

GOLDEN FLEECE

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NOVEMBER

HISTORICAL
ADVENTURE



Coasts of Chance II

by H. BEDFORD-JONES

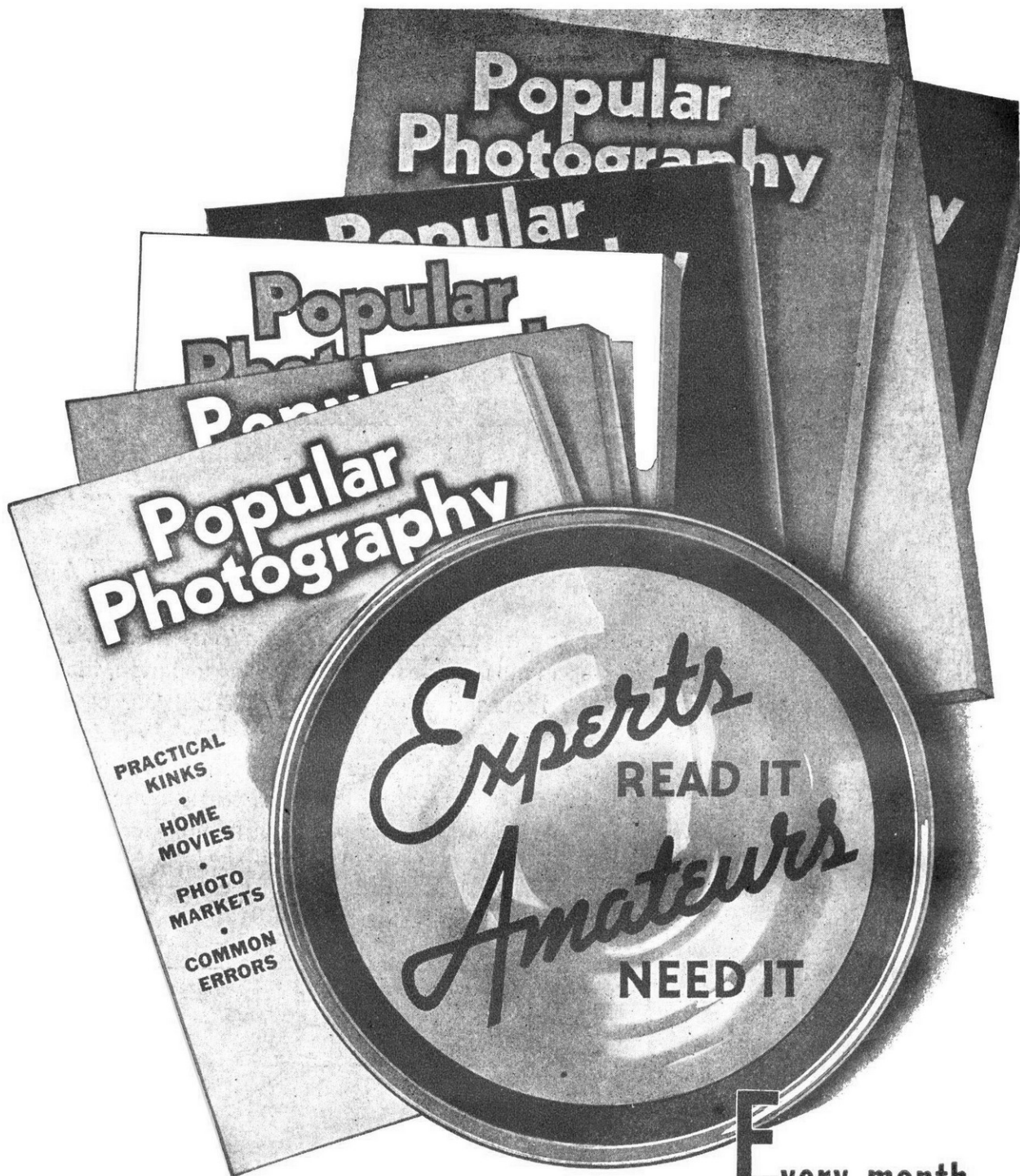
Black Vulmea's Vengeance

by ROBERT E. HOWARD

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BUNYIPS IN THE MULGA by Anthony M. Rud

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HISTORICAL ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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Vol. 1 No. 2

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These stories are fiction. If any character bears the name of a living person, it is purely coincidence.

A. J. Gontier, Jr.

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Bunyips in

by ANTHONY M. RUD

Illustrated by
JAY JACKSON



the Mulga



All of a sudden, as they passed through a ten-foot thicket of wattle, hideous yells sounded and a shower of spears flew.

CHAPTER I *Two Yanks*

A CROSS the dry beds of the Salt Lakes, thirty miles northeast of Kalgoorlie, the bearded, dust-grayed driver of a spring wagon halted his weary pair of horses. He unhitched and made desert camp.

Through binoculars he carefully scanned the desert sunset horizon. Not even a dust puff raised by some lolling, lone kangaroo, showed above the sand and stunted mulga scrub.

The bearded messenger nodded silent satisfaction. He had been careful to keep his starting time a secret. That was the chief reason why he had made so many safe trips between the bank at Kalgoorlie, and the new dry placer camp of Kargie. The last two weeks, however, there had been rumors. The giant, black-bearded inhuman monster, Paxton Trenholm, had been glimpsed

not far away, leading his camel-riding Malay murderers from the North.

This bushranger, Paxton Trenholm, for all his awesome fits of madness and violence, had uncanny sources of information regarding mine bullion, pay-rolls, and even the occasional lucky finds made far north on the pearl beaches. He had a way of turning up and looting, where the honeypot of wealth was stickiest.

There were thirty-one separate rewards on Trenholm's head.

The dusty messenger, Tom Varney, took two water cans, a galvanized pail and a sack of oats from the back of the wagon, now he believed it safe to stay here. He cared for the horses. Then he brought out a Primus stove, and prepared a frugal meal of tea and damper for himself.

Packing away everything, since he intended to start at first streaks of dawn, and breakfast in Kargie, he put

both hands reassuringly upon a small, oblong chest hidden under the seat. It was made of teak, brassbound and held closed by three Yale padlocks. The duplicate keys to these locks were at Kalgoorlie and Kargie. The messenger never carried them on his person.

Ten minutes later he made a blanket bed which would have looked familiar to an American cowboy—which Tom Varney had been, years back. In a few minutes more, he slept.

His camp-making had been watched. From the crest of a low sand dune more than a mile away, a black-bearded man wriggled back into the hollow where the camels were lying and men crouching. The bushranger, Paxton Trenholm, closed his folding brass telescope and put it away in its leather case.

"All top-hole," he said with satisfaction. "We'll give him an hour to be snoring. It will be pitch dark then. Keep those camels lying down, and don't let them grunt and groan too loudly."

The sleeping messenger, Tom Varney, never had a chance. He awoke suddenly to find the weight of a squat, muscled Malay on his chest, and the sharp blade of a kris at his throat. At a distance of three yards stood a tall, black-bearded, well proportioned white man who held a dark lantern now unhooded. In his other hand a revolver slanted, aimed at Tom's head.

"We have no particular need to kill you, Varney," said Trenholm, sounding negligent and rather haughty with his English public school accent. "So turn over obediently like a good lad, and let us bind your wrists."

Gritting his teeth in savage, hopeless anger, the messenger was forced

to comply. He knew it was a mere whim on this madman's part, that he still breathed. Trenholm was like that—a paranoiac whose fits of murderous insanity came in cycles. In between rampages he was known to be quiet, cultured of manner, almost sane. Varney said nothing at all, as he was trussed with skill—albeit loosely enough so he could work free in the course of an hour or two.

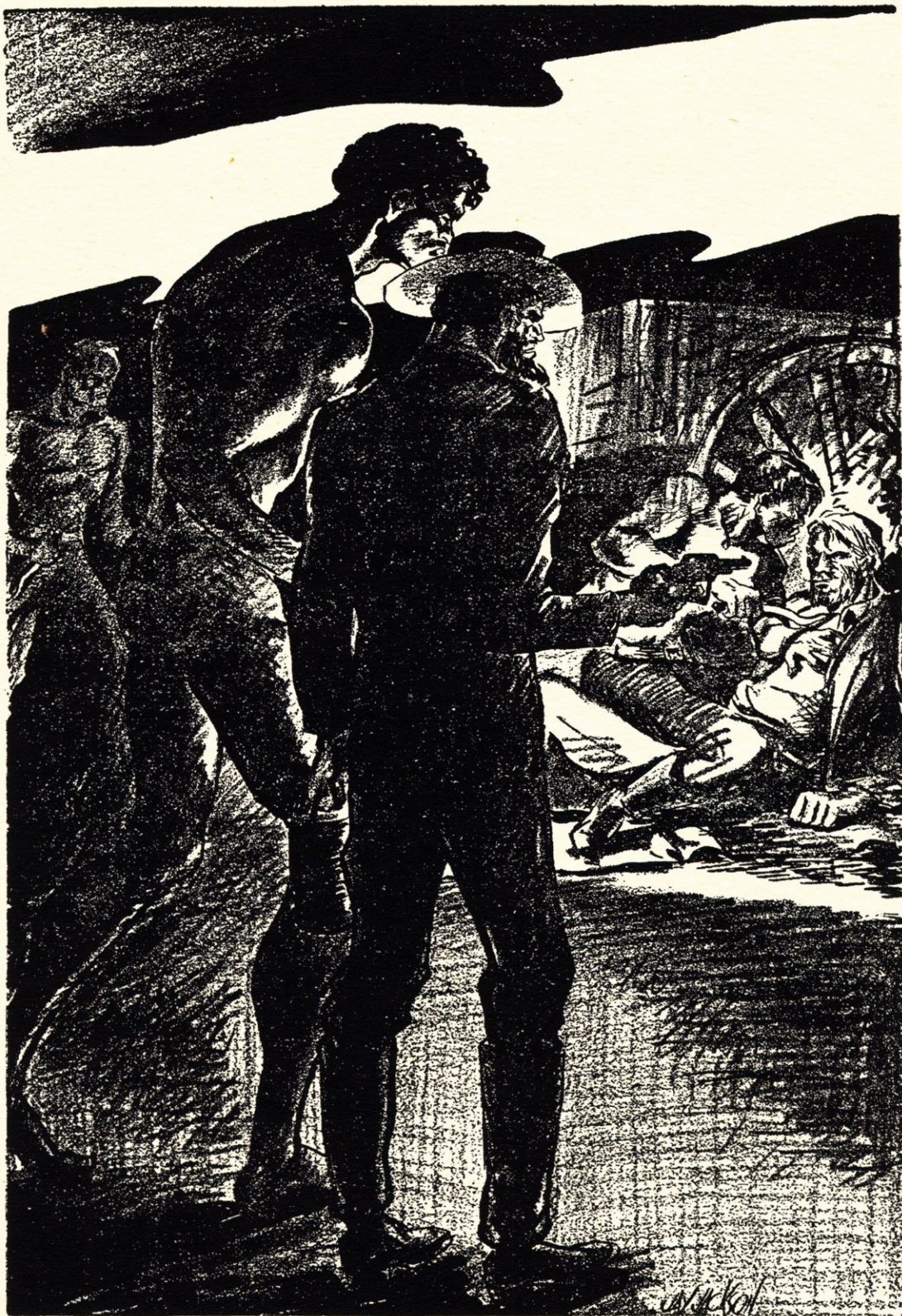
They paid him no more attention then. While the Malays and the seven-foot, skinny blackfellow servant got their camels, Paxton Trenholm harnessed the horses and drove away into the night. Helpless, writhing against his bonds, Tom Varney had to let them get away with the treasure entrusted to his keeping.

TOM took a deep breath, and then started to work free. But even when he succeeded, what then? In the brassbound teak box had been the money of other men, slightly more than nine thousand dollars, brought back in payment for the pokes of new gold sent in his care to Kalgoorlie by the dry-placer miners of Kargie.

Was there any chance at all that these rough miners would believe his story, and forgive the loss?

Their curt, angry answer was given at nightfall, when Tom arrived. Growling a beginning frenzy of disbelief, threatening a rope, they threw the unlucky messenger into his own corrugated iron shack, and padlocked the door.

At the rude barrel house which served Kargie as a pub, an angry meeting started. Tom had a few friends, but only a few—due to the fact that he was a Yank. The friends did not have much to say. They had known him



"We have no particular need to kill you, Varney, so turn over obediently like a good lad."

as taciturn, and a good shot with revolver and rifle. They knew he had come from a far-off place called Texas, and that he was thirty-two years old. Not much in that on which to build a defense. Except the one noted and peculiar fact that Yanks did not seem to lie. Not the way Chinks or Cockneys did, anyhow. Tom Varney, of course, had sworn harshly that his tale was true. The police might have been ready to believe. Not these men.

When the crowd had drunk itself into a lynching fury, and had come surging to the iron shack after Tom Varney, they found a hole burrowed under one wall, and the prisoner gone. That tore it.

He had left one scribbled letter, with the plea that it be mailed to his kid brother back in Texas. The letter read:

Dear Sam:

I'm damn glad you stayed on the ranch. I'm in bad trouble. They say I stole about nine thousand dollars. Acourse its a lie, but I cant prove it, lessen I can bring in the head of Paxton Trenholm in a sack. Likely I'll lose out, but anyhow I aint being taken alive by police or anybody. And I aim to get Trenholm.

Goodbye, kid. Love,
Tom.

The police took charge of the letter. After a time it occurred to someone that it might be a good idea, after all, to keep other Yank Varneys out of Australia. So the police did mail the letter to Sam Houston Varney, at Sweetwater, Texas, with a grimly explanatory enclosure—stating their case against Tom.

But if their intention was to keep young Sam out of the Antipodes, they had adopted exactly the wrong tactics. Within a week after receiving that hor-

rible message, Sam had sold the paternal ranch and small herd, and was on the Pacific Ocean bound for Melbourne—and more trouble than he ever dreamt existed.

TWO months had passed. The hunt for Tom Varney had subsided. Then it was a tall, bronzed, gray-eyed young man in a broad-brimmed black hat, presented himself at the headquarters of the West Australian Provincial Police, at Kalgoorlie. Sam Varney had reached there by railroad, but had found it practically impossible to go one step further toward the mine town of Kargie. Larrikins, indigent prospectors, and men hauling liquor, made the trip. But Sam Varney was not accompanying any of these—not until the money in his belt had been put down on the line for a certain purpose.

"I'm Tom Varney's brother—you'll remember, I reckon, a man named Tom Varney?" he said quietly to the policeman.

"Hm. Yes, we remember Tom Varney. Why?"

"He's accused of stealing \$9,200," was the reply. "That's a lie. However, till I can prove it ain't true, here's all of the money I c'd raise. You'll find \$8,500 there. Also there's my I. O. U. for \$700. I'll take that up soon's I can. G'bye."

And dropping the money belt before the astonished officer, Sam Houston Varney strode out of the office, paying no heed to the voices which called after him.

"Well—I'm an emu's uncle!" gasped the desk policeman. Or words to that effect. "Perhaps we don't need to worry about keeping Varneys from Texas out of Australia, after all?"

"There's lots worse than Yanks," admitted a brother officer with extreme tolerance. "Wonder what he's going to do to raise that extra seven hundred? Rob a bank?"

Like many plainsmen, young Sam Varney had been impressed and thrilled by his crossing of the ocean. He decided to try a job on a coaster for a while, till he got his bearings. One thing was sure. He did not want any of the dry goldfields—which were said to be petering out, anyhow.

He had met a sea captain, and the latter, glad indeed to get a hand in these days when men were scarce, had told him to come along and meet the *Narwhal* at Freemantle. Sam, of course, had not the slightest idea of the reputation along the coast of the tramp freighter *Narwhal*, or of the even less savory things said about Captain Moebus and the tow-headed Axel Larssen, his mate.

THERE is no use going into a log of his experience. First he was robbed of his few possessions. Then he was beaten in three plucky but hopeless fights with the captain and mate. Bruised, sore, sometimes unconscious, he was tied up every time the *Narwhal* made a regular port. Not until they put in, several weeks later, at a small island near shore in the Bight, did Sam have any chance to escape.

They did not tie him this time. What use? The Bight swarmed with sharks. Even if a man made shore, there was nothing at all in front of him but waterless desert. On the tiny island, of course, there was no chance to escape. There was only a beachcomber's hut or two—and with these Captain Moebus had a little nefarious business with contraband.

When the captain and mate had gone ashore to transact it, Sam looked longingly at the mainland shore. Less than a mile away. He thought he could make it—and did not think at all about what he might find, if he proved successful. Taking his chance when other members of the crew were below, he dove from the side, and swam hand over hand for the desert shore.

An hour later the captain and mate, returning, made sure he was not on board. There was no small boat missing. The answer seemed plain.

"Good riddance!" snarled Captain Moebus. "The white-pointers 'ave 'ad a meal!"

He was wrong. Just twenty minutes earlier Sam Varney had hauled himself to the sandy, barren shore of the Bight. He was near the point of complete exhaustion from his long swim, and the physical batterings received before. But no shark had noticed him.

CHAPTER II

Monsters in the Mulga.

THE first thing the Yank saw, when the smart of salt was out of his eyes, was a fence. It was a good strong fence, built of close mesh—not barbed wire. It came right down and ended at a stout pile driven in below tide marks.

Sam grinned at it, and sat down beside it to rest. Time had been, back on the Panhandle range, when he had cursed fences. Now one looked like a friendly and familiar thing. Prob'ly a ranch or sheep station right near, he said to himself drowsily. He slid slowly over on one side and slept.

Two hours later from the west came six swift camels—racing maharis, not

the undersized, slow creatures used by Afghans here. One camel carried packs. It was led by a tall, skinny blackfellow on another camel. This was a Kimberley Lake aborigine, Paxton Trenholm's body servant.

The big white man, the notorious bushranger - madman, rode another camel. Likewise mounted, three squat, high-cheekboned Malays followed him.

They came right down to the end of the fence, and there discovered the sleeping Yank. By this time Sam had an arm over his eyes, and was snoring—the way very tired men always do when they lie on their backs.

Pistol in hand, Trenholm frowned down. Then he shrugged, and threw a shot down into the ground, so sand sprayed over Sam's face.

The sleeper grunted. His arm fell away, and his eyes came part-way open. Then he snored again. He had not really awakened, though Trenholm thought so. A queer inspiration had come to the bushranger. He shouted something to his riders, and rode down around the end of the fence, and on out of sight to the east.

An hour later he returned. The sleeper was still there. Trenholm motioned silence. Like ghosts the camels circled the fence, getting wet to their knees. Then they disappeared in the dusk, bound northwest.

Trenholm chuckled in his beard. The madness was coming on him gradually again, and he would have slain the lazy white man sleeping there—except for one thing. The police had been a little too close lately. It would help a lot to have this lazybones report that Trenholm had crossed the fence line, and gone east. If they started looking for him over in South Australia, he would have time to seek refuge with

the giant blackfellows—the Aruntas, Parrabarras, or Kimberleys, among whom he was regarded as a demi-god, or more. He had riches enough for this year. He wanted a chance to lie low and foment trouble for the police and for other white men. He hated all of his own color skin.

IN EARLY dawn Sam awoke, shivering, to blink in wonder at a strange world. The first object he beheld was the fence. He got to his feet, swung his arms to start circulation, and looked along the wire in hope of seeing a building, a ranch-house. None was in sight. He shrugged philosophically, in spite of hunger and a degree of thirst from the salt water, and started to tramp northward along the friendly fence.

Funny, he had a dream about men riding camels, going around the end of the fence. Just nightmare, of course. He'd been dead tired, and still ached. The sun would be up soon, though, and it would warm up his bones. If he stuck to the fence he'd have to get somewhere sometime, wouldn't he?

Not necessarily—not within walking distance, Sam. This was like no fence you ever saw in Texas. One of the longest barriers ever built by man for any purpose, it had cost the Australian Government \$1,000 a mile. There were 1,500 unbroken miles of it. It stretched from Starvation Boat Harbor in the Bight, where Sam had swam ashore, straight north across the whole continent, to Condon, on the muggy, crocodile-infested Ninety-Mile Beach!

There was not a single ranch or sheep station on its entire length. Just jungles, deserts, wastes of mulga scrub, gidgie bush, beefwood and wattle. The fence was built, and watchfully pa-

trolled by men, for a strange but deadly serious purpose. It was meant to keep the plague of rabbits out of West Australia.

As he trudged, his garments clinging after their sea-water shrinkage, Sam thought grimly of his double task—triple task, really, for it entailed getting hold of his brother. Tom Varney had vanished so successfully that the police

starve. Getting something would be easy, he thought. But it would just be something temporary, to let him get oriented. Once he had a good idea of the bushranger's trail, and a stake sufficient to provide him with rifle and a mount, Sam would break loose for the manhunt. The rewards accumulated on Paxton Trenholm would repay the sum of Sam's note fifty times over.



The big white man, the notorious bushranger-madman, rode another camel.

of all Australia had not been able to arrest him. Sam realized that nearly broke, with that \$700 note to meet, he could not hope to find Tom except in one way. Get on the track of Paxton Trenholm. Somewhere, following the bushranger, trying to capture or kill him, would be that stern man of single purpose, Tom Varney.

Sam had to have a job of work, or

Now he grew increasingly thirsty. In ignorance of this part of Australia, and hoping it was not like the gold deserts, he still scanned the horizon for sign of a ranch. There was none. But now in the mulga there was wild life on every hand.

DOGLIKE creatures, dingoes, howled at him and slunk away.

They haunted the fence—for a reason Sam discovered. He came upon a built-in rabbit trap. Two of the stringy, long-eared creatures were prisoners, and the dingoes had been trying to dig in to get at them.

Sam became thoughtful. He studied the unending fence, straight to the northern horizon like a railway track on the Texas plains. Then, wishing he had a drink, he unlatched the trap, took out one of the stringy jacks, killed and skinned it. His waterproof match safe held a few matches. He gathered branches of mulga, lit a fire, and spitted the tough rabbit.

"They sure go in for ranches as *are* ranches, out here," he muttered. "I haven't seen hide or hair of any critters, though. Doggone, but I c'd use a drink!"

Ironically the branches of thorny acacia crackled and snapped on his fire. Ironically—for unknown to Sam, the heavier stems of this mulga held pure water. Like the barrel cacti of southwestern American deserts, it was there to save the life of man or beast. It was the sole reason wallabies and other creatures could live in many thousands of square miles of this continent.

He ate the rabbit. Thumpings in the sand, and whistles of breath made him turn. There, galumphing away toward the dreary sameness of horizon, were five big kangaroos and two small joeys.

"Bunyips in the mulga!" grinned Sam dryly, recalling crew yarns of the fearsome interior. Bunyips really were imaginary monsters of lesser degree in the lodge of devils believed in by the blackfellow aborigines.

Old Mooldarbie (chief devil according to many tribes) kept him a ferocious pack of bunyips. Unless propitiated,

sometimes by human sacrifice, Mooldarbie loosed these hungry scourges. Then lone blackboys, even whole (nomadic) villages disappeared.

The word nomadic really explained the disappearances; but the tall, half-starved black aborigines are Stone Age children in their minds as well as in their weapons and manner of life.

Five minutes later Sam looked up, stopped and stared. Two dots were moving slowly and dustily down upon him from the north, riders on the west side of the fence. Sam gave a dry shout of gladness, and waved one arm like a semaphore. Maybe a drink!

The dots grew in size, and now Sam saw that here were two men actually mounted on camels! Then perhaps his odd nightmare might have been reality, after all!

CHAPTER III

Fence-riding Cameleer.

THESE mounts were the undersized Sudanese camels, brought via Kenya. They were necessities in a land where the only water for hundreds of miles was brought to the surface by artesian bores. The brutes, mean and complaining as they always were, still could go five days at a stretch in hot weather without drinking. And they could subsist when they had to on spinifex, the prickly, coarse grass of the plains.

The two bronzed riders came. They looked down wonderingly and somewhat suspiciously at a man on foot in this mulga wasteland. But Sam was too thirsty to stand on ceremony.

Howdy, strangers," he greeted, his voice little more than a croak. "Where can I get a drink of water?"

The elder of the pair, a man with

lined, leathery face but clear, sun-squinted eyes, unbent a trifle. "Here's the nearest supply, friend," he answered, unbuckling a canteen and unstoppering it. "You're a long way from a well."

There was a hint of inquiry in the last, but Sam waited to gurgle down a full pint of the tepid water, which tasted better to him than champagne right then.

It would take Sam a little while to learn, but the elder of these two men was Fence Inspector Goelitz, in charge of the three southern "lengths" of the rabbit fence. The younger was Bart Jolley, a recruit fence-rider.

After the drink, Goelitz offered a cheroot from a long, narrow case. Sam accepted with a grin. "Now, I'll tell you all," he said, puffing with satisfaction, though choking momentarily on an inhalation of the strong smoke. "I s'pose you're police?"

No, not police. Goelitz explained a little, and learned Sam's name. Then Sam told briefly of his six weeks nautical experience, and mentioned the *Narwhal*, Captain Moebus commanding.

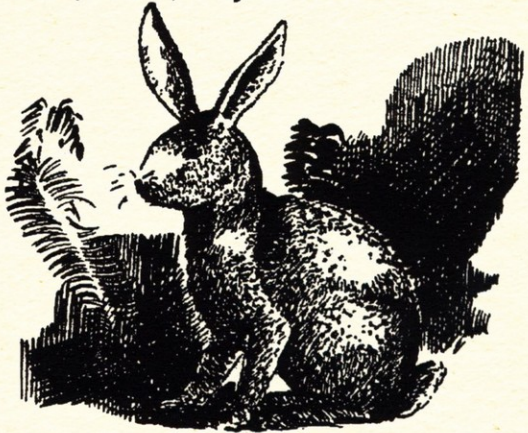
He probably could not have given himself any better break. The reek and stench of the *Narwhal's* unsavory reputation had reached both men. Anybody who could not stand Moebus and Axel Larssen, probably was a decent sort. The Inspector's manner became more cordial.

"So now I'm looking for a job. Any job at all," concluded Sam, saying nothing about his brother, or the quest of vindication.

"What can do you?" asked Goelitz. This was a form inquiry. Right then expansion in Australia was at its height, and the fence was starved for men. The Government wage was not as large as

that any able-bodied man could earn with shovel and pick working for other men in the goldfields, and almost every man who could raise a grubstake was prospecting on his own anyway.

Sam told of Texas and his ranch experience. He was modest about a real ability as a rider. Also he said nothing about the accomplishment which had been his chief pride—his shooting. Yet Goelitz, looking critically at six feet of lean, bronzed American manhood, was grimly satisfied.



The Villain

"I'LL take you on," he said, "if you're not shy of a fight now and then. We ride heavily armed—for good reason. The blackfellows have been troublesome of late. They're always cutting the fence to get wire frameworks for their wurleys; but lately it's worse than that. Someone or something is making bloody trouble."

"Better try me," suggested Sam, smiling. This sounded better than he had dared hope. "I'll hold up my end."

"Very good!" snapped Goelitz. "Then, this is the job!" He explained tersely.

Sixty years earlier a misguided Queensland larrikin brought ashore four mated pairs of rabbits. They promptly escaped into the mallee of the

eastern coast. Now the descendants of those eight bunnies numbered millions, perhaps billions. They had overrun and practically ruined all the agricultural and grazing lands of the eastern half of the continent, despite the several kinds of deadly warfare carried on against them.

There was a reward of \$150,000 and five square miles of any unoccupied land in Australia waiting for the man who suggested a plan for controlling the rabbit plague. The great scientist, Louis Pasteur, had been employed in the hope of working out a bacterial method of extermination. Even he had been forced to surrender.

Meanwhile, this fence was to shut out rabbits from the rich agricultural areas of the southwest, where the plague had not yet appeared.

Sam caught his breath at thought of such a reward. There was a fugitive thought of importing American coyotes to prey on the rabbits, but it vanished. Coyotes could be worse than rabbits, especially in a land where valuable Merino sheep were raised in enormous herds. And then Sam caught himself sharply. No matter what else happened, he had to find his brother Tom, and help the elder snare Paxton Trenholm and vindicate self-respect before the world.

"You'll work hard, and live for the fence!" concluded the inspector. "You'll fight for it—and I may as well warn you right now that ten or more riders in the north sections have been killed by blackfellows in the past six months!"

"Fine!" said Sam. "When do I start north?"

"You'll stay right here with me in the south for now," said Goelitz. "There are troubles enough here without hunting new ones."

He clasped hands with Sam, as did Bart Jolley—the latter smiling genuine welcome to a personable companion of his own age.

The three of them, however, little suspected that trouble brewed by a madman, even at that moment, was gathering for them—at a spot in the gidgie bush less than thirty miles away.

CHAPTER IV

Death in the Gidgie

THE first day, clinging to the bony rump of the inspector's camel, Sam was broken in to the work. With Bart Jolley, they headed south for the few miles Sam had trudged, examining each post, each yard of wire, killing and skinning the rabbits found in the traps, making sure that repair materials were in the hidden caches away from the fence.

(When the blackfellows found these caches they stole everything.)

"I s'pose," observed Sam, "all east and west travellers have trouble getting through. Prob'ly have to go clear down and around the end of the fence, eh?"

"Hm. Traffic isn't what you'd call heavy."

"I saw five-six jiggers on camels last night, headin' east."

"Eh? What's that?" Goelitz suddenly tensed, looking backward over his shoulder. "You saw—what?"

Sam explained that he might have dreamed it, but he thought he had seen a tall white man with a black beard, a skinny blackfellow, and some squatty brown men, all on camels, ride eastward around the end of the fence.

"Paxton Trenholm!" burst out Bart Jolley. "Going east!"

"That means that maybe West Aus-

tralia is rid of him at last!" breathed Goelitz, not noticing that Sam's hands suddenly had clenched till the knuckles came white. "Also it means we hump it to Murriguddury, where I can get on the end of a telephone wire!"

But despite this excited phoning which Goelitz did, as soon as they reached the supply point of Murrigud-dury three miles west of the fence end, they never found Paxton Trenholm in South Australia. Scores of police hunted him, but he lay back in a village of the Parrabarras, west of the wire. He was planning, with cold fury, greater trouble for the white men than he ever had caused.

Goelitz also called up the provincial police, asking as a matter of routine if they had anything against a young man named Sam Houston Varney, his new rider.

When he came back there was a peculiar light, almost of respect, in his eyes. But he said nothing. He outfitted Sam with clothes, rifle, revolver, ammunition, canteens and a swag (saddle roll of blankets, cooking utensils, with salt, sugar, pepper, tea and two cans of condensed milk). Then they picked him out a mangy camel, and a saddle, both decidedly shopworn in appearance.

The more permanent parts of his outfit would go north by the next bullockie train (supply wagons, drawn by six yoke of oxen apiece, each driven by a bullockie). A railroad had started north-east from Adelaide, but it had not got far as yet. The greater part of the fence was supplied from the north and south by these ox-wagons.

Sam himself was rather white under the bronze of his cheeks. His eyes were grave. If this had been Paxton Trenholm, indeed, then should not he,

Sam, try for another job in South Australia? It was fortunate for him that the stark need of eating and living forced him to shelve that idea for the time being.

He finally told the story briefly and passionately to Goelitz, warning the latter that probably he would have



Lyre Bird

to quit him some day when he had a fair stake, to take up the long hunt for Trenholm and Tom Varney.

"I 'spect Tom's dead by now, or he'd have got Trenholm," said Sam. "Just the same, we Varneys stick to what we start. That's why I'm warning you, Goelitz."

"I'm glad to have you, Sam, as long as you can stay," said the Inspector, and meant it. A young man, Yank

or otherwise, who would sell all his possessions to help square up an unjust debt of an elder brother was a new experience. Goelitz warmed to his recruit rider, and privately hoped that the police would catch or kill the bushranger shortly, so Sam could stay on indefinitely.

THERE was a contract-sameness about the great fence, as Sam learned in the days that followed. Each one hundred miles was called a "length." It was supposed to be patrolled by two riders. In the middle of each length was an artesian well, and a corrugated iron shack which the riders used as headquarters.

The inspectors, of whom there were five, each had charge of three fence lengths. Each inspector had a fairly comfortable cabin placed near the artesian well on the middle length of his division. It was possible for an inspector to marry. Two of them had done so.

Men were short now. Bart Jolley had the southernmost length to himself. Goelitz and Sam left him at the northern boundary. A ratty, mean-eyed fellow was met now, Koken by name. Goelitz passed him with only a few inquiries, evidently not caring much for his company. But after they had got further along, expecting to meet the second rider of this length, Goelitz began to worry.

"Don't like it," he frowned, scanning the northern horizon. "Morrison's a good man. He ought to've met us this noon—five hours ago. I think we'll wait tucker an hour, and see if he doesn't show up. There's a dust storm coming," he added, peering through his binoculars. "Not a real hell-roarer like we get sometimes, though."

The coming of the wind, with its load of stinging, suffocating particles, made them seek shelter in a thick growth of golden wattle. An hour passed, then the wind died, and they could light a fire for tea and damper. It was too late to go further. They camped right there, and the missing cameleer did not arrive.

Next morning they had breakfasted early, and gone two miles on their way when they came upon a saddled camel. The beast was grazing, untethered.

"This is bad," worried Goelitz. "I hope it's only an accident. But we have to find Morrison right away." His eyes were searching the almost impenetrable scrub to his left. He lifted his rifle from the boot, and levered a cartridge into the chamber.

Sam Varney did the same. He also unbuttoned the dust flap of his revolver holster, and buttoned it back out of the way of a quick draw. Easing the heavy revolver up and down in leather, he tested the feel of the grip, and the balance. Not as good as his old Colt, but a serviceable weapon with smashing power.

A SUDDEN cry burst from the inspector's throat. They had come to a glade-like pocket which stretched back some eighty feet into the wall of scrub. There were the evidences of a one-man camp. A dead cooking fire. A scattering of effects mauled through by blacks. And on his face, one arm outstretched forward, lay what was left of Morrison, the cameleer!

Dismounting hurriedly, the two men ran to the body. Goelitz cursed savagely, going down to one knee. The body had been mutilated in horrible fashion.

"Look out!" suddenly shouted Sam,

who had been fidgeting uneasily. He had glimpsed a tell-tale movement in the scrub.

That second spears whizzed!

With his split-second of warning, Sam was able to plunge sidewise, slapping down his palm in a fast draw almost as good as he had been capable of in Texas days.

His revolver crashed—once, twice, thrice—and then as he ducked a spear, a fourth time. He had the hot satisfaction of seeing two cortorted and hideously painted black faces, suddenly disappear. A third leapt upward with a howl, then fell back at Sam's last shot.

The scrub shook frenziedly as one survivor—possibly wounded—left the scene as fast as his legs would carry him. The attack was over.

Restraining the impulse to dash in pursuit, Sam turned to his companion. Goelitz was down on hands and knees, half-fainting from pain. An obsidian lance had transfixed his right thigh from the rear.

"Just let me alone—one minute. Then—help!" gasped Goelitz.

Sam nodded, understanding. Swiftly reloading his revolver, he went cautiously into the scrub. Nothing seemed to move there now.

But at that moment something whizzed up from the ground, aimed at his head! A stone-weighted waddy!

It was thonged to the wrist of a blackfellow who lay there, frothing blood from a chest wound, but malignant to the last.

Sam dodged, managing to throw up his left arm and deflect the blow which otherwise might have brained him. Leaping back, he aimed the revolver—but did not fire. That one effort had been the last for the aborigine. Now he shuffled his skinny legs in the leaves, shuddered all over twice, and lay still.

There was a second white-striped body spread-eagled across a bush, which bent under the weight. And two yards further a third blackfellow with yellow circles painted on his cheeks sat with head slumped forward to his chest, and both arms clasped about his mid-section.

Varney went back to his wounded chief. "Three of 'em accounted for," he reported, "and I think I tagged a fourth. Ready for me to cut off that spearhead and pull it out of the hole?" He opened his keen-bladed jackknife.

"Go ahead. It can't hurt worse 'n it does!" bade Goelitz, white-lipped. He gripped his thigh with both hands to squeeze the nerves. "Wish to hell I had a spot of wheat whiskey!"

Sam, knowing a little of range surgery, was careful and deft. Just the same, Goelitz fainted when the spear was pulled out. By the time he returned to consciousness, Sam had the wounds bound tightly, and was riding the rump of the inspector's camel, leading two more, and holding Goelitz in the saddle before him.

Thus they reached Goelitz's own comfortable cabin, and that night the inspector told Sam that he was to take over this length of mulga and gidgie in place of the dead Morrison.

CHAPTER V

Molongo Corroborree

THE recruit cameleer had cooked himself ten kettles of soup from the tails of young kangaroos, and was well on his way to becoming a seasoned rider before he had another encounter with the blackfellows. Aruntas and Parrabarras roamed this region, and until this year they had been friendly enough—if troublesome as thieves.

Sam did his job. It was absorbingly interesting to him. But every man he met—the bullockies who came with supplies, the Afghan camel couriers, the railway engineers who came over from the new line on the east for gossip or occasional supplies—was besieged with questions regarding Paxton Trenholm, the twentieth century bushranger.

From the men, and then from a file of old papers kept by the sour, fox-faced rider, Koken, Sam learned practically all that was known about his quarry. Trenholm was a remittance man of proud English family—one who had not deigned to change his name the way most banished men did. The scandal back home probably had been caused by one of his first maniacal rages, then unsuspected. He had been attacked by a palpably drunken man whom he did not know, and had retaliated with such fury and such giant strength that the unfortunate drunk died of a broken skull and broken jaw. The English jury had deliberated long, but finally acquitted Trenholm. His family possibly sensed the truth. They shipped him to the Antipodes.

Trenholm, with some capital to start, turned up on the northwestern pearl beaches, as a buyer. He went seasonally from Broome to Anchor, to Vesey Beach, over to Perak, and back to the Burdetts in his own power schooner.

Then one day at Highgate Mibs his recurrent insanity betrayed him. For reason unknown, possibly attempted thievery, he strangled and broke to a pulp a half-caste pearler.

That was when he went wild. He took to the scrub, murdered two provincial policemen sent after him, and got himself a roving band of Kimber-

ley Lake blackfellows. For periods he would be quiet, and no man would see him or hear of him. Then he would start on red foray. He was out-and-out bushranger now, pearl pirate, and a sort of inhuman demi-god to the blacks and Malays.

"When his fit of madness is on him," Goelitz told Sam, "he will kill anyone of white skin he meets."

"I hope he's mad when I meet him again," said the young rider grimly, "because I'm going to shoot on sight!"

HOT weather came, bringing an oily reek of tarweed. Pests of flies made life miserable for camels and men. Inspector Goelitz was hobbling about again, taking up his duties by graduated stages.

Sam had been having his troubles. A village of Parrabarras lay about three miles west of the fence. These tall, emaciated blacks raided the fence and broke through every time Sam's back was turned. And strangely enough, they invariably attacked a certain spot just east of their village. Sam had got to the point where he hurried through every other duty in order to get back to this spot. And then usually he found a disheartening job of fence repair awaiting.

This was serious. As yet few rabbits had reached this part. Yet any day the vanguard might arrive, and enough bunnies seep through to start the plague in the west, and make the fence of no more avail.

Sam got an interpreter to help him out—he had learned a little of the aborigine dialects, but too little for extended conversation—and tried to talk to the gaunt villagers. No dice. They simply refused to say anything at all. And then immediately he re-

turned, they picked up their whole portable array of wurleys (cone-shaped huts), and moved to within less than a mile of the sore spot in the wire!

Sam told Goelitz, and brought him to the scene. "I'm going to fix 'em next time!" the recruit announced. "Come back here and have a look at my own devil-devil. I only wish they'd start their damned bull-roarers now! I'd like you to be with me."

Goelitz frowned and followed. Like most Australians, he felt that the sooner the aborigines were exterminated, the better. But it was impossible to carry war to them.

BEHIND a covert of dwarf screw-pines Sam Varney had concealed a ten-foot contraption of wood, canvas and paint. It was a toothy, menacing face outlined in red paint, a scarecrow whose outstretched arms could be made to flap the canvas sleeves up and down when a cord was pulled by the man carrying the whole thing. Childish, of course, but then these blacks were nothing but superstitious children.

"It might work—but then there probably would be fifty spears sticking through the middle of that nightgown," said Goelitz. "Better not risk it when you're alone, Sam. I need you."

They had no more than started back to the fence and their tethered camels, however, when a nasal, whining shriek brought them up standing. The first of the bull-roarers, the whirring hand-sirens which always signalled the banishment of the gins from the ceremonial circle of corroboree. Instantly a dozen more bull-roarers joined. The air quivered with that whining, nerve-jangling nastiness of sound.

"Reckon you got to see!" said Sam with grim satisfaction. "We've got an

hour before the bucks come, but the gins 'll be down cutting wire in half that time. Le's hide the camels first."

When the sound died, the two fence men crouched down back of the screw pines. Already they could hear the far-off chattering voices of the gins. These women would come down and



Koala

do the first work. Then they would scatter when their lords and masters came.

The chattering grew to an ululating clamor of weird cries. The gins came running, scampering, leaping high in the air, turning, kicking their tooth-pick stilts of legs, brandishing whatever weapons or tools they had been able to gather.

They did not immediately attack the wire, but went through a seemingly endless and meaningless ceremonial capering on the far side. Sam watched intently. The conviction was growing in his mind that these raids were not for the purpose of securing wire, but for some superstitious or religious notion. Perhaps this particular spot where the wire always was cut was

thought to be a special highway of the devils of the scrub.

The time grew short. Sam was impatient, wiping cold perspiration from his forehead. There was no use doing anything until the bucks came, but they were due any second. Why didn't the gins begin? They had to do most of the heavy work, anyhow.

But now high-pitched screams sounded, and as if these meant acknowledgement of permission for their work, the gins turned and charged the wire. With clubs, pick-axes stolen from caches, obsidian knives, old waddies and other implements, they went at it with an intense fervor. In a surprisingly short time the posts went down. Then the wire was hacked, bent, broken, torn away.

The white men, though cursing below their breath, did not interfere. The warriors had not come.

But then the women cried out in fear, and scattered back into hiding. When their men were painted in the vertical white stripes of Molongo corroborree, it was death for any gin to get in their way.

NAKED, white-striped so they uncannily resembled skeletons, the warriors—about thirty-five in the band—converged upon the twenty-foot fence gap. They hurled spears into the ground ahead of them, yelling fiercely. Wrenched them out, hurled them again. A few brained imaginary enemies with waddies. Others sent the heavy, non-returning (though curving) war boom-erangs sailing through the fence gap.

"I tell you, they're driving bunyips *through the fence!*" whispered Sam with sudden conviction. "Getting rid of vermin! Now my number is up!"

With that he produced a short reed

horn of cardboard, clasped it in his teeth. It was the sort of horn children blow on holiday celebrations, and it gave a moaning snort intense and arresting.

Now up from the screw-pine covert flip-flapped the ludicrous scarecrow of red-painted canvas, and a hoarse, awesome sound seemed to come from its throat!

Slowly, swooping it appeared to fly along the ground, straight for the defiant warriors and the gap in the fence. With each flap it gave its haunting, terrible cry—

For six seconds the painted warriors stood petrified, gaping at a materialization of the most dreaded spirit of the mulga. Then shrieks and screams rent the air. Stumbling, falling in their frenzy to escape, the entire band of painted Parrabarras turned and fled. Their diminishing yells of terror floated back as they sprinted for the safety of their wurleys, a mile distant.

Sam kept going. This was going to cure the blacks, he swore. Despite a cautionary shout from Goelitz back there, he flip-flapped straight into the scrub, and kept on for about half a mile.

There the scrub thinned, and a glade opened. He stopped, planted the pole which held up the scarecrow, fixing it so it appeared to be lurking behind a low bush, ready to leap out upon any black fellow crazy enough to come near.

Satisfied, Sam started back. At the end of the glade he turned for one last glance at his handiwork—just in time to see an erect, black-bearded man on a camel, accompanied by a black-fellow likewise mounted, yank the scarecrow pole out of the ground!

Paxton Trenholm!

His eyes starting from their sockets, Sam yanked out his revolver. But



Slowly, swoopingly it appeared to fly along the ground . . . With each flap it gave its haunting, terrible cry . . .

he did not get time to circle for a shot at decent range. The two there at the other end of the glade started up their camels, and headed away in the direction of the Parrabarra village, dragging the scarecrow behind them!

On foot Sam was at a complete disadvantage. Cursing, half-praying, he turned and sprinted back to the wire. He had to have his own beast, and warn Inspector Goelitz so the latter could send police. He knew the elder man would forbid, thinking only of the fence. But even the loss of a job he thoroughly liked would not stop Sam now. Here was the insane bushranger-murderer who had ruined his brother!

CHAPTER VI

Wanted Men

UNEXPECTEDLY, Goelitz offered no objection. There was a queer light in his eyes, and he clasped Sam's hand strongly in farewell, saying gruffly that he would send word to the police that Trenholm had doubled back, and was not in South Australia after all.

Sam was glad. He did not know, but that phone conversation Goelitz had had with the police, at the time Sam was recruited, was the reason. The inspector realized clearly that Sam would go—hell and high water notwithstanding. He was a good man, anxious to face almost certain death. Might as well be cheered on his way.

Sam whipped his camel into a shambling run, straight for the Parrabarra village. As he went he levered a cartridge into the rifle chamber. All he asked for was a chance to face Trenholm. If the other man got him, at least Sam would fling one shot—and there would be the rightful vengeance of all white men in Australia, wrapped

around the nose of that bullet!

The scarecrow had worked too well. When Sam came to the native village, he found that only about one-third of the wurleys had been carried away by their blackfellow owners. The rest stood empty, deserted. In the middle of the cooking square lay the effigy of Mooldarbie, flat on his back. Trenholm probably had meant to point out to the blacks how easily they had been fooled. Finding the aborigines vanished, the bushranger had dropped the contraption in disgust.

Now the cameleer had to think. He had visited this village only a few days earlier, and was certain it had not then been used by Trenholm as a base. The bushranger, too, was reputed to surround himself with creature comforts when he deigned to pass any time in a native village. Here the wurleys were all small and poor, mere above-ground burrows.

Nothing to do but dismount and hunt camel tracks leading away. For some time, circling, Sam had no luck. If only he had a blacktracker, one of those trained natives said to be able to follow a trail too cold even for bloodhounds.

But at some distance from the village he came upon plain prints in soft sand. Five or six beasts being ridden away at a good gait.

Well, Sam followed at a walk. Twice when he tried to speed up matters, whipping his camel, he lost the spoor, and had to go back and start over. It was slow going. He ground his teeth, knowing that Trenholm and his men, up on meharis, could be putting tremendous distance between themselves and the slow pursuer, supposing they had glimpsed Sam back there in the glade.

"I'm saying they didn't!" he gritted, and kept on. Half an hour later, topping a dune like a small hill, Sam suddenly whirled his camel, made the beast kneel, then lie down as he leapt off to take cover. Just beyond, in a shallow valley, stretched the huts of a large native village. And Sam's first glance had caught one triple-sized, high-roofed wurley, surely more commodious than any Parrabarra or Arunta aborigine ever built.

HEADQUARTERS of the bush-ranger, Paxton Trenholm!

Taking his rifle, making sure that his revolver was loaded with six cartridges and the hammer lowered, he tossed aside his hat and bellied a way toward the crest of the dune. Just one good bead on Trenholm, and—

"Stick 'em in front of yuh, palms down!" came a low, savage voice from the rear.

Out of the scrub unseen by Sam Varney, had stalked a grotesque apparition. A white man whose graying beard was eight inches in length and blowing in all directions. A white man clad in horrible rags of indescribable filthiness.

Varney swore and sat up, instead of obeying literally. He was prodded by the barrel of the rifle in the newcomer's hands, so lifted his own thumbs ear-high.

"One of Trenholm's gang, are you?" Sam snarled, infuriated at his failure. He would die now, of course, and Trenholm probably would escape again. "Well, take it from me, I—"

The words died in his throat. Something strange and awesome had happened to the bearded brigand. A choked cry came from his throat. The bloodshot eyes fairly started from their

sockets. The rifle drooped.

"My God A'mighty!" he said in a gasping whisper, clawing at his eyes with his left hand. "You, Sam! Oh, damn your hide, Sam, *why* did you come to Australia?"



"My God A'mighty!" he said in a gasping whisper.

With a gulping cry of horrified recognition, Sam was on his feet.

"Tom!" he choked, and flung arms around the wasted frame of his elder brother.

GOELITZ had reached his own cabin, bathed, and was resting his wounded leg—after sending a courier with news of Trenholm to the nearest police—when a strangely clad youth tramped wearily up and got himself several dippers of water at the artesian well.

Sam still had a Winchester rifle, but no bandoleer of cartridges. No revolver or holster. On his feet were

broken, worn-out relics of boots through which his toes projected. He wore the lower half of a suit of underwear, and beside that—nothing. Gone were his canteens, swag, camel and everything else!

"I s'pose I'm fired," he said when Goelitz came to him, frowning. "I ran into a desp'rate man, and this is all he left me—oh, hell, Chief, I got about \$180 coming. Let me go ahead and work out what I owe for the rest of the outfit—camel and all.

"That was my brother, you see. He was almost up with Trenholm. I—I had to stake him, because there wasn't enough for two. So I—I reckon I owe the Government a lot."

"For sending Nemesis on the trail of Trenholm the bushranger?" asked Goelitz in a peculiar tone. "No, Sam. Australia has spent \$50,000 and more trying to catch Paxton Trenholm. I don't believe another four hundred, more or less, will break the treasury!

"I just hope, Sam Varney, your brother is as good a man as you are!"

"Tom? Huh! Tom's the goods. You wait. Trenholm's as good as dead and buried, right now! Tom doesn't ever quit—anything."

CHAPTER VII

Duster girls.

A TRANS-CONTINENTAL railway was being resurveyed. On the original survey, north and south, a few miles of steel had been laid from Adelaide to Oodnadatta. From Palmerston, far north on Clarence Strait, a few miles of road had crept southward. The middle 1300 miles, however, were being changed by surveyors, bringing the line quite near the great fence.

Heavy freight and occasional pas-

sengers came by rail to Oodnadatta, thence to the bullockie lines at the fence. Sometimes the fence ox-wagons were sent over for stuff shipped up from Adelaide.

The riders knew when the bullockies were coming. This meant mail, candy, newspapers, tobacco. Each division point and post which marked the end of each length of fence was a meeting place and post-office.

A spruce but taciturn, rather gloomy young man named Farrand from the next northern length, met Sam one day at the dividing post. One of the fence teams was due to return, bringing papers and mail. A hearty, red-faced Irishman named McManus, was the bullockie. He was usually half-snorted on wheat whiskey, but belligerently jovial. Sam liked him for his zest, and for the tall yarns he told around evening camp-fires.

Sam rather liked Farrand and wanted to be friends, but the other rider was reserved—not unfriendly, but simply aloof. He was the son of an English general, but had not inherited his father's abilities in Math. Farrand had been sent down from Sandhurst as a flunker, and had banished himself. He felt that his world had come to an end.

It was to be interesting enough to see how quickly the coming of this bullockie was to change the Englishman's viewpoint!

They saw the dust of the ox-wagon long before it arrived; and had a blazing fire, with tucker ready when McManus came. This time, however, they saw to their amazement that the Irishman was walking.

He had two blackboys with him, and six led camels followed the covered wagon. But the reason for walking was that three dustered female

figures occupied the whole of the seat. Passengers—and women, in a land where white-skinned girls or women were almost non-existent!

In the flurry of greeting, camp-making, and hurried toilettes, Sam met a middle-aged, gloomy woman named Sara Peabody. She was the widow of a celebrated bushranger, who had been hanged with appropriate ceremony eighteen years before. Since that time she had been housekeeper for a rancher, Randall Smith. When his ranch failed, Smith took a place as fence-inspector, and Sara Peabody came with him to care for his motherless daughter, Claire.

CLAIRE, now returning from three years of school at Perth, was a laughing, tomboyish sort, with freckles on her small nose, and ready comradeship in her clear blue eyes. Sam liked her at first sight, but found that there was always a queer constriction in his throat when he tried to talk to her. She accepted him without constraint, and soon was jollying him—exactly as she talked with Farrand, or McManus, or Sara Peabody, for that matter.

The third duster girl was a young widow, just discarding mourning for an elderly husband. Her name was Elinor Mathes, and she was a coquettish brunette, friend of Claire, and ready for any new sensation she could find. This trip was an adventure, and on it she secretly meant to turn as many masculine heads as she was able.

Oddly enough, Farrand was entranced by her, and followed her around as though hypnotized. On the other hand, Elinor Mathes immediately showed a partiality for Sam Varney—and he could talk spiritedly to her

because he knew much more about girls of her sort than he did about the Claire Smiths of the world. Sam never would be a victim of Elinor Mathes. She sensed the difficulty, and it put her on her mettle. Before that first meal was over, she had decided to add Sam to her string. But the man queerly enough showed only a sort of exasperation when she gave him all the opportunity in the world to fall in love.



Kangaroos

After tucker there was the job for the men of raising the fence—the posts having been uprooted and the wire laid flat to allow the ox-wagon to reach the west side. The two younger women came out and talked, while Sara Peabody went about preparations for the night in the tent McManus pitched for them.

Then early goodnights, for the travellers were tired. McManus sat up smoking and talking to Farrand and Sam for an hour after this. But the bullockie was not his jovial self. He

had a bunion that ached, and he had heard tales about trouble all along the fence line. It seemed to be spreading further and further north, steadily.

"I'm told it's that divvil Trenholm that's behind most of it," the Irishman said. "It worries me, with these colleens along. Lave the blackfellows alone, an' they're peaceful entirely. Poke 'em up an' they may do anything a-tall!"

Sam learned that Elinor Mathes would visit Claire Smith and her father, Sara Peabody now returning from her luxurious three years as chaperon, to take up the duties of housekeeper again. Their place was far in the north, however. Sam Varney realized with a peculiar pang that in the ordinary nature of things he never would see Claire Smith again. She was the sort he genuinely liked. But, of course, with Trenholm still on the loose and his brother Tom still unsuccessful in the chase, Sam could not think of girls. That debt of \$700 would take him a full year to clear, even if he spent nothing save odd silver for his own wants.

Next morning breakfast was early, then dust and swearing from McManus as the oxen were yoked, and the northward journey begun.

Claire came to Sam, waiting until Elinor's last dark-eyed coquetry had wasted itself. Then they shook hands. It was Claire who held to that clasp a second longer than necessary.

"Goodbye, Sam Varney," she said. "Come and see us when you're up our way."

"I'll come to see *you*!" he replied, since Elinor was getting into her seat in the wagon.

"That's what I meant, Sam Varney!" she smiled—and then a moment later leaned out from her side seat to blow

a kiss in his direction. Claire perhaps had her own style of coquetry, a little slower but far more effective with men like Sam.

Farrand did not say goodbye to Sam. The Englishman was riding north one hundred miles with the ox-wagon, to the end of this fence length. And for this stretch Farrand meant to improve every minute, which meant ceaseless attention to Elinor Mathes.

CHAPTER VIII

War Drums Thunder.

WHILE Sam went about the routine of his work, his mind was filled with a desire to get transferred north. He liked Goelitz, and the inspector certainly had given Sam more than one unusual break.

Paxton Trenholm and presumably Tom Varney were up north somewhere now, however. And so was Claire Smith. McManus had intimated to the men alone that he thought Randall Smith a complete fool to bring women in to the lonely well cabin at a time like this. There would be days and nights when Smith himself could not get back to his headquarters, and the three women would be completely alone.

In past times this had been all right, but now with Trenholm fomenting raids, there was no guessing what might happen.

Oddly enough, Claire Smith thought a number of times, as she rode the slow ox-wagon north, that she would suggest Sam Varney's name to her father. It might be that Inspector Randall Smith could arrange unobtrusively to have the young rider transferred.

After saying farewell to Farrand,

the ox-wagon entered the jurisdiction of Inspector Harris, and remained there for the next three hundred miles. After that dreary nine-day part of the journey was finished, traveling from dawn to dark of the summer days, they entered the three-length demesne of Inspector Burke. Claire's father was the next inspector to the north.

At the midway point of Burke's lengths, McManus the bullockie would turn back from the center of Australia and make his slow way back down the fence, gathering rabbit skins in bales and taking outgoing mail. One of the returning ox-wagons from the north would take Claire and the other two women the rest of the way home.

That was the plan, but it did not work out that way. Occasionally at sunset they heard a far-away whispering murmur of sound. It made the camels uneasy. Claire looked a little frightened, but said nothing to Elinor. These were the war drums of the aborigines.

The day before they reached the central well of Burke's sections—three hundred miles from home—the drums came nearer, and could not be blinked. McManus swore softly to himself, and Elinor asked wondering questions.

Up here the cameleers rode in pairs for protection. Several of them had been killed. There had been trouble three months earlier, but now it had returned with much greater seriousness. Afghan couriers came on swift meharis, but they spoke in gutturals only to the bullockie. Sara Peabody knew the signs, but she spent her time sitting straight and stiff. Her lips moved as she muttered prayers. Her refuge from everything was religion.

McManus went to Claire finally. "I'm worried, Ma'am," he said in a gruff

undertone. "I wish you'd turn right about an' come back with me. Them black Kimberley divvils from the north-west have been raidin'. The Parrabarras an' Aruntas ain't so bad, but the sivinfut Kimberleys! Tch! Then 'tis said the Parrabarras took a couple Kimberleys captive, an' ate 'em. That don't help none to speak of."

"Oh!" cried Claire, paling. Cannibalism, she knew, was impossible to suppress completely, but here it probably meant a long drawn out war between these two nomadic tribes, with white men suffering from the violence of both.

Something happened, however, to relieve McManus of responsibility, and make the remainder of the journey seem perfectly safe for the three women. A big stagecoach loaded with Government surveyors, and bristling with the barrels of ready rifles, caught up with McManus.

In the palaver that ensued, it developed that the surveyors would be only too glad to crowd together, some climbing to the top, in order to make room for three women—two of them young and pretty. Thus several days would be cut from the journey, and there would be plenty of defenders in case of attack. So it seemed.

Claire, Elinor and Sara Peabody made the change gladly. They learned the disturbing fact that the Government, valuing the line of protective fence more just at this time than it valued the completion of railway survey, had ordered every available man over to help defend the Smith and Doremus sections—Doremus being inspector of the northernmost division. It was thought that Paxton Trenholm had been stirring up the black nomads to war between themselves, and also

to make attacks upon the fence and its defenders—

THE horse-drawn stagecoach made much faster time—and necessarily, since cans of water had to be crowded on to supply man and beast for the full hundred miles between each two artesian bores. The coach was so crowded that everyone was uncomfortable, yet it seemed safe. They heard the drums fitfully, but there was nothing like a continuous booming of them. The aborigines really were few in number, though they travelled over vast distances, and might be a menace anywhere at any time.

It was the next to last day of the journey for Claire, when the attack came without warning. All of a sudden, as they passed through a ten-foot thicket of wattle, hideous yells sounded and a shower of spears flew. Two of the horses went down badly wounded, and the others, transfixed less seriously, snorted, squealed and thrashed about in a frenzy of fear.

The driver of the coach leaned sideways, and fell off to the ground. The blade of a darrah-wood boomerang had crunched into his skull like a hatchet-blade into a pumpkin. The crazed horses, trying to bolt from the dying bodies of their companions, tipped over the stage. Terror-stricken men spilled out, clutching weapons but unable to get clear of the wreckage in time to use them speedily enough.

A dozen ochre-painted blacks sprinted forward to the massacre, shrieking their blood-madness. They swung stone waddies, stabbed with knives of volcanic glass. And so swiftly did it all happen that three of the surveying party went down with riven skulls before any one of the defenders could

get clear of the debris and fire a single aimed shot.

But then came sudden change. Three men backed, crouching, pumping lead from hot rifles. Then came the flatter thunder of short-arms. It was a fury of extermination! Six, eight, ten of the blackfellows went down almost at once. The remaining ones saw and tried to flee, but too late. The revolver slugs cut them down without mercy. In less than fifteen seconds the entire fight was finished, and the scrub was a shambles.

Claire Smith had been flung out through the open door. Sara Peabody fell on top of her—and that saved Claire's life. A waddy stroke killed the elder woman, who had not even seen the black murderer making for her.

Inside the smashed coach they found the senseless Elinor Mathes. Outside of bruises—and a hair-raising adventure—she had not suffered seriously. But it would take several days before she would get over shivering.

They fixed up a rude drag, out of parts of the stagecoach. On it rode Claire and Elinor, while the surviving men walked alongside. Thus they came north, and were met unexpectedly by Inspector Randall Smith himself, and two of his cameleers.

Then they were safe enough, though no one felt like wasting time in getting back to the well cabin.

From two miles distant on a small, wooded knoll, a black-bearded giant white man had watched the destruction of the coach, and the final defeat of the black raiders. Now a snarl burst from Paxton Trenholm. He snapped together the brass telescope, and thrust it back into leather case.

"We ride another fifty miles north!"

he rasped. "Bring the camels! They're not through with me yet!"

His black bodyservant and the three squat Malays ran immediately for the meharis.

CHAPTER IX

Black Fires.

INSPECTOR GOELITZ had refused Sam Varney's first overtures toward a transfer north, but ten days later news broke which changed everything. Sam did not hear until the end of the week, when Goelitz, with Farrand and a bearded jackaroo named Corbie, rode into his lonely camp to tell the ominous tale of what had happened in the north. Goelitz was to go with his experienced men. The supply base at Murrigud-dury would send men to take over temporarily. Corbie, a loose-witted drifter, was the first of these.

"Trenholm's blacks have stormed the wire! Attacked a stagecoach with three white women in it! Killed surveyors!" bellowed Corbie, who seemingly could not wait for the recital of his superior. "Blue-blazin' hell's to pay!"

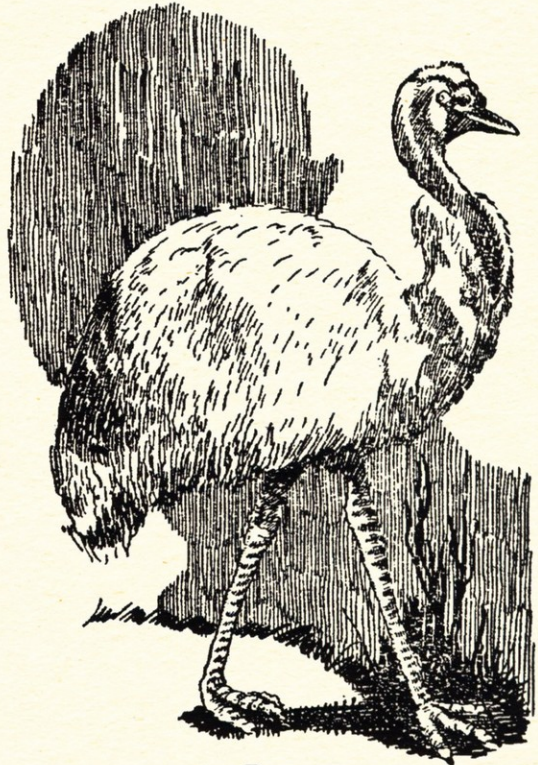
"Claire Smith!" ejaculated Sam. "Was she—"

"Not hurt," said Goelitz. "Now you shut up, Corbie. He's going to take your place for now, Sam. The whole upper third of the wire is threatened. You, I and Farrand are going to ride night and day till we get there! Get your guns, ammunition and swag. Hurry!"

Five minutes later they left without ceremony. Riding all day, resting only a brief hour of the night to keep their camels going, they pressed north. Four days passed. On the northernmost section of Harris's part of the fence they found this inspector and all his cam-eleers working hard on an immense re-

pair. Blackfellows had cut and carried away over two hundred yards of the posts and wire!

"You can't tell me my Parrabarras ever did this on their own!" snorted Harris, a belligerent, stocky man of middle height, with bushy reddish mustaches. "That black-whiskered fiend Trenholm is behind it. He sent a whole



Emu

damn village to tear down this fence while I was thirty miles north. They killed Hank Jasper, and then put a spear through Ballinger's leg. Ballinger has the pack of rabbit hounds up here, you know."

The danger from rabbits was great, with so long a stretch of wire down. Goelitz, Farrand and Sam lent a hand in stretching the new wire. And while they were at it, back in the scrub sounded the whirring whine of many bull-roarers!

"I only hope Trenholm's with 'em when they come!" said Sam Varney grimly.

"No hope. He just eggs 'em on to raid, then sits back and watches the trouble. Crazy as a bedbug, of course."

THIS time there was no thought of allowing any work of destruction. The armed men met the gins, when they came from corroborree, and fired a volley over their heads. Disappointed in their hope of lifting another great length of wire, they fled with wailing cries.

But the skeleton-striped blackfellows, when they came, evidently had been fired with Trenholm's frenzy to a point where the threat of guns and determined white men could not scare. Howling, flourishing their waddies, spears, and hurling boomerangs, they swarmed to attack the whites between them and the wire.

The latter, just finished with the aduous fence repair, were merciless. The repeating rifles and small arms kept thundering, and fully twenty-five of the attackers died without ever getting close enough to kill a single white. Several of the fence men had minor spear wounds, and one had been knocked senseless by a glancing boomerang. But that was all. The black survivors finally realized that it was no use, and fled.

"That's all!" cried Inspector Harris. "Lord, aren't they gluttons for punishment!"

"Well, we'll press right along then," said Goelitz. "I think you've got this situation under control now."

As Sam rode his camel northward, however, a word of Harris's had started a train of speculations in his mind—

golden speculations, tied up with dim, wondering thoughts of a girl who had freckles on her nose.

Gluttons! The reward for a suggestion which would end the rabbit plague in Australia! Claire Smith!

Sam had recalled with a thrill, tales told by one of his uncles who had been in the Klondike from '98 to 1901. The uncle had brought back little gold, but one of the stories he told now seemed to Sam extremely pertinent. It concerned a little animal of the north country which went around *killing rabbits for the sheer fun of it!*

This was the Canadian glutton—or wolverene, as some named it! Why should not Australia import a number of these small but ferocious killers, and let them loose to murder rabbits?

The very first chance he got, some days later, Sam put this idea in form of a letter, and sent it south by Afghan courier. Like all contestants for prizes the world over, then he dreamed of what he meant to do with \$150,000 and five square miles of land. Naturally enough, most of those dreams had something to do with a girl who had blue eyes and freckles on her nose.

THE next day saw a distinct change in the vegetation, as they pressed on toward the sections of Smith and Do-remus. The mulga scrub thinned out and vanished. Its place was taken by beefwood, baobabs and kasheew trees, and over the rolling plain small bolsons of kangaroo grass made the feeding of the camels easier.

Three more days, and they entered the section of Inspector Randall Smith. Goelitz kept scanning the northward horizon, and a frown corrugated his brows.

"Don't like it!" he said half to himself. "We haven't met a courier or a fence-rider—anybody!"

"There's a war on," Sam said, concealing his inward apprehension for Claire Smith and the girl, Elinor, who had gone north with her. "Prob'ly there're all up helping Doremus with the top section."

"The loot would look better here. Smith has the best house on the fence. Then—there's the women," said Goelitz grimly. Without more words the three men urged their camels to a shambling run. The beasts were nearing the point of complete exhaustion from their grueling trip, and the riders themselves were not much better off.

Nothing appeared that day. Next afternoon they reached the artesian well on the lowest length of Smith's section. Here stood the corrugated iron shack, iron water tank, windmill and pumphouse, and nothing else. The door of the shack sagged open, half-broken from its hinges. They knew the story before they reached the shack.

"Looted!" cried Farrand, who was first to dismount and take a look inside. The shack had been stripped of everything. Even the iron cots were gone.

"There were two riders here," said Goelitz, sadness in his eyes. "Let's shove along. It may be still worse up above."

Sam's face was drawn and stern. If Paxton Trenholm really was behind all these outrages, where could Tom Varney have gone? On a good camel, with the bushranger only a short way ahead, he must have caught up with the outlaw band long since.

The answer seemed plain. Tom had met Trenholm, and failed. It was all up to Sam now to uphold the honor of his family.

Progress now had diminished in heartbreaking fashion. The camels were ready to drop. Food had run out. There was no chance to hunt, except now and then to take snapshots with rifles at the small but edible "Nor'west parrots," which were a screeching nuisance everywhere. There were few rabbits in the traps of the fence, and in this hot climate the flesh of these stringy jacks was too strong-flavored to stomach.

Then on the second morning, as they were trying to flog Farrand's camel into rising to its feet—instead of lying there and moaning until it starved to death—all of them heard faint thunder of rifle firing ahead of them in the north. They mounted somehow, and forced the staggering, exhausted beasts onward.

Unshaven, hungry, in need of sleep, all three men were in a savagely worried frame of mind. And now appeared a terrifying discovery. Far ahead against the horizon, a column of thick, black smoke arose. At the height of perhaps one hundred fifty feet it mushroomed in a threatening club like the head of a waddy!

"Smith's house!" cried Goelitz bitterly. "Those poor women! It can't be anything but the house. That's built of darrah wood—pitchy. That's why the smoke is so black."

"Claire Smith!" whispered Sam to himself. His face had blanched beneath the dirt and tan. This was what they had feared. Yet the arrogant optimism of youth had said all along to the rider that this thing might happen to others, but not to him. Not to the girl he loved! Oh yes, it might not be love. He didn't really know. But that would be something to figure when and if—

THE inspector's guess was proved certainty as they drove the gasping, tottering camels to the limit—and beyond. Farrand's mount suddenly collapsed under him, but he sprang free.

"Keep going!" he cried sharply, tugging at the rifle in the boot. "I'll be with you!"

Sam and Goelitz nodded, taut-lipped. They now could see the rolling billows of black smoke rising from the burning house. And now appeared an evil eye of red in the midst of the black.

Then the inspector shouted, reining up and holding one hand aloft. His camel immediately went to its knees with a stifled groan, then fell over. Goelitz leapt clear, running to where a dead body lay half-slumped, half-hung on the fence.

The dead man was undersized, stocky, brown of skin. His flat countenance and high cheekbones bespoke the Malay. He had been shot between the narrow eyes.

"Looks like one of Trenholm's gang!" shouted Sam. "Come on!"

He and Goelitz dashed through the aisles of a compact grape arbor, then across a small, irrigated truck garden near the artesian well. But both men knew at heart they were too late.

"No use at the house. Roof's fallen in!" shouted Sam. He shielded his face from the heat and circled.

Suffocating fumes swept at them from the blood-red, pitchy fire, blotting out their sight of one another. And then came a shout of discovery in Farrand's voice. He had dog-trotted after them. Reaching the far edge of the vineyard he had stumbled upon two headless corpses, and with them the body of a third man, unconscious but still breathing. It was patent,

however, that the poor fellow could not live.

"Three cameleers!" gulped Goelitz, and swore savagely. "There's the pile of blackfellows they got before they cashed in! This chap—I don't know him—well, he's gone."

"Where are the women? The three girls?" cried Sam, beside himself with horror.

No present answer to that. In another angle of the grape arbor the searchers came upon all that was left of Inspector Randall Smith. Like the cameleers, he had fired every cartridge he carried, then died in hand-to-hand conflict, taking no less than six blacks with him—not counting those who doubtless fell at longer range.

One of Smith's arms had been chopped off just below the shoulder, and a waddy had smashed his skull to the bridge of his nose. They had stripped the body of clothing.

Later the bodies of two more men would be discovered in the cooling ashes of the house. But for now one thought and one only gripped Sam Varney.

"I'm going after her—then!" he told Goelitz. "I've tracked cows that were lost. Mebbe I can do something here. You—well, you get in touch with the police if you can."

"All right, Sam," said Goelitz soberly, taking no offense at being ordered about by his agonized subordinate. "God go with you!"

"I'll need a thousand devils if I find Trenholm!" grated Sam.

CHAPTER X

Answer to a Widow's Prayer.

SAM went on foot, travelling out west into the scrub, then circling. He came upon traces of two parties

of blacks. No camel tracks. No sign of white woman's shoes.

"Mebbe only blacks were there—and they took her away!" breathed Sam. "Trenholm 'd be sitting back somewheres—like a big, black spider—"

Forced to choose, he took the second trail, which seemed to have been made by a party of fifteen or more blackfellows. The distances between footprints were enormous. Sam shuddered. He had glimpsed one of these Kimberley Lake blacks on two occasions—the times he had seen Paxton Trenholm with his bodyservant. The tracks made it almost certain these were not Parra-barras or Aruntas, who were of lesser stature. Many of the gaunt, somber-visaged Kimberleys were said to be seven feet tall—the tallest men of any race on the face of the earth.

In half an hour, though, he reached heavy thickets, where twigs and heavier branches lay springy in the leaf mould underfoot. Here the trail petered out, though evidently still bound in the same general direction.

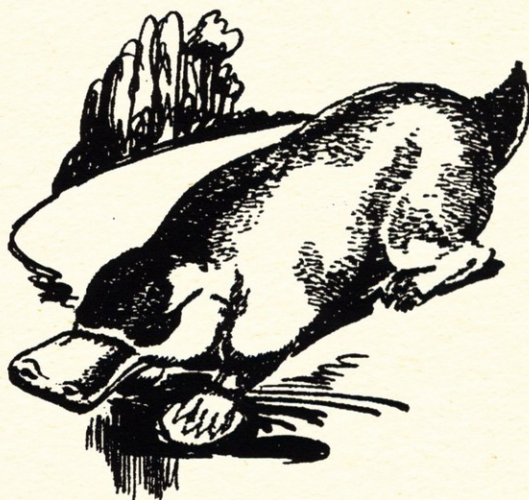
Sam plugged on, going now in long, slanting zigzags first to left, then to right. He had the luck to cut the trail again, but now darkness was coming. He resolved to keep going, trusting in the coming of an early full moon. Chances were slender indeed, but he felt he had to give every one to the women caught by these primitive devils.

Moonrise found him still going. He stopped a few seconds every now and then, listening, hoping to hear the sounds of a native camp or village. If that were ahead of him, and the women captives there, Sam knew he would have the only advantage a lone white man could have. These superstitious aborigines never ventured out at night, peopling the dark with blood-thirsty

bunyips and all other manner of man-eating devils.

Two more hours, three, passed slowly by—with fatigue gradually dulling the senses of the plodding man. Then suddenly he came to himself, falling! He had gone sound asleep on his feet!

He was forced to give up for the time being, make the best of it. He lay down, and instantly was gripped by the dreamless sleep of exhaustion.



Duck-billed platypus

While he slept forces he did not suspect fought to give him a chance. The indefatigable police had been warned the previous day, and four detachments had closed in, hoping against hope to trap the wily bushranger Trenholm, who had caused this uprising, as well as punish the murderous blackfellows.

And the police had succeeded in one thing, at least. They had turned back two forces of blacks, kept them moving through the night. Even now one of them was approaching the sleeping Sam Varney.

THE jar of distant shots awoke Sam with a start. It was still bright moonlight, and he leapt up, dazed for

a moment to find himself in the jungle thickets.

He came to his senses not a second too soon. Coming toward him through the thicket, hurrying like gaunt black specters of silence, came a scattered line of blackfellows spaced from one another like skirmishers.

With a yell of surprise, Sam dodged a spear as one of the black phantoms rushed at him and hurled a death shaft. A second later that aborigine sprawled on his face, one of Sam's rifle bullets through his bony chest.

Sam found himself facing three more—one of whom carried a limp, unconscious bundle in his arms. A white woman! Of course it had to be Claire. Sam forgot completely that there had been two others in that moment of flying spear and spouting lead.

Down went two of the blacks. And on both sides others yelled, probably thinking they had been trapped by more police. They fled at top speed, paying no attention to Sam, fortunately.

The gaunt Kimberley now flung aside the girl's body, and came for Sam with waddy swinging. Sam's rifle clicked—a dud cartridge, or else it had gone empty before he realized!

The stone waddy whished sidewise at his knees—the cunning stroke which cripples and fells an enemy, leaving him an easy victim for further attack.

Sam shouted, as he snatched desperately at his revolver. He leapt high, as a schoolgirl leaps over a skipping rope. And the waddy knocked away one of his heels, but did not touch flesh or bone!

As he alighted, and before the terrible club could be swung a second time, Sam shot once, twice, point-blank into the torso of the black. The aborigine bellowed, folded up and

sprawled, twitching. It ceased. He was dead. Crouching, expecting more enemies, Sam stared about in the thicket. Nothing.

He was alone save for the girl he had rescued, there on the ground. She moved as he ran to her side, and lifted her face.

It was the coquette, the widow Elinor Mathes!

"Sam! Sam!" she cried, her voice breaking with incredulity and gladness. "Oh, are you *real*? That—that black man—"

She reached up both arms, sobbing as she clasped them tightly about the neck of the astounded Sam Varney, who ejaculated something suspiciously like a bitter curse.

"Where is Claire? Have these men got her?" He gestured in the direction the blacks had vanished.

"Oh no. Another bunch, I think," she sobbed. "Oh, carry me, Sam. I—I don't think I could possibly walk!"

Cursing inwardly, unable to desert this girl in distress as he wanted with all his heart to do, Sam picked her up roughly in his arms and began stalking back toward the fence.

CHAPTER XI

The Last Bushranger.

A FEW minutes ended that. Sam still was tired, and ferocious at the turn of fortune which had thrown this woman into his arms—instead of Claire Smith. There came a distant sound of firing, at right angles from his course back to the fence! That could mean only one thing—a rescue party of police or surveyors!

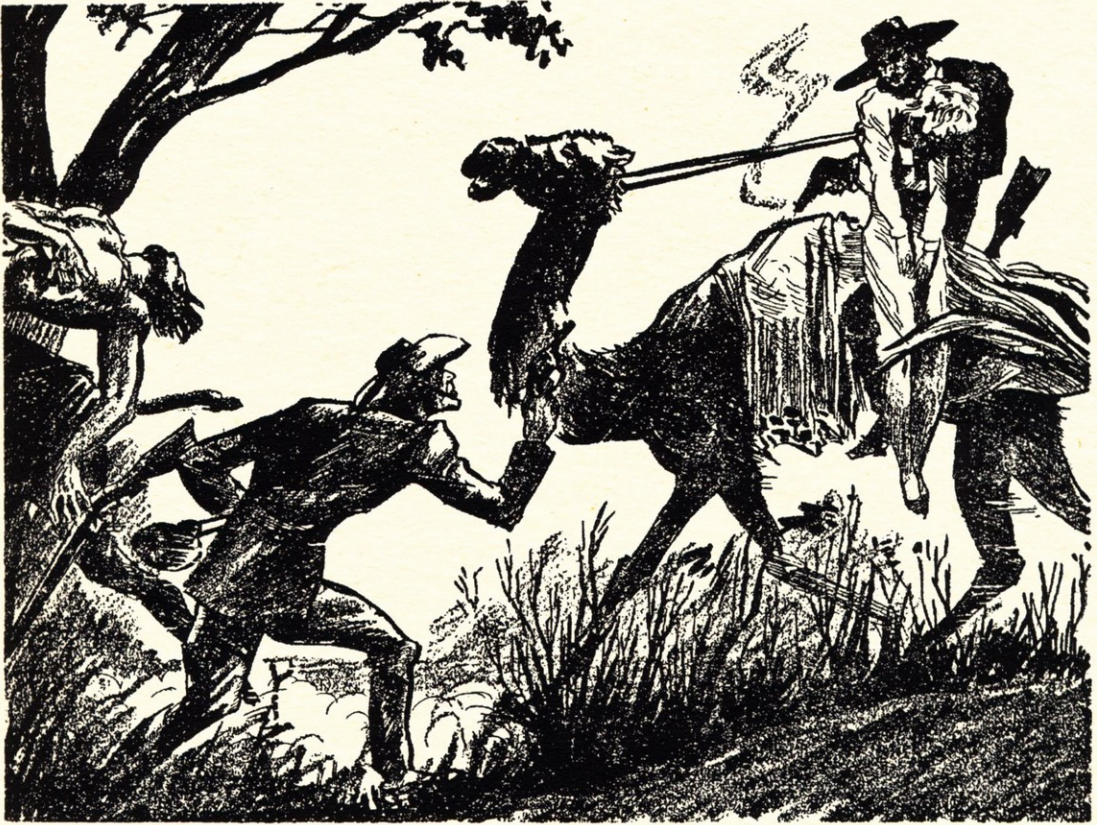
Instantly Sam put down his burden. In spite of Elinor's wailing protest, he made her use her own feet. His own strength and ability might be

needed any second. He set a pace through the thickets which had her stumbling and gasping, afraid to be left behind.

More scattered shots, nearer! Armed white men were harrying a party of blacks—or possibly chasing Paxton Trenholm himself! For weeks the po-

dawn and last wan moonlight. As Sam stopped, rifle loaded again and ready, large animals crashed through the scrub in his direction. Camels!

A hoarse shout burst from Sam's throat. These were not police or fence men! The first two riders were squat-bodied, brown men, naked above the



Sam saw a horrible thing. The limp figure held against Trenholm's chest was the unconscious body of Claire Smith!

lice had been closing in on the bush-ranger, at last nearing the moment when he would have to stand at bay. This might be the last battle!

With the breathless young woman stumbling after him, Sam kept on toward the spot from which the sounds had come. Then the sudden crackling of branches ahead caught his attention. Here was a sort of glade in the gidgie and beefwood, lighted by first gray of

waist. The third was a skinny, coal-black giant, a Kimberley blackfellow. Then came a huge white man, black spade bearded—

Paxton Trenholm had ridden to his reckoning!

They came fast, straight at him. Seeing this was to be close action, Sam dropped his rifle and yanked the revolver. At the same instant the foremost Malay screamed a warning,

and fired a rifle from his hip—and unaimed.

Sam shot from a crouch. The slug struck the Malay in the chest, sending him sprawling. With a yowl the tall black leapt down and fled back on the camel trail. He went straight into the hands of police, who would have use for him later. He would lead them to Trenholm's caches of loot.

The camels came right up to him. Sam shot a second time, winging the second Malay, but feeling the hot crease of a bullet across his own shoulder-blades. Trenholm had shot!

SAM saw a horrible thing. The bearded bushranger had lifted a limp bundle, using it as a shield as he maneuvered for a better aimed shot down at Sam. The latter dodged as the shot blazed.

The limp figure there, held against Trenholm's chest, was the unconscious body of Claire Smith!

For a precious second the American could not fire; and with a maniacal snarl of triumph Trenholm threw down a third time.

Sam's left leg went out from under him. By the agonizing pain he suspected his kneecap was shattered. On the way to the ground, however, he loosed his own delayed bullet, pumping it straight into the chest of the camel, just inside the left foreleg.

The beast gasped piteously and slumped to his knees. Two human bodies went plunging from the saddle—the second of these the mad bushranger, Paxton Trenholm.

He landed heavily on his side, with an explosive grunt. Disregarding the agony in his leg, Sam crawled across the two yards that separated them, and threw himself upon the giant quarry,

striking savagely down with his revolver barrel, half-stunning Trenholm who roared with rage and pain and turned to grapple.

The huge arms clutched Sam Varney, who realized the folly of holding his fire and grappling with this madman while disabled. Now Sam strove for just one thing, a chance to shoot. He still had the revolver, but his arms were pinioned, and the great black-beard was crushing his ribs inward—

Having no other weapon now, Sam butted with his head. Trenholm cursed savagely, crazily—but for a split second his hugging arms loosened a trifle as he spat forth a tooth.

Sam's chance! With a wrenching jerk he tore loose his right arm. Slam! Slam! Two heavy slugs tore into the bushranger's torso.

A shuddering shriek cleft his throat. He jerked backward, thrashing, flinging Sam from him as if the Yank had been a straw man. Incredulity and terror suddenly cleared the brain of Trenholm.

"You've—murdered me!" he shrieked. Then bloody froth came to choke his words.

"Not murder—vengeance!" said Varney, from between taut lips set against his own overbearing pain.

That was the moment when the sobbing Elinor Mathes ran to him. Sam thrust her away.

"See to Claire," he bade in a croaking voice. He lifted the revolver and fired, as a half-dozen fleeing black-fellows came toward them.

But these aborigines sought only to escape. They divided, and passed him and the two girls. That moment Trenholm's back arched, and the death rattle sounded in his throat. He slumped—and the man who may have been the

last of Australia's bushrangers was dead.

Now came a lone figure on a worn and shambling camel. It was a gray-bearded man who stopped dead at the sight of Sam and the revolver. Then the newcomer slid off, making a choked sound, and ran forward to the motionless body of Trenholm.

"Tom!" cried Sam. "Take care of these girls. I—"

But for several long seconds the elder brother paid no heed.

"An' you wouldn't save him for me, kid!" he said then. "He was mine. I—" the words died in a mutter.

"I couldn't," said Sam. "It's all in the Varney family, though."

That was when the force of Territorial police reached them, to exclaim and stare in fascinated triumph down at the corpse of the most dreaded raider of the mulga.

CHAPTER XII

Little Texas.

THE Yank Varneys were exonerated. Not much more remains to be told—or can be told, since these lives are far from ended.

Sam's leg took a long time to mend. Tom stayed right with him. So did Elinor and Claire. In the end Sam was forced to desperate measures of plain speaking with the widow, who after her rescue did her best to earmark the Texan as her own property.

Sam finally blurted out to her that he loved Claire. And that was a good fortnight before he got up courage enough to say so to the right person. It was just possible that the girl with blue eyes and freckles had a faint idea, though, since she just smiled happily and sat down upon his knee saying

something obscure about being relieved that her husband-to-be wasn't tongue-tied.

The rewards for Trenholm were paid promptly, and that meant capital for the Varneys. Sam insisted that Tom was a full partner, over the latter's protests. But when they got down to the details of starting a cow ranch in the kangaroo grass country, Tom forgot all about his scruples in enthusiasm for another sight of some Texas whiteface breeding stock.

Real luck perched on the Varney banner, though it did not come until after their tiny ranch was started. Sam did not win the grand prize for his idea regarding the rabbit plague. But down in New South Wales, one year later, the Commission solemnly voted him \$10,000 as a special award. Gluttons had been tried out, and certainly killed rabbits wholesale in the cooler parts of Australia.

Because too few of the Canadian killers could be secured, and because gluttons did not thrive where tropical temperatures were the rule, they were not the final answer to the problem, though they certainly helped.

The only unhappy man of all the contingent, perhaps, was Inspector Goelitz. He offered Sam the inspectorship on the division of the dead Randall Smith. But Sam shook his head. Claire positively refused to have anything more to do with the fence.

"Sorry," the ex-cameleer smiled. "I'm going to be busy down at Three Flags. I want you to come and see us, though."

"Three flags?"

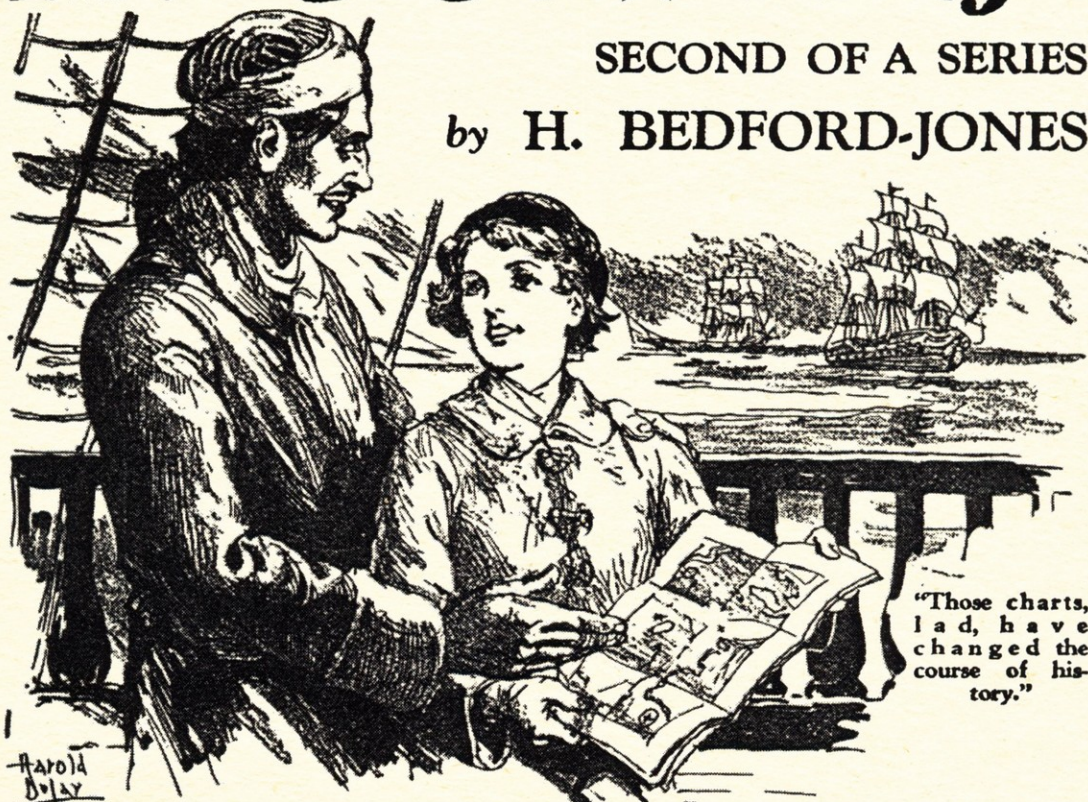
"Yeah, the ranch. We're going to fly the Australian flag, the Lone Star banner, and the American flag!"

"Well," shrugged Goelitz ruefully, shaking hands in farewell, "that surely ought to scare away the bunyips!"

The Coasts of

SECOND OF A SERIES

by H. BEDFORD-JONES



"Those charts, lad, have changed the course of history."

"SHE LOVED IBERVILLE"

THEY lived life roughly in those days; a storm of battle and sudden death filled all Newfoundland in 1697. In a world of ravening men, white and red, a girl alone had not an earthly chance.

Not a soul guessed that the crop-haired stripling, the tap-boy in the Placentia tavern, was really a girl. Not a soul dreamed that in the hands of young Adams lay the destiny of men, the future of fleets and armies, of Hudson's Bay, of the fur-trade, even of Canada and half the new world itself! Least of all did Bess Adams dream such a thing.

Alone and desperate, she labored in the tavern for bare existence—a slim, agile boy, breasts tightly bound, rough woolen garments concealing any hint of sex. Her father had been a pilot in Hudson's Bay, for the English. But, while the English held most of Newfoundland, the French held Placentia.

"Quick! Canadians are in there—attend to them!" cried the harassed innkeeper, and shoved young Adams into the main room. Thus began destiny, in the dead of winter, as she obeyed the order.

A crude place, this tavern room; huge, log-walled, with an immense fire-

Chance

Illustrated by
HAROLD DELAY

place for heating and cooking. But, seated at the table, were the most romantic figures in all America—Pierre le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, darkly handsome, saturnine, magnetic, and his brother, the boy Bienville, on first campaign.

Iberville looked up at the hovering tap-boy. His face warmed, his eyes kindled, the spell of his lean, eager self leaped forth.

"Ha, pale cheeks and big eyes!" he exclaimed in his vibrant, gusty manner. "Brave eyes, by my faith! Fetch us wine, brave eyes!"

Later, when the innkeeper was passing, Iberville hailed him and spoke about the tap-boy. English, no doubt?

"Not at all, monsieur," was the reply. "A lad who fled here for shelter. One of the Irish slaves."

That explained everything. In Newfoundland were many of the hapless Irish Jacobites, sold as slaves to the English settlements. Wherever possible, they fled to freedom among the French, but too often died in the effort.

So Bess Adams, waiting on the little group of Canadians, heard wondrous things amid their laughter and eager talk. It was the dead of winter. Iberville had brought a few of his Canadian backwoodsmen, and meant to lead them on snowshoes to destroy every English settlement on the island. And what men they were!

Iberville himself, at home in Versailles or the deep forest; his young brother, the lovely, lordly Bienville;

Abbé Baudoin, who had been a musketeer before he became a fighting chaplain; Montigny, the dark, savage Canadian leader, and the rest of them. Romantic names and men, every one.

"Now listen, my friends!" cried Iberville, as the tap-boy poised opposite. "With the spring, my brother Serigny brings a fleet from France; we'll sweep the English out of Hudson's Bay. But first, our work lies here! And when the fleet comes, when I leave here for the north, I want to leave this whole island a French possession."

Hudson's Bay! He was leading a fleet to the great bay, to conquer the whole vast fur trade at one swoop! Bess Adams went about her work with a dream in her dark eyes. And, all this long frost-ridden winter, whenever Iberville saw her, he greeted her with a slap on the shoulder and a cheery word. "Ha, brave eyes!" It was his name for her. He remembered her. That in itself was enough to make one's heart leap high.

She saw him often, for he was in Placentia on hurried trips, now and again. English prisoners poured in, St. John's was taken, the settlements scattered along the island shores were raided and wiped out. But here, in the rude log tavern where the Canadians roared their drinking songs, Iberville was no stranger.

A slender man, all fire and flame. To the French, he was a puzzle. To the Canadians, a demigod. To the Indians, a great war-chief. To the English, a devil let loose. But to Bess Adams,

he was a hero; and she was closer right than any of them.

There was no logic in her worship; he was a married man, and a great man. She might better have set her heart upon young Bienville, or any of the gay, roistering Canadians, half Indian in talk and dress; but she did not. She was a girl, and Iberville became her hero, just as he was to all his men. They talked of him everywhere, of his exploits at sea, in the woods, in the frozen north. He and his brethren of the le Moyne family were the heroes of all Canada.

His personality captivated her simple, rough heart; he had come into her life like a vision from another world. "Ha, brave eyes!" The kindly words burned into her spirit, and true words they were. Bess Adams, in her guise as a boy, was playing a deadly, risky game and playing it well, for not a soul suspected her real sex.

Tucked away among her few personal effects was a little sheaf of folded papers, her sole heritage from her father, pilot of the English adventurers in Hudson's Bay.

THE long frozen weeks passed, while the huge log fires blazed and hunters brought in moose and caribou for meat; and wounded men who brought in batches of prisoners told new tales of the snowshoe war and of Iberville's high deeds. Indians, feathered and painted, stalked about; Canadians, painted and feathered like their Iroquois friends, drank and talked and laughed. And suddenly came destiny.

Sails came up the bay—the fleet was in from France!

All Placentia roared and rocked with

news. It was a dramatic moment. Hudson's Straits were open only a few short weeks in the year, ice-closed most of the time. Further, an English fleet was on the way to reinforce the English forts on the bay. Iberville must win that race! But Iberville was somewhere in the woods, finishing his conquest. Messengers went out to seek him in hot haste. They found him. Dropping everything else, he came in to Placentia. Bess Adams saw him arrive with his wild, bronzed Canadians. Out in the bay was his brother Serigny with four ships of war, the crews half dead with scurvy.

That night they crowded the tavern. Gallant officers from France, gentlemen of Canada, Iberville in his woollens, young Bienville in a gay uniform, the older Serigny in epaulets. Three of the famed le Moyne brethren, each of them a prince in looks and thought and deed! But it was to Iberville that the dark eyes of Bess Adams strayed, as she came and went.

She caught his voice, ringing, vibrant, rich.

"Go? Now, at once, the minute we can leave! Ice? Be damned to it! We'll fight through the straits somehow. If those English ships beat us to the bay?—but they shan't! One thing I'd give my right arm to have. Fort Nelson is the chief English post there, and we've no charts of the shore or the river. That coast is all shoals and shallows for miles out into the bay. It's destruction for any ship which has no chart. Ours are all old ones."

"We could get no better," said Serigny, frowning. "None of our pilots know the waters of the bay, Pierre. And what if we meet the English fleet?"

The laughing eyes of Iberville swept the circle of intent faces.

"I suppose," he said, "you gentlemen would lay ship to ship and blaze away?"

"Why not?" spoke up an officer. "Those are the approved naval tactics, monsieur?"

Iberville's laugh blared out. "Aye, of course! But not my tactics, gentlemen. If we do meet the English, I intend to invent new tactics; fight them

of the future. Bess Adams, however, went back and forth at her work, fingers trembling on the dishes, eyes alight, cheeks flushed. This seigneur, this hero, captain of all the fleet, needed one thing—and she alone could supply his lack!

The secret quivered within her, until her very heart hungered and cried out.



"Ice? Be damned to it! We'll fight through the straits somehow!"

Indian fashion! No, never mind explanations. Wait and see what happens when the time comes! There's always something new over the horizon, if one can find it. Some day, when we've thrown the English out of all this north-land, I want to seek a new country, found a new colony for France—far down in the south. I'll take my Canadians to Louisiana and build an empire there!"

They laughed at his dream, his vision

Later, when the crowd broke up, the three le Moyne brethren sat talking among themselves, laughing, radiant, with tales of Canada, the court, the snowshoe campaign. And of a sudden their voices died and their bright eyes focussed, as the tap-boy came and stood before them, eager gaze fastened on Iberville. He glanced up and smiled.

"Ha, brave eyes! What is it, lad?"

"Why, monsieur," said Bess Adams, choking a little with excitement, "are

you heading for the straits at once?"

"Why, yes!" he said gravely, but with a twinkle in his eyes. "We must be there when the ice clears from the straits. We must slip through to the bay, ahead of the English."

"And I heard you say you'd give much," she hurried on, "for charts. Charts of the bay and the river where Fort Nelson lies. If you had a chart that showed the depths along the coast, would it help you?"

IN the sudden silence, the dark lean face of Iberville narrowed abruptly, and his eyes blazed forth.

"What's this? You know where such charts could be had?"

"Yes. I have them," said Bess Adams. "My father was a pilot for the English company. I—I'd like to sell the charts to you."

Her voice faltered and died, as that of Serigny crackled up.

"Careful, Pierre! This may be some English trick. Beware!"

"Honest eyes give the lie to tricks," said Iberville. "Come, lad! I thought you were one of the Irish slaves? How, then, was your father an English pilot?"

"He died," she said simply. "My mother was Irish, and she died. The English would have harmed me, and I fled here for safety."

Now, all this was true enough in its way. A young girl alone in the settlements was as safe as a fat rabbit in the midst of a wolf-pack; in this wild land women were rarer than diamonds or gold. To the three le Moynes who looked at her, Bess Adams was no more than a boy, shock-headed, roughly clad, excited.

"Come, lad, I know you," said Iberville kindly. "But I don't understand

your words, or your talk of selling these charts."

The boy flushed scarlet.

"Not for money, monsieur; not that at all! I'd sell you the charts for a place aboard your ship, your own ship. I can serve. I'm strong and willing."

"I'll be damned!" said Iberville, staring. "You want to go with the fleet? Why?"

Shy, confused, the boy hesitated.

"Why stay here, monsieur? It's like you said a little while ago; something new, over the horizon! Here life is deadly. With—with you, it's worth while."

Iberville, radiant, put up a hand and gripped the boy's shoulder.

"Ha, brave eyes! You're a lad after my own heart! The chaplain aboard the *Pelican*, my own ship, is an Irishman, one Fitzmaurice of Kerry. He'll find you a place—but first, what about these charts? Where are they?"

"Upstairs, monsieur, with my things in the loft. Then, you'll take me?"

"Yes, yes! Get your charts, boy; if you speak the truth, you have my word on it. Get them, get them! Name of the devil, what luck this may prove to be—get them!"

So Bess Adams got the little leather-encased packet from the cold sleeping loft, and brought it down. Iberville unfolded the papers, and in a growing blaze of excitement the three men studied them; until, abruptly, Iberville reached out and caught the boy in a wild, joyous embrace.

"A marvel, a marvel!" he cried, in an ecstasy of delight. "Brave eyes, you've brought us luck and all else; here's the one thing we needed! Get what things you have, and go aboard ship with me this night."

Bess Adams, red and frightened lest

that embrace discover her secret, wriggled out of it amid the laughter of the others, and fled.

She was not the only one to go aboard. Into the squadron piled the Canadians and a few redskin allies, mostly on Iberville's ship. Without losing a moment, despite scurvy-smitten crews, the impetuous le Moynes were off.

TO Bess Adams, it was like a wild fantastic dream, as the shores of Newfoundland faded away and the four ships hauled northward along the Labrador coast. One might say that she was utterly mad, struck silly by an insensate infatuation for an older man; perhaps! Yet cold stark sanity has condemned many a person to a lifetime of hell. To pitch sanity overboard and follow a dream takes courage and a great heart.

Although the quarters aboard the *Pelican* were crowded, her secret remained entirely safe. There was no pampered relaxation about this life; all was bitter cold, bitter wet; half the crew down with scurvy. Men went unshaved. They slept in their clothes.

Besides, the poor drab wench with her tightly bound breasts and coarse garments was by no means abloom with beauty. Only those great dark eyes of her might have hinted the truth, had there been anyone to suspect; but there was none. The glowering Indians, who might have sensed her secret, were too seasick to care.

With the red-headed Fitzmaurice of Kerry, she made fast friends; an Irish exile, this fighting chaplain was a gay soul, who divined her intense admiration for Iberville and shared it fully. So did the merry Bacqueville, the Royal Commissioner. He was a Creole from

the West Indies, and worshipped Iberville; he had a vast project, in fact, of writing a book about Canada, and hung day and night upon one or other of the Canadians, getting stories of Indian raids and Hudson's Bay.

This Bacqueville had a vast curiosity about everything, scratched away with quill and ink-horn at every opportunity, and was an arrant nuisance; but so debonair and merry was he that everyone gladly contributed to his lore. Bess Adams, who knew how to trim a quill, gave him much help and taught him a little English, and liked him in her shy, distant way.

Not that she had much time to spare; from the start, she worked as never before in her life, and liked it. Of Iberville she saw a good deal, always getting a smiling word and a gay jest to warm her cold spirits; he spared her the smiles he gave to few others. For his one burning thought now was to drive ahead at any and every cost. The first to get through the straits and reach the bay would win the prize of empire.

They passed Labrador and came at last into the straits between the enormous iron cliffs, heading on among the ice-drifts. Here, for Bess Adams and all others aboard, life became a very hell of hopeless effort, with Iberville lashing them to frantic exertion by day and night. They chopped at the ice, they blasted it with powder, they somehow smashed a way through it and ahead—only to be carried back, time and again, by the heavy drift.

Days passed into weeks. They lingered, sometimes within sight of the bay itself, more often carried back for miles with the pack. Fog hung over everything and toil was incessant. The other ships were completely lost to

sight. The *Pelican* was alone and helpless before the fantastic currents. Some of her well men and guns had been put aboard the *Profound*, so she was short-handed despite the aid of the Canadians.

In the eternal fog, life became a mad jumble, a weary round of labor, varied by bits of fantasy. Bears were chased and hunted down on the ice. Once, a number of Eskimos showed up for barter—funny little dumpy men clad in furs from head to foot. Their visit marked a red-letter day for Bess Adams, and a day of near disaster.

The ship was gripped fast in the ice. Bess Adams was staring curiously at the dumpy little Eskimos, bartering on the ice alongside, when without warning Iberville's hand came down at her shoulder, his voice broke forth at her ear.

"Come along, lad! You need a bit of exercise. We'll take a look at the ice ahead; if I'm not mistaken, there's a break in it. Ready?"

With a flush of eager delight, she followed him over the side to the ice. Musket on shoulder, Iberville swung along jauntily; and she, in the thrill of being alone with him, cared not whether the fog closed out the ship or not.

Now, the boy's hero-worship had been observed aboard, and had become something of a joke among the officers. Perhaps Iberville had compassion upon her, perhaps he thrilled a little to her wide-eyed devotion; but today, as they slipped and slid along in their moccasins, he threw off ten years and became a laughing, jesting boy.

AN ice-hummock loomed up. He pretended it was a bear and charged it, jerked the tomahawk from

his belt and hurled it, gave the Mohawk whoop and scalp-yell—and suddenly lost footing and went all asprawl. Laughing, Bess Adams retrieved the fallen musket, only to slip and go down herself.

She, however, really went down, and disappeared with one gulping cry of terror into an ice-hole. The icy water closed above her. The musket was lost. She herself was nearly lost; Iberville, luckily, got a grip on her upflung arm. He pulled her up and on the ice, and then jerked off his long woolen coat.

"Strip, lad!" he commanded. "Out of those wet things. Get into this coat, and back to the ship."

"No, no!" She shrank back, such fear in her eyes that he stared at her in startled astonishment. "It won't matter—I can change aboard the ship—"

"Change now!" he commanded in his imperative way. "Why, you're blue with cold! You'll freeze solid before reaching the ship, lad! Come, strip to the buff and I'll slap the blood back into your body."

Panic seized her. She turned and ran for it—ran, soaked and streaming and freezing, back the way they had come. Iberville, luckily, was so far from comprehending her reasons that the whole thing struck him humorously, and he pursued her with a roar of laughter. However, she ran with desperation spurring her on, and reaching the ship ahead of him, dived for 'tween decks and privacy, amid bursts of laughter from the men on deck.

What might have come of it was problematical, had not all thought of it been driven from every mind. For, as Iberville came alongside the ship, he halted suddenly. Every voice ceased, and laughter died, as a sound came

dully through the fog.

"Guns!" said somebody.

Guns, indeed. A distant thunder of gunfire rolling along the towering iron cliffs. What it meant, they could only conjecture. Later, they learned that the *Profound* had been carried by the ice-drift slap into the midst of the English squadron; she fought them

FREE! Free of the ice and fog, with destiny ahead!

The *Pelican* went scudding across the wide bay for Nelson. There was a wild and uproarious celebration aboard her. Bess Adams carried wine to the officers' mess; gay French nobles, the red-headed Fitzmaurice, lean Canadians, the Indian chief, young Bien-



"Strip, lad!" he commanded.
"Out of those wet things."

until the drift carried her away again into the fog.

The *Pelican* remained alone, under curtains of mist, but drifted at last into the mouth of the straits. There, ahead of them, was the bay, dotted with floe ice; and as near as could be told, Serigny and the other ships must be ahead of them. The fog lifted, showing not another sail in sight. A breeze stirred. Came wind, and the thunderous break-up of the floes. A channel opened ahead, and Iberville cracked on all sail.

ville, dark eager Iberville, a wild company of clamorous tongues.

And suddenly Iberville caught at the cabin-boy and shoved a winecup into his hand.

"A toast to the lad!" rang out his voice. "A health to him, who gave us what we most needed! Drink it yourself with us, brave eyes; we're all comrades here, and if success comes, then we owe it to you and your charts! Drink!"

"Then I'll drink to you, M. d'Iberville, and those who love you!" ex-

claimed Bess Adams, her deep dark eyes all aglow. More laughter, hearty cheers, eyes flashing through the tobacco smoke, and the girl's heart leaping. Comrades! And he had saved her life, that day on the ice. But it did not end there. Grandville, officer of the marines, leaped to his feet and raised his cup anew.

"Another toast to the lad!" he cried. "My men have told me how he's passed among the sick, comforting them, feeding them, helping them. To the lad who's tender as a woman and brave as a lion!"

They drank the toast with acclaim, while Bess Adams shrank and blushed again. She dreaded having the general attention focused upon her, and was thankful when she could get away from it all.

Moreover, the future worried her. She had embarked on this mad cruise to be with Iberville. Once ashore, everything would be changed; discovery must come, soon or late. She had nothing to expect from the future. Her hero-worship asked nothing, true. She did not seek love. Yet, once her secret was known, she would certainly be handed over to some soldier or settler as a wife and a mother of wilderness children. And from this she shrank with horror, a prospect unendurable.

So the *Pelican* headed on, straight as an arrow, to the Nelson river. Now a fever of suspense took hold upon every soul aboard. Were the other ships here? Had the English, perhaps, beaten them all?

Hereabouts the land was very low, and shoals ran out into the bay for miles. The channel by which one might reach the river and the fort would have to be sounded very carefully, since the ice had swept away all

buoys and markers. Yet, if the English had not arrived, the race was won.

With afternoon, the blue land grew in the west, a shoreline still snowy and icebound. The dark trees grew, and the wide river-mouth. A shout of joy burst from Iberville as he lowered his spy-glass. Empty!

"We've won the race! In with the canvas!"

To a sharp burst of yells and war-whoops succeeded running seamen, sharp orders, the slap-slap of canvas coming in. The anchor was let fall, a good ten miles out from the land, because of the shoal waters.

Boats? There was only a pinnace, towing under the stern, but some canoes had been taken aboard at Placentia. Martigny and a score of his woodsmen were sent ashore, to scout the fort, drive the English within the walls, and get information. Also, the worst cases among the sick men were sent to die ashore, if die they must.

Then, with night coming down, the guns were shifted and lanterns were hung about the decks. Fiddles came out, wine was decanted, and with chanson and roaring song, officer and seaman, voyageur and cabin-boy danced and celebrated gaily. They toasted the great flag of white with the three golden lilies of France with joyous hearts. Toil was done, and ahead lay victory!

"All due to the charts the lad gave us," said Iberville, standing with his brother in a dark corner of the deck. They were unaware of a shadow hovering near them. "When the English fleet comes, those charts will mean victory."

"Why!" asked young Bienville.

"Because they'll enable me to fight and destroy that fleet in my own fashion. According to our information, the

English ships are far superior to ours, with heavy crews; but I've thought out a new way of handling ships in action. Well, wait and see!"

Bess Adams crept away, with a new glow in her heart, and went down to the sick men below, giving them all the help and comfort a kindly girl's heart could give. Sixty men down there, unable to move, and others barely able to stagger about the deck. Scurvy had smitten the marines and seamen with fearful hand.

She slept, through the dawn and into the daylight, to be wakened in broad morning by feet stamping along the decks, by eager voices, by wild shouts of joy. She came tumbling on deck into a bitter cold wind under gray and threatening skies, to cheer with the others. For there, off to the eastward, three tiny sails broke the horizon. Serigny and the other ships had arrived safely!

OUT to meet them! Iberville's voice lifted down the decks; laughing, singing, jesting, the men leaped to work. The anchor was hove in, the canvas bellied out, and away went the *Pelican* to greet her consorts and guide them to safe anchorage. Hot boasts rose high; now let the English fleet come, and see what would happen! The battle tactics of the day were simple—lay alongside an enemy ship, hammer away with broadsides, grapple him and lay him aboard. What a fight there would be in the bay, if the English came and the four French ships were ready for them! No quarter in these waters; defeat meant death. Only the fittest could survive.

So, amid the joyous clamor, Bess Adams carried hot food and wine to

the poop, where the officers clustered about Iberville. Wild storm threatened. Flurries of snow were in the air, and in the bitter cold the spray froze where it fell. Across the shallow waters of the bay ruffled squall after squall.

Then, as she held her tray to him, Bess Adams caught a mutter from Iberville.

"Strange they don't answer our signals! Eh? What's this?"

"Wine, monsieur, and a bit of hot soup."

Iberville accepted it, gulped it down hastily as he squinted at the horizon. He lifted the flagon of wine; then his hand poised, and Bess Adams saw his lean dark face lose color. His other hand shot out and gripped young Bienville's arm and drew him close, and a low, quick word came from his lips.

"Bienville—below, and get there fast! Take charge of the upper gun tier. Tell Grandville and La Salle to clear the lower deck for action; get gone! St. Martin! Summon every Canadian to the forecastle with muskets and powder-horns; quick! Ligondez! Stretch hand-lines along the decks to help men get about on the ice. Break out powder and serve round-shot for the guns. Battle stations! Battle stations, all hands!"

For one dread instant, Bess Adams thought he had gone insane. So did others. Stupefied amazement settled on those around, wondering glances were exchanged. Then from the look-outs drifted down a sudden frightful yell of warning and dismay; from the three approaching ships broke flecks of scarlet.

Not Serigny had arrived—but the English!

The realization was ghastly. Three

ships coming down the wind; and with English forts holding every harbor on the bay, no possible escape for the *Pelican*. Bess Adams felt a cold chill grip at her very soul. The entire ship fell silent, as awful consternation gripped at officers and men. Then her gaze fell on Iberville, and her heart leaped.

"Up with the Lilies!" His voice blared like a trumpet. A laugh was on his lips, a sparkle, a flame lit his eye. "Here goes France, my friends! Here goes France!"

"Here goes France!" The words were repeated, went rippling from man to man. A cheer lifted; then a wild, shrill burst of shouts pealed up. Orders flew. Guns were being cleared, shot brought up, powder readied, lines rigged along the freezing, slippery decks for handhold. Iberville turned to Bess Adams.

"The charts, lad, your charts! For God's love, jump!"

She ran to the chart-locker and back again, holding the charts for him; his hand steadying her blue cracked fingers, his blazing face close to hers, his vibrant spirit flooding into her, while her heart pounded and her hungry eyes gripped his strong features. Then he laughed, and clapped her on the shoulder.

"Good lad! Stand by with the charts, now; and be ready to carry orders."

Voices were crackling around, pilots arguing, information being exchanged; even before leaving France, full information had been received about these English ships. Each one of them was a match, and more than a match, for the sadly crippled *Pelican*, with so many of her men sick or ashore, and a scant forty guns available. For down this bitter wind blew the noble

Hampshire, 56; the *Hudson Bay*, 32; and the *Dering*, 36, crowded with men and troops for the bay forts.

Grandville, his marines ready, came to Iberville. He was white-lipped.

"Pierre! How can you hope to fight these English! Better to run for it."

"Run? Very well. Tell me where to run," and Iberville laughed, curtly, ironically.

"But how to fight?"

"As a ship should fight—with brains to back her guns! I've dreamed of such a day as this!" came the strong, deep voice that thrilled Bess Adams to the quick. "Tactics? Aye, as they will be in the future! Why has a ship sails and a rudder, if not for use? Now, my friend, unless they cripple us at the first fire, you'll see a ship handled as she should be handled!"

A GUN spoke, a white wreath blowing from the *Hampshire*, and Grandville ran for his post. It was nine-thirty when that first gun spoke.

With two men at the long helm, Iberville sent his orders along the decks and waited. To any seaman's eye, the position of his ship was hopeless; she was obviously lost. To north and west and south lay the low shores and the long treacherous shallows; to the east, the open waters of the bay were cut off by the English ships foaming down the wind. Iberville consulted the charts again, as Bess Adams held them ready, and laughed softly.

"Those charts, lad, have changed the course of history!" he said. "Without them, France would be lost this morning."

The *Pelican* was heading out and away to the southward, cutting across the rougher water of the shoals. The three English ships naturally took for

granted that she was trying to make her escape. They changed course and came in line formation to cut her off, leaning to the thrust of the wind; gallant ships, wealth and an empire in their grip.

Suddenly Iberville's voice blared, men leaped to tacks and braces.

To the utter amazement of the Eng-

began to roar, and the stout decks shivered to the recoil. His voice rose again amid the wild turmoil.

That whole broadside was poured into the *Hampshire*. Hard up with the helm, brace in the after yards! Up mounted the mainsail and bellied out; the spanker was brailed in, and like a shifting devil the *Pelican* whirled and



He lifted the flagon of wine; then his hand poised and Bess Adams saw his lean dark face lose color.

lish, the *Pelican* ceased to run. She altered course sharply; now she was bearing straight for them, circled out, and had the weather-gauge of them! Iberville barked again. Reef-tackles set taut, the fore and main courses were spilled as though they were about to furl.

To the *Hampshire*, it was obvious that the French meant to lay them aboard. Dour Captain Fletcher refused the challenge, luffed and paid off; a quick, wild laugh of exultant delight burst from Iberville. The sound of it was drowned as the guns

drove straight for the *Dering*. Into this stout ship the guns roared a blast of grape, cutting her rigging into shreds, and then roared another blast into the *Hudson Bay*. Another shift, and Iberville was off.

But dour old Fletcher knew his business. The *Hampshire* came foaming along back, with a rolling thunder of guns; and here was the instant Iberville had dreaded, with good reason.

The rigging of the *Pelican* was cut to rope-yarns by that hail of shot; sheets, braces and topping-lifts were severed. Her desperate seamen leaped

to reeve new lines, make repairs, get the canvas up again; but for the moment she was well nigh helpless. And the three enemy ships closed in upon her murderously.

So near were they that musketry flashed and banged, balls showering the decks. Yells of hatred were exchanged. But Bacqueville, ordering the Canadian sharpshooters, poured in a vicious fire, picking off the English helmsmen; a fortunate squall came hurtling down with a flurry of snow, and on its wings the *Pelican* worked out to the clear and was off.

Not undamaged, alow and aloft. Her decks were freezing crimson now; and Fitzmaurice of Kerry was shriving the dying and helping to carry wounded men below. With woman's thought, Bess Adams had gone to get a mug of hot soup; she brought it to Iberville, and he took it with quick gratitude. But as he took it, he saw the scarlet trickle coming from her sleeve and spreading between her fingers.

"What, lad? Hurt?"

"Oh, no, monsieur! A man was hit beside me—it is his blood."

She lied, and joyed in the lie. A bullet through the flesh of the arm was no great hurt; and there was small need of bandages here. Wounds froze almost at once in this icy blast of air.

"Good," said he. "Stand ready with the charts. I'll need them again."

No doubt of that; those veteran English commanders who knew by heart every fathom of the treacherous shoals, now had the audacious Frenchman where they wanted him. He was far outmatched, with no chance of escape from the lee shore, with shallows reaching out miles and miles; they had only to outsail him, force him back on the

shoals, and pound him into surrender or shipwreck.

During three and a half hours they strove stubbornly to do it.

A GAIN and again they drove him almost upon the shallows—almost, but not quite. Wearing and tacking is ever a losing proposition; hence must a square-rigger shiver her canvas to lose some way, before turning on her heel. With plenty of searoom and deep water under his forefoot, Iberville might not have worried, but with shoals beneath his lee, he was constantly on the brink of disaster.

After each tack and wear the *Pelican* lost some way, and once she started turning, she had to be kept going around fast. But Iberville knew his vessel, and he knew seamanship; more important than all else, he knew exactly where those shoals and shallows lay, and had shore bearings on all passages. Always he tacked and wore abruptly, the bleeding hands of his seamen laboring with the icy brails, lifts and sheets, while the other men worked the guns like mad.

Always he managed to keep the weather-gauge, by maneuvering which was a miracle to behold. He took their blasts of shot and bullets as he slipped past, and his own guns roared hearty answer. Their constant endeavor was to cripple him; time after time, grape screamed through the rigging, but fast as shroud or stay was shot away it was repaired, and fresh men took the places of those who fell from aloft.

So the *Pelican* evaded the long shoals by a hairbreadth, with an uncanny knowledge of depths and passages, leading an eerie dance of death by wind and tide, until the cursing English cried that

they had to do, not with men, but with devils.

And all the while, the bitter cold became more intense. Snow thickened in the air, and the wind was freshening toward actual gale; but the English meant to settle things at all costs, and Iberville did not refuse the challenge. Repeatedly, the storms of iron and lead swept the ship, until her handlines were frozen red, until blood sloshed and froze about her gun-carriages. Yet the voice of Iberville lifted clear and calm, while Bess Adams relayed his orders, one arm useless and her eyes like burning stars in a white face.

Roundshot and musketry and grape poured into the doomed frigate; but ever she gave back shot for shot. If a helmsman was hit, another man took his place at the reddened tiller. Her gunners died, and staggering sick men came reeling from below to man the cannon with scarecrow hands. Repeatedly Iberville accomplished the impossible, slipping away each time he was cornered, and the one fought on against the three.

Then Fletcher, despairing of winning by such tactics, suddenly lost all patience. He seized his chance, and suddenly bore down with the *Hampshire*, in a savage effort to ram and sink the Frenchman.

Iberville let out a wild yell. Bess Adams stumbled and slipped to the poop rail, shrilly repeating the frantic orders. Powder-blackened men tailed on to the lines; the yards swung, the helm went over, and the foaming *Hampshire* lost her weather-gauge as the reeling *Pelican* evaded the frenzied rush.

"Round shot!" shouted Iberville, sending the word to the gun crews. "Double-shot every gun!"

The two ships were plunging along at the edge of the shallows, so near that their yardarms almost touched; so close now, side by side, that grenades and curses and yells flew back and forth, faces peered from port and bulwark, musketry rippled out unceasingly while the guns belched and thundered. But the English used grape, while the French guns held double loads of round shot only, at this point-blank range.

Staggering and shuddering under recoil of smashing shot and howling squall, the two craft drove on and on as though gripped in a frenzy of utter madness, the same insensate battle-fury that gripped their crews.

Then, it seemed, the end had come. One final terrific broadside, a blast of fire and iron from those English guns, sent the *Pelican* fluttering around into the wind, all her rigging cut to ribbons, half the men in her waist dead amid that hurricane of grape, and her helmsman struck down.

Bess Adams slipped as the frigate reeled; a splinter from the rail smashed her across the head and sent her all asprawl on the bloody ice. Luckily, the jagged wood did her no great damage. She struggled erect, wiping blood from her eyes, and a wild cry escaped her. Iberville was gone! All her heart, all her fright, leaped forth in that shrill, frantic cry; then she checked it.

Gone, yes; but to the helm. He stood there gripping the reddened tiller. His voice lifted with its vibrant, powerful blare, to be drowned in a new and more frightful cry that went surging along the decks.

STARING out as the smoke blew away, Bess Adams saw it happen; she saw the lordly *Hampshire* reel and

stagger, her very bottom ripped out by those terrific broadsides. All in a minute, every sail set, she plunged and sank down under the white-capped seas, and came to rest upon the shoals with only her topmast still showing, and her two hundred and thirty men spotting the water as they drowned.

"To the lines! All hands!" came the ring of Iberville's voice.

A lesser man would have been content; not he! Once more the guns began to crash, as the wounded frigate swept around and Iberville held her straight for the *Hudson Bay*. The Englishman headed up into the wind; his flag and foresail came fluttering down—surrender! The guns ceased. While the men yelled in mad exultation on her splintered icy decks, the *Pelican* drove on, hurtling straight for the third enemy.

The *Dering*, however, had no heart for that meeting. She turned about, shook out her reefed canvas and was away like a bird in flight, pouring one last broadside into the victorious *Pelican* as she swung.

Bess Adams, clinging to the rail, heard Iberville groan aloud as he surveyed his bloody decks; then the ringing voice was up again, up and stirring his men. After the *Dering* tore the shot-shattered frigate, straight into the open water eastward, while men worked like devils to get the shot-holes stoppered against the gushing water. Out of the northeast was driving down a wild gale of snow and black clouds.

Bess Adams hung there at the rail, helpless, hurt, a spreading wetness of warm blood on her body. And suddenly she felt the arm of Iberville about her, his voice at her ear.

"Why, lad—you're hurt! Below

with you, below; get the wounds dressed. Ha, brave eyes! I love you for this day's work! Below, and into dry clothes. Here, somebody! Give the lad a hand along the deck."

Below, then, and into hell, where men screamed and groaned under rude surgery, where blood ran like water, and hideous death was everywhere. When they would have stripped her to seek the hurts, Bess Adams flinched and fled away from it all.

In a dark corner she bared herself where none could see. She made shift to bandage the torn arm, and the bullet-scape along her ribs; neither was dangerous, and the cut over her scalp was a mere nothing. She felt no pain at all. The touch of Iberville's hand, the quick warmth of his voice, was in her veins like heady wine.

And with it, another thought. It was the end; and she would meet it beside him, up on deck, facing death with level gaze.

They all knew it was the end, as the hours dragged on. The *Dering* escaped in the black smother of storm and Iberville headed around for Nelson; but there was no shelter or refuge from the approaching doom, and every soul aboard realized it. Snowflakes broke silvery on the wind and dead frozen faces peered from the scupper ice. Water was pouring into the riven ship, and the dark afternoon was deepening into stormy night.

Yes, it was a dear-bought victory. Men cursed or stared in frozen despair, with only the gay le Moyne voices like a ringing clank of steel to pluck up hopeless hearts. They found the surrendered *Hudson Bay* lying at anchor, miles offshore among the shoals; and as the night closed down, the *Pelican* also came to anchor, there to

await the end that was all too certain. Find the river-mouth she could not. There was no other shelter. And by this time tremendous seas were lifting from across the shallow bay, lifting her, battering her, promising to smash her to pieces even if the anchors held. What the English broadsides had be-

gard, nodded gloomily at the ensign, while he puffed at a pipe.

"The lilies are red this night, and will be redder!" he said grimly. "Hear the poor wounded devils shriek as she plunges! And there's nothing we can do for them. We're all bound to hell together."



'Why lad—
you're hurt! Be-
low with you,
below; and get
the wounds
dressed.'

gun, the waves would finish; she was practically sinking under them.

Toward ten of the night Iberville, Bienville and some remaining officers, gathered in the mess cabin. Bess Adams fetched some scraps of cold food and some wine, between the wild and frenzied lurches of the ship.

ACROSS a table lay the shot-torn flag, with a great bloody smear across the three golden Fleurs-de-lis. Iberville, gaunt and harried and hag-

"At least, we've something new to relate in hell!" spoke up La Salle, the young ensign, with a faint laugh. "His Majesty's navy has learned something today, thanks to you. It's nearly thirty years since the first frigate was laid down. In all that time, no one has ever until now shown what such a ship could do if handled aright. All they teach in the Naval College is to lay alongside and keep on firing. Why, Iberville, do you realize what was discovered this day? Tactics, sea-

manship applied to actual fighting!"

A hum of approval rose.

"What use the discovery, if none lives to tell of it?" said Iberville with weary irony. "Bacqueville, you might write it down in your notebook, to be washed ashore later."

The young Creole officer grinned. "I'm a Royal Commissioner, not a naval officer, Pierre. All I can say is that you fought the ship for three hours and more."

Iberville lifted his head. "And not dead yet!" he exclaimed with a flash of spirit. "Ha, brave eyes!" His gaze warmed on Bess Adams, as she handed him more wine. "Not badly hurt after all, eh?"

She was about to answer, when the ship seemed to lift and shake herself. Then came a deafening shock, a crash that hurled Bess Adams into a corner, and darkness as the one light was extinguished. The rudder had been ripped out bodily.

Next moment a huge following sea pooped the ship squarely, smashing all the after cabins into ruined wreckage; icy water was sent cascading through the entire vessel. A wild cry went flittering along the decks. The cables had parted, and the ship was at the mercy of the wind and sea.

It was midnight, after two hours of blind, staggering lunges, when she finally struck upon the shoals.

Those next hours, in pitch icy darkness, were hours of hell and superhuman exertions. Tremendous battering seas broke over the shattered wreck, snow came down in gusts and thick flurries; to care for the sick and wounded men, many of whom were washed away to death, became the first object of everyone. When the gray light of dawn at last came, it was all too evi-

dent that the frigate was fast breaking up.

Bess Adams, at the point of total exhaustion, had no strength, no life, remaining. A line about her waist, she was held securely in the lee of the poop, half frozen. Now, as the daylight grew, she lifted agonized eyes toward shore, and once more her heart sank. The snow ceased, to reveal a tree-fringed shore barely within sight—a good six miles distant.

It seemed the end of all hope. None the less, the indomitable Iberville stirred his men to action; he, whose energy never flagged, had strength for all. With some, he fell to work making rafts, in the waist. Others cut spars adrift and set out for the distant line of shore.

Iberville caught sight of the figure crouching under the poop, abandoned his work, and came to the girl with a flash of his gay, radiant smile.

"What, lad? You've given up hope? Nonsense! Come, there's a place for you on the first raft."

She looked up at him, all her poor wild heart in her eyes.

"No, monsieur. Not until you go."

"Why, God love you, brave eyes!" Touched, Iberville reached out and caught her hand, and looked into her face. "Very well; we're comrades, you and I. We'll go together, on the second raft. The wounded, or what's left of them, go on the first. Wait here, and I'll not forget you."

To his hearty grip, his look, his voice, she warmed. Alone again, she watched and waited while the men toiled on. Some were swimming for shore, others drowned as they were licked off.

Crash upon crash resounded, as the doomed hulk quivered under the raven-

ing seas, whose spray hid her from sight at times. At length the first raft was launched in the lee, and when the wounded had been lashed aboard, it set off, to be swept toward shore.

THE second raft was readied and got into the water. A huge sea burst, sweeping the deck with spray and flood. Bess Adams looked up to see young Bienville before her, his hand outstretched, his voice ringing heartily.

"Come along, comrade! Pierre sent me to get you. Can you walk?"

Free of the lashing, she could stagger, at least; she was numb and frozen. With every moment the wreck was going to pieces under their very feet. Cries of despair went up on all sides as she began to split in two.

Somehow, Bess Adams got aboard the raft, clinging frantically beside Bienville. At the broken bulwarks stood Iberville, passing the other men aboard. The raft sank deeper in the water; it was nearly awash. Shouts of alarm and protest went up. There was no more room, if those already aboard her wanted to live.

"Only one more to come!" shouted Iberville cheerfully.

"Pierre! Come yourself!" cried the boy Bienville. "No room for more!"

Iberville looked down at him and laughed, as the last man crawled over.

"The men go first, brother! The captain last."

The man poised, jumped, and beneath his weight the unwieldy raft sogged under the water. Iberville stood poised, his lean features set hard.

"Go ahead! Cast off the line!"

"No, no!" With a shrill cry, Bess Adams came to her feet, ankle deep in water. "Here's room, Iberville—here! Take my place! I can swim and hold to a line."

"Stop it!" he shouted harshly, but he was too late.

With a sudden swift movement, she was off the raft, plunging into the water. Iberville delayed not. He jumped, gained the vacant place, and the line was cast off.

"Here!" Iberville's voice blared out frantically. "The lad, the lad! Throw him a line! For God's sake don't let him try to swim for it—"

A sea swept Bess Adams up, almost beside him, swept her high and broke over her. For an instant they saw her face. Iberville saw her eyes fastened upon him. Then the salt spray broke, and she was sucked away. The raft went lurching and staggering off toward the wave-swept shallows.

The gray skies broke. The white flag of France came careering toward the river mouth; Serigny and his three ships were here at last, with men and guns to sweep the bay of the north for France. And Bess Adams, who could not swim a stroke, lay cold but smiling, and careless of all life's ills.

She had loved Iberville.

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... No. 3 in this thrilling "IF" series ...

To restore a Stuart to his throne, Ismail of Morocco would loose a hundred thousand Moslem fanatics on English soil!

in the December GOLDEN FLEECE

Black Vulmea's

In an instant it had
him lapped and
wrapped about with
coils of cold pliant
steel.



Harold
Daly.

Vengeance



Illustrated by HAROLD DELAY

by ROBERT E. HOWARD

CHAPTER I

OUT of the *Cockatoo's* cabin staggered Black Terence Vulmea, pipe in one hand and flagon in the other. He stood with booted legs wide, teetering slightly to the gentle lift of the lofty poop. He was bareheaded and his shirt was open, revealing his broad hairy chest. He emptied the flagon and tossed it over the side with a gusty sigh of satisfaction, then directed his somewhat blurred gaze on the deck below. From poop ladder to fore-castle it was littered by sprawling figures. The ship smelt like a brewery. Empty barrels, with their heads stove in, stood or rolled between the prostrate forms. Vulmea was the only man on his feet. From galley-boy to first mate the rest of the ship's company lay senseless after a debauch that had lasted a whole night long. There was not even a man at the helm.

But it was lashed securely and in that placid sea no hand was needed on the

wheel. The breeze was light but steady. Land was a thin blue line to the east. A stainless blue sky held a sun whose heat had not yet become fierce.

Vulmea blinked indulgently down upon the sprawled figures of his crew, and glanced idly over the larboard side. He grunted incredulously and batted his eyes. A ship loomed where he had expected to see only naked ocean stretching to the skyline. She was little more than a hundred yards away, and was bearing down swiftly on the *Cockatoo*, obviously with the intention of laying her alongside. She was tall and square-rigged, her white canvas flashing dazzlingly in the sun. From the maintruck the flag of England whipped red against the blue. Her bulwarks were lined with tense figures, bristling with boarding-pikes and grappling irons, and through her open ports the astounded pirate glimpsed the glow of the burning matches the gunners held ready.

"All hands to battle-quarters!" yell-

ed Vulmea confusedly. Reverberant snores answered the summons. All hands remained as they were.

"Wake up, you lousy dogs!" roared their captain. "Up, curse you! A king's ship is at our throats!"

His only response came in the form of staccato commands from the frigate's deck, barking across the narrowing strip of blue water.

"Damnation!"

Cursing luridly he lurched in a reeling run across the poop to the swivel-gun which stood at the head of the larboard ladder. Seizing this he swung it about until its muzzle bore full on the bulwark of the approaching frigate. Objects wavered dizzily before his bloodshot eyes, but he squinted along its barrel as if he were aiming a musket.

"Strike your colors, you damned pirate!" came a hail from the trim figure that trod the warship's poop, sword in hand.

"Go to hell!" roared Vulmea, and knocked the glowing coals of his pipe into the vent of the gun-breech. The falcon crashed, smoke puffed out in a white cloud, and the double handful of musket balls with which the gun had been charged mowed a ghastly lane through the boarding party clustered along the frigate's bulwark. Like a clap of thunder came the answering broadside and a storm of metal raked the *Cockatoo's* decks, turning them into a red shambles.

Sails ripped, ropes parted, timbers splintered, and blood and brains mingled with the pools of liquor spilt on the decks. A round shot as big as a man's head smashed into the falcon, ripping it loose from the swivel and dashing it against the man who had fired it. The impact knocked him backward headlong across the poop

where his head hit the rail with a crack that was too much even for an Irish skull. Black Vulmea sagged senseless to the boards. He was as deaf to the triumphant shouts and the stamp of victorious feet on his red-streaming decks as were his men who had gone from the sleep of drunkenness to the black sleep of death without knowing what had hit them.

CAPTAIN JOHN WENTYARD, of his Majesty's frigate the *Redoubtable*, sipped his wine delicately and set down the glass with a gesture that in another man would have smacked of affectation. Wentyard was a tall man, with a narrow, pale face, colorless eyes, and a prominent nose. His costume was almost sober in comparison with the glitter of his officers who sat in respectful silence about the mahogany table in the main cabin.

"Bring in the prisoner," he ordered, and there was a glint of satisfaction in his cold eyes.

They brought in Black Vulmea, between four brawny sailors, his hands manacled before him and a chain on his ankles that was just long enough to allow him to walk without tripping. Blood was clotted in the pirate's thick black hair. His shirt was in tatters, revealing a torso bronzed by the sun and rippling with great muscles. Through the stern-windows, he could see the topmasts of the *Cockatoo*, just sinking out of sight. That close-range broadside had robbed the frigate of a prize. His conquerors were before him and there was no mercy in their stares, but Vulmea did not seem at all abashed or intimidated. He met the stern eyes of the officers with a level gaze that reflected only a sardonic amusement. Wentyard frowned. He preferred that

his captives cringe before him. It made him feel more like Justice personified, looking unemotionally down from a great height on the sufferings of the evil.

"You are Black Vulmea, the notorious pirate?"

"I'm Vulmea," was the laconic answer.

lish ships as well as Spanish—and be damned to you, heron-beak!"

The officers gasped at this effrontery, and Wentyard smiled a ghastly, mirthless smile, white with anger he held in rein.

"You know that I have the authority to hang you out of hand?" he reminded the other.



"I'm a pirate and I've plundered English ships as well as Spanish—and be damned to you, heron-beak!"

"I suppose you will say, as do all these rogues," sneered Wentyard, "that you hold a commission from the Governor of Tortuga? These privateer commissions from the French mean nothing to his Majesty. You—"

"Save your breath, fish-eyes!" Vulmea grinned hardily. "I hold no commission from anybody. I'm not one of your accursed swashbucklers who hide behind the name of buccaneer. I'm a pirate, and I've plundered Eng-

"I know," answered the pirate softly. "It won't be the first time you've hanged me, John Wentyard."

"What?" The Englishman stared.

A flame grew in Vulmea's blue eyes and his voice changed subtly in tone and inflection; the brogue thickened almost imperceptibly.

"On the Galway coast it was, years ago, captain. You were a young officer then, scarce more than a boy—but with all your present characteristics already fully developed. There were some

wholesale evictions, with the military to see the job was done, and the Irish were mad enough to make a fight of it—poor, ragged, half-starved peasants, fighting with sticks against full-armed English soldiers and sailors. After the massacre there were the usual hangings, and there was a boy crept into a thicket to watch—a lad of ten, who didn't even know what it was all about. You spied him, John Wentyard, and had your dogs drag him forth and string him up alongside the kicking bodies of the others. 'He's Irish,' you said as they heaved him aloft. 'Little snakes grow into big ones.' I was that boy. I've looked forward to this meeting, you English dog!"

Vulmea still smiled, but the veins knotted in his temples and the great muscles stood out distinctly on his manacled arms. Ironed and guarded though the pirate was, Wentyard involuntarily drew back, daunted by the stark and naked hate that blazed from those savage eyes.

"How did you escape your just deserts?" he asked coldly, recovering his poise.

Vulmea laughed shortly.

"Some of the peasants escaped the massacre and were hiding in the thickets. As soon as you left they came out, and not being civilized, cultured Englishmen, but only poor, savage Irishry, they cut me down along with the others, and found there was still a bit of life in me. We Gaels are hard to kill, as you Britons have learned to your cost."

"You fell into our hands easily enough this time," observed Wentyard.

Vulmea grinned. His eyes were grimly amused now, but the glint of murderous hate still lurked in their depths.

"WHO'D have thought to meet a king's ship in these western seas? It's been weeks since we sighted a sail of any kind, save for the carrack we took yesterday, with a cargo of wine bound for Panama from Valparaiso. It's not the time of year for rich prizes. When the lads wanted a drinking bout, who was I to deny them? We drew out of the lanes the Spaniards mostly follow, and thought we had the ocean to ourselves. I'd been sleeping in my cabin for some hours before I came on deck to smoke a pipe or so, and saw you about to board us without firing a shot."

"You killed seven of my men," harshly accused Wentyard.

"And you killed all of mine," retorted Vulmea. "Poor devils, they'll wake up in hell without knowing how they got there."

He grinned again, fiercely. His toes dug hard against the floor, unnoticed by the men who gripped him on either side. The blood was rioting through his veins, and the berserk feel of his great strength was upon him. He knew he could, in a sudden, volcanic explosion of power, tear free from the men who held him, clear the space between him and his enemy with one bound, despite his chains, and crush Wentyard's skull with a smashing swing of his manacled fists. That he himself would die an instant later mattered not at all. In that moment he felt neither fears nor regrets—only a reckless, ferocious exultation and a cruel contempt for these stupid Englishmen about him. He laughed in their faces, joying in the knowledge that they did not know why he laughed. So they thought to chain the tiger, did they? Little they guessed of the devastating fury that lurked in his catlike thews.

He began filling his great chest, drawing in his breath slowly, imperceptibly, as his calves knotted and the muscles of his arms grew hard. Then Wentyard spoke again.

"I will not be overstepping my authority if I hang you within the hour. In any event you hang, either from my yard-arm or from a gibbet on the Port Royal wharves. But life is sweet, even to rogues like you, who notoriously cling to every moment granted them by outraged society. It would gain you a few more months of life if I were to take you back to Jamaica to be sentenced by the governor. This I might be persuaded to do, on one condition."

"What's that?" Vulmea's tensed muscles did not relax; imperceptibly he began to settle into a semi-crouch.

"That you tell me the whereabouts of the pirate, Van Raven."

In that instant, while his knotted muscles went pliant again, Vulmea unerringly gauged and appraised the man who faced him, and changed his plan. He straightened and smiled.

"And why the Dutchman, Wentyard?" he asked softly. "Why not Tranicos, or Villiers, or McVeigh, or a dozen others more destructive to English trade than Van Raven? Is it because of the treasure he took from the Spanish plate-fleet? Aye, the king would like well to set his hands on that hoard, and there's a rich prize would go to the captain lucky or bold enough to find Van Raven and plunder him. Is that why you came all the way around the Horn, John Wentyard?"

"We are at peace with Spain," answered Wentyard acidly. "As for the purposes of an officer in his Majesty's navy, they are not for you to question."

Vulmea laughed at him, the blue flame in his eyes.

"ONCE I sank a king's cruiser off Hispaniola," he said. "Damn you and your prating of 'His Majesty'! Your English king is no more to me than so much rotten driftwood. Van Raven? He's a bird of passage. Who knows where he sails? But if it's treasure you want, I can show you a hoard that would make the Dutchman's loot look like a peat-pool beside the Caribbean Sea!"

A pale spark seemed to snap from Wentyard's colorless eyes, and his officers leaned forward tensely. Vulmea grinned hardily. He knew the credulity of navy men, which they shared with landsmen and honest mariners, in regard to pirates and plunder. Every seaman not himself a rover, believed that every buccaneer had knowledge of vast hidden wealth. The loot the men of the Red Brotherhood took from the Spaniards, rich enough as it was, was magnified a thousand times in the telling, and rumor made every swaggering sea-rat the guardian of a treasure-trove.

Coolly plumbing the avarice of Wentyard's hard soul, Vulmea said: "Ten days' sail from here there's a nameless bay on the coast of Ecuador. Four years ago Dick Harston, the English pirate and I anchored there, in quest of a hoard of ancient jewels called the Fangs of Satan. An Indian swore he had found them, hidden in a ruined temple in an uninhabited jungle a day's march inland, but superstitious fear of the old gods kept him from helping himself. But he was willing to guide us there."

"We marched inland with both crews, for neither of us trusted the other. To make a long tale short, we found the ruins of an old city, and, beneath an ancient, broken altar, we

found the jewels—rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, bloodstones, big as hen eggs, making a quivering flame of fire about the crumbling old shrine!"

The flame grew in Wentyard's eyes. His white fingers knotted about the slender stem of his wine glass.

"The sight of them was enough to madden a man," Vulmea continued, watching the captain narrowly. "We camped there for the night, and, one way or another, we fell out over the division of the spoil, though there was enough to make every man of us rich for life. We came to blows, though, and whilst we fought among ourselves, there came a scout running with word that a Spanish fleet had come into the bay, driven our ships away, and sent five hundred men ashore to pursue us. By Satan, they were on us before the scout ceased the telling! One of my men snatched the plunder away and hid it in the old temple, and we scattered, each band for itself. There was no time to take the plunder. We barely got away with our naked lives. Eventually I, with most of my crew, made my way back to the coast and was picked up by my ship which came slinking back after escaping from the Spaniards.

"Harston gained his ship with a handful of men, after skirmishing all the way with the Spaniards who chased him instead of us, and later was slain by savages on the coast of California.

"The Dons harried me all the way around the Horn, and I never had an opportunity to go back after the loot—until this voyage. It was there I was going when you overhauled me. The treasure's still there. Promise me my life and I'll take you to it."

"That is impossible," snapped Went-

yard. "The best I can promise you is trial before the governor of Jamaica."

"Well," said Vulmea, "maybe the governor might be more lenient than you. And much may happen between here and Jamaica."

Wentyard did not reply, but spread a map on the broad table.

"Where is this bay?"

Vulmea indicated a certain spot on the coast. The sailors released their grip on his arms while he marked it, and Wentyard's head was within reach, but the Irishman's plans were changed, and they included a chance for life—desperate, but nevertheless a chance.

"Very well. Take him below."

Vulmea went out with his guards, and Wentyard sneered coldly.

"A gentleman of his Majesty's navy is not bound by a promise to such a rogue as he. Once the treasure is aboard the *Redoubtable*, gentlemen, I promise you he shall swing from a yard-arm."

Ten days later the anchors rattled down in the nameless bay Vulmea had described.

CHAPTER II

IT SEEMED desolate enough to have been the coast of an uninhabited continent. The bay was merely a shallow indentation of the shore-line. Dense jungle crowded the narrow strip of white sand that was the beach. Gay-plumed birds flitted among the broad fronds, and the silence of primordial savagery brooded over all. But a dim trail led back into the twilight vistas of green-walled mystery.

Dawn was a white mist on the water when seventeen men marched down the dim path. One was John Wentyard. On an expedition designed to

find treasure, he would trust the command to none but himself. Fifteen were soldiers, armed with hangers and muskets. The seventeenth was Black Vulmea. The Irishman's legs, perforce, were free, and the irons had been removed from his arms. But his wrists were bound before him with cords, and one end of the cord was in the grip of a brawny marine whose other hand held a cutlass ready to chop down the pirate if he made any move to escape.

"Fifteen men are enough," Vulmea had told Wentyard. "Too many! Men go mad easily in the tropics, and the sight of the Fangs of Satan is enough to madden any man, king's man or not. The more that see the jewels, the greater chance of mutiny before you raise the Horn again. You don't need more than three or four. Who are you afraid of? You said England was at peace with Spain, and there are no Spaniards anywhere near this spot, in any event."

"I wasn't thinking of Spaniards," answered Wentyard coldly. "I am providing against any attempt you might make to escape."

"Well," laughed Vulmea, "do you think you need fifteen men for that?"

"I'm taking no chances," was the grim retort. "You are stronger than two or three ordinary men, Vulmea, and full of wiles. My men will march with pieces ready, and if you try to bolt, they will shoot you down like the dog you are—should you, by any chance, avoid being cut down by your guard. Besides, there is always the chance of savages."

The pirate jeered.

"Go beyond the Cordilleras if you seek real savages. There are Indians there who cut off your head and shrink

it no bigger than your fist. But they never come on this side of the mountains. As for the race that built the temple, they've all been dead for centuries. Bring your armed escort if you want to. It will be of no use. One strong man can carry away the whole hoard."

"One strong man!" murmured Wentyard, licking his lips as his mind reeled at the thought of the wealth represented by a load of jewels that required the full strength of a strong man to carry. Confused visions of knighthood and admiralty whirled through his head. "What about the path?" he asked suspiciously. "If this coast is uninhabited, how comes it there?"

"It was an old road, centuries ago, probably used by the race that built the city. In some places you can see where it was paved. But Harston and I were the first to use it for centuries. And you can tell it hasn't been used since. You can see where the young growth has sprung up above the scars of the axes we used to clear a way."

Wentyard was forced to agree. So now, before sunrise, the landing party was swinging inland at a steady gait that ate up the miles. The bay and the ship were quickly lost to sight. All morning they tramped along through steaming heat, between green, tangled jungle walls where gay-hued birds flitted silently and monkeys chattered. Thick vines hung low across the trail, impeding their progress, and they were sorely annoyed by gnats and other insects. At noon they paused only long enough to drink some water and eat the ready-cooked food they had brought along. The men were stolid veterans, inured to long marches, and Wentyard would allow them no more rest than was necessary for their brief meal. He

was afire with savage eagerness to view the hoard Vulmea had described.

The trail did not twist as much as most jungle paths. It was overgrown with vegetation, but it gave evidence that it had once been a road, well-built and broad. Pieces of paving were still visible here and there. By mid-afternoon the land began to rise slightly to be broken by low, jungle-choked hills. They were aware of this only by the rising and dipping of the trail. The dense walls on either hand shut off their view.

Neither Wentyard nor any of his men glimpsed the furtive, shadowy shapes which now glided along through the jungle on either hand. Vulmea was aware of their presence, but he only smiled grimly and said nothing. Carefully and so subtly that his guard did not suspect it, the pirate worked at the cords on his wrists, weakening and straining the strands by continual tugging and twisting. He had been doing this all day, and he could feel them slowly giving way.

THE sun hung low in the jungle branches when the pirate halted and pointed to where the old road bent almost at right angles and disappeared into the mouth of a ravine.

"Down that ravine lies the old temple where the jewels are hidden."

"On, then!" snapped Wentyard, fanning himself with his plumed hat. Sweat trickled down his face, wilting the collar of his crimson, gilt-embroidered coat. A frenzy of impatience was on him, his eyes dazzled by the imagined glitter of the gems Vulmea had so vividly described. Avarice makes for credulity, and it never occurred to Wentyard to doubt Vulmea's tale. He saw in the Irishman only a hulking

brute eager to buy a few months more of life. Gentlemen of his Majesty's navy were not accustomed to analyzing the characters of pirates. Wentyard's code was painfully simple: a heavy hand and a roughshod directness. He had never bothered to study or try to understand outlaw types.

They entered the mouth of the ravine and marched on between cliffs fringed with overhanging fronds. Wentyard fanned himself with his hat and gnawed his lip with impatience as he stared eagerly about for some sign of the ruins described by his captive. His face was paler than ever, despite the heat which reddened the bluff faces of his men, tramping ponderously after him. Vulmea's brown face showed no undue moisture. He did not tramp; he moved with the sure, supple tread of a panther, and without a suggestion of a seaman's lurching roll. His eyes ranged the walls above them and when a frond swayed without a breath of wind to move it, he did not miss it.

The ravine was some fifty feet wide, the floor carpeted by a low, thick growth of vegetation. The jungle ran densely along the rims of the walls, which were some forty feet high. They were sheer for the most part, but here and there natural ramps ran down into the gulch, half-covered with tangled vines. A few hundred yards ahead of them they saw that the ravine bent out of sight around a rocky shoulder. From the opposite wall there jutted a corresponding crag. The outlines of these boulders were blurred by moss and creepers, but they seemed too symmetrical to be the work of nature alone.

Vulmea stopped, near one of the natural ramps that sloped down from the rim. His captors looked at him questioningly.

"Why are you stopping?" demanded Wentyard fretfully. His foot struck something in the rank grass and he kicked it aside. It rolled free and grinned up at him—a rotting human skull. He saw glints of white in the green all about him—skulls and bones almost covered by the dense vegetation.

"Is this where you piratical dogs

rounded by sheer cliffs on all sides." He laughed harshly. "This is like the road to Hell, John Wentyard: easy to go down—not so easy to go up again."

"What are you maundering about?" snarled Wentyard, clapping his hat viciously on his head. "You Irish are all babblers and mooncalves! Get on with—"



slew each other?" he demanded crossly. "What are you waiting on? What are you listening for?"

Vulmea relaxed his tense attitude and smiled indulgently.

"That used to be a gateway there ahead of us," he said. "Those rocks on each side are really gate-pillars. This ravine was a roadway, leading to the city when people lived there. It's the only approach to it, for it's sur-

FROM the jungle beyond the mouth of the ravine came a sharp twang. Something whined venomously down the gulch, ending its flight with a vicious thud. One of the soldiers gulped and started convulsively. His musket clattered to the earth and he reeled, clawing at his throat from which protruded a long shaft, vibrating like a serpent's head. Suddenly he pitched to the ground and lay twitching.

"Indians!" yelled Wentyard, and turned furiously on his prisoner. "Dog! Look at that! You said there were no savages hereabouts!"

Vulmea laughed scornfully.

"Do you call them savages? Bah! Poor-spirited dogs that skulk in the jungle, too fearful to show themselves on the coast. Don't you see them slinking among the trees? Best give them a volley before they grow too bold."

Wentyard snarled at him, but the Englishman knew the value of a display of firearms when dealing with natives, and he had a glimpse of brown figures moving among the green foliage. He barked an order and fourteen muskets crashed, and the bullets rattled among the leaves. A few severed fronds drifted down; that was all. But even as the smoke puffed out in a cloud, Vulmea snapped the frayed cords on his wrists, knocked his guard staggering with a buffet under the ear, snatched his cutlass and was gone, running like a cat up the steep wall of the ravine. The soldiers with their empty muskets gaped helplessly after him, and Wentyard's pistol banged futilely, an instant too late. From the green fringe above them came a mocking laugh.

"Fools! You stand in the door of Hell!"

"Dog!" yelled Wentyard, beside himself, but with his greed still uppermost in his befuddled mind. "We'll find the treasure without your help!"

"You can't find something that doesn't exist," retorted the unseen pirate. "There never were any jewels. It was a lie to draw you into a trap. Dick Harston never came here. I came here, and the Indians butchered all my crew in that ravine, as those skulls in the grass there testify."

"Liar!" was all Wentyard could find

tongue for. "Lying dog! You told us there were no Indians hereabouts!"

"I told you the head-hunters never came over the mountains," retorted Vulmea. "They don't, either. I told you the people who built the city were all dead. That's so, too. I didn't tell you that a tribe of brown devils live in the jungle near here. They never go down to the coast, and they don't like to have white men come into the jungle. I think they were the people who wiped out the race that built the city, long ago. Anyway, they wiped out my men, and the only reason I got away was because I'd lived with the red men of North America and learned their woodcraft. You're in a trap you won't get out of, Wentyard!"

"Climb that wall and take him!" ordered Wentyard, and half a dozen men slung their muskets on their backs and began clumsily to essay the rugged ramp up which the pirate had run with such catlike ease.

"Better trim sail and stand by to repel boarders," Vulmea advised him from above. "There are hundreds of red devils out there—and no tame dogs to run at the crack of a caliver, either."

"And you'd betray white men to savages!" raged Wentyard.

"It goes against my principles," the Irishman admitted, "but it was my only chance for life. I'm sorry for your men. That's why I advised you to bring only a handful. I wanted to spare as many as possible. There are enough Indians out there in the jungle to eat your whole ship's company. As for you, you filthy dog, what you did in Ireland forfeited any consideration you might expect as a white man. I gambled on my neck and took my chances with all of you. It might have been me that arrow hit."

THE voice ceased abruptly, and just as Wentyard was wondering if there were no Indians on the wall above them, the foliage was violently agitated, there sounded a wild yell, and down came a naked brown body, all asprawl, limbs revolving in the air. It crashed on the floor of the ravine and lay motionless—the figure of a brawny warrior, naked but for a loin-cloth of bark. The dead man was deep-chested, broad-shouldered and muscular, with features not unintelligent, but hard and brutal. He had been slashed across the neck.

The bushes waved briefly, and then again, further along the rim, which agitation Wentyard believed marked the flight of the Irishman along the ravine wall, pursued by the companions of the dead warrior, who must have stolen up on Vulmea while the pirate was shouting his taunts.

That chase was made in deadly silence, but down in the ravine conditions were anything but silent. At the sight of the falling body a blood-curdling ululation burst forth from the jungle outside the mouth of the ravine, and a storm of arrows came whistling down it. Another man fell, and three more were wounded, and Wentyard called down the men who were laboriously struggling up the wine-matted ramp. He fell back down the ravine, almost to the bend where the ancient gate-posts jutted, and beyond that point he feared to go. He felt sure that the ravine beyond the Gateway was filled with lurking savages. They would not have hemmed him in on all sides and then left open an avenue of escape.

At the spot where he halted there was a cluster of broken rocks, that looked as though as they might once

have formed the walls of a building of some sort. Among them Wentyard made his stand. He ordered his men to lie prone, their musket barrels resting on the rocks. One man he detailed to watch for savages creeping up the ravine from behind them, the others watched the green wall visible beyond the path that ran into the mouth of the ravine. Fear chilled Wentyard's heart. The sun was already lost behind the trees and the shadows were lengthening. In the brief dusk of the tropic twilight how could a white man's eye pick out a swift, flitting brown body, or a musket ball find its mark? And when darkness fell—Wentyard shivered despite the heat.

Arrows kept singing down the ravine, but they fell short or splintered on the rocks. But now bowmen hidden on the walls drove down their shafts, and from their vantage point the stones afforded little protection. The screams of men skewered to the ground rose harrowingly. Wentyard saw his command melting away under his eyes. The only thing that kept them from being instantly exterminated was the steady fire he had them keep up at the foliage on the cliffs. They seldom saw their foes; they only saw the fronds shake, had an occasional glimpse of a brown arm. But the heavy balls, ripping through the broad leaves, made the hidden archers wary, and the shafts came at intervals instead of in volleys. Once a piercing death yell announced that a blind ball had gone home, and the English raised a croaking cheer.

Perhaps it was this which brought the infuriated warriors out of the jungle. Perhaps, like the white men, they disliked fighting in the dark, and wanted to conclude the slaughter be-

fore night fell. Perhaps they were ashamed longer to lurk hidden from a handful of men.

At any rate, they came out of the jungle beyond the trail suddenly, and by the scores, not scrawny primitives, but brawny, hard-muscled warriors, confident of their strength and physically a match for even the sinewy Englishmen. They came in a wave of brown bodies that suddenly flooded the ravine, and others leaped down the walls, swinging from the lianas. They were hundreds against the handful of Englishmen left. These rose from the rocks without orders, meeting death with the bulldog stubbornness of their breed. They fired a volley full into the tide of snarling faces that surged upon them, and then drew hangers and clubbed empty muskets. There was no time to reload. Their blast tore lanes in the onswEEPing human torrent, but it did not falter; it came on and engulfed the white men in a snarling, slashing, smiting whirlpool.

HANGERS whirled and bit through flesh and bone, clubbed muskets rose and fell, spattering brains. But copper-headed axes flashed dully in the twilight, war-clubs made a red ruin of the skulls they kissed, and there were a score of red arms to drag down each struggling white man. The ravine was choked with a milling, eddying mass, revolving about a fast-dwindling cluster of desperate, white-skinned figures.

Not until his last man fell did Wentyard break away, blood smeared on his arms, dripping from his sword. He was hemmed in by a surging ring of ferocious figures, but he had one loaded pistol left. He fired it full in a painted face surmounted by a feath-

ered chest and saw it vanish in red ruin. He clubbed a shaven head with the empty barrel, and rushed through the gap made by the falling bodies. A wild figure leaped at him, swinging a war-club, but the sword was quicker. Wentyard tore the blade free as the savage fell. Dusk was ebbing swiftly into darkness, and the figures swirling about him were becoming indistinct, vague of outline. Twilight waned quickly in the ravine and darkness had settled there before it veiled the jungle outside. It was the darkness that saved Wentyard, confusing his attackers. As the sworded Indian fell he found himself free, though men were rushing on him from behind, with clubs lifted.

Blindly he fled down the ravine. It lay empty before him. Fear lent wings to his feet. He raced through the stone abutted Gateway. Beyond it he saw the ravine widen out; stone walls rose ahead of him, almost hidden by vines and creepers, pierced with blank windows and doorways. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of a thrust in the back. His heart was pounding so loudly, the blood hammering so agonizingly in his temples that he could not tell whether or not bare feet were thudding close behind him.

His hat and coat were gone, his shirt torn and blood-stained, though somehow he had come through that desperate melee unwounded. Before him he saw a vine-tangled wall, and an empty doorway. He ran reelingly into the door and turned, falling to his knee from sheer exhaustion. He shook the sweat from his eyes, panting gaspingly as he fumbled to reload his pistols. The ravine was a dim alleyway before him, running to the rock-buttressed bend. Moment by moment he expected

to see it thronged with fierce faces, with swarming figures. But it lay empty and the fierce cries of the victorious warriors drew no nearer. For some reason they had not followed him through the Gateway.

Terror that they were creeping on him from behind brought him to his feet, pistols cocked, staring this way and that.

He was in a room whose stone walls seemed ready to crumble. It was roofless, and grass grew between the broken stones of the floor. Through the gaping roof he could see the stars just blinking out, and the frond-fringed rim of the cliff. Through a door opposite the one by which he crouched he had a vague glimpse of other vegetation-choked, roofless chambers beyond.

Silence brooded over the ruins, and now silence had fallen beyond the bend of the ravine. He fixed his eyes on the blur that was the Gateway, and waited. It stood empty. Yet he knew that the Indians were aware of his flight. Why did they not rush in and cut his throat? Were they afraid of his pistols? They had shown no fear of his soldiers' muskets. Had they gone away, for some inexplicable reason? Were those shadowy chambers behind him filled with lurking warriors? If so, why in God's name were they waiting?

He rose and went to the opposite door, craned his neck warily through it, and after some hesitation, entered the adjoining chamber. It had no outlet into the open. All its doors led into other chambers, equally ruinous, with broken roofs, cracked floors and crumbling walls. Three or four he traversed, his tread, as he crushed down the vegetation growing among the broken stones, seeming intolerably loud

in the stillness. Abandoning his explorations—for the labyrinth seemed endless—he returned to the room that opened toward the ravine. No sound came up the gulch, but it was so dark under the cliff that men could have entered the Gateway and been crouching near him, without his being able to see them.

AT LAST he could endure the suspense no longer. Walking as quietly as he was able, he left the ruins and approached the Gateway, now a well of blackness. A few moments later he was hugging the left-hand abutment and straining his eyes to see into the ravine beyond. It was too dark to see anything more than the stars blinking over the rims of the walls. He took a cautious step beyond the Gateway—it was the swift swish of feet through the vegetation on the floor that saved his life. He sensed rather than saw a black shape loom out of the darkness, and he fired blindly and point-blank. The flash lighted a ferocious face, falling backward, and beyond it the Englishman dimly glimpsed other figures, solid ranks of them, surging inexorably toward him.

With a choked cry he hurled himself back around the gate-pillar, stumbled and fell and lay dumb and quaking, clenching his teeth against the sharp agony he expected in the shape of a spear-thrust. None came. No figure came lunging after him. Incredulously he gathered himself to his feet, his pistols shaking in his hands. They were waiting, beyond that bend, but they would not come through the Gateway, not even to glut their blood-lust. This fact forced itself upon him, with its implication of inexplicable mystery.

Stumblingly he made his way back

to the ruins and groped into the black doorway, overcoming an instinctive aversion against entering the roofless chamber. Starlight shone through the broken roof, lightening the gloom a little, but black shadows clustered along the walls and the inner door was an ebon well of mystery. Like most Englishmen of his generation John Wentyard more than half believed in ghosts, and he felt that if ever there was a place fit to be haunted by the phantoms of a lost and forgotten race, it was these sullen ruins.

He glanced fearfully through the broken roof at the dark fringe of overhanging fronds on the cliffs above, hanging motionless in the breathless air, and wondered if moonrise, illuminating his refuge, would bring arrows questing down through the roof. Except for the far lone cry of a night-bird, the jungle was silent. There was not so much as the rustle of a leaf. If there were men on the cliffs there was no sign to show it. He was aware of hunger and an increasing thirst; rage gnawed at him, and a fear that was already tinged with panic.

He crouched at the doorway, pistols in his hands, naked sword at his knee, and after a while the moon rose, touching the overhanging fronds with silver long before it untangled itself from the trees and rose high enough to pour its light over the cliffs. Its light invaded the ruins, but no arrows came from the cliff, nor was there any sound from beyond the Gateway. Wentyard thrust his head through the door and surveyed his retreat.

The ravine, after it passed between the ancient gate-pillars, opened into a broad bowl, walled by cliffs, and unbroken except for the mouth of the gulch. Wentyard saw the rim as a

continuous, roughly circular line, now edged with the fire of moonlight. The ruins in which he had taken refuge almost filled this bowl, being built against the cliffs on one side. Decay and smothering vines had almost obliterated the original architectural plan. He saw the structure as a maze of roofless chambers, the outer doors opening upon the broad space left between it and the opposite wall of the cliff. This space was covered with low, dense vegetation, which also choked some of the chambers. Wentyard saw no way of escape. The cliffs were not like the walls of the ravine. They were of solid rock and sheer, even jutting outward a little at the rim. No vines trailed down them. They did not rise many yards above the broken roofs of the ruins, but they were as far out of his reach as if they had towered a thousand feet. He was caught like a rat in a trap. The only way out was up the ravine, where the blood-lusting warriors waited with grim patience. He remembered Vulmea's mocking warning: "—Like the road to Hell: easy to go down; not so easy to go up again!" Passionately he hoped that the Indians had caught the Irishman and slain him slowly and painfully. He could have watched Vulmea flayed alive with intense satisfaction.

PRESENTLY, despite hunger and thirst and fear, he fell asleep, to dream of ancient temples where drums muttered and strange figures in parrot-feather mantles moved through the smoke of sacrificial fires; and he dreamed at last of a silent, hideous shape which came to the inner door of his roofless chamber and regarded him with cold, inhuman eyes.

It was from this dream that he

awakened, bathed in cold sweat, to start up with an incoherent cry, clutching his pistols. Then, fully awake, he stood in the middle of the chamber, trying to gather his scattered wits. Memory of the dream was vague but terrifying. Had he actually seen a shadow sway in the doorway and vanish as he awoke, or had it been only

Cursing his nervous imagination he returned to the outer doorway. He told himself that he chose that place the better to guard against an attack from the ravine, but the real reason was that he could not bring himself to select a spot deeper in the gloomy interior of the ancient ruins.

He sat down cross-legged just inside



part of his nightmare? The red, lopsided moon was poised on the western rim of the cliffs, and that side of the bowl was in thick shadow, but still an illusive light found its way into the ruins. Wentyard peered through the inner doorway, pistols cocked. Light floated rather than streamed down from above, and showed him an empty chamber beyond. The vegetation on the floor was crushed down, but he remembered having walked back and forth across it several times.

the doorway, his back against the wall, his pistols beside him and his sword across his knees. His eyes burned and his lips felt baked with the thirst that tortured him. The sight of the heavy globules of dew that hung on the grass almost maddened him, but he did not seek to quench his thirst by that means, believing as he did that it was rank poison. He drew his belt closer, against his hunger, and told himself that he would not sleep. But he did sleep, in spite of everything.

CHAPTER III

IT WAS a frightful scream close at hand that awakened Wentyard. He was on his feet before he was fully awake, glaring wildly about him. The moon had set and the interior of the chamber was dark as Egypt, in which the outer doorway was but a somewhat lighter blur. But outside it there sounded a blood-chilling gurgling, the heaving and flopping of a heavy body. Then silence.

It was a human being that had screamed. Wentyard groped for his pistols, found his sword instead, and hurried forth, his taut nerves thrumming. The starlight in the bowl, dim as it was, was less Stygian than the absolute blackness of the ruins. But he did not see the figure stretched in the grass until he stumbled over it. That was all he saw, then—just that dim form stretched on the ground before the doorway. The foliage hanging over the cliff rustled a little in the faint breeze. Shadows hung thick under the wall and about the ruins. A score of men might have been lurking near him, unseen. But there was no sound.

After a while Wentyard knelt beside the figure, straining his eyes in the starlight. He grunted softly. The dead man was not an Indian, but a black man, a brawny ebon giant, clad, like the red men, in a bark loin clout, with a crest of parrot feathers on his kinky head. A murderous copper-headed axe lay near his hand, and a great gash showed in his muscular breast, a lesser wound under his shoulder blade. He had been stabbed so savagely that the blade had transfixed him and come out through his back.

Wentyard swore at the accumulated mystery of it. The presence of the

black man was not inexplicable. Negro slaves, fleeing from Spanish masters, frequently took to the jungle and lived with the natives. This black evidently did not share in whatever superstition or caution kept the Indians outside the bowl; he had come in alone to butcher the victim they had at bay. But the mystery of his death remained. The blow that had impaled him had been driven with more than ordinary strength. There was a sinister suggestion about the episode, though the mysterious killer had saved Wentyard from being brained in his sleep—it was as if some inscrutable being, having claimed the Englishman for its own, refused to be robbed of its prey. Wentyard shivered, shaking off the thought.

Then he realized that he was armed only with his sword. He had rushed out of the ruins half asleep, leaving his pistols behind him, after a brief fumbling that failed to find them in the darkness. He turned and hurried back into the chamber and began to grope on the floor, first irritably, then with growing horror. *The pistols were gone.*

At this realization panic overwhelmed Wentyard. He found himself out in the starlight again without knowing just how he had got there. He was sweating, trembling in every limb, biting his tongue to keep from screaming in hysterical terror.

FRANTICALLY he fought for control. It was not imagination, then, which peopled those ghastly ruins with furtive, sinister shapes that glided from room to shadowy room on noiseless feet, and spied upon him while he slept. *Something* besides himself had been in that room—something that had stolen his pistols either while he was fumbling over the dead negro outside, or—

grisly thought!—while he slept. He believed the latter had been the case. He had heard no sound in the ruins while he was outside. But why had it not taken his sword as well? Was it the Indians, after all, playing a horrible game with him? Was it their eyes he seemed to feel burning upon him from the shadows? But he did not believe it was the Indians. They would have no reason to kill their black ally.

Wentyard felt that he was near the end of his rope. He was nearly frantic with thirst and hunger, and he shrank from the contemplation of another day of heat in that waterless bowl. He went toward the ravine mouth, grasping his sword in desperation, telling himself that it was better to be speared quickly than haunted to an unknown doom by unseen phantoms, or perish of thirst. But the blind instinct to live drove him back from the rock-buttressed Gateway. He could not bring himself to exchange an uncertain fate for certain death. Faint noises beyond the bend told him that men, many men, were waiting there, and he retreated, cursing weakly.

In a futile gust of passion he dragged the black man's body to the Gateway and thrust it through. At least he would not have it for a companion to poison the air when it rotted in the heat.

He sat down about half-way between the ruins and the ravine-mouth, hugging his sword and straining his eyes into the shadowy starlight, and felt that he was being watched from the ruins; he sensed a Presence there, inscrutable, inhuman, waiting—waiting—

He was still sitting there when dawn flooded jungle and cliffs with grey light, and a brown warrior, appearing in the Gateway, bent his bow and sent an

arrow at the figure hunkered in the open space. The shaft cut into the grass near Wentyard's foot, and the white man sprang up stiffly and ran into the doorway of the ruins. The warrior did not shoot again. As if frightened by his own temerity, he turned and hurried back through the Gateway and vanished from sight.

Wentyard spat dryly and swore. Daylight dispelled some of the phantom terrors of the night, and he was suffering so much from thirst that his fear was temporarily submerged. He was determined to explore the ruins by each crevice and cranny and bring to bay whatever was lurking among them. At least he would have daylight by which to face it.

To this end he turned toward the inner door, and then he stopped in his tracks, his heart in his throat. In the inner doorway stood a great gourd, newly cut and hollowed, and filled with water; beside it was a stack of fruit, and in another calabash there was meat, still smoking faintly. With a stride he reached the door and glared through. Only an empty chamber met his eyes.

Sight of water and scent of food drove from his mind all thoughts of anything except his physical needs. He seized the water-gourd and drank gulpingly, the precious liquid splashing on his breast. The water was fresh and sweet, and no wine had ever given him such delirious satisfaction. The meat he found was still warm. What it was he neither knew nor cared. He ate ravenously, grasping the joints in his fingers and tearing away the flesh with his teeth. It had evidently been roasted over an open fire, and without salt or seasoning, but it tasted like food of the gods to the ravenous man. He did not seek to explain the miracle, nor

to wonder if the food were poisoned. The inscrutable haunter of the ruins which had saved his life that night, and which had stolen his pistols, apparently meant to preserve him for the time being, at least, and Wentyard accepted the gifts without question.

And having eaten he lay down and slept. He did not believe the Indians would invade the ruins; he did not care much if they did, and speared him in his sleep. He believed that the unknown being which haunted the rooms could slay him any time it wished. It had been close to him again and again and had not struck. It had showed no signs of hostility so far, except to steal his pistols. To go searching for it might drive it into hostility.

Wentyard, despite his slaked thirst and full belly, was at the point where he had a desperate indifference to consequences. His world seemed to have crumbled about him. He had led his men into a trap to see them butchered; he had seen his prisoner escape; he was caught like a caged rat himself; the wealth he had lusted after and dreamed about had been proved a lie. Worn out with vain ragings against his fate, he slept.

THE sun was high when he awoke and sat up with a startled oath. Black Vulmea stood looking down at him.

"Damn!" Wentyard sprang up, snatching at his sword. His mind was a riot of maddening emotions, but physically he was a new man, and nerved to a rage that was tinged with near-insanity.

"You dog!" he raved. "So the Indians didn't catch you on the cliffs!"

"Those red dogs?" Vulmea laughed. "They didn't follow me past the Gate-

way. They don't come on the cliffs overlooking these ruins. They've got a cordon of men strung through the jungle, surrounding this place, but I can get through any time I want to. I cooked your breakfast—and mine—right under their noses, and they never saw me."

"My breakfast!" Wentyard glared wildly. "You mean it was you brought water and food for me?"

"Who else?"

"But—but why?" Wentyard was floundering in a maze of bewilderment.

Vulmea laughed, but he laughed only with his lips. His eyes were burning. "Well, at first I thought it would satisfy me if I saw you get an arrow through your guts. Then when you broke away and got in here, I said, 'Better still! They'll keep the swine there until he starves, and I'll lurk about and watch him die slowly.' I knew they wouldn't come in after you. When they ambushed me and my crew in the ravine, I cut my way through them and got in here, just as you did, and they didn't follow me in. But I got out of here the first night. I made sure you wouldn't get out the way I did that time, and then settled myself to watch you die. I could come or go as I pleased after nightfall, and you'd never see or hear me."

"But in that case, I don't see why—"

"You probably wouldn't understand!" snarled Vulmea. "But just watching you starve wasn't enough. I wanted to kill you myself—I wanted to see your blood gush, and watch your eyes glaze!" The Irishman's voice thickened with his passion, and his great hands clenched until the knuckles showed white. "And I didn't want to kill a man half-dead with want. So I went back up into the jungle on the

cliffs and got water and fruit, and knocked a monkey off a limb with a stone, and roasted him. I brought you a good meal and set it there in the door while you were sitting outside the ruins. You couldn't see me from where you were sitting, and of course you didn't hear anything. You English are all dull-eared."

"And it was you who stole my pistols last night!" muttered Wentyard, staring at the butts jutting from Vulmea's Spanish girdle.

"Aye! I took them from the floor beside you while you slept. I learned stealth from the Indians of North America. I didn't want you to shoot me when I came to pay my debt. While I was getting them I heard somebody sneaking up outside, and saw a black man coming toward the doorway. I didn't want him to be robbing me of my revenge, so I stuck my cutlass through him. You awakened when he howled, and ran out, as you'll remember, but I stepped back around the corner and in at another door. I didn't want to meet you except in broad open daylight and you in fighting trim."

"Then it was you who spied on me from the inner door," muttered Wentyard. "You whose shadow I saw just before the moon sank behind the cliffs."

"Not I!" Vulmea's denial was genuine. "I didn't come down into the ruins until after moonset, when I came to steal your pistols. Then I went back up on the cliffs, and came again just before dawn to leave your food."

"But enough of this talk!" he roared gustily, whipping out his cutlass. "I'm mad with thinking of the Galway coast and dead men kicking in a row, and a rope that strangled me! I've tricked you, trapped you, and now I'm going to kill you!"

Wentyard's face was a ghastly mask of hate, livid, with bared teeth and glaring eyes.

"**D**OG!" with a screech he lunged, trying to catch Vulmea off-guard.

But the cutlass met and deflected the straight blade, and Wentyard bounded back just in time to avoid the decapitating sweep of the pirate's steel. Vulmea laughed fiercely and came on like a storm, and Wentyard met him with a drowning man's desperation.

Like most officers of the British navy, Wentyard was proficient in the use of the long straight sword he carried. He was almost as tall as Vulmea, and though he looked slender beside the powerful figure of the pirate, he believed that his skill would offset the sheer strength of the Irishman.

He was disillusioned within the first few moments of the fight. Vulmea was neither slow nor clumsy. He was as quick as a wounded panther, and his sword-play was no less crafty than Wentyard's. It only seemed so, because of the pirate's furious style of attack, showering blow on blow with what looked like sheer recklessness. But the very ferocity of his attack was his best defense, for it gave his opponent no time to launch a counter-attack.

The power of his blows, beating down on Wentyard's blade, rocked and shook the Englishman to his heels, numbing his wrist and arm with their impact. Blind fury, humiliation, naked fright combined to rob the captain of his poise and cunning. A stamp of feet, a louder clash of steel, and Wentyard's blade whirled into a corner. The Englishman reeled back, his face livid, his eyes like those of a madman.

"Pick up your sword!" Vulmea was

panting, not so much from exertion as from rage. Wentyard did not seem to hear him.

"Bah!" Vulmea threw aside his cutlass in a spasm of disgust. "Can't you even fight? I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

He slapped Wentyard viciously first on one side of the face and then on the other. The Englishman screamed wordlessly and launched himself at the pirate's throat, and Vulmea checked him with a buffet in the face and knocked him sprawling with a savage smash under the heart. Wentyard got to his knees and shook the blood from his face, while Vulmea stood over him, his brows black and his great fists knotted.

"Get up!" muttered the Irishman thickly. "Get up, you hangman of peasants and children!"

Wentyard did not heed him. He was groping inside his shirt, from which he drew out something he stared at with painful intensity.

"Get up, damn you, before I set my boot-heels on your face—"

Vulmea broke off, glaring incredulously. Wentyard, crouching over the object he had drawn from his shirt, was weeping in great, racking sobs.

"What the hell!" Vulmea jerked it away from him, consumed by wonder to learn what could bring tears from John Wentyard. It was a skillfully painted miniature. The blow he had struck Wentyard had cracked it, but not enough to obliterate the soft gentle faces of a pretty young woman and child which smiled up at the scowling Irishman.

"Well, I'm damned!" Vulmea stared from the broken portrait in his hand to the man crouching miserably on the floor. "Your wife and daughter?"

Wentyard, his bloody face sunk in his hands, nodded mutely. He had endured much within the last night and day. The breaking of the portrait he always carried over his heart was the last straw; it seemed like an attack on the one soft spot in his hard soul, and it left him dazed and demoralized.

VULMEA scowled ferociously, but it somehow seemed forced.

"I didn't know you had a wife and child," he said almost defensively.

"The lass is but five years old," gulped Wentyard. "I haven't seen them in nearly a year. My God, what's to become of them now? A navy captain's pay is none so great. I've never been able to save anything. It was for them I sailed in search of Van Raven and his treasure. I hoped to get a prize that would take care of them if aught happened to me. Kill me!" he cried shrilly, his voice cracking at the highest pitch. "Kill me and be done with it, before I lose my manhood with thinking of them, and beg for my life like a craven dog!"

But Vulmea stood looking down at him with a frown. Varying expressions crossed his dark face, and suddenly he thrust the portrait back in the Englishman's hand.

"You're too poor a creature for me to soil my hands with!" he sneered, and turning on his heel, strode through the inner door.

Wentyard stared dully after him, then, still on his knees, began to caress the broken picture, whimpering softly like an animal in pain as if the breaks in the ivory were wounds in his own flesh. Men break suddenly and unexpectedly in the tropics, and Wentyard's collapse was appalling.

He did not look up when the swift

stamp of boots announced Vulmea's sudden return, without the pirate's usual stealth. A savage clutch on his shoulder raised him to stare stupidly into the Irishman's convulsed face.

"You're an infernal dog!" snarled Vulmea, in a fury that differed strangely from his former murderous hate. He

Wentyard looked up at him stupidly.

"You—you came back to help me?"

"I might as well stab you as leave you here to starve!" roared the pirate, sheathing his sword. "Get up and stick your skewer back in its scabbard. Who'd have ever thought that a scraun like you would have women-folk like



broke into lurid imprecations, cursing Wentyard with all the proficiency he had acquired during his years at sea. "I ought to split your skull," he wound up. "For years I've dreamed of it, especially when I was drunk. I'm a cursed fool not to stretch you dead on the floor. I don't owe you any consideration, blast you! Your wife and daughter don't mean anything to me. But I'm a fool, like all the Irish, a blasted, chicken-hearted, sentimental fool, and I can't be the cause of a helpless woman and her colleen starving. Get up and quit sniveling!"

those innocents? Hell's fire! You ought to be shot! Pick up your sword. You may need it before we get away. But remember, I don't trust you any further than I can throw a whale by the tail, and I'm keeping your pistols. If you try to stab me when I'm not looking I'll break your head with my cutlass hilt."

Wentyard, like a man in a daze, replaced the painting carefully in his bosom and mechanically picked up his sword and sheathed it. His numbed wits began to thaw out, and he tried to pull himself together.

"What are we to do now?" he asked.

"**S**HUT up!" growled the pirate. "I'm going to save you for the sake of the lady and the lass, but I don't have to talk to you!" With rare consistency he then continued: "We'll leave this trap the same way I came and went.

"Listen: four years ago I came here with a hundred men. I'd heard rumors of a ruined city up here, and I thought there might be loot hidden in it. I followed the old road from the beach, and those brown dogs let me and my men get in the ravine before they started butchering us. There must have been five or six hundred of them. They raked us from the walls, and then charged us—some came down the ravine and others jumped down the walls behind us and cut us off. I was the only one who got away, and I managed to cut my way through them, and ran into this bowl. They didn't follow me in, but stayed outside the Gateway to see that I didn't get out.

"But I found another way—a slab had fallen away from the wall of a room that was built against the cliff, and a stairway was cut in the rock. I followed it and came out of a sort of trap door up on the cliffs. A slab of rock was over it, but I don't think the Indians knew anything about it anyway, because they never go up on the cliffs that overhang the basin. They never come in here from the ravine, either. There's something here they're afraid of—ghosts, most likely.

"The cliffs slope down into the jungle on the outer sides, and the slopes and the crest are covered with trees and thickets. They had a cordon of men strung around the foot of the slopes, but I got through at night

easily enough, made my way to the coast and sailed away with the handful of men I'd left aboard my ship.

"When you captured me the other day, I was going to kill you with my manacles, but you started talking about treasure, and a thought sprang in my mind to steer you into a trap that I might possibly get out of. I remembered this place, and I mixed a lot of truth in with some lies. The Fangs of Satan are no myth; they are a hoard of jewels hidden somewhere on this coast, but this isn't the place. There's no plunder about here.

"The Indians have a ring of men strung around this place, as they did before. I can get through, but it isn't going to be so easy getting you through. You English are like buffaloes when you start through the brush. We'll start just after dark and try to get through before the moon rises.

"Come on; I'll show you the stair."

Wentyard followed him through a series of crumbling, vine-tangled chambers, until he halted before a doorway that gaped in the wall that was built against the cliff. A thick slab leaned against the wall which obviously served as a door. The Englishman saw a flight of narrow steps, carved in the solid rock, leading upward through a shaft tunneled in the cliff.

"I meant to block the upper mouth by heaping big rocks on the slab that covers it," said Vulmea. "That was when I was going to let you starve. I knew you might find the stair. I doubt if the Indians know anything about it, as they never come in here or go up on the cliffs. But they know a man might be able to get out over the cliffs some way, so they've thrown that cordon around the slopes.

"That nigger I killed was a different proposition. A slave ship was wrecked off this coast a year ago, and the blacks escaped and took to the jungle. There's a regular mob of them living somewhere near here. This particular black man wasn't afraid to come into the ruins. If there are more of his kind out there with the Indians, they may try again tonight. But I believe he was the only one, or he wouldn't have come alone."

"Why don't we go up the cliff now and hide among the trees?" asked Wentyard.

"Because we might be seen by the men watching below the slopes, and they'd guess that we were going to make a break tonight, and redouble their vigilance. After awhile I'll go and get some more food. They won't see me."

THE men returned to the chamber where Wentyard had slept. Vulmea grew taciturn, and Wentyard made no attempt at conversation. They sat in silence while the afternoon dragged by. An hour or so before sundown Vulmea rose with a curt word, went up the stair and emerged on the cliffs. Among the trees he brought down a monkey with a dextrously-thrown stone, skinned it, and brought it back into the ruins along with a calabash of water from a spring on the hillside. For all his woodcraft he was not aware that he was being watched; he did not see the fierce black face that glared at him from a thicket that stood where the cliffs began to slope down into the jungle below.

Later, when he and Wentyard were roasting the meat over a fire built in the ruins, he raised his head and listened intently.

"What do you hear?" asked Wentyard.

"A drum," grunted the Irishman.

"I hear it," said Wentyard after a moment. "Nothing unusual about that."

"It doesn't sound like an Indian drum," answered Vulmea. "Sounds more like an African drum."

Wentyard nodded agreement; his ship had lain off the mangrove swamps of the Slave Coast, and he had heard such drums rumbling to one another through the steaming night. There was a subtle difference in the rhythm and timbre that distinguished it from an Indian drum.

Evening came on and ripened slowly to dusk. The drum ceased to throb. Back in the low hills, beyond the ring of cliffs, a fire glinted under the dusky trees, casting brown and black faces into sharp relief.

An Indian whose ornaments and bearing marked him as a chief squatted on his hams, his immobile face turned toward the ebony giant who stood facing him. This man was nearly a head taller than any other man there, his proportions overshadowing both the Indians squatting about the fire and the black warriors who stood in a close group behind him. A jaguar-skin mantle was cast carelessly over his brawny shoulders, and copper bracelets ornamented his thickly-muscled arms. There was an ivory ring on his head, and parrot-feathers stood up from his kinky hair. A shield of hard wood and toughened bull-hide was on his left arm, and in his right hand he gripped a great spear whose hammered iron head was as broad as a man's hand.

"I came swiftly when I heard the drum," he said gutturally, in the bastard-Spanish that served as a common

speech for the savages of both colors. "I knew it was N'Onga who called me. N'Onga had gone from my camp to fetch Ajumba, who was lingering with your tribe. N'Onga told me by the drum-talk that a white man was at bay, and Ajumba was dead. I came in haste. Now you tell me that you dare not enter the Old City."

"I have told you a devil dwells there," answered the Indian doggedly. "He has chosen the white man for his own. He will be angry if you try to take him away from him. It is death to enter his kingdom."

The black chief lifted his great spear and shook it defiantly.

"I was a slave to the Spaniards long enough to know that the only devil is a white man! I do not fear your devil. In my land his brothers are big as he, and I have slain one with a spear like this. A day and a night have passed since the white man fled into the Old City. Why has not the devil devoured him, or this other who lingers on the cliffs?"

"The devil is not hungry," muttered the Indian. "He waits until he is hungry. He has eaten recently. When he is hungry again he will take them. I will not go into his lair with my men. You are a stranger in this country. You do not understand these things."

"I understand that Bigomba who was a king in his own country fears nothing, neither man nor demon," retorted the black giant. "You tell me that Ajumba went into the Old City by night, and died. I have seen his body. The devil did not slay him. One of the white men stabbed him. If Ajumba could go into the Old City and not be seized by the devil, then I and my thirty men can go. I know how the big white man comes and goes between the

cliffs and the ruins. There is a hole in the rock with a slab for a door over it. N'Onga watched from the bushes high up on the slopes and saw him come forth and later return through it. I have placed men there to watch it. If the white men come again through that hole, my warriors will spear them. If they do not come, we will go in as soon as the moon rises. Your men hold the ravine, and they can not flee that way. We will hunt them like rats through the crumbling houses."

CHAPTER IV

"EASY now," muttered Vulmea. "It's as dark as Hell in this shaft."

Dusk had deepened into early darkness. The white men were groping their way up the steps cut in the rock. Looking back and down Wentyard made out the lower mouth of the shaft only as a slightly lighter blur in the blackness. They climbed on, feeling their way, and presently Vulmea halted with a muttered warning. Wentyard, groping, touched his thigh and felt the muscles tensing upon it. He knew that Vulmea had placed his shoulders under the slab that closed the upper entrance, and was heaving it up. He saw a crack appear suddenly in the blackness above him, limning the Irishman's bent head and foreshortened figure.

The stone came clear and starlight gleamed through the aperture, laced by the overhanging branches of trees. Vulmea let the slab fall on the stone rim, and started to climb out of the shaft. He had emerged head, shoulders and hips when without warning a black form loomed against the stars and a gleam of steel hissed downward at his breast.

Vulmea threw up his cutlass and the spear rang against it, staggering him on the steps with the impact. Snatching a pistol from his belt with his left hand he fired point-blank and the black man groaned and fell, head and arms dangling in the opening. He struck the pirate as he fell, destroying Vulmea's already precarious balance. He toppled

from the slave ship. That drum we heard was one of them calling the others. Look out!"

Spears came whirring down the shaft, splintering on the steps, glancing from the walls. The white men hurled themselves recklessly down the steps at the risk of broken limbs. They tumbled through the lower doorway and Vul-



"I came swiftly when I heard the drum," he said gutturally.

backward down the steps, carrying Wentyard with him. A dozen steps down they brought up in a sprawling heap, and staring upward, saw the square well above them fringed with indistinct black blobs they knew were heads outlined against the stars.

"I thought you said the Indians never—" panted Wentyard.

"They're not Indians," growled Vulmea, rising. "They're negroes. Cimar-rooms! The same dogs who escaped

mea slammed the heavy slab in place.

"They'll be coming down it next," he snarled. "We've got to heap enough rocks against it to hold it—no, wait a minute! If they've got the guts to come at all, they'll come by the ravine if they can't get in this way, or on ropes hung from the cliffs. This place is easy enough to get into—not so damned easy to get out of. We'll leave the shaft open. If they come this way we can get them in a bunch as they try to come out."

He pulled the slab aside, standing carefully away from the door.

"Suppose they come from the ravine and this way, too?"

"They probably will," growled Vulmea, "but maybe they'll come this way first, and maybe if they come down in a bunch we can kill them all. There may not be more than a dozen of them. They'll never persuade the Indians to follow them in."

He set about reloading the pistol he had fired, with quick, sure hands in the dark. It consumed the last grain of powder in the flask. The white men lurked like phantoms of murder about the doorway of the stair, waiting to strike suddenly and deadlily. Time dragged. No sound came from above. Wentyard's imagination was at work again, picturing an invasion from the ravine, and dusky figures gliding about them, surrounding the chamber. He spoke of this and Vulmea shook his head.

"When they come I'll hear them; nothing on two legs can get in here without my knowing it."

Suddenly Wentyard was aware of a dim glow pervading the ruins. The moon was rising above the cliffs. Vulmea swore.

"No chance of our getting away tonight. Maybe those black dogs were waiting for the moon to come up. Go into the chamber where you slept and watch the ravine. If you see them sneaking in that way, let me know. I can take care of any that come down the stair."

Wentyard felt his flesh crawl as he made his way through those dim chambers. The moonlight glinted down through vines tangled across the broken roofs, and shadows lay thick across his

path. He reached the chamber where he had slept, and where the coals of their fire still glowed dully. He started across toward the outer door when a soft sound brought him whirling around. A cry was wrenched from his throat.

Out of the darkness of a corner rose a swaying shape; a great wedge-shaped head and an arched neck were outlined against the moonlight. In one brain-staggering instant the mystery of the ruins became clear to him; he knew what had watched him with lidless eyes as he lay sleeping, and what had glided away from his door as he awoke—he knew why the Indians would not come into the ruins or mount the cliffs above them. He was face to face with the devil of the deserted city, hungry at last—and that devil was a giant anaconda!

In that moment John Wentyard experienced such fear and loathing horror as ordinarily come to men only in foul nightmares. He could not run, and after that first scream his tongue seemed frozen to his palate. Only when the hideous head darted toward him did he break free from the paralysis that engulfed him and then it was too late.

He struck at it wildly and futilely, and in an instant it had him—lapped and wrapped about with coils which were like huge cables of cold, pliant steel. He shrieked again, fighting madly against the crushing constriction—he heard the rush of Vulmea's boots—then the pirate's pistols crashed together and he heard plainly the thud of the bullets into the great snake's body. It jerked convulsively and whipped from about him, hurling him sprawling to the floor, and then it came at Vulmea like the rush of a hurricane through the grass, its forked tongue licking in

and out in the moonlight, and the noise of its hissing filling the chamber.

Vulmea avoided the battering-ram stroke of the blunt nose with a sidewise spring that would have shamed a starving jaguar, and his cutlass was a sheen in the moonlight as it hewed deep into the mighty neck. Blood spurted and the great reptile rolled and knotted, sweeping the floor and dislodging stones from the wall with its thrashing tail. Vulmea leaped high, clearing it as it lashed but Wentyard, just climbing to his feet, was struck and knocked sprawling into a corner. Vulmea was springing in again, cutlass lifted, when the monster rolled aside and fled through the inner door, with a loud rushing sound through the thick vegetation.

Vulmea was after it, his berserk fury fully roused. He did not wish the wounded reptile to crawl away and hide, perhaps to return later and take them by surprise. Through chamber after chamber the chase led, in a direction neither of the men had followed in his former explorations, and at last into a room almost choked by tangled vines. Tearing these aside Vulmea stared into a black aperture in the wall, just in time to see the monster vanishing into its depths. Wentyard, trembling in every limb, had followed, and now looked over the pirate's shoulder. A reptilian reek came from the aperture, which they now saw as an arched doorway, partly masked by thick vines. Enough moonlight found its way through the roof to reveal a glimpse of stone steps leading up into darkness.

"I MISSED this," muttered Vulmea. "When I found the stair I didn't look any further for an exit. Look how the door-sill glistens with scales that

have been rubbed off that brute's belly. He uses it often. I believe those steps lead to a tunnel that goes clear through the cliffs. There's nothing in this bowl that even a snake could eat or drink. He has to go out into the jungle to get water and food. If he was in the habit of going out by the way of the ravine, there'd be a path worn away through the vegetation, like there is in this room. Besides, the Indians wouldn't stay in the ravine. Unless there's some other exit we haven't found, I believe that he comes and goes this way, and that means it lets into the outer world. It's worth trying, anyway."

"You mean to follow that fiend into that black tunnel?" ejaculated Wentyard aghast.

"Why not? We've got to follow and kill him anyway. If we run into a nest of them—well, we've got to die some time, and if we wait here much longer the Cimarroons will be cutting our throats. This is a chance to get away, I believe. But we won't go in the dark."

Hurrying back to the room where they had cooked the monkey, Vulmea caught up a fagot, wrapped a torn strip of his shirt about one end and set it smouldering in the coals which he blew into a tiny flame. The improvised torch flickered and smoked, but it cast light of a sort. Vulmea strode back to the chamber where the snake had vanished, followed by Wentyard who stayed close within the dancing ring of light, and saw writhing serpents in every vine that swayed overhead.

The torch revealed blood thickly spattered on the stone steps. Squeezing their way between the tangled vines which did not admit a man's body as easily as a serpent's, they mounted the steps warily. Vulmea went first, holding the torch high and ahead of him,

his cutlass in his right hand. He had thrown away the useless, empty pistols. They climbed half a dozen steps and came into a tunnel some fifteen feet wide and perhaps ten feet high from the stone floor to the vaulted roof. The serpent-reek and the glisten of the floor told of long occupancy by the brute, and the blood-drops ran on before them.

The walls, floor and roof of the tunnel, were in much better state of preservation than were the ruins outside, and Wentyard found time to marvel at the ingenuity of the ancient race which had built it.

Meanwhile, in the moonlit chamber they had just quitted, a giant black man appeared as silently as a shadow. His great spear glinted in the moonlight, and the plumes on his head rustled as he turned to look about him. Four warriors followed him.

"They went into that door," said one of these, pointing to the vine-tangled entrance. "I saw their torch vanish into it. But I feared to follow them, alone as I was, and I ran to tell you, Bigomba."

"But what of the screams and the shot we heard just before we descended the shaft?" asked another uneasily.

"I think they met the demon and slew it," answered Bigomba. "Then they went into this door. Perhaps it is a tunnel which leads through the cliffs. One of you go gather the rest of the warriors who are scattered through the rooms searching for the white dogs. Bring them after me. Bring torches with you. As for me, I will follow with the other three, at once. Bigomba sees like a lion in the dark."

As Vulmea and Wentyard advanced through the tunnel Wentyard watched the torch fearfully. It was not very

satisfactory, but it gave some light, and he shuddered to think of its going out or burning to a stump and leaving them in darkness. He strained his eyes into the gloom ahead, momentarily expecting to see a vague, hideous figure rear up amidst it. But when Vulmea halted suddenly it was not because of an appearance of the reptile. They had reached a point where a smaller corridor branched off the main tunnel, leading away to the left.

"Which shall we take?"

Vulmea bent over the floor, lowering his torch.

"The blood-drops go to the left," he grunted. "That's the way he went."

"**W**AIT!" Wentyard gripped his arm and pointed along the main tunnel. "Look! There ahead of us! Light!"

Vulmea thrust his torch behind him, for its flickering glare made the shadows seem blacker beyond its feeble radius. Ahead of them, then, he saw something like a floating gray mist, and knew it was moonlight finding its way somehow into the tunnel. Abandoning the hunt for the wounded reptile, the men rushed forward and emerged into a broad square chamber, hewn out of solid rock. But Wentyard swore in bitter disappointment. The moonlight was coming, not from a door opening into the jungle, but from a square shaft in the roof, high above their heads.

An archway opened in each wall, and the one opposite the arch by which they had entered was fitted with a heavy door, corroded and eaten by decay. Against the wall to their right stood a stone image, taller than a man, a carved grotesque, at once manlike and bestial. A stone altar stood before it, its surface channeled and darkly stained.



He held it up—a
thing like a giant's
necklace.

Something on the idol's breast caught the moonlight in a frosty sparkle.

"The devil!" Vulmea sprang forward and wrenched it away. He held it up—a thing like a giant's necklace, made of jointed plates of hammered gold, each as broad as a man's palm and set with curiously-cut jewels.

"I thought I lied when I told you there were gems here," grunted the pirate. "It seems I spoke the truth unwittingly! These are not the Fangs of Satan, but they'll fetch a tidy fortune anywhere in Europe."

"What are you doing?" demanded Wentyard, as the Irishman laid the huge necklace on the altar and lifted his cutlass. Vulmea's reply was a stroke that severed the ornament into equal halves. One half he thrust into Wentyard's astounded hands.

"If we get out of here alive that will provide for the wife and child," he grunted.

"But you—" stammered Wentyard. "You hate me—yet you save my life and then give me this—"

"Shut up!" snarled the pirate. "I'm not giving it to you; I'm giving it to the girl and her baby. Don't you venture to thank me, curse you! I hate you as much as I—"

He stiffened suddenly, wheeling to glare down the tunnel up which they had come. He stamped out the torch and crouched down behind the altar, drawing Wentyard with him.

"Men!" he snarled. "Coming down the tunnel, I heard steel clink on stone. I hope they didn't see the torch. Maybe they didn't. It wasn't much more than a coal in the moonlight."

They strained their eyes down the tunnel. The moon hovered at an angle above the open shaft which allowed some of its light to stream a short way

down the tunnel. Vision ceased at the spot where the smaller corridor branched off. Presently four shadows bulked out of the blackness beyond, taking shape gradually like figures emerging from a thick fog. They halted, and the white men saw the largest one—a giant who towered above the others—point silently with his spear, up the tunnel, then down the corridor. Two of the shadowy shapes detached themselves from the group and moved off down the corridor out of sight. The giant and the other man came on up the tunnel.

"The Cimarroons, hunting us," muttered Vulmea. "They're splitting their party to make sure they find us. Lie low; there may be a whole crew right behind them."

THEY crouched lower behind the altar while the two blacks came up the tunnel, growing more distinct as they advanced. Wentyard's skin crawled at the sight of the broad-bladed spears held ready in their hands. The biggest one moved with the supple tread of a great panther, head thrust forward, spear poised, shield lifted. He was a formidable image of rampant barbarism, and Wentyard wondered if even such a man as Vulmea could stand before him with naked steel and live.

They halted in the doorway, and the white men caught the white flash of their eyes as they glared suspiciously about the chamber. The smaller black seized the giant's arm convulsively and pointed, and Wentyard's heart jumped into his throat. He thought they had been discovered, but the negro was pointing at the idol. The big man grunted contemptuously. However slavishly in awe he might be

of the fetishes of his native coast, the gods and demons of other races held no terrors for him.

But he moved forward majestically to investigate, and Wentyard realized that discovery was inevitable.

Vulmea whispered fiercely in his ear: "We've got to get them, quick! Take the brave. I'll take the chief. Now!"

They sprang up together, and the blacks cried out involuntarily, recoiling from the unexpected apparitions. In that instant the white men were upon them.

The shock of their sudden appearance had stunned the smaller black. He was small only in comparison with his gigantic companion. He was as tall as Wentyard and the great muscles knotted under his sleek skin. But he was staggering back, gaping stupidly, spear and shield lowered on limply hanging arms. Only the bite of steel brought him to his senses, and then it was too late. He screamed and lunged madly, but Wentyard's sword had girded deep into his vitals and his lunge was wild. The Englishman side-stepped and thrust again and yet again, under and over the shield, fleshing his blade in groin and throat. The black man swayed in his rush, his arms fell, shield and spear clattered to the floor and he toppled down upon them.

Wentyard turned to stare at the battle waging behind him, where the two giants fought under the square beam of moonlight, black and white, spear and shield against cutlass.

Bigomba, quicker-witted than his follower, had not gone down under the unexpected rush of the white man. He had reacted instantly to his fighting instinct. Instead of retreating he had thrown up his shield to catch the down-

swinging cutlass, and had countered with a ferocious lunge that scraped blood from the Irishman's neck as he ducked aside.

Now they fought in grim silence, while Wentyard circled about them, unable to get in a thrust that might not imperil Vulmea. Both moved with the sure-footed quickness of tigers. The black man towered above the white, but even his magnificent proportions could not overshadow the sinewy physique of the pirate. In the moonlight the great muscles of both men knotted, rippled and coiled in response to their herculean exertions. The play was bewildering, almost blinding the eye that tried to follow it.

Again and again the pirate barely avoided the dart of the great spear, and again and again Bigomba caught on his shield a stroke that otherwise would have shorn him asunder. Speed of foot and strength of wrist alone saved Vulmea, for he had no defensive armor. But repeatedly he either dodged or side-stepped the savage thrusts, or beat aside the spear with his blade. And he rained blow on blow with his cutlass, slashing the bull-hide to ribbons, until the shield was little more than a wooden framework through which, slipping in a lightning-like thrust, the cutlass drew first blood as it raked through the flesh across the black chief's ribs.

At that Bigomba roared like a wounded lion, and like a wounded lion he leaped. Hurling the shield at Vulmea's head he threw all his giant body behind the arm that drove the spear at the Irishman's breast. The muscles leaped up in quivering bunches on his arm as he smote, and Wentyard cried out, unable to believe that Vulmea could avoid the lunge. But chain-

lightning was slow compared to the pirate's shift. He ducked, side-stepped, and as the spear whipped past under his arm-pit, he dealt a cut that found no shield in the way. The cutlass was a blinding flicker of steel in the moonlight, ending its arc in a butcher-shop *crunch*. Bigomba fell as a tree falls and lay still. His head had been all but severed from his body.

VULMEA stepped back, panting. His great chest heaved under the tattered shirt, and sweat dripped from his face. At last he had met a man almost his match, and the strain of that terrible encounter left the tendons of his thighs quivering.

"We've got to get out of here before the rest of them come," he gasped, catching up his half of the idol's necklace. "That smaller corridor must lead to the outside, but those niggers are in it, and we haven't any torch. Let's try this door. Maybe we can get out that way."

The ancient door was a rotten mass of crumbling panels and corroded copper bands. It cracked and splintered under the impact of Vulmea's heavy shoulder, and through the apertures the pirate felt the stir of fresh air, and caught the scent of a damp river-reek. He drew back to smash again at the door, when a chorus of fierce yells brought him about snarling like a trapped wolf. Swift feet pattered up the tunnel, torches waved, and barbaric shouts re-echoed under the vaulted roof. The white men saw a mass of fierce faces and flashing spears, thrown into relief by the flaring torches, surging up the tunnel. The light of their coming streamed before them. They had heard and interpreted the sounds of combat as they hurried up

the tunnel, and now they had sighted their enemies, and they burst into a run, howling like wolves.

"Break the door, quick!" cried Wentyard.

"No time now," grunted Vulmea. "They'd be on us before we could get through. We'll make our stand here."

He ran across the chamber to meet them before they could emerge from the comparatively narrow archway, and Wentyard followed him. Despair gripped the Englishman and in a spasm of futile rage he hurled the half-necklace from him. The glint of its jewels was mockery. He fought down the sick memory of those who waited for him in England as he took his place at the door beside the giant pirate.

As they saw their prey at bay the howls of the oncoming blacks grew wilder. Spears were brandished among the torches—then a shriek of different timbre cut the din. The foremost blacks had almost reached the point where the corridor branched off the tunnel—and out of the corridor raced a frantic figure. It was one of the black men who had gone down it exploring. And behind him came a blood-smeared nightmare. The great serpent had turned at bay at last.

It was among the blacks before they knew what was happening. Yells of hate changed to screams of terror, and in an instant all was madness, a clustering tangle of struggling black bodies and limbs, and that great sinuous cable-like trunk writhing and whipping among them, the wedge-shaped head darting and battering. Torches were knocked against the walls, scattering sparks. One man, caught in the squirming coils, was crushed and killed almost instantly, and others were dashed to the floor or hurled with bone-splinter-

tering force against the walls by the battering-ram head, or the lashing, beam-like tail. Shot and slashed as it was, wounded mortally, the great snake clung to life with the horrible vitality of its kind, and in the blind fury of its death-throes it became an appalling engine of destruction.

Within a matter of moments the blacks who survived had broken away and were fleeing down the tunnel, screaming their fear. Half a dozen limp and broken bodies lay sprawled behind them, and the serpent, unlooping himself from these victims, swept down the tunnel after the living who fled from him. Fugitives and pursuer vanished into the darkness, from which frantic yells came back faintly.

"GOD!" Wentyard wiped his brow with a trembling hand. "That might have happened to us!"

"Those niggers who went groping down the corridor must have stumbled onto him lying in the dark," muttered Vulmea. "I guess he got tired of running. Or maybe he knew he had his death-wound and turned back to kill somebody before he died. He'll chase those niggers until either he's killed them all, or died himself. They may turn on him and spear him to death when they get into the open. Pick up your part of the necklace. I'm going to try that door again."

Three powerful drives of his shoulder were required before the ancient door finally gave way. Fresh, damp air poured through, though the interior was dark. But Vulmea entered without hesitation, and Wentyard followed him. After a few yards of groping in the dark, the narrow corridor turned sharply to the left, and they emerged into a somewhat wider passage, where

a familiar, nauseating reek made Wentyard shudder.

"The snake used this tunnel," said Vulmea. "This must be the corridor that branches off the tunnel on the other side of the idol-room. There must be a regular net-work of subterranean rooms and tunnels under these cliffs. I wonder what we'd find if we explored all of them."

Wentyard fervently disavowed any curiosity in that direction, and an instant later jumped convulsively when Vulmea snapped suddenly: "Look there!"

"Where? How can a man look anywhere in this darkness?"

"Ahead of us, damn it! It's light at the other end of this tunnel!"

"Your eyes are better than mine," muttered Wentyard, but he followed the pirate with new eagerness, and soon he too could see the tiny disk of grey that seemed set in a solid black wall. After that it seemed to the Englishman that they walked for miles. It was not that far in reality, but the disk grew slowly in size and clarity, and Wentyard knew that they had come a long way from the idol-room when at last they thrust their heads through a round, vine-crossed opening and saw the stars reflected in the black water of a sullen river flowing beneath them.

"This is the way he came and went, all right," grunted Vulmea.

The tunnel opened in the steep bank and there was a narrow strip of beach below it, probably existent only in dry seasons. They dropped down to it and looked about at the dense jungle walls which hung over the river.

"Where are we?" asked Wentyard helplessly, his sense of direction entirely muddled.

"Beyond the foot of the slopes," an-

swered Vulmea, "and that means we're outside the cordon the Indians have strung around the cliffs. The coast lies in that direction; come on!"

THE sun hung high above the western horizon when two men emerged from the jungle that fringed the beach, and saw the tiny bay stretching before them.

Vulmea stopped in the shadow of the trees.

"There's your ship, lying at anchor where we left her. All you've got to do now is hail her for a boat to be sent ashore, and your part of the adventure is over."

Wentyard looked at his companion. The Englishman was bruised, scratched by briars, his clothing hanging in tatters. He could hardly have been recognized as the trim captain of the *Redoubtable*. But the change was not limited to his appearance. It went deeper. He was a different man than the one who marched his prisoner ashore in quest of a mythical hoard of gems.

"What of you? I owe you a debt that I can never—"

"You owe me nothing," Vulmea broke in. "I don't trust you, Wentyard."

The other winced. Vulmea did not know that it was the cruelest thing he could have said. He did not mean it as cruelty. He was simply speaking his mind, and it did not occur to him that it would hurt the Englishman.

"Do you think I could ever harm you now, after this?" exclaimed Wentyard. "Pirate or not, I could never—"

"You're grateful and full of the milk of human kindness now," answered Vulmea, and laughed hardly. "But you might change your mind after you got

back on your decks. John Wentyard lost in the jungle is one man; Captain Wentyard aboard his king's warship is another."

"I swear—" began Wentyard desperately, and then stopped, realizing the futility of his protestations. He realized, with an almost physical pain, that a man can never escape the consequences of a wrong, even though the victim may forgive him. His punishment now was an inability to convince Vulmea of his sincerity, and it hurt him far more bitterly than the Irishman could ever realize. But he could not expect Vulmea to trust him, he realized miserably. In that moment he loathed himself for what he had been, and for the smug, self-sufficient arrogance which had caused him to ruthlessly trample on all who fell outside the charmed circle of his approval. At that moment there was nothing in the world he desired more than the firm hand-clasp of the man who had fought and wrought so tremendously for him; but he knew he did not deserve it.

"You can't stay here!" he protested weakly.

"The Indians never come to this coast," answered Vulmea. "I'm not afraid of the Cimarroons. Don't worry about me." He laughed again, at what he considered the jest of anyone worrying about his safety. "I've lived in the wilds before now. I'm not the only pirate in these seas. There's a rendezvous you know nothing about. I can reach it easily. I'll be back on the Main with a ship and a crew the next time you hear about me."

And turning supply, he strode into the foliage and vanished, while Wentyard, dangling in his hand a jeweled strip of gold, stared helplessly after him.



Master Blythe Gets His Cannon

by
WILLIAM
ORMOND
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Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

"He tripped on the doorsill and fell flat on his back; he seemed to shrink as a dark pool formed around him."

MASTER BLYTHE, late one April day in 1775, sat on the battered butt of a dock-side piling and stared at the sparkling waters of Narragansett Bay. In spite of his name and the cheerful condition of the bay, Master Blythe's small body drooped with dejection and his blue eyes burned with a desperate fury.

"Blast her!" Master Blythe muttered. "She lies there solid as Goat Island, and it'd take a frigate to blow her out of the water!"

The object of Master Blythe's ire was His Majesty, King George III's trim cruiser, *Scorpion*, schooner rigged and mounting eighteen guns. The *Scorpion* swung at anchor with the same jaunty insolence that marked her officers when they led their press-gangs into Newport's water-front taverns.

"Peter Hemp's aboard her," Master Blythe grated savagely. He hauled the bright bronze hilt of his small-sword up between his knees and gnawed at the neat button. His three cornered hat slid to the back of his powdered wig and

his blue coat bunched around his shoulders. "And my trade's ruined!"

Heavy brogans thudded the rough planking of the dock behind Master Blythe, but he did not remove his baleful glare from the distant *Scorpion*. The brogans pounded toward him. "Cap'n Blythe!"

The shout made Master Blythe sink lower on the post; shrink into the stiff collar of his coat. He didn't deserve his title! Hadn't his own saucy brig been boarded by a boat's crew off the *Scorpion*? Boarded after a six months' voyage—just as they were entering their home port!

The twinge of bitterness that wrenched through Master Blythe's lower abdomen almost made him ill.

That cocky young whelp of a British ensign! He'd routed out Master Blythe's crew of joyful seamen, looked them over like he was judging so many cattle—and then with insolent deliberation had ordered a full dozen horrified stalwarts over the rail!

Seamen within sight of home and wives and children had been pressed into the hated king's service!

And not only that, but that sprig of

an ensign had ordered Peter Hemp into the waiting boat! Peter Hemp, big red-headed mate of the brig, Master Blythe's boyhood friend, had gone over the side: but his stricken glance had stabbed deep.

Master Blythe, indignant and helpless in the face of naked cutlasses, had redoubled his heated protests. He had shouted his rights and had come close to damning Britain; the king; and His Majesty's Royal Navy!

The smirking ensign had nodded and Master Blythe thought he had won his point! But the ensign had nodded to his burly bos'n who stood directly behind Master Blythe. The bos'n had swung his heavy sea boot. His kick took Master Blythe with unexpected suddenness. It lifted Master Blythe off the deck and sent him sailing through the open companion-way. Master Blythe and his protests had landed at the bottom of the ladder.

MASTER BLYTHE had straightened his crumpled spine, wiped the blood from his face and with painful effort had dragged himself back up the companion-way and across the deck. In spite of his native caution, Master Blythe had weakly clung to the rail, shouting and shaking his small fist at the *Scorpion's* retreating boat and the upright figure of the mocking ensign!

The brogans pounded close behind Master Blythe and a voice, hoarse with excitement, shouted:

"Cap'n Blythe! Have ye heard the news!"

Master Blythe frowned. For the past week he had been avoiding company. There was no news he wanted to hear. Master Blythe swung then, reluctantly, to face the panting arrival.

It was Old Ben Smith, gasping with

exertion and hitching up his seaman's trousers. "Gor' blimey, Cap'n," he blurted. "The minute-men has chased the blasted Redcoats clean home from Concord!"

"What?" Master Blythe jerked bolt upright. "Aye! Yesterday it was! The Redcoats marched out of Boston better'n a thousand strong! They fired the first shot at Lexington! But the minute-men rallied at Concord, an' stopped 'em at Concord bridge! Then shootin' from every stump and wall, the minute-men chased the whole bloody gang back to Boston! Killed nigh onto three-four hunnerd of 'em!"

A cold thrill shivered through Master Blythe. He breathed deeply and exhaled a thoughtful: "Lord!"

"Newport's gone wild!" Old Ben hurried on. "They're breathin' rebellion! The minute-men are gatherin' an' they're goin' to march at once and help lay siege to Boston! Never did see so many muskets!"

"Muskets!" Master Blythe's eyes swept back to the anchored *Scorpion*. Behind those ports were the muzzles of shotted cannon—Master Blythe's quick elation left him. "Muskets can't sink ships-of-war, Ben."

Perplexity knotted Old Ben's weathered face. "Huh? Wha's that?"

Gloom clouded Master Blythe's eyes. Minute-men could kill Redcoats, but it took cannon to sink a man-of-war! It was all very well for minute-men to go marching to Boston but sailors belonged on the sea—and if the Colonies went to war England would bottle up every port on the Atlantic. Master Blythe pointed to the *Scorpion*. "England has three hundred and fifty of those ships! We'd never get a cargo out of port. We'd starve!"

Old Ben's neck swelled as Master

Blythe's arm dropped to his side. "I thought ye had some spunk!" he exploded. "Look at ye! Draped over that bollard like a wet sail! Your best friend's aboard that stinkin' Britisher!"

None knew it better than Master Blythe! But how was a ruined Newport ship's captain going to get him off? It was easy enough to talk rebellion—but fighting the king's navy took more than talk and minute-men! And as for a little brig's master — Master Blythe snorted.

Old Ben did not wait for an answer. He rolled away from Master Blythe, scorn bristling from his square cut shoulders.

YES, Master Blythe reflected bitterly, his best friend was aboard the Britisher. But not even the most foolhardy seaman in Newport would try to take him off by force! And now, Old Ben would march back to Newport's taverns and in the heat of anger he would brand Master Blythe a coward and a Tory.

Master Blythe shook his head sadly. Lord, if there was only some way to get cannon! He'd show Newport how quick he'd engage that Britisher! He'd try it with only half a dozen guns!

His glance flicked along the low seawall; over the idle shipping moored at the deserted docks; and on to his own little brig. True enough he had two small cannon on board, but he'd never get within range of the *Scorpion's* guns. They'd blast him out of the water before he could go into action!

Wearily, Master Blythe eased himself off the bollard. A horn of ale might lift his drooping spirits. He would go up to the taverns and pledge his loyalty to the Colonies and wish the minute-men good luck.

Dusk was settling darkly over the town and, as Master Blythe picked his way through the cordage on the dock, he failed to notice the *Scorpion's* long-boat pull away from the ship-of-war. The oar blades did not flash and the oarlocks, carefully oiled and muffled, made no sound.

The press-gang's boat slipped through the water. Dinner hour on the water-front would find the taverns crowded. Make easy pickings for the hard-handed gang bent upon the remorseless task of filling out the *Scorpion's* crew.

Master Blythe turned into Thames Street and made for the secluded quiet of "The Seamen's Haven." Yes, a glass would help him. Master Blythe could not remember when he had been so depressed.

Yet, strangely, the "Haven" was not overcrowded. As Master Blythe entered the cool taproom a sullen hush settled on the dozen odd occupants. They turned their faces away.

Old Ben had had his say and—from the greeting—he'd said plenty. Nevertheless, Master Blythe touched the brim of his hat and nodded: "What cheer, gentlemen?"

A growl answered him. But Master Blythe was not to be put off so easily. He looked over the frozen faces of the assembly. Old Ben was seated on a stool at the far end of the taproom.

"Ben," Master Blythe asked briskly, "where's everyone?"

Old Ben's undershot jaw jutted. "The minute-men's gone on to Boston. They ain't cowards—they ain't! An' most o' the seamen has trudged along with 'em—even the storekeepers has shut up..."

"Ben!" Master Blythe leaned forward slightly. "Were you insinuating that I am a coward?"

Old Ben's hand crept along his belt, slipped around behind his back to the ugly seaman's dirk on his hip. "Master Blythe, I sailed in your father's ship 'afore I signed with you! He were a man! He wouldn't have left his best friend—not Peter Hemp—"

Old Ben stopped suddenly. His eyes bunged. He closed his mouth soundlessly. He jabbed a blunt forefinger at the open door. His jaw worked and he screamed:

"Press-men!"

MASTER BLYTHE pivoted: every man in the taproom bounced to his feet and faced the doorway. A score of British tars raced down the cobbled street, swarmed around the tavern. An ensign brought up the rear. He sauntered through the door with cool insolence. He could afford to be cool. A hairy chested bos'n swishing a cat-o-nine-tails, and two hunch shouldered jack-tars with cutlasses trailed after him respectfully. They did the dirty work while the rest of the press-gang outside blocked escape!

Master Blythe stiffened, his chin came up, his shoulders went back. He looked like a bantam rooster with his feathers ruffled—it was the same ensign who had boarded Master Blythe's brig!

The ensign bowed and smirked. "Well, my fine fellows, who among ye would sign with the king?" The ensign lifted his brows at the silence. "No volunteers?"

Anger seethed through Master Blythe. These poor able-bodied seamen were at the mercy of the press-gang! With the minute-men gone to Boston and the town practically empty the press-gang could do as they pleased.

"Hmm," murmured the ensign, disdainfully looking over the taproom. "A

sorry looking lot, by Jove!" He shook his head and his eye fell on Master Blythe. He pointed his slender walking stick. "*You* would make a dam' fine cabin-boy! We need a cabin-boy."

The burly bos'n blurted a gruff gawfaw. He flicked the cat-o-nine-tails suggestively. For a painfully long moment Master Blythe did not fully realize the significance of that flirting cat-o-nine-tails.

Then Master Blythe felt very hot. Blood rushed to his face. His breath was constricted. He was a small man and that he granted—but he was master and owner of his own ship! The anger that had seethed through Master Blythe boiled.

They meant to press *him* into service as a cabin-boy!

Master Blythe was surprised to hear his own voice say as coolly as a New England breeze: "I am a ship's master, young sir, and I warn you not to lay a hand on my person!"

A DEAD silence smothered the taproom. Master Blythe heard Old Ben gasp. Even the huge bos'n was startled. The ensign was furious. His lips rolled apart. "Damn your impertinence! When the king wants a man—high or low—he gets him! Bos'n, give him a taste of the cat!"

Master Blythe's sea-won muscles became as taut as a ship's line in a gale. His right hand clenched. His stiff fingers opened again.

The bos'n lunged forward. The cat-o-nine-tails unwound; the skin-splitting lash reached for Master Blythe.

But Master Blythe had not waited for the whip. His hand flashed like a train of lighted powder to his sword hilt.

"Cabin-boy!" he spat the word like a mouthful of sand. Then, with small-

sword quivering fingerlike in his hand, Master Blythe nimbly side-stepped and drove his blade into the bos'n's hairy chest. The point of Master Blythe's small-sword came out of the bos'n's back!

"Ahhhh——" the bos'n moaned. The cat-o-nine-tails slid out of his hairy paw and with an expression of utter amazement on his face the bos'n reeled across the taproom. He tripped on the doorsill and fell flat on his back: he seemed to shrink as a dark pool formed around him.

"Treason!" the ensign shrieked. He clawed at the hilt of his small-sword. "Surrender! Surrender in the King's Name! You'll hang for this!"

"No," said Master Blythe, and he drove forward to engage the ensign's blade. "No, I will not surrender!"

The ensign lunged, sword darting at Master Blythe's throat. Master Blythe deftly parried the thrust and his quick return sliced the ensign's cheek. The ensign floundered wildly. He had little relish for Master Blythe's kind of sword play!

"Ho!" he shouted. "To the King!"

The two press-men with cutlasses seemed to wake from some horrible nightmare. They shook themselves and started for Master Blythe. A tall ape-armed Newport seaman near the door laconically spit on his hand, caught up a three legged stool and cracked the nearest press-man on the head.

Master Blythe was too intent to notice. His glittering blade swooped and ripped into the ensign's sword arm. The ensign's small-sword shot out of his hand. He yelped like a frightened terrier and scurried to the taproom door.

"Have at ye!" Master Blythe barked and whirled on the last press-man. The wretch dropped his cutlass and chased the ensign into the street.

"Look out!" It was Old Ben's below. "There's a big gang outside!"

"So I see," Master Blythe leaped for the bar. A brace of loaded pistols always rested there. He tucked his bloody sword under his arm, scooped up the pistols and sprinted to the door.

"Get that dirty little imp!" the ensign raged at the press-gang. He wrapped his coat around his arm and kept well away. "Go in after him!" The press-gang stalked forward cautiously, a little uncertain.

But there was nothing uncertain about Master Blythe. He crouched in the wide doorway, a long pistol knotted in each small fist. "Come on, gentlemen, and get your meat for the king. Meat that will poison him!"

A press-man with a black patch over his eye snorted derisively. "This will poison ye!" He cocked his short barrelled fowling piece and took deliberate aim at Master Blythe, his one eye glowering along the sights.

Master Blythe swung his pistol and fired. "You asked for it!"

THE black patch over the sailor's eye jumped. The sailor jumped too. He twisted as he fell and fired his flint-lock into the press-gang! The blast of small shot sprayed the street. The press-gang yowled and charged. They charged right over the ensign and raced down the cobbled street to the safety of the *Scorpion's* barge. The ensign picked himself out of the gutter and ran after them.

Master Blythe fired his second shot over their heads. The ensign overtook the press-gang. Master Blythe shrugged a little regretfully and turned back into the taproom.

"Now," he said quietly, "now, I will have my ale."

The landlord waddled to Master Blythe's elbow, cleared his throat respectfully and set a brimming tankard in front of him. "Your ale, Cap'n."

Master Blythe sheathed his sword, slapped it firmly into the scabbard. He looked up then and saw Old Ben Smith standing before him. The old seaman's face was a mask of awe and wonder. He tugged nervously at his forelock.

"Cap'n Blythe," Old Ben swallowed twice. "I begs your pardon humble like! I'll eat dirt! I'll drink bilge water! If ye'll only forgive me, I'll—"

Master Blythe lifted a hand, "Easy, Ben! Any man can fly off the nadle." He raised his tankard and nodded to the room. "To the Sovereign Colony of Rhode Island — and damn King George's breeches!"

There was a hearty chorus of "Ayes" to Master Blythe's toast, tankards clicked. Master Blythe buried his face in the foam and drank his pint to the bottom.

Old Ben did not move. He waited

impatiently until Master Blythe set his tankard on the table. "Cap'n, sir, if ye'll pardon me, sir."

"Yes, Ben."

"Don't sit there like that with your legs crossed, sir! Get a horse under ye! Ride like hell! That press-gang will be back with half the ship's crew! They'll hang you, Cap'n Blythe!" Old Ben's voice quavered. "They'll seize your fine little brig! You ain't got a chance! You run, Cap'n, 'fore they be acomin' back!"

"Yes, Ben, I know all that," Master Blythe nodded slowly. And more! His snug white house, his brig, his life—everything he possessed was forfeit. "I'm a traitor to the king in their eyes, but—" he added significantly, "I'm a citizen of Rhode Island first, and I say a state of war exists. The British will have to look out for themselves!"

"My God," Old Ben groaned. "Cap'n, sir, be ye daft? The King's Navy'll come roaring up the quay any minute now, an' ye won't have a chance!

"A tall ape-armed Newport seaman near the door laconically spit on his hand, caught up a three legged stool and cracked the nearest press-man on the head."



Please, Cap'n, get your flippers goin'—an' run like hell!"

"Belay, Ben, stow it!" Master Blythe scowled at a spot of dust on his buckled shoes. He stood up slowly, diminutive and gentle beside the rugged, sputtering sailor. He glanced around the room. "Ben's right and you'd all better skeddaddle. That press-gang and the *Scorpion's* will storm Newport this night! They'll be back with blood in their eyes!"

"God love us! We're all traitors!" Old Ben choked. "We stood by while His Majesty's people were put to rout! We'll *all* dance from a yard-arm!"

Stools bounced, a tankard crashed on the flagstones. Old Ben's words were a blow that left every man jack of them gasping!

The fat landlord swelled out his cheeks and boomed: "Damn me—it was worth it! They can tear down mine inn! I'd stick here and fight if we had a man to lead us!"

Every man in the taproom halted and looked at Master Blythe. The gangling, ape-armed seaman rolled forward. "How about it, Cap'n Blythe? It's up to you. We follow where you lead!"

With one voice they agreed, a hearty, determined growl of approval.

Master Blythe clasped his hands under the long tails of his blue coat. He stared at the floor for a long moment then looked up and said reflectively: "There's better than a hundred men aboard the *Scorpion*! She mounts eighteen guns! In a pinch she could anchor just out of musket shot and bombard Newport to a bloody shambles!"

"It's up to you, Cap'n Blythe," the long sailor repeated.

"Yes, I know," Master Blythe said. "I was just casting up the odds. We

can scarce muster a score of men, with all the minute-men gone, and no tars in the town . . ." Master Blythe sighed. "Well, my buckos, get home quickly, fetch cutlasses and pistols, mind you. Then meet me at the sea-wall within the hour!"

THERE was a scramble for the door and Master Blythe called after them. "Easy does it! They'll be coming ashore!"

"You keep them there pistols," the landlord puffed. "I've another brace!"

Thoughtfully, Master Blythe loaded the long barreled flintlocks while the landlord locked the tavern doors and slammed the heavy shutters. Thames Street was deserted. The whole town must have followed the minute-men.

Night, clear and calm, had settled on the bay. A glow to the east warned Master Blythe that the moon would be bright. He paused at the corner of Broadway and peered at the distant and somber shadow of the *Scorpion*. Lights moved like fireflies on the man-of-war's deck.

"Very active out there," Master Blythe mused. The landlord came gal-lumping down the street; he slowed to a dog-trot and Master Blythe was startled. The landlord's white apron was gone, and his vast girth was held by a broad belt with a massive brass buckle. A shining cutlass and two goose-neck pistols jutted out of the belt.

Master Blythe nodded approvingly. "We'll get to the sea-wall."

Three longboats put out from the side of the *Scorpion*. They moved swiftly over the open water, dark and sinister, and very quiet. Master Blythe watched them impatiently. The Newport seamen drifted up one by one to join Master Blythe in the shadow of the sea wall.

Eighteen men counting himself. One man for each of the *Scorpion's* cannon! It could be worse. Yes—he could be here all alone!

The *Scorpion's* longboats were close to the end of the landing dock. Master Blythe said, "Crouch down behind the sea-wall, men, and for God's sake be quiet!"

Old Ben brushed past. "What ye gonna do, cap'n? Ambush 'em like them Concord fellers done the Redcoats?"

"No! Don't fire!" Master Blythe warned. "Don't pull a trigger unless I give the word!"

The seamen ducked into hiding just as the first of the *Scorpion's* longboats bumped the dock. A horde of striped shirted jacktars swarmed on the quay. They formed a column of twos under the quick, low voiced commands of their blue-coated officers. The soft glow of the rising moon glinted on their arms.

"A full strength landing party," Master Blythe breathed. "They're going to take the town apart!"

At double-quick the landing party came down the dock and swung briskly into Broadway. Their sea boots rumbled ominously. The officers with drawn swords trotted beside the grim and silent ranks.

MASTER BLYTHE hunched lower and pleaded under his breath. "Don't shoot, boys, don't shoot! Hold your fire!" Master Blythe felt a ripple of tension sweep his hidden men, a gathering anger that might send them charging over the low wall.

The landing party smartly jogged abreast of the seawall. Sixty men, Master Blythe counted, and all of them scowling with the fierce joy of fighting men soon to be completely revenged. They came within ten yards

of the wall and veered past, deploying a thin skirmish line at the head of Thames Street. They were going to sweep the town.

"What'n hell's wrong with ye, cap'n?" Old Ben growled. "Why didn't you shoot 'em! They're gone now!"

"Good!" Master Blythe said. The last of the landing party disappeared down Thames Street. He jumped to the top of the wall. "Ben, if you hear a shot tell the boys to scatter and run like hell. If you hear me whistle, come arunning! Pass the word along."

Master Blythe was gone then, boldly marching down the dock, his smallsword clanking at his side and the hard heels of his buckled shoes clicking as briskly as any Officer's in His Majesty's Navy! He saw the sentry guarding the longboats swing to meet him.

Master Blythe straightened his shoulders. His hand slipped to the pistol butt inside his blue coat. He was banking on that blue coat. In this moonlight, the sentry could easily mistake him for a ship's officer!

"What's wrong, sir?" the sentry called. He held his musket at ready. Master Blythe quickened his step. He was within thirty paces of the sentry. He whipped out his pistols.

"I'll blow your head off if you move!" Master Blythe barked.

That settled the sentry. He lowered his musket. Master Blythe started to whistle, a cheerful melodious whistle. He walked within a yard of the sentry. "Drop that musket!"

"I'm a pressed-man, sir, the sentry muttered. "I won't raise no cry if you give me a chance to get away! Only don't let them bluecoats lay hands on me! A hunnert lashes . . ."

"Shut up!" Master Blythe ordered curtly and waved his pistol. The Newport seaman came running down the dock. They gathered around Master Blythe and his prisoner.

Old Ben lifted his pistol and nodded at the captive. "Shall I brain him?"

"No! I need him," Master Blythe said. "Into a longboat men! Look sharp! We'll pay the *Scorpion* a visit!"

The ape-armed seaman whistled.

Master Blythe turned on him. "You left it up to me—but there's still time to clear away."

"No, cap'n," the ape-armed seaman grunted, "I like's to row in the moonlight! But every man aboard the *Scorpion* will be on deck—they'll be lookin' for fires in the town."

"Yes," Master Blythe said, "but get an oar in your hands!"

MASTER BLYTHE sat in the stern with the sentry at his side. The Newport seamen pulled with a will. The longboat hissed over the water. Old Ben, facing Master Blythe, grunted between strokes. "Cap'n . . . thought you . . . couldn't take a . . . ship . . . without . . . cannon!"

Master Blythe smiled. "No time for cannon, Ben. Besides I'd like to see Peter Hemp!" The low rakish stern of the *Scorpion* loomed ahead, Master Blythe lifted the pistol in his lap and shoved the muzzle into the sentry's side. "When they hail us, you make reply! One slip, sailor, and I'll shoot a very neat hole through you!"

The port side of the *Scorpion* faced the town. Master Blythe directed the longboat under the starboard rail. The watch sent a surprised hail across the water. "Boat, Ahoy!"

Master Blythe prodded his prisoner's ribs. "Give 'em a true answer!"

Heads popped over the starboard rail. The breathless Newport seamen leaned on their oars. The longboat coasted under the frowning muzzles of the *Scorpion's* cannon. An action lantern near the quarterdeck cast a strange and sickly light on the water.

Master Blythe's prisoner sucked in a sullen breath and flinched as the pistol nudged hard. "Lieutenant Gratt's boat! Bringing a prisoner!"

"So you got him, eh?" the jubilant watch called. "We didn't think you'd be back so quick!"

"Neither did I!"

Master Blythe choked. He rammed his pistol into the seaman's ribs. "If that's a tip off . . ."

"It ain't, sir," the sentry whined, "Gawd, no, it ain't!"

A harsh laugh echoed from the *Scorpion's* deck. "Bring the dirty little rebel aboard!"

"I'll be right up," Master Blythe whispered. "Ease her into the Jacob's Ladder, boys, and follow me!"

Master Blythe loosened his small sword in the scabbard, tucked a pistol into his buttoned coat and grasped the other pistol firmly. He would need to be firm about this business: there were about forty men aboard the *Scorpion* and they'd fight like fiends.

THE Newport seamen shipped their oars. The ladder was under Master Blythe's left hand. The longboat bumped the fender. Then Master Blythe clambered swiftly up the ladder, a good deal faster than he would have gone up the side of his own brig!

Master Blythe looked up. The face above him gaped with surprise. Master Blythe did not have time to be surprised. He was moving too fast. He swung his right arm up and over.

The long barrel of Master Blythe's pistol slapped that startled face, smashed it back over the rail.

Master Blythe bounced to the deck: right in the middle of the *Scorpion's* crew. A big blackamoor darted for the mainmast and a rack of cutlasses. His big hand wound around a hilt. Master Blythe leveled his cocked pistol and smoke gushed around an orange flame. The blackamoor's hand turned red.

The Newport seamen stormed over the rail: Old Ben in the van. His wild yell and headlong charge scattered the stunned crew!

The blue-coated officer of the watch roared from the quarterdeck. "Damme! The blighters are rebels!" His commands lashed the *Scorpion's* crew into action. The deck swarmed. Knots of men, fighting savagely, swirled against the rail.

Master Blythe's small sword was in his hand. He saw the officer on the quarterdeck dash for the small swivel cannon mounted on the rail. The swivel gun was used on boarders. It was effective and it was exceptionally handy.

That swivel gun in the hands of the officer would clear the deck!

"No you don't," Master Blythe muttered. He sprinted along the rail. A cutlass swiped out of nowhere. Master Blythe's hat and his wig sailed into the bay, but Master Blythe's small sword streaked out. The wielder of the cutlass clawed at his bloody throat and sprawled out of Master Blythe's path.

The officer, a sputtering match in his hand, wrenched the swivel gun around. He swung the muzzle over the deck. It pointed directly at a flying wedge of Newport seamen rushing the forecastle head.

"Hold!" Master Blythe roared.

The officer, a snarl of fury on his lean face, jerked around. He had the choice of firing the swivel gun or protecting himself from Master Blythe's small-sword. He dropped the match and cleared his sword.

"Very wise," Master Blythe murmured. He whipped forward, sword poised, to cross blades with the officer.

"Damn your bones!" the officer panted. "You little pup, I'll teach you a trick or two you won't relish!" He lunged at Master Blythe with all the force and anger of a man who has been rudely interrupted in the course of duty.

Master Blythe leaned back from the officer's point and parried with high *prime*. He was a little slow. The point pinked Master Blythe's cheek.

"Ha!" the officer chortled as blood splattered down the front of Master Blythe's blue coat.

Perhaps, Master Blythe decided, he had been a bit impulsive. This officer's long arm, and clever sword play might well be fatal. The tall officer parried Master Blythe's quick return and savagely thrust at Master Blythe's briefly exposed chest.

Master Blythe jack-knifed, strained to counter in *tierce*. The officer's point slashed into Master Blythe's coat, grazed his chest and ripped out of the fabric below his left arm!

"LUD!" Master Blythe breathed as he snapped upright.

The officer was grinning broadly, confident and assured. As their blades engaged he nodded. "That's twice! The third time does it!"

He was deliberate in his preparations for the final assault. He started the long and difficult *double on both sides*

of the arm. His complicated and graceful parades were an insulting contemptuous gesture of self-acknowledged superiority. His point danced around Master Blythe. The officer was enjoying himself hugely!

If the officer had forgotten himself in a fencing lesson, Master Blythe had not forgotten that he was fighting for a ship—and he had no time for nonsense! Master Blythe's blood-smeared jaw clamped shut. "This has gone far enough!"

The officer's whirring blade darted and Master Blythe, ignoring the niceties of the attack, parried and lunged hard. His *time thrust* put an end to the fencing lesson! Master Blythe's blade shot through the officer's indifferent guard and slid into his shoulder as smoothly as a surgeon making an incision.

The tall officer's sword arm slowly dropped, his limp fingers opened, his small-sword clattered on the deck. He stared down at Master Blythe, his eyes round with astonishment. "Why, you little beggar!"

"Ship's owner!" Master Blythe corrected, withdrawing his blade from the officer's shoulder. The officer swayed, staggered back and slowly sat down, his hand clutching his shoulder.

Master Blythe whirled then, snatched up the smoldering match from the deck and jumped to the swivel gun. The Newport seamen were finding things difficult. The landlord braced himself against the mainmast, flailed his cutlass like a butcher knife. His blows were effective, but the crowding ring of jacktars made him grunt with exertion. Old Ben and the ape-armed seaman furiously fought to clear the forecastle head. The odds were against them.

"Not so good," Master Blythe mut-

tered. He blew on the match until it glowed brightly. Then sighting the swivel gun on a dozen odd charging *Scorpion* jacktars, Master Blythe put the match to the touch-hole. The swivel gun bucked, roared, and blasted small-shot.

"Very effective," Master Blythe shuddered. The gray smoke drifted across the littered deck. The cannon had turned the tide. Up forward came a sharp cry of "Quarter! Quarter!" The cry lifted to a chorus! The *Scorpion's* crew had their bellies full!

"Drive 'em below!" Master Blythe shouted. The *Scorpion's* shattered crew crowded forward with anxious eyes on the swivel gun. Master Blythe remembered the wounded officer. He swung around—the officer had crawled to the stern rail.

"Haw!" said the officer triumphantly. He jerked his head at the bay. "See?"

Master Blythe saw! Crowded to the gunwales; surging through the water; oars flashing in the moonlight came the *Scorpion's* longboats! The landing party was returning. They were within two hundred yards of the ship and the oarsmen rowed like mad!

"Hell!" said Master Blythe. He lifted his voice. "Ben! Ben!"

Master Blythe leaned across the deck, dropped beside a blunt muzzled port-side carronade. He spun the elevation screw. The carronade dropped. He sighted the gun a little grimly. His battered Newport seamen could never stand against those boarders if they got under the *Scorpion's* lee!

Old Ben bounded to Master Blythe's side. He saw the approaching longboats. "You'll never hit 'em!"

"Kick those blocks out," Master Blythe snapped. "And pray the braces hold!" He yanked his second pistol out

of his coat front, held it close to the touch-hole of the carronade. The pistol cracked: the cannon roared.

Master Blythe peered through the dark smoke. A tall geyser of water spouted between the racing longboats. The moonlight glinted on the column. The rowers faltered. Sharp voices urged them on.

"Get crews to the guns, Ben," Master Blythe barked. "I'll give 'em a hail!"

Old Ben snorted. "There ain't men enough, Cap'n! Not even fer the port broadside!"

"Kick loose what guns you can then," Master Blythe swung nimbly to the ratlines. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "Boats, ahoy!" His voice carried over the water. "Sheer off and rest your oars or I'll blow you out of the water!"

THE longboats drifted, clearer now in the moonlight. Master Blythe glanced down. Eight Newport seamen were trying to clear five guns, they worked frantically. "Ben, can you get those guns free if we need 'em?"

"Aye, sir, but I've nothin' to touch 'em off with, Cap'n!"

"You'll find a match on the quarter deck," Master Blythe said and cupped his hands again and shouted. "I'll give you a full broadside if you come closer!"

A voice, shrill with anger, blazed from the drifting longboats. "In the King's name, hold fire! Stand by to deliver my ship! You'll swing for piracy and treason!"

Master Blythe frowned. Piracy? That was extremely harsh!

There was a flurry on the deck, a half score of men burst out of the forward companionway. For a moment, Master Blythe thought he was attacked front and rear. Then he saw a shining

red-head. Peter Hemp! His own mate and fresh support for the weary Newport seamen. The big mate was grinning. He led his men forward to serve the guns!

"Good evening, Mister Hemp," Master Blythe said. He pointed to the longboats. "That fellow says we're pirates!"

"Pirates, hell!" Peter Hemp exploded. "We'll fight for Liberty and Rhode Island!"

A good answer, Master Blythe decided. And, since the Colonies were at war with England, Rhode Island might as well acquire a Navy! Master Blythe pursed his lips. He looked out over the water. He wanted the ship but he did not want a hundred prisoners. That landing party couldn't go back to hostile Newport!

Master Blythe smiled to himself. The Massachusetts people had chased the Redcoats back to Boston! It was an idea—a good idea!

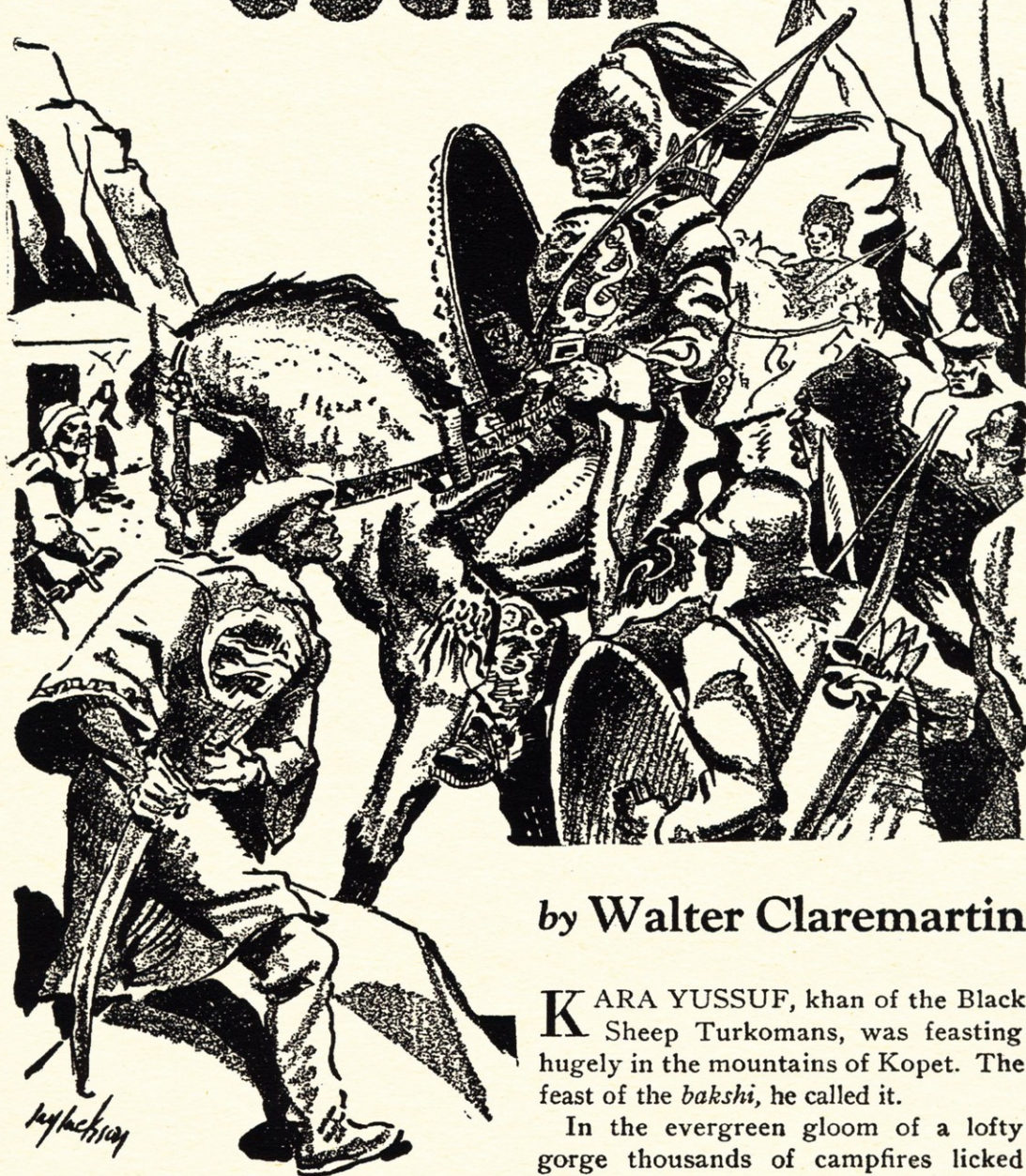
He lifted his voice. "The British are bottled up in Boston! I suggest you try rowing!"

There was a sputtering shout of rage from the longboats. Master Blythe turned to his red-headed mate. "Drop a shot between 'em, Mister Hemp! This's not the moment for them to quibble about rowing to Boston!"

Master Blythe leaned back against the ratlines and watched the longboats' oarsmen angrily chop the water, pulling out to Narragansett Bay. He sighed, and then frowned down at Old Ben.

"That proves my point, sir! See 'em pull! You must have *cannon*—" Master Blythe paused, whistled a soundless tune; he nodded to himself. "And now, we have cannon and there's no sense wasting 'em! We'll sail—and use 'em on a British ship-of-war!"

GOLDEN HOUR OF GUCHEE



Illustrated by JAY JACKSON

by Walter Claremartin

KARA YUSSUF, khan of the Black Sheep Turkomans, was feasting hugely in the mountains of Kopet. The feast of the *bakshi*, he called it.

In the evergreen gloom of a lofty gorge thousands of campfires licked off the twilight. Around each of the campfires were men. They disposed themselves busily, sewing boots, whet-

ting spears, picking flints from the frogs of their horses.

At each fire a brass kettle of mutton-rice stew steamed and bubbled and smelled fat and rank. The men liked that smell, and sniffed often.

Mountaineers, not subjects of the Black Sheep khan, trudged from fire to fire, peddling provisions. The Turkomans swapped knives with the mountain men and baited the red-kirtled women. The feast of the singing *bakshi* seemed to be in a grand good humor.

Kara Yussuf himself, flinging thrift to the winds, entertained in his goat-hair pavilion. Black-bearded, pinch-eyed, with a sword-cleft in his chin, he symbolized courage and cunning. Primed with wine he waved greetings and hallooed to the fires; but talked low in the ears of his chieftains.

In the spirit of peace and goodwill to mankind, Kara Yussuf had discarded his weapons. His war helmet was passed, full of sweetmeats. Though his sabre still hung in the sheath at his belt, it was hidden by the long jubba of rainbow silk reserved for holiday splendor.

At one of the reeking pots of *p'lov*, outside the regal pavilion, a man stared at the khan, fascinated. He, too, had a split beard of the same square cut, a cleft in his chin, and a squint. His hair, his eyes, in a loose way his whole aspect, resembled the face of the khan.

The resemblance stopped short in the matter of the soul; for the fellow looked dreamy and kind.

When the khan dipped his fist into his mutton-rice mess, the man aped him, though he burned his whole hand. He imitated the khan's every gesture. So engrossed he became in thus playing the king that one of his pot comrades shouted:

"Look, Uncle, our Guchee is at it again!"

The old fellow called Uncle cackled. "Ay," he said, "Guchee fancies he looks like Kara Yussuf. But his belly's too round, I'm thinking."

"We can remedy that," said a squat, sunburned fellow, "by dividing amongst us his share of the kettle."

"Even then," cackled Uncle, "a good dog could detect him; for Guchee still would smell of the yaboos."

Guchee raised his cleft chin with a khan-like scorn:

"Cackle on, you old hen. My hour shall come. I was not born to look great for nothing."

"Thou wert born," said another, "to whack yaboos on the rump—"

His jest was cut short as if his tongue had been clipped. A warning stillness struck the encampment.

FROM the mouth of the nearest guarded pass came the jingle and thud of armed riding.

The Turkomans gripped their weapons and stared as Mangali, the Tatar, rode through.

Mangali, the Tatar, great Tamerlane's friend, was equipped as be seemed the Earth-Shakers. His bridle reins dazzled with silver and sunstone; his arrow case twinkled with gold. His helmet sprouted the red horse-tail that had swept a million souls to oblivion.

None but this mighty Tatar chief could wield that appalling *tulwar*, double length and double width, hung by a loop of camel's hair from the horn of his brocaded saddle.

Though he was traveling through bitterly jealous lands, the Tatar led only six warriors.

Tall guards near the khan's pavilion crossed lances to halt the armed band:

"In the name of Kara Yussuf, supreme lord of the Black Sheep Turkomans, declare thy name and thy errand."

Mangali snatched a treasure bag from his belt and emptied it into the path, a shower of gleaming coins.

"Gold from the sacking of great cities," he answered scornfully. "It is Mangali, friend of Timur, rides through."

The wool-wrapped Turkomans glared stonily from their brightly dyed sheep-skin bonnets. "Pass, friend of Lord Timur," they said.

When Mangali and his warriors had moved on through the pines, the guards swooped down with hungry eyes and scraped up the bloodstained fortune.

The Tatars threaded the blinding fires until they sighted the khan in his jubba.

"*Ulluh yarin!* God with thee!" Mangali saluted the khan.

The khan rose. "*Khosh geldin!* Thou art welcome, Mangali. Alight. Tarry here. Thou art even in time for the feast of the singing bakshi."

"The feast of the singing bakshi—and no women to sing?" said Mangali.

"Nay, we sing much better without them. Thou shalt stay and judge it thyself."

"Nay, Kara Yussuf, 'tis better for thee to judge the tone of thy people. I haste from the hunt back to Samarkand where Lord Timur hath need of loyal spears and shafts to drive the Jat into the sea. We shall drink a gourd of chaal with thee and thy friends, since thou art at peace with Timur."

Yussuf sent a slave for camel's milk, spicy with Kopet wines.

"At peace—with Timur," he toasted, his fiery black eyes a riddle.

Out through the lofty valley, among the odorous fires and the black felt tents of the flat-nosed Turkomans, Mangali set forth again. His hunting falcon was on his shoulder. The falcon's eyes were not more keen than the eyes of the tawny warrior. Ten thousand sheep could be shepherded in those dark bristling ravines; four or five thousand ponies.

"Ha! feast of the bakshi!" he rumbled. "They sing better, they do, without women!"

They were passing the campfire where Guchee stood, a gourd of mare's milk in his hand. Mangali checked his horse sharply.

"By the beard of my grandsire!" He turned in his saddle to stare back at the khan's pavilion.

Guchee beamed and grimaced, delighted; but the warriors about the fire laughed.

"Nay, stranger," the dried cackling Uncle explained, "Guchee is not commander of the Black Sheep Turkomans, though he knows well enough how to ape him."

"Then he must be sardar of a meeng, commander of a thousand," Mangali suggested in mock innocence.

Guchee's comrades laughed roundly. "Nay, not of a thousand; nor five hundred; nor yet a hare-chasing hundred."

"Fifty," declared Guchee, with offended pride.

"Ha ya! Fifty yaboos of the pack-mule train. Tell the Tatar lord how thou didst win thy scar, Guchee."

"In battle," the man answered haughtily, posing his face to the fire-light so the stranger could get the effect.

"Yea, a most famous battle," drawled the leather-faced cynic. "The battle

of Wood-on-Wood. When Kara Yussuf was marked by a Persian blade, this Guchee fellow banged his chin on the edge of a stump. The old wench at the well saw him do it."

A merry laughter went round the pot; even the Tatars sharing.

"Laugh, old gourds, till ye crack!" cried Guchee. "My turn shall come. He that looks like the great may be called to act for the great. Who can say what is written by Ulluh?"

"I can see 'tis a wise stick beats thy yaboos, my friend. Ulluh yarin!" said Mangali, departing. The Tatars thundered down the rock trail.

With his left hand—for the khan was left-handed—Guchee hoisted the mushk of koomiss and swigged valiantly. In lofty style he addressed the dried cynic:

"I tell thee, old jackass, thou'rt jealous. Can I help that I look like the khan? Why, when I galloped into Nisapur on my white stallion—"

"Mule!" yelled somebody.

"Fool, thou knowest my white stallion. When I galloped into Nisapur, the lord of the city with twenty dancing maidens welcomed me: saying: 'Hail, Kara Yussuf!' But I would not fare by deceit, so I convinced him he was in error."

"Twenty broken-hearted damsels," groaned someone.

"In a great hour," Guchee continued, "I could substitute for the khan. Believe it or not, ye rump-headed skeptics. It is the will of Ulluh I should look like a khan, and something important shall come of it. A holy Eesh-an prophesied that."

THE feast of the bakshi continued—long enough to gather the clans. Then Kara Yussuf rolled up his port-

able city; packed *kajavaks* of provisions on camels and yaboos; reviewed the largest and fiercest army of Turkomans ever mobilized by a nomad khan; galloped stealthily night by night down from the craggy Kopet range, to crack the frontiers of Timur.

In the middle of the Black Sand desert, two days from the oasis of Merv, they ran into Mangali's army.

"The old fox worked fast!" Kara Yussuf pulled his split beard. "But verily my eye is a liar, or we outnumber them two to one."

He ordered the pack train moved to the right to avoid a possible stampede. Five hundred camels, yaboos and mules, half hid in a valley of tamarisk scrub, were watched by fifty Persian slaves commanded by ten stout Turkomans, of whom Guchee was one.

Kara Yussuf set his horde in formation. Too wily to charge into a steel-tipped hail from the mighty horned bows of the Tatars, the Turkoman chief chose to wait. Lord Timur, he knew, had much need of Mangali to assist him in smashing the Jat. Mangali would not dare to dally.

Mangali accepted the challenge. His bannermen waved the advance.

"*Dar u gar!*" The terrible Tatar cry had paralyzed half of Asia.

Pouring death from their bristling quivers the Tatars stormed over the plain. Thousands of croaking partridges in panic-smitten swarms roared from the patchy wormwood and fought through the furling dust clouds to the sky. The crimson banners of Samarkand darted above the low breakers of drifted sand. Plumed helmets swam along the dunes like shark fins over billows.

Confident of their overwhelming

strength the Turkoman riders seized their spears and leaped to meet the whirlwind.

The crash of war was bewildering. For a time Mangali could not fight clear to see how the tide was moving. When he did cut through to the edge of the storm he saw the battle was veering against him.

Frenzied with hope of victory the Turkomans were whooping the name of their khan and driving the Tatars backward. If they broke, they were done for; a massacre. To retreat in order meant sure defeat, for the Turkomans vastly outweighed them.

Only a rally, a forward rush, could break Kara Yussuf's formation.

Turning his tawny head right and left, the veteran Tatar studied the landscape. His quick eye stopped on the baggage herd, half hid in the tamarisk bushes. Ten men in the saddle were straining their necks to observe how the battle progressed. One of these men was Guchee.

"*Dar u gar!*" pealed the Tatar chieftain and charged, straight into the mules and yaboos. The pack guards braced for his onslaught. A terrific melee rattled the bush, while the animals snorted and milled. Mangali was slashed through his bullshide boots, and his charger bled hard at the flanks.

He fought on, through the riot, to Guchee.

A few minutes later, pursued by four, Mangali raced back to the battle; bearing aloft on the point of his spear a bearded human head. In and out among the clashing groups he lunged, braying victoriously:

"The khan is slain! The khan is slain! Behold the head of Yussuf!"

"The khan is slain!" The cry spread through the ranks of Tatars. "Behold his head! Behold his head!" The Turkomans heard, saw, hesitated. An instant was enough. The respiration Tatars raised their cry and took the aggressive madly. The Turkomans, believing themselves leaderless, flinched, wavered, broke. Their backward rout carried Kara Yussuf along, swearing mightily but unnoticed.

Mangali maneuvered his crack horse troop to force the Turkomans into their pack train. A stampede finished the battle. Unhorsed, unhelmeted, his beard floury with dust, Kara Yussuf went down with his clans.

MANGALI looked up at the head on his spear. A grim smile broke through his iron features.

"By Ulluh, old fellow, 'tis a great day for thee. Thou hast achieved thy ambition!"

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Hangman's Coin

by Thorp McCluskey

Illustrated by
JAY JACKSON

BLACK JEM WILLIS watched the crisply-aproned tavern maid pour boiling hot water from a shiny tea-kettle into his rum and sugar. At last he lifted a grimy hand.

"Have done, Miss Jezebel," he said, with a ribald chuckle. "Would you have me drinking pap, my pretty lass? And how far mought it be to Boston Town?"

She tossed her head, and her blue eyes crackled as she answered him, "I am not called Jezebel, tinker, but Rosalind. And it would seem that pap's too strong for you, if but a bit of rum and supper have loosed your tongue so disrespectful. And as for Boston Town, tinker, it might be eighty mile, and it might be forty, but from Hooker's Crossing, seven mile down the pike, 'tis fifty-eight."

Black Jem, unable quickly to think of an apt retort, contented himself with sliding two silver shillings across the table-top and burying his nose in the fragrant drink. The tavern-maid, head held high, scooped up Jem's platter with its knuckle bone and soggy scraps of bread, and marched into the kitchen.

Black Jem leaned back against the

pine-planked wall and watched the room through glowering, beetle-browed eyes. . . .

This small inn, huddled so close beside the Boston Pike, did, Black Jem enviously saw, a good business. Six or seven men, travelers like himself, were eating and drinking, preparatory to a night's slumber in the rooms overhead; the sounds of rigs in the yard outside and of men ahorseback were frequent and brisk. Black Jem, through a rosy, rum-induced mist, wondered savagely if he would ever have the gold with which to buy a place like this and settle down.

At a large table in the center of the room a party of young men were holding merry revelry. The center of the table groaned beneath two monstrous turkeys, now fast disappearing beneath the ravenous onslaughts of the youths, who were lubricating their esophageal passages with mighty potations from a stone jug of applejack, a drink authoritative as the speech of a Bishop.

Black Jem watched the jovial youths with interest. Only one, he saw, was not drinking, while the others were encouraging the lad on to some feat

which appeared to require both courage and self-assurance.

"She is a pretty lass," one was saying, his voice full of thick laughter and his eyes sparkling with fervour. "And she has promised you her hand if you but gain her father's consent. I must warn you, friend Andrew; his nose is as long and as cold as an icicle. And, when he scents a suitor, he is like a mad bull."

"Ho! Ho!" another laughed. "One year ago I approached him, and for a fortnight afterward the imprint of his boot was blue upon my buttocks!"

"Still," said a third, "he is purse proud. Andrew is no penniless suitor; unlike ourselves he has worked hard and saved his money. I think, Andrew, that if you show him the gold and tell him that once you have gained his consent you will use it to the purchase of a third interest in Ebenezer Phelps' grist mill, he will grant you his daughter."

For the first time Andrew Bennett spoke.

"I hope so, gentlemen; I hope so, indeed," he exclaimed eagerly. He touched a leathern pouch at his waist. "I have the money here, that Judge Hackaday may see for himself whether or not I am a suitor of merit. And now, friends, I must be gone. It is high twilight, and I have yet to cover seven miles of pike."

"Shall we go with you, an escort of forlorn suitors?" one shouted. Smiling, Andrew Bennett shook his head.

"It will be scarce dark ere I arrive, and the roads are quiet. And, too, I have a pistol. Wait here; I will return before eleven to take a nightcap with you."

Black Jem, with seeming unconcern, signalled to the little tavern maid for another rum and water.

But, fifteen minutes later, when the revelry had reached a new height, he slipped from the inn. Standing in the stableyard, he summoned the ostler.

"My roan mare," he said brusksly, letting his pack slide with a jingle to the ground.

"You beant stayin' the night, tink-er?" the stableboy asked, incredulously.

"No," Black Jem said sourly. "The roads are safe, and it is far to Boston. I ride on to Hooker's Crossing to-night. . . ."

THE September New England twilight had deepened into night. A storm was making, and more frequently than not the pallid, three-quarters moon was shrouded behind scudding ribbons of black cloud. The road, in the interval between twilight and darkness, had become abruptly deserted. It was not a pleasant night to be out, with the chill, easterly wind rising. . . .

But Black Jem rode in high good humour, urging his saddlebowed mare against the wind at what most men would call a fool's pace. The fewer people on the pike, the better for him. . . .

Thrice he passed men upon the road, men who were homeward bound or who were seeking the nearest inn, and thrice he pulled up his mare and stared into their faces before, cursing, he rode on. And now ahead, once again, he heard the steady clatter of a horse's hoofs.

"Ho there, friend!" Black Jem shouted, as he drew up beside a night-concealed figure riding at a steady, ground-covering pace toward Hooker's crossing. "How many miles to an inn, this night?"

The clouds lay black across the moon. Although the man riding beside him was no more than a moving

blotch against the night, Black Jem sensed that he was wary and alert.

"Who are you?" a voice came crisply. "I am armed; I have a pistol. . . .

Black Jem grinned. The voice was the voice of the youth he had seen in the inn.

"I be Jem Willis," he said jovially. "Jem Willis, a poor tinker, ajourneying to Boston Town. Let me ride by you. This night is not one for honest men to be out alone."

There was a long silence, broken only by the clatter of the horses' hoofs, before the youth answered.

"I ride only to Hooker's crossing. An inn is there at which you may find lodging. You may ride by me if you will."

Black Jem's mare drew close beside the youth's horse. "Thank'ee, lad," the tinker said heartily. "'Twill spell the loneliness." He squinted upward toward where the moon rode the sky, hidden behind a long tattered cloud that blotted out the stars. He must wait until the moon shone forth. . . .

They rode in silence.

And then the moon gleamed fitfully through the fraying cloud—dimmed again. But not for long, Jem knew. His right hand fumbled within his homespun jacket.

Abruptly the moonlight gleamed, with a cold, revealing pallor. The fine cambric at the youth's breast was a white blotch against the darkness. Black Jem's left knee dug into his mare's shoulder. As the horses stumbled together he struck, with a wide, strong, backward sweep of his right hand.

The youth's horse reared as he felt his saddle suddenly lightened. Wheeling, scenting blood, a shrill whinny bursting from his dilated nostrils, he thundered down the black road toward home.

Black Jem dismounted and stood over the coughing, twisted figure in the road.

"Ho, now, my fine friend," he said commiseratingly, as he swiftly slipped the blood-drenched pouch from the lad's waist and transferred it to his own, "I hope that that prick I gave you pains not overmuch. 'Twill not pain for long; the blow was fatal." He chuckled callously. "'Tis well for you—else I would have had to strike again. I would not have you live to know my face."

The youth's eyes, pain-widened, stared upward into Black Jem's night-shrouded countenance.

"You have killed me, tinker," he coughed, then, through blood flecked lips, "yet I will venture a prophecy. You have killed me for my gold, and my gold shall betray you. More, you will not live, tinker, to spend one piece of gold from that pouch, and you will die for this crime, dancing at the end of a rope. Though I die now, Justice yet lives. . . ."

A fountain of blood gushed over his shirtfront, cutting short his words, and he shuddered, stiffened, and relaxed. He was dead.

BLACK JEM shrugged, for he feared neither God nor man nor devil. Casting a quick glance about, he saw a clump of elder bushes close beside the road. Hurriedly he dragged the corpse behind their concealing screen. Then, a song in his heart, he mounted into the saddle and continued on his way.

As he rode he pondered what he would do. It was bad that Bennett's horse had escaped to give the alarm; he had planned to kill both horse and rider. The best strategy now would

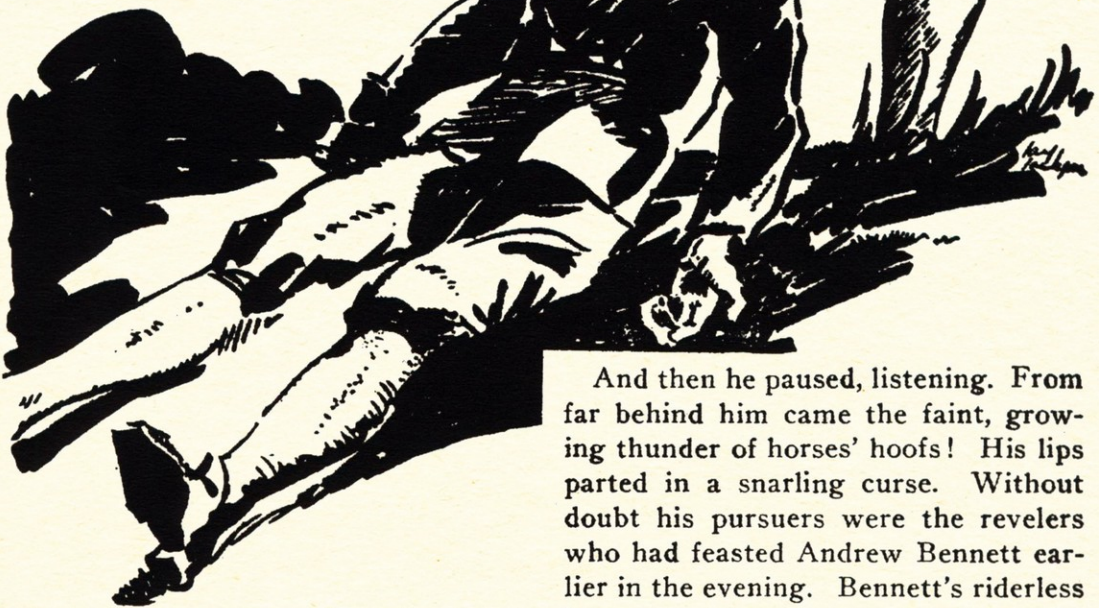
be to slay his own mare, and make his way afoot to Albany. People would be on the lookout for a tinker, riding a mare and carrying a pack. Once in Albany he would be safe.

A quarter mile down the road he led his mare deep into the wood, pushing into the very heart of a copse of young pine where, he was reasonably certain, she would lie undetected for many days. With commendable despatch he tethered her to a sturdy sapling and cut her throat.

Feeling considerably lightened at heart, Black Jem returned to the road and resumed his journey. Unburdened by mare or pack, his escape was as good as accomplished.

And now the infrequent lights of

Hurriedly he dragged the corpse behind their concealing screen.



Hooker's Crossing showed ahead, widely spaced, glimmering low down beyond the fields. The road sloped gently downward; the village lay in a shallow valley. And presently Black Jem was passing the low built, clap-boarded houses that blinked at him

through the darkness. He was alert as any hunted thing; he wanted no person to say, tomorrow, that a stranger had been seen this night awalking through the village.

And then he paused, listening. From far behind him came the faint, growing thunder of horses' hoofs! His lips parted in a snarling curse. Without doubt his pursuers were the revelers who had feasted Andrew Bennett earlier in the evening. Bennett's riderless horse must have gone straight to the inn!

Black Jem decided quickly. He was passing a churchyard, its tombstones ghostly in the night, its elm-sentineled quietude enclosed by a fence of white pickets through which an iron-latched

gate beckoned to the little church beyond.

The thunder of pursuit dinned closer.

Black Jem ran behind the church. And there, at his very feet, he saw a small trapdoor, leading into the church cellar. Tugging at this door, he found it unlocked. Hurriedly he let himself into the abysmal, damp gloom beneath the church.

Feeling his way through total darkness, Black Jem crept toward the rear of the cellar. Here he found a narrow stairway, at the top of which was a door. Opening this door, Black Jem tiptoed, an invisible shadow against vaultlike gloom, toward a small stained-glass window that cast a faintly tinted glow across the rows of straight-backed pews.

The horsemen were clattering past the church, were stopping in noisy disorder before a house a hundred yards down the street! Black Jem pressed his face close against the tiny diamond panes.

In the darkness, through those small colored panes, Black Jem could see nothing. And yet his position, there at the front of the church, so close to the street, gave him an odd assurance of security. He could not be surprised, and there was always the cellar trapdoor through which he could flee. . . .

THERE was a sound of many voices down the street, the opening and closing of doors, the running of men afoot. A solitary horesman rode at breakneck pace over the road Black Jem had come.

They were rousing the countryside!

In the cold, still blackness within the empty church Black Jem grinned crookedly. What matter to him if they

watched the roads and scoured the thickets? Who among them would think of searching the village church for a murderer?

Suddenly Black Jem stiffened. The clattering of men assembling down the village street was abruptly moving closer. A voice came loudly above the clamor—"Ho, now, Eben Taylor! Be you the key to the church about your person, or do it hang to home within the clock? Open up and ring the bell and call out more men!"

There was the groaning of the iron latch and the creak of the wooden gate. Black Jem, peering through the colored panes, could not see the man approaching through the thick grass between the tombstones. But no matter, the man was there. He was coming to open the church. . . .

But there was one place in the church where men never went, except to change a bellrope. The belfry!

Even as, silently and swiftly, he sought and found and climbed the ladder that led through a small square hole into the belfry, Black Jem was once more grinning to himself. They would ring the bell, and all the time he would be squatting in the belfry!

Somewhere, in the iron-solid blackness above his head, pigeons stirred and whispered sleepily, and Black Jem's nerves leaped. Then, with a grimace of disgust, he sat down upon a dusty beam and waited. Pigeons . . .!

Black Jem's fingers, sweeping the gloom in wide circles, touched the bellrope. Black Jem wondered fleetingly if it was a big bell. . . .

The church door, twenty or more feet beneath the beam on which he sat, opened. There was a brief pause, and then, suddenly, the thick rope slid downward between his fingers, swiftly,

scorchingly. There was a creaking, grating sound a few feet above his head, and the bell sounded, not loudly, but with a sort of anticipatory clatter. Black Jem grinned twistedly. It was a big bell. . . .

There was a swishing as the rope hurtled upward, winding half around the iron wheel beside the bell, a sudden rush of air as the bell gained momentum and swung through its mighty arc, then, at last, the heavy, reverberating boom of the clapper striking the upward swinging metal.

And suddenly the eight foot cubicle in which Black Jem crouched hummed and throbbed to the beat of the big bell! The bell was ringing as though its rope were in the hands of a man demented, rapidly, frenziedly, as though its ringer wanted to turn the heavy oaken cradle completely over and bring bell and iron wheel crashing down through the belfry floor upon his own head. It rushed and swooped through the blackness above Jem's ears—half a ton of savage, plunging metal, buzzing and humming like a gigantic bumblebee. And—"Swoop—Boom! Swoop—Boom!" its call went out across the countryside.

THERE was no grin on Black Jem's face now. His hands were tight pressed across his ears to stop the vibrations that beat against his skull like a million hammers; his mouth burst open. He turned his back to the bell and crouched close against the belfry grille, as though by doing this he might gain an infinitesimal fraction of the silence outside.

Like dream sounds through the thunder of the bell he heard the running of men, their shouts and oaths and the clop of their feet as they as-

sembled in the churchyard and on the porch of the church. The whinnying and stamping of excited horses mingled faintly with the booming of the bell, and dancing fingers of lantern-light, probing between the belfry grilles, sent crazy gleams and shadows spinning and swerving before Black Jem's eyes.

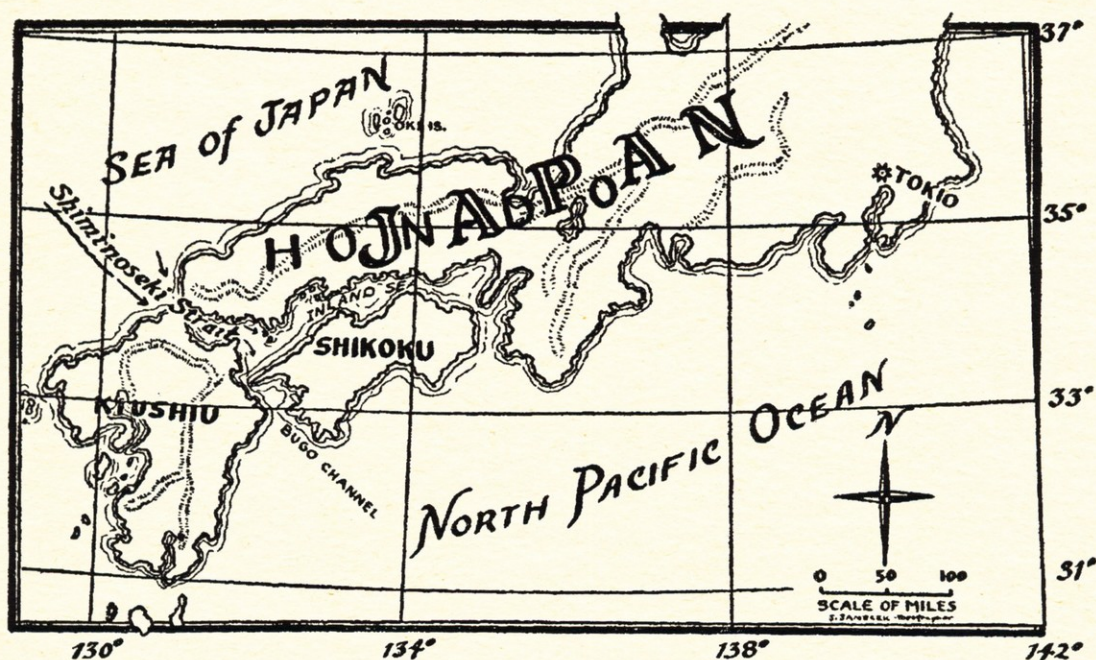
He could see the bell now, an iron demon whirling and raging above his head; he writhed and cowered, his face racked, his hands cupping his ears, against the dusty beams as the pigeons whirled into the night.

And then, small against the clangor of the bell, he heard a man's voice, shouting, "Ho, now, Eben Taylor! Have done with your ringing! Would you rouse the whole countryside 'twixt here and Boston? We are enough for the search; let the bell be still!"

Above Black Jem's head the bell obediently slowed its wild gyrations and hung motionless. But from the muttering, restless crowd below a voice suddenly shrilled:

"Look there, Judge Hackaday! Look there—a-droppin' from the belfry-grille! Pieces of gold—bloody pieces of gold! Sure as Tophet the varmint as done this deed tonight's acrouchin' in the belfry!"

Black Jem's trembling fingers fumbled like bloody claws in the gaping mouth of the empty leathern pouch, the pouch whose thong had been cut almost in two by the knife-stroke that killed Andrew Bennett. The thong had parted now, parted in the darkness as Black Jem writhed beneath the booming of the bell. And the gold was gone now, gone from Black Jem's hands forever; it had slipped through the grille piece by piece from the crazily tilted pouch. . . .



Action at Shimonoséki

by ALLEN P. WESCOTT

THE RECENT BOMBING of the *Panay* of the Yangtze river patrol was not Japan's first attack upon an American warship. In 1863—just three quarters of a century ago—the U. S. S. *Wyoming* was attacked, but in the battle which ensued, the *Wyoming* sank two Japanese ships, disabled a third, destroyed one land battery, damaged six others, and emerged with but trifling losses although heavily outnumbered both in men and metal. While this action, judged from either skill or audacity, rivals such famous sea fights as those between the *Bonhomme Richard* and the *Serapis*, the *Constellation* and *La Vengeance*, or the *United States* and the *Macedonian*, and while the *Wyoming's* commander, David Stockton McDougal, certainly possessed all the valor, and the ability as a seaman, of Jones, Hull or Decatur, the battle in the Straits of Shimonoséki, occurring as it did on the

far side of the globe and at a time when we were involved in the Civil War, passed virtually unnoticed, and this daring exploit of the *Wyoming*, her gallant crew and commander, is all but unknown today.

The *Wyoming* was a sloop-of-war, second class, built at Philadelphia in 1858, and a sister ship to the renowned *Kearsarge* launched at Kittery, Maine, a bit later. She was long, narrow and fast with a tonnage of 726 and a displacement of 1560. She was about 200 feet in length with a 33-foot beam and a draught of about 16 feet. A screw ship of 843 horsepower and bark rigged, her speed was probably eleven or twelve knots. She mounted six guns—four 32-pounders and two 11-inch Dahlgren pivot-guns. Her crew numbered 160 officers and men. The two pivot-guns, one forward and one aft, were, in those days, among the heaviest of naval ordnance. They weighed about

17,000 pounds each and fired shells weighing 136 pounds which were propelled by 15 or 20 pounds of powder. Their range, when elevated 15 degrees, was some 3600 yards. McDougal, who assumed command early in 1861, was then fifty-four and a veteran of thirty-two years service including, of course, the Mexican War.

Fearful that the British-built Confederate privateers might extend their depredations to the eastern seas, the *Wyoming* was ordered to the Pacific where the *Alabama* had already destroyed some whalers.

While Japan became known to Europe through Marco Polo in the 13th Century, she was exclusive and nonprogressive and there had been little intercourse with other nations until Perry's visit to Yedo (now Tokio) ten years before the *Wyoming's* exploit. Japan was still hostile to "barbarians" and the Mikado Koméi was determined to again close the ports, drive all aliens from the islands and return to the former hermit-like existence. The situation in Japan seventy-five years ago was not unlike that in China at the beginning of the present century when the "Boxers" rose against the "foreign devils." A wave of assassination and incendiarism swept the island empire and in April, 1863, while at Hong Kong, McDougal received word from the American minister at Yokohama urging him to bring the *Wyoming* and "be ready to use her guns for the protection of the Legation and American residents in Japan." Upon arrival McDougal found that a state of terror existed and the *Wyoming* afforded a safe haven for French, British and other nationals as well as Americans.

Japan was governed dually by the Mikado and a Shogun (Tycoon or military ruler), but the various provinces were largely controlled by *daimios*, or feudal nobles, who frequently acted independently of the Tokio government. Such was Choshu, lord of Nagato and guardian

of the Straits of Shimonoséki, who determined to wage an anti-foreign crusade on his own hook. These straits lie between the islands of Hondo and Kiushiu and form the western entrance to the inland sea. They are three miles long and vary in width from half a mile to a mile and a half, though the navigable channel is but a few hundred feet wide. The straits are crooked with numerous submerged rocks and shoals and the tides rush through at a rapid rate. Shimonoséki, the town at the entrance, has been called the "Gibraltar of the Japanese Mediterranean." To close these straits, the Choshu men had fortified the bluffs overlooking them, erecting seven batteries each consisting of from two to seven guns. In all there were about 30 pieces which were mounted on *ho-dai* (cannon platforms) 50 to 100 feet above sea level. These guns were mostly modern, foreign ones of large caliber. A few were 12- and 24-pounders but most of them were 32-pounders and there were several 8-inch Dahlgrens. These American cannon had been presented to Japan by the United States as a gesture of friendship.

TO AUGMENT these defenses, the Japanese had purchased and armed three ships. One was the iron steamer *Lancefield* of 600 tons obtained from an American firm. Another was the *Lanrick*, a clipper-built brig formerly used in the opium trade, while the third was the *Daniel Webster*, an American bark. The *Lancefield* was rechristened the *Koshin* while the *Lanrick* became the *Kosei*. The combined armament of the three men-of-war was 20 guns—mostly brass 24-pounders. The artillery then, of both ships and shore batteries, was about 50 guns and the combined personnel—the crews of the ships and the gunners ashore—probably totalled fully 1200 men. This was the force which McDougal was later to attack

with a 6-gun sloop and a crew of 160.

As soon as the forts had been constructed and the merchant ships converted to men-of-war, the Japanese underwent a thorough course in gunnery as they lay in wait for their first victim. They had not long to wait. On the 25th of June an American merchantman, the steamship *Pembroke*, entered the straits enroute to Nagasaki and Shanghai from Yokohama. She carried a native pilot furnished by the Japanese government and her skipper had no suspicion of hostilities until suddenly fired upon by the *Koshin* and the *Kosei*. The *Pembroke* escaped in the darkness retreating to the Pacific via the little-used Bungo channel. She disappeared so suddenly that the Japanese believed that they had sent her to the bottom and it was so reported at the American legation.

A couple of weeks later the French ship *Kien-chang* appeared at the straits and was immediately taken under fire. She was badly damaged and a number of her crew were killed, but she was able to make Nagasaki though in an almost sinking condition. Three days later the *Medusa*, a 16-gun steam frigate of the Dutch navy, entered the straits. She had not progressed far when she found herself subjected to concentrated fire from both ships and shore. The Dutchman kept up fire for half an hour but owing to his deep draught he dared not attack directly so gave it up and went his way. The *Medusa* had been hit 31 times and had suffered considerable damage, with nine casualties in her crew. Later a French gunboat, the *Tancrède*, was fired upon and damaged and a *Satsuma* steamer, mistaken for a foreign warship, was sunk. There was nothing wrong with Japanese gunnery!

On the 11th of July McDougal was informed of the supposed sinking of the *Pembroke*. He hastily put aboard stores and proceeded to the straits. McDougal had two Japanese pilots but was without a

chart of the waters or plan of the batteries. However he did know the draught of the *Koshin* and he believed that the *Wyoming* could go into any shallow waters that were sufficiently deep for the ex-*Lancefield*. He was undoubtedly fully aware of the odds against him, and that in the event of defeat he would have no choice but to fire the magazine and destroy his ship and men. Even against these odds, McDougal's attack was no rash plunge and while it required nerve and courage it was carefully planned and skilfully executed. He knew his ship and had confidence in himself and his crew. With his decks cleared for action, he sailed boldly into the straits via the Bungo channel which is a sort of side entrance to the east of the islands.

EARLY in the forenoon the *Wyoming* rounded the Monshi promontory and came within sight of the town, the batteries and the three Choshu ships. A welcoming shot fired at the *Wyoming* struck just above the engine room cutting away a windsail halyard. Quarters sounded and the hands took their places at the guns. The Japanese ships were just ahead. Kedge anchors hung from the *Koshin's* yardarms to be used as grappling irons when the Japanese closed to board. The *Wyoming* was still in the narrow channel but despite the protests of the frightened pilots who feared he would ground her, McDougal left the channel and headed straight for the three ships, one of which, the *Koshin*, had steam up and was preparing to move. As the American approached, the shore batteries opened fire. The *Wyoming* instantly replied and one of her broadsides completely destroyed a battery though the Americans were unaware of it at the time. As the *Wyoming* came abreast of the bark the latter fired a broadside, killing two American seamen. A marine was also killed by a shot from the Sennenji battery. The *Wyoming* con-

tinued on and as she forged ahead of the brig she received another broadside. She was so close to her adversaries that the gun muzzles almost touched as they passed. Firing rapidly, the ships were fairly wrapped in flame. The Japanese gunners, firing furiously, were able to pour three broadsides into the *Wyoming* as she steamed past. One shell entered her just under one of the 32-pounders, killing or wounding all but three of her gun crew. A wounded seaman continued to work a gun alone until late in the action when he received reinforcements.

MCDUGAL had entered the passage against the tide and the strong current in the narrow straits made manoeuvre difficult, but despite this and the shot and shell rained upon the *Wyoming* she was not doing badly herself. Every shot fired at the bark and brig had taken effect and the latter was now in a sinking condition. Thus far the *Koshin* had taken but a minor part in the conflict. Now her anchor was up and she was preparing to manoeuvre. Just then the *Wyoming* ran aground. Under the heavy fire of six batteries and two ships, she struggled desperately to free herself. She wriggled loose just before the *Koshin* got close enough to ram or grapple her and the fight was resumed. The *Wyoming* had now traversed nearly the entire length of the straits and McDougal might have passed between Shimonoséki and Modji and out to the open sea but instead he swung her 'round again and ran the gauntlet a second time, now directing most of his attention to the *Koshin*.

BOATSWAIN'S mate Frank Wyatt was in charge of one pivot-gun; Peter King commanded the other. "Cut loose and provide! Run in! Shift Pivot to the right! Serve vent and sponge! Load! Run out! Prime! Point! Ready

—Fire! Another shell was on its way. One struck the *Koshin Maru*, the Prince of Choshii's own ship, entering just above the water line, piercing plates and boiler and tearing a great hole in the far side; then continuing on its way, it finally exploded among the houses in the town beyond. A moment later there was an explosion on the stricken ship. A great column of water rose skyward like a geyser carrying wreckage and debris with it. Fire broke out on the doomed steamer and her sailors leaped into the sea where the *Wyoming's* sailors picked them off with revolvers until McDougal stopped them. About 40 of the *Koshin's* crew were lost.

The shore batteries still continued their bombardment as did the bark whose crew was firing as fast as they could serve her six guns, but she was soon riddled and many of the guns ashore were silenced. The *Wyoming* was so completely enveloped in her own smoke that visibility was difficult, but she succeeded in dropping shells within the batteries despite this handicap. The artillerymen ashore had no difficulty in finding the *Wyoming* since her topmasts stuck up through the smoke, and besides she always passed at known and expected ranges.

As in the case of the *Constitution* and the *Guerriere*, fifty-one years before, this action lasted 70 minutes. The *Wyoming* had lost but five killed and six wounded. She was still in good condition to fight though she had been hulled seven times, her foremast and mainmast had each been struck four times, her funnel was riddled, and her rigging badly cut. In a brief report to Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, McDougal said modestly, "I hope we taught them a lesson."

The *Alabama*, for which the *Wyoming* was primarily in search, was located the following June off Cherbourg by the *Wyoming's* sister ship, the *Kearsarge*, which defeated and destroyed her.



He gently rippled its gleaming fabric and . . . it laughed!"

The Mantle That Laughed

by VINCENT CORNIER

Illustrations by DON ULSH

AN IRASCIBLE and unkempt old man who described himself as Joseph Earnshaw Bedford, master-mariner, retired, went to London some time ago to sell an extraordinary kind of treasure. He picked on the world-famous firm of Messrs. Gillard and Aubersohn, of Old Bond Street, West, as that most likely to deal with him at the price he asked for this treasure.

It was a great, glimmering cloak which, at first sight, appeared to be an ecclesiastical or a royal vestment fashioned in cloth-of-gold—a mediæval *pallium*, perhaps, or a semi-barbaric coronation mantle. But examination showed it was of finest chain-mail; an intricately woven system of rectangu-

larly drawn gold wires, all as supple and thin as a woman's metal-mesh purse.

A few nodules of moonstone studded the *rigol* of the collar. The throat clasps were reminiscent of those eclipsed sundiscs which are to be seen ornamenting the May Day harnessings of dray horses. The whole garment would have shrouded a tall man from neck to heels. . . . And Captain Bedford asked a thousand guineas for it.

"Just as many quids as it's years old," he boomed.

"Really?" The suave Claude Aubersohn, who had been summoned by his puzzled buying experts, breathed that word. "I'm so sorry to have to doubt

you. But a millennium old—*no*—I'm *very* doubtful!"

"Y'can be what the hell you like, mister!" Bedford was annoyed by the sycophantically smiling group behind Aubersohn. "What a youngster like you thinks, don't matter a rap t'me. I'm telling you. And I know, y'see—I *know*!"

"That's marvelous news!" Aubersohn calmly returned. "The exact *genre* and generation of this mantle have sorely puzzled our best experts in such matters. Your deeper knowledge will be valuable, I've no doubt. *Er*—I understood you to say you were a seafaring man?"

"And y' can chuck y'r high-hatting an' all! It don't come off, see! Afore I took to shipboard I was a Bedford o' Low Ponting, Brummagem. *That* convey anything to you?"

According to his lights Aubersohn was an eminently fair dealer. He recognized the mention of one of the most remarkable gold-workers' families in existence: a family carrying on an exclusive handicraftsmanship, in a business centuries old. The Bedfords of Low Ponting, Birmingham, were masters entrusted with the noblest of work, and that alone. What one of them would not know about this specimen would hardly be worth the knowing.

"**I**—I'm sure I beg your pardon," Aubersohn actually made a slight bow, "That being the case, I'm saying no more."

"Well, y'seem t'be able to apologize, anyway," Bedford grimly chuckled, "and that's something." Then he grew more genial, almost confidential. "It was like this, mister. I allus had a bent for the sea and, after years in the workrooms, I chucked up and followed that bent—although, mind y', I never entirely neglected my original trade, even if it was only

studying theory. So it came about, in 1892, I got took up with the Leybourne-Hatton expedition into Central Mexico . . . looking for ancient *Anahualtecan* remains."

"Ah," sighed Aubersohn, and he surveyed the mantle with a newer intelligence. "I recall something about that expedition. Wiped out, wasn't it?"

"*Aye*, by fever, superstitious *peons*, and murderin' Indians. Sir Albert Leybourne and me did manage to make the coast, round about Vera Cruz, but he'd gotten his death warrant. He snuffed it ten days later—yellow-jack. Anyway, that's all aside the point. I'm trying to convince you I knows what I'm talking about. That gold cloak was made by the *Anahualtecan*s more'n any thousand years ago. . . . An' we dug it out'n the dried-up bed of the Guatualiyi Lake in June, '93."

"*Anahualtecan*s, Captain Bedford? I don't quite get you."

"The 'bird-heads,' the 'people of the waters,' if you like. The prime strain of the Toltecs and the later Aztecs; the original people of Central Mexico—worshippers of the sun. . . . But, look here, mister, I'm not giving free history lessons. I'm trying to sell that mantle. Now, what about it?"

"**W**ELL, it's not a pennorth of peanuts, is it? One simply can't decide in a minute—"

"It's a decision within an hour, at any rate, or I'm taking it elsewhere, mister. Can't help it if I'm blunt, an' all that. Y'd better realize just how matters stand."

"Oh, quite!"

"And don't be delicate-minded, either. I can't stick niminy-piminy work. Y' needn't be frightened to ask if it's m'own property."

"Certainly that—*er*—consideration does enter."

"*Aye!* Why, now then, we'll soon settle that!" Bedford produced a grubby and bulging foolscap envelope. He emptied it of various documents which he splayed out, like a hand of cards, in front of Aubersohn. "There y'are! Y'll find my master's certificate and identity papers, with photographs and signatures attached, an' all the rest, among that lot. Satisfy y'self I *am* Joe Bedford—then take a look at that letter." He stubbed at a yellowed sheet of notepaper dated "October 7th, 1893." "Sir Bertie Leybourne, poor young feller, was dyin' when he wrote that. That's my title to the mantle."

Aubersohn carefully went through the documents.

"Everything appears very correct, Captain Bedford," he agreed. "But what does Leybourne mean, after he says you can have the cloak, by his phrase: 'if it is possible to find it again?'"

"What he says. Y'don't imagine we made Vera Cruz laden down with gold-work, d'you? *Ugh!* We hadn't no more'n our fly-picked an' tick-ridden hides on us!"

"You'd hidden the stuff again, I presume?"

"*Aye*, in seven different *caches*. It wasn't till 1910 that I managed to get back to that country. Then all I ever rediscovered was the mantle. . . . *I'd* hidden *that!*"

"Quite!" Aubersohn stroked his guard-dee moustache and smiled, knowingly. "Well, I'm satisfied you're the rightful owner. One final question, though: Leybourne refers throughout his letter to the 'laughing mantle.' What proof have you to provide that this golden cloak merits that curious description?"

Captain Bedford grinned and grabbed hold of the mantle. He gently rippled its gleaming fabric and—*it laughed!*

There was no mistaking the fact of that much. It laughed in the rich contralto way of a happy woman. Bedford swept it sideways and it pealed like the brazen contempt of heroes before the sounding of enemy trumpets. He lifted it suddenly and let it straighten its folds in a series of undulations, growing less, and there was heard the shrilling of excited and feather-headed girls at play. He let it slip, caressingly, gently, from his fingers, and its wild structure came to rest with the lowly echoes of a child chuckling about baby jokings on the verge of sleep.

"Now you've come to y'r last chance," said Captain Joseph Bedford. "What's it t'be: a deal, or not a deal?"

"As I—I said before"—Aubersohn was in a vicious quandary—"it's not at all possible to decide a matter like this in a few minutes. You must remember, there is my partner, Mr. Gillard, to be consulted."

"Then you consult him, lad!" Bedford took the mantle and folded it into a shape to fit the suitcase in which he carried it. "I'm not stoppin' you. Y've said y'say, an' I'll say mine—I'll sell it for its old gold value afore I'll be beat. I'll get m' price for it, that way."

"Coming from a Bedford of the Low Ponting Bedfords," Aubersohn cuttingly retorted, "that's puerile nonsense! Utterly ridiculous!" He ignored the pop-eyed fury of the old man and made rapid calculation on the back of an envelope. "Even at seven pounds a fine ounce, troy, there'd have to be nearly ten pounds avoirdupois of gold in that cloak to fetch a thousand guineas—and I'll be damned if it weighs a quarter of a stone!"

The old man pursed his lips as though something were sour behind them, but a reluctant glitter of admiration was in his eyes. He stopped packing the mantle and looked up.

"Right enough, mister! A very good

point! Well, an' how d'y' account for that?" He tapped the apparently solid collar and the clasps. "*Looks* heavy enough, don't it?"

"I'm afraid looks won't affect the matter. It's certainly not solid gold-work throughout—it couldn't be."

Bedford muttered something, then stood on the seat of a chair. He suspended the mantle by its ornate collar and shook its fabric as determinedly as a housewife puts a full-bodied wave into the shaking of a dusty rug.

This time Aubersohn and his buyers started back, their hands going up to their assaulted ears. Although they had experienced its faculty for making laughter-like sounds, they were not prepared for this. . . . It was a man-made thunder: an immense concussion. They felt they were made breathless in the midst of a battle of bells. Turmoils of clangorous air burst on them with stunning force and there were those velvety violences which castle upon the bankings of great organ pipes, in their fullest voicing. Then, in the collapse of all this power, the tunes of laughter came to life again. . . .

"*Not gold?*" snarled Captain Bedford. "Why, this is the mantle of the very god of gold! It's what the priests wore when they served his altars—not gold? *Ugh!*"

Aubersohn was a rich man, and young.

"Captain Bedford," he rapped, "I'll take this on my own responsibility." He stretched out his soft, moist hands. "You shall have your thousand guineas. . . . Give me that lovely thing!"

WITH notes for two hundred in his wallet and a check for the balance alongside, it pleased Captain Joseph Bedford to be expansive. His mood was nourished by a perfect Madeira which Claude Aubersohn produced—that, and a fine cigar, which he enjoyed in a private room.

Aubersohn wanted the old fellow to talk. He wanted to know everything about his purchase. But Bedford had little to tell. He merely amplified his account of the original discovery of the mantle in the volcanic mud-floor of Lake Guatualiyi, adding to this a pronouncement by Professor Hatton, the scientific member of the lost expedition.

"Old Hatton said as how this thing 'd be made t' imitate human happiness an' heavenly wrath—laughter an' thunder. He said it would be worn at festivals, in honor of *Quetzalcoatl*, the *Anahualtecan's* golden god. Those were proper happy do-ments, it seems: ceremonies o' flowers an' scents an' fun—carnivals like."

"That runs absolutely contrary to all I've ever known, Captain Bedford! I always understood those ancient Mexicans to be a fiendishly cruel race, addicted to human sacrifice."

"You're talkin' about Aztecs. I'm not! Those bloody-minded beggars worshipped a cannibal god, *Huitzilopochtli*. They followed on after the original *Anahualtecan's* had left the land, acause o' drought or plague or somethin', in the eighth century. Now, d'you see?"

"Yes, I think I do. Sorry!"

"Y're thinkin' all cock-eyed," Bedford growled. "What you've got in mind's a sort o' medley o' sun-worshippers' treasure, the *Conquistadores*, an' the golden Spanish Main; ain't it now?" Aubersohn looked wry and nodded. "Well, forget it! I'm talkin' of a marvelous race of mild-hearted people, whose civilization died out nigh on six hundred years before them times.

. . . The greatest masters o' the art o' gold-working this world has ever known!"

Captain Bedford barefacedly applied himself to that exquisite Madeira. He refilled his big glass without so much as "by your leave." He was acting the skip-

per at his own cabin table again—master of immediate circumstance, amenable to no other man's convention or law. As the rich wine influenced him, he grew boastful and chuckled, as though in possession of a vast and secret joke.

"**A** YE," he vaunted at last, "the greatest gold-workers there's ever been . . . till my time—*me!*"

Aubersohn winced and made some cold rejoinder.

"*Oh, y'needn't fash y'rself, Mr. Aubersohn! I'm not talkin' punk. Here, look at these!*"

He pulled out a dirty roll of linen tied with tapes. Opening this, two tissue-paper wrapped packages were disclosed, which, on their opening in turn, displayed to Aubersohn a magnificently floreated Spanish hair-ornament and a bundle of long gold wires—rectangularly drawn filaments, similar to those which went into the formation of the mantle that laughed. A kind of vaseline-like coating dulled the glimmering of these wires, but the hair comb was dryly brilliant and clean.

Aubersohn picked up the ornament, then made a move to take hold of the wires. Bedford shot out a hand, clutching his wrist, and preventing him.

"*Nay, nay, mister—the comb if y'like, but leave them others alone!*" The affronted Aubersohn had the impression that Bedford was casting about in mind for some excuse. It came: "*Y'see, mister, it's like this here—they wires has been varnished with a—a special sort of preparation. If you go fingering about 'em y'll do 'em no good. . . . They're still tacky.*"

That was quite convincing. On closer examination Claude Aubersohn acknowledged that the square-edged wires appeared to have been newly varnished—with a dingy lac, that sent up a waveringly poignant scent which he recognized but

could not for the moment define. Then a chord of memory was touched and he associated the thin and peculiar smell with creeper-clad ruins. It was that of rain-washed ivy heated by a sudden sunlight, in still airs.

Then Aubersohn forgot the wires. Bewilderingly he realized that in his right hand was poised a miracle. This Spanish-looking comb was of massive gold—he twanged its teeth and tested the strength of its high upstanding back—yet had it been made of aluminum it could not have been more delicately light. Instead of having the down-drag of the third heaviest precious metal, it was as insignificant in weight as a bit of millboard.

AND while he was gazing like a zany at the comb, an opened penknife came sliding across the table-top towards him.

"Go on, lad! Y've done y'r best to prove it or bust it—do a bit more, wi' my compliments! *Go on!* take that knife an' try t' scratch it. If y' can, I—I'll make y' a present of it."

The small blade of the penknife was turned by the gold of the comb. . . . Instead of being soft and vulnerable, the precious stuff was as adamant as high-speed tool-steel.

"Now, then, Mister Aubersohn," said Captain Bedford, "there y've got gold of nigh on twenty-four carat fineness, as light as aluminum, instead o' being heavier than lead. And, instead o' being *softer* than lead, y've got a gold so hard that naught short of a diamond point can rive its skin! *I* made that hair comb, in exactly the same way as them old *Anahualtecs* made that mantle. And, what's more, *I hardened* that gold—as the gold o' that mantle's hardened." Once again he emptied and replenished his glass. "Poor old Joey Bedford, the bloomin' mug—better'n any other gold craftsman in the world! . . . Master of a

secret worth millions, an' reduced t' selling a museum piece worth five thousand quid—t'get a bite an' sup in his empty old belly! How's that for the irony o' life, lad?"

DEFTLY but delicately Aubersohn regained his command of the situation. He saw that care was needed—Bedford was deliberately inflaming himself with the Madeira, and a drunken *contretemps* on those dignified business premises could never be allowed. And yet the very fact of Bedford's drinking was loosening his tongue . . . to unbind, as well, the glowing roll of fortune.

Aubersohn trembled behind his mien of patient tolerance. This old man was uttering wonder. There was no disbelieving him. Instinct was the monitor, and it was sanction absolute for every thrilling word. . . . When first it was unearthed, the extreme hardness and lightness of the *Anahaultecan* mantle had puzzled Bedford. He had laid his bewilderment before Professor Hatton. The scientist told him that the gold had been tempered or "case-hardened," as steel is case-hardened. He had no suggestion to offer in the mystery of the apparent defeat of specific gravity. By rights, the weight of that cloak should have been five times greater than it was.

As to the "hardening" of the gold—Bedford did not need instructing as to the value of that. He knew the art was anciently practiced, but its secret had been lost. To resurrect that art would mean great wealth. . . . So, for twenty-five years, he had labored at the problem: seeking to make the laughing mantle yield the craft-mystery it had embodied.

He had succeeded, but it cost him all his savings. Latterly he had recourse to a money-lender, one Julius Schillam, of High Holborn, who masqueraded as a patents agent. From this man Bedford had nearly a thousand pounds in loans.

There was infinite security. Schillam was no philanthropic fool. From such specimens as the Spanish comb, it was evident that Bedford's patient research work had succeeded. It was merely a matter of time until the commercial reward was reaped.

There the old seaman was foundered. He had not realized Schillam played a treacherous game. The patent specifications and everything else—with the one exception of the chemical formulæ—were in Schillam's keeping. But the business stopped there. At first Bedford was impatient for progress, then annoyed, and finally angrily suspicious.

Schillam showed his hand. His ultimatum was: a fifty-fifty interest in the whole commercial exploit and an immediate furnishing to him of the necessary chemical formulæ, or he would cry off and sue for the return of his lent money.

Bedford defied him, trusting to justice from the law. But when the case was heard he was astounded to discover he was not permitted to "drag in the irrelevant issues of some problematical patent." . . . Judgment was delivered for Schillam. The money and costs had to be paid forthwith.

Bedford was desperately decided. He packed all his tools and chemicals; committed his precious formulæ to mind and burned their written records—disappeared into the East End and laid low.

Starvation found him out at last. He had no resources except the mantle and that Spanish comb. He decided to sell the mantle, despite Schillam's bailiffs. He had no sentiment regarding it. It had taught him all it ever could teach. What its long-dead makers knew, he had rediscovered and reapplied to the last iota. It was useless to him now.

The money Aubersohn had paid—Bedford was brutally frank—would provide

for him in some quiet country place, until such time when he could interest some honest investor in the pending patent. Schillam would not matter, then. There would be money enough to settle his claims, and to spare.

It was all very naïve but all so importantly a part of the old sailor's simple and uncompromising faith in the eventual triumph of right. . . . And Aubersohn was oddly touched.

"CAPTAIN BEDFORD," he said, "you'll really have to go, shortly. I'm a very busy man, y'know. But I'd like you to know this as well—it might be possible for me to provide financial aid for your patents scheme. I don't make you any rash promise, but, I repeat, it might be possible."

"I—I wish to God it were, sir!"

"Well, we'll have to see. It's obvious you must have financial backing. Equally is it obvious that, if I am to provide it, I must have every opportunity of exploring the commercial possibilities you say exist. Also I must know very much more about you, Captain, than I do at present! I admit that's blunt—but then, you tell me, you don't like niminy-piminy work."

"Y'r talkin' in a way I can understand, mister."

Aubersohn considered awhile. Then he decided to test Bedford to the uttermost.

"Would you—dare you—let me interview this chap, Schillam?" He saw Bedford was puzzled but in no sense disconcerted. "What if I called on him, representing myself as interested on your behalf, and negotiated with him?"

"Aye; but what for?"

"Get it from him, in writing, that he'll release all your patent specifications, *etcetera*, on the settlement with him of the money, and the law costs, you owe him. Don't you realize that's the first, and most

vital step? There's no knowing what he'll have been up to, behind your back, while you've been playing 'possum in the East End!"

Bedford was rocked by that. It had never crossed his mind that Schillam still remained in possession of the most important, and carefully documented, part of the gold-working secret. Lucky chance might place him in an invulnerable position . . . if he managed to solve the riddle of the formulæ. . . . Bedford would have lost a fortune and would have wasted a quarter of a century's work, for Schillam's benefit.

He grew quite frantic. Indeed, he extracted a promise from Aubersohn that he would open negotiations instantly. He gave Schillam's address, and Aubersohn said he would visit the fellow that night.

Then Aubersohn furnished Bedford with his home address, in Golders Green, and wrote down a Speedwell exchange telephone number. He was eminently satisfied: Bedford's tale would bear the strictest investigation.

"It'll take you some time to get fixed up in that country cottage, Captain," he said. "Anyway, I'm relieving you of any liability of confiding in me your precise whereabouts." He gave Bedford the paper. "That'll find me, any time."

"I've been livin' over a—a sort o' sailors' junk-shop—Jake Clegg's place, in Shadwell."

"Never mind, Bedford; you'll find some better place now, I hope. Anyhow, when you want to arrange another meeting, just ring up and say so. And when you phone, you needn't give your name—just call yourself 'Mantle.' Say, 'Mantle, wanting to speak to Mr. Aubersohn,' and I'll guarantee you'll get on to me and no one else. I'll tell my domestic staff that the mention of that word demands priority

of attention, day or night. Now, *satisfied?*"

Captain Joseph Bedford solemnly thrust out his horny right hand.

"*Shake,*" he said. . . . Claude Aubersohn shook.

Not until Bedford had been gone half an hour did Aubersohn notice he had left the Spanish comb and those wires behind him, on a chair. Aubersohn picked them up, intending to put them in the safe. Then he remembered that Gillard, his partner, had equal access to that safe.

Preferring not to endure awkward questionings at this stage, Aubersohn placed comb and wires in an inner pocket. Respecting Bedford's warning, he most carefully refrained from fingering the tacky varnish on those wires—which proceeding might have done them damage, Bedford had said.

Yes, an eminently fair dealer was Mr. Aubersohn.

THE patents agent, Julius Schillam, died at half-past eight that night. . . .

His clerk stated that when he left the office, just after six, Schillam was engaged with a Mr. Claude Aubersohn on business connected with an affair kept on file and marked: "Mexico—B—Gold-work." The clerk was sorry he could not tell more. The file was strictly private; always kept in Schillam's safe. Oh, yes, Mr. Schillam was quite well at six o'clock—although he seemed in a temper about something.

At seven o'clock a charwoman heard Schillam stamping about his office, muttering and cursing and making little, sharp sounds of pain. By half-past seven he had barricaded himself in the suite and was yelling at the top of his voice. In another half-hour he had wrecked the interior, throwing everything portable out of the windows. . . . At twenty past eight, police

and firemen, accompanied by two doctors, broke into the place.

ON SEEING Schillam, the doctors ordered the rescue team to stand back. There was hardly need for that. Schillam's hands and face were almost unrecognizable as human features. They were swollen and yellow and purple-splotched like the casement of an overripe pomegranate.

As the doctors touched him, he collapsed and died.

The suite was sealed, the corridor declared isolated and the whole great business floor—put under guard—closed down.

All of which, coming under the uncannily perspicacious notice of Fleet Street men, pointed to a certain conclusion. Still, they did not so much as whisper their thoughts at first. Placards of late evening newspaper editions merely proclaimed: "Amazing Holborn Scenes"—"Financier's Mysterious Fate"—"Drama in Office."

Not until ten o'clock was a special edition issued, with a few lines of "fudge" in the stop-press box and an ominous placarding of one red word on an expanse of white newsprint . . . *PLAGUE?* . . . and London's strange old heart stood still.

It had taken the newspaper men long to decide. Not in time—time was not the measure of the circumstance. Terrifying experience was that. Even as the machines ran off their copies the toll of the "plague deaths" rose to four. A constable, a street fruit hawker, and a barman who had worked in Fetter Lane, were the victims. They had died as Schillam had died. And swift investigation proved that these men had formed part of the crowd which stood and, crowd-like, found vast amusement in dodging the rain of assorted articles Schillam threw from his windows.

That printed word shocked Whitehall. Its import brought a horde of anxious officials to an all-night consideration of the problem. Here, about the City of London, menace was stalking with speed. At midnight the death roll stood at seven—and only one man, so far, had survived.

I shall never forget that crisis. Where the evening papers had ended their work, ours, on the *Daily Post*, began. "The atmosphere throughout the news-rooms was almost as awesome as if we dealt with another outbreak of war. And affairs were especially complicated by an official warning to discount the news to our "utmost discretion."

We replied that policy demanded the widest possible circulation of the story: our duty was to open the public eye.

Officialdom thundered back—*No*, a thousand times, no! Publicity would paralyze the business heart of the capital, maybe for no valid reason, after all. It was doubtful if plague did exist. In fact, one expert had definitely pronounced against it. This expert's name? No need for secrecy . . . a Mr. Barnabas Hildreth.

That was enough for me. My policy was dictated by an implicit trust in the sanities of friend Barnabas. I let it be thoroughly understood that I *was* the editor of the *Daily Post*—and killed the story.

So home to Bayswater, where, in the very small hours, I was astonished to find light and warmth and the ineffable Barnabas, making himself free of my quarters, just sitting down to a breakfast he had prepared for himself and me.

"Timed it exactly, haven't I?" he chuckled. "I rang up your office and found you'd gone; hence this. Hope you don't mind," and he poured out coffee.

"You look pretty perky for a plague-hunter! Is the job over?"

"I hope so. Seven or eight have snuffed it, so I'm told—but it wasn't plague. Dam-

nably like it, though!" He ate placidly for a while. "I've just come away from the bedside of the luckiest man in England, a chap called Aubersohn. He's laid up with a nasty hand and arm, but he's the sole survivor. And he's been saved by advice telephoned to his doctors by a fellow called Bedford . . . the original 'carrier,' thinking in terms of plague, if we must."

"But I don't quite get you——"

THEN Barnabas outlined the story I have already set down, after working from Aubersohn's later and more detailed account. When he had finished, breakfast also was ended.

"That arrangement of using the code word 'mantle' undoubtedly has saved Aubersohn from going the way of the others," he concluded as we lit cigarettes. "More than that, it's indicated a way in which to combat further cases, if and when they arise. . . . Bedford must have seen the evening papers, and reading of Schillam's death, together with Aubersohn's illness, he decided to do what he could."

"I see! He rang up Golders Green, introduced himself as 'mantle'—and actually dared to give the doctors who were attending Aubersohn, their instructions? Cool, I must say!"

"I don't think so. Bedford was safe enough. He had liked Aubersohn and, knowing that plague wasn't the trouble, took steps accordingly. He told the doctors of a treatment which was very similar to that used in fighting the venoms of snake-bite."

"But—but what had caused the death of Schillam?"

"Those gold wires Bedford left behind him . . . or, to be precise, the sticky 'varnish' on them. That stuff was a terrible and instantly penetrating poison. Remember, Bedford wouldn't let Aubersohn touch

them. Then Aubersohn, playing fairly, was careful with them after Bedford's departure. So his life's been saved.

"He carried them in his pocket, you'll recollect. Well, when he visited Schillam, prepared to buy the fellow off, Aubersohn was fool enough to produce them in course

lac which coated those wires—which weren't wires at all!

"However, Schillam hung on to them. And after Aubersohn left, at six-thirty, he concentrated on them, never knowing that every sticky touch upon his flesh was just another nail in his coffin.



As dawn was breaking we found Clegg's Junk Shop.

of conversation. . . . Schillam handled them before he could be denied. He did more—he contrived to steal four or five of them.

"I argue that Schillam realized that the sticky varnish held the one key he wanted to unlock the whole of Bedford's secret gold-working process. He probably had every clue except the actual formula of the

Then the poison entered his system. He realized then . . . and, in the delirium preceding his collapse, he must have pitched them out of the window, with other things. Gold is gold . . . that constable, the costermonger, and that barman each had one of those glittering death-traps when they were searched in the hospital. Each was in that hilarious crowd, watching."

"If they weren't lengths of gold wire, what were they?"

"SOUNDS quite mad, Geoffrey—but you can't doubt a scientific determination: they were fine spines, gold-plated in a most revolutionary manner . . . coarse and hair-like excrescences produced from an armadillo's carapace." He got up and impatiently waved my questionings aside. "Now, are you fit? I've an idea that Bedford will have gone to earth again in that East End haunt of his. Anyway, I'm going to visit 'Jake Clegg's place in Shadwell'—coming?"

As dawn was breaking we found Clegg's junk-shop: a fusty, ramshackle, and glass-fronted dump for rubbish ranging from sailors' curios to old guns; from sea-boots to parrots.

OH, NO, Jake Clegg knew nothing at all about Captain Joseph Bedford. Moreover, he "took it proper crool fer two blokes what wasn't even coppers" to come turning him out of his honest bed like this.

But we were well inside his shop—and Barnabas Hildreth had cocked a ruminative gaze on two grotesque-looking specimens which hung above a fireplace, in a dark nook. So recently had the beast been mentioned, I immediately identified these as being the armor-banded shells of armadillos. . . . Coarse and gingery growths, like cocoanut fiber riddled with thousands of tiniest pores, or holes, fringed the edgings of each transverse plate; like bristles on the jointings of a crab.

"Quite sure, now, you know nothing about Captain Bedford?"

"Nao! S'welp me strite mortal blind if——"

"Please spare yourself the oath," Barnabas smiled. Then he walked up to the shells and examined them carefully. "Tell me, Mr. Clegg, were these armadillo cov-

erings smooth and polished when you hung 'em up here?"

"Yus. Puffictly smooove. Them whiskers sorta starts ter grow on 'em after a bit, an' keeps on growin', so long's they're kep' warm an' dry. But them's not fer sale."

"No—I realize that, Mr. Clegg. I don't want to buy them. . . . They'll be of far more use to Captain Bedford——"

Clegg uttered a word not to be written. Then he shuffled away from us with his broken teeth bared in a ferocious grin. He crossed to the well of a flight of stairs, and shouted:

"Ey, Bedford! Gime's up—the blurry Busies is 'ere!"

The heart-taking smash of a shot shook all the place. And, with the staggering downfall of a body, we rushed the stairs, Barnabas Hildreth cursing . . . *cursing* . . .

Joseph Earnshaw Bedford had blown out his brains.

TEN days went past before Hildreth bore down on me again, his case completed by the research reports of half a dozen different scientists who had tried to solve the riddle of the mantle.

I learned that, in its first state, no gold went into its makeup. Originally its collar and clasps had been carved from the soft and porous shell-material of the armadillo. The "chain mail" had been *knitted*, exactly as wool is knitted, out of long and equally porous fibers—square-edged excrescences which perpetuate shell growth, cellular structure, after the swamp beast's death. They grow in its lifetime as well, but constant rooting activities keep them blunted to nothingness.

The genius of the *Anahuatlteicans* transformed this unlikely stuff into that shimmering golden cloak! When carved and knitted, the thing was plunged into a vat containing a lac in which particles of gold were held in suspension; dissolved. The

dry shell and the fibers soaked up this stuff until every pore was laden with fluid metal. . . . Now the mantle was dried. After drying it was "fired," as porcelain is fired.

THE lac was driven off in the form of vapor. The gold remained behind—its outer skin fused into a glossy mass like pottery glaze. The heat which was applied was sufficient to reduce all the shell to impalpable dust, but not fierce enough to melt the interior system of cellular metal. What remained was a man-made replica of Nature's work in forming a bone. The outer "glaze" represented the ivory denseness of bone enamel; the cells of gold, formed beneath this glazing, reproduced a bone's cancellous tissue.

Hence the apparent "defeat of specific gravity"—naturally this infinitely honey-combed production, despite its size, weighed only a fraction of what it would have weighed had it been massive metal. Barnabas provided the best possible illustration, in asking me to consider equal bulks of pumice stone and iron ore.

"That drives it home," he said. "In that mantle the normal density of solid gold had been replaced by an abnormal manufacture of porous—pumice stone—gold! Equal bulk; vastly differing weight."

I asked him then about the plague-producing poison.

"Those tacky wires, which Bedford showed to Aubersohn, represented that stage of working, previous to the 'firing' process. They, too, were fibers from an armadillo shell. Bedford had soaked them in precisely the same richly auriferous solution which the *Anahualtecans* employed; his rediscovered secret. The Spanish comb was in another category. It had been fashioned of shell and fiber, soaked, dried out, and then fired—it was harmless, like the mantle.

"But the sticky varnish on those fibers was not!" He smiled, complacently. "Aubersohn was reminded of the smell of ivy. That was accurate! The solution containing the dissolved pure gold, so we have determined, was mainly prepared from the lac of an ivy growth—from *Rhus Toxicodendron*, the American poison ivy, a cousin of our innocuous Virginian creeper.

"All that family belong to the 'varnish-producing group' of trees. All of them yield mediums used in lacquering with precious metals. But *Rhus Toxicodendron's* sticky sap is far too deadly for any modern employment. Evidently the *Anahualtecans* found a way to control it, even as Bedford did, a thousand years later.

"Yes, it's murderous! The shed cuticle of the growth can make a strong man unconscious, inhaling it. A touch of a leaf means insupportable agony. And that lac, that sap, contains a fixed oil so potent that one drop in a gallon of olive oil produces a flesh-searing stuff stronger than vitriol! Finally, to walk in a place where poison ivy grows can induce on the walker a skin disease very like erysipelas . . . its vapor, its scent, causing that!

"Bedford, if you please, was using a distilled and concentrated essence of that hideous juice! No wonder it burned those poor devils like the flames of plague! Aubersohn vows he only got an accidental tap on his finger from those tacky things—in taking them from Schillam—yet look at his hand and arm! *Ugh*—the business hardly bears consideration!"

And since he shivered into silence, I asked:

"Well, what about the case-hardening of the gold? After all's said and done, that was the greater discovery."

A succession of strange expressions crossed Hildreth's face.

"Ingram, that part of the secret went

The Round Table



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As you know, magazines must be prepared long in advance of their sale date. Since you have not yet had time to get to your places at the Round Table, discussion will begin next month.

(Continued from page 127)

out of the world when a leaden slug went into a great man's brain! And my part in that useless suicide, I shall never cease to regret."

"But—but I don't see what you've got to reproach yourself about."

"DON'T you? I'm afraid I do!" He wearily shook his head. "Everything was running so smoothly. . . . The faculty for the emission of laughter-like sounds and a kind of thunder, had been traced to the million little echoing caverns in the spongy gold—these, in turn, had pointed to some bone-like material being used in their formation. . . . Finally, it was decided that the sticky 'wires' were

posthumous growths of armadillo shell, loaded with fine gold and poisonous lac. Bedford must have been able to procure such.

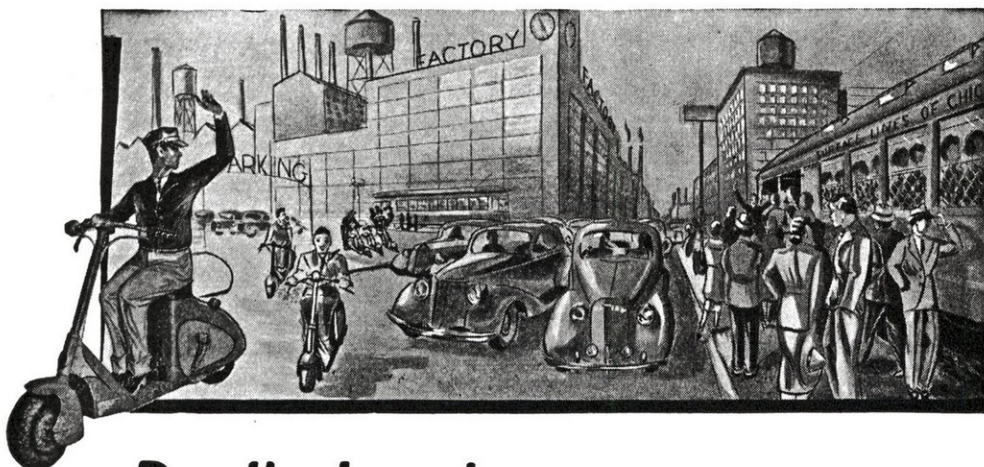
"All that remained was the obtaining of proof. And there, in Clegg's shop, proof in abundance was hanging in that chimney ingie. Then, like a fool, I let my self-congratulation override reason. I—I was too cock-a-hoop: cheaply mysterious.

"If only I'd kept my tongue between my teeth, Bedford's secrets would have been alive in the world today—and he with them, a happy man, honored for the genius he was."

So I left him in a brooding silence. I could only agree.

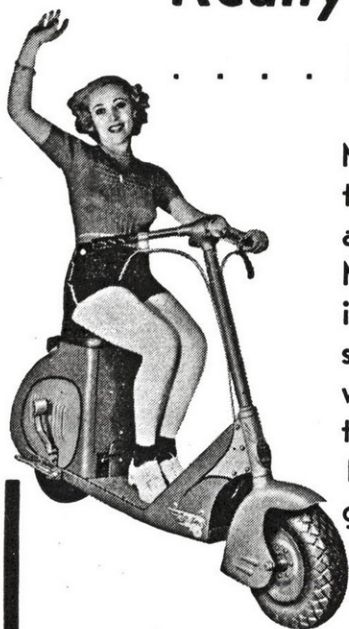
NOTE: Vincent Cornier, the author of this story, is a metallurgist of considerable experience in gold and baser metals, whose stories are extremely popular in Great Britain. If you enjoy "The Mantle That Laughed" as much as we have, you will be glad to know that more of his stories are coming.

Also in the near future, watch for "Two Against the Gods" by E. Hoffmann Price, "Gates of Empire" by Robert E. Howard, "Golden Chains" by Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr., "The White Rogue" by Anthony Rud, etc., etc.



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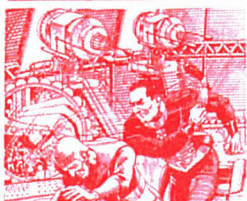
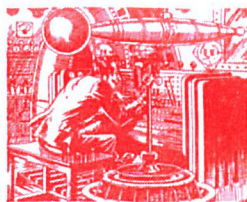


RAY OF ETERNITY ^{By} RICHARD TOOKER

Time did not exist when the weird ray of the time screen flashed forth. Death cut a grim swath across the blasted valley of Eli Martin, making it a tomb of mummies.

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Vance had a motive for murder, and then his supersonic experiments gave him a means. Like puppets he could make men march, controlled by the vibrations of his machine.



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A full color feature on the back cover, showing the Stratosphere Airliner of 1988; Science Quiz; Riddles of Science. And many other engrossing departments.



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