle. But he did it once too often.

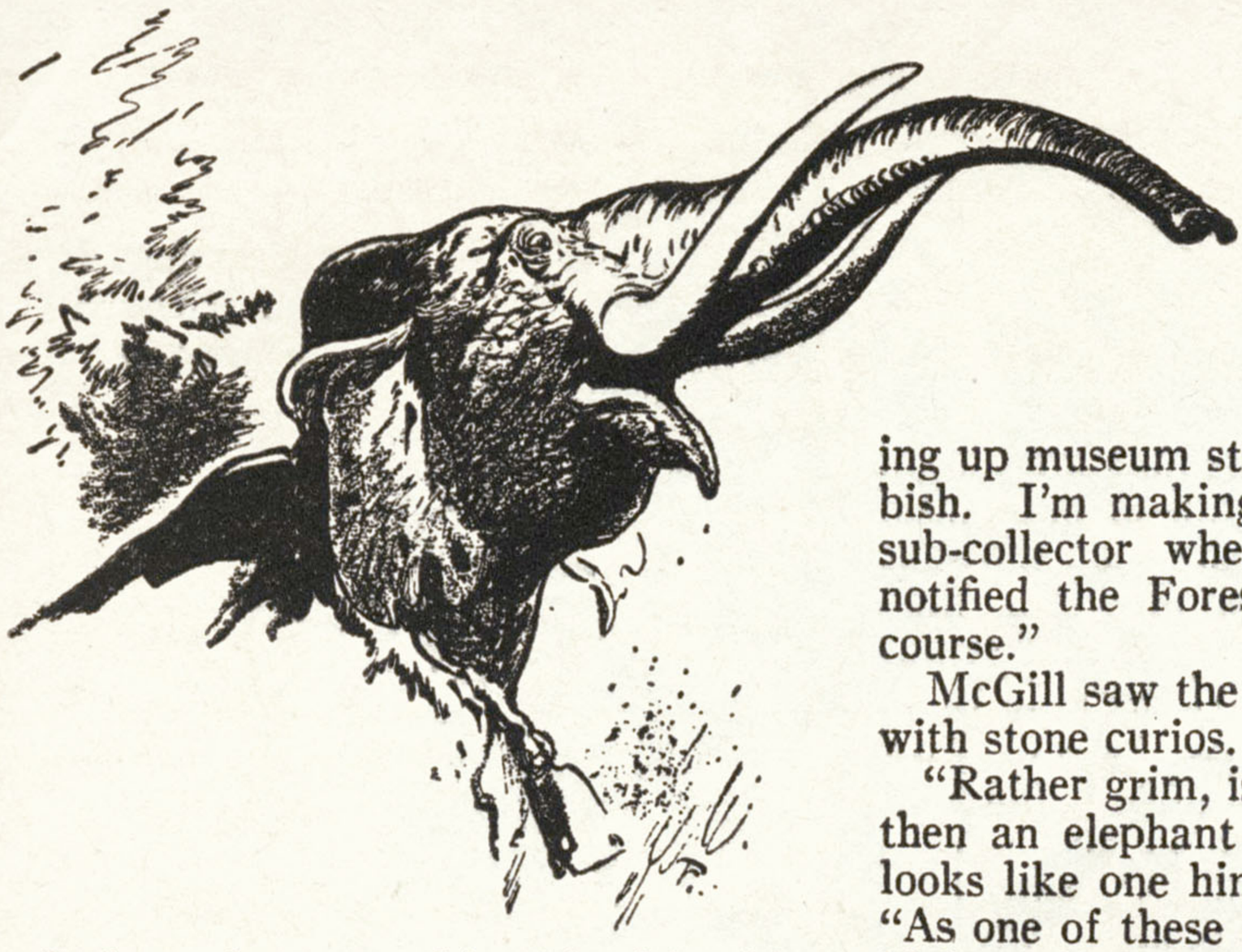
Not that it was poor judgment. The beast was in musth, and the herdsman had failed to warn McGill that the period was on. The bull had lifted McGill by the nape of his neck and flayed the ground with him as an elephant will beat out the dust from the roots of a plant he is eating.

DURING the six months McGill was in a plaster cast, he wondered just how far he would dare to go again. The silver bell rang night and day, due to a physical accident to his eardrum, per-

Pen drawings by John Richard Flanagan

"One of those solitary rogues came out of the tall grass and tipped the man over and stepped on his head."

haps. He resolved to leave the doctoring of the elephants to a native. He would leave the training to some one else, too. Not that he was afraid of elephants, even now. But he knew he must not try his power over them until he could face them without flinching. Even the gentle ones saw the tremor of his hands and heard the new note in his voice. He must wait till he got back his nerve. He knew the Rangoon office was asking why he had no new twelve-year-olds broken to the saddle, and why he had older ones used as travelers when they should be put to light timber work. He could not put the excuse in words: it was his growing fear that he could never handle them again.



And now here was this girl asking him to go out and face a rogue!

"Why, yes, of course," he said readily and in a steady voice. "I'll get him for you. Don't be afraid."

They rode directly to the scene of the death. Chin villagers, herders and teak-fellers crowded the clearing. Four elephants, three of them beaters, and one for the howdah, were being saddled and packed with tents, supervised by a white man. The latter was slim-shouldered, with a fresh schoolboy glow, and he was dressed in khaki and riding-boots which had never known scratch or grass-stain.

Kirbie Loring said as they drove up to the outfit: "Terry McGill is going with us, Jack."

Jack Loring scowled as they shook hands. "But look here: I've already got a *shikari*. I'm catching this elephant myself."

"Oh, no, you aren't." Kirbie turned to McGill. "He's anxious to get a feather in his topi. He'll lose the credit if a real hunter is in the party."

McGill wanted to say something about babes in the woods being better off with a grown-up along, but he laughed: "You get the right of the first shot. Sorry. I've got to go. Your sister's orders." He turned, leaving Kirbie to pacify the boy, and went down to the crowd in the clearing.

The trader Grimstead was there—a pudgy man stuffed into damp whites, his jowls washed to a wan ochre by his forty tropic years. He was seated at a camp table writing a list of the dead man's effects, while his Number One boy went through the kit.

"His name was Troy, judging from his letters," Grimstead said. "And he seems to've been one of these professors hunting up museum stuff. Look at that rubbish. I'm making an inventory for the sub-collector when he gets here. I've notified the Forest Department too, of course."

McGill saw the open fiber bags stuffed with stone curios.

"Rather grim, isn't it, collecting idols; then an elephant steps on him, and he looks like one himself," Grimstead said. "As one of these natives just said: 'An idol made by a poor craftsman.' His head's much longer than when I saw him last."

"Let's have a look at the pug-marks," McGill said.

Grimstead pointed them out. "There's where it happened. The rogue stepped on his head so quietly that there wasn't a chirrup from the herd. No blood on the ground, as you see. Just some brains."

A quickened pulse hammered at McGill's ears. He wondered if the ground had looked like that when he had his own bashing. Not likely. It had been scuffed up, brushed in heaps by his own body. His punishment had been more prolonged.

"How big was he?"

"Over nine feet—a highland bull. Five toes on his front feet, you can see by the pugs. Four on the hind ones. I'd class him as a Kumiria first grade. Any rajah would buy him for a ceremonial elephant."

"Not for ceremony," the headman of the herders said. "But for the infliction of death, as in the old days rajahs made their elephants drunk for battle."

"Like to see what he did to Troy?" Grimstead asked.

McGill lit a cheroot excitedly. No, he did not want to see Troy. It would bring it all back! He merely said: "Get me a cow-elephant for a decoy, and tell your herdsman to rub her forehead with limes and love-grass."

"Still believe in that superstition?"

"I believe in all of them, sometimes."

Kirbie Loring and her brother came down. The latter said: "Look here, I hate to say this. Dashed blunt of me. But I object to your going along. And I don't think you want to, especially."

Color shot to McGill's face, making the scars shine. "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"They said down at Rangoon your nerves have been pretty well shaken up. No fault of yours, of course; but I can't see why you'd want to go hunting bad elephants."

"You *are* a little puppy, Jack!" Kirbie Loring said.

McGill doubled his fists. But he faced the girl.

"Then you must have heard of it too, I expect?" he said.

Her eyes were hot. "I wouldn't have asked you to come, would I, if I'd believed a word of all that gossip? When I met you in Rangoon, I could tell the sort you were. All that my father said was that you're more cautious than you used to be—"

"Too cautious," Jack said.

"All right," she snapped. "We need that kind of man to take care of a young snipe like you! You apologize, Jack. Gup like that isn't thrown at a man's face. It isn't cricket."

McGill spoke first. "No need for apologies. We haven't time. Suppose we start?"

"Topping!" Kirbie's eyes shone.

SOON the decoy cow was driven up. She was a shabby beast, doctored for sale according to Grimstead's tricks. A large crack in her trunk was filled with putty, breastband bruises painted out, her tail clipped so that a superstitious buyer would not point out that the hairs grew in different ways—a bad omen.

"I've warned the youngsters they're after a dangerous beast, McGill," Grimstead said. "But they won't listen. So good luck. It's all up to you."

McGill's hands went with a nervous twitch to his ears. "What's that damned bell for?" he cried.

One of the herdsmen had put a metal bell on the decoy cow. "It's best that she wear it when we pass through a village, sahib, as a warning to all not to approach too close."

McGill caught the girl's eyes. She seemed astonished at his outburst.

He said in a calmer tone:. "Then let her wear it only in the villages." The bell was packed away, but its clang mauled at his ears when they began their ride.

They swung through the tall grass down to the river mud. The three whites rode in the howdah, the baggage elephants following—a wake of blue-black undulating above the sea of tall grass.

The tracks did not follow the hard-packed elephant trails made by the wild herds. This tusker roamed alone. He was wily, avoiding the high places and clearings. He might be hard to catch.

THAT night they camped at a ford. Sleepless on his cot, McGill listened to the tolling in his ears. Every sound of the jungle was transmuted into the chafing measure. The death of Troy had brought it back, pounding in his skull. Or perhaps it was just the heat and a good case of the "Malabar head." He wanted to ask the others if they heard what he heard. But the girl must not get an inkling of his funk. Neither must that confounded young brat.

McGill tried to sleep. But as he lay on his cot, he saw a monstrous shadow blotting out the moon. The teak trees crashed apart; bamboo crackled and whipped. He leaped to his feet, glancing for one horrified moment at the girl asleep in the next tent. The tent-flaps were up, and the moon bathed her lovely forehead. It would be the last sight he would have of her on this earth—that was his instant's horror. Her loveliness would be twisted "like an idol's face carved by a bad craftsman."

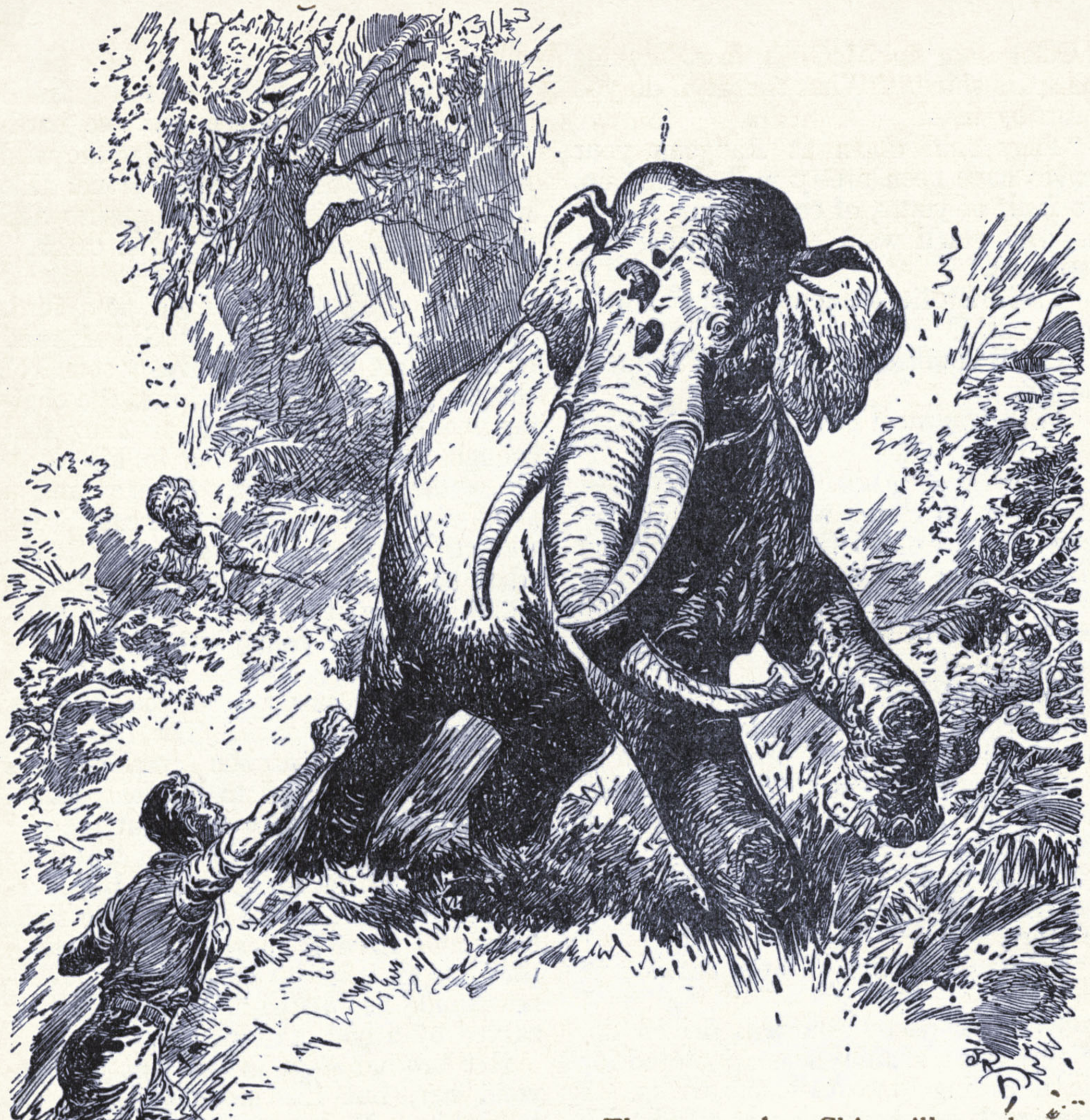
Her brother slept in the tent just beyond her, but the moonlight did not reach him. Perhaps he would awake in time to save his sister. McGill did not stop to reach for his gun in an attempt to save her himself. There was no time. The stroke was too imminent—the one step wanton and terrible. There was only time for McGill to save himself by a wild leap into the scrub—and flight.

The moment had come and gone. The test was made. . . .

But he was still on his cot, even though he remembered he had just fled. He was sitting up waving his arms, shouting. The monsoon wind lashed the bamboo, the whir of it mingling like a syncopated measure with the thrum of a silver bell. The tethered elephants wove uneasily at their picket-chains because of his shouting. Two of the mahouts stood at the foot of his cot. The girl was at his side.

"I say, you are in a bad state!"

He felt her soft hand on his forehead. A lantern, lighted that moment, brought her face out from the void, alabaster and anxious, as the face of a mother will look to a frightened child.



The tusker lunged forward; McGill hurled the coconut against the massive forehead.

Her brother's voice came laconically from behind a tent-flap. "Dreaming of the rogue, McGill, old top?"

"Certainly not!" No one would ever know what he had dreamed; it was what the Hindus call "a dumb man's dream," which ceases forever to exist. "That confounded curry, I expect."

"It won't be curry tomorrow," Jack laughed. "It'll be the rogue in person."

"Get back to sleep—all of you!" McGill growled. He reached for a cigarette. Confound them all! Were they blaming him for a dream? All men are cowards in their dreams.

The girl was troubled at the fixity of his eyes. "There's nothing else wrong?"

"Of course not."

"Not afraid? I mean of what might happen—tomorrow?"

"I couldn't be afraid, thinking of you."

They passed a Chin village the next day. Yes, the headman said, his people had seen a solitary bull, but it was at night and they thought he belonged to the teak people. When they heard he had killed a white man, there was awe, then jabbering. The white man, according to description, was the one who had been digging in the ruins of a temple. The gods of the jungle were angered and had sent this elephant in vengeance.

McGill tried to pacify his frightened drivers. Elephant-lore, he said, was rife with superstitions, and he believed many of them. But this idea of vengeance was nonsense.

This tolling in his ears was nonsense too, he told himself. There is one tree, the pipal, which makes a tinkling sound when the wind blows through its dry leaves; this was what he heard when they jogged on. Only this, and the tread of great feet on the earth.

That night he knew the rogue was very close. The evening wind had not blown dust over his tracks, which meant that he had passed here since. The mo-

ment was coming. It would come tomorrow.

McGill knew it, and he knew that his nerve was breaking fast. It meant the girl might lose her life. "It's all up to you!" as Grimstead had said. In justice to the girl, he should tell the truth. He paced around the camp when they were all in bed, thinking up what he ought to say to her.

"You're putting your trust in me, but I can't live up to it." It was his duty to tell her that. "It's not cowardice. But I've simply got to get this sound out of my brains. I've got to try myself by facing a tame elephant first, a trouble-maker, but not a wild rogue. If I can do that without flinching, I'll be cured. Until then, how will I know what I'll do at the show-down? What if I break? Our gun-loaders get the panic; so do our elephants, just as the rogue charges us! Bluffing any longer is unfair to you."

Resolved, he stood at the open door of her double-sided tent. He moved to one side so the moon could shine over his shoulder and on her serene face. Her eyes were open, enormous.

"Anything wrong?" It was a tender trusting note, passing through him like spring water.

"Nothing at all," he said. "Can't you sleep?"

"I heard you prowling about. Don't worry about me. I haven't a fear in the world—if—if you're all right."

He went in and poured a glass of English water and gave it to her. They said a few more things, comforting each other. But he did not say what he had planned to say.

He came out tingling with that last pressure of her hand. He dropped off to sleep feeling it.

HE awoke, to see another dim form blotting out the moon. He also saw the humped back of an elephant passing like a nearer hill across the haze of hills beyond. He would not be fooled into shouting again, although, he told himself, the thing was frightfully vivid. He shut his eyes and clenched his teeth. The sweat was cold on his forehead as a sudden fearful doubt struck him. He reached for his gun. It was a nine-millimeter Luger which, with its eight-inch barrel and the power to pierce an elephant's hide, he relied on against the final moment. But it was gone.

It was not a dream this time. In fact, the other dream had been rooted in the same material: reality. A mahout, both times, must have been the black form standing close to his cot, shading the moonlight from his face. He remembered when he had awakened from his nightmare, shouting, two of the mahouts were standing there. They had been trying to get his gun, evidently. This time they had won!

He leaped out into the pattern of moonlight that poured through the vines. He ran to the center tent, which contained all of the kit except the howdah-cloths, straw pads and breastbands. He wanted to get his rifle. But it was not here.

He shot a wild glance at the elephants. The beaters and the cow stood silent, looming. On one tree only the chain fetters showed where the howdah-elephant had been tethered. But he was gone. And so were the drivers.

He shouted, not the frantic shout of a dream, but a steady resigned call. Jack Loring and his sister came from their separate tents.

LORING took the news like a frustrated boy. It was defeat, not danger. "I suppose now you'll suggest the only brave thing to do is to go home!"

"What else? I've got you and your sister on my hands; and it's a big jungle."

"And who's afraid of that!" The girl's voice was almost challenging.

"Does that mean you want to keep on hunting!" McGill exclaimed. "You aren't both crazy, I hope."

Jack laughed. "You're coming the hero pretty well, McGill. If just standing here and talking counts, you win."

"And Jack thinks *he's* won," the girl stormed. Yes, it was only frustration for her too, not fear. "I wanted him to see what you'd do when the time came. And now you've lost your chance. I wanted to go back to Rangoon and tell them all that their gup is just malice and lies!"

But McGill did not take them home.

He went to the food-kit, muttering they would have breakfast. He had a reasonable conviction that the rogue was hanging around the camp. The runaway drivers must have known it. And here was the cow-elephant which they had been glad to leave behind.

The camp table and stools stood on the dining-mat where they had been set the night before. The mat was under a grove of coco-palms some distance from the tents, with an acre or two of clearing all about. McGill had insisted on that.

Thinking as an elephant thinks, he wanted open spaces around him. He had chosen the site as a wise *bomo* will choose the site for an elephant-trap where there are no trees that grow close together like a stockade, no creepers that will look like a noose.

When they sat down to eat, McGill put out the lantern which Jack had lighted.

Jack's form, suddenly black against the sullen glow in the east, stiffened cockily. "Now what?"

"We shall have to eat in the dark; sorry."

"My word! That's a good one. Afraid the rogue will see us?"

"He doesn't have to. He can smell—a good distance, too."

"Then what's the rally—sitting here in the dark!"

"The rogue may have a driver."

Two silhouetted heads—Jack's and the girl's—jerked up.

Jack exploded: "I say, have you gone quite crazy! What would a wild rogue be doing with a driver?"

"He may not be wild. He may be tame, which could be worse."

Jack chuckled. "When he killed Troy, a dozen men saw him do it. A lot of coolies were up cooking their rice. They could tell a tame elephant from a wild one."

"But it was just before dawn. They couldn't tell his color. Besides that, the herd foraging on the flats didn't make a chirrup. How about that? All elephants, as they say, fear a rogue."

"You mean we haven't been trailing a rogue at all?" Jack asked with a groan.

"Not a wild one. The killing was too neat. Rajahs used to train an executioner elephant to step on a criminal's head. Troy got it like that."

"No such thing in British India," Jack said.

"We don't know all these jungle rajahs. One of them might have followed the customs of his fathers."

Jack thought this over. "The drivers' theft of our guns—you don't think some rajah gave them orders! But why?"

"He might have had a reason."

JACK turned slowly to his sister. In the deep dusk both their faces were like skulls. He said in a tight voice: "Why don't you come out with it! We had better not be talking riddles, McGill. Not now!"

"Don't move, anyone," McGill said in a low tone.

They saw him stiffen. Kirbie Loring clung to his eyes, trying to pierce the dark veil.

BEYOND the clearing McGill saw the branches and vines move in the gray light. The vines writhed as if one of the creepers had awakened with the coming of the dawn wind. It was a trunk.

McGill snatched at the girl's hand. "Just be quiet, all of us. He's after that decoy."

Jack got up like a toadstool growing inch by inch. "Kirbie!" he whispered. "Come on!"

"Sit down, Loring. Don't think you can run."

"We've got to!"

"Out there in the open? Better not try it."

They sat congealed. . . .

"Say something!" Jack swallowed hard.

"Righto. He's watching us. If we talk, it'll help."

McGill kept his face turned. He knew the girl's eyes never left him. He did not want that light to come too fast—not with her staring at him. He could not hide what was in his eyes any more. It was the first thrilling ecstasy of fear he had ever known in his life, not for himself, but for her.

He felt her snuggle against him. And he felt the tremble in her body. It was a vibration in tune with his whole being, with the whole jungle. All things were suddenly in harmony.

He tried to pierce the dank shadows beyond the palm clump. Before the dawn gushed up through the forest, he imagined he could see the great blur of darkness which was the bull-elephant, swinging up and down. He was foraging quietly in the tall grass just as he had done, so witnesses said, when he came out to kill Troy.

McGill scowled hard. The grass tangled and waved; a trunk lifted higher, reaching for a scent. It trumpeted. With the slow flood of light they saw the fellow now. At least they saw him shouldering his way through the shadows of the vines, coming toward them.

McGill got up. The girl jumped to his side, grabbing him. He shook her off, then took out his knife.

"When I get out there, you two make a break. But wait till he comes for me."

Her eyes were madly bright. "You'll be killed!"

"Not if he's tame." He hacked a pole of bamboo.

"You're betting on a chance like that!" Jack Loring gasped.

"You can't! You can't go!" Kirbie cried wildly. "What if you're wrong?"

"Either way, you and your brat brother get off." He had the pole cut now.

She looked up at his face as she clung. The light had burst on it, garish and hot. She tried distractedly to think. "And if you're right, what? You'll be killed, anyway!"

"There's a chance to win."

She shook her head wildly. "You can't do it! I won't let you. I know what you're doing. You want to prove something—to us, and maybe to yourself."

"Right! So let me go."

Jack broke in:

"Cut your damned heroics, McGill. You've proved they're liars—every dashed man who says you're afraid. So cut it."

McGill answered by jerking free of both, running out with his pole into the open clearing. They saw him standing there alone, his lank form twisted in the mists.

The elephant saw him, and swayed out into the light.

It was not until that moment that McGill knew that he had cast his dice on a desperate chance and lost.

This was not a tame elephant. He was brown, hence he was wild. His hide was clear in the hot glare, a hide that had never known the blackening of neat's-foot oil. The wild fellow had been waiting there long enough to think things over, to separate that tangle of scents—the scent of the decoy which drew him instinctively, and the scent of human beings which he hated.

IN his first panic, McGill thought of turning back for the palm-clump. But it was too late to back down now. It was better to stand there, praying, hoping desperately that there was a slim incredible chance that the hide had been black once, the extra toes glued on, as native traders will prepare an elephant for the market *keddahs*. With a painted coat, an incognito of cowdung and *chunam*, the beast might be tame. And Terry McGill might handle him. That is to say, if he did not falter!

Kirbie Loring saw the tall thin figure stoop to pick up a coconut; and when he stooped, the tusker lunged forward, leaning, shambling a great step.

McGill glared out of bloodless eyes at the monumental shifting of that body. This was a contemplative rogue, knowing no hurry. There was a pause. If he were tame, his mahout would be hiding somewhere in the brush behind him. The beast would await his command. But McGill could not wait for it. He hurled the coconut against the massive forehead, and it split in pieces and fell.

The beast curled up his trunk as an Indian elephant, unlike the African, will do when charging. But with trunk curled, he could not voice his astonishment—for a monstrous astonishment it was—at such a puny affront. Tame or wild, he reacted in the same way.

McGill was still in doubt. He'd better not show the tremor of a lip or hand now! He walked stiffly to hide the shake in his knees. And as he walked, he thought of the hot rigid arms of that girl which had just been clinging to him, wishing they were about him now! He knew he was in her eyes. She believed he was a brave man. He imagined himself brave—the man that was in her eyes. And with this illusion the shudder left his knees.

AN elephant, it is said, can smell the fear secreted by a man's glands. McGill believed he had handled the bad ones before because he was never afraid. Perhaps it was only a superstition, but he believed all superstitions now. And he wanted to show the elephant he believed.

When the trunk stretched out, reaching, McGill picked up the fallen bits of coconut and examined them. He walked away, "without looking over his shoulder," as the age-old lore of *bomos* ordains. He did it as *bomos* had done it for generations. The beast, if he were tame, had seen drivers perform that rite many a time when inquiring of the gods the direction of a journey. Hence, if he were tame, he would observe that this man did not act in strange ways, but in the ways of a wise herdsman whose touch and voice and goad must be obeyed.

The bull waited with tiny, quizzical eyes. He watched this usual and complacent thing—a man gathering weeds from the trail and chewing them and spitting them at him. Thus betel juice and the weeds of the highroads had been shot at him from the mouths of his masters many a time. It cured his nervous rocking when he bore a howdah. The next thing this man would do, perhaps, would be the pleasant rubbing of great hairy caterpillars on his itching hide! He was a man to comfort and to command. His ankus was merely a bamboo pole, but it touched his trunk at the spot where

he felt it most. This was a man to be listened to and waited upon. Indeed, the *mantras* he was praying in a steady low voice were the old, old *mantras*, not in a strange tongue, but in the singsong of familiar Burmese.

AS he walked straight up to him, McGill saw that the "rogue" had carried a howdah many a time; the marks were on his back, even though they had been painted with dyes. He circled the beast, sauntering. He talked to him and kept the bamboo goad deftly against his trunk, his legs, his head. He stepped closer, circling him within arm's-reach, shoving his jaw with the pole when the old fellow tried to turn and watch him. He babbled the old prayers unceasingly. He believed what his father's herdsmen had told him when he was a small boy: when about to noose an elephant, you must pay respects to Nabi Noh and sprinkle the noose with the juice of grass; and you must repeat a *mantra* over sugar-cane and plantain and put them in the noose.

McGill knew these things, and the old tusker knew that he knew! He let the man come up to him. He let him slip the noose of jungle vines about his forefeet. He let him come up behind him and step on the heel of his hind foot, and then into the looped-up tail, swinging himself shikari fashion to the back.

One leap, and McGill was behind the flapping ears.

"I told you two brats to run," he called out.

"Run from what?" Jack Loring called back.

"You think we'd have missed this!" Kirbie cheered. "I should hope not! Terry McGill, you're a daisy!"

The tusker came shambling up, driven by his rider to the tethered beaters and the extra *krinkhala* chain.

"I'm telling you, get out of the way!" McGill said. "He's got one murder to his credit. And he'd have murdered me if his mahout were anywhere around."

Jack's gaze swept the whole clearing. "Maybe his mahout ran away."

"As good a guess as any. What I'm sure of, is that this elephant killed Troy under orders; then a mahout was told to take him off in the jungle and hide him. When he found a hunting-party on the trail, the mahout got scared and abandoned him."

"Then what was the beast hanging around our camp for?"

"The decoy cow, for one thing. And these beaters. They're old cronies of his, no doubt. From the same herd. When he was abandoned, he just followed us and hung around our camp."

McGill made the beast kneel; he dismounted on the upcurled trunk, then tethered him.

Jack Loring was thinking hard. "Jove! I think I've got it! Grimstead killed Troy!"

McGill nodded. "I found him going over Troy's kit. There was a lot of rubbish, idols, things of no value to us. But I dare say some of it was priceless, which Grimstead didn't mention in his inventory for the sub-collector."

"You mean he had this elephant kill him!" The girl gasped. "An elephant from his own herd."

"Doctored up, of course," McGill said, "so no one would recognize him. That's why he didn't want him caught. He even told our drivers—who were his own men—to steal our guns, so we'd give up the hunt."

"But you didn't give up!" Kirbie said.

Jack Loring was scowling hard at McGill's gaunt face, as if he could not believe what he saw.

"You took a pretty long shot, McGill. You couldn't have been sure—not until you were right out there facing him!"

"Your sister made me sure of everything, Loring."

"Yes, but dash it all, you were just gambling! Why, damn it, you didn't even flinch!"

KIRBIE was also staring. The strain had ebbed from her eyes. Another tide had come into them, strong and violent. She reached for both his hands—but she did not have to say anything. Her brother had already said it, in his own way.

But she asked McGill a question when they were ready to pack out. McGill had hung that metal bell on the executioner—the bell which had once been worn by the decoy. They were going back to where there were men; hence the badge of warning must be hung there.

"You aren't going to ride him all the way home!"

"He's our star witness," McGill reminded her.

"But with a metal bell on him? It rather gets on one's nerves," she said; then asked innocently: "But not on yours, I expect?"

McGill smiled. "Not any more."

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

GAMBLER'S CHOICE

By JACKSON GREGORY

Who wrote "Judith of Blue Lake Ranch" and "The Shadow on the Mesa."

Decorations by PERCY LEASON

THE OLDEN GOLDEN WEST LIVES DANGEROUSLY AGAIN IN THIS COLORFUL NOVEL OF THE YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN WHO RODE THROUGH THE WILDERNESS TO SEEK THEIR FORTUNES IN CALIFORNIA.

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

Drawn by Jeremy Cannon

Taut reins and screaming brake brought the stage to a rocking standstill. . . . But Long Peters, shot by outlaws, hung dead from the strap he had buckled about him.

GAMBLER'S CHOICE

By JACKSON GREGORY

Who wrote "Judith of Blue Lake Ranch" and "Sentinel of the Desert."

MAYTIME came laughing over the hills into Pleasant Valley with wild roses in her hair. The skies were as blue and serene as eyes of angels; then of a sudden, over the mountains, thunderclouds boiled up.

The pink-tipped petals of a boy-and-girl love were unfolding that day while the sun shone; and when the clouds were at their blackest, murder was done. The beginning of a long, wavering trail opened up; a far call was sounding.

"It seems a sort of wonderful thing," said young Jesse Bodine. He didn't look at the girl sitting on the grass so close beside him; there were times when he had to keep his eyes off her, times as now when they were following the idle wanderings of his lean brown fingers up and down the long barrel of his muzzle-loading rifle. "Sort of wonderful that your folks and my folks, not knowing one another at all, never even having heard tell of one another, your folks coming all the way from Kentucky and my folks coming all the way from Tennessee, and with maybe millions and millions of folks living in the world, happened to be the ones to come to the same spot out here, and pick out their places right smack-dab together."

"I know! I've thought that too, Jesse. It—it's fate, that's what it is!"

He came very close then to putting out his strong, lean hand to her two little hands clasped in the lap of her blue-and-pink gingham dress; but he couldn't bring himself to. Neither of them had ever said, "I love you," and they had never kissed; but their hearts were beginning to talk during their long silences. They knew, though it all seemed too wondrous possibly to be true. But everything in this Maytime was wonderful.

The Bodines from Tennessee had been first of the two families to come as far west as Pleasant Valley; they had found the valley marked off already into lusty young farms and dotted with green log cabins, and so had kept on to the farther rim of the valley, finding a place to suit them among the foothills. Then, the next season, the Haverils had arrived, the girl's people, a thin, worn caravan straggling out toward the setting sun, seeking land and water, a place where game abounded and where the seasons were bountiful. Old Abner Haveril, the father and patriarch, had visited with old Tom Bodine, had been received with quiet welcome, had watched with still-eyed interest as old Tom's long arm pointed out certain desirable free lands, and had settled with his family and few goods and chattels on the farther side of Buckeye Creek. A scant two miles, what hereabouts was regarded as a stone's-throw, separated the Bodine cabin from the new Haveril one.

The two families saw little of each other, saw little of anyone, having plenty to do right at home. Yet Jesse Bodine saw and took notice of the little Haveril girl; he was seventeen or eighteen then, not thinking particularly of girls, having an older sister and a younger one, and very little in common with either; and Kate Haveril was about fourteen or fifteen. Yet after a while he got into the habit of looking after her whenever at rare intervals he saw her, his eyes trailing the flicker of a gay ribbon or the pastel of a faded calico when she went running down the crooked path through

the trees, hurrying not to be late to the school at a crossroads down in the valley. He fished the pools of Buckeye Creek, and she came there sometimes to gather berries; and she would always put flowers in her hair and sometimes would sing. He would hide, silent and stoic like an Indian, watching her.

AND now Kate Haveril was a big girl sixteen years old and Jesse Bodine was almost twenty, a tall, manly fellow who looked, little Kate thought, somehow like an eagle. Now it was their secret that they met at this grassy spot ringed about by its brushy wall, shaded in late spring and hot summer by a grove.

Their speech, when words took the place of their more eloquent silences, was all about commonplace things. She spoke of berries in berry-time, and of school and the things she had read and learned, and of little everyday happenings at home, whether of someone ailing or a new baby calf, or the owl with the broken wing which her youngest brother had made a pet; he of work in the fields and woods, hunting and trapping. Today he was giving her part of his kill to take home with her, a heavy, fat gobbler; she would explain to her mother, all in a rush: "I saw the big Bodine boy; he had been hunting, and sent this."

"I ran plumb out of powder," said Jesse. "I've got to go to town tomorrow. There's a sort of valley hunched up on the lap of the mountain, where there's more game than you can shake a stick at. I wished I'd had one more shot left."

"Tell me again what it's like when you get clean to the top," said Kate, and their eyes were lifted to the high blue barrier. "On the other side, Jesse. I want to see it too, sometime."

He took a deep breath.

"If a man just keeps on going, long enough and far enough, over those mountains and some more mountains and across plains and valleys, you get to California—where all the gold is."

If his eyes brightened as they always did when his quick fancies led his hopes, so and not less did hers.

"Oh, Jesse! I wish—"

"Look, Kitty! There's a storm coming; you'll get soaked through if we don't hurry."

But they didn't hurry; in so wonderful a world there was wonder in a gathering storm with the blue skies going black, with a queer light making the grass greener than ever, with a queer hush in the air so that the murmur and bicker of the creek sounded louder and clearer, with a sudden blast of wind through the pines.

"It's beautiful!" said Kate Haveril, scarcely above a whisper. They stood up and looked at each other now. "It scares me—it always does when there is thunder and lightning; but it's beautiful."

He nodded. "It'll catch you long before you can get home. We better take to shelter and wait till it's over; it won't last long."

They knew better than to look for shelter under the trees: the lightning when it came would run in liquid fire down some of those tall fellows from lofty top to bottom. Young Bodine snatched up his game and led the way, while Kate Haveril broke into a little trot close behind.

When the storm broke over their heads, thundering through the mountain gorges, crashing through the shivering pines, the boy and girl stood in a place of adequate shelter. Here in a crook of the stream there was a tiny strip of sand-and-pebble beach over which the bank, carved grottowise at the base, extended like a roof; above their heads they could see the naked roots of trees, and a fringe of berry-bearing vines hung down like curtains. They didn't even get their feet wet coming here; they looked across the darkening curve of water and to the opposite bank. And when the first clap of thunder made them twitch, and the heavy drops of rain came threshing down, they looked at each other and smiled and were as happy as they had ever been in all their lives. . . . And in an electric moment which came almost immediately, and which stood out from all the rest of life as vividly as dark tree-tops flashed out of the pall of shadow when lightning tore through the sky, they saw one man kill another.

THE two men stood revealed quite clearly, less than a dozen yards away. What few words they spoke came with sufficient clearness, through the first crashing sounds of the storm, to be understood. One of them was a small, yellow-bearded man to whom his companion shouted: "Hi, Joe! Wait a shake."

"The crossing's right here somewheres," said Joe, stopping and turning when near the brink.

The other was a large man, tall and heavy and of great girth; he too was

bearded—an enormous black beard that forked under the chin and was twisted into two horns. He hurried and overtook Joe, and clapped a big hand on Joe's slight shoulder.

SOME familiar chime rang in Jesse Bodine's memory. That little fellow Joe, with the yellow beard! Young Bodine could have sworn he had seen the man somewhere—perhaps a long way from here and a long time ago.

Joe said impatiently: "What you want, Miller? Can't you see there's a big storm coming? I tell you right here somewhere is the reg'lar crossing, and then a wagon road."

Both men carried long rifles, and there were sheath-knives at their belts; the big man, Miller, wore two pistols at his belt. As Joe paused, Miller came up to him and stood towering above him, looking in all directions as though seeking something. Then—he struck with never another word, but with a little grunt of effort, and drove a horn-hafted knife into the little man's chest close up to the throat. Joe was hurled backward and came close to going over the edge of the bank and down into Buckeye Creek.

Miller snatched at him and dragged him back and struck again, sinking the broad knife-blade deep into a scrawny body that jerked into rigidity and then went horribly limp. Miller squatted and wiped his blade clean on the wet grass.

Kate Haveril started to scream, but she couldn't; her throat was locked tight. Then she clapped both hands to her mouth and cowered back, crouching down, trying to make her small self smaller. Also instinctively Jesse Bodine jerked his rifle up to his shoulder; then, remembering, he lowered it slowly and stepped back closer to Kate. Even then, before there was time for a single clear thought, he arrived at a determination to which he was to cling all his life; he would always save a last shot in his gun for the unexpected emergency. If he had only one more charge of powder! A man owed it to himself always to have in reserve one charge of powder and ball.

Miller again glanced all around him, then set to work tugging and jerking at something tied securely, hard-knotted to Joe's belt. It was a little buckskin bag; Miller got it free, got its mouth untied, poured a part of its contents into his palm. Then hurriedly he poured it back into the bag, tied the bag to his own belt and stood up.

He seemed a long time doing anything after that: He just stood there, while Kate's heart was beating so that it seemed it must burst through the wall of her fear-tightened breast; he just stood there while Jesse Bodine, his face drawn, his lean jaws locked hard, stood equally still, one hand gripping his rifle, the other on his own knife. At last clear thought came to Jesse; he was telling himself that if he or Kate in any way betrayed their presence, they were as good as dead. Big black Miller, who had killed like that for the contents of a little buckskin bag, would never turn a hair at further killing to cover up his other murder.

Jesse turned slowly and looked down at Kate; her hands were still tight pressed against her mouth; and her eyes, flashing up at him, were wide and round with an agony of horror. He frowned at her and shook his head warningly. When he turned again toward the killer, the man had at last moved, and now was in all haste to be gone. He hurried across the little clearing, plunged into the underbrush and disappeared; and Jesse couldn't even tell what direction he took. For a moment all had been still; now again the thunder rolled its reverberating drumbeats, and lightning tore the sky wide open.

FROM Kate's face all color had drained; Jesse Bodine had never seen anyone look so white and ill and stricken. Somehow, she had come to her feet; Jesse had to help her stand.

"He is gone?" whispered the shivering girl.

Young Bodine nodded. He cleared his throat quietly and said huskily:

"If only I hadn't used up my last shot!"

"Yes! You would have killed him! I wanted you to. For one minute I wanted you to kill him; I wanted to kill him myself! Now—now I'm glad, Jesse, that *you* haven't killed a man too!"

"We've got to hurry—"

"Maybe he'll come back for something! If he saw us, he'd know we saw him, and he would—" She broke off with a shudder; she wiped her staring eyes with her hands, trying to wipe the memory of that knife away.

"No. He's gone for good. We've got to hurry and tell folks what happened. I've got to hurry home and get some more powder; there's always a little. What a fool I was! And you run home

too, Kitty; tell your father and brothers. He can't get far before we run him down."

She clung to him.

"I can't go alone! Don't leave me, Jesse! I'll go with you."

"All right. Now come ahead."

First they stood a moment looking out, listening, hearing and seeing nothing but the storm. She said in a small voice: "That other man—are we sure he is dead, Jesse? Maybe we ought to go to him first?" But Jesse shook his head; the man must be dead, or if not, there was nothing they could do for him until they brought help. So, hand in hand and cautiously, they left their retreat, going a little way downstream alongside the darkening water, then clambering up a bank and coming to a dim, winding path through the trees and thickets.

When they could, they began to run.

THE Bodine household were gathered in the kitchen, an ample room, high-raftered and homelike. A dark-bearded, thick-shouldered man, sitting on a bench tinkering with a pair of hames on the table before him, looked up and stared at them. He said nothing, just waited. That was Tom Bodine, Jesse's father, and such was Tom Bodine's way, a man slow to take action but quick enough to act when once started.

A tall woman, middle-aged, still fine-looking and with something proud in her bearing, Jesse's mother, was at the stove. She too looked at them and was silent, waiting the way her husband did, but with a livelier quickening of her black eyes.

Then there were the younger ones, Jesse's brothers and sisters: Jimmy, the oldest, twenty-four and with a small curly brown beard; Luella, twenty-two, who looked like her mother, a dark beauty; Bert, a boy of fifteen with a dash of red in his tousled hair and a glint of brown in his round eyes; and "Baby" Molly, a plump, impulsive little thing of thirteen. And these younger ones, from big Brother Jim to little Baby Molly, broke into a volley of question and exclamation.

Jesse Bodine shut the door behind him, and a moment stood looking down at the widening pool of water draining off him and Kate, getting his breath.

Kate still looked frightened as she glanced all about her; she had never been in the Bodine home before, had never seen the Bodines themselves at such close range. And she saw how they looked at her.

Then Jesse took a deep breath and started talking, and save for the lash of wind-whipped rain on the shake roof and the frequent booms of thunder and the boy's quiet speech, there was not a sound. While he was speaking, his mother came closer and sat down on one of the benches and lifted her face toward his, listening quietly, watching his eyes. Then, even before he finished his curt recital, she got up again and went to Kate Haveril; she took the girl's hand in hers and led her to the bench, and the two sat down together.

Tom Bodine stood up and went for his coat and hat and rifle. The others were quick to emulate him; the small amount of powder on hand was divided swiftly.

"We'll get him," said old Tom. "He won't go far in all this rain before he hits for shelter. Bert, you duck over to the Haveril place; tell 'em there. Any of the men-folks that's home can overtake us."

"I'm coming with you!" cried young Bert excitedly.

Tom Bodine regarded his youngest son a moment thoughtfully, then said:

"Yes, you come along, Bert; 'pears like you're a man grown and I didn't notice. One of the girls can go tell the Haverils."

Kate said: "I'll go. I'm Kate Haveril, you know."

"Yes, we know, Kate," said Jesse's mother in her quiet voice. "It's best you go, you knowing as much about it as Jesse does. Luella, you go along with Kate; she'll be feeling sort of jumpy, all alone."

"I'll go too!" cried little Molly, and as the men-folks started with their guns, the three girls ran out into the rain, headed for the Haveril place.

HOPING to pick up the fugitive murderer's trail, the Bodines went direct to the spot where the murder had taken place, where flight had begun. With the rain beating down upon them they stood, a small, stilled group, looking down into the dead white face of the man with the yellow beard.

Closest of all stooped old Tom Bodine. For as long as a man could have counted ten he stood stooped over, intent and rigid. Slowly he straightened up and looked at his son Jesse.

"So you heard the other feller call him Joe, did you?" He spoke quietly

and gravely. "And you sort of seemed to rec'lect having seen him some place? Well, it's Joe, all right. You saw him back in Tennessee, Jesse. Queer, you even remembered, it was so long ago—"

"MY God!" said Jimmy, the twenty-four-year-old Bodine. "It's Uncle Joe!" And then Jesse remembered.

"Yes, it's Joe," said their father. "It's Joe, all right. He was my youngest brother. It's been more'n ten years since we saw him that time. He said he was on his way to Californy; he said he'd come back sometime with his pockets full of gold for us. He said— It don't matter now what he said. He must have found out where we went; he was coming to see us, and was almost home when this had to happen." He bent over again, this time to straighten the dead man's body properly, the stiffening arms at its sides, and placed Joe's battered old black hat over the upturned face. "Show us which way the man went, Jesse," he said then. "And you better lead for a spell, tracking; you're better'n the rest of us at that."

Jesse stepped swiftly to the spot where the big man with the forked beard had broken through the bushes; he found traces aplenty in broken branches trampled underfoot, and even in the deeper imprints of heavy boots that the rain had not washed away. Once having picked up the trail, he had no difficulty following it. The big man, Miller, had headed as nearly as he could in a straight line that would lead some three or four miles farther on into Wagon-road Gap, one of the steep passes through the mountains.

"Guess we know now which way he's going," said Tom Bodine. "Headed west, through the Gap and towards Californy. Best, just the same, we should keep our eye skinned for more tracks awhile longer, 'less he turns off. Step along, son."

So Jesse again led them, swiftly again, then more slowly, questing about, this way and that, jerking his head up to stare ahead, for all the world like a hunting dog. And after a while they heard shouts behind them, and then the Haveril men, three of them—old Abner the father and his two grown sons Ransome and Richard—came hurrying to join them, each with his rifle over his arm. There was but a minute or two taken off for talk; it was young Bert Bodine who blurted out the news that the man murdered was their Uncle Joe; then the seven men moved forward again toward the lifting mountain.

Of a sudden the storm passed away, the rain ceased and the sun bright and glorious. Rain-drops on branch and leaf were sparkling jewels, a new green was upon the open grassy slopes and valleys; a happy bird, hushed and fearful no longer, began to sing and the world was fair and fresh and clean and joyous again. Yet the man with the yellow beard lay dead just back there, and the man with the black forked beard twisted into rough horns was somewhere ahead.

After a while old Abner Haveril said to old Tom Bodine, "Your boy tracks like a Injun." And Tom nodded and was proud of his keen, stalwart son. It's a fine, heartening thing to hear praise spoken of your son by a just man like Abner Haveril.

"My girl Kate tells me," said Abner, "that the killer couldn't have any sort of notion that her and your boy Jesse was anywhere near. If that's so, he can't have any notion anybody's after him. That being so, we're apt to run him down real soon, being as he's no doubt holed up somewheres for shelter."

"That's so," said Tom Bodine. "I'd thought of that."

Young Bert had the way of always sticking close to the older folk; he liked to listen to what they said. Now he spoke up.

"What do you think he killed him for, Papa? What do you think Uncle Joe had in that buckskin pouch? Gold, do you s'pose? And that's why he got kilt?"

"Maybe, Bert; I don't know," said Tom Bodine patiently. "Now you keep shut up."

IT was but a few minutes later when they came upon their quarry with a suddenness which startled them and left him thunderstruck. As they had deemed likely, he had sought shelter during the worst of the brief storm; where a shoulder of a hill broke down into a bit of rocky cliff he had crept into a deep cleft with an overhang of rock and turf like a section of ragged shed roof; had he lain quiet, he might have escaped, for among the rubble strewing the slope he had left

no track; as it was, the men were passing silently when he crawled out into view.

He had no chance then, and knew it, with those unwavering rifle-barrels a bristling arc before him, and did not even lift hand or foot in his own behalf. They closed in on him and disarmed him without a word; he remained as silent until after the thing was done.

HE kept looking at one face after another; he saw the same expression everywhere; even on young Bert's face the look seemed a reflection of that on old Tom's.

"Come along," said Tom Bodine.

The black-bearded man didn't speak even then; he stumbled along in their midst, back toward the spot where so short a time ago he had killed Joe Bodine. It was likely that he knew from the first sight of them, though he could not understand how it came about that retribution came so swiftly; he could not possibly fail to understand when at last they came to their destination. Tom Bodine removed the hat from Joe's face; the clear sunlight glanced into Joe's eyes.

"You killed him," said Tom.

"No," said Miller. He moistened his lips; he brushed the tangle of beard away from his lips. "I never killed him. I never saw him."

"My son saw you kill him," said Tom Bodine. "Jesse saw you kill him and rob him just now."

"Which is your son? Which one?"

Tom pointed. Jesse's lean, hard face was scarcely a yard from Miller's.

Miller shook his head.

"No. I didn't kill anybody. If this man, your son, says so, he's a liar. I'll tell you how it is." He twisted the forks of his coarse beard with both hands together. "Your son must have killed him, so he says I done it."

"This is the right man all right, aint it, Jesse?" his father asked.

Jesse nodded. Also he stepped closer and untied the buckskin bag at Miller's belt; he opened it and poured its contents into the dented crown of his hat and showed them what it was. Gold, as young Bert had thought it ought to be; gold that Uncle Joe had brought them from California.

"We'd ought to've brought a rope," said old Abner. "Here we come off in a rush, and nobody brought a rope." He unpocketed a hard, dry slab of chewing tobacco and a broken-bladed clasp-knife and started whittling a chew. "Ransome Haveril, you go down to the house and bring a rope."

There was a cold fury in Jesse Bodine's eyes, a fury that was a stranger there until today.

"We don't need any rope; we don't need to wait," he said very quietly yet very distinctly. And when Abner Haveril demanded tartly, "What in tarnation does the boy mean? To turn the skunk loose?" Jesse said, "No."

"Go get that rope, and hurry, Ransome," said old Abner. Ransome hurried away on his errand, and Abner got his tobacco shavings into his mouth, pocketed plug and knife and said to Jesse, speaking placidly again: "I dunno, Jesse Bodine, but somehow a execution don't seem reg'lar 'thout the rope. We got ammunition and guns aplenty and could shoot this feller, or we could stick him like a pig with his own knife, and I don't know's it would make any hell-fired diff'rence. Only, a rope seems more sort of reg'lar."

There was a log handy, and he sat down on it; so did Tom Bodine and young Bert, though young Bert's feet kept shifting, and a slow greenish pallor was creeping into his face. For a long while he stared in fascination at the man about to die; then he jerked his eyes away and didn't look that way again.

MILLER said: "Got any whisky, anybody?" Nobody had. He said: "God-a'mighty, I never wanted a drink so bad!" Then he asked for a smoke. Jimmy Bodine gave him tobacco and papers; Miller's fingers were slightly unsteady but he managed.

"It's reg'lar," said old Abner, "to ask a man if he's got any last wishes; if there's any word he wants sent to anybody."

Miller hurled the cigarette down and stamped on it.

"I tell you I didn't kill him!" he shouted. "Nobody saw me; this boy's a liar! You got to let me go!"

"My girl saw you," said old Abner.

Miller was sullen and silent until he saw Ransome Haveril returning, saw the coil of rope in his hand. Then he made a hopeless, desperate, maniacal bid for escape, flailing with his thick arms, clawing and kicking. They had to pile on him, three or four of them, and drag him down. He fought to the last second, fought with his last breath as the noose tightened. They hanged him to kick his

life out a few yards from the still, aloof form that had once been the gay, wild, generous, likable Joe Bodine.

Chapter Two

JESSE BODINE and Kate Haveril did not meet again on the banks of the Buckeye. No matter though the sun shone and the warm little wandering breezes rippled the grass and May buds opened, their old familiar haunts had lost something that would never come back, just as something new and sinister and ugly had come to stain the world hereabouts horribly and indelibly. Nor, for several days, did they meet anywhere.

That same evening Jesse Bodine went down into the valley to the little cross-roads settlement they called the Town, for ammunition. The next daybreak found him "gone hunting" far up into the mountains. He was silent when he left; when after two nights of sleeping out in the open wherever night found him he returned, he was silent.

In the Bodine household itself nothing seemed changed, nothing beyond that subtle change in Jesse Bodine himself. Uncle Joe had been brought down to the wood-lot out at the loveliest sunny rim of the pasture and decently interred, his grave properly marked and mounded, with a low, neat picket fence around it. His murderer had been promptly returned to the earth at the spot where he had so swiftly expiated his crime, and there was nothing left of the two of them save memories and Joe Bodine's little buckskin pouch with its California gold.

The pouch lay for days untouched on the ax-hewn oak mantel over the fireplace, for the most part even unmentioned, hardly regarded, maybe touched only now and then by the flick of a sidewise glance. But at last, on the third or fourth day, Tom Bodine took it down in the presence of the assembled family.

"Joe wanted us to have it, some of it anyhow, I reckon," he said.

"How much is it, Pop, in money?" asked young Bert.

"I don't know," said Tom Bodine, hefting it in a measuring sort of way in his horny palm. "I'll get it weighed down at Lunt's hardware store; Charley Lunt will know. It's a heap of money, though. Don't know; maybe six-seven hundred dollars."

"Maybe a thousand, even?" said Baby Molly, and grew rounder-eyed than ever.

"I wish I could remember Uncle Joe, what he was like, when he was to visit us that time in Tennessee," she added.

"You were only a baby then, maybe couple years old. You wouldn't remember."

Later her mother told her all about Uncle Joe, how he was the gayest, jolliest of all the Bodines, the youngest too, and always going off to far-away places, bringing back amazing tales for many a retelling. He played a fiddle, too, the only one of the Bodines to do that, as far as Tom's wife could remember.

"Do you s'pose the man that killed him follered him all the way from California, Ma? How'd he know about Uncle Joe's gold?"

"We'll never know, pet. Joe was always careless—oh, about everything; about his companions, I'm afraid. He might have talked; you can't tell. He wouldn't have hurt a fly himself, not for anything; he wouldn't be likely to suspect any man of wanting to kill him."

"I wish Uncle Joe hadn't died. I wonder what Californy is like, Ma? I wish he could have told us."

"Other folks have been there. Some of 'em come back, some don't. Some day maybe you'll get to hear some one talk about it that knows."

NOW Jesse was back from the mountains, but somehow still seemed far away from them.

He sat on a bench at the table and cleaned his rifle; he melted lead in the fire shovel and molded bullets; he went about his daily chores; and that was about all from Jesse Bodine those days.

He met up with Ransome Haveril in the foothills, where Jesse had gone with the two bays and the sled for firewood; it was the first time he had seen any of the Haveril family since the affair at Buckeye Creek. Ransome Haveril, on a like errand, left his team standing and came over, ax on shoulder. Ransome was the oldest of the young Haverils, four or five years Jesse's senior, though scarcely more mature, tall and dark like Jesse, handsome in the eyes of the Pleasant Valley girls, a big brother next to godhead in the eyes of his favorite sister Kate. He and Jesse had always liked each other, much to Kate's delight.

Ransome's dog, a shepherd with round yellow spots over its soft brown eyes, followed him and flopped down close to his feet when he stopped. So the two young men spoke briefly of dogs.

Ransome told how a skunk had raided the chicken-pen recently. They idled over to a log and sat down and took out their knives.

"I'm going West," said Jesse.

"Wonder what she's like out that way?" mused Ransome.

"I've been thinking about it quite a spell. Now I've made up my mind. The folks don't need me around; they wouldn't have needed me anyhow, and now with all that gold Uncle Joe brought, they're fixed up fine."

"When are you going, Jesse?"

"I don't know. Any time now. I haven't told anybody about it, Ransome."

Ransome nodded. A man would naturally keep his mouth shut until the last minute; no use starting a wind at home, a lot of talk stirred up by the old folks.

"My folks don't need me around particular either," he said after a while. The two didn't look at each other; both had their eyes lifted toward the bulwark of the mountains. Both were looking through the mountains, over them, far beyond. "Might go along with you, Jesse, if you want me to."

"We'll need plenty ammunition—good stout shoes, too."

"A man can tote along enough jerked venison and parched corn to last him a long ways. There'll be plenty game."

"I've got ten dollars of my own," said Jesse. "I've been saving it."

"I spent mine the last dance I was to," Ransome admitted. "But I've got extra ammunition."

"Tomorrow morning? I'll meet you right here at sunup."

"Suits me." They stood up and closed their clasp-knives.

Jesse had something else to say, but took his time, hesitant though determined to get it said.

"I've got to see your sister Kate before I go," he said after a while. "You see, I've got a going-away present I want to give to her. You ask her will she come outside tonight after supper, will you, Ransome?"

"All right. G'-by, Jesse."

"Tomorrow morning. Sunup."

THAT evening Jesse told his mother first. Somehow, he couldn't tell why, he found it hard to do. She was in the kitchen alone; he followed her around, got into her way, brought her unneeded wood for the woodbox, told her how good the dry-apple pie smelled.

She washed and dried her hands and sat down.

"Well, Jesse? What is it? It's not a girl you've got in your head already, is it?"

"I'm going away, Mother. Going out West. Tomorrow early."

SHE didn't say anything for a time. Into her eyes came, he thought, the strangest look in the world; he couldn't make anything of it.

"Told your father yet, Jesse?"

He shook his head.

"I've known a weary long time it was coming, Jesse, just waiting to hear you say it. Well, better go tell him. He's out by the smokehouse." Then suddenly she threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. He saw her dab at her cheeks as she went back to whatever it was she had been doing. He hurried out to speak with his father.

"I'm going, Father," said Jesse, hurrying to get it said. "West. In the morning."

"So you're going West, are you?" Tom Bodine, like his wife, sat down; there was an upended keg handy and he settled on it and pulled off his hat and ran his toil-hardened hand through the thick thatch of his black and grizzled hair. "Well, son, I don't know as I blame you. Folks keep on a-moving fu'ther and fu'ther West all the time. My father got as far as he did; I got this far; you'll be aching to move on ahead. Well, your mother's been telling me so a year; she said it was coming, unless by chance you stayed on account Katie Haveril."

In the eerie, uncertain light of dusk, Jesse Bodine stood like one bemused. His mother knew a year ago, before he himself knew? And his mother knew of Kate too. He said:

"You know how it is—and you won't be needing me—"

"No. I never needed any man, son, not hard enough to want him to stay when he had some other place pulling him. So you're going in the morning?"

"Maybe Ransome Haveril will go along with me."

"That's good. He's a good boy. Told your mother yet?"

"Yes. Just now."

"That's good. She say anything?"

Jesse shook his head. His father, the session done, stood up and for an instant laid his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Take care of yourself, Jesse," was all he had to add.

It was just before supper that the news came out into the open for all the family, and instantly the big cabin became a place of turmoil from puncheon floor to smoky rafter; even the candles seemed to sputter in a brand-new fashion and the smoked hams and sides of venison to turn and sway with an electrified will all their own. Jesse's brothers exclaimed this thing and that, and had many wise remarks to make; his sisters gasped and stared at him as at a new creature in their midst, and caught him by the arms and shook him and all the while, after the first astonishment, were half between laughter and tears. Molly's was the wildest and noisiest excitement of all.

What Jesse was doing was exactly what she would do if only she were a boy! California! The wonders of its mountains and plains and valleys, its forests and rivers and waterfalls, its gold, gold, gold! Gold everywhere! And glorious new things to see and to do!

"Haven't forgotten Uncle Joe, have you?" put in brother Jim.

That hushed them, and little mercuric Molly grew fearful and hugged Jesse's arm tighter than ever. But her sister Luella's smile returned quickly, a mite of malice in it as she said sweetly:

"Jim would like to go too, but we know he can't: Sarah won't let him."

"Lou!" her mother chided. It was a recent discovery in the family that Jimmy had been sparking Sarah Fairbanks all spring; and Sarah was a widow. A young widow, a pretty, vivacious one; one who had married a man much older than herself and who now, childless, had heired her husband's property. Well-to-do, they had called him. There were those who would say that Jim Bodine would be making a fine match; there were others, and Jim's mother was one of them, who were apt to say, "Well, maybe I'm old-fashioned," but did not think it a very nice thing for any woman to have two husbands in the same lifetime. When Sarah's name was mentioned, Mrs. Bodine usually found some excuse to leave the room.

IN the lull young Bert, who hadn't found a chance to get a word in edgewise, offered wistfully:

"I wish I could go too! Couldn't I, Jesse? Say, Jesse—"

"Dry up, Bertie," said his mother, as nearly sharp with him as she knew how to be. "And go bring me a bucket of water. It's most supper-time."

Jesse didn't eat. He told his mother that he wasn't hungry yet and slipped outside while the others were gathering at the table; he knew that Kate would have had her supper and would be waiting for him by the time he could hasten over to the Haveril home.

And waiting she was, all excitement. All that her brother had told her was: "Jesse's coming over. He wants to see you right after supper. He—he is bringing you a present." And when she and Jesse met on the path a couple of hundred yards from the house, he could see in the starlight the shining eagerness in her eyes.

"Ransome told you?"

"Just that you were coming, that you wanted to see me."

"Nothing else?"

ABOUT them were trees, still and dark in the starlight; but they stood in an open spot; her eyes were held up to his and he could even see the tremor of her lips in a secret smile. She nodded, and her curly hair shook as though the wind were in it.

"He said you were bringing me something! What is it, Jesse?"

He brought it out of his pocket, a pretty gold locket on a fine gold chain. He had seen it one day in town, among the few gay trinkets at Charley Lunt's store and had hoarded for it a long while, thinking with an anticipatory shiver how lovely it would be around her white throat. He gave it to her in silence and stood rigid while, wondering, she took it into her hands. Suddenly her hands shut tight about it and she clasped it to her breast.

"Oh, Jesse! I love it! I am going to keep it forever and ever!" She lifted it and brushed it against her lips and cuddled it against her cheek. It was the first gift and spoke with poignant eloquence to a heart attuned to its musical whisperings; of a sudden her heart beat so hard that almost it pained her.

"It's a going-away present, Kitty. Didn't Ransome tell you? I'm going away."

Her hands came down slowly and she stiffened so that she was rigid, too; he heard her deep intake of breath.

"Going away? What do you mean? Not far, Jesse? Not for long?"

"West. All the way to California." He knew then that he was going to hurt her; he wished he had spoken to her first of all, that he hadn't come out in

this blunt fashion. He felt all mixed-up inside, oddly embarrassed. He had to go; he knew he had to go. Right now he wanted to stay, to be with her. It was with an effort that he went on. He tried to speak with a cheery heartiness which he did not feel now but which he had felt an hour ago when talking with his admiring and mildly envious sisters.

He spoke rapidly, and it was the first time she had ever heard him speak with a rush of words; he told her of what he meant to see and do and experience; he grew with her, as with them, boastful.

California was waiting for him; that was it, fair, golden California! Oh, there'd be dangers and adventures and hardships; he laughed at them. There were fame and fortune waiting out there for the man who was man enough to wrest them into his own grip. A man couldn't tell how long he might be gone, how many years. But some day he was coming back; he would come back laden with gold. Then he would come to her, and—and—

KATE thought her heart was broken; at sixteen she thought that hearts did truly break. She wanted to cry, she wanted to scream. She began laughing at him. She showed him altogether a fiery, scornful, mocking Kate Haveril that he had never dreamed existed.

"You big, overgrown baby!" she taunted. "Oh, how smart you are and what noble deeds you are going to do—in *California!* You'll fill your hands with gold, won't you? Will you come back riding in a golden carriage drawn by six white horses? And will you let me run along at your wheels or run ahead and throw flowers for your white horses to prance on? But maybe by then I'll be an old lady with white hair—and maybe it will be my daughter who will throw flowers for you!"

He had turned pale and his eyes were flaming, but she could not see that. Weakly he said: "Kitty, don't you see? Don't you understand?" She heard herself laughing again. Then she whipped about and ran, and as she ran she flung the tiny locket on its fine golden chain over her shoulder. He stared down at it but didn't touch it. He stared after her, stunned, incredulous, and saw her vanish in a pool of darkness at the cabin corner.

He stood a long while, watching the lamplit window, yellow in the thickening night, waiting, hoping that she would come back. Then he heard voices in the cabin, heard her gay laughter.

He turned then and walked away.

It was late when he returned home that night, and all had gone to bed except his mother and Baby Molly. He had a few mouthfuls of food in the kitchen, pretending to eat rather than really eating. Molly yawned and went off to bed; she was going to be awake and tell him good-by in the morning, no matter how early he left.

But only his mother was standing out there by the woodpile in the daybreak, though he suspected that his father was awake. His mother tucked her arm through his and they walked slowly a few steps together.

"It's all right that you are going, Jesse," she said quietly and steadily. "I understand. Maybe you won't ever come back, and maybe you will. Maybe if you do come back I'll be alive, and maybe I'll be dead. It's far away, Jesse. God takes care of things. You just be a good boy, Jesse. Be a good boy, and you'll be a good man. Now kiss me and go."

She hugged him in a fiercely strong embrace, then almost pushed him away. She hurried back to her kitchen, going around the cabin, and did not once look back. He strode off toward the hills and a meeting with Ransome Haveril and the mountains beyond, and neither did he look back.

BUT both he and Ransome, from a high place before they came to the Gap, making an excuse of resting after a rapid climb, turned their faces toward the valley lands they were discarding for an inviting unknown. They could see still columns of smoke standing straight up into the clear new day from the two cabins; the sun was just up and the smoke columns were almost black down close to the chimneys, bluish-gray at the top.

Ransome affected to laugh, but seemed vaguely disturbed and ill at ease.

"Get away without any row, Jesse?" he asked.

Jesse nodded. "They said it was all right. Funny, they already had a notion I'd be going."

"My father just said: 'Go 'head, if you're a mind to, and get it over.' Mother, well, she cried a little but said she wouldn't keep me. I don't know what come over Kate, though. I never saw her act up like that. She sure give me hell and what-for, Jesse." He tried

his laugh again. "Funny, she put all the blame on you, and you'd have thought we were a couple of scum of the earth. I always thought she liked you, too."

Chapter Three

FROM the first it had been Jesse Bodine's expedition. To the end, and no matter what end, it must be Jesse Bodine's. Younger than Ransome Haveril, he was stronger—stronger in everything. His hands could grasp and hold; his mind could grasp and hold. And deep within was a hot, bright fire.

Youth running wild! The youth of the lone pioneer. To do as you please, to think as you please, to go as you please. Go on, go on to what is next. There's always something better ahead.

They knew, as they had known when they started from Pleasant Valley, that most folks traveling westward followed an established route which lay nearly a hundred miles to the south; that they had but to turn southward to strike into that emigrant trail, provided they craved the companionship of their own kind. They'd find families, groups of families with wagons and some livestock, all California-bound. And there'd be an infrequent trading-post or a farm or some sort of settlement. Following sign; asking what lay ahead; planning. The clank of a caravan, the grinding of wheels, dust rising under plodding hoofs. Night-camps, camp-fires, men congregated talking; a fiddle or guitar somewhere, voices singing; old folks remembering and advising, young folks eluding and finding one another on the outer rim of fire-flickered circles; an old man dying and a boy and girl falling in love. It might be fun, all that. But—they might as well have stayed at Pleasant Valley.

They came one summer day to a little round lake; at one end where a creek fed it were pines mirroring themselves in the water. They stripped and bathed for the fun of it, and Ransome swam out a hundred yards from shore and dived, and threshed about and swam back. He stood up, laughing, mopping his hair back from his wet face, and Jesse, wading close to shore, frowned.

He didn't like to see his friend doing so easily what he could not do at all. As a boy down at a swimming-hole in Kentucky, Ransome along with the rest of the boys learned to swim when six or eight years old; Jesse, in his Tennessee hills, had never heard of a swimming-hole.

"Show me how you do it, Ran," he said. "We're going to stay right here until I can swim like that."

Ransome was delighted. Lessons began immediately. They tarried day after day after day. They made a semi-permanent camp with rock and clay stove, a lean-to of boughs and willow branches. They hunted, fished, loafed and day-dreamed, each in his fashion, and swam. And Ransome said, "Your grandpappy must have been a duck," before they took up the westering trail again. . . .

Frost was in the air nights and mornings; winter was on the way. They struck southward at last, heading for the traveled way along which the westward wagons rolled. And so, on a cold, black autumnal day, they came to Temlock's Crossroads.

TEMLOCK kept a trading-station of sorts; he was known as a well-to-do man whose slogan was, "This is a great country! Yes-siree, she sure is a great country!" His store was an eye-arresting structure, long and narrow, that had been put up in sections as time and expansion demanded, so that it looked like several log cabins jammed together end to end. He traded in everything; on his shelves, or stacked away, or hanging from cross-beams, were nearly always to be found flour and sugar, salt and tobacco of both kinds, boots and shoes and guns, picks and shovels, calico by the bolt; he had scales for weighing raw ore; on his wall was a price-list of furs, from back East; ammunition, tools and steel traps were his stock-in-trade. He dispensed raw liquor at four bits a shot.

"Yes-siree! It's a great country! Why, we already got a stage running through three times a week! What more do you want? —All right, Mrs. T.; I'm a-coming. . . What's that? Oh, just a couple young fellers dropped in. On their way to California. Come in, boys."

A voice shouted, "Here comes the stage!" and men gathered to watch, their gradual appearance smacking of magic. Where they came from neither Jesse nor Ransome knew. "Must of popped right out of the brush," said Ransome. There

were a couple of swarthy, black-mustachioed Mexicans among them, an Indian in a worn red-and-black blanket, an old, gray, stooped man, a gangly youth in high boots and a broad hat too big for him, and a Texas long-horn—so called more from his enormous yellow mustache than from the land of his problematic nativity, the woods being full of Texans.

The old gray man spat tobacco juice and observed with obvious relish:

"Hank's late ag'in. He cain't bring the stage in like George Bill used to do. Shucks!"

The stage came rolling in with Hank's long whip cracking for the final spurt, the horses in a lather, fine, fast horses as Western stage-horses had to be.

There was a flurry in the station's hard-packed yard, with Hank climbing down from his high seat, the three passengers alighting and pressing in at an open door, horses being led away, fresh horses brought. To Jesse Bodine and Ransome Haveril looking on, everything was very gay and lively.

Of the travelers, one was a man of slightly more than middle age with a set and stony look to his eyes; he was Chris Anders, who had made his stake in gold in the West, and had started back home with his fortune in an old carpet-bag; he had been robbed only a couple of hundred miles east of Temlock's, and was on his way West again, to make his pile again. Another was a seedy, nondescript man whom nobody particularly noticed. The third, however, demanded attention and got an amazing lot of it. His appearance was distinctive.

The old gray man exclaimed when the trio had passed inside:

"Claude Purcell, by thunder!"

"Minister?" asked Ransome Haveril.

"Minister, hell! Cain't you hear good? I said that was Claude Purcell!"

THE stage pulled out with its full complement of passengers and one in addition: the long-horn Texan climbed aboard, bound for Bantam Springs. Cress Temlock, again in his doorway, regarded Jesse and Ransome.

"Thought as maybe you boys was taking the stage," he said. His eyes asked, "Well, now you're here—anything you want?"

"Ammunition," said Jesse.

All this while he had spent little and sparingly of his original fortune of ten dollars, and that little almost exclusively for powder and lead. They loitered all afternoon at the trading-post, spent two dollars for a banquetlike supper of coffee and hot biscuits and gravy and potatoes and beans and a sort of pudding with brown sauce poured thick over it and—this alone brought no thrill—generous helpings of a savory venison stew. After that they sat with the others in a small smoke-filled room watching a listless game of poker. The players were Temlock, the gray man, one of today's Mexicans whom they called Chico Fuerte, and a raw-boned youth who evidently was Temlock's hired hand. The men bet quarters mostly; a dollar bet for a showdown was an average high.

JESSE BODINE had never played a game of poker in his life, and had but a sketchy idea of what it was all about. He watched and was interested; this was a change for him and Ransome, as good as going to a show. And when Temlock, sensing his interest, said, "Want to set in?" Jesse pulled up his chair.

"I've got only about four dollars left," he said.

He put his money on the table and was dealt a hand. Beginner's luck stood at his elbow; he drew four aces and was lucky enough to catch Temlock and the old man both with hands good enough to draw them along for a look-see. So Jesse pulled in his gleanings and counted ten dollars.

Beginner's luck pressed even closer. He won the second time, hands running. Here, he felt, was a man's game; here was zest! And beginner's luck seemed to have picked him for her darling, and it was as though she meant to be true to him always. But every man knows that luck alone is a poor part of draw poker. In a few minutes of play Jesse Bodine sat back, a blank and empty feeling replacing the short-lived zest, his four dollars looking aloof and far away under the old gray man's tapping fingers. . . .

They moved along westward again. For a time storms held off, though their threat was a frequent reminder; and when winter's great guns started thundering, the two were within a day's travel of a new camp which they knew nothing about until, through icy wind gusts sharp-edged with sleet, they came within sight of it. It was a rough-and-ready encampment forced into existence through the grim realities of death and birth. Three families after sober council had elected to wait for springtime in

a parklike mountain-sheltered valley. They were the Olsens, the Robertsons and the Crabtrees. A baby had been born to the young and delicate wife of an elder Crabtree boy; that was one thing. Then a very old man, one of the Olsens, the grandfather of the youngest of that clan, had come painfully to the end of his trail in this remote place; his foot had slipped on the frosted iron tire of a wagon-wheel as he was climbing down, and he had fallen. He was slow in dying; his feeble old wife followed, to make a twin hummock beside him in the shade of a cottonwood. And three horses belonging to the Robertsons had eaten something in their pasturage that killed them; loco weed, Clay Robertson thought, but no one knew.

Here was water and timber, and if they hastened garnering, fish and game and wood. They estimated that they were long on provisions if they had run short on luck. Among them they had company, and all were helping hands. They built three log cabins; they were digging in for the winter when Jesse Bodine and Ransome Haveril saw smoke and sparks from their rock chimneys in the dreary early dusk and shouted: "Hello, there!"

Welcomed to tarry, they fell to with a will, building their own small cabin, one room, fireplace, two bunks. Later would come table, benches; winter tasks. And there followed a space of time for them which was to be recognized later on as one of the fullest, most complete and profitable of their lives.

IT was Ransome's idea, filled with love of company and a thrill at this season, to construct a community building, a long, low cabin with an enormous fireplace in each end; a place for getting together on the hardest days and darkest and coldest nights to come. Never was a task more heartily entered upon, every member of the small group filled with suggestions, their hands filled with endeavor.

As soon as this first storm blew itself out, a man would take one of the wagons with a four-horse team and drive out to Lusk's Meadows, a trading-post some eighty or ninety miles away, taking with him a list of articles the camp would most need: potatoes, flour, tobacco, Mustang Liniment, Wizard Oil, salt and grain were high on that list.

Meantime white chips flew under flying axes, and men went out with their rifles; a rifle-shot carried far and clear. The men swinging their axes would stop a minute, say, "That's Will," or "That's Frank," and would wonder whether the new addition to the winter larder was going to be bear meat or deer, or maybe elk.

It grew into quite a little settlement, for now the smokehouse was added; in the clear cold starry nights or of a rare bright day with the sun shining on a clear fall of snow, it was as pretty as a picture.

Here Ransome Haveril found a pretty, blue-eyed and pink-cheeked girl—Ransome was girl-hungry. She was Nellie Crabtree, seventeen years old, the sister of Ann and April Crabtree. Ann was the mother of the new baby. April was the Crabtrees' youngest, not quite twelve.

SO winter came and found them laboring hard for the luxury of mere existence, but somehow living more richly than they took time or had time to think about; the smell of wood-smoke was brave and heartening in the cold, and sparks up chimneys were as lovely as stars. In the long, general cabin they played cards with old decks, and checkers on boards newly made; they talked, swapping experiences and advice; they sang, all together, the songs which were the songs of all such people; there was a guitar and a fiddle among them; they even danced, though less and less frequently. For it took young people to dance; and the old people had eyes which never blinked, which somehow discouraged this sort of thing; their glances were as eloquent as a shotgun against a cabin wall.

Here Jesse Bodine found something: a new and tender influence that for a time permeated his whole being as the fragrance of a flower may seep through a fabric. It came to him through a child, little April. Like her sister Nellie, she was blue-eyed; she was as pretty as a fragile doll, and you felt you must treat her with delicate touch. Somehow, he couldn't tell why, she made Jesse Bodine think of his own little sister, Baby Molly.

April was dear and sweet and sensitive; her lip quivered easily and her eyes swam; she was a fairylike little thing, and when she laughed—she laughed as readily as she wept, and far more often—it was tinkly, irresistible music. And all she wanted to do after the very first was sit and look at handsome Jesse Bodine, to follow him around, to bring him

things and—how she thrilled that first time!—to walk along at his side, her hand in his!

To Jesse Bodine, though he never thought of such a thing, she was perhaps the single softening influence a rigorous life had brought him since Kate Haveril flung his little locket and fine gold chain down in the dust.

Chapter Four

KATE HAVERIL traveled her own burning desert stretches, and likewise penetrated deep dark ravines of her own mountains. She did not cry; what had happened to her lay too deep for tears. No one in her busy home noticed that anything untoward had occurred—except, of course that all missed their well-loved Ransome.

"I expect you miss your big brother," Kate's mother remarked, and came no nearer than that to the tragic truth.

Kate had stopped going to the school down in the valley, because she was sixteen, which was to say a mature woman; and besides there had been her secret thought that she would be married soon. "Mrs. Jesse Bodine!" After Jesse's desertion of her it grew intolerable, just staying at home and thinking of how they used to meet at the creek, and would never meet there again. She gathered up her books bright and early of a Monday morning and informed her mother she was going to finish school.

The teacher, Mr. Yancy, was an elderly, ascetic-looking man, tall and stooped and watery-eyed; he wore a long black coat, shiny and threadbare along the hems; in his time he had been clerk, preacher, peddler; and he could play a mournful violin. He was an old bachelor and lived at the village over behind the store.

Kate Haveril at sixteen was the oldest and prettiest girl of his elastic scholar group, of which at times there were four or five humped over their whittled desks, rarely a dozen, sometimes even more. In ages they ran from five or six up to Kate's age.

She sat on a hard bench in the little log schoolhouse, a book before her, a pencil in her hand, and dreamed day-dreams. She read and read; she took spurts of interest in her school work, and a few of these flying attacks took her to the outer confines of Mr. Yancy's knowledge.

One day when his asthma was bad and his supply of medicine exhausted, he was about to declare a holiday. His watery eyes took stock of his little flock; just six little boys and girls all about five or six years old—and Miss Kate Haveril. He beckoned Kate up to his desk with the long pointer he used all day as a cane, rod and scepter, and said to her with dry facetiousness:

"How'd you like to be school-teacher today?" And he called her Miss Haveril, and the children giggled and whispered to one another: "He called her Miss Haveril! And she's going to be the teacher!"

So Kate taught the school that day, and was mighty serious about it. There came a glow from the small thing she was doing; it became a large thing, working with the tools of words and thoughts, molding if only in a little these few handfuls of human clay.

Mr. Yancy came back in time to dismiss school; he found the children busy and behaving themselves. Kate found herself more and more frequently at the teacher's desk, staying for longer times. Mr. Yancy had opened a door for her.

AND he opened another door for her; rather, this time, Kate herself did the opening, using him for a key. She was rapidly growing into a girl, nearly seventeen now, who knew what she wanted and meant to get it. She said one day:

"I help you a good deal with your school, don't I, Mr. Yancy?"

"Yes, you do. You're a good girl, Katie."

"I want to learn music. Will you teach me?"

"Well— Yes, I could teach you how to read music."

"I want to play!"

"All I can play real well is the violin. You wouldn't want that, and—"

"Why wouldn't I?"

He smiled a wintry, crabapple smile.

"The violin? It's not ladylike. You know that."

"Why isn't it?"

He had bushy white brows. The light in his uncertain eyes seemed to brighten.

"Now, you look here, Kate Haveril. There are things a lady should do and things she mustn't." And so forth, the school-teacher lecturing.

Kate heard him out respectfully. The next day she started learning the violin.

She kept it secret the best she could. When her brother Richard discovered

and made the news general at the supper-table, Kate's face turned crimson under the looks swiveled on her. All that a reluctant Mr. Yancy had said, and more, was spoken to her in thoroughly direct manner. The idea of a girl, almost woman-grown, playing a fiddle!

IF it was a shocking thing, the next move of Kate Haveril's was far more shocking. Mr. Yancy took to his bed, really ill. They had to cast about for a teacher to fill out the school year. Kate said she would do it, take the pay, too. She did. And throughout the wide-sprawled neighborhood many a good woman threw up her hands in what was termed holy horror, and asked what the world was coming to. A female schoolteacher! And as the wise ones foresaw, it wasn't long before little Kate was spoken of as that Kate Haveril, or that Haveril girl. The wild one, you know.

Her love for her music grew apace with budding understanding of what it truly meant and could mean; her voice came out stronger and dearer and tenderer, lovely. She played the violin well enough; she played the organ; she could play anything, hand organ or accordion. She was going to be a musician!

Wild Kate Haveril!

Well, she did grow to be a bit wild. She was eighteen then; she had torn Jesse Bodine and all young love out of her heart two years ago. She was still the wild-rose girl Jesse had thought her; she was still budding, though she thought herself in full bloom; she was, and even the disapproving agreed that she was, the loveliest girl in all Pleasant Valley. You had to remember, though, that there is a wicked loveliness given by the devil to his chosen ones.

Of course she went to every dance within a radius of forty miles; even that afforded talk. To top the matter, she seemed to go each time with a different boy; who ever heard of such a thing? Worse, it was said that whether in square dance or schottische, mazurka or heel-and-toe polka, she flirted outrageously.

Kate was nearing nineteen, and still teaching in the valley; she was going to start in giving music lessons. She grew into her first intimate friendship. Again she disturbed the serenity of a serene folk; she was forever with Sarah Fairbanks. *Mrs.* Sarah Fairbanks, the young widow, who, it was rumored, was going to marry again—to marry one of the Bodine boys this time.

Kate's mother was bewildered, frightened, distressed.

"Katie, I know you're a good girl and always will be a good girl. But *why* did you take up with that Sarah Fairbanks?"

Kate flared out in defence of her new friend. Was it a crime that Sarah was young and pretty still? Was it her fault that she was a widow? She hadn't poisoned her husband, had she? Was she supposed to turn into an old hag on a cane because he died? Should she veil her face and wear black all her life?

Mrs. Haveril couldn't answer all these and a string of other questions; she could only feel, at the end, that it would be more ladylike if Sarah Fairbanks *did* do those things.

And through her new friend, Kate met a new young man, too, and came close to marrying him.

Sarah Fairbanks was only twenty-three to Kate's nineteen, and was never meant to be any man's tombstone. She had more property, more money and nice things, thanks to the foresight of the late Mr. Fairbanks, than any other girl in the valley, and did her excellent best to surround herself with light and color, music and dancing and all the gayeties which she considered within bounds. When, on a picnic sponsored by her, Kate was engineered into meeting Drill Bradway, it was just that birds of a feather were drawn together, said Sarah.

SARAH went ahead and married Jesse Bodine's brother Jim, as was expected, and some said this and some said that, and only the two young people knew what sort of bargains they had got, and no doubt they themselves didn't know for quite a time. And Kate and Drill Bradway began keeping company.

There was a dash to him, yet a steadiness too, and no one denied his good looks; they made a handsome pair. His father was a man of means, an old-timer who had acquired broad lands, who of recent years had owned the village store and blacksmith shop. Altogether, Drill Bradway was a young man of whom most, Kate's parents with the rest, approved. He was still a trifle happy-go-lucky, but boys will be boys.

Then, all for no reason on earth, so it was said, Kate discarded her new Romeo with less than a flick of her finger-tips and long-lashed eyes, and was seen driving in the livery-stable top buggy with a scandalous newcomer; no one knew much of him beyond that he came from nowhere, that he drank and played cards, and he didn't seem to have an interest in life beyond that which he could extract from some musical instrument. He fiddled and banjoed, and made music on a comb with a piece of paper.

AFTER the marriage of Sarah and Jim Bodine, Kate often saw the Bodines. She grew fond of both girls, Luella and little Molly,—not so little any longer,—and they of her; she saw Luella married, and Molly thinking about marriage. She saw the Bodine household disintegrate. Jesse's mother overtaxed herself, gave her own welfare scant consideration when during the winter she virtually gave her all to a neighbor woman stricken with pneumonia; Mrs. Bodine died in the early spring, the second after Jesse's departure. Her husband died not very long after as the result of an accident: a team of young horses ran away when he was driving it into town the first time; a wagon-wheel crashed against a rock at the roadside and he was pitched from the seat. His side and back were injured; he never recovered fully. With the deaths of the parents, the old place passed into a new phase. The younger Bodines sold it and moved into the village.

It was at this time that Kate jilted Drill Bradway and began smiling at her latest beau. And then there came into Kate's life upheaval and explosion. At last the family, after council, laid the law down to Kate Haveril. They began with her treatment of Drill Bradway, and spared none of their own opinions or her feelings. They proceeded from Bradway to the good-for-nothing scalawag she was being seen with now, and were a thought less sparing than before.

Kate didn't say a word. She stood very still, her soft pink cheeks going pale, her lovely soft eyes, large and laughing at first, slowly going dark and hard. By the end, her face was white, her eyes were blazing—and her lips shut tight.

That night she ran away.

Having done most of the things a girl could do to be unladylike and bring disgrace on her name, she now did the culminating thing.

She ran away. To set the crown on it, she whacked off her glory of hair and purloined a suit of her brother's, even to the pants, and was gone no one knew where. Most folks could guess where. Another girl gone to the devil.

She headed south. Her first ride was with a man in a wagon, going the thirty miles to town for a Moline plow. She went still farther south because she heard of a town, and there was another ride afforded her by a teamster hauling hay to the larger town. And she saw the first of many wagon trains going West.

Nineteen, she passed without trouble as a pretty lad of fifteen or so. For one thing, who on earth would ever suppose a girl would do a thing like the one she was so brazenly accomplishing? She found herself moving westward, for the West was calling, lusty and strong, in all young blood.

There were chores which she could do for her board and keep; on a farm she could feed the chickens, gather the eggs, help in the kitchen at times of boiling kettles whether canning-day or wash-day or at a hog-killing. And when once in a blue moon there was talk of a dance, she could fiddle! They could never get enough dancing with that boy Kit at fiddle, banjo or infrequent organ.

She helped a storekeeper in one little town for four months. She learned how to wear her clothes, ragged shirts and coats, loose, shapeless trousers, as a shield against detection. She kept her hair as short as most boys', which was to say almost any ragged length so long as it didn't curl up from the shoulders. She learned to cast her voice in its lowest possible register when she spoke; sometimes a man laughed and said: "Whoa, there, Bub! What's going on with the voice? Changing, huh? Growing up to be a real man! Say, any whiskers, yet?"

And she was careful, very careful, about her eyes.

ONE day more than a full year after she had run away from Pleasant Valley, she came to a little new clutter of log cabins which had just been given a name, just recognized by its own haphazard builders as more than a temporary camp; from one of the families they named the settlement Crabtree.

And so it was inevitable that Kit Haveril met April.

"Hello," said an astonishingly pretty, blue-eyed girl of some sixteen years.

"Hello," said Kit.

April smiled, and Kit had never seen a sunnier, sweeter smile; and Kit smiled back.

"I met the nicest boy at the store today," April told her mother. "His name is Kit. He is looking for some sort of work to do, and I told him maybe Papa would let him help with the chores or something."

Long ago Jesse Bodine and Kate's brother Ransome, had gone on their way. They wouldn't have known Crabtree Settlement of this date. They wouldn't have known little April, grown into this April of sixteen. Time had made its changes, all for the better this time. The first log-cabins still stood, but were used only as outhouses; woodsheds, toolsheds, smokehouses and the like. Other, larger and more painstakingly planned dwellings had grown up; the Crabtrees, always planning, come another spring, to go to California, were ranchers now, and prospering; everyone knew old man Crabtree. There were other ranches in the hills; a silver mine was operating not a dozen miles away.

Kit Haveril worked for Mr. Crabtree for nearly six months. When asked her name, she had answered simply, "Kit." Folk weren't great hands at wanting a string of names; when they asked for a name at all, it was simply for a convenient handle to call a man by.

April garnered eggs and fed the chickens, and Kit split kindling and milked the cows; April swept and cooked, and Kit teamed; April helped with the house and Kit with the stock. April and Kit played checkers together; on two occasions they danced together. And what both enjoyed most of all, in the evenings before bedtime, with the household gathered in what light the pine fire gave, they sang together. Folk in other cabins came to their doors and windows and listened. . . .

The horses nodded in the mid-morning sun; it was late September now, and the sunshine was like thin gold-leaf. Kit smiled at her little friend in a queer way which baffled April; Kit seemed somehow far older this morning, and altogether a wiser and superior creature.

"I am going to tell you a secret, April. I wouldn't tell anyone in the world but you, and I'm not even going to ask you not to tell, because—"

"Because you know I wouldn't, anyhow! You know, Kit, that I wouldn't do anything at all that you didn't want me to. Don't you, Kit?"

"You are going to be surprised, April. You are going to be glad, too, for now we are going to be better friends than ever." Lowering her voice, she murmured a few words.

At the surprise of the disclosure, April Crabtree turned scarlet and then very pale, and there was a moment of silence and confusion for the two girls. Then with a little cry that could have been either of joy or grief or both commingled, April ran into Kit's arms and hugged her tighter than she had ever done before.

"Kit" cried a little too, that morning.

Chapter Five

HANGTOWN, Yankee Jim's, Cold Springs, Shirt Tail Cañon, Murderers' Bar, Columbia, Chinese Gulch, Gold Hill, Yellow Jacket! Just names in the ears of Jesse Bodine and Ransome Haveril; just names at first, then at last they were tangible, material places of fact.

Yellow Jacket was clamorous, strident, hectic more often than not, a rough town, a hot-blooded town, a man's town. To Yellow Jacket's way of thinking, if you liked the town, Welcome; 'tend to your own business and let other folks 'tend to theirs, and make yourselves at home. If you didn't like it just exactly the way it was, get to hell out of there. Some that didn't like it and didn't tarry, remarked that there were three places, heaven, hell and Yellow Jacket.

Today the stage came into Yellow Jacket with its six horses at the dead run. Shouts went up: "Stage coming!" Men who had never seen Long Peters bring the stage into town stared, marveling, at the racing horses, the wildly rocking coach. Men used to Long Peters stared today too. "Runaway!" a man yelled as the stage swung around the last bend to come to hotel and stable. That bend was taken on two wheels; never, or so it seemed, did a lumbering coach come closer to turning over.

That was the day Jesse Bodine came to Yellow Jacket—Jesse and his friend Ransome Haveril.

Twenty-four running hoofs pounded up such a thick volume of dust that it was hard to see coach and driver when taut reins and screaming brake brought the stage to a rocking standstill. But from the men standing closest, from others hurriedly crowding up, other shouts went up. . . . Long Peters hadn't brought

his stage in today, and would never bring in another. From the strap he had buckled about him when starting the last lap, down the mountain, Long Peters, half on the seat and half off, hung dead —shot by outlaws. Dead, too, was the express agent, inside the coach where he had been lifted to draw his last breath.

A LONG moment the driver sat still, his hands slowly relaxing on the reins as men surged about and held the trembling, sweat-wet horses; he just sat and looked about him and down into the faces lifted to his. He was a young man, lean and dark and quietly masterful; silent in all this clamour, unperturbed, and inscrutable.

A large, powerfully built man with the stamp of authority upon him, shouldered through the crowd and stopped with his hand on the wheel while he looked straight up into the driver's dark, steady eyes.

"What's all this?" he demanded. "What's happened?"

The driver had removed his broad-brimmed black hat rather than lose it on the run into town, and had sat on it; now he drew it from under him, knocked its crumpled appearance back into shape and put it on. Then he climbed down from his high seat.

By now the stage doors were open, and other men got out, Ransome Haveril among them, Ransome with one arm in a sling made by tying two big bright-red bandana handkerchiefs together. Another passenger, a small excitable man dressed like the small storekeeper he was, Henry Trimble of Peck and Trimble's General Store, poured out full information, saying every now and then in the run of his talk, "My God, boys, it was terrible!" and all the time wiping sweat away.

"Who was it?" a voice shouted. "That damn' greaser Joaquin Murietta?"

"Might have been," said Henry Trimble. "Might have been the Bedloe gang. They was all masked; you couldn't tell. Five of 'em I counted; I think there was three-four others; under cover, you know, and shooting all together. They got Long Peters, and they got the new express agent, and the stage is all shot full of holes, and this stranger here got it in one arm; and if it hadn't been for him and the man that's driving for Long Peters, they'd have got us all, I reckon, and the box too. We brought the box in safe."

Sheriff Dan Comstock, the powerfully built man with the stamp of authority upon him, had a pair of icy blue eyes which some said were as good as guns, and these he had kept steadily trained upon the lean, saturnine young man coming down from the driver's seat.

"Looks like you're welcome, stranger," he said gravely and quietly, and then added: "Like I say, you're a stranger in Yellow Jacket."

The young man regarded him, his bulk, his badge and his blue eyes. For the first time he spoke.

"You mean you don't like strangers here?"

"I said you're welcome."

"Thanks. My friend with his arm tied up needs a doctor. Where'll I find one?"

"Take your friend in the hotel. Doc Dabney will be around somewhere. Mind saying who you are?"

"I'm Jesse Bodine."

"I'll remember."

Jesse Bodine started to move away, but the Sheriff detained him with a question:

"You wouldn't know any of the outlaw gang if you saw them again?"

"I wouldn't know their faces because of the masks they had on. But one of them—he was the leader, I guess—I'd know his voice if I ever heard it. I'm sure of that."

"What kind of a voice?"

"You can't describe a man's voice, can you? I'd just remember if I ever heard it again."

Jesse Bodine moved through the crowd which stood aside for him, watching him pass, and came to Ransome.

"How bad is it, Ransome, do you think?" he asked.

Ransome managed a crooked smile; it twisted his young mustache and beard awry. He was pale and looked sick, and pain haunted his eyes.

"Not bad, I guess, Jess. But I'm sort of groggy; I've bled like a stuck pig. Lucky you got us along in a hurry. Get me a drink, Jess."

"Right away. And a doctor too. Take it easy, Ran."

THEY went up the rickety steps, across the wooden sidewalk and into the front room of the Gold Hill Hotel. Jesse eased his friend down into a rocking-chair and stepped through the swing doors into the hotel's bar. The place was empty, not even the bartender hav-

ing stayed behind when all hands surged out to see with their own eyes what was wrong with Long Peters. Jesse went behind the bar for bottle and glass, and carried them to his friend.

A voice said irritably: "Dammit, you're a cool hand, stranger." The bartender had bethought him of his responsibilities, and had returned just in time to see a man with back turned to him walking away with a bottle of liquor.

"My friend needed a drink," said Jesse. He poured generously and handed the glass to Ransome. Then he proffered the bottle and a ten-dollar goldpiece to the bartender.

SEEING who it was, the bartender was taken aback. He gestured with both hands like a man waving away something distasteful.

"I didn't get a good look at you, stranger. I didn't realize you was the man that brought the stage in. Your friend will need the whole damn' bottle, from the looks of him. And the drink is on the house."

"Thanks," said Jesse.

Ransome drank deep and was comforted. The landlord came hurrying in from the street and led the way without delay to a small, shadowy bedroom down the hall and at a corner of the building. He and Jesse Bodine lowered the shaky Ransome Haveril down to the bed. "I'll get Doc Dab here in two shakes," the landlord promised, and hurried away.

Jesse stepped to the window, pushed the curtains aside and looked out upon a section of the street; men on horseback were already pouring out of town in a gathering flood, headed toward the mountains, toward the bridge across Cottonwood Gulch where the hold-up had been attempted. He estimated that more than a score of riders, all armed, were hell-bent to overtake the fugitive bandits.

Taller by an inch or two was Jesse Bodine than when, two years before, he had turned his back upon Pleasant Valley, his face toward an unknown Yellow Jacket. In some things he had changed; in some he remained and would always remain the same. Sinewy and poised, there was the look of purpose to him; about his lean middle was the cartridge belt of the country and from it sagged the two heavy Colt revolvers which he had used so coolly, so efficiently, with such deadly skill today. Passengers on the stagecoach, he and Ransome Haveril had paid their way with gold which they

had made working for a cow outfit where a long valley just over the mountains had invited cattlemen and their feuds.

Jesse Bodine, for one, arrived at a time that seemed made for him. California, young today and lusty, was younger then, raw and primal. There were still *ranchos* so vast that a *vaquero* might ride all day without crossing an imaginary boundary line, the old Spanish grants and already some new American holdings. There were towns so sleepy and placid and good-humored that men didn't bother any more carrying their weapons abroad. But there were, too, the mountain towns, wild and tumultuous. From Sonora along the Mother Lode to Hangtown, Coloma, across to Nevada City, San Juan of the North—mountain towns, mining towns, hell-roaring towns populated by young men.

WHEN Doc Dabney came to attend to Ransome's wound, Sheriff Comstock came with him. Doc Dabney was young, though his full beard made him look older, and the sort of life he led added a semblance of further years; he was moderately drunk on arrival. Sheriff Comstock, likewise a bearded man who wore his imposing yellow whiskers in two forked prongs to make one remember the man who had murdered Uncle Joe on Buckeye Creek, had impressed Jesse Bodine as being a man in his forties, but was only twenty-eight.

Doc Dabney, humming a little song, got his eyes nicely focused, stiffened his back and went to work. He was not without skill, but he didn't know the meaning of gentleness and didn't care a snap of his fingers for causing pain. Ransome, bandaged, was ordered to bed, or else to sit still and get busy making some fresh blood: he was a fool not to have tied up his arm better; he had lost more blood than there was any sense losing. The thing for him to do now was eat lots of half-raw meat and fill himself up skin-tight with whisky. Dabney shut his little black bag, demanded his fee of five dollars but did not give Jesse back any change out of his gold ten, and lurched down the hall to the hotel bar to prove the worth of his own prescription.

"If there's anything you boys want," said the Sheriff, following the Doctor out, "just say so. This town's right grateful to you."

Jesse got his friend to bed and brought him strong, hot soup and black coffee from a Chinese restaurant across the street. It was mid-afternoon when they had come racing into town; it was early blue dusk with the first stars out when the self-appointed posse that had stormed out to the Cottonwood Bridge came straggling back empty-handed, jaded and disgusted—and thirsty. Ransome partook of more soup, this time followed up with a good stiff hot toddy, and dropped off into troubled sleep.

IT was dark when Jesse Bodine stepped out to see what the town was like by lamplight and candle-light. He had combed his long black hair straight back and wore his hat on it at an angle; he had dusted his high black boots and had shaken out his red-and-black-checked shirt, whipping the dust out of that too; as he strode along the creaking plank sidewalk the two revolvers bumped at his lean hips. He mingled with other young men who, like himself, expressed their youth in the way they dressed, the way they wore their side-arms, spurs too, some of them, and the way they walked.

He glanced interestedly in at every door he passed; it was a fresh, pleasant summer evening, and most of the doors stood hospitably open. A saloon, little shops of one sort or another—eating-places, jeweler, watchmaker and goldsmith, general store, postoffice,—saloon again—two saloons to any one of another sort of place. Inside were coal-oil lamps with silvered reflectors; their light straggled out across the sidewalk, weakening toward the middle of the road. Early as was the hour there was a busy hum throughout the main street of Yellow Jacket.

Jesse Bodine stepped in through one of the saloon doors and went to the bar and called for his drink. He didn't exactly want it; whisky had played a small part in his life and that small part had caused him to regard it shrewdly and a thought suspiciously; he drank now as an excuse for crossing the threshold away from the sense of being alone and into a warm company. The man behind the bar scarcely glanced at him; setting forth bottle and glass, he was raking in the silver dollar,—one of Jesse's few remaining ones,—when a voice boomed out:

"Hey there, Blacky! Don't you know who your customer is?"

Blacky, well named, glanced up briefly.

"No, I don't," he said. "Why? Aint his money no good?"

"It's Jesse Bodine!" And Jesse wondered how the man with the booming voice knew; later he discovered that many knew, having had the information more or less directly from Dan Comstock.

"Who'n hell is Jesse Bodine?" asked the bartender plaintively.

"He's the man that brought Long Peters' stage in today! Where was you anyhow when the stage come in?"

Blacky promptly shoved the silver dollar away from him.

"It's on the house, Bodine," he said as if by vote. "Drink hearty. Sorry I didn't see who it was."

"I'll pay for mine, thanks," said Jesse in that quiet way of his. He wasn't being nasty about it; he was simply negotiating a deal in the customary manner. He added, having no desire to appear discourteous: "You don't owe me anything."

"Have it your way," said Blacky, a fair man.

Jesse downed his drink and called for a cigar; he was passed the box of fat black torpedo-like things with very ornate red-black-and-gold bands about their bellies, the best the house afforded.

Later he stepped into other saloons, and generally asked only for a cigar. Most men knew who he was; he was the man who had brought in Long Peters' stage, after both Long Peters and the new express agent had been shot down; he had fought it out with the highwaymen.

HE heard them speak of the hold-up, some in angry voices, some casually as of a bit of interesting news. Some held that it was Joaquin Murietta's work, others laid the thing at the door of a man named Bedloe; both names he had heard mentioned by the little storekeeper who had been a passenger along with him. The consensus was that the desperadoes, no matter under whose bloody banner they went, were safe away this time. They had swooped down from the mountains; they had sped back into the mountains—the mountains with their thousand dark ravines and hidden valleys and caves would protect them.

Starlight, lamplight next, music now. Loud music it was, music with a quick beat like running feet, blatant music. He

saw a crowd of men surging into one of the larger and gaudier saloons, the most flamboyantly ornate in Yellow Jacket, the Silver Mirror it was called, and eased along through the swing doors with the surge and jostle of the throng. Behind the long bar was the glass that gave the place its name, a vastly long French mirror in a gilded frame that had come up from San Francisco only at the cost of infinite labor and care and an inordinate sum of money. The room was big and barnlike; at the farther end was a slightly raised stage of sorts; girls were very much in evidence.

At the moment of Jesse's entrance the whole bevy had gathered about one man like bees to the honeycomb. He was a tall man, tall even among so many other tall men, red-headed, red-bearded; there was red dirt, the dirt of the mines, on his heavy boots. He wore his battered old hat on the back of his head, and there was a leaping blue fire in his eyes. His coat was thrust back to right and left; his vest was of black and white cowhide with the hair still on it; he wore two big gold watches like gilded turnips; the watch-chains crossed, and they were made of nuggets strung on copper wire. The man, with the girls all about him, was talking.

"Roll up, gents, and name your poison," he shouted. "If you know me, you're welcome, and if you don't, you're welcome anyhow, but by God, if there's a man here that don't want to drink with Bud Weaver, let him git out! Me, I'm Bud Weaver, and I aint ashamed of it, and tonight I'm weaving it wide. Gents, tonight's my night to howl!"

And howl he did, like a prowling timber wolf, and the girls about him added shrill "Yee's!" and "Yippee's!" and men, yielding headlong to the contagion, laughed and shouted and stamped.

Bud Weaver cut his howl short-off and extended both long arms commandingly and called for "Silence!" and got it.

"I'm a-singing you a song," said Bud Weaver, and did so. The song was:

> Oh, my name's Sam,
> And I don't give a damn;
> I'd as soon be a nigger
> As a pore white man,
> I play my fiddle
> And I drink my dram
> Some folks don't like it
> But I don't give a damn!

Again his long-armed gesture silenced the room, quieting what might have been a mighty gust of applause. Men, in a community craving amusement, were amused.

"I was a cattle-man," he said this time. "All my life I was a cattle-man. Then I heard tell of this country, and I come along with some of you other boys to get me a carpet-bag full of gold. Well, I got it now; I've worked like a damn' mule and I got it, and it's right over yonder in the bank at this minute. Most of it is; I've held out plenty for tonight. Tonight the Silver Mirror the same as belongs to me." He turned his elongated frame slowly, seeking the proprietor; on focusing upon a swarthy, sleek-haired, long-mustachioed man at the far end of the bar, he challenged, "Aint that right, Jake?"

"Whatever you say, Bud!"

"Thank you, Jake," said Bud, very polite. "Like I say, boys, tonight is my night to howl and I'm hell-bent on doing it proper. Tomorrow morning I go to the bank and get my money, and I stomp the red dirt off'n my boot-heels and take a stage and go down into the Big Valley to buy me the damnedest cattle outfit you ever heard a man talk about in his dreams. This morning I sold out my claims to Big Copeland for a hundred and forty thousand dollars. That goes into my outfit, and the lovely mountain city of Yellow Jacket won't never see me no more. And now, gents, make your wishes known!" And for peroration he gave them a second wolf-like yowl that made the first seem like the whisper of a summer breeze.

Bud Weaver was well liked; that was one thing. For another thing, such an invitation as his made other quick, if but transient, friendships. Nothing was clearer than that the Silver Mirror was all set for an evening of high festivities. Or, if anything whatever was clearer just then to Jesse Bodine, it was that he had at long last come into port where he wanted to be, where a man could fill his hands with wealth like a child gathering wild flowers, where a man in rude clothes with the soil still on his hands and the red dirt on his boots, could spend like a king.

BUT of a sudden, with sounds of hilarity beating against him, like waves against an insensate rock, he lost all sense of the roisterers, his attention riveted elsewhere. His eyes came to a chance meeting with another pair of eyes bent steadily upon him from across the room,

and he saw a man he remembered, a man one did not forget though seen only once, and even after a long lapse of time.

It was the gambler, Claude Purcell, the man who had forcibly drawn his attention more than a year ago, that day at Temlock's trading-station; Ransome Haveril, too, had noted him, demanding, "Is he a minister?" Since that day many names of people had chimed along with names of towns in Jesse Bodine's ears: Joaquin Murietta, whom he had heard mentioned today; the Bedloes; Lola Montez, still echoing, and her little protégée Lotta of today; Rattlesnake Dick; Sonoro Jim; Claude Purcell.

IT struck Jesse Bodine that in any crowd, even with men jammed so close about him that he could scarcely breathe, this Claude Purcell would strangely seem aloof, an individual alien to the others. He was clad now as at Temlock's in long black coat, highly polished black boots, high silk hat. But it was not his garb that drew attention here in a place of all sorts of outlandish dress; where other men were ruddy or tanned almost to blackness, his thin face was white. Men said that the sun had not shone on Claude Purcell once in ten years; certainly he never appeared in public until dark. His trade was plied by night or else, if by day, in closed rooms.

But there was still something else. It was his eyes. Never had Jesse Bodine looked into eyes so dark and magnetic and penetrating.

A very faint smile touched the gambler's lips. He came straight across the room to Bodine and put his hand out; his slender fingers were cool and strong against Jesse's warm hand.

"Howdy, Mr. Bodine," he said in a pleasant, quiet voice. "I'm glad to see you again."

"Again?" said Jesse.

"I was making a trip by stage. You were at Temlock's place that day. Your friend was with you then, too; the man with his arm in a sling today."

"I remember seeing you at Temlock's," said Jesse. "I didn't know you had seen me."

The gambler remained for a few more gravely civil words, made no reference to the part Jesse had played in the affair at Cottonwood Bridge, and turned away to speak with someone else, leaving with Jesse the queer impression that he was to see Purcell again—since somehow, for whatever reason, the gambler had been studying him and intended to see more of him. When Claude Purcell left the room Jesse Bodine's eyes followed him.

Meantime Bud Weaver, who had set out to have the time of his life, was going splendidly. He was a man of strong constitution and could drink like a horse, and that was the way he was drinking. And already, not satisfied with the pyramiding expenses piling up for his holiday as men lined up at the bar three deep to drink his health over and over again, he was freely dispensing largesse with his own hands. The girls admired his watch-chains, did they? He told them with profane emphasis that he was glad that they did; as for him he was sick and tired of the sight of common, raw gold; he wouldn't touch an ounce of it again ever in his life with a ten-foot pole unless it was made up neatly into nice clean shiny coins. He ripped both chains from their moorings—they seemed to come up by the roots, the dangling timepieces like tubers; he stripped the nuggets from their copper chains and pressed them into the eager, rosy palms itching for the touch of the sordid ore so newly riven from the dirt. After he had given away the watches, too—two of the girls wore them ostentatiously about their bare necks—he dusted his hands off.

"Now suppose you ladies step up on the platform and entertain the gents," he suggested. "Sing, dance, anything! You've saw the show girls, some of you, down in San Francisco? Well, then!"

They "Yee'd!" and "Yippee'd!" and scampered to the low platform, and men craned their necks to watch. One of them with a pure, sweet, liquid voice was singing "When the Roses Come Again" as Jesse Bodine, mindful of Ransome Haveril alone in his room, went out and returned to the hotel. He found Ransome asleep, a bit restless and flushed, but certainly just as well left alone as companioned. So Jesse returned to the street.

THE sidewalks were empty now, save for an occasional solitary figure or a small group passing from one saloon or gaming-house to another. There was a brilliant galaxy of stars, some of them seeming to burn like steady fires upon the dark ridges of the mountains and the frogs croaked down in a marshy place and the night was filled with beauty. Already the subdued hum of voices

had grown in volume; it was as though Yellow Jacket were a sprawling, loose-limbed giant muttering in its sleep.

Not ten steps from the hotel door Jesse met the gambler, likewise strolling and seemingly aimless. His hands were under his coat tails, his head was back as if he were remarking within himself upon the beauty of the starry sky, and he was slowly smoking a cigar. He halted.

"How is young Haveril?" he asked.

"Asleep. I guess he's doing all right."

"Not a doubt of it. Dr. Dabney says it's a good clean wound with no bone broken, no major blood-vessel torn. A day or two of rest and he'll be as good as new." They strolled along a few steps; Purcell said, "If you have nothing in particular to do, no special place to go, I'd be glad to have you stop in at my cabin for a chat. I'd like to get to know you better, Bodine."

"Thank you, sir," said Jesse. "I'd be glad."

PURCELL'S cabin, a neat two-room affair of logs, stood as if slightly aloof like Claude Purcell himself, at the north edge of the town. Young Bodine, vaguely flattered yet also vaguely distrustful since he failed to understand why he should awaken any interest in a man like Claude Purcell, was faintly ill at ease at first on entering the gambler's sitting-room. To the younger man the place reeked with elegance; this was the first time in his life he had ever set his foot on a carpet. Yet the carpet was there, a rich, expensive Turkey red, and his dusty boots were perforce making marks on it. There were four mahogany chairs, a mahogany table with marble top, a lamp with a sparkling fringe of prismatic crystals about the glowing shade.

Purcell proffered a box of cigars; the two sat and stretched out their legs; for a time the gambler gracefully made conversation. What Jesse already knew, that he had to do with a man of some degree of culture, was further impressed upon him. He saw a shelf with books on it; there was a stack of newspapers; he made out a copy of the Atlanta *Constitution* on top.

"I wonder what I've got that Claude Purcell wants?" he kept thinking.

Presently Bud Weaver and his night of howling was mentioned. That faint smile touched the gambler's face.

"Bud's a good sort," he said. "This country needs more men like him, steady

and honest and capable and industrious. And though he hasn't thought it all out for himself, he's one of the leaders of a new movement out here. These men have been raping the land to rip the gold out of it; it's time that men developed the land. They're beginning to turn into the fertile valleys, to build up big ranches, to live like civilized human beings. Bud is dreaming a bigger dream tonight than he knows."

Conversation drifted. Or perhaps it was rather that it seemed adrift while being smoothly and adroitly steered. Mr. Purcell who, it appeared, knew every town of any size or interest—that meant money and gambling, poker preferably—in the State, spoke interestingly and held young Bodine's attention, for Jesse wanted to know all that he could of the wonders and opportunities of California and estimated that no man could better inform him than Claude Purcell. Once Purcell asked casually:

"Do you care for poker yourself, Mr. Bodine?"

And Jesse was swift to wonder, Is that it? Has he got it in his head somehow that I've got money?

"I do like to play poker," he said frankly, "but I'm no great hand at it yet."

Purcell smiled.

"I'm glad you added that 'yet'." He leaned forward, gently brushed the overlong ash from his cigar, was still a moment and then said gravely, "You've got it in you, Mr. Bodine, to be a great poker-player. As great at poker as I am; perhaps greater." And he sat back and began speaking of other chance matters.

"FOR the most part," he said, "you'll find Yellow Jacket a quiet and peaceful spot; men are busy here and mind their own business and so keep out of trouble and the making of trouble. Your coming chanced to be at a rather noisy time, what with the stage-robbery attempted, and now the farewell party of our good friend Bud Weaver. On most occasions, however—"

Without warning and quite soundlessly his door was flung open and three men stepped into the room.

"Stay just as you are now," said one of the men, the one slightly in front of the others. He was a small, very dark man; he looked to be of Latin extraction. He, like the two larger, blonder men close behind him, looked full of determined business, as did the weapons in their hands; the three pairs of eyes were menacing, suspiciously watchful.

One of the three kicked the door shut. Neither Jesse Bodine nor Claude Purcell stirred. They were smoking; as it happened each at the moment was holding his cigar in the fingers of his left hand; the gambler's right hand was on his chest, fingers fanlike, his thumb in his vest armhole; Jesse's lay on the table, idly fingering the rim of an ash-tray.

"WHAT do you boys want, Mike?" asked Purcell, quietly.

"You know what we want, Purcell. And we're going to get it."

"Money, I suppose?"

Into Mike's dark face came a flush.

"We aint no damn' thieves an' you know it, Claude," he said, harsh and surly. "An' it aint your money we're after. It's Charley King's. No," he added slowly, "it aint Charley's no longer. It's Mrs. King's now, Charley's widder. Her'n her two little girls'."

"So Charley King is dead? I'm sorry," Purcell lifted his brows; he shook his head and did look sorry. "What happened to him?"

"You did," said one of the larger men; though he shifted restlessly, he kept his heavy, big-barreled pistol trained on the gambler's upper chest. "You played him poker not two weeks ago, over to Grass Valley. Charlie lost nine thousand dollars to you. Him and his old woman was savin' that, gettin' ready to move and take their youngsters back home, back East. Charley couldn't go home and face 'em. He got drunk instead; he stayed drunk day and night; finally he shot himself."

"Mr. Bodine," said Purcell.

"Yes, Mr. Purcell?"

"You keep out of this. Understand? No matter what happens, you keep out."

"All right," said Jesse.

"You're damn' right he'll keep out!" said Mike. "Unless he wants his guts shot full of holes."

"So," mused the gambler aloud. "Charley King loses some money to me in a poker game, then goes out and gets drunk and shoots himself, and you boys come all the way over here from Grass Valley to belly-ache to me and ask for Charley's money back?"

"You got it, Purcell," said Mike.

The gambler shrugged.

"It's a new one on me," he said, and shook his head again and seemed to sigh over the thing. "I remember when I was a boy and we used to play marbles for keeps, there was always some watery-eyed, leaky-nosed boy who wanted his marbles back when he lost. I wouldn't have said that you boys graded up that way."

There was anger in Mike's eyes and in the eyes of his two companions, and Jesse Bodine felt that three fingers fairly itched on the triggers of their guns. The third of the trio spoke up now for the first time; it was as though all three meant to go on record as pressing equally the case of the late Charley King.

"You got a reputation as a square gambler, Purcell," he said. "How you got it, I don't know. There aint no such animal. You're as crooked as the rest of your lot, which is to say as crooked as a dog's hind leg. You didn't win Charley's money; you cheated him out of it. And me, for one, I'd just as leave you made as much as a move right now as to wiggle your ears; that'd be all the excuse I want to blow you clean to hell."

CLAUDE PURCELL did not oblige; he did not stir a muscle as he sat looking thoughtfully at his visitors.

"So Claude Purcell had to cheat to win from a man like Charley King, did he?" he asked at last. "That's nonsense. Still, have it your way. It's nine thousand dollars you came to get, isn't it? Gentlemen, I'll raise no argument. You have the drop on me, and the game is made and I lose; your three sixes top my hand. Will you go on your way quietly now, accepting my word that I'll send the money over to you within ten days?"

They jeered at him for taking them for fools.

"Your word," said Mike, "aint worth a grain of fool's gold with any of us, Purcell. We'll take the money now. And don't say you aint got it, because we know better or we wouldn't be here. Cough up and make it lively."

"I've a notion to see you in hell first," said the gambler equably.

"You'll be there a long way ahead of us. Better get another notion."

Purcell sighed. "Perhaps you're right. Yes, I've the nine thousand, and you might as well have it now. It's in the

other room, in my strong-box. The key is in my vest pocket. Shall I move my hand enough to get the key for you?"

"Keep still!" roared out the man nearest the door. "Don't twitch a finger or I'll let you have it!"

"Last time it was my ears," said Purcell.

"Stay just like you are—both of you," warned Mike, and moved slowly forward. "I'll get the key. Which pocket, Purcell?"

"Lower left vest pocket," said Purcell.

Mike drew so near that his coat brushed the gambler's, and all the while kept his gun trained upon the higher portion of the vest mentioned, and all the while his two companions were as watchful for treachery as two old tomcats eying a promising rat-hole. But what happened next was too swift for any of them.

Even Jesse Bodine couldn't have told how a small, silvered pistol got into Claude Purcell's hand as the gambler fairly exploded into incredibly fast action. He shot Mike square between the eyes; he shot one of Mike's companions through the bared brown throat; he shot the other man three times, once high up through the chest, then again through the chest as the man stood rocking on his feet, then between the eyes as he had shot Mike. Before Mike's body struck the floor both other men were falling. And not a man of the three had fired a single shot.

JESSE BODINE found himself on his feet, his own gun in his hand, staring in shocked bewilderment. Slowly Purcell rose from his chair, the sluggish smoke dribbling out of the short barrel of his gun. There was a very slight narrowing of his cold, hard eyes—not another hint of expression on his face.

"I'll step along and tell the Sheriff about it," he said. "He likes to keep law and order operating in Yellow Jacket, and most of us here are with him in that."

Jesse Bodine moistened his lips; they had gone harsh and dry.

"Shall I come with you? If you want a witness—"

Purcell shrugged and dropped his gun down to the table.

"My word is enough with Comstock. If he wants more—well, he can come back with me and see how things stand here. It's a clear enough case of self-defence. But you won't want to stay here with this company. We'll just close the door and leave things as they are."

They walked back toward the heart of Yellow Jacket; and there was a hollow sound from the wooden sidewalk under their heels. The gambler asked a man or two if he had seen Comstock; Jesse returned thoughtfully to the hotel to look in on Ransome Haveril again.

THIS time he found his friend awake and sitting up in the chair by the open window, rocking back and forth in pain, and cursing fretfully.

"Where you been, Jess?"

"Nowhere. Here, I'll make you another hot toddy."

"Yes. Make it strong as hell. In another minute I'd have been biting my arm off. God, it hurts!"

He drank half a tumbler of hot whisky in hot water with sugar, and drew a long grateful breath. Then he crawled back to his bed and shut his eyes. . . .

Jesse sat in the chair, not rocking but tensely still, and looked out into the night where there was a slice of earth and sky between the corners of the hotel and the adjacent building. Had Purcell cheated the way those men said he had, he wondered. Was there a strong-box in the next room, and was the money in it, and was the key in Purcell's pocket? Where did that gun come from that all of a sudden was in the gambler's hands? And what did Purcell want from him?

After a while Ransome dozed off again; and Jesse Bodine, of less mind now for sleep than ever, sat on in his chair for a long time; then, restless, he tiptoed out. He judged it must be about three o'clock; yet Yellow Jacket's many saloons weren't thinking of time. He turned toward the Silver Mirror, attracted by the thunderous shouts coming from that direction. Bud Weaver, he supposed, was still making mad carousal. He was right. And he was just in time to be treated to a curious sight:

Coming toward him at some little distance beyond the Silver Mirror, were two figures walking down the middle of the road. One was a very tall man; he could make out that much even in the poor light of the hour. The other, far slighter and shorter figure, could have been almost anything; Jesse Bodine's first eerie impression was that the bigger man had captured and was conveying a sheeted ghost, for surely there was a flutter of white, and he could not know on the instant that it was the flutter of an angrily

expostulating little man's nightshirt. Then a crowd of men came surging out of the Silver Mirror, shouting and laughing and stamping, a crowd at the top of hilarity, and obscured his view. Coming closer, he got the explanation.

Bud Weaver had run out of ready cash; he had arrived with sudden unexpectedness at the moment when he could not find on his person anywhere, no matter how he rifled his pockets, a nugget or a coin or so much as a pinch of gold-dust; and this had happened when he felt he had only started to celebrate. Inspired, he had marched off to the cabin where the banker of Yellow Jacket lived; he had done the direct thing in the direct way; and now, in high good humor despite the little man's yanks and tugs and seething expostulations, was jabbing the nose of his gun into the small of the little man's back and ordering him to open his bank and produce what was Bud Weaver's. And this time Bud wasn't contented with a paltry thousand dollars; he carried his heavily weighted carpet-bag into the Silver Mirror. Jesse Bodine saw him vanish through another flutter, that of the bright dresses of the young ladies of the place.

JESSE BODINE passed beyond the outer fringe of the town, into a rutted road; and quitting the road, climbed a little way up the flank of the rocky hill; he sat in the silence on a flat stone, his gaze upon the town's dark outline dotted with dim lights.

He took sober stock of this place, what he could see of it by day and night, what he could sense of it. He knew that it was not all mad merriment like tonight's, for these men were horny-handed with the labor of their days; it was not all banditry and such violence as had taken place in the gambler's cabin. There were the mining claims where strong, purposeful fingers clawed the soft, yellow, mighty gold from the bosom of the earth. And beyond the reach of his physical vision but strongly vivid in his mind's eye, were the valley lands and the peaceful, busy towns; the enormous cattle ranges, mile after mile of them. He looked at the sleeping world with the eyes of a young conqueror biding his time. Like Bud Weaver and others before him, he dreamed of his own kingdom. And, unlike Bud Weaver in this, he thought he began to see another way of coming swifter and straighter to his heart's desire.

The sky along the eastern horizon was paling, slowly, steadily; the stars were waning and losing their glory in the coming glory of a new day, and the air was sweet and clean, fresh from the mountains with their pines, on the little newborn breeze. Jesse breathed deep, as he walked back to his room.

He went to his room and slept, sitting in the rocking-chair by the window with the gentle stir of air fanning his face. He and Ransome slept for hours. It was he who woke first. He went out to the stoop to wash; the water was deliciously cold on his hands and face, on his bared arms and chest and head.

He returned to the street, hunting a place that should be open by now where he could get breakfast. The sidewalks were all but deserted; the night's roisterers had gone their way to work or to sleep. He saw one still figure sitting on the edge of the sidewalk, legs hanging down to the street, shoulders humped over, hat drawn forward over a concealed face.

The man looked up. A pair of heavy-lidded and red-rimmed eyes turned up to him, then drifted away. Near the man's feet, empty in the dust, was an old carpet-bag.

"I'm waiting for the Silver Mirror to open up," said Bud Weaver wearily. "I left my watches there for safekeeping. I bought 'em back from those girls last night, and gave 'em to Jake to keep for me. A man can't tell what time it is with no watches, can he?"

A cheery call came from across the street, where the cook looked out of his little lunch-counter.

"Hi, Bud! Better come over and get a cup of coffee. It's on the house."

Bud Weaver shook his head and winced and shut his eyes tight a moment.

"I'm waiting for Jake to open up. I left my watches at the Silver Mirror. I want to know what time it is, and there aint a damn' watch in this town I'd trust but mine."

The lunch-counter man came across the road. He was laughing as he said:

"Why don't you open it yourself, Bud? You've got the key yet, aint you?"

"Me? What are you talking about?" He fumbled in his pockets and found a long brass key. He looked blank. "How'n hell did I get it?" he demanded. "I didn't kill Jake for it, did I?"

"You bought the Silver Mirror from him," laughed the other man, and winked at Jesse. "Don't you remember?"

Bud Weaver thought this over, for a long time.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said. He got stiffly to his feet, knocked his hat-brim back and went to the saloon, key in hand. "I want to see what time it is," he said as he opened the door and went in.

Chapter Six

RANSOME HAVERIL'S wound healed rapidly, and his strength came flooding back. He and Jesse had a cabin together on the edge of town, like the gambler's. Ransome made friends on every hand, and news of all sorts flowed to him; he it was who brought Jesse Bodine word of newly discovered possibilities of Cold Creek. Within a week the two were working their own claims there, instructed in the use of tools by other men, red-shirted and shaggy-bearded, working above and below them. For a time they worked hard from dawn to dark, swinging with pick, heaving with shovel, moving boulders out of their way and sending them rolling to land with a great splash in the creek-bottom; squatting over the pans in which they washed their gold.

After a month they felt like old-timers here in Yellow Jacket. They knew everyone, they had learned their way about. And they estimated that they had done well. They had not turned up an individual nugget worth a thousand dollars, despite always a secret high hope; but in a snug hiding-place under one of the hand-hewn puncheons of their floor their joint pile of dust and watermelon-seed and a few small nuggets satisfied them. At the end of the month, having promised themselves to wait a full four working weeks, they weighed in on Harry Trimble's scales, and when they cut the pile in two, each had close to four hundred dollars.

"Man!" cried Ransome. "Just greenhorns, we can knock out ten-fifteen dollars a day apiece! That's just run o' the mill, too. And one of these days—"

They trimmed each other's hair; they scrubbed, and Jesse shaved while Ransome trimmed a beard of which daily he grew prouder. Ransome went to the store—they took that Saturday afternoon off, and all Sunday too, a thing which many others did—and bought new boots and hat, a flaming red shirt, new socks, an elegant pair of pants with stripes. Jesse fared forth in his turn, and all that Ransome could see new was a tall and shiny pair of black boots.

Early that night Ransome started out to do the town. He dropped in at every saloon and amused himself with the various games, roulette and faro and chuck-a-luck; he met up with his friends for much talk and laughter and the necessary trips to the bar; he opened wine for the camp girls at the Silver Mirror. And he made new friends.

Tonight he was to cement a new friendship which was to have far-reaching effects not only in his own life but in that of certain others, Jesse Bodine's among them. He was seated at one of the Silver Mirror's small tables, a bottle and glasses between him and the prettiest, youngest and altogether liveliest of the Silver Mirror girls, a golden-haired, blue-eyed Southern miss, when a newcomer to Yellow Jacket dawned on his view for the first time, on the girl's for but the second time. She emitted a small smothered squeal.

"Misteh Ransome, suh, just look yonder and see what I see!" crooned Peaches.

HERE was one who had ridden far that day, a young dandy from one of the Spanish *ranchos* farther south. His boots were the smallest and shiniest and of the highest heels ever to come Yellow Jacket's way; the hat had a low crown, a very broad stiff brim, an ornate silvered band; about the man's waist was a scarlet silk sash into which were thrust two ivory-handled pistols and a long ivory-hafted knife. The man had a small dark face, and wore a gold chain about his brown throat from which hung an oval locket big as a silver dollar; a tiny mustache as black as his eyes was twisted to end in needle points.

"What is it?" grinned Ransome.

"A very grand Spanish don," said the enthusiastic Peaches. "He came once befoh. He is Don Philip Something-or-Other from La Fiesta. He will see me, and then he will come oveh to ouah table—and you will offeh him a drink, won't you, Misteh Ransome, deah?"

The young don, as his liquid eyes swept the room, could not have failed to see Miss Peaches, for she craned her creamy neck far and parted her welcoming red lips into a luscious smile. But

he moved straight to the bar, whipping his pantaloons idly with his soft-leather gauntlets, and paid her not the slightest attention.

Ransome laughed. Also he protested.

"Look here, you're having a bottle of wine with me. How about turning those great big eyes and that murdering smile my way? Here's happiness, Peaches."

"I don't care," pouted Peaches. "He just didn't see me. He said such nice things to me the otheh time; he told me my eyes were brighteh than stars, and that when he rode at night and saw the stars he would always be remembering me. And his voice was just like singing."

"With him, maybe that's all it was, just a song," Ransome teased her.

"Misteh Ransome!" She set her hat at a defiant angle, a monstrous pink hat —parasol size, with a drooping ostrich feather. "If you was a Southe'n gentleman, you wouldn't say such things!"

"Only from as far south as Kentucky," chuckled Ransome.

A COUPLE of hours later when the Silver Mirror's piano was being thumped by a mournful-looking, droopy-eyed and droopy-mustached man, and the bevy was on the platform, singing and cavorting for the delectation of the crowd, Ransome found himself packed elbow-to-elbow with Don Felipe Moraga in the throng. He felt something strike his hand with a light tap, and looking down, saw that it was Moraga's chain and locket. The clasp had somehow come open; only Ransome's quick, lucky gesture saved the bauble from slithering on down underfoot.

The locket flew open in his palm; within was a miniature, beautifully painted; and Ransome gasped out under his breath:

"Lord! She's the prettiest thing any man ever saw!"

Don Felipe's delicate, well-kept hands, were softly applauding what was going forward on the stage. He said absently:

"Pardon? I thought you addressed me, señor."

"Your locket," said Ransome, and held it up, still open. "It fell."

Don Felipe took it quickly then, and closed it with a snap. He strove to bow after his own graceful fashion.

"Thank you, señor," he said courteously, but with no warmth in his tone. His eyes on Ransome's now were cold and unfriendly. "And you said, señor?"

"Just that she is mighty beautiful, the girl in your locket."

Don Felipe's eyes narrowed; then he said briefly: "It is my sister."

That, of course, was to stop talk. Ransome had no doubt that he lied, but let it go at that. Just the same, the image of the girl, lovely like a dark flower, remained pictured in the eyes of his heart. He had meant what he had said.

The number on the stage was over; the girls were coming down, and Ransome was moving away when Don Felipe's voice, softer now, and without malice, stopped him:

"I am ashamed that I spoke as I did, señor. I cherish that locket with my heart. I did not make you understand that my gratitude is for you, all of it."

"That's all right," said Ransome lightly. "Glad I noticed it."

"Might I be permitted to make my amends in a glass of wine, señor?"

The two drank together, and one drink led to another. They went out of the Silver Mirror arm in arm. They introduced themselves and shook hands: Mr. Ransome Curtis Haveril from Pleasant Valley, formerly of Kentucky; Señor Don Felipe Antonio Maria Moraga, of La Fiesta.

"Tonight, señor, I am in Yellow Jacket just for fun!" Don Felipe's eyes twinkled and the feet in his small tight boots began tapping. "I ride the sixty miles from La Fiesta to play! *Bueno!* They are gay here on a Saturday night; cards to play, music to hear—and *las muchachas* to dance!"

THEY were drawn to each other, these two; they sat in a dim corner of a long barroom and smoked together and drank together, and liked each other better all the while. It wasn't long before Ransome could refer again to the girl in the picture.

"It is nothing but only the truth, Señor Haveril! She is my little sister. She is only sixteen now and I am already twenty-four—on my birthday she gives me this locket! I wear it at all times. She is like an angel, the little Juanita; her brother is sometimes a bad boy, and needs a little angel over his heart to make him be good again!"

He laughed softly and lifted the miniature to his lips.

And that struck Ransome Haveril as strange, hardly conduct befitting a man full grown, but he made allowance for Spanish blood.

"I've heard talk about the old Spanish grants," he said, with a purpose in the back of his mind. "Bigger than all get-out, they say. They say each man's place is like his own kingdom, sort of. And I've heard of the Spanish towns, like Monterey."

"Amigo!" cried Don Felipe. "You are going to come along with me to visit us at La Fiesta! You are going to see one of the oldest and finest *ranchos,* and the best horses in California! My mama and papa will be glad when I bring you to them. Yes, you are going to come along with me. *No?"*

"Come with you? There's nothing I'd like better, Don Philip," said Ransome. "I've never seen one of your big California *ranchos."* And he had never seen a prettier girl than Don Felipe's little sister.

LATER, as conversation wandered, Bud Weaver's name was mentioned. Young Moraga's countenance darkened.

"I have been hoping to see Mr. Bud Weaver," he said, frowning. "From what everyone says of him he is a fine man. Just the man that all of us at La Fiesta wanted for a neighbor. You see, señor, this Bud Weaver was to buy a ranch adjoining ours; he even had an option on it. He did not come as he had promised. And now, here in Yellow Jacket, I have heard an explanation. They say that he celebrated his departure from Yellow Jacket too soon; that now his money is all gone." He shrugged and sighed and fell to drumming on the table.

"There is another man who wants the Rancho Monte," he went on. "He will get it, now that Bud Weaver cannot. He is a man I do not like, señor; nobody who knows him likes that man. I am going to tell you who he is, and I only can hope that he is no friend of yours or of any friends of yours. It is a man named Willard Breen. Hackamore Breen, they call him. Do you know him?"

"Here I thought I knew everybody in Yellow Jacket, and I never heard of any Willard Breen."

"Oh, he does not dwell here; he is almost a newcomer to our country, and is always on the go, looking for something; he has much, much money, they say, and I suppose it was the ranch he was always hunting. Until he found El Rancho Monte. But he comes here often; when there is a big poker-game, there is this man Breen, and there are many big poker-games at the Silver Mirror. He is in town tonight, because I saw him." Again he sighed and drummed on the table. "Tomorrow, like me, he will be riding south, I bet you. To try to be a neighbor to the Moragas! Maybe some day I am going to have to kill that man."

ON the sidewalk again, smoking their cigarettes and idling, Ransome saw Jesse Bodine walking alone. Ransome called and Jesse stopped.

"Meet a friend of mine, Jesse," said Ransome. "He's Don Felipe Moraga from the big Fiesta Ranch, sixty miles south of here. I'm riding down with him to see his place tomorrow. Don Philip, this is my friend and pardner, Jesse Bodine."

They shook hands, Jesse gravely as was his fashion, measuring as best he could this new "friend" of the gregarious Ransome's, Don Felipe with a warm smile.

"Ever heard of a fellow named Breen —Willard Breen?" Ransome asked.

Jesse nodded. "Yes. He's playing poker tonight at the Silver Mirror; Claude Purcell told me of him. Why?"

"Nothing. Don Philip just mentioned him, that's all."

"And you, Mr. Bodine?" Moraga asked. "You are playing too?"

Again Jesse nodded.

"That is what I should like to do!" cried the young Spaniard. "I have brought some money with me, five hundred dollars." Then he laughed deprecatingly and shrugged. "With Claude Purcell in the game, one knows who wins!"

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Moraga?" Jesse Bodine's voice was cold.

"Oh, I don't mean that there is anything that is not honest in Mr. Purcell's game! He has a name for being a square gambler. But he has a skill at the game that no other men seem to have."

"Still you want to play?"

"But what is money for? It is for amusement, surely. To sit in a game with Mr. Purcell, a thing I have never done, would be, I think, something to remember! Yes, yes; I would like it."

"And you won't mind," laughed Ransome, "if your friend Breen sits in too?"

Moraga looked at him very soberly.

"Maybe God is going to deal a Moraga all the high cards tonight," he said. "To win all that fellow's money—ah, that would be like a good dream turning true."

The three went along together to the Silver Mirror. Jake Epperson was again behind the bar—his bar. For it appeared that again he was proprietor here. The three got a part of the story a minute later when Jake ushered them into a small back room; Claude Purcell was there already, leaning back in his chair. So was Bud Weaver, who wanted to play; so was Breen, the man whom Don Felipe did not like.

Bud Weaver was talking:

"And after all, I reckon the luckiest thing I done that night was to buy this place. I didn't want it, but all the rest of my money faded, and anyhow I woke up next day owning the best barroom in town. Howsomever, Jake's back in town and back behind the bar. He's got the Silver Mirror back, and I've got the cash, or part of it. And that's how come I'm horning in tonight with you boys."

WHEN he had finished, Claude Purcell got to his feet and made the necessary introductions. Jesse Bodine shook hands with Willard Breen and with Bud Weaver; Ransome Haveril followed suit. Don Felipe grasped Bud's hand, but only bowed a stiff little bow to Breen. Breen smiled, then touched his neat brown mustache and wiped the smile away. He was a young man; he was lean and sinewy and brown, his eyes a sharp, cold blue. He impressed both Jesse and Ransome unfavorably: he was a crafty man, or his constantly narrowing eyes belied him—and a cruel one, or that cruel, thin-lipped mouth under the neat mustache meant nothing.

"Count me out," Ransome Haveril said when they drew chairs up to the table. "I'll watch a couple of minutes, if you don't mind, then move along." He clapped a hand on his new friend's shoulder. "I'll be looking in on you later, Don Philip," he promised.

"Where I come from," said Willard Breen coldly, "a man either sits in to a game or finds his fun somewhere else."

It was as good as a slap in the face, not only for Ransome but for his friends, as if saying bluntly: "I don't know you, and some of these others do. How do I know what tip-offs you'd like to give?"

Don Felipe flushed hotly and started to speak; even the quiet Jesse Bodine stared angrily; but Claude Purcell said in a businesslike way:

"Mr. Breen is right, boys. It's a custom here in Yellow Jacket, and no offence meant."

"I'll go," said Ransome promptly. But he hung on his heel long enough for a steady glare at Willard Breen. Ransome went out just as Jake Epperson came in with cards and chips; a roustabout at his heels brought whisky-bottles, water and glasses, setting them down on a small side-table where already there was a box of cigars.

Jake pulled up his chair, fingered the chips before him and invited cheerily:

"Name what you'll take, boys. Chips are free as long as you pay for them." Then he laughed. That was Jake's way of starting a game, Jake's little joke.

"I'll take a thousand bucks to start with," said Bud Weaver. "Just to grease my play."

With Jake banking, the game started.

Jesse Bodine lost every cent he had that night. When he arose from the table and stretched, shortly after midnight, he was, so far as money went, as clean as a hound's tooth, but in his eyes was eagerness, battle-lust. Tonight he was through, but there were to be other nights; many of them.

Long before he had shoved his last chip into the pot, he had seen young Moraga shaken free of his ultimate *peso*.

"Too bad, Moraga," Willard Breen said as he raked in a nice little stack, Moraga's last. The young fellow's eyes flashed, but he only smiled, shrugged and said: "*Gracias, caballeros.* It was good fun, no? And now I will go and look for my friend Señor Haveril."

BEFORE Jesse Bodine was forced out, he had had a run of luck; he had played his cards shrewdly enough, and had won more than he had ever won in his life; at one time he was better than a thousand dollars ahead. But then he ran afoul of the saloonkeeper Jake Epperson, who took him down for fully a quarter of his stack. He won small pots after that; no sizable one. Then he ran into Willard Breen looking for him. Jesse had estimated Breen at holding a full house at best; he himself had four sevens. Breen showed four queens.

That little smile of Breen's hurt a man more than a blow. And there was nothing to do about it.

"Going, Mr. Bodine?" asked Claude Purcell. "Will you do me a small favor?" He drew a small morocco-bound memorandum-book from his pocket, and a filigreed gold pencil; he tore out a leaf and wrote a few words in a fine copperplate hand. He tendered this to Jesse,

saying: "Will you glance at this memo as you go, and if it's all right, hand it to Chris? You know him? He's tending bar in Jake's place."

Wondering, Jesse took the paper and went out; as he closed the door, he heard Breen suggesting that, with but the four playing now, they cut the joker in. This was being done as Jesse closed the door.

HE looked curiously at the note. It was written to him, and said:

If you'll hand this to Chris, he'll stake you to a thousand dollars. That's in case you'd like to come back into the game. And if you lose you can take your time paying me.

He crumpled the note in his hand. Why on earth should Claude Purcell want to lend Jesse Bodine, almost a stranger, a thousand dollars? "He isn't Santa Claus," he muttered to himself. "What have I got that a man like Claude Purcell would want?"

Returning to the door, he looked in. "All taken care of, Mr. Purcell," he said. "And I was to say thanks to you. Good night, boys."

He strolled out into the open air, thinking. Just the glance he had had back into the card-room afforded food for thought; he had seen the way Bud Weaver was looking across the table at Willard Breen; there was naked red murder in Bud's eyes, and small wonder. All night Breen had been jeering at him from behind a thin mask; any man could see how those two hated each other. There was jovial, obvious, straight-from-the-shoulder Bud Weaver, who had had his heart set on the Monte Ranch, and who a few days ago had counted it as good as his own; there was the other man who hungered for the same beautiful acres and who now in his turn counted them in his pocket because Bud Weaver had to make a fool of himself with his money. Once Breen had said with a chuckle: "I'm buying me a ranch tomorrow; every dollar I rake in now helps to buy another herd." Bud Weaver winced so that all could see.

Bud Weaver lost twenty thousand dollars before three o'clock, and kicked his chair back and went growling to the bar. The bevy came fluttering, but he damned them out of his sight and got drunk alone. Next day he would go to the store, outfit himself again and once more turn his back to the valley lands, his face to the rocky hills where gold was.

In the end, with Jake Epperson saying sourly that he had enough, the spoils were pretty nearly evenly divided between Claude Purcell and Willard Breen.

Jesse Bodine had waited for the game to end and saw them come out when in a little while it would be day. Seeing his chance for a word alone with the gambler, he took it.

"That was mighty nice of you, to offer to stake me, Mr. Purcell," he said.

"Why not come over to my cabin with me?" asked Purcell. "We'll make a pot of coffee. I'd like a talk with you, Mr. Bodine."

The next day, then, these things happened:

Bud Weaver locked his hard hands about a pick-handle again.

Willard Breen rode nonchalantly southward and bought El Monte Rancho, thus at last becoming the Moragas' dreaded neighbor.

Ransome Haveril bought a horse from the only man in town with a horse for sale,—the man who cared for the stage-horses,—and rode away with Don Felipe for a week's visit at La Fiesta.

And Jesse Bodine found out what Claude Purcell wanted.

Chapter Seven

AFTER that night when men spoke of Claude Purcell it was more often than not to mention Jesse Bodine too. It was to say that Purcell and Bodine were here or there together; that they were in a big game over at Hang Town; that the two had played in the newest, swankiest gambling-place in San Francisco. Time rolled by: weeks, months, a full year. Then it was "Claude Purcell and Duke Bodine."

Duke Bodine! The name suited him. He dressed the part. Up and down the string of rollicking mining-camps and towns, down to the coast as far as Monterey, there was no more carefully dressed man than Duke Bodine. Black suited him; he stuck to it from glossy black boots, long-tailed black coat, trousers sometimes with a faint stripe, sometimes gray, but nearly always black; flowing black tie, a broad-brimmed black hat. He wore a large diamond on the little finger of his left hand. He had paid three thousand dollars for it from the winnings of a poker-game in the extravagant city which so short a while ago had been Yerba Buena.

He and Purcell had had a long talk that night after the game at the Silver Mirror; Duke Bodine was the result. Claude Purcell had said to him over their coffee in Purcell's cabin:

"Mr. Bodine, I make it a rule to respect each man's privacy, and I have no desire to enter yours unwelcomed. If I seem to grow too personal at any point, you have but to say the word and I'll draw off."

"Go ahead," said Jesse Bodine.

"I think that already you are fully aware of this fact: Money in almost limitless quantities is to be had here in California, and by any man who wants it. And all men do want it. You have realized that there are two ways to get it. One is to go out into the mines, drag the gold up out of the earth. The other way is to let other men do that—and hand it on to you. In my time I have tried both methods. You know which I have chosen."

WHEN he paused a moment, Jesse Bodine again said: "Go ahead."

"The gambling fever is always in men's blood," said the gambler. "In the blood of all men to some extent. Here in California, every man you meet has the betting urge strong upon him. Men go to their mines; they work like mules; they stay sober and keep away from towns; they come in with their gold, and insist immediately on spending wildly and on hitting the gaming tables. Of course all play to win. But most play, even more than that, for the sake of the game. And for the most part, Mr. Bodine, they do many other things far better than they play poker. Such men will never learn how to win at poker; they can't. You can. All you lack is experience. You are a born poker-player. You have intelligence, and poker is not a game of chance."

"And then, Mr. Purcell?"

"I have some money; I want more. I plan to open several gambling-houses. I am looking for a man like you. Let me assume that I know more about cards than you do; let me pass along to you some of the knowledge I've gleaned; play with me and other men a few times so that I can watch your game. Then come in with me."

To Jesse Bodine came a glow and a thrill. Already he had seen in Claude Purcell something of a superman; from now on the gambler was to him a sort of god. The two were seen together in big games. Purcell dissected every game after the session, win or lose; his talk had to do not only with the values of hands, the chances of the draw whether to a pair, two pair, threes or a bob-tailed flush, but with the "styles" of the men they played with. No detail connected with poker-playing was too slight to be noted. Before one of these games he said: "You watch Captain Randall; he's one of the biggest players in the country. Watch him without letting him know you are watching. If you ever see him scratch his jaw with his thumbnail, go after him! He'll be bluffing then. He's been doing that for years; he doesn't know it himself." Jesse Bodine remembered, and watched, and got his chance; with three tens in his own hand, he took six thousand dollars away from the Captain in a single pot. The Captain didn't have the full house that others thought he had; his thumbnail betrayed him.

Things like that, all sorts of things Jesse Bodine was taught and told by Claude Purcell. And now he was Duke Bodine, the gambler's stanchest friend and admirer, but, he thought, his own man. A man with a three-thousand-dollar diamond on his little finger, and fifty thousand dollars in a safe place.

And Duke Bodine, like most men—like Claude Purcell himself, and like Bud Weaver—was counting his present as only a stepping-stone to the thing he wanted: He had his eye on the Lazy Creek Ranch.

The Lazy Creek, the Monte which Hackamore Breen now owned, and the Moraga rancho, La Fiesta, were like three sleeping giants with their heads on one pillow, their monster forms spreading out in different directions. Duke Bodine had seen the three ranches, as a guest of the Moragas at the suggestion of his friend Ransome Haveril, and in his heart he had said of the Lazy Creek Ranch: "It's lying here asleep, waiting for me! And it won't be long."

SO the weeks passed and the months, and a full year.

During this time he and Ransome Haveril saw little of each other. Ransome stuck with their claim when Jesse pulled out and went his way with Purcell. The claim continued to disgorge its golden treasure, and Ransome began saving; he too meant some day to withdraw from the rough mountain country, to live in one of California's cities. But first of all, when he should become

a man of means, he was going to marry little Juanita Moraga. Twice a month he was a welcome visitor at La Fiesta.

ANOTHER man than Duke Bodine wanted the Lazy Creek Ranch and likewise meant to have it: this man was Hackamore Breen. What happened was Breen's doing. It gave Bodine the ranch, came close to bringing Hackamore Breen his death, and made Bodine an enemy. This was the way of it:

Lazy Creek Ranch had been aforetime Las Hermosas, a grant of many indefinite acres extending some twenty-odd miles in sprawling length, encompassing two lovely valleys extending up into mountain ravines, and had belonged to one of the old Spanish-Californians. Along had come one of the gringoes, a trickster from the East with holes in his pockets, a smooth tongue in his mouth and rascality in his head, a young man named Frank Brewster. He was plausible, and the Spanish-Californian was a generous and trusting soul. Brewster, in no hurry, yet losing little time, accomplished his aim: He married the Spanish-California gentleman's daughter and soon got his hands in the old gentleman's coffers. The ranch was already being robbed right and left by other plausible crooks whom the old Californian trusted; it wasn't long until Brewster had got it into very grave difficulties; in the end the family was dispersed, the ranch sold for a penny—and Brewster himself turned out to be the owner. That was some ten years before.

Next he grew dissatisfied; he had killed the cattle for their hides and tallow or had sold them off; his wife had now left him and gone to her mother's people in Monterey; Brewster was nicely trimmed by a cleverer crook than himself. During these ten years the ranch had been idle, deserted. Now he wanted to do what a few more months would force him to do willy-nilly, to get what ready money he could and hie him to greener pastures. He had heard of Duke Bodine's interest and sent word to him that he was ready to sell and knew that terms could be arranged.

Duke Bodine was in Yellow Jacket when he received the word from Frank Brewster. The message exuded an atmosphere of haste and secrecy. Bodine was to come alone; to meet Brewster that night in the card-room which was to be kept private for them at Shingle John's saloon in the little valley town of

Shingle. It was near dusk when Bodine got this word, and in the first dark he was on horseback, riding south.

Blue night hung over the ranges, and a wind sighed down through the hills; there was the faint, far call of coyotes; save for that the night was still. Duke Bodine forded the creek, splashing silver drops and creating meshes of fine spray, and rode through the quiet to Shingle John's.

Shingle John, a gross, sullen man, his hair down to his shoulders, his beard a dark brown mat, was alone in his bar. He had small eyes, inordinately bright, and turned them expectantly on the young man stepping in. Shingle John knew of his coming and was awaiting it.

"You're Duke Bodine, I take it," he said.

"Is Frank Brewster here?"

"Shore, he's here. Been a-waitin' for you for two hours." He jerked his head toward the rear of the room where there were two doors, both closed. "He's in there." He spat deliberately. "He aint alone, though; Hackamore Breen's there too. Beat you to it, he did, Bodine."

"Thanks," said Duke Bodine. Rather than ask, he'd try both doors. But while his spurs were clanking down the long empty room he heard angry voices, one Brewster's, one Hackamore Breen's. He heard his own name and knew that they knew who was coming. His hand was on the latch when he heard the first shot.

He whipped the door open. In a small lamplit room with the lamp a dull glow like a sickly little moon through a bluish, smoky mist, Frank Brewster was falling backward; and as he toppled, Hackamore Breen poured the second and third shots into his body. Brewster made a strangling sound and melted to the floor as though his bones had turned to water.

It was sheer murder; the murdered man hadn't even pulled his belt-gun out of its leather.

HACKAMORE BREEN whirled, his face evil with rage and hate; already with nerves at stretch, he saw the look stamped on Duke Bodine's hardened face. But quick as he was, Bodine was a

scant fraction of a second the quicker. Their two shots rang out like one; yet in less time than a man can register, a bullet can travel such a short distance as lay between them. Hackamore Breen's aim was disturbed and his bullet flew wild as he fell close to where Frank Brewster's dead body lay.

"You've killed him," said Shingle John.

"Any objections?" said Duke Bodine.

"No. That's to say, in a way I haint, and then ag'in in a way I have. He had it comin', Hack Breen did; so did Frank Brewster, for that matter, an' it's jest as good both of 'em is dead. But you've shore messed up my place like hell and all."

Bodine holstered his gun and stepped into the card-room to stoop over the two fallen men. No more than a glance was needed to tell him that it was all over with the man he had come here to see. As for Breen himself, it was a different matter; he had taken Duke Bodine's shot somewhere in the upper body and might live or might die. Much no doubt would depend on what attention he got. Bodine turned his back on Breen's white face and went out of the card-room.

Shingle John followed him.

"Look here, Bodine. You got to lend me a hand—"

Duke Bodine went to his horse and sat a moment meditatively still in the saddle. Frank Brewster was dead, so there could be no immediate purchase. There would be heirs appearing in time to put in their claims; there would be the long court procedure to follow. And so the Lazy Creek was now far away and out of his reach—due to Breen.

What now? Stay overnight in Shingle? He was of a mind to ride elsewhere. It was forty miles or more back to Yellow Jacket; it would be something like fifteen miles to ride on to the Hacienda de la Fiesta. The Moragas would never turn a traveler from their wide door; further, it was likely that Ransome Haveril was at La Fiesta, and Bodine had not seen Ran for three or four months.

THROUGH the silent night he rode for more than two hours with the fertile soil of La Fiesta Rancho underfoot before he reached the ranch headquarters, itself like a small village. He saw the starlight glint upon the horns of cattle beyond count; more than once his approach put to flight a herd of wild horses. It was well after midnight when he saw the dull red of tile roofs and the lighter shade of sturdy whitewashed walls, looking gray by night. Beyond the main building, across a little tributary of the Mañana Creek, were the barns and corrals, the smaller adobe houses sheltering the army of retainers, Indians for the most part, *vaqueros* and those many hangers-on tolerated by the bounty of the old Spanish-California families. Not a light shone anywhere; the place lay fast asleep under the stars.

HE stabled his horse, then opened the gate in the white wall about the old house and walked quietly along the narrow walk flagged by earthen bottles forced neck-down into the ground, and to the wide oaken door set deep into the three-foot-thick adobe wall. There was a bell-pull; but he hesitated to awaken the sleeping household. Then for the first time he saw a light; someone was carrying a candle from one room to another. He gave the cord a pull and heard the jangle of the bell within doors.

A face looked out of a window; a voice called, *"Quien es?"*

It was Señora Moraga—Doña Luisa, as everyone called her, wife of the Moraga patriarch, mother of Don Felipe and his little sister Juanita, and of fourteen other sons and daughters. She was on her way, modest in voluminous black shawl, to the kitchen to prepare something for Señor Moraga who could not sleep for a toothache. She welcomed Duke Bodine with a deprecatory wave of her hand and a maiden's blush for her costume, and hurried away for more suitable dress and to announce the glad news that Señor Bodine was honoring the Moraga home with his presence.

Left alone with the candle in the large main *sala* of the place, with ancestral paintings looking down at him from the whitewashed adobe walls, Duke Bodine did not have long to wait.

One by one, until the huge household was astir, they came down the stairs or from some other part of the house; with the rest were Don Felipe and his friend Ransome Haveril.

Very formally Duke Bodine was presented to those of the flock whom he had not met before. All shook him by the hand; all made him welcome in the sincere way that was theirs.

It remained for Ransome Haveril to ask:

"What brings you here this time of night, Jesse?"

A hush filled the room when Bodine had finished telling of the occurrence at Shingle John's. But the silence was but of a shocked moment's duration, shattered swiftly with exclamations. These in turn were stilled by the commanding hand which Don Antonio uplifted. His were troubled eyes.

"Señor," he said gravely to Duke Bodine, "I do not wish any man's death; but for you, for us all, it would be a good thing if that man Breen dies tonight. He has come among us to make trouble; he has made trouble already. If there is any good in that man, I do not know what it is. There is much that is bad. If he lives, take care!"

They talked, together there, for upward of an hour. Duke Bodine learned things about Hackamore Breen which he had not known before. Breen once had come wooing one of the Moraga girls, little laughing Rosa, only two years older than Juanita. Rosa had laughed at him behind her fan at first. Then one day she saw him beating a horse cruelly, and the girl had fled, horrified. After that she had never laughed at Hackamore Breen, even behind her fan. She had never let him so much as see her face from that time.

Then Breen had looked toward little Juanita; but she, who had heard the story from Rosa's whitened lips, avoided him as she would have shunned a snake. He was persistent; he sought after Maria. He wanted to marry into the Moraga family. Maria would have none of him; she had a way of lifting and shaking her long skirts at the sight of him, of lifting her dimpled chin and drifting away.

Even then, they realized later, Hackamore Breen was trying to acquire some sort of interest, any sort to begin with, in the big Fiesta Rancho. But the Moragas, though always outwardly courteous, would have none of him. He had grown, they knew, to hate them; as he had punished a horse that had angered him, so would he punish a Moraga.

NOW he had bought the adjoining ranch, one of the three vast holdings which lay like giants broadly extended, with their heads resting among the hills as upon a shared pillow; and now already he was making trouble. For there was a grave vagueness concerning boundaries, and La Fiesta and El Monte appeared to overlap; Breen claimed lands which had always been Moraga lands.

At last the family withdrew, leaving the two friends Bodine and Haveril together for the private talk they would be sure to want. The two drew their chairs closer together and looked at each other and smiled.

RANSOME HAVERIL clapped his hand down on Bodine's knee.

"Well, Jesse! It's a sight for sore eyes, to see you again. And I hear great things about you! *Duke Bodine,* huh?"

"Tell me about yourself, Ran."

"Doing great, Jess. Yep, me too. Remember the day we first talked about leaving Pleasant Valley and striking out West? That was a great day for us, Jesse. Yes, I'm doing fine. Last week I bought the store in Mañana; I'm going to make money hand over fist. And then—"

"Marrying soon, I guess," said Duke Bodine.

Ransome laughed. "Damn it all, Jess, if ever I could just once get that girl alone for two minutes! How can a man ask a girl to marry him when there's always her brother or her sister or her father or mother or her aunt hanging around?"

It was Duke Bodine's turn to laugh. "I imagine the señorita knows what you want to say anyhow. And I guess you know the answer! . . . . Congratulations, Ran."

"Thanks. Maybe you're right. But, look here: there's something else I want to talk about. I was down in Mañana this morning, looking at my new store. A man came in, and we got to talking. He was a stranger to me but I've heard of him. Yarcum, his name is, Rance Yarcum; he used to be a sort of peddler, and now he's a pretty slick customer, so they say. And what he told me, Jesse, makes me think this man Breen did you a pretty big favor and saved you a heap of money when he killed Brewster—most likely he saved you the trouble of killing Brewster yourself!"

"What are you driving at, Ran?"

"Last night, according to Rance Yarcum, he had a run-in with Brewster, and Brewster sold him the Lazy Creek!"

Bodine was frowning. "But Brewster sent me word—"

"Brewster was getting ready to leave the country. So he sees a foxy play: He sells the Lazy Creek to Yarcum—sells it cheap, too, but gets the hard money. Then he fixes to meet up with you; he'd have sold it to you too, for whatever he

could get, then lit for somewhere else—and let you and Rance Yarcum figure out who owned the Lazy Creek! I'm dead sure of that, Jesse."

"I'll be damned!" said Duke Bodine softly. "Where is this Rance Yarcum now?" he asked.

"Headed straight to San Francisco. He was pretty gleeful, Yarcum was, over what he'd done, and he felt like telling the world about how smart he was. He has scooped in the Lazy Creek, but not to keep; not Rance Yarcum. He says there's a man in San Francisco he can sell to at a profit in ten minutes after he finds him. And he said that he was going to have a talk with Hackamore Breen about things; he figures that Breen still wants the Lazy Creek, and that if he gets two gents bidding against each other—"

"But he must have known Breen wasn't in San Francisco?"

"He knows Breen's headed there—was, I mean, until you shot him. You see, it's common talk around here that Breen's gone wild-crazy over a song-and-dance girl, and that he can't let her be. You've heard of her, I guess; everybody has. It's the new chief entertainer at the Golden Palace. They call her Lady Kate."

Duke Bodine nodded absently. Yes, he had heard of Lady Kate. Everybody had. He stood up, took a couple of steps toward the window, stood looking out into the starlit night, then turned to say:

"Thanks, Ransome. I'll be off at daybreak. If I can't overtake this Rance Yarcum of yours on the way, I'll get him in San Francisco. If you'll explain to the Moragas—"

His words were cut off by a pistol-shot and the splintering of glass. Both he and Ransome Haveril leaped for cover, then ran to the door. A bullet had come so close to Duke Bodine that his flesh had shivered, and he had fancied he felt the wind of its passing against his cheek.

NO other shot was fired. Presently they heard running hoofs; the sound was that of a horse down in the shadows by the creek, going fast. They came back and closed the door; no use following with the fugitive so well away.

"I reckon Hackamore Breen aint dead yet," muttered Ransome. "That was a close call, Jesse."

"Breen wouldn't be in any shape to ride after me—"

"Breen has men on his pay-roll that do things like that for him, Jesse. Better watch out."

Duke Bodine shrugged. Of course he would have to watch out. But already his thoughts were back with Rance Yarcum. San Francisco. . . . Duke Bodine and Lady Kate.

Chapter Eight

RANCE YARCUM proved to be a hard man to locate, and it was not until after more than a month of persistent search that Duke Bodine came up with him.

It was a chill, foggy night in San Francisco, with the fog lying in folds above the vague housetops, hanging like curtains down into the streets so that the lights were like dim, uncertain stars. Duke Bodine had drawn near the wide double doors of the Golden Palace, one of the several places where he might come up with his man, when a showy carriage drawn by two ornately harnessed, fine black horses pulled up at the edge of the high plank sidewalk, and a woman's voice from the carriage's dark interior called softly to him:

"Mr. Duke Bodine, isn't it?"

He lifted his hat and bowed; he hadn't the faintest idea who it was, even when a head was put out through the door, for all that he saw was an enormous black hat with a sweeping ostrich plume curling down over the brim and brushing a cloaked shoulder; the face, the eyes, the mouth were to be guessed at rather than seen, but the voice was hauntingly pleasant.

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Bodine?" asked the voice, and he thought that its owner was smiling.

"Certainly, ma'am," said Duke Bodine politely, and stepped closer.

He could see her eyes now, large and laughing as he had thought they would be, and could make out her smiling mouth, though none too clearly. He felt sure that he had never seen her before.

"I am Lady Kate," she told him, and he knew that she was watching him shrewdly.

Duke Bodine was not impressed. He had heard much of Lady Kate as had everyone else during the last six months or a year, he thought. Beautiful, undeniably; talented, a very clever woman—and as hard as nails. He knew how she had sung and danced in scores of mountain camps, and how men had gone wild over her and had thrown gold at her feet; and how, laughingly, blowing

them kisses from her fingertips, she had had a little negro boy, all decked out in gold braid, gather up the spoils and carry it off to her dressing-room. A wealthy woman now, without doubt, despite the extravagant parties which she was always giving some celebrity or another.

"It is just possible, Mr. Duke Bodine," pursued Lady Kate, "that I am in a position to do you a small favor. Someone mentioned to me that you were here; people do talk so, don't they? And mentioned also that it was common knowledge that you are looking for a gentleman named Yarcum—Mr. Rance Yarcum, recently owner of the Lazy Creek Ranch over in the Mañana country."

"Yes," he answered. "That's so. Do you mean that you know where he is?"

"If you would care to ride with me—" said Lady Kate. He could make out that she was making room for him, gathering her skirts closer.

"Thank you. This is very kind of you." He got in.

"Drive on," commanded the lady, and the restless black horses were off at a lively trot.

"You will think me very bold and unmaidenly," said Lady Kate so demurely that he sensed mockery.

"Not in the least," he replied. "I think you are most kind."

"Will you tell me about yourself, Mr. Bodine? Your reputation makes of you a terribly romantic character, you know. I have heard such tales of you, I am almost afraid to be alone with you!"

"You are laughing at me all the time, Lady Kate," said Duke Bodine quietly. "Just why, I don't know. That, of course, is your privilege. But may I ask where you are taking me? To wherever Rance Yarcum is?"

"You are not afraid that I am kidnaping you, Mr. Duke Bodine?"

HE wondered why each time she called him that, "Mr. Duke Bodine"; it seemed to him that, ever so slightly, she stressed the *"Duke."*

"Kidnaped by so glorious a lady as your reputation makes you?"

"They tell me that you are the most fortunate—or is it skillful?—gambler in the West; above Claude Purcell, even. Isn't it a lovely ring that you are wearing! I've heard of that, even. I saw it flash there on the sidewalk."

The carriage swayed and lurched with the horses' swift trotting; he felt the gossamer brushing of her gown against his hand. The dark within which he was so intimately enclosed with her was faintly fragrant; it was like the faint breath of wild flowers in Maytime. There had been a fragrance like that somewhere in his life long ago—in Maytime, in Pleasant Valley.

"Not so fast," Lady Kate called to the driver, and the horses were promptly drawn down to a head-tossing walk. To Mr. Duke Bodine she explained gayly: "It is such a short drive, and why hurry through life's pleasant moments? Although, I must admit I am impatient too, to arrive. Do you know why, Mr. Duke Bodine? You see how honest I am, quite a simple soul indeed! Well, then: I want to see you in the light!"

"I cannot keep up with you, Lady Kate," he told her. "Your wits fly too fast for mine. You see, I am still concerned with something which you said just now, when you spoke of my ring. Shall we go back to it?" He had drawn it from his finger; she caught a subdued gleam as he extended it toward her. "Will you accept it as a small gift from one who has not words to thank you for your kindness?"

FOR an instant he hoped he had upset that perfect poise of hers; he could have sworn that she had, barely in time, smothered a gasp. Then she put out her hand for the ring; he felt her gloved fingers, their touch most daintily light, brush his. She was laughing gayly again.

"Lovely!" She lifted her hand for him to watch. "Can you see, in this dark? I am wearing it! It is on my thumb, over my glove. Is it a very lucky ring, Mr. Duke Bodine?"

"It is lucky now, with you wearing it!"

"Is it my pay for the little kindness I am doing you, taking you to where Mr. Yarcum is?"

"I didn't think of it that way."

"You have friends among the old Spanish-Californians, haven't you? I believe you know the Moragas of La Fiesta quite well? Have you lived with people like them so much that you have acquired their ways? This ring, now; I know it must be valued at several thousand dollars!"

"To Lady Kate, I know, several thousand dollars is nothing."

"Funny, isn't it, that you and I, though we've heard of each other so much, have never met until now? You have never seen me, even? You have never been interested enough from what

you have heard of me, to come to hear me sing?"

"I have been very busy," said Duke Bodine.

"Too busy for women?"

"That is how it has been," he told her.

She leaned back among her cushions, and for a time was very still. There was no sound just now save the click of the horses' hoofs; they had turned into a newly cobbled street.

Once he thought that he heard her sigh.

"General Bright-Hampden is a very dear friend of mine," she said abruptly. "He has generously loaned me his house. Just now he is somewhere in South America, where he has shipping interests. It is to his house that I am taking you. Several gentlemen are dining with me tonight. Mr. Rance Yarcum is to be one of them."

The horses strained up the hill to a pair of wide iron gates with a lantern at each side. The gates stood open; beyond, Duke Bodine could see the subdued glow of lights indicating the three-storied house. The house door, too, opened at the sound of the carriage's approach; a white-haired negro in livery hastened down the steps to assist Lady Kate to alight.

She caught up her skirts and ran up the steps, calling gayly, "Come on, Mr. Duke Bodine," and had passed into the light of the hall before he reached the threshold. She did not fully turn her head; all that he saw of her face was the curve of her cheek, her enormous black hat with its flaunting white plume obscuring the rest, as with her skirts still gathered up in her two hands, she said over her shoulder from the first step of the broad, curving staircase: "Cæsar will show you into the drawing-room."

HE knew the sort of thing to expect upon entering the home of General Bright-Hampden. Lady Kate's glistening high-heeled French slippers carried her upward upon red Turkey carpet; the lights were brilliant, shining through the pendant prisms of the ceiling clusters; the furnishings were solid mahogany.

Cæsar conducted him to an open double door and announced sonorously: "Mr. Duke Bodine, gentlemen!" The first man Duke Bodine recognized in a small group standing about a table, glasses in their hands, was his friend Claude Purcell.

Purcell greeted him warmly.

"I didn't know you were in town, Duke," he said. "Know everyone here?"

DUKE BODINE glanced at the other faces which had turned at his entrance. He thought one of them must be Rance Yarcum; he had never seen the man but here was one who fitted the description: a small, wiry, dark man who dressed loudly, and who looked shrewd and alert, a sharp trader.

"I'm a stranger to everyone here but you, Claude," said Duke Bodine.

"That won't do," said Purcell with his hint of a smile. "Gentlemen! My good friend, Mr. Duke Bodine. He wants to meet you all. Duke, Captain Robert Leigh; he is English and a friend of our absent host General Bright-Hampden." Captain Leigh, blue-eyed and boyish-looking, bowed stiffly. "Mr. Bodine, Mr. Rance Yarcum." Duke Bodine had been quite right; it was the small, sharp-looking man who ducked his head and stepped briskly forward to offer his hand. "Mr. Bodine," continued the gambler, "you have heard of Mr. William Coburn, our important mining engineer and owner." Mr. William Coburn, florid and bald and given to an explosive manner of speech, nearly wrung his hand off, very glad indeed to meet Mr. Duke Bodine. Then there remained, "Señor Alfredo Moraga," white-haired, and quietly distinguished-looking. He turned out to be a brother of Don Antonio of La Fiesta.

"Mr. Bodine, you've come just at the right minute!" cried the explosive Mr. William Coburn. He lifted his glass high. "Just in time, Mr. Bodine, to drink a toast with us. Gentlemen, to our absent hostess, who will surely not keep us waiting much longer! To the Flower of California, Lady Kate!"

Cæsar filled Duke Bodine's glass. Bodine joined the rest in the chorus of "Lady Kate!" and their glasses flashed up.

Presently Bodine and Purcell were slightly withdrawn, as the small group disintegrated. Purcell asked casually:

"What good wind blows you this way, Duke?"

"I want a word with Yarcum, Claude. And I'd like it as soon as possible, as I don't know what's ahead for the night, and I'd like to settle something with him before any sort of interruption. How well do you know him?"

"As well as I want to," said Purcell. "I don't like the man. But I know him well enough to get him in a corner for you to talk with, if that's what you want."

"He owns the Lazy Creek Ranch. I'm after it. So is Hackamore Breen."

"The Lazy Creek?" Purcell lifted the thin dark line of his brows; it was as good as a shrug. "I didn't know you were going in for real-estate, Duke. Better look San Francisco over, if you are. There's still a chance here to buy a likely property in the morning, sell it in the afternoon and make a fair stake."

"It's not that, Claude. You know I've always meant to go in for ranching, when things were ripe."

"Like our friend Bud Weaver?" smiled Purcell.

"Not like Bud Weaver, I hope. I'd await another opportunity to talk with Yarcum, but for one thing: as I've said, Breen wants the Lazy Creek, and Breen's a friend of Lady Kate's. For all I know, he may show up and get the first shot at Rance Yarcum."

"I didn't know you knew the lady, Duke."

"I don't. I never saw her until tonight. . . . Yarcum's looking this way."

PURCELL was quick to catch Rance Yarcum's roving eye, and drew him across the room with an almost imperceptible gesture of his head.

"Duke wants a word with you, Rance," he said carelessly. "I'll leave you two to your better acquaintance." He moved away, to join the Captain and Señor Moraga.

"I want the Lazy Creek Ranch, Mr. Yarcum," said Duke Bodine. "I know about what you gave Frank Brewster for it. I'll give you that and ten thousand dollars on top of it."

Yarcum's shrewd face grew shrewder. He pulled at his lower lip, simulating profound meditation.

"There is hardly time to discuss a thing like this tonight," he said after a moment. Measuring the extent of Duke Bodine's interest, that was what he was trying to do. "Tomorrow morning—"

"Now," said Duke Bodine. "A little thing like this doesn't take time. I'm ready to hand you the money now; that'll take one minute. You can jot down a receipt, guaranteeing delivery tomorrow of the deed; that'll take a minute. If we get busy at the same time, it'll be the one minute for both."

"Make it an extra fifteen thousand instead of ten—"

"Certainly." Duke Bodine unbuttoned coat and waistcoat, unstrapped a broad money-belt, thereby disclosing the weapons he wore underneath it, and stepped to a small table in an alcove. Rance Yarcum goggled at him; his thoughts could have been read by a child: Why hadn't he asked an additional twenty thousand instead of fifteen?

"LOOK here, Mr. Bodine—" he said.

Duke Bodine turned slowly.

"I believe we have just made a trade, Mr. Yarcum?" he said coldly. "You asked your extra fifteen thousand, and I said: 'Certainly.' You have a scrap of paper and a pencil, haven't you? If not, I have."

"All right, all right! Well, then: I paid Brewster twenty thousand—"

"You paid Brewster about half that. Brewster sold to you for what he could get in a hurry; next he was going to sell the same place to me for what he could get, but Hackamore Breen killed him first. Personally, I think Breen was a thought hasty in killing him offhand like that. A man should be given a couple of minutes to square himself. Here's twenty-five thousand, Mr. Yarcum."

Yarcum was sweating visibly when he got the few lines down and signed. He took up his money, counted it shrewdly but in haste, and hurried back to the table for more wine.

Duke Bodine stood with the scrap of paper twisting slowly in his fingers, staring out through the window to which he had stepped from the alcove. The fog trailed its ghostly veils about the face of the City; the curve of the bay, its islands and high-masted shipping, was lost in the night. But he would have seen none of it all had the full moon hung in a clear sky over it. He was seeing the Lazy Creek Ranch as he meant it some day to be. . . .

He was snapped abruptly out of his musings. Cæsar at the door of the drawing-room was announcing:

"Gentlemen! Mr. Willard Hack'more Breen!"

Chapter Nine

NO one here had heard a word of the meeting of Duke Bodine and Willard "Hackamore" Breen at Shingle John's. And that was because Duke Bodine had told no one but the Moragas at La Fiesta, and Ransome Haveril; and because Hackamore Breen, for his part, had thought best to leave Duke Bodine out of his account of it. There was a dead man to explain, Frank Brewster. The thing to do, Shingle John willingly conniving, was to tell the tale in such way as to keep Hackamore Breen in the clear. Thus: Breen, regaining consciousness, fired a couple of shots from the gun Shingle John obligingly pulled from the dead man's holster, then said, sure, he had killed Brewster, after Brewster had tried to shoot him. Self-defense, and no need for folks to go poking their noses into a private matter already disposed of.

So now, when Hackamore Breen came into the room, and stiffened at first sight of the man who had come so close to killing him there at Shingle John's, and when the several men present saw the way he and Duke Bodine stood stone still, looking at each other and saying never a word, there was a long moment of tension.

Then Lady Kate made her entrance.

For the first time Duke Bodine saw her clearly and in a bright light. He had known all along that she was beautiful; her loveliness now was a revelation.

She paused a second in the frame of the wide doorway, and she willfully dramatized herself—put her head back and lowered her lids and laughed her welcome, with both bare white arms extended. Her eyes swept the room; none but Lady Kate knew that her gaze was, most of all, for Duke Bodine.

SHE read the look on his face, a spontaneous, leaping admiration. Would there be recognition? There was none. Never in his life had his thoughts been farther away from little Kitty Haveril than they were at this moment. He saw in Lady Kate of California nothing at all of the wild rose of Pleasant Valley.

First of all she put both slim white hands out to Hackamore Breen and gave him a smile which, though all were free to see, was warmly intimate, for him alone, somehow a secret smile. Instantly Duke Bodine remembered: Some said that the heartless Lady Kate had had a heart after all, and that she had given it to Hackamore Breen. At any rate she singled him out now. She said warmly:

"Willard! It's nice seeing you. I heard of—of your accident. You are all right now, though!"

Breen reddened. Duke Bodine would be hearing that! Lady Kate looked curiously at him, then passed on to her other guests.

Lady Kate turned smiling to Duke Bodine last of all.

"Hello, Duke," was what she said. "My, but you're looking fine. Such a long time since I've seen you! California does agree with you, doesn't it?" She gave him her hand and he held it in his, loosely clasped, very still. She laughed softly and exclaimed, "I do believe your eyelashes have grown longer! Why, Duke, they're like a girl's."

He kept his silence. If his heart leaped, then stood still, no one of them knew. If swiftly as a flash there came to him a memory—Pleasant Valley, Maytime, a girl—only Duke Bodine knew. He relinquished her hand and stepped back and looked at her, unsmiling.

"You have changed too," was all that he said.

If she was disappointed, she gave no sign.

"Yes, we have both changed," she said, and turned to the others.

Cæsar, parting the heavy portières of the doorway at the far end of the drawing-room, announced:

"Dinner is sarved, Miss Ladykate."

Lady Kate took Señor Moraga's arm and led the way.

At the table, gayety was forced and spurious; Duke Bodine and Hackamore Breen faced each other directly, Bodine on Lady Kate's right, Breen on her left. Why she had placed them thus only Lady Kate could tell, and even her motives may have been clouded.

It was Breen himself who caught up the tempo from Lady Kate and salvaged the dinner hour. For of a sudden Breen showed the other that side of him which he had saved for what he judged "polite society." He spoke well, when he gave his mind to it. Very skillfully he set himself the happy task of coming to Lady Kate's aid; once he even said pleasantly, "Am I right, Mr. Bodine?" and transferred his smile to the man he so thoroughly hated, and received Duke Bodine's affably spoken affirmative.

And so, after the bad start, everything began to move along splendidly. Laughter was going around and a glow of well-

being had quite dissipated the earlier chill when Lady Kate stood up.

"Please, gentlemen!" she cried at them. "You must sit down again and finish your wine. You know that I have to run now, because I am to sing at the Golden Palace, but there's no need to escort me there! You are going to wait here for me until I come back. Most of you know your way to the card-room, don't you? And I know that wherever Mr. Purcell and Mr. Duke Bodine are, a poker-game isn't far off!"

"But you must permit us to hear you sing tonight, señorita!" exclaimed Señor Moraga.

Lady Kate laughed and blew him a kiss from her fingertips.

"When I come back, then. I will sing for you alone, señor!" Her eyes drifted to Duke Bodine. "I am going to ask Mr. Duke Bodine to escort me. Will you, Duke? And at the same time promise you'll return here immediately to these other gentlemen?"

THE two passed out through the front door held open by Cæsar. The carriage was at the steps; Duke Bodine helped her in, then went around to the other side and got in to sit beside her. The driver cracked his whip, and they were off.

He heard her sigh as she settled back.

"Always so silent, Mr. Duke Bodine?"

"I don't know what to say," he answered her, his voice flat and toneless.

"I was thinking of something funny," said Lady Kate. "When you started West that time, do you remember I said that you'd be coming back sometime in style—with a coach and six white horses, or something. And when we meet again, it is I who appear in the carriage!"

"Yes, I remember. It's a memory as of another world, another life."

"You haven't turned out to be a great talker, have you?"

"No. I haven't even thanked you properly for tonight. Taking me where Yarcum was, I mean. It meant a great deal to me. You see, for a long time I've had my eye on the Lazy Creek Ranch. Yarcum beat me to it awhile back. Thanks to you, it's mine now."

"The Lazy Creek! I've heard of it. It's near La Fiesta and El Monte, isn't it? I'm sure Willard has mentioned it to me. Why, he was after it himself at one time!"

"Yes."

"And he still does want it?"

"It's mine now," Duke Bodine told her the second time. "If I knew how, I'd thank you properly."

"Oh!"

AGAIN they fell silent. Bodine felt disturbed; and of a sudden the world seemed a queer sort of place.

"I have heard much of you," she said quietly after a time, "you and Claude Purcell. I haven't heard anyone speak of Ransome. Do you know where he is? Do you still see him?"

"Yes. We have remained friends. I expect to see him in a few days. He is at the Moraga hacienda, La Fiesta."

"You will tell him you have seen me?"

"Don't you want me to?"

"I am shrugging my shoulders, but you can't see, can you? My big brother Ransome, that I used to be so proud of, used to worship so! Then one day he just—just went away. You went your way, and Ransome went with you, and in my turn I went my way. I'm just shrugging, Duke Bodine."

Duke Bodine got to thinking gropingly of that Maytime of a long ago, of a day when a boy and girl and bickering Buckeye Creek had the world to themselves, when the boy dared think of kissing the girl, but dared no further. And he thought of a fine golden chain and a pendant locket, discarded. With narrowed eyes he watched the way of the wind with the thinning wisps of fog. He thought of ashes being wind-blown.

To Lady Kate he said: "We're almost there. You asked me to promise to go back to the house on the hill. I'm not sure that I care to do that. My business with Yarcum is done for tonight."

"There is always poker," she reminded him crisply.

"Yes. There is always poker."

"It's a small thing. Yes, still shrugging! But you promised."

"All right."

"Ransome Haveril hasn't fallen in with thieves too, has he?"

"Thieves?"

"Men like Claude Purcell. Crooked gamblers."

"Claude Purcell is my friend. He is as honest, as square-dealing a man as any I've ever known."

"An honest gambler!" She laughed her scorn at that. "Water that is not wet; a light that sheds darkness; a snake that walks upright on its tail! Honest gambler! You fool! Or are you only a fool, and nothing worse?"

"There is nothing worse," said Duke Bodine, very cool. But he added after a pause, and therefore was the more deliberate: "Unless it be a man like Hackamore Breen."

"Willard Breen is a very dear friend of mine," she said hotly.

He answered her in a coldly impersonal way:

"So I gather. That's why I warned you."

"So it's a warning, then? Thank you, Mr. Duke Bodine, I don't need it. Furthermore, it's a slander. Willard is fine; maybe you have heard that I am to marry him?"

"He is a damned scoundrel," said Duke Bodine, very cool.

"Perhaps you don't understand when I use the word *fine!* He wouldn't stab a man in the back!"

"Ah, that's just what he would do! That's the sort Hackamore Breen is. Anyhow, I've told you."

"Oh!" The ejaculation was like the flicker of flame. Then Lady Kate gathered her skirts about her; the carriage was coming to a stop in front of the Golden Palace. Duke Bodine stepped down and offered to help her, but she brushed his hand aside. A small crowd gathered at the door of the Palace lifted hats and clapped hands; she bowed and smiled and passed inside. Bodine stepped back into the carriage and, a man to keep a promise, was returned to the house on the hill.

OLD Cæsar escorted him to the card-room. Six men were playing: Duke Bodine, Claude Purcell, Captain Leigh, Bill Coburn, Señor Moraga and Hackamore Breen. Already, having been eager to escape, Rance Yarcum had taken his departure. Perhaps he wasn't altogether comfortable in the presence of Duke Bodine and Hackamore Breen at the same time.

Señor Moraga waved Cæsar away with his wine-bucket, and demanded brandy.

"With a fair lady present," said Señor Moraga in his mother tongue, "it is different, and wine is to be taken to toast all loveliness; but at man's work or man's play, a man's drink! *Salud y pesatas, caballeros!*"

Health and wealth! A fine toast for a poker-game. Coburn approved the brandy idea; so did Hackamore Breen. Purcell never drank at all, and Bodine but sparingly. Captain Leigh, a sentimental look in his eyes, stuck to wine. Bill Coburn, a good drinker, had already taken as much as would do most men for the twenty-four hours.

Captain Leigh didn't last long. Slightly embarrassed, on withdrawing, cleaned out, he was obviously of half a mind to apologize for having bothered them.

"Sit down, my boy, sit down and watch the game!" boomed Bill Coburn heartily.

"I don't like an outsider looking on," said Hackamore Breen at his surliest.

"Oh, shut up, you," Coburn snorted. "Let Leigh do as he damn' well pleases. I'll tell you, Leigh! Go in yonder to the piano! Give us some music and those rousing old songs of yours!" He chuckled and peeked slyly at his cards. "We won't keep you waiting long; I'll clean up here in short order."

And Captain Leigh did stroll away to the piano, and for a little while gave them music as Bill Coburn had suggested.

THERE was a sizable jack-pot which no one could open. They sweetened it all round and drew new cards. Hackamore Breen, "under the gun," passed. Moraga, next, passed. Bill Coburn opened; Purcell boosted him; Bodine saw Purcell's bet; and this time Hackamore Breen came in and raised Purcell's boost. Swiftly the pot grew fat—some fifteen hundred dollars.

Moraga withdrew, muttering soft Spanish oaths; Coburn slammed down his cards; Purcell withdrew.

Breen had called for three cards; Bodine had called for three. Bodine had gone in with a pair of jacks and had drawn the other pair; four jacks with five men playing. He raised Breen, and Breen raised him back.

Bodine went out on a limb with his four jacks. Just the same, and before the limb broke altogether under his weight, a sense of being wrong warned him; perhaps it had been the twitch of a muscle in Breen's face or a gleam in his eye. At any rate, he called Breen, and Breen put down four queens and raked in the pot.

Neither man said anything; it was just another pot lost. But Hackamore Breen had a trick of jeering at a man without using words, and could sneer without lifting a lip.

The game went on with Duke Bodine dead-set to pull Breen down. Bill Coburn shook a couple of kinks out of his tongue. "Damn you, Purcell," he said once when Purcell had won from him pretty heavily, and on Purcell's deal, "I

don't know why the hell I play with you. A man ought to know better than taking chances with a professional gambler."

Used to things like that, Purcell was unruffled and let the remark pass. Again Hackamore Breen held his peace as far as words went, but that sneer of his again spoke for him. And when shortly after Purcell raked in another big pot, Breen asked with stressed innocence, as though he had forgotten: "Who dealt that mess, anyhow?"

Purcell had dealt.

Duke Bodine did not turn his head to look at his friend, but watched him out of the corner of his eyes, from under those lowered, long-lashed lids of his. Claude Purcell's expression, or lack of it, was unaffected; he did not speak.

The game went on. There came a hand which seriously engaged Bodine and Purcell and Breen and Coburn. The cards were running high; Bodine and Breen each had called for three cards, Purcell and Coburn two. Purcell was in with a couple of hundred dollars when he decided that he did not like the look of things. Breen had raised; Coburn had come in—and Purcell put his hand down, rose and said: "Deal me out, the next hand."

Cæsar long ago had departed to wherever it was that Cæsar betook himself at stage of a game; Purcell wandered away for a cigar and stopped for a word or two with Captain Leigh, who, in the front room, was looking out a window at the lights of the City.

"Damn that Purcell," growled Coburn apropos of nothing in particular.

Bodine boosted the pot. Hackamore Breen, glowering over his cards, took his time. Then he came in and shoved another ten dollars along, on top of Bodine's, and sitting back, said: "You know what these gamblers are, Bill."

COBURN made his bet, covering Breen's and sweetening the pot fifty dollars. Then he said, "Huh, Hackamore?" as though he hadn't heard. And Breen, still with that intangible sneer of his, still whipping the man he hated over Purcell's back, said measuredly:

"Hell, we all know Purcell's as crooked as a broken stick."

Duke Bodine came in. He boosted Coburn a hundred dollars. And then the three of them out for blood. Before they were done, it was the best pot of the evening; and Duke Bodine dragged it in with a straight flush.

Then he looked up from the table, straight into Hackamore Breen's cold, angry eyes.

"You're a liar, Breen," he said.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" shouted Señor Moraga, a note of horror in his voice. "Remember we are the guests of a lady!"

Duke Bodine and Hackamore Breen sat very still in their chairs. Bill Coburn moved softly, shoving his chair back soundlessly and stepping nimbly aside. There was a tall grandfather's clock standing at the side of the door through which Purcell had just now passed for his cigar and a word with Captain Leigh; and through the hush came its steady and measured *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock,* and the sound seemed to grow louder and clearer, more distinct and emphatic; it was like the beat of a measured tread, a counting-off of the seconds of a man's life.

AT last Hackamore Breen spoke. "Were you talking to me, Bodine?"

"Yes," said Duke Bodine.

He knew what Hackamore Breen was about. The man was as deadly as a rattlesnake, but just now as wary as a cat walking a limb above a pack of hounds. Claude Purcell, Captain Leigh close at his heels, had come to stand in the open doorway; Duke Bodine without shifting his eyes from Hackamore Breen's darkly flushed face, could see the two clearly reflected in a large mirror on the wall.

Purcell spoke coolly.

"I think I heard my name," he said.

"Damn it!" exploded Bill Coburn. "Let's go slow here, boys! Lady Kate's apt to be back any minute now."

Captain Leigh, looking troubled, exclaimed: "Both Mr. Purcell and I heard what was said, and it's one of those things that can't be left hanging in mid-air. I, for one, took it that we were all gentlemen playing together here." He was looking curiously at Claude Purcell. Then he transferred that bright stare of his to Señor Moraga. "You, señor," he said, "have heard what both Mr. Coburn and Mr. Breen said. You, I understand, have known Mr. Purcell well."

Señor Moraga surprised them all then. He drew himself stiffly erect and said very distinctly without raising his voice:

"Yes. I played tonight with the others simply as one of a lady's guests—stifled my own personal feelings rather than risk offending her." He gave them a high Spanish shrug; his eyes were cold and

bright and contemptuous. "I have long known Mr. Purcell for what he is, no gentleman but a cheat at cards, and—"

His words were like shears cutting the tension of restraint and releasing destruction, snipping the thin thread of his own life. Claude Purcell, without a word, whipped forward his right hand from behind his back and shot Moraga square between the eyes. The shot licked out with the deadly quickness of a rapier's flash; and equally swift were the actions which followed it: Breen moved with a swiftness akin to Purcell's, throwing himself sidewise in his chair, snatching his gun up out of the leather holding it so loosely, firing across the table, the three movements welded into one. But again he had to do with a man keener and quicker and more steel-nerved than himself. His shot and Duke Bodine's rang out while what seemed a whole fusillade thundered through the room; and Hackamore Breen spilled to the floor while Duke Bodine, with no worse than a bullet-hole through his sleeve and a burn along his forearm, sprang to his feet.

He leaped up and whirled in time to see what was happening: Moraga, falling, was just striking the floor. Bill Coburn, shouting wrathfully, did his best to kill Claude Purcell, and would have succeeded save for the gambler's cool brain and ruthlessness. In a flash Purcell leaped to the side of the door, and passing, shoved Captain Leigh between himself and the menace of Bill Coburn's weapon. Purcell vanished from sight, and Captain Leigh staggered a few wild steps, then sat down on the floor, shot by Bill Coburn.

"Leigh! Leigh!" said Coburn. "My God, man! I—"

Captain Leigh wasn't listening, wasn't looking at him. He had turned the other way, and saw Claude Purcell across the drawing-room, about to be gone for good. Leigh called after him:

"You—Purcell!"

PURCELL glanced over his shoulder. Captain Leigh, still sitting, had managed to get his own pistol into his hand. He lifted it, calling his warning:

"Purcell! For killing Moraga—"

His weapon finished the sentence for him. When in another second Claude Purcell would have been safe away, Leigh's first and only shot brought him down. An amazing play of expression at last came to the gambler's face; Duke Bodine, running to him and stooping over him, saw surprise, bewilderment—then a flash of terror.

"Mr. Purcell!" Duke knelt beside him and partly lifted him from the floor.

"He has killed me. I—I am dying!"

"Those things they said about you—I know they were all lies!"

"You fool!" said the gambler; and in that look of his, at last so freely expressive, along with fear now was the final jeer of contempt.

Then Lady Kate came running in.

Chapter Ten

LADY KATE'S face was as white as death, her eyes enormous with horror. Duke Bodine stood up, and she stared at him speechless.

Finally he said tonelessly: "You had better not come in, Kate."

But she pushed by him and hurried to where Captain Leigh sat propped against a wall; his hand was pressed against his side and his fingers were red; the pistol on the floor close to his knee still sent up a thin grayish-blue wisp of smoke; the scent of it acrid and sharp in their nostrils.

Captain Leigh, a very gallant gentleman, tried to say something to her; tried to let her know that he, for one, was ashamed that this had happened.

Then Lady Kate, already numbed with horror, saw Señor Moraga lying on his back, dead. Breen was trying to pull himself up, trying to get his gun again.

Bill Coburn, hurrying to Leigh, went out of his way so far as to kick the fallen weapon across the room and out of Breen's reach.

"Damn it, man," he said thickly, "we've had enough of this."

The girl went swiftly to Hackamore Breen and put her arms about him, helping him up into his chair again.

"Willard! Willard—who did this to you? Dear God in heaven—"

She did not need to be told. Already she sensed a part of the story even before she saw how Hackamore Breen's baleful eyes turned to Duke Bodine.

"You did this, Jesse Bodine!" she cried, her voice sharp with anger.

Bodine didn't answer her. He stared at her a long, still moment, then turned

from her and Hackamore Breen, and went to Coburn, bending over Leigh.

"We'd best get him to a bed somewhere, Coburn, right away," he was saying. "Then I'll go scare up a doctor."

"I shot him, Bodine," Coburn muttered. "It was that damned Purcell; he shoved Leigh right into it."

"Purcell is dead," said Bodine. "So is Señor Moraga. Help me with Captain Leigh. We'd best hurry too, I tell you."

Within five minutes he was on his way down the hill to find a doctor and others to do what needed to be done. He did not return to the house on the hill. Instead, within the hour he was on his horse and riding out of town. He wanted as he had never wanted before, to be alone. Well, there was the Lazy Creek Ranch awaiting him. . . .

And to Lazy Creek Ranch he came in the bright morning of the third day. He gave La Fiesta a wide berth, not yet ready for any human companionship, not ready, certainly, to see Ransome Haveril and have to speak of that Lady Kate of whom they had heard so many tales. Lady Kate of today—little Kitty Haveril of long and long ago.

The world lay quiet about him, a deep-breathing, smiling, peaceful world. The gentle throb of dove notes came to him through the silence, and the valley quail marched in front of him along a broad, cattle-made trail, and he saw deer feeding. Cattle were fat and sleek in the valleys; wild horses tossed their manes and watched him.

FOR upward of ten years the ranch—his ranch—had been untenanted; the stock he saw bore the brands of either La Fiesta or of El Monte. When he reached the ranch headquarters, it was to come to a place of utter desertion and largely of ruin. There were the two barns, gray and crooked, with shake roofs sagging like broken-down sway-backed horses; there was the old adobe house on a slight knoll above the creek. Once there had been a flower garden; the earthen walls still stood about it, tile-crowned, and there were a few desolate pear trees, a gnarled olive or two, here and there a straggling Spanish rose.

He had brought with him a sack of provisions, and he bivouacked in a large sunny room with a long view down the valley—his valley; and thus began for him a period of time, all too brief, of a splendid isolation. For he had come here like a wounded wolf to its lair.

"You fool!" had been Purcell's last words to him, along with the undying contempt of a dying man—and fool he had been! He had seen, though in the mirror, how Claude Purcell had murdered Señor Moraga, how he had thrust the gallant Captain Leigh into the pathway of Coburn's bullets, how then he had sought to escape, leaving Bodine to do what he could for himself—his friend who had taken up his quarrel, who had named Breen a liar for Purcell's sake. . . . Bodine was sick at heart.

THEN there was Lady Kate. Jesse saw her as she was, or at least as he thought she was; and he thought of her as he had known her so long ago when she wore the little pink-and-blue gingham dress. He dwelt broodingly on a vanished Maytime.

He had heard so many things spoken of Lady Kate. He winced as one of those rumors, so unheeded until now, recurred to him: It was said that she was one of those gay ladies who was for sale, but who came high; men said that she had been Hackamore Breen's light-o'-love, and that so mighty was the spell she had cast over him that he was going to marry her, to install her like a reigning queen at El Monte Ranch.

Kate—married to Hackamore Breen! The thought was like a knife in his side.

A week passed and he did not leave his own acres save for one night-ride to Shingle Town to replenish his larder. He got his beans and salt and flour; more important, he came by a certain scrap of news after angling for it: Hackamore Breen was not only alive, but was making a rapid recovery; and already, the day before, he had returned to his place at El Monte Ranch. There was more than that: He had traveled with a sort of cavalcade; two wagons, men on horseback, two ladies. One was the Lady Kate, who, it was said, had done more than the doctor in caring for him, the other a friend of Lady Kate's of an older and scarcely less broad reputation, Big Belle of the Mines. . . .

Then something altogether wonderful happened. Jesse Bodine woke from a restless sleep and went to his window to look out on the stars glimmering, Lazy Creek drifting slowly, with silver dimples in the rapids. He dressed and went out, and climbed on his horse and rode up along the winding valley.

He saw a flicker of firelight, and in the firelight, a girl. He didn't know her in

the least. He was merely mildly surprised to find several people encamped on his ranch.

But she, seeing him, even with shadows wrapped about him, gasped: "Jesse!"

Then, of course, he knew. He came down out of the saddle and seized her two hands in his, and a smile came back to his lips and into his eyes.

"Little April Crabtree! You—here!"

He didn't know that she had once loved him. He didn't know that she had ever known Kate Haveril.

ALMOST overnight Jesse Bodine became a sort of Young Patriarch. The Crabtrees—father, mother, Ann with her two babies, and of course April—were glad to pour water on their campfire and come to stay for a time at the big empty house on Lazy Creek. And later still others came as Jesse began to take the first steps to build up the ranch and stock it and to drive permanent roots deep into the soil. There was a certain to-be-remembered Bud Weaver, a Texan, a man whom Jesse had liked from the first; Bud, always about to acquire his own spreading acres, was content for the time to come to Jesse Bodine as foreman; there came with him a long, narrow, weary-eyed man with melancholy mustaches, Bud's uncle, Lonesome Pete.

So it began, and others gathered; there were a dozen Indians, a sort of family clan, assorted *vaqueros,* house-boys, field-hands along with their wives and children and ponies; they constituted almost a small village down in the end of the meadow, and in the course of time, became loyal and were like children whom Jesse must maintain and protect.

Ransome Haveril got news of Jesse's return and lost no time in coming to Lazy Creek.

Sitting gracefully sidewise in the high-horned saddle, he appeared at the top of the knoll, and let out a high yelp with huge gratification as he spied his old friend Jesse Bodine slouching in the late sunshine on a spacious if dreary veranda.

"Hi! Jess, you old son-of-a-gun!"

"Ran, you ugly father of yellow tomcats! Pile down, and make yourself to home! Look around, Ran! This is my new place, and it's all yours same as mine. Like it?"

Then of course, after a grin and a handshake, it all had to come out: Kate Haveril—Lady Kate.

Ransome went pale and looked sick.

"Quit your joking, Jess."

No, but it was true. Kate Haveril, just over the hill, so to speak. With that double-dealing Hackamore Breen. Readying to marry him, it looked like.

"By God!" said Ransome Haveril, and now his face went red. Jesse, grim-jawed and hard-eyed, nodded.

"That's the way it is, Ran."

"Jess, I won't take it from you or any other man! She wouldn't be like that! Damn it, you lie!"

"I haven't said anything," said Jesse Bodine.

"I know! I know! They say that Lady Kate is just a girl of the camps—any man's girl! It's a lie, Jess. And she is with Breen?"

"She has a chaperon," his friend reminded him. "Big Belle is with them."

Ransome stood frowning a moment. When he spoke it was to say quietly:

"I tell you it's all a damned lie. Just the same, I've got to kill him."

But when he rode over to El Monte, after a time with Jesse and April, talking of days which to them all seemed so far away, he found Breen absent; and Lady Kate was sitting in the yard with Big Belle, under a great live-oak.

Lady Kate wasn't any Lady Kate at all today, but just a lovely young girl in the careless dress of a country girl in an early California; a ribbon in her hair, bright orange calico, dusty shoes. And she didn't even know him right away, this stalwart, dark-bearded young man. But Ransome came down out of the saddle, caught her hands, and hugged her.

"Kate! Kate! Oh, Kate!"

BUT the magic of the moment was swiftly broken, for he remembered his errand.

"Katherine," he said, "tell me—where's that yellow dog Hackamore Breen?"

"You can't talk like that of him! I am going to marry him, Ransome. Real soon, too."

"You'll do nothing of the kind! You—why, Katherine, you can't!"

"Why can't I?"

"Because—damn it, Kate, there's Jesse—Jesse Bodine! He's my one real friend, Kate. He'd go to hell for me, and I would for him, too. And he loves you, and always has, and you know it."

She gave him a small smile, tight and cynical.

"Jesse Bodine? Love?" She rumpled his hair. "Ransome, you silly boy!"

Then Belle broke in upon them. (She had been eavesdropping, and judged it

time!) It was Big Belle who had given Lady Kate her name, Big Belle who had a boarding-house up in Nevada City, who mothered a lot of dance-hall girls; and now she made her entrance singing:

I'm a Daisy Bell, and a Bell can ring!
Here's something you can recollec':
If any damn' man jus' makes me mad,
Well, I step out and break his neck!
So hop along, roll along, come along
For a smile from Daisy Bell,
An' if you don't like the tune of my song,
Well, gents, go plumb to—San Francisco.

She was fat and middle-aged and somehow lovable. Ransome lighted up at the sight of her, as she said:

"Lady Kate, why didn't you ever tell me you had a brother? You mystery girls make me sick! —Put 'er there, Mr. Haveril!" And she and Ransome shook hands and liked each other.

"I've got to high-tail out of here," said Ransome, giving up for the day anyhow his idea of killing Hackamore Breen. "I'm on my way back to the Lazy Creek. By the way, there's a girl there, name of April! She's just exactly like somebody, Kathy, that we used to read about in that big fat book of fairy-tales. No, she's not my girl, but she—"

Kate, at ease now, laughed that lovely, husky-throated laughter of hers.

"April? That's funny; an odd name, isn't it, Ransome? I knew an April once upon a time—"

"Not this one," said Ransome. "Jesse and me, coming West, met up with her and her folks. I sort of liked her sister Nellie. But little April was dead in love with Jesse. April Crabtree, her name is, and she's staying at the Lazy Creek now, and—"

"But Ransome! I do know her! I didn't know she was here in California! Ransome! You say she fell in love with Jesse? And—and—"

"So long, Sis," said Ransome, and kissed her forehead. Then he shook hands again with Big Belle, saying, "I'm glad to know you, ma'am!" And he went off, clanking his spurs, to his horse.

Chapter Eleven

JESSE BODINE had long ago given over carrying a rifle, but now had bought the finest new carbine to be had in San Francisco, and carried it with him wherever he rode. He said, when she mentioned it, that there was an old timber wolf he was gunning for. But it wasn't long before April knew the timber wolf was Hackamore Breen. And the morning that he said casually that he was going out to have a good look at the watershed, and went out looking at his carbine in a certain way, she knew what was in the wind.

She stood out in the hard-packed yard when Jesse rode away. Then she ran to her room, got hastily into overalls and boots, and went down to the barn. One of Jesse's Indians, grinning and flourishing his hat rather than just removing it, brought her a saddled horse.

After a while she saw, far ahead, Jesse Bodine riding up through the scattering of pines and oaks on a slope which ran down to the headwaters of the creek. He rode out that day with blood in his eye, looking for Hackamore Breen, hoping to find him trespassing.

THE way that the three big ranches spread out, the Moragas claimed the watershed, and so did Jesse Bodine; between them there could never be any trouble. Hackamore Breen, however, claimed the same territory, and that was different!

Jesse pulled his horse down to a dead halt and unlimbered his new carbine; it might come in handy some day to see whether this horse would stand for shooting from the saddle. He chose a whitish, resinous wound on a pine for a target, and fired; his horse shivered, then stood still. Jesse patted the tense shoulder; here was a horse to ride! Then he tried again, just truing up on his marksmanship. He selected a ripe pine cone and made a try toward cutting it free from the lofty limb. While the cone was falling, he laughed quietly to himself; it was rather good to know that now, after this long time, he still had the trick of such shooting as could bark a squirrel. He rode on again, and though the echoes of his two shots were dead among the hills, the memory of them lingered on in other ears than his own.

Then, from the brow of the hill, he saw five men. They were on his land, as he figured it, and they were building some sort of fence; a few crazily crooked posts with stripped saplings strung between them, and the fence was across the trail that a man from Lazy Creek would travel, headed this way. And one of the men, not laboring but smoking a cigarette while from the saddle he commanded the others, was Hackamore Breen.

Jesse slid out of the saddle. His horse, for which he felt a sudden affection, he led into a pine grove. Then he stepped out into the open.

"You, Breen!" he called. "Better tell your men to jerk that fence down!"

"Oh!" thought April, her hand against her lips, as she halted her horse and sat watching through the pines.

BREEN saw who it was and reached for his belt-gun. He yelled back:

"Got you dead to rights this time!" And he laughed in his sneering way, as he said to his men: "Kill him, and you get five hundred dollars in gold!"

They started shooting—three of his four men carried rifles. Those three stood out in the sunlight so that Jesse Bodine could see them clearly, and he coolly and steadily shot them down: One, two, three. It was like knocking over tenpins. He was satisfied if he got them in leg or arm, just so that he put them out of the fight, for after all, he had no quarrel with them.

Then, with the corners of his mouth drawn in, a sort of hell's grin, he shot down Breen's other man, leaving Breen himself for the last.

"That's just to show you, Hackamore, damn you!" he called pleasantly. "Want me to shoot your eye out?"

Hackamore Breen, with his Colt .44, did all that a man could against a carbine at that distance. But he was wise enough to spring back behind a tree. Walking warily, Jesse bore down on him.

Breen emptied his gun at him, then jerked farther back, altogether out of sight, to break the gun and refill the cylinder. And Jesse, knowing what the man must be about, came stalking his game.

They fired together, and Breen's bullet cut the air at Jesse's ear; Jesse's bullet chanced to catch Breen's gun on the very tip, flipping it out of his hand, numbing his gun arm. Seeing and understanding, Jesse bore down on him with a whoop while Breen was reaching for his other gun.

His attack was like that of an Indian leaping upon a pale-face whose scalp he particularly hungered for.

"Throw down your gun, Mr. Breen," he said. "Throw down your gun and let me use my knuckles on your face!"

Breen, with the muzzle of a carbine at his midriff, threw down his gun and jerked his hands skyward. Then Jesse Bodine laughed at him, and whether or not Hackamore Breen had ever heard a man laugh like that, it was certain that April never had.

"I'm not going to kill you today, Mr. Breen," said Jesse Bodine. He threw down his own gun.

"I'm not going to kill you today after all, Mr. Breen. I've a friend, Ransome Haveril, who has the right before me. But I'm going to send you back to someone who, when she looks at you, will say: 'Why, you've been visiting with Duke Bodine!'"

A sort of blue murder came stormily into Hackamore Breen's eyes.

As Jesse Bodine hurled himself at the man whom he longed with an infinite longing to beat down into the earth, that blue fire in Hackamore Breen's eyes grew hotter with a new, exultant flash. For Breen's ace in the hole was a big-bladed sheath-knife dangling from his belt. He whipped it out and brought it sweeping up with every intent and hope of splitting his enemy wide open.

And very close did he come then to achieving his heart's desire; but Bodine saw it in the last nick of time, and was as swift and sure in blocking the murderous downward sweep by catching Breen's descending wrist in a clutch that gripped and locked like steel. The two men began a fierce struggle then for the mastery of the weapon. . . . April's heart stood still and she stopped breathing as in frozen horror she watched. For an instant they resembled still statues of gladiators more than living men.

Jesse Bodine began to laugh softly.

"It's no good, Mr. Breen," he said. "I'm squeezing the blood out of your hand. In a minute I'm going to damn' near kill you!"

He was right. A moment more, and the knife fell from Breen's paralyzed fingers; and for an instant the two men stood motionless.

THEN Jesse Bodine bored into Breen, battering his congested face with fists smashing like iron hammers. At last Jesse's clubbed fist came up like a stone in a sling—and Hackamore Breen went down and lay still as a dead man.

"Got you, damn you!" panted Jesse Bodine.

Then, out of a blur of sound, he heard a shrill, agonized scream from April.

"Jesse! Look out!"

One of the men on the ground, had heaved himself halfway up, propped with one hand on the ground and with his

other hand had dragged to him Breen's fallen revolver. Jesse Bodine did the one thing possible; he leaped at the man, instead of springing aside, and the toe of his boot crashed into the wrist; the gun flew wide, exploding in the air; the man crouched back whimpering.

SWIFTLY as the thing was done and over with, already April had come running. She snatched up one of the fallen rifles; stood there shaking, menacing them all with it, crying wildly:

"I'll kill you—every one of you!"

Not a man of them moved. They scarcely breathed. Jesse Bodine stared at her incredulously.

"Good girl, April," he said in a quiet voice, and still looked at her queerly. "I'm still alive, and it's because of you, April."

Then he turned from her and took up his carbine.

"Boys," he said to the Breen men, "the party is over. You get to hell out of here, off my land. And take Mr. Breen with you. Don't any of you ever show up here again as long as you live. Get going."

The men got away to their horses as best they could; dragging Breen along with them, they heaved him into a saddle and rode away. Only then the rifle slid out of April's grasp and she buried her face in her hands and began to cry stormily.

Jesse Bodine held her in his arms.

"I was so frightened, Jesse," she said. Then she wiped her eyes and added: "It was glorious the way you fought them all."

"If it hadn't been for you—"

"Sh! Let's go away from here now."

They went in silence to their horses and turned back toward the Lazy Creek ranch-house, but just before they came within sight of it April stopped her horse and said tremulously:

"Jesse, you go on and leave me here. I guess I'd better be all by myself for a little while. I'll be all right. I'll follow along in a few minutes."

She watched him out of sight through the trees, then slid from her horse and lay down, her face hidden in her crossed arms. And there she lay when a few minutes later Ransome Haveril, riding this way, found her.

"April!" he cried anxiously, in a flash standing over her. "You've been hurt!"

She sat up. "No," she told him. "Just lying here and thinking!"

He shook his head. "You can't fool old man Ransome. Something has happened. What's the matter, April?"

She told him. Ransome sat down beside her, staring angrily off into the distance.

"Jesse ought to have killed him," he muttered. "Why didn't he?" He turned his brooding eyes back to her. "Do you know that Breen thinks he is going to marry my— Did you ever hear of a Lady Kate, April?"

"Yes. Everyone has, I suppose. But what about her, Ransome?"

"Breen thinks he's going to marry her. That's why I wish Jesse had killed him. That's why I'm going to kill him myself. Lady Kate is my sister."

"Lady Kate—your sister!" she gasped.

"And what's more, you knew her once. Remember Kate Haveril?"

She looked stunned. "Kit Haveril! Kate Haveril, Lady Kate! But, Ransome—"

"She's over there now, at Breen's. Fixing to marry him. And long ago before Jesse and I started west, to California, Jesse and Kate were sweethearts. Now see what has happened to them!"

"Does Jesse still love her?"

"How do I know! How does anybody know anything about anybody else? Jesse love Kate? Hell, yes! Of course he does, though maybe he doesn't know it. He's never once looked at another girl."

"That's Jesse," nodded little April. "You're right. Of course he loves her. And she loves him." She jumped up and brushed dead leaves from her clothes. "Let's go now, Ransome."

Then, as he too, got to his feet, she surprised him by laughing softly.

"If you had only seen what Jesse did to that Breen man just now, you'd *know* that he loves her! I just wish Kate had been there to see!"

AS it happened, though Lady Kate had not seen actually with her own eyes what had just taken place, she was seeing it pretty accurately right now with the eye of her mind. For when Hackamore Breen, slumping in the saddle, came home to El Monte, his men look-

ing sick in their saddles, Kate Haveril was out under the big oak below the house and was the first to see them. Breen would have given pretty nearly anything he possessed to have been able to keep out of her sight for a few hours. There was black, dried blood on his face, his bruised lips were swollen, his nose was a shapeless swelling, one eye was purple, his clothes were torn.

Solicitously Kate ran to meet him.

"Why, Willard! You—" She gasped out the few words, then grew rigid and silent. Her first thought was, "What has happened to him? Who would do this to him?" And in a flash she answered her own question: "Jesse Bodine has done this to you!"

That was worse than rubbing salt into a raw wound. Why should she be so sure that that damned Bodine had done this to him, that Bodine *could* do this to him?

Hackamore Breen's last grip on himself went then with the acid of shame added to the pain and humiliation he had already endured. He said things which at the moment he himself did not realize he was saying, used words to say them with, which he never should have used. Not only did he curse Jesse Bodine up and down, shouting out incoherently what he was going to do to that gambler and crook, but he dragged Lady Kate into the arena of his fury— He named her the sort of woman he had heard her named in the mining-camps, accused her—far more rightfully than he knew—of having an eye on Duke Bodine.

LADY KATE turned her back on him and went to the house and to Big Belle—who had heard every word.

"Serves you right and I'm glad of it," she said sourly. "I've told you what for a man he is, and you shut your fool eyes. Now you ought to know!"

"We're leaving here right away," said Kate. "Come with me to pack our things."

"Where do you think we're going?"

"Anywhere but here! Back to San Francisco, I suppose. Come; hurry!"

"Hold on a minute, child," said Big Belle. "If you really want to get out from under all this," she said, "better use your head. Hack Breen will have his notion where we're going. Keep your shirt on, kid, or he'll see to it that you *never* get away!"

"I see what you mean," said Kate miserably. "Oh, Belle!"

"Shush! And stiffen your backbone. When you and me go, the hell with any packing! We'll sneak out by the dark of the moon, grab a couple of horses and high-tail without nobody knowing."

This time it was for Kate to whisper an urgent: *"Sh!"*

For she heard Breen's heavy tread at the front door.

Chapter Twelve

A FEW sunny days passed by during which, had a stranger passed this way, he must have exclaimed: "How serene, how filled with peace and plenty, and all good things is this pastoral life in California!"

At the Lazy Creek Ranch everyone was busy, everyone seemed happy; there was much to do and much was being done. Bud Weaver with his henchman-uncle, Lonesome Pete of the mournful visage and enormous, drooping mustaches, were overflowing with plans for the renascence, then the general betterment toward perfection of a ranch which they both swore was the finest up-and-down spread this side Texas, or th' other side, either. And both, having heard of Jesse Bodine's encounter with Hackamore Breen and his men, were over-eager for a return engagement.

"Ever since once I played poker with that coyote that time, over to Yellow Jacket," said Bud Weaver, "I been hoping! Glory to come, what a day it'll be when he gives me a show to shoot his eyes out!"

Scarcely less interested and optimistic was old man Crabtree, April's father. And Ransome Haveril and Don Felipe Moraga and Captain Leigh,—who on his recovery had come down to the ranch,—all three of them more of the time at Lazy Creek than anywhere else, were richly in accord with all this, eager for a showdown with Breen and his men.

These were queer days for Jesse Bodine. For the most part he was silent, off somewhere by himself. For him it was a time of a fulfillment and of an empty sorrow. He was building himself a place like a kingdom; it spread across miles and miles and yet other miles, some day, he vowed, would spread still farther and farther.

But he did not have what he wanted most of all. . . .

He rode at times alone to the crest of a low-lying ridge from which one could

almost look across the miles to the Hackamore Breen ranch-house; once or twice he saw smoke from its chimneys. And at these times, afraid for Lady Kate and hungering for her, he asked himself why he had not killed Hackamore Breen and made an end of an unendurable situation.

April began to find it difficult to get anything done, with so much requiring her attention. And that was because, if it wasn't Ransome Haveril seeking her out, it was Don Felipe, and if not Don Felipe, then Captain Leigh; and if none of these, then even Bud Weaver or actually Lonesome Pete pulling his drooping mustaches mournfully at her, and with much to say. But from the first it had been handsome Don Felipe who held her heart.

They were all young, and California was young, and youth is mating-time; and there is nothing very much you can do about it. And some young ladies like April, very much in love, can't help wanting to see everybody else in love and happy. Matches are willingly made by such heavenly hands as little April's.

"Captain Leigh," she told him one day, all eagerness, "I have been asked by Don Philip's mother and father, he told me yesterday, to visit them. I am going to do it! And I am going to tell Miss Rosy everything you want me to!"

And April all the while was daydreaming of Jesse Bodine and Kate Haveril. The "Kit" she had loved so long ago! And her fingers fairly tingled.

ONE noontime Dan Comstock, the Sheriff from Yellow Jacket, rode down to Lazy Creek, seeking Jesse Bodine. He and Jesse squatted on their heels out by the barn, and talked.

"Remember the day you brought the stage into Yellow Jacket, Bodine?" asked the straight-from-the-shoulder Comstock, his icy-blue eyes trained like guns on Jesse's face.

"I remember."

"The bandits killed Long Peters that day, remember? You didn't know him alive, but you brought him in dead. Well, happens he was a friend of mine."

Jesse Bodine looked his interest, a notch above mere curiosity. Long Peters was a long time dead now, no matter whose friend.

"Maybe I told you that time," the Sheriff went on, "that I couldn't figure out whether the job had been pulled off by Joaquin Murietta or by the Bedloe gang. You might not remember that. But me, I don't forget easy. And it sticks in my mind, something you said. It was like this: You said you didn't get a chance to see the bandit captain clear, him being masked, but you heard his voice when he yelled out his orders. And you said it was a voice you'd know again if you ever heard it. You might remember that?"

Jesse scratched the ground with a bit of twig, thoughtfully. Then he nodded.

"That still goes, Sheriff. I've thought sometimes I might hear that voice again, somewhere, but I never have. Yes. If I heard it now, I'd know it."

THE Sheriff for a while watched Jesse's twig-scratches in silence. At last he observed:

"I aint a great hand for monkeying around with other folks' business, Bodine, but like most, I got a sort of natural curiosity. I've heard tell that you and your neighbor Hackamore Breen don't jibe, as the feller says."

"Well?" Jesse asked him.

"I might ask you to do me a favor," said Comstock.

"Ask ahead."

"Thanks." Comstock stood up. "It won't be long; maybe tonight. I'm not riding far before I'll be back."

"I'd like to have you put up with us as long as you can," invited Jesse, and he too got to his feet. "You're not hinting that Breen was one of the men that stuck up Long Peters' stage, are you?"

"No, not exactly."

"I didn't suppose so. Anyhow, it wasn't his voice I heard."

"No such luck. Hack Breen's too crafty a critter for anything like that to happen to him. Well, I'll ride along, and maybe I'll see you later—and maybe we'll have something to tell each other. For one thing, if there's trouble between you and Breen, I'm not on Breen's side. So long, Bodine."

"Ride lucky," said Jesse.

He had plenty to think about during the afternoon and plenty to do. The sun was midway down in the west when one of his Indian boys handed him a folded bit of paper.

There were just a few penciled lines:

Dear Jesse, please do what I ask right away, won't you? It's terribly important. Come to the watershed place. And wait there, if you have to, a little while. I'll explain. *April.*

He frowned over the thing and could make neither head nor tail of it. But not for a second did he have the slightest thought of keeping April waiting. He got his carbine, shoved it into its leather on the saddle and rode.

It was a serene, pleasant afternoon and the pines made a shadowy solitude all their own on the slopes where the only sound was the soft whispering of their never-still branches, and splotches of sunlight were pure gold. This was all his, the fertile earth and the hills and the running water and forests and the sky above—but all the while he was wondering about April. And when he reached the spot where he had contended with Hackamore Breen and his men, and there was no April there, he began to feel uneasy.

And when he presently heard the quick beat of a horse's hoofs, and noted with a flick of suspicion that they were oncoming from the direction of the Breen ranch. Another moment and he saw the rider coming straight toward him through the pines.

"Kate!" he exclaimed, and his surprised gladness rang in his voice.

She looked at him level-eyed from under the broad brim of her hat, and she said in that lovely voice of hers:

"I came here to meet April Crabtree."

"Why, so did I," said Jesse.

"She wrote me a note that an Indian boy brought over—"

"She wrote *me* a note!"

They looked at each other gravely. Then a smile touched his lips and he said very softly: "You are just like a wild rose, Kitty."

He came down out of the saddle and went to her and put up his hands, bidding her with his eyes to come down. Suddenly he thought how little she looked, there on top of the tall horse.

Kate said in a small voice: "April played a trick on us. Is that it, Jesse? You didn't do this, did you?"

"No. Our God-blessed little April did it! Let her have her way, Kate."

HER expression did not change; but slowly she let her reins slip out of her hands, then reached those hands out to him. But when she came down into his embrace:

"No, Jesse," she said firmly. "Let me go. I will talk with you—"

He put one hand to her throat and lifted out the little gold chain. From it dangled the small bauble of a locket that had come once upon a time from the Pleasant Valley general store. Now, for companion-piece, there was a diamond ring strung with it on the chain, and he knew it for the ring Duke Bodine had given to Lady Kate, that night in the lusty young city by the Golden Gate!

He laughed quietly, deep down in his throat, and drew her into his arms again and kissed her. And Kate threw her arms about his neck, and began to cry—and as far as the records go there never was any "Lady Kate" after that.

Chapter Thirteen

AS the first lamps and candles were being lighted at the Lazy Creek Ranch that night, Sheriff Dan Comstock came again looking for Jesse Bodine.

"I've been doing me some back-tracking," said the Sheriff, when he had Jesse alone in a little room which April was converting into an "office" for Mr. Jesse Bodine, owner and manager of the Lazy Creek Ranch. "I'm going to ask you a favor, and that means you're helping me. After that—dammit, I'll shed my blood on your side the fence."

"Fair enough," laughed Jesse.

"We'll take us a little ride then, Bodine."

They passed through the big living-room which, with logs blazing in the deep old black fireplace, and music of mouth-organ, and Captain Leigh's singing, and the tapping of light feet as Don Felipe instructed little April in an old Spanish dance, was a very gay place. Jesse perforce stopped to draw Kate aside and have a word with her.

For Kate had come straight home with him, making good her freedom, not even returning for a word with Big Belle. And that was because that word had already been spoken. When she had received April's note, she had shown it to Belle, and that buxom lady had said eagerly:

"Here's your chance, child! You meet your little friend, then keep right on going! You'll hardly be more than out of sight when I'll make my get-away too."

Now Jesse drew Kate outside for a stolen moment, a brief half-explanation, since he lacked information for a full one. Then, toeing into his stirrup, he asked Comstock: "Which way?"

"Down to Shingle John's. You've been there, I heard."

Yes, he remembered the time: When he had gone to a meeting with a man named Frank Brewster, when Hackamore had killed Brewster, and Jesse Bodine had shot Hackamore. And Shingle John had been disgruntled because they had made a mess of his place.

After little more than an hour's ride they arrived at Shingle, tiny, dim-lit settlement in a lazily flowing bend of Lazy Creek, and dismounted in the dark a hundred yards away from Shingle John's. When the Sheriff removed his spurs and hung them on his saddle-horn, Jesse Bodine did likewise; Comstock led the way, keeping in the dark, around to the rear of Shingle John's.

When they stopped under a small, high window, it was quite dark, the window blanketed; yet the card-room was tenanted and sounds came freely enough to them: A chair moving, the chink of coins, clink of glass, a man's voice.

Then, out of comparatively long silences, several voices. Men at poker, silent for the most part. A man laughed —Hackamore Breen, who always had to jeer when he won.

The poker-game went on; and outside, Comstock and Jesse Bodine stood quite still, eavesdropping. Again a voice burst out explosively, an extraordinarily unpleasant voice, rough and discordant.

JESSE BODINE'S grip shut down hard on Comstock's arm.

"That's the man!" he said. "That's the voice! I'll swear to it!"

"Thanks, Bodine," said Comstock, and drew a deep breath of satisfaction. "I was already well-nigh sure of it. That's Jake Bedloe. All right; come on."

"Where this time?"

"Back to your place. I'm accepting your invitation to eat and sleep at Lazy Creek. Riding along, I'll tell you a thing or two." And as they rode: "If we don't travel too fast," Comstock said, "maybe we can talk this out before we get to your place." He removed his hat, rumpled his hair and clapped the hat on again. "I guess we better begin with Breen."

"I'd rather end with him, but have it your way."

"*Bueno, compañero.* Hack Breen is out to burn you down, and you know it, and the whole damn' country knows it, and knows why. He's going to get your hide if he can. Right?"

"Go ahead."

"All right. Now for Jake Bedloe. By the way, you heard Breen with him just now? They are old pardners. . . . The day you brought the stage in, like I said, I figured the robbery was Joaquin Murietta's or Bedloe's. Just guesswork, by the ear-marks of the way the thing was done. So I just hung fire and kept hoping. But there was one thing I did pick up that helped, and it was a gun that somebody had left out there by the Cottonwood Bridge. There was blood on the gun; I guess you or somebody else in the stage must have shot one of the robbers in the hand. Anyhow, there the gun was; and what is more, I knew that gun the minute I got my eye on it: An old-timer, long-barreled, with the sweetest looking horn-handle you ever saw, with a sort of half-moon where your thumb goes. Sure I knew it; it used to be mine. I'd lost it in a poker-game more'n a year before.

"Well, it didn't take me anywhere fast, but it sure took me far! I started back with the man I lost it to and traced the thing from man to man that owned it since, and in the year's time eleven men had carried it! None of 'em had kept it long; well, that wasn't surprising." He chuckled with obvious enjoyment. "Bodine, the gun looked fine, but it just wasn't worth a single damn; maybe if it had been, I wouldn't have let it go so easy over a card-table. And among them eleven men, two of 'em was dead. shot dead! That kind of a gun, it was. And following the trail of that gun through eleven owners, two of 'em dead, was a tarnation of a job. Anyhow, I got it done a month ago. And it was Dick Bedloe, Jake's brother and one of the gang, that had owned it most recent. And only a couple of weeks ago I saw Dick over to Dry Town. He had a scar on the back of his right hand you could see from across the room."

When he paused a moment, Jesse observed thoughtfully: "Looks like you've come pretty close to nailing that Cottonwood Bridge job on the Bedloes—what with the gun and my remembering Jake Bedloe's voice."

"IT'S just about twice as much evidence as I need," said Comstock with satisfaction. "All right. Now here's where you're going to be interested. One thing, like we've said, Hackamore Breen is out to pull you down and dig you under and pile rocks on your grave. Another thing, Hack Breen and Jake Bedloe are friends. Another thing, Jake Bedloe is staying at El Monte now, and

his two brothers are due to show up there most any minute. That's something, aint it?"

"It's a hatful," muttered Jesse Bodine, and thought of Kate Haveril and April and of Mrs. Crabtree and her daughter with her two babies, all at Lazy Creek.

"And here's the funny thing. Over in Nevada City the other day, where I was helping out at Happy Renfrew's birthday party, there was a fight in a saloon, and a man got killed. He was a half-Injun that I kind of liked, seeing he did me a big kindness three-four years ago. I kind of tried to make things easy for him. He stuck it out two days before he cashed in his chips. At the end he did a lot of talking. He'd been with the Bedloe gang; I knew that. He jabbered about them; most of all, he jabbered about their swag. He still craved for his share, I guess. He had it in his head that they'd been hoarding up the loot from a lot of highway robberies, meaning to split the pot when it got as rich as they wanted it. And he knew where they'd hid it. Guess where?"

"How in hell should I know?" asked Jesse Bodine.

"They picked themselves out, says my half-breed Injun, a likely spot: an old deserted house way to hell and gone, a place nobody'd lived in for a long time, and where nobody'd most likely live for years to come."

Jesse stared. "My place!" he said.

"Lazy Creek! Why not? Somewheres in your house, I'm betting you, all that swag is hid—and Mr. Jake Bedloe wants it—and you can look out heap *pronto* for a midnight visit from the Bedloes and Hackamore Breen and all their little friends and companions!"

"Good God, man! They'd kill like Indians on the warpath! And look at the folks I've got there!"

"Thought you might get interested," said the Sheriff.

They put their horses to the gallop. A few further words were jolted out: Comstock surmised that Bedloe would have six or eight or maybe ten men with him; there might be that many of Hackamore Breen's men if they did decide to attack, and to do so with joined forces.

KATE HAVERIL was wearing a diamond ring on her thumb. And about her neck was a fine gold chain, and its dangling locket hung outside her dress.

"Love me, Jesse?" she whispered.

"If I don't love you, Kate Haveril, there are no stars in the sky, and no God backing the stars up, and the grass was never green! Come here, where you belong!"

She went swiftly into his arms.

WHILE Dan Comstock joined the others, Jesse Bodine told Kate first of all of the purpose of his visit to Shingle, of Jake Bedloe's being there with Hackamore Breen, then of the Sheriff's theory.

Her hand tightened on his arm. She said, serious but unafraid:

"They'll raid us! Of course. For Willard to try to pay you back and for the Bedloes to recover their treasure."

"So you see, you mustn't be here. Right away, tonight, while Breen and Bedloe are playing poker at Shingle John's, I'll get the big wagon ready. You women and the kids are going over to La Fiesta. The boys can do as they please, go or stay. But you womenfolk—"

"I wonder why it is," said Kate, "that men seem to think, when it's a question of the danger of getting killed, that a woman should feel any different about it than a man does? How do you figure it out, Mr. Bodine? And why is it that a man always figures a woman can't line up sights and pull a trigger? Tell me—"

He caught her back into his arms.

"Just the same, to please me, you'll go?"

"No," said Kate. "I'm darned if I will! I'll do anything on earth, I think, to please you, Jesse Bodine, except one thing: I won't ever leave you again. I've had enough of that for one lifetime."

They went back to the others in the living-room; and there Comstock, at a nod from Jesse, told them all he knew of the Bedloes and of the present condition of affairs. But the womenfolk refused, as Kate had refused, to budge. That was settled, unless their menfolk tied them up and hauled them away. Well, then, why not spend a pleasant evening treasure-hunting?

They lighted a score of candles and the few lamps on the place; they went singly or in couples—Don Felipe and April were never more than a yard apart.

They found nothing that night, but they did have a good time. And they halted safely this side of tearing the house down. And in the end the house grew quiet, and the candles were blown out.

But out in the barn, with a couple of lanterns, were Jesse Bodine and the Sheriff. And one by one the other men, having received a quiet word during the hubbub, came to join them.

"Dealing with bad-men is one thing; dealing with womenfolk is another, as maybe you boys might know," said Dan Comstock. "Now, I've talked aside with Bodine here, and we've got another idea.

"You see, I sort of wanted to let things drift until the Bedloes showed up here to grab back what they cached here, so me, I could grab it off of them. But if we wait that long, we wait until they're ready, until the rest of Bedloe's friends show. Here's the other way of it: I go out right now, tonight, back to Shingle John's, and I say: 'Jake Bedloe, you're under arrest for robbery, murder, holding up the stage and killing Long Peters!' And to make my play sort of even, some of you boys come along. That way, there won't be any raid on the Lazy Creek. And likewise, that way, most likely we'll tie a can to Hackamore Breen's tail; if he don't happen to get shot, I can arrest him for chipping in with Bedloe in defiance of the law. If we ride fast, we'll most likely find them still at poker at Shingle John's. Bodine agrees."

"Gentlemen!" exclaimed Captain Bob Leigh. "May I ask what we are waiting for?"

"There's not a chance in a hundred," said Jesse Bodine, "but we can't afford to overlook that chance, that we might miss the men we're looking for, and that they might show up here while we're somewhere else. One of us has to stay here and keep an eye open. First we decide who's to stay; then we go stir up the Indian *vaqueros* and see that they've all got rifles, and scatter them in the dark outside the house; if they see any flock of riders coming, they're to blaze them out of their saddles as they come along. It'll take us only an hour to get to Shingle; an hour to get back, if there's nobody there. And it's still early."

THE men looked at one another, asking with their eyes the same question: "Who's going to stay?"

"Mr. Crabtree," said Jesse Bodine, "you're elected to hold the fort here until we get back. You're the man for it; for one thing, you're pretty much of a stranger here and don't know any of the men we're looking for; another thing, you'll want to be near your family."

Crabtree sighed. "I'd sort of like to traipse along of you boys," he said, "but I guess Bodine's right. I'll step along an' round up the Injun camp. So long, boys."

They rode swiftly, knowing that they were leaving Lazy Creek and their womenfolk not too well defended in case of a miscarriage in their plans. They wanted to get to Shingle with all possible dispatch, to make sure.

And when they saw the reflected glint of stars, broken waveringly in the creek bending about Shingle, they were down from their saddles like one man, and were hurrying, silent and swift, to Shingle John's. There was a light in the main room where the bar was; they moved noiselessly to the rear, and stood a moment under the dark window.

"Still at it," said Comstock, relieved.

"Not playing cards, though," said Jesse. "Listen."

FROM within came a confused storm of voices. Breen's voice was to be distinguished, and it strove to dominate. That metallic voice of Jake Bedloe's was unmistakable.

"Lookee," muttered Bud Weaver. "A man without a horse is only half a man! How do we know what's going to happen now? So a couple of us fellows steps back and hides our horses good. And a couple goes and lets their horses loose, counting 'em first to see how many men we're stacking into, and scatters their riding-stock clean to hell. Then we step up and say, 'Howdy, gents!'"

"It's a mighty nice idea, Bud," said the Sheriff. "Listening to them men talking in there tells me one thing: The two other Bedloes have come, and likely there's more with them. Let's take care of the horses first, like you say."

So Bud and Lonesome Pete, and Captain Leigh and Ransome Haveril hastened away to dispose of the two sets of saddle-horses, and returned hurriedly. Bud Weaver reported:

"There was eleven of their horses, all with their saddles on 'em, tied out by John's barn. Whether they all belonged to the Breen-Bedloe crowd, we don't know; anyhow, we set 'em high-tailing, and anyhow likewise Breen and Bedloe is afoot. Now!"

Comstock, who had been all the while listening intently to the voices in the card-room, made his succinct report:

"Breen and Jake Bedloe are in there. Likewise the two other Bedloe boys; that's four of 'em. There's others I can't swear to: Jim Oliver, for one, I'd say, and Injun Tuckalee for another; and three-four others, and all helling to go places. Like Bud says, boys, let's go get what we come for."

He led the way, to the front. They shoved the swing-doors open and entered the main room where the bar was.

The place was lighted by a couple of coal-oil lamps with darkened reflectors. It was very quiet. Besides the bartender Shingle John, there were only four men in the place: two tired-looking miners sat disconsolate at a dim corner table; a half-breed draped over the near end of the bar, looking without interest into an empty glass; a young cowboy, evidently awaiting some one, sat playing solitaire.

At the quiet tread of feet, Shingle John looked up; then he came erect.

"What you want?" he demanded uneasily.

Sheriff Comstock knew the half-breed draped over the end of the bar; and signaled him with the quirk of an eyebrow.

"Poco-poco," he said, forking over a gold-piece, "get on your horse and ride hell-for-leather to Yellow Jacket, and tell Doc Dabney I said to come on over right away!"

"Somebody seek?" asked Poco-poco.

"Not yet, but soon!" said the Sheriff. "Get going, kid."

POCO-POCO hurried away. Comstock glanced about, at the readiness on the faces of the men backing him up, said briefly, "Seven to eleven—lucky numbers, and seven's the luckiest!" Then he lifted his voice to carry well, and sang out:

"You, Jake Bedloe! Come out and come shooting, or come with your hands up! It's Dan Comstock talking! Make it quick, or I'll burn this place down and shoot as you pile out!"

A roar came from Shingle John:

"No, you don't, Dan Comstock! I won't have my place all messed up again, and I won't have it burned down—"

"Shut up!" admonished Comstock. And called loudly again: "Hear me, Bedloe? Come get it, or come walking soft. You, Hackamore Breen, stay out of this—or chip in, if you want. —But you step along, Bedloe!"

There was a heavy silence. Behind the closed door of the card-room there was, no doubt, a hurried conference.

THEN the door opened; Jake Bedloe stepped into the front room. He was an enormous man, some six or seven inches above six feet, broad and powerful, a lusty young black-bearded giant. He came out with his hands lifted no higher than his floating ribs, and he carried a ready gun in each hand. And as he stepped through the door, Hackamore Breen stepped lightly behind him, and then there were the two other Bedloes, much like Jake in looks, and Injun Tuckalee and Jim Oliver, and the rest of the eleven of them. And their eyes were steady and hard and murderous.

"Well, Dan?" said Jake Bedloe in that harshly discordant voice of his. "What's it all about?"

"You're under arrest," said Comstock, "for highway robbery and murder—for killing Long Peters at Cottonwood Bridge. Want to come quiet?"

"Maybe we better talk it over, Dan," said Jake Bedloe.

Glances licked through the dim light like spurts of flame. Jesse Bodine's eyes and Hackamore Breen's met.

"We'll talk at the jail in Yellow Jacket, Jake. And you'll hang inside of twenty-four hours unless you wink out right now. Make up your mind!"

"Dammit!" yelled Shingle John, and from behind the bar started flourishing a stubby shotgun. "You shut up, you boys, and clear out, or—"

The man was half drunk; whether or not he meant to shoot just then, whether he hit the target he had in mind, was never to be known. A shaky finger on one of the two triggers precipitated a general bedlam; the explosion of his buckshot-loaded shotgun was like that of a cannon, and his discharge, tearing over Comstock's head by four or five feet, blew the swinging lamp into atoms.

Comstock, whether or not under a misapprehension, threw his gun down and shot Shingle John through the upper chest.

Shingle John dropped out of sight behind his bar, and there was the loud clatter of his falling shotgun. The uninterested bystanders vanished like puffs of steam over a hot stove. Red gun-flashes ripped through the semi-dark. Two or three men of Bedloe's following whipped back into the card-room to leap out through the window and get away.

Lonesome Pete grabbed Bud Weaver's arm: "They're runnin' out on us!" he yelled. And with Bud Weaver he ran out and to the back of the house.

In half a dozen seconds the front room was acrid with smoke, and the place was almost swallowed by an utter dark; a chance shot exploded the second lamp. Kerosene leaked out, and fire caught along the wall and licked hungrily at the dry boards, making a small, lovely plume of fire from a resinous knothole; it gave the only light.

There came a burst of shots from outside: Lonesome Pete and Bud Weaver were arguing it out in the smoke with the trio who had fled. Through the sound of firing burst the crash of breaking glass; a man had hurled himself toward safety through a window.

Something struck Jesse Bodine in the side of the head, staggering him. But it wasn't a bullet; just something hurled at him, whether a bottle or a stone or an emptied gun, he did not know. The last thing he had seen reasonably clearly was Hackamore Breen, and Breen was shooting at him, a gun in each hand. Now, steadying himself, he saw a dark form slide by him, headed for the swing-doors. He hastened in pursuit. Another dark figure crashed into him; that was Ransome Haveril, he knew from Ransome's strident cursing, Ransome's angry shout, "Out of my way! That's Breen and he's mine!"

Jesse and Ransome crashed through the swing-doors together.

DIZZIED and half blinded from the blow he had received, Jesse Bodine half fell down the steps into the dark of the road and lost sight then of both Ransome and Hackamore Breen. But he steadied himself as he saw several other forms come lunging through the swing-doors, one of which was now hanging crazily on a single hinge. He held fire; he couldn't make out who they were.

Then he heard a raucous voice, never to be mistaken, and a very big man was almost on top of him and was firing with both hands as he charged; Jesse fired back point-blank, and the big man's thick body vanished in the dark; where it went, Jesse Bodine did not know until later, when he found it at his feet.

Bud Weaver and Lonesome Pete came reeling back, insubstantial shadows in the night; each had an arm about the other, and they staggered, but were shouting defiance. Both had been hurt; but they had taken care of the men who had tried to duck out through the card-room window.

A storm of shouts and shots within doors was like a sudden crash of thunder. After it, heavy silence shut down.

Chapter Fourteen

RANSOME HAVERIL'S voice came from the outer dark, calling:

"All right, Jesse?"

"All right, Ran. You?"

"Sure. Fine. I got him, Jess."

"That's good. Come ahead."

They brought a lamp from the card-room.

Shingle John was dying. He kept muttering curses. Damn their eyes, they were making a mess of his place. . . .

Hackamore Breen was dead, shot through the side of the head. Jake Bedloe lived to be hauled off to Yellow Jacket and very promptly hanged. Injun Tuckalee was dead with four bullets through him. Bud Weaver had a bullet through his arm and one searing his middle body, and Lonesome Pete as long as he lived would carry a sagging, stiff shoulder and a scar along his high, bald forehead. Captain Bobbie Leigh again came close to dying, shot twice, and would have died that very night except for the prompt arrival of that rough-and-ready yet equally expert surgeon, Doc Dabney. And Sheriff Dan Comstock had not dodged all the flying lead; that night he lost a thumb, but was glad it was off the left hand, and didn't seem to mind that for a month he went lame in his left leg. For he had his rope on Jake Bedloe, who had killed Long Peters at Cottonwood Bridge; and one of the other Bedloes was dead and the other vanished into the night for all time.

"I'm riding back to Lazy Creek for a wagon," said Jesse Bodine.

But he had ridden only a half-mile when he met a wagon hurrying from Lazy Creek to Shingle, John Crabtree whipping up the horses; and in the wagon were three mattresses and two girls, Kate Haveril and April Crabtree.

BUD WEAVER had a bit of money left; so had Lonesome Pete, and they had a couple of friends, cattlemen, in Texas who had a little money, and Jesse Bodine loaned them ten thousand dollars. So Bud Weaver and his friends bought-in El Monte; and the name of

Hackamore Breen was forgotten. But, in due course, with forgetting one thing, it may well be that something else is remembered....

It was Jesse Bodine who did the remembering, to begin with. He and Kate had ridden in an early, pearly dawn to the crest of Black Pine Ridge. From there you could see, Jesse vowed, half around the world in either direction.

"Ours! All ours, Kate!"

They leaned together from their saddles. . . . And it was then that Jesse remembered.

He said very quietly: "I keep on remembering how the little path wriggled along Buckeye Creek, and how the fields looked from the hills—and how your house was right over yonder, and our house was right out that way—and our folks, Kate—"

"Oh, Jesse! I know!" There came a sob into her throat, and her eyes glistened, and her fingers wrapped themselves tighter than ever about his.

"Yes." He nodded slowly. "You see, Kate, it's going to be fun. Ransome and little Juanita Moraga are going to be married; so are Bob Leigh and the other little Moraga girl. And so are Kitty Haveril and Jesse Bodine!"

He laughed softly, and Kate, for whatever reason, blushed like the fresh tip of a wild rosebud just opening.

"So," said Patriarch Jesse Bodine of Lazy Creek Ranch, "here's the idea: We give a party, Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Bodine. We outfit us with three big wagons, four horses to the wagon, with canvas tops in case it rains. One for the Bodines, one for Mr. and Mrs. Ransome Haveril, one for Mr. and Mrs. Bob Leigh! And we start off on a honeymoon, strung half across the country so that one wagon doesn't crowd the other, *and we go all the way back to Pleasant Valley!* And there we have a big dance and barbecue, and we pick up the rest of the Haverils and Bodines, and we all come back to Lazy Creek to live happy ever after! Shucks, Kate, it's just around the corner! I bet we can make it inside a year!"

And how Kate Haveril got from her horse onto his horse and into his arms, and why she should have been sobbing, nobody knows.

THE END

"Death Joins the Country Club," a murder mystery by Claire Cameron, will be our complete novel next month.

I Was an

Life aboard the prison ship; the rescue by the destroyer Cossack.

THE ship's carpenter came into our prison one evening. I asked him, in English, whether there was any news he could tell us. He did not understand the question, so one of the other fellows who knew a little German interpreted for me. However, the carpenter preferred to communicate with us in pantomime, speaking only a word here and there.

In this way he gave us to understand that something very serious had happened to the *Graf Spee.* As he said her name, he pointed downwards. Then he raised three fingers and said something like *"croyzer."* He mentioned four names: Montevideo, *Ajax, Achilles, Exeter.*

We nearly burst with excitement when we grasped his meaning and almost mobbed the German.

"Is it true? Really true?"

"Ja, ja," said the carpenter, shaking his head miserably; yet I had an idea he was rather fancying himself in his rôle as reporter. He went on talking in pantomime, and with some difficulty we were able to gather what had happened, and how the three small British cruisers had attacked the battleship. The carpenter was even able to convey to us the rather complicated information that the German authorities made out that the battle of Montevideo was a big German victory, but he—the carpenter—and some of the others, the older men on the ship, knew the real truth.

Unfortunately the carpenter was caught by Fritz talking to us, and he was punished for it. The sentence was forty days in prison!

I frequently noticed that the Germans liked to spy on each other, not so much as a matter of duty, as because, somehow, most of them seemed to have a grudge against each other. The sen-

REAL EX-

Altmark Prisoner

By THOMAS FOLEY

tence on the carpenter was particularly cruel, for he was a thin, sickly fellow. Had he had to spend the whole forty days inside that awful tank, he could not possibly have survived. Fortunately, the ship's doctor thought the same, and Captain Dau reduced the sentence to only three weeks. After his spell in the tank he came out pale, with trembling limbs, a shadow of his former self—and after that we never heard his voice again.

One day the Captain had a notice displayed in our prison. This was what it said:

> "The British prisoners are strictly forbidden to complain about anything to anyone, except to the prison officer direct. Anyone complaining in any connection to anyone else, will be punished with imprisonment."

Despite this notice, however, a Liverpool man named Thomas complained to the guards about something that simply could not be ignored, though in the end he also reported his complaint to Babyface. It was about the latrine, which was quite close to our prison, and which was in a disgraceful state.

Thomas spoke to the prison officer one day when he came down accompanied by the ship's doctor.

"This is intolerable," said Thomas. "After all, we're not criminals."

"Perhaps worse," laughed Babyface; "you're British."

But the doctor flew into a rage. His face went purple and he began to shout.

"Criminals! Criminals! Don't you dare say that again. I'm doing all I can for you."

"Much obliged, Doctor," said Thomas coolly; "but you really can't leave us with that latrine as it is now. This is a floating concentration-camp. I'm sure you won't find anything like this in any English prison. If you can't make a change, I will approach the Captain direct."

Remarkably enough, this frank and uncompromising talk did not produce the consequences which we expected. The Germans must have felt they were very much in the wrong, and they had the latrine cleaned next day.

While Thomas escaped punishment, another man, whom I did not know, as he was in another part of the ship, earned a welcome punishment for us all. The man was an officer. He got hold of a tin of milk, pierced it, let the milk run out, then inserted a letter stating that it was from a prisoner on board the *Altmark*, which was sailing the ocean disguised as a Norwegian ship, but was actually a German ship and the supply-ship of the *Graf Spee*, and had some hundreds of British prisoners on board. The letter also contained a brief description of the conditions under which the prisoners were living.

The man succeeded in throwing the tin out of a porthole; but unfortunately for him, the *Altmark* was steaming rather slowly at the time, and as she was very much afraid of coming up against a British warship, she had eleven lookouts instead of the usual two. Of course one of the eleven noticed the tin floating in the water. Suddenly we heard shouts from up above, and a few sharp commands. The ship stopped, and the tin was fished out.

WHEN we heard about the matter from the guards, we were prepared for the mad commander's revenge, because we were quite certain the Germans would not be able to discover the "culprit" and would punish all the prisoners. We had an idea that the Captain would do that in any case.

At the seven o'clock roll-call Babyface told us the whole story, explaining that as the culprit could not be discovered, the whole three hundred of us would be confined to our quarters for three days, during which we would not be allowed on

For details of our prize offer for these fact stories of adventure, see page 1.

deck for a single minute. The Captain added a little diabolical detail. We were not to wash during those three days.

Plans of Escape

Naturally, our time on the hell-ship was not spent entirely in thinking of her hellishness, doing solitary, swapping yarns and larking. As a matter of fact, scarcely an hour passed without our discussing the question of escape. The great trouble was that there was not a single officer among us, no real leader as mutineers. Another difficulty, of course, was the fact that we could not obtain any weapons. Nevertheless we kept on hammering out a plan, and it was decided that if nothing happened until we were nearing Germany we would make an attempt to seize the ship, no matter what the consequences might be.

The plan which we eventually agreed to carry out when we were near the German coast, was as follows:

Each evening we were inspected by Babyface and the doctor, and of course, the guard was always there, either within our prison, or just outside. By attacking and disarming these three, we would obtain three useful weapons, the best being the officer's automatic.

Thus armed, we would go up on deck, disarming each guard individually, as we met them, then occupying the bridge and seizing the ship. We had had plenty of opportunities to "spy out the land" and have a good look at the bridge, the engines, and all the rest of the ship. It would have been easy for us to sail the ship anywhere, for we were all sailors.

We knew that any plan of this kind would have a far better prospect of success in the North Sea than in the Atlantic, as in the North Sea there was a good chance of our meeting a British warship. Even so, our plan was a desperate one, almost certainly suicidal. That was why we decided to attempt a mutiny only as a last resort, for we were all determined not to go to Germany.

One day Jack Flanagan asked Babyface about the latest war news. Naturally, Babyface only knew the German version of everything. Or was he pulling our leg? I have not been back long enough to find out whether the Germans were really fed with the sort of news he treated us to. This is the sort of thing he said:

"The British are more than halfway towards defeat. British shipping has almost been swept off the sea everywhere. Their ships get sunk one after the other by our mines, and they have already lost millions of tons of shipping. Britain is under a strict German blockade, and there is no doubt whatever that there is going to be a terrible scarcity of food in the country within a few months. Liverpool harbor is completely blocked by the wrecks of sunken ships, so that its traffic is dead. Britain has lost not only the greater part of her own merchant navy, but also many neutral ships!"

Needless to say, we did not believe a word of Babyface's lies, and some of us made no attempt to suppress our merriment. Babyface shrugged.

"You may laugh," he said. "You're under no obligation to believe what I say, but you'll learn soon enough that Britain has as good as lost the war."

Starvation

Meanwhile, as time passed, we came to know the weekly menu. Breakfast was always a black beverage which the Germans called coffee, and three thin slices of black bread. Monday's dinner consisted of soup, macaroni and beans. Tea was always a cup of tea, two slices of black bread and a rancid substance which the Germans called margarine. Sometimes we were given a little cheese with dinner. Tuesday's chief meal was tinned herring, a small tin for every two men. Wednesday's dinner was in most cases black bread and cheese and nothing else. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday we called starving days, because the midday meal was then even worse, and more scanty, than on the other four days of the week. On Thursday we were given Hungarian goulash and rice. That was not too bad. In any case, we received the goulash with tremendous enthusiasm after three days of practical starvation. On Friday, dinner consisted of sauerkraut and potatoes, with a microscopic piece of bleached meat on top of the sauerkraut. Anyhow, the meat was white, as though all the goodness had been boiled out of it.

On Saturday we got *susse Suppe* which being interpreted means "sweet soup." Even now, as I write, the thought of that dish makes me shudder. On Sunday, we had a dinner of spinach, potatoes and meat. One held that our Sunday dinner was dog's meat, the other, that it was cat's meat, and the third that it was horseflesh.

As I have said, most of the guards came and went. However, we also had

some regulars, one of whom was Fritz, a big hulking brute, with the strength of an ox, and he was probably the worst of the lot. He was coarse and brutal, and always kept jostling us.

One of the other regulars was an Austrian named Hans. He had a mania for spying on everybody, either to the Babyface or the Captain direct, and he was quite obviously happy when, as a result, someone was severely punished. He was always on the lookout to catch someone smoking. When he came in and saw nothing—and, of course, we were jolly careful during his spells of duty—he stood sniffing for the smell of tobacco smoke. He always detected it, and always reported the matter to Babyface, but the latter only spoke to us about this once.

A THIRD regular guard was a tall blond fellow whom we called Blondie. We liked him very much indeed. He too was able to speak a little English. Blondie was one of the two or three Germans who treated us decently. He used to smuggle cigarettes in to us, tried to lighten our lot in any other way he could, and was thoroughly friendly and human. He hated the Nazis, despised Hitler, and hated the war. He often spoke about the bestiality of the Nazis.

He said his position was the worst of all, for he not only had to keep secret his detestation of the bloody gangsters, but he even had to fight with them and for them. He could do nothing against them without courting certain death. Nevertheless, Blondie was always cheerful and gay, and he never ceased to amuse us with his jokes, though he was careful not to show his friendliness for us before the other Germans.

The fourth regular was a twenty-year-old boy from Baden. His name was Albert. He too behaved more or less normally, and even though he stuck to the regulations, he at least did not try to make our lot worse than it already was by continual sneaking. Whenever Albert was in the room he kept his hand on his revolver, as though he were afraid that we were going to attack him—in which, of course, he was not far wrong. Albert was an enthusiastic Nazi. He worshipped the Fuehrer.

Apart from Babyface, there was only one officer I talked with. He was a queer-looking tall man with a long flaming-red beard. One day, when we were on deck, he remarked to me that the ship was very damp and many of the men were suffering from rheumatism. He added that those who were living on the lower decks—meaning us—were particularly apt to contract the disease. I complained of pain in the shoulder; whereupon the officer advised me to go and see the doctor immediately.

What was the atmosphere among the crew in general? Of course, in the circumstances it was not easy for us to observe everything, and it is with this reservation that I say that I had a distinct impression that the younger members of the crew were mostly ardent Nazis, and very much under the spell of the ceaseless propaganda. At the same time, the older men were in the majority on board the *Altmark*, and I had an even more distinct impression that they detested Nazism and hated the war.

Christmas

On the morning of Christmas Eve two old British captains appeared in our quarters, those who had been transferred with the crews to the *Altmark*. One of them, Captain Brown, said to us:

"Merry Christmas, boys. I know it isn't a really merry one this time, but we're all sure that next Christmas will be much better. The Navy, the R.A.F. and the Army will see to that."

However, the two captains looked rather downcast. We talked with them for a few minutes, then they went away. Of course, we ourselves were not exactly merry. We all talked about home, about wives, kids, mothers, and a little bit also about English breakfasts. I am afraid we got a bit sentimental and were sorry for ourselves. The *Travanian* boys, in particular, were badly upset, for they had been at sea for twelve months before their capture and ordinarily they would have reached England for Christmas. However, the palm for aggrievedness went to my pal Jack Flanagan, for he had reckoned to get married in Liverpool at about this time.

In the evening we were given a Christmas dinner. It consisted of Hungarian goulash and rice. Incidentally, the Germans had told us that if our food was bad, we must remember that we were getting exactly the same as the German crew. Like many other German statements, this was not true. The Germans were getting chicken dinner. How did we know? Very simply. We found one chicken at the bottom of our copperful

of goulash, thrown there by one of the more decent cooks....

Throughout the whole of our voyage we did not see any other ships, not one. The *Altmark* had eleven look-outs, and as soon as they spotted another ship on the horizon, the *Altmark* made off. Sometimes her speed suddenly increased, and at such times we always knew that there must be another ship somewhere in the distance.

AFTER the defeat and scuttling of the *Graf Spee* our hopes revived. We said to ourselves that the blockade of Pernambuco was sure to bring us salvation. But our hopes were dashed. The *Altmark* succeeded in slipping away. Hope, as a matter of fact, became scarcer and scarcer as we were approaching Germany, though apart from a few confirmed pessimists, we never lost faith in the British Navy.

Despite all our miseries, sufferings and humiliations, we had our amusements. Boredom was really our worst problem. Charley Soderblum, a naturalized Finn, who used anxiously to inquire of the guards about the progress of the Russo-Finnish war, made a set of chessmen and a proper board. He was a genius at it, for of course he had no proper tools and had to work with a blunt table-knife and emery paper. It was a fine set, considering, and I wonder what happened to it. I hope it was not left on board the *Altmark,* for it would make a fine souvenir for someone.

We played a great deal. At first there were only three or four men who knew how to play chess, but later we all learned the game. I mostly stuck to darts, however, which was played almost without a stop throughout our waking hours. Flanagan made a ludo game, while Thomas and Lofty made a pack of cards. It was a tremendous success, beautifully drawn and painted, and card-games were perhaps the most popular pastime. We played cribbage and bridge. We prisoners were all friends together and never quarreled, but there were many stormy arguments over the card-games.

At the beginning of February I got into trouble with one of the guards. He had caught me smoking and threatened to report me.

"Quite right," I said. "But then, I'll report you for your barter transactions with the prisoners, and for robbing us as you do."

That gave him a fright, for he was the worst of the lot, having taken a fellow's jacket for four cigarettes, and a shirt for two. He did not report me, though for obvious reasons I should not have retaliated.

A day or two later I got into a fierce argument over the water. I went on deck for my ration of drinking-water, and the German who was doling it out gave me only half a can. He had done the same with some other fellows before me, but they had not said anything. But I would not have it, and told him that according to the Captain's orders, we were entitled to a full can of water. He started to shout in German, but I would not give way, because I knew the rule had not been altered; otherwise there would have been a written notice displayed in our quarters. Actually, the German was trying to steal half the prisoners' drinking-water.

In the end the German told me to come back later, at two o'clock, for the other half of my ration. I came up at two o'clock, but he disclaimed all knowledge of the matter and said he had given me a full can of water in the morning, and would I leave him alone! At the sound of the argument the first mate came along. I politely explained the trouble to him, saying that the German had stolen half our drinking-water. The officer grew serious. He did not reply to my complaint, but sent me below. Half an hour later I received another half can of water, and later I heard that the water-thief had been punished.

NATURALLY, it was a problem to know what part of the ocean we were in. We kept watching the sun, morning, noon and night, and also, when we could, the stars. In this way we always had some idea where we were, and one of the German crew who was friendly to us sometimes managed to let us know the position of the ship. First we sailed from South America to South Africa; from there, we sailed back into the South Atlantic. When it became known that the *Graf Spee* had been scuttled, the *Altmark* changed her course and made for Germany—that is, tried to dodge the British blockade in order to get there. Thus we sailed back to South Africa, and rounding the Cape, sailed northward.

One day when we were off the African continent, the ship was painted over again. All the Germans were working like blazes. It took them one day—it

was a Sunday—to paint the ship gray, instead of white, with a new name—*Chiquire*—amidships, and the Norwegian colors in a conspicuous place.

As we were approaching Iceland, then the Norwegian coast, the name of the ship changed more and more frequently, and there were times when we did not know what name was painted on her. There were a few lifeboats, however, which throughout the time bore the name "*New York*." Of course these piratical tactics shocked and amazed us, as we could not imagine anything like this happening on a British ship.

One day one of the boys remarked to Babyface that all their efforts were in vain, as the *Altmark* could never evade the British Navy.

"Really," laughed the officer. "Why, soon there won't be anything left of your precious Navy."

"That isn't our information," I chimed in. "As far as we know, there aren't many U-boats left."

"That's a fairy tale," said Babyface. "We build five U-boats a week. Churchill can't prevent that."

I asked him whether he thought it was any use to keep repainting the ship.

"Bah," he replied. "A ship is a ship, whatever color she is."

"That is true," I said; "but it's also true that the Navy knows every ship there is, including the *Altmark*. I hope they'll send a plane to look for us and sink us."

"But," said Babyface, "we've got a gun, and we sha'n't be afraid to fire it."

When the *Altmark* was near the Cape, I suddenly remembered that as we were sailing past in the *Doric Star*, we had seen a Dutch ship of the same shape as the *Altmark*, and I realized that it must have been the *Altmark* herself. The boys, when I mentioned the matter, all agreed with me. . . .

From the tropics we sailed into colder and colder weather, until, when sailing round Iceland, it was well below zero. We suffered terribly from the cold, as the blankets we had gave no warmth at all, and the Germans, instead of giving us more blankets, took some away from us to give to their own crew, so that there was a time when we were afraid that some of us might freeze to death during the night.

We were sailing near the Arctic when the same sort of thing seemed to occur to the Germans themselves. I am sure the Captain would not have minded if we had all frozen to death, but he was probably afraid that he would have to answer for it if anything like that happened, and as a slight concession, he let the engines run all night for two nights, so that we should get a little warmth from them. To compensate himself for this concession he gave orders that during those two days our latrine was not to be cleaned.

At this time our lives were made even more intolerable than it had been, by the fact that we were not allowed any exercise at all. In these regions the Captain had every reason to fear he might meet a British warship, so we were strictly forbidden to go on deck, and days passed without any of us having as much as a breath of fresh air. Previously, our food had always been fetched by two of our own men; now even that was stopped, and the guards acted as our waiters.

One day one of the boys, MacMillan by name, saw some Morse signals in the distance and said we were being ordered to stop! There was an excited discussion. Where did the signals come from? From a ship? No, from land. And if the signals were from the land, it was quite certain that they were not from the British coast, for the Captain was not fool enough to sail so close to the lion's lair. This conclusion depressed us a great deal, because it meant that the *Altmark* had succeeded in evading our warships round Iceland.

"THAT'S how it is," said Sam Flowers. "As a matter of fact, it's much worse. I think we're approaching the German coast!"

I almost began to believe that he was right, but some of the other boys said they were certain we were not anywhere near the German coast. Anyhow, we were all in an abyss of despair. All was lost. . . .

Of course, we all tried not to show what we felt, and there was a lot of talk about trusting the Navy. Someone said that even if we were in a German port, the Navy could get us out. Actually, however, none of us had any real hope left. One of the boys challenged me:

"Still laying 400 to 1 in quids?"

"No, but I'll lay you two to one."

Suddenly there was a terrific bustle on deck. One of the German guards burst into our room, dashed up to the porthole and clamped it shut, then fixed some iron bars across it, so that we could not see anything. Then he dashed off again,

and later we heard that the Germans had hung a piece of canvas in front of the entrance. We were virtually buried in the ship's bottom.

We were sick with excitement. And we were almost physically sick for the reason that now that the porthole and the entrance were completely blocked up, we did not get any air at all, and the atmosphere of our prison became more stifling every minute. We knew we could not bear it for long, and several of the boys became ill. We existed like this for a whole day and night, vainly complaining to the guard, and on one occasion, to Babyface. The sick men were not allowed to see the doctor. The Germans even forgot to let us have our food.

BY morning we managed to pry an iron bar from the porthole. Flanagan peered out and said he could see a swastika flag. That was the final blow. We argued that the *Altmark* would not have dared to hoist the Nazi flag anywhere but in Germany. We were feeling properly crushed. The question now was, what German port we were near. I looked out of the porthole and, having been to Kiel once or twice, was able to say that we were not there. We went on peering out through the crack left between the iron bars and saw that we were sailing between two islands. We could see the people walking on shore, and at one point we saw a stationary taxi. From its markings we could tell that it was Norwegian.

Norway! It was a heartening discovery. Then we were not in Germany, after all. But what difference did it make?

Still when we knew ourselves to be sailing along the Norwegian coast we started to discuss plans of escape with renewed vigor. There was a fresh possibility now, of which we had not thought before. We did not require any weapons; nor would the attempt be at all dangerous as compared with an armed mutiny, for all we had to do was to get on deck somehow and jump into the water. We could easily swim ashore, for the *Altmark* was hugging the coast so closely that sometimes she was not more than twenty yards or so from the shore.

We began to kick at the door, shout, whistle and generally to make as big a row as we could. We were hoping someone might hear us from shore. But nothing happened. The Germans placed another sheet of canvas in front of the entrance to our prison, which effectually muffled our cries—in any case half drowned by the din of the engines. They heard us on deck, but not on shore.

AT dawn next morning we awakened at the sound of a bugle. Three short blasts, one long blast. There was the sound of a whistle from the *Altmark* in reply. We strained our ears excitedly. The ship stopped. There was the sound of a tremendous bustle from the top deck. We guessed that the ship was being searched.

Now or never! We knew this was the decisive moment, and unless we succeeded in attracting the attention of the examiners, we would be taken to Germany—and perhaps years of bitter captivity.

Gathering all the strength we had left, we started to make the most deafening din we could manage, kicking at the door, stamping our feet, and bawling at the top of our voices. Several of the boys put their fingers into their mouths and whistled. We worked away like mad, and within a few minutes we were hoarse and exhausted, with our fists bleeding and faces streaming with perspiration. But it was all in vain. No one seemed to have heard us. Was it possible that the Norwegians really did not hear us, or was it that they did not want to? Some of us went to the porthole, and prying away another iron bar, looked out. We saw two gunboats floating about near the *Altmark*.

It would have been useless to wave, as the porthole was not sufficiently uncovered for anyone from outside to see; so we started to bawl again, hoping to attract attention by the noise. Still nothing happened. It was clear the Norwegians did not want to hear us. And, looking back, reviewing all the circumstances, I am still convinced that that was so. We made such a terrific din that it far overtopped the noise of the engines; and even if the searchers had been stone deaf, the sound-waves would have struck their ears.

Two or three hours passed like this. Sometimes we looked at the two Norwegian gunboats. They looked like big toys. We saw their funnels and guns, which I took to be 4.7's. I could not see the color of the boats, as the porthole only allowed a view of the upper parts, but not the hulls.

Suddenly, in the middle of the insane din we were making, the door burst open,

and in rushed one of the guards. He dashed up to the porthole and fixed the iron bars again. Then he dashed back to the door and said:

"No exercise for three days, for this noise."

We laughed; we had not had any exercise for days.

"In addition," said the guard, "your rations will be reduced, and the Captain has also forbidden the cleaning of the latrines. We'll teach you to behave!" he concluded angrily.

He went out, slamming the door and adjusting the canvas curtains outside.

WE spent two or three hours in the Norwegian port, then sailed away slowly. After about eight or nine hours we stopped again. Today I know that this was at Bergen. Again we knew that some Norwegians had come aboard, and again we tried to attract attention by making as much noise as we could. Despair lent renewed strength to our voices, and we bawled and bellowed with all our might; the whole ship seemed to shiver from the awful racket we were making. This time we used the empty shrapnel-boxes as battering-rams, in addition to which we kept on kicking the door, stamping our feet and of course shouting all we could.

All in vain. Suddenly we felt that the ship was moving again. We realized, at last, that there was no hope for us. We had spent the last few days alternating between hope and despair; now we were all certain that our fate was definitely sealed, that it was madness to hope for escape from the Nazi hell awaiting us.

The guard reappeared and informed us that the Captain had decided to impose a very severe punishment on us for what we had done. We did not care. We told him to go to the devil, along with the Captain. We said a lot more, in true sailor fashion, about him, the Captain, the Fuehrer and Germany. Our attitude was so threatening that the fellow got in a blue funk and took no notice of the flowery language to which we had treated him.

The moment he was out of the room, we again started to pry away the iron bars from the porthole. But what was the use? We gave it up, and sat down. There we sat, staring into nothing, defeated, hopeless.

"Still confident, Digger?" some of the boys said to me. I did not reply. Flanagan observed that only a miracle could help us now. And, he added, miracles don't happen today.

In that he was mistaken, however, as all the world knows.

That night we slept like dead, utterly exhausted from the terrific exertions of the previous day. At 5 A.M. we were wakened by a terrific racket.

We all jumped to our feet. An airplane. . . . Of course, at that time we had no idea what plane it was. But just then we were so highly strung that we reacted to everything with great violence, and attributed great importance to any event. We strained our ears. . . . Nothing, except the clang of the engines. The *Altmark* was now proceeding very slowly, owing to ice.

About an hour and a half after we had heard the plane, the ship stopped. We were not in a port, but in the open sea. Four hours later we started again, and we could hear the crunching sound as the bow of the ship plowed through the ice.

We spent most of that day trying to free the porthole. This time it was harder than before, as we had been deprived of everything that could have been used as a tool for our purpose. At last, however, we managed it. Through the porthole we peered out into the night, in utter hopelessness.

"THE NAVY'S HERE!"

IT was then that the miracle happened. The ship was now proceeding at a fairly high speed. John Bammant, fourth mate of the *Doric Star,* went to the porthole. A minute later he cried out, in a voice that expressed all the surprised joy in the world:

"Boys! The British Navy!"

We jumped up like mad and made a dash for the porthole. John's cry left no doubt that he was not pulling our legs or anything like that. The ship suddenly stopped; then it started again at a terrific speed. Within half a minute there was a terrific, rending crash. The ship shivered so violently I thought she was falling to pieces. I had already run aground once, so I knew what had happened.

"We're aground!" I cried. "Lifebelts, all of you!" This was done within a few seconds. Then we stood waiting, and straining our eyes and ears to hear or see something. Surely the Germans were not going to let us drown like rats if the ship was really in danger? But

nothing happened. No one came. Suddenly I began to shout:

"Sam! Sam!"

"What is it?" said Flowers.

"You got the cards?" I asked.

"Of course I got them. I got them in my pocket."

Of course I was talking nonsense; I know that now. But I did not really know what I was talking about just then.

BAMMANT was still at the porthole; he saw nothing. There was an eerie silence all over the ship. The minutes seemed like hours. We had no idea exactly what was happening, but we knew that whatever it was, it would decide our fate.

Suddenly we heard a noise—someone coming down the ladder. It seemed they were going to let us out after all, and save us. We heard two men stopping behind the door. We all crowded to the door, ready to leave, feeling sure, now, that the ship was sinking.

But we were mistaken. We waited in vain. The door was not unlocked. And we heard the two men climbing the ladder again. We stood listening. Suddenly we heard a *tic-tac, tic-tac* at the bottom of the door, like the sound of a big clock.

"A time-bomb!" cried Bammant.

We all felt that he was right. It later turned out that he was. The Germans had placed time-bombs in front of every hold where there were British prisoners. Feeling that the ship was lost, in any case, they decided to blow it up, together with her human cargo. That was the crowning infamy.

So the seconds and the minutes passed. The tension was intolerable. Then Bammant, who was back at the porthole, saw the *Cossack*. He could see her quite clearly. He started to talk, just like a wireless commentator, with the same staccato precision, giving us a brief description of everything he was able to see.

"Yes, yes, boys. . . . It's a destroyer. . . . She's coming closer. She's quite close now, within a few yards."

The next instant we experienced another shock, and there was a crashing, rending sound. This was received with a burst of cheering. We guessed what had happened. And Bammant went on with his commentary.

"The destroyer's here. . . . An officer's jumping across to the *Altmark;* he's got a revolver. . . . Now a sailor. . . . He's fallen in the water. . . . Another—good! Another. . . . Good lad! Good lad! Good! *Good!*" He said "Good" whenever a British sailor landed on board. Then he turned to us: "Boys! The Navy's on board!"

We started to cheer with all our might, madly, throwing our belongings up in the air, dancing, hugging each other. Suddenly, however, we heard the crack of a shot. We stood stiff, silent. There was another shot, and another and another. Many more.

I think we all feared for a moment that perhaps the Germans might succeed in beating back the small boarding-party. But none of us said anything. In any case, the doubt passed within an instant. We knew that that was impossible. The shooting lasted only a few minutes. Then we heard someone coming down the ladder.

Who was it? The tension of those few seconds was indescribable. Who was it? Was it a German, come to hasten the explosion of the time-bomb? Then we heard the canvas curtain being drawn aside. The door opened. Then there came a deep voice:

"Any Englishmen down here?"

"Yes," we cried in chorus.

"Well," said the voice, coolly, naturally, "the Navy's here. H.M.S. *Cossack's* come to rescue you."

WE cheered like a thousand madmen. That's the only way I can convey the shattering noise of that burst of cheering. Our "concert" at Bergen was like a whisper as compared with this.

Within a few minutes we were on deck. I was one of the first to come up, and the first picture I saw was Jimmy Harbour, the *Cossack's* first torpedo man, standing on the bridge of the *Altmark*. A British officer came up to us and said to me:

"We've been following you for two days, but couldn't do anything because you were sailing in Norwegian waters. Then the Admiralty gave the word—and here we are."

At this moment there was the crack of a shot from the shore. Some of the German sailors had jumped to the ice and had managed to reach the shore. They were now firing from there. Of course, the British replied. There was a total of about six or eight shots fired. One of the Germans on shore fell. The Captain with the goatee beard was also on shore, bellowing with all his might. He was in an awful rage. No wonder. What was he going to say to his Fuehrer now?

Suddenly I myself saw red and felt that I wanted to kill that damned Nazi. I dashed up to one of the *Cossack* boys on board and asked him to lend me his rifle.

"Don't be silly, old man," he said kindly. "This is not for private use. Anyhow, we've been ordered to cease fire."

Then one of the officers, Lieutenant Turner, I think, spoke to us ex-prisoners. He told us that the Germans had placed time-bombs all over the ship, and they were set to explode in forty minutes, so we must hurry up and leave the ship. He said we would be transferred to the *Cossack,* for we must be as far away as possible from the *Altmark* at the time of the explosions, in case they were not prevented.

At this moment another British officer saw a German sailor lying prostrate on the ice. He immediately jumped down, picked him up as easily as a sack of feathers, and brought him on board. They tried artificial respiration, which was later continued on board the *Cossack,* but the man was already dead.

The dead German was Blondie, the fair-haired German guard who led such a tragic double life. I was sorry for the poor lad.

Before I left the *Altmark,* I went to have a quick look at the parts I had not seen. I entered the hospital, where there was much bustling. The German doctor was busy attending to the wounded. When there was a lull, I went up to him and said:

"Good-by, Doctor. I assure you the German prisoners will have a better time than we had here."

"*Auf wiedersehen,*" said he. And we shook hands.

I also met Fritz, who used to say that the Navy was slow.

"Well, Fritz," I said, "the Navy isn't so slow, after all."

"The fortune of war," said Fritz. "It's our turn to be prisoners, that's all."

What followed after this lives in my memory like a dream. We were surrounded by the British sailors and cheered. We transferred to the *Cossack* by the light of her searchlights. Then we sailed, and the *Altmark* soon became a dark shadow in the night. There were a tremendous number of men on board the *Cossack;* yet somehow there was room for everybody, and we were not half so crowded as on board the much bigger *Altmark.*

After a little while we realized that some four or five other British warships were waiting for us.

"This is not a lucky day for the Germans," said one of the sailors. "They scuttled a ship at this spot a little while ago."

We ex-prisoners had not slept for some forty-eight hours and were dead tired, but none of us thought of going to bed. Captain Vian of the *Cossack* addressed us.

"I'm happy," he said, "to've been the lucky one to save you. The Navy's done everything possible. The Admiralty gave orders for us to catch the *Altmark* and rescue you, so the Navy caught the *Altmark* and rescued you. You're entitled to be proud of yourselves. The merchant sailors are also helping a great deal in the war; they are also fighters, and our comrades in arms. Trust in the Navy—and in yourselves. We're all confident we're going to win this war."

We all liked Captain Vian. He is tall, broad-shouldered, a real "do or die" type.

We arrived in Leith at three-thirty in the morning.

We were on British soil once more. We had arrived, though we were a little late. There was a vast crowd on shore, waving wildly as they cheered us to the echo.

We all had a bath. And some grub. British grub! I slept for thirty-six hours.

NEXT day we took a train for London arriving at King's Cross Station at eight P.M. In London again, for the first time after sixteen years! Here again there was a crowd awaiting us, and we were cheered some more. Some of the other boys had parents, wives or sweethearts waiting for them. There was no one waiting for me. My parents and sisters did not know that I was one of the *Altmark* prisoners. After sixteen years I did not even know their address, and do not know it now. I am still trying to find them.

I spend much of my time walking about the streets of London. All who learn that I was on the *Altmark* are kind and friendly.

On my first day in London I had a look at something now quite normal to Londoners, but I could not imagine what it was like, though I had heard and read a lot about it. The thing I was so curious about was an air-raid shelter.

THE END

Taken for a Slide

For understandable reasons, the author of this quaint record has used a pen-name.

By COWBOY CARSON

I WAS a youngster living in a sleepy little Midwest town. We had no automobiles, no movies, no radio. Our only thrill was when a few of us kids hid out some place and listened open-mouthed while one of the older boys read the latest *Daredevil Dick* dime novel.

It was one of those thrillers that fired me with the ambition to become a cowboy. I began at once to practice roping. After throwing at a post for a while, I found that too tame and decided to try my skill on a real live cow.

We had three milch cows and several husky calves. Our cow-lot occupied about an acre. After the milking had been done that evening, I got my "lasso" and started in to rope Bess, an old red cow that was a household pet.

My intention was far better than my skill. I missed old Bess and dropped my loop neatly over the head of a wild yearling steer whose downright meanness had given him the name of Dynamite.

For Dynamite, that was a new and startling experience. He reared, whirled, and made a wild dash across the lot. I tried to hold him, but the rope burned through my fingers.

So I started running. Of course, I couldn't keep up with that crazed steer. And suddenly I realized that I had made a horrible mistake. Thinking it would help me to handle the long rope, I had tied the other end around my waist.

I was so scared I let out a wild yell for help. That made Dynamite run faster. I was leaping across the ground at top speed, and my fingers were tugging at the knot when the last of the rope paid out.

"Wham!" as *Daredevil Dick* would have said. I was yanked clear off my feet. It seemed to me that I sailed through the air a mile before I came smash down on my face.

I was knocked breathless. But I soon had my head up again and was screaming in terror. And Dynamite was fleeing in terror. Behind him, at the end of that rope, I was taken for a slide through the muck and mire of the cow-lot.

It was spring. The cow-lot was muddy. Moreover, before being penned up for the night, the cattle spent the day eating the luscious green grass of the pasture.

So you can imagine how our cow-lot was. I don't have to imagine it. I've been through it—at the end of a rope.

The lot was almost square. That gave Dynamite plenty of room to turn corners without slackening his wild speed. But I had no control over my turning.

So it was that suddenly, through the flying muck, I saw myself heading straight for a post—an oak post. I tried to twist aside, but was helpless. Just when it seemed that my brains would be dashed out against that post, I was jerked about and spun over and over. The oak post spanked me a terrific wallop—then we were off again.

I don't know how many times we went around that lot, nor how many posts I hit in passing. I was almost blinded, and practically unconscious, when my mother, having heard my screams, saw my predicament and came running with a butcher-knife. She managed to corner Dynamite long enough to cut the rope.

At first Mother was more frightened even than I was. But when she found I was not seriously injured, she was mad.

"Don't come near me!" she stormed. "I'll get soap and clean clothes. Then we'll go to the creek. And while you're scrubbing, I'm going to cut an armful of switches and wear every last one out on you!"

But she didn't. Long before we got to the creek, Mother was laughing too much to be mad at anyone. However, she did worse than whip me. She told everyone about my experience. And from that day on I was "Cowboy" Carson.

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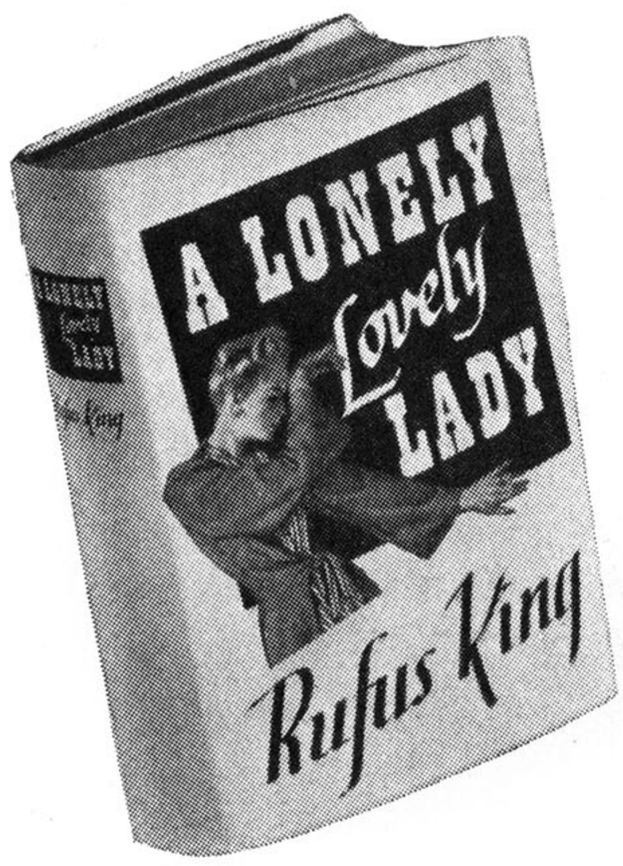
The Redbook-Dodd, Mead contest judges voted unanimously for "Hildreth—Her Story" by Harlow Estes. A rich, understanding novel about a girl whose attempts to straighten out other people's lives only succeeded in entangling her own. For instance, she watched her aunt, a widow with four children, become engaged to a young man she'd known for years—and only then discovered that her aunt's fiancé was the one man who meant the world to her. Enjoy "Hildreth" and its tempestuous, fascinating characters. Starts now in August Redbook.



A STRANGE MAN DIES—*and a mother suspects her daughter*

There was something very peculiar about Mr. Parne. But when dire necessity forces a lady to open her fine old home to paying guests, and it's snowing, one can't be *too* particular. The next morning Mrs. Elsert found that Mr. Parne must have been very peculiar indeed, because he had been shot dead—and, worst of all, her daughter Nan seemed to know something about the dead man. But the sharp eyes and brain of Dr. Colin Starr found still stranger things—and out of them Rufus King has made a bang-up mystery novel. It's complete in August Redbook.

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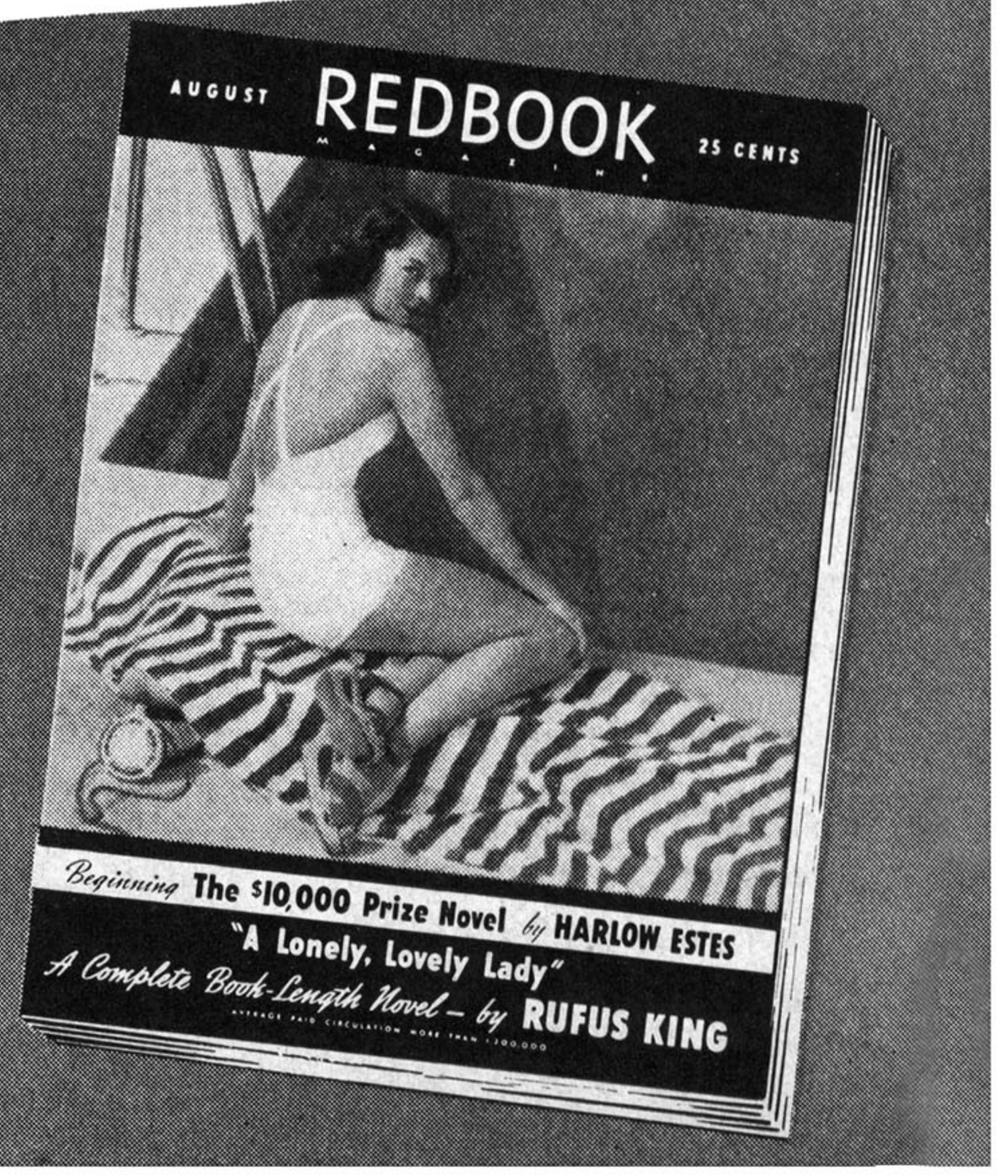

FASTER! FASTER!

"Speed's the thing in aquaplaning," says Florence Holliss, "but in a cigarette the fun and the *extras* go with slower burning...with Camels."

A THRILL in every wave—a breath-taking bounce that says, *hang on or take your ducking!* Florence Holliss, above, likes the fast pace in sports. But in cigarettes, she prefers the slower-burning brand... Camels.

"THE FASTER THE PACE, the more the fun," says Florence Holliss, above. That goes for all her favorite sports... aquaplaning, tennis, riding. But she likes her smoking *slow*. "I always smoke Camels," Florence says. "They burn slower and make smoking so much more enjoyable. Camels are extra mild and extra cool—and they have such a welcome flavor." Make Camels your cigarette and enjoy *extra pleasure* and *extra smoking* (see right).

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