

"Black-Out"—in modern London—THEODORE ROSCOE  
FRANK GRUBER—H. S. DRAGO—H. BEDFORD-JONES

# Short Stories

August 10<sup>th</sup>

Twice A Month .25c

A swift novelette  
of the scorching  
Red Sea coastline  
by

**TALBOT  
MUNDY**



**"ODDS  
ON THE  
PROPHET"**



It's annoying when folks  
just drop in... *but*



# infectious dandruff

*is more annoying still!*

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BIGGEST AND BEST —TWICE A MONTH

# Stories



latest stories—no reprints

August 10th, 1941

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*We regret that through error the gunner on the cover of our July 25th issue was credited to Edgar F. Wittmack who painted the cover for this issue. The artist last time was Charles Wood.*

*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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# DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

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Health, Youth, Happiness, Success?**

Can we cast off all fear, negation, failure, worry, poverty and disease? Can we reach those mental and spiritual heights which at present appear unattainable? To these eternal questions, the answers given by Edwin J. Dingle, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, are unusual. He reveals the story of a remarkable system of mind and body control that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of business and professional success, and new happiness. Many report improvement in health. Others tell of magnetic personality, courage and poise.

The method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country, rarely visited by outsiders, and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western World.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind-power, capable of surprising feats. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized, our powers put to sleep, by the suggestions of associates, by what we read, and by various other



experiences. To realize their really marvelous powers, men and women must escape from this hypnotism. The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in freeing the mind of the hypnotizing ideas that paralyze the giant powers within us.

A nine-thousand word treatise revealing many startling results of this system is now being offered by the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 38E, Los Angeles, Calif. They offer to send it free to any readers who quickly send their names and addresses. Readers are urged to write them promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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—title of the terrifying, tremendous novelette by August W. Derleth in the September issue (now on sale) of that unique magazine—**WEIRD TALES.**



Visit the house where weirdly beautiful music wells flute-like from the surrounding darkness; where the fury of the gale swoops around the gables—yet no movement disturbs the line of trees dark upon the night sky.

What was that horrible caricature of a man which rose to the semblance of a head high in the heavens—with carmine stars where its eyes might have been? To whom,—or *what*—belonged those thunderous footsteps that echoed, and re-echoed, in the valley before the house? Whence came that cold which reeked of outer space?

You step, in this tale, across a forbidden threshold . . . where waits a bestial, hellish monstrosity—a monstrosity that walks on the winds high above the earth!

*Also*

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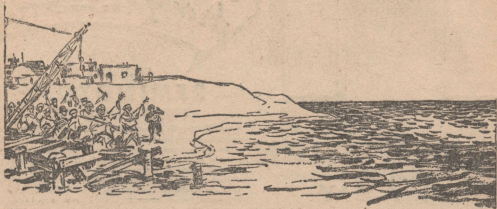
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*Rearing Skyward—The Prophet Leaped as Though Fifty Yards of Sea Were the Brook at Aintree!*

## ODDS ON THE PROPHET



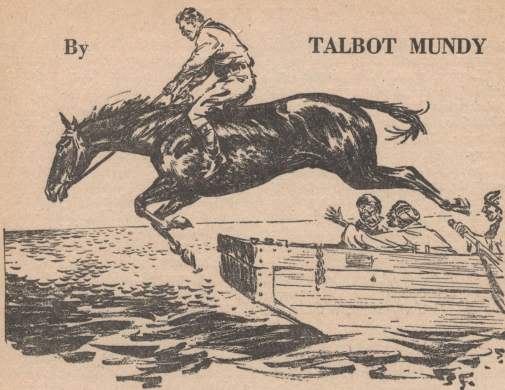
THE Arabian inhabitants of Zakkum speak of the place as "the Jewel in the Prophet of God's girdle, more lovely than Hodeidah." But there are lots of people who don't admire Hodeidah; and the Lord Mohammed may have had peculiar taste in jewelry. The name Zakkum means "The Hell Tree." There is one tree there, outside the city, beyond the "Gate of the Doomed." It is used for execution purposes; critics from Hodeidah, for instance, are lashed to its barkless dead branches to stare at the hot sky. But Max Rector knew nothing of that, because Roddy Nolan had not yet told him. The advantage of not telling Max before one had to was that Max couldn't air wisdom about things he had never heard of. Roddy was looking for breaks—looking for them in the dark. He didn't want an argument.

It was a hot night, even for the Red Sea coastline, where it is always scorching hot, raw-cold or stormy, and its storms come straight from hell. That is why it produces nothing else than fanatics—fanatical camels, customs, fleas and men, to say nothing of women. The moonless, breathless

humidity was made more noticeably silent by the intermittent crash of a ground-swell, amid coral reefs and on the fangs of the stinking beach. It made the beach seem nearer than it was. The main street of Zakkum was a diagonal gully between blank white walls that looked like night turned solid. The sky was an ebony vault; the stars swung beneath it like colored electric bulbs. It was tragically stagey. Max had smashed his electric torch when he stepped ashore; there was no light to show where street curs lay; the Arabs stumbled over them and kicked them, cursed and yelping, to perdition, lancing the stuffy silence without relieving it. Hooded, cloaked and arrogantly masculine, but femininely curious, the Arabs walked slowly, those in front continually turning to stare and delaying the others. They had the unself-conscious self-assertiveness of small boys at an accident and the solemnity of mutes at a funeral. They breathed all the available air and that made Max Rector half-hysterical; he was more than a nuisance in that mood; he was dangerous. Roddy Nolan was an old-timer on the Red Sea littoral; he had been a buyer of horses,

By

TALBOT MUNDY



camels, sheep and goats during the World War. He did not know Zakkum except by reputation, but he did know Arabs. He knew how important it was to make a good impression. He was remembering his Arabic. He asked no questions.

"There!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Didn't I tell you? You can find a Greek wherever the Devil overdid it and forgot to wipe up."

A door in the left-hand wall had opened. Sudden, yellow lamplight splurged on the white wall opposite.

"What the hell good is a Greek?" Max Rector grumbled.

"When you shake hands with a Greek, count your fingers," say the Turks. But there's luck where Greeks are—"

"Good luck? Whose?"

"Not always good, but always something doing. Greeks are luck. They're like oil in engine bearings. That's what luck is—oil for opportunity. It's quite unmoral. You take it or leave it."

"Mention engine bearings to me and—"

"Oh, forget 'em." Roddy had heard enough about Max's troubles. "A Greek," he said, "can live and like it where they'd put an Armenian on the spot for one per cent as much chicanery. This one looks good."

"God, man! You're an optimist!"

"So is he, or he couldn't live here."

"You're bughouse." Max Rector meant that. He always sincerely believed anyone mad who had an idea, or who knew something he didn't know.

THE crowd of Arabs surged into the zone of light, through it, and revealed the Greek standing in his doorway, in an ill-fitting pair of soiled khaki pants and a clean shirt. He had close-clipped black hair and a Mephistophelian mustache. His face was as pock-marked as the surface of the moon, and as yellow, but he was not bad looking. His eyes were soft and liquid with a sort of wistful intelligence. He had a shapely and yet peculiarly vulgar looking nose. Through his open shirt the sweat

shone on black hair that curled on his muscular chest and shoulders.

"Evening, gents." He grinned familiarly. "I'm Paulos Kamarajes—John D. Wanamaker - Macy - Altman - Montgomery Ward-Sears Roebuck of Zakkum. Cash and carry. U. S. dollars are as good as any money. What can I do for you?"

The Arabs crowded even closer, uncountable, smelling of leathery sweat, dead fish and burlap; only the nearest faces looked half-real, framed in the deceiving, hoary dignity of flowing head-dress; those that crowded behind and beyond were ghosts that belched, having had their supper, too much coffee, tobacco, no doubt kat, the green leaf that semi-stupifies them so that they believe the Red Sea Coast is civilized and sane.

"Make these creatures scam," Max Rec-tor exploded. That was a real explosion. He was too respectable to swear if he could possibly restrain himself. He shoved two Arabs. They resented it; their slow grins in the yellow light looked deadlier than spoken threats.

"These are sons of the Prophet," said Kamarajes. He said it with emphasis. Evidently some one in the crowd knew enough English to get the gist of an insult. Max could think of nothing complimentary to say, so he piped down, wiping sweat on his silk shirt-sleeve, careful to hit no one with his elbow.

Roddy stated fundamentals: "We want word with the local ruler. I don't know why these people guided us to your place."

"I told them to, as soon as I saw you drop anchor," said Kamarajes. "The local ruler is away from home. These people don't like it that you have brought a guard ashore. They ask, do you think them bad men who might abuse you? I said to them let me be interpreter. They won't abuse you if you leave it to me."

Roddy thought it as well to give the Greek fair warning. It might limit the scope of obliquity. So he answered: "Thank you. I speak Arabic."

"Maybe," said the Greek. "But I know Zakkum. You better tell those sailors off your yacht to go back. They might be abused badly if they don't go. You are safer without them."

It was Max's yacht. They were his men, paid to applaud his whimsies. If Max should explode like a fulminate cap, he might detonate that bo'sun and eight men, and they were likely to start something even more expensive than an engine breakdown. Roddy consulted Max in whispers.

"D'you want us killed or kidnapped?" Max retorted.

"Either trust my judgment or use your own. Suit yourself," said Roddy. He could keep his own temper but not Max's also.

"All right, have it your own way," Max shrugged off the responsibility and shouted: "Bo'sun, take your men back to the beach. If the crowd bothers you there, push off in the boat, but stay close inshore. I'll fire a pistol if I want you. Come then in a hurry."

"Aye, aye, sir." The feet of nine invisible men trudged away into the darkness, like a noise offstage; they suggested an army in the wings.

"Dammit, they'll believe I've met a woman," Max grumbled.

"Perhaps you have," said Kamarajes. "You have come to the right place."

"Oh, are you a madam?" Max asked. He couldn't resist parading his respectability. His was a millionaire morality, contemptuous, swift to nail labels on lies; and a lie was whatever he didn't believe.

**B**UT the Greek had been insulted by Arab experts; whoever has endured that and survived it, can keep his temper if nothing else. He chuckled. "Come in, gents." He stood aside, speaking to the almost invisible crowd in fluent Arabic. He appeared to have influence; they began drifting away. When he entered he bolted the door behind him. "I have promised by the nine-and-ninety names of Allah, that I will tell them your business," he an-

nounced. "That should keep them quiet. How about a drink, gents. There's no ice, but I've Johnny Walker, Haig and Haig, Martel, Benedictine, Curacoa—"

"Sell 'em?" Max asked, remembering something he had heard about Arab religion and prohibition. He had forgotten his cue to pipe down.

"Swap 'em. Seed pearls—skins—hides—coffee—oyster-shell. This is prohibition country—not Wahabi, mind you—not yet. The Wahabies\* are coming, but not yet. You don't get crucified—not yet—for touching liquor. But it's against religion, and sin's expensive—twenty-five or thirty bucks a bottle. This is on the house, though. What's yours? How about a cocktail?"

"No ice? Scotch for me," said Roddy Nolan. "Let me smell that bottle."

Max saw the point of accepting hospitality. He did his best to be gracious. "Me, too, if that isn't poison."

"Gents," said Kamarajes, "those Arabs are dangerous on a quart of the real thing. Bootleg hooch 'ud make 'em cuckoo; they'd skin me alive. What 'ud make a tough coon sentimental in the Loop, 'ud set these bozos to Kukluxing infidels. I'm an infidel, and so are you, so let's be honest. I sell straight goods."

He glanced around the store with an air of being amused by his own pride. It was a big square room with a stench of hides that came through shutterless windows opening on a courtyard in the rear. There were shelves stacked with the usual trade goods, a huge chest for the liquor, a table, four chairs, an iron cot, and several heaps of cushions on the mat-covered floor. The place was scrupulously clean. A bullet-headed Swahili man-servant leaned in through one of the windows awaiting orders; he was silhouetted, black against a patch of starlit sky. Roddy tossed off a short drink and sat down. Max followed

suit, pulling a wry face; he hated anything he felt was forced on him; he was one of those men who enjoy their own bounty and resent other people's.

"Tell him," he said, revealing fat lips as he wiped his yellowish mustache, "if only to convince you you're crazy. Go on, tell him."

"Tell me anything," said Kamarajes. "Gents, I'm here to get a living. I don't eat sand. There's no luck in dirty money. But if you've a proposition—"

"We've a horse," said Roddy.

The Greek whistled softly to himself; his luminous, humorous eyes grew slightly narrower. "A horse—here?" he said. "You'd have something rarer now, if you took Irishmen to Chicago or Jews to New York. If you'd any kind of hop, for instance *bhang* now, I could sell that. I could use a gross of Jew's harps, or a couple of cases of women's make-up. I could pay a fair price for silk socks or wrist-watches, or alarm-clocks. Guns and ammunition, if they're good, are worth their weight in silver. I'll buy old magazines or Victrola records. But a horse—"

"It's a racehorse," said Roddy. "My friend here, Mr. Max Rector, very kindly offered to convey my horse and me to India. The yacht's engines have broken down; the chief engineer doesn't know yet how long repairs may take. The heat and close confinement are not doing the horse any good. I would like to bring him ashore, where he can get exercise. I noticed a scow tied to the jetty; we could use that to get him ashore; and we've plenty of fodder. How about it? Can I get permission and protection from the local sheikh?"

The Greek whistled softly again. "You'd better call him Sultan—Sultan Ayyub. He is touchy. What's it worth to me if I arrange it?"

"Fifty dollars," Max said promptly. His father had made the fortune. Max had increased and preserved it by inheriting prudence along with the dollars.

\* The Wahabis, ruled by Ibn Saud, are a fanatically puritan sect that has already conquered Mecca and is ambitious to bring all Arabia under its grim domination.



KAMARAJES concealed emotion by wiping his face with a sweat-cloth. "Have you liquor aboard?" he asked after a moment. "You're not a dry ship, are you? Sell me liquor at cost—all you have—and I'll treat you high, wide and handsome!"

He looked and spoke like a reasonably square shooter; his eyes were alert, not furtive. But Max awaited a nod from Roddy before he answered; he preferred to have someone to blame if necessary. Even so he was ungracious.

"See my steward in the morning. He might spare you a case or two of gin or something."

The Greek rolled himself a cigarette. "You want me to fix it with the Sultan for the horse to come ashore, and be protected, and have exercise—"

"Yes, and get aboard again safely, as soon as the yacht's engines have been repaired," said Roddy.

"I might manage it. Can you sell me ammunition?"

Max scowled. "With a British sloop likely to turn up? I don't want my yacht confiscated, thank you."

The Greek's smile suggested he knew plenty about British sloops, but also plenty about the shirt-fronts of respectability behind which beat the hearts of rogues.

"It wouldn't matter," he said, "if the ammunition don't fit. These guys can make a rifle from an iron bedpost. It's loaded shells they'll pay pearls for."

Max shut his mouth tight and scowled so that his glasses slipped down off his nose.

"Nothing doing. I will make you a present of three cases of gin. I would be breaking the law to sell you liquor."

Kamarajes leaned his weight on his hands on the table, glancing from one man to the other, studying faces. His own face revealed cunning and humor but not much malice—no more than a man needs for business purposes. He seemed to make up his mind to reserve Roddy for a later, sub-

tlar and perhaps more profitable effort. He addressed himself to Max:

"Sir, I perceive you're a man of principle." He wiped the table with a bartender's sweep of the arm. "You wouldn't wrong man or woman, I can tell that."

"Not if I knew it," Max answered.

Roddy drew a sharp breath as if Max had hurt him. Kamarajes' eyes laughed; not being Max Rector's guest, he gave not a Red Sea damn for Max's smugness.

"I'll bet women get a square deal from you, mister."

"I didn't come here to deal with women," Max retorted. "If this is a bad-house—"

"It's a good-house, but a bad country," said Kamarajes.

"Anyhow, no women." Max had climbed on his high horse and proposed to remain there. It is a long time since the fall of Troy, but very few Greeks have forgotten how to put hollow horses to use. Roddy watched the Greek as if it were a poker game, but the Greek kept his eyes on Max.

"Sure a woman couldn't tempt you, Mister?"

"No," Max answered. "Get that into your head. I'm not interested."

Kamarajes turned his back to get the whiskey bottle from the shelf behind him. Roddy saw him glance at the Swahili servant framed in the open window. The Swahili nodded. Kamarajes faced them again and refilled the glasses.

"Good," he said. "That's all I wanted to know. Let the women alone and you're safe in any country. Here's luck, gent."

He emptied his own glass at a gulp.

"Can I count on you," he looked straight at Max, "not to get me in dutch with the Sultan if I let you see a young girl that he keeps his special eye on?"

"Certainly," Max answered.

"Not if she falls for you?"

Max felt and looked flattered; Roddy was the younger man but not nearly so handsome. The Greek showed good sense.

Roddy after all, was a horsey pauper, sportily plucky and all that kind of thing, but unimportant. Affluence does stamp a man; it gives him responsibility and experience. But it stirs cupidity in women. The Greek was quite right. He glanced sideways at Roddy.

"I'd as soon meet a rattlesnake as a woman in this place, but bring her in, if you want to. I don't mind. She shan't get into mischief with us, believe me."

"That's a promise?"

"Yes, for both of us."

Roddy lighted a cigarette. A child could have understood the gesture; but Max was no child; he was born a millionaire; other people had to keep his promises or get left.

The Greek turned to the Swahili. "Al Sitt Lillilee," he ordered.

The Swahili vanished. Hardly a second later the latch clicked on the door between the two wide windows.

## II

ALL doors are dramatic even in the daytime; that one of packing case pine, between two windows that framed starlit night, appeared to turn a page of mystery. Max Rector's idea of genuine drama was the rise and fall of stock market prices, but it stirred even him. It opened slowly, as if of its own volition. There was nothing. Then she stood there, as if she had come from nowhere, born of the star sprayed night behind her. With yellow lamplight on her face, she looked like a lithograph framed by the jetsam lumber of the doorposts. There was no guessing her age—eighteen — nineteen — twenty — perhaps older.

"Gypsy!" Max said after a moment, half-contemptuously. Like a roulette ball, his thought had to hurry as soon as it could into one of the regulation funk-holes. Having called her a Gypsy, he knew now what to expect, and it wasn't dividends.

Roddy corrected him. "White, by gad!"

Knowing a good bit about Gypsies is part of a professional horseman's necessary education. This girl was not one—definitely not. She had a Gypsy's stance—motionless rhythm. Lillilee? Lee might be an English Gypsy's name. But Lilly? Her face was pure Nordic. Ice-experience was in it, softened by laughter and tropical sun. She might be even Scandinavian; she had blue eyes. That Gypsy look was assumed, or perhaps imposed by association. Roddy stood up. Max remained seated. The Greek watched them, standing back to the wall, with his foot on one rung of a chair.

"Don't forget yourself," Max warned in a loud whisper. "Remember, we promised." It was quite clear what he thought of any girl discovered in that place.



Roddy, after that one explosive contradiction of Max's guess, stood silent. He knew enough to be puzzled, but little enough to be certain of only one thing: that the girl was not the Greek's property. He felt almost sure she belonged to herself; she looked so confidently curious and sure of her own right to opinions. Nevertheless, she could not be free or she would certainly not be in Zakkum, unveiled, desirable, young. Armed sloops patrol that coastline in a constant vigil against slave-

runners. But there are five hundred thousand slaves in the world; slaves do reach Arabian markets, and some of them like it. The Swahili servant probably had been a slave; perhaps the Greek had freed him. Was the girl one? White female slaves are not unknown. They are not even rare. They bring enormous prices. But at eighteen or twenty they have usually lost even the look of white ancestry.

She stood looking from one to the other, unsmiling, evidently not embarrassed, but as keenly observant as if she were buying horses. She was not dressed like an Arab woman. Roddy noticed an American mail order catalogue and two or three thumbed old copies of *Vogue* on one of the shop shelves. The flowing line of a thin yellow silk shawl thrown loosely over a white smock made her look tall at first glance, but she was actually less than middle height and slim, healthily sun-burned and as leanly strong as a dancer in training. Perhaps not really beautiful, thought Roddy, or was she? Certainly not pretty—surely fascinating. She knew what to do with her hands, which is rare except among the thoroughly savage or over-civilized, and she was evidently neither one nor the other. It occurred to Roddy that the Greek was just as curious as himself as to how she would behave.

Max broke the silence. "What does she do?" he asked, "Dance the hootchikootch?"

"She does whatever she likes," said Kamarajes. "The last man who tried to abuse Lilly Lee got his feet beaten to jelly with the ribs of date-palms. If anyone tried a second time he'd be buried up to the neck in the sand with his face to the sun; and he'd be smeared with a little honey, although honey's expensive and the flies in these parts don't need much tempting. That's why I warned you. She enjoys the Sultan's special favor."

THE girl smiled suddenly. She looked like a boy then, with her shapely, alert looking head and dark bobbed hair; the

gloom behind her had made it impossible to see what her hair was like until she walked straight toward Roddy. She offered a strong, sunburned hand. He shook it. Then she sat on the table and threw off the filmy yellow drape; that made her look not at all like a boy, but even more self-confident. There was nothing defeated about her appearance. She had the teeth of a healthy young savage and a tongue that was nearly as red as her lipstick. Her dark-blue eyes were frankly inquisitive and bright with good humor. She was not in the least ashamed to show her bare legs, and they were good to look at. Max studied them, frowning, but he kept on looking.

"Well?" she said, smiling at Roddy. She was moist from the heat, but she smelt as wholesome as a weaned calf.

Roddy hardly knew what to say, but it is a safe rule in Arabia not to begin by asking questions. He felt for the range from behind conventional banality:

"It's hot," he said. "Phew!" Then he turned his chair toward her and sat down, wiping his face on a damp handkerchief.

"Yes, I heard all that through the window," she answered—fluent English, confused accent. "You have a horse. The horse is on a ship. The ship is broken. The engine-driver says you wait until he mends it. Who is that man?"

Max used his thumb to raise the ends of his mustache, hesitating between a smile and a frown. Roddy came to his rescue:

"He owns the yacht."

"Yes, I heard that, but who is he? Why doesn't he signal for help? Is he afraid of the ships that might come? What has he been doing? Running guns? I heard talk about guns."

"No, I haven't," said Max. He wiped his glasses. "What business is that of yours, Miss? Who are you?"

"My name is Lilly Lee. I have a radio. I pick up Jerusalem, Barcelona, Paris, Dresden, Berlin, London. Haven't you a radio on your ship? All ships have them. Can't you send an S.O.S.?"

Max tried to talk down to her. "If I wish to." He had too recently faced a public investigation to enjoy a witness chair or even a suggestion of one. He had come away to forget such horrors. But the girl made him feel timid, so he looked pompous. She was purposely making him angry, and Max knew it.

"Why don't you wish to?" she demanded.

"I carry a crew that can make repairs."

"Stingy, eh? You don't wish to pay—what do you call it?—salvation?"

"Salvage," Max corrected. "Do you call that stingy?" He tried to seem amused, but his face betrayed him.

"Stingy? I heard you offer Paulos fifty dollars. That is how many pounds? How many francs? Then you said you would give him three cases of hootch—three only. Do you call that generous?"

"I don't carry hootch on my yacht. What do you take me for, a bootlegger?" Max exploded. "Where did you learn English? It's a pity they didn't teach you to mind your own business—and decent manners at the same time."

"**H**AH!" She smiled at Roddy; the change of expression made her look simultaneously five years older and five years younger—young with mischief, aged by obscene experience. It must have been obscene. She swore a streak of scandalous Arabic, then barrack-room French, measuring off the last joint of the little-finger of her left hand, pointing it at Max. "You look haughty, but you don't know that much!"

I have met people like you, and I know lots of sorts of manners." Then she turned again toward Roddy, changing her tone of voice.

"Why have you your horse on *his* ship?"

Roddy fell in with her mood as the likeliest means of changing it. She might talk if he told her the truth.

"To get the horse to India."

"But why on his ship?"

"I was broke. Do you know what being broke means?"

She chuckled. "Don't I! Will you sell the horse in India?"

"No. Race him."

"Is he a jump horse or a flat horse?"

"Both," Roddy answered. "He has won as a steeplechaser and on the flat, too."

She appeared pleased. "You ride?" she demanded.

Roddy nodded. She looked him over—head to heel, shoulders, hands—

"Yes," she said, "you ride. That other man doesn't. He plays cards. He eats too much. He buys things and sneers at the people who make them. You will go from here to India? Will you put in at Aden on the way?"

Roddy glanced at Max. Max shook his head. She seemed to approve. But she was not satisfied yet.

"Why not Aden?"

"Quarantine," Max answered disgustedly. "They'd keep me anchored there a fortnight, after having visited this damned hole. Why? Why do you ask?"

She ignored him, but she seemed pleased to know he was not going to Aden. "If it were your ship," she said, smiling at Roddy.

"It isn't." Roddy almost shuddered at the thought of owning such a monstrous encumbrance. But he felt a sudden impulse to soothe Max Rector's feelings by stressing his own unimportance. Max was after all his host. "All I own in the world," he said, "is a horse and about a thousand dollars." He nodded his head toward Max.

"There's your Prince Bountiful." He had almost said butter-and-egg man.

She continued to ignore Max. But she spoke to Roddy as one insider to another:

"You may bring your horse ashore just as soon as you wish."

"Thanks," said Roddy. He was not going to let anything in Arabia surprise him, but he was still skeptical. "Can *you* give permission?"



"I do anything I like, except to go away from Zakkum."

"She is watched," said Kamarajes. "But she has protection. Oh, boy!"

"And I have these," she added.

She produced a knife and a pearl-handled automatic, from somewhere up under her smock. The knife was a beautiful, slim-bladed thing with an ivory handle. She appeared to wish Max to notice them.

"Do you ever use them?" Roddy asked, wondering why she should think Max dangerous.

"Oh, yes."

Kamarajes chuckled. "She is watched, I tell you." He walked to the window and leaned out. Almost instantly a man peered in, not an Arab, though he wore the Arabian headdress. His coal-black face had the seldom mistakable, sexless concentration of a eunuch's. He had a wide scar from a cut that had severed his nose, but in spite of the disfigurement the face was not unpleasant; they were a sort of old nurse's features, skeptical but tolerant. He strolled away, smiling. Kamarajes, with his back to the window, grew communicative, his pock-marked face betraying, but not explaining some secret motive.

"Gypsy Lee brought her here. That was during the War, when she was little." He rolled another cigarette, watching Lilly Lee's face. "He was not her father—"

"How do you know?" the girl interrupted. "Nobody knows."

Kamarajes shrugged his shoulders. "And the woman said to be her mother wasn't her mother. She died of thieving. If she had stolen from men—" He shrugged again. "But she stole from women, so there was real trouble. Those other fool Gypsies stuck up for the thief, so the whole damned lot got taken for a ride—all except this one. They were ridden to the hell tree. But she was a little girl. And she isn't a Gypsy. I don't know what she is. Neither does she. I think they stole her somewhere. I took her to school in Jerusalem, but the Sultan stopped paying the bills—"

"You're a liar," she interrupted.

"Well," said Kamarajes, "do you want me to tell the truth?"

"No. I will tell it."

SHE was having a marvelous time, enjoying mid-stage. She seemed sure she could manage the Greek. She seemed to wish to make a good impression on Roddy. It was a puzzle why she should treat Max so contemptuously, unless she saw through his morality to the selfishness beneath. Max had been stodgily moral about women ever since a patient mistress turned up at his father's funeral and claimed common law rights. He still resented what that had cost him.

"Let's go back to the ship," Max said. He yawned to conceal irritation. "It's late. There's nothing amusing here. I'm anxious to see how they're coming along in the engine-room."

"You go," the girl retorted. "Leave this owner-of-a-horse" (she used an Arabian word) "to talk to me. Paulos shall lend you a guide."

Kamarajes seconded the motion. "Sure," he said, moving a kerosene lamp so that his own face should be more in shadow.

Max sagged back into his chair, looking sulkily suspicious. "Oh, well. There's no risk of bad weather; I guess the yacht's all right. If we take quinine we may escape malaria. Let's hope we catch nothing worse." He slapped at a mosquito.

The girl stuck the point of her knife in the table and flicked it until it thrummed. Then she faced Roddy and took up her story where the Greek had left off.

"It was Sultan Ayyub's father who paid for me at the school, although it was Paulos who took me to *El Kudz*."

Roddy interrupted: "Why Jerusalem?"

"Because I was to be brought up an unbeliever but knowing plenty. Nobody knows enough; but I know more than any Arab woman."

\* Jerusalem.

"It was easy to send money to Jerusalem," Kamarajes explained. "She could go to school there without forgetting what she learned here. When they educate girls in Arabia it has to be practical. Arabs say a man can learn laws and make women obey. But a girl, if she gets an education, and only about one in a hundred thousand does, is supposed to learn how to break rules and get away with it. Moslem women have to wear the burka. That's like prohibition. Lilly Lee would have been a moll behind a burka. She'd have been no more good than any other moll. As it is, she's okay. I took her to a little mission run by Syrian Christians. Money talks; so they didn't."

"And I ran away," said the girl.

"At once?" asked Roddy.

"Oh, no. I stayed three years, until I'd learned enough of that stuff. I have tried to forget most of it, except the three Rs. After I ran away, Paulos put the money for my schooling into his own pocket—didn't you, Paulos?"

"Should I have paid it to the mish'naries—for nothing?" he retorted. "All that money?"

"Sultan Abu Nakib died and his son Ayyub succeeded him," she continued. "Ayyub found out about me and about what Paulos had done with the money. Ayyub isn't a strong man. So he isn't merciful. He beat Paulos and put him in prison. But I didn't know about that. I had gone away with Gypsies, because I liked them. They didn't tell me what I mustn't do but what I can do if I learn how. I'm good at learning. So I went with them all through Europe—Syria, Turkey, Roumania, Hungary, Germany, France, England—up to mischief always. Sometimes bad mischief. Not always lucky. But they taught me to dance very well and to sing not so well; and I learned lots of languages—until we got into trouble in England and I was sent to a reform school. That was worse than Zakkum! Much worse! But I ran away when Czarbo and

the rest of them were let out of prison; they weren't in long—nine months—they'd only stolen—and I learned good English—didn't I?—can't I talk it?"

Max looked as though he thought she talked too well. He refused to be interested—blew his nose and kept his face averted.

"Go on. I'm listening," said Roddy.

"You will listen," said Max, "to a tale too many one of these days."

THE girl stared at Max a moment and then continued:

"Czarbo had been training me for the stage. We followed circuses and country fairs, but he always said the stage is the thing to aim at. So he trained me strictly, and he used to beat me, but not often. He was too old, and I don't think he liked me enough to beat me too much. And besides, I'm not a Gypsy and he knew that I wouldn't stand what Gypsies will. Czarbo taught me how to get money, and yet never to give men what they're trying to buy. He taught about morals and the difference between hypocrisy and good sense. Czarbo meant to sell me sooner or later; I knew that. When they let him out of prison he decided it was time for us to go to America. But when we got there they wouldn't admit us. We were sent back, and when we got to England they wouldn't let us land there either. But Czarbo had money enough to take us to France, and the French let us in, because Czarbo bribed someone. And then we were broke. Czarbo thought it time to sell me, though he didn't say so. He was afraid there'd be trouble about it, because I'm not a Gypsy and he knew I'd raise hell. I don't choose to be sold. Czarbo himself had taught me why not."

Max snorted.

"Carry on," said Roddy.

"I always do carry on, as you call it. But it isn't always simple. I was carrying on in Marseilles when Dimitris found me. I was dancing in a cabaret near the docks, and singing on the docks when steamers

came. Czarbo was dead, and it was difficult to keep the *nervis* of the Vieux Port from making me a mere piece of meat in their market. I had to make them fight about me. They fought with knives and slew each other. But Czarbo's women—there were three of them—had gone; I didn't like them, and they didn't like me. I had learned I couldn't live alone in Marseilles when Dimitros saw me."

"Who is Dimitros?" asked Roddy.

"Paulos' partner. He escaped when Ayyub—"

"You mean Sultan Ayyub?"

"Yes, when Sultan Ayyub beat Paulos and put him in prison. Dimitros said Paulos would die unless I went to Zakkum and explained things. Ayyub would tire of feeding him and would let him starve, or perhaps tie him to the hell-tree. But Dimitros begged me not to go back. He said I'd probably forgotten Arabic, and I'd be put in Ayyub's harem or something worse. He said he'd make my fortune in Marseilles. I didn't wish to be sold by Dimitros. Some day I myself will sell me, for my own price."

"How much?" Max asked.

She ignored him, except that she turned away a little. "So, I came to Zakkum to help Paulos."

"How did you get here?" Roddy asked her.

"Oh, that wasn't difficult. I have acted boy all over Europe. I used to ride Czarbo's horses, when he had any. I used to help Czarbo to steal horses; that was how we got into trouble in England. I stole five hundred francs from Dimitros, and I gave them to a Frenchman to smuggle me on a big passenger ship to Alexandria. I nearly got caught in Alexandria; I had to hide amid drums of gasoline on the dock. But I got away all right. I told a rich Jew that my mother was dead. Jews love their mothers. That Jew paid my fare on the train to Cairo, and his wife gave me food for the journey. Then I begged my way to Sawakin, by pretending I had been lost

and left behind by a family of pilgrims on their way to Mecca."

"How did you cross the sea to Zakkum?"

"The way the slaves all get here. That's simple. Don't you know about it? I offered myself to a dealer in slaves. If you cost them nothing, and you look good, you can always bargain to be taken to the market you prefer. They might get into very bad trouble if they broke faith with a slave who knows the law, and isn't afraid of the police. I had to let that dealer know I'm a woman, because that made me perfectly safe. Spoiled goods bring low prices. And besides, he was an Arab, from Makalia, and they're good with women. After I was safe on the dhow I told him why I wished to go to Zakkum. He had ten other slaves in his dhow, and those he sold in Zakkum, but he refused to sell me. He was a good man. All his slaves were fat and happy when they landed. He let me make my own terms, although, of course, he made his, too. He made a profit. That's how Paulos got out of Ayyub's prison. I have been here three years."

"Do you like it?" Roddy asked her.

"I hate it. But I can't get away."

"You've only to appeal to a consul," said Max, in a voice like a banker refusing a loan. Max could make common sense sound hateful.

SHE stared at him for a moment and then answered scornfully: "Which counsel? Of what country? Where is my country?"

"Any consul would report you to the League of Nations."

"Oh, yes? What would *they* do? Marry me to the Prince of Wales?"

Max glared at Kamarajes. "What's wrong with *you*, that you don't take her away from here? Of what country are you a citizen?"

"None," said Kamarajes. "I can't get a passport."

"Why not? How did you get to Jerusalem?"

"Any o' your business?" the Greek asked.

Max stood up, shoving his chair away noisily. "Come along," he said. "Haven't you had enough? Let's get back to the yacht."

"What were the terms you made?" asked Roddy. He made a gesture to Max to wait a minute.

"Paulos out of prison. Me to have my liberty in Zakkum and be Ayyub's—"

"Spy," said Kamarajes.

"Until Ayyub chooses me a man agreeable to him. But I must also agree. He can't give me unless I'm willing."

"Would you break the bargain?" Roddy asked her.

She nodded. "Ayyub broke his."

"He did not," said Kamarajes. There was pride in his voice.

"Well, he tried to. But I'm popular. I raised hell. Ayyub didn't dare. So now he wants me to go to Mahmoud ben Amara, who is a fat *barfush*\* with a harem in Mecca and makes money cheating pilgrims. Ayyub owes him lots of money. But that was not in the bargain either."

"We can't interfere," said Max. "I don't suppose the law can help you. By your own account, you're here of your own free will. If you're as popular as you say, your Arab friends should help you."

"They want me here," she answered and turned her back to him.

"Well, it seems you made your own bed," said Max. He walked up to Roddy and touched his shoulder. "Are you coming?"

"How about the horse?" asked Roddy.

THE girl glanced at Kamarajes. "First thing in the morning," said the Greek. "I'll be out there myself with the scow. Another drink, gents? No? All right. Two of my men shall see you to the beach. If you've any old newspapers or magazines—"

"Perhaps my steward has some." Max

unbolted the door. He jerked it open. "Are you coming, Roddy?"

Roddy shook hands with Lilly Lee. "Were you telling us lies?" he asked, smiling.

She looked straight in his eyes. "You know dam-well I wasn't."

"Any woman who wants to be is safe with Arabs," said Kamarajes. "Arabs are all right. But it can't last forever. And then what?"

"See you in the morning," Roddy answered. He didn't know "what." He followed Max. Two of the Greek's black servants accompanied them with lanterns as far as the beach, where the boat's crew waited. Max sulked until they reached the yacht, half a mile out from the shore. When they reached the dock he blew up.

"Nolan, you're crazy. You're an example of perpetual motion—out of one trouble and into another. I believe you'd go long of hot air if a crook had the nerve to ask you money for it. You wouldn't be broke if you weren't a madman. Dammit, man, you swallowed that girl's patter like a rube at a circus side-show. Couldn't you see she was playing you?"

Roddy had seen that perfectly. He leaned against the bulwark rail, looked up at the stars and then cupped his hands to light a cigarette. What was the use of saying anything? A man whose entire fortune consists of a heat-crazed stallion and about a thousand dollars can't afford to be quarrelsome, and he was not a quarrelsome fellow anyhow. But a disagreeable man with a huge yacht is in poor case too, unless he likes to be lonely. It is easier to fill a hotel with good companions, especially after one's financial secrets have been scornfully investigated and exposed to public derision. Max was sensible enough to guess that Roddy Nolan might prefer to take his chance in Zakkum rather than be hectorred, no matter how much he needed hospitality. He changed his tenor:

"If you'd had as many women try to blackmail you as I've had, you'd be

\* Blackguard.



more suspicious. Roddy, my boy, you're too good-natured and too trusting. Take my advice and keep out of trouble."

"Yes, you have trouble enough," said Roddy.

That smoothed Max; he loved the subtle flattery of being told his troubles were a Titan's. He became grossly condescending:

"Fall for her, if you choose, old fellow. I'm no lady-killer, but I know what the biological urge is. But don't be a sucker. Don't get that knife in your back. Keep your eye on that Greek. Above all, don't bring the girl to the yacht. She might make endless trouble. International law is dangerous stuff to monkey with. There isn't exactly a Mann Act on the high seas, but—"

"Oh, the hell with her," said Roddy. What he meant was, the hell with Max Rector, but he had to get along with the man somehow, and it was useless to try to explain his view that only those whom Max could call suckers enjoy life. Genuine suckers are rare, but have few regrets. Not being greedy, they don't have to bury their greed later on in the ashes of disillusion. A proper sportsman, according to Roddy's view, expects less profit than entertainment, but gets plenty of that; it doesn't trouble him much to be called a sucker by the sort who think that fear is righteous and greed is principle. Roddy had frequently betted his boots on a hunch, and had frequently lost. But he also had frequently won, and he had seldom been bored, except by such people as Max. He had a horse, a thousand dollars, his health and the ability to enjoy them all. But he wanted to live to enjoy them. He knew that the biological urge is a short means to a sure and dreadful death, for a foreigner on the Arabian coast-line. He despised Max for being such an ass as not to know that.

He strolled aft for a look at his horse, stalled in a huge crate between the motor-driven ventilators. Max went down to the engine-room, to insult the engineer with

platitudes and to annoy the sweat-wet crew, who toiled in the glare of electric light amid dismantled engines. Roddy gave the horse a carrot, talked to him a bit, and then sat on the top of the horse-box, gazing at the stars, wondering why, in a world of about two billion people and a hundred and ninety-six million square miles, he, Roddy Nolan, should meet such a girl as Lilly Lee, in such a place as Zakkum, because of a broken-down Diesel-electric engine. Is there such a thing as destiny? Or is everything chance? There are traps that leave devilish little to chance; he knew that. He could see the bait. He could guess the trap. But why? What for?

"Well," he remarked to himself at last. "If the stars know anything, they don't tell a fellow like me. I guess the only way to find out is to bite and see what happens."

### III

MAX had few respectable gifts, not even a real flair for navigation (which is very different from seamanship). His genius was for what he called "the conservation of resources"; other people called it hogging dollars. Master as well as owner of the *Blue Heron* the trick, as he would have called it, of commanding respect from junior officers eluded him as completely as the art of making friends and keeping them. Of the three certificated officers who had signed in New York for a voyage around the world, not one remained. Max had had to pick up substitutes in Marseilles and Alexandria, and he had had to take pot luck at that. All three were already insulted and dissatisfied. Worse yet, his original engineer had told him, in Alexandria, to hire the Devil, if the Devil felt like being made a fool of; he had gone ashore with his belongings, and had raised hell at the consulate. Max had had to "compensate" him. After several days' delay he had found a middle-aged Scotsman out of a job; he didn't like him or trust him, but he had to take him;

and either MacNamara didn't thoroughly know diesel-electric engines, or else he had obeyed Max too implicitly against his better judgment. Anyhow, the engines were in a devil of a mess. Daybreak found the sleepless MacNamara, wild-eyed and half-naked, interrupting Max in silk pajamas at his morning tea on the bridge deck.

"Progress?" Max asked. Before he had shaved he was always in a supercilious mood.

To raise your eyebrows at a hard-bitten Scotsman is about as tactless as to stick out your tongue at an Irish cop. The dregs of MacNamara's suavity, if he ever had any, went overboard along with the sweat that he stripped off his brow with messy fingers.

"Aye. It depends what's progress. I have reached a decession to warn ye to tak' a tow, if ye can get it—back to Suez, I'd say. Come a westerrly, ye'd have a bad lee. Come a southerly, ye'd lie worrse. Come a northerly, ye'd drag as sure as death an' taxes."

"How long?" Max asked.

"Ten days—meenimim. An' that's provided I can keep the crew contented wi' a bonus. They're a puir lot o' Bolsheviki—verra ineffecient—an' they're feelin' the heat. They've the right o' it, claiming overtime, and—"

Max interrupted angrily. "They signed on to work, not to take a vacation."

"Aye. But they'll tak' no imposection. Ye'll gie a bonus, or ye're up against a deefficulty. That's my opeenion. Man, we've to tak' down an' reassemble half Schenectady. An' mark those Arabs. It 'ud cost ye less to tak' a tow to Suez, than to fall foul o' such heathen as inhabit these parrts. Are ye insured against a cut-throat?"

The scow was coming, towed by two rowboats, surrounded by about twenty more. In the stern of the scow Kamarajes waved a slouch hat to Roddy Nolan, who already had the horse-box slung to his liking. All sorts of gadgets down below had been disconnected and there was no power

available for the winch at the moment, but Roddy had made friends with the mate, so half the crew were standing by to man the derrick and lower the big crate overside. Roddy, in an effort to calm the stallion's mood, was up on the top of the box with the hose; but the water came up warm and sticky with little comfort in it. "The Prophet" was trying to kick the box to pieces. Having discovered very early in the voyage that the sailor, who volunteered as groom for the extra pay, was afraid of him, the horse had turned so savage that Roddy himself had to do the grooming and cleaning out, until Max, in disgust, had hired a Port Said Gypsy. But the Gypsy was also afraid, and had deserted at Suez. He was supposed to have jumped overboard after they put to sea; his name was still on the manifest, but the desertion had not been logged; Max had told the second officer to make the entry, but had given him such a hell of a bawling out for something else that the second officer had simply forgotten to do it. Max loathed the sight of the second officer; he had just ordered him off the bridge. To see Roddy, after all his guest, doing the work of a hired sailor, made him furious.

"Dammit," he exploded. "It's a hold-up. Bolsheviki is right. These engines are supposed to be the last word—fool-proof."

"Aye. But they're no proof against temperamental improprieties."

"I believe it's a case of sabotage. However, I'll have to pay time and a half, I suppose. Blackmail, I call it. It's up to you to see they earn the money."

"And a leetle liquor? It's bad in preen-ciple, but verra good practice if y'r conscience isn't over strong f'r y'r diplomacy."

Max scowled. "I will tell the steward."

"Mind ye," said MacNamara, "I can give ye power for the radio, an' my advice is to use that an' beg a tow to Suez. It may be costly, if we run into a head wind, but let the underwriters pay. We can patch her up here after a fashion. Aye. Ye can make Bombay, I don't doot, if the

Arabs let ye. But ye don't know Arabs. Ye'd be in a predeccament if they discovered how helpless ye are."

THE word "helpless" enraged Max so that he couldn't think except that Mac-Namara probably was scheming to work a commission from the repair-yard in Suez. On that awful morning when he had sat in a witness-chair to be investigated on oath, a federal attorney had called him a "helpless product of chance and cupidity, quailing like a coward from the public scorn," merely because he had "not remembered" something or other. All the papers had carried it along with his picture. He had hardly cared to face even his stenographer. The surreptitious grins at the club had been unbearable. If he should take a tow to Suez now the papers would yelp with glee about it. He had come away to escape publicity, not to court it. Besides, he wasn't helpless. He resented the imputation.

"The Arabs are all right," he said sulkily. "I made the necessary overtures to them last night. It's merely a question of being diplomatic. Mind your own business."

"Verra weel," said MacNamara. "But ye'll kindly log my statement of opeenion. And I tak' the liberty o' recommending ye to let none o' the crew go ashore."

MacNamara went below, fuming. Then came Kamarajes, with a slouch hat in his hand and a genial grin, climbing to the bridge-deck uninvited. He looked over-exposed against the blue sky; on his face were deep dark shadows that made his smile look sinister.

"Good morning, Mister. Three cases of gin, you promised, and some old magazines—"

Max jumped up from the deck-chair. "Get off my bridge!" He suddenly remembered then that the Greek might prove useful, so he changed the tone of his arrogance. "My good man, don't you know it isn't customary to walk up to a yacht's

bridge without being asked? I'll overlook it this time, but don't do it again. Go back to that scow, and I'll have your needs attended to. And by the way, while you're about it, tell those Arabs to keep away. You understand, I want no visitors. Tell 'em to keep off."

The Greek bowed beautifully and retired to overtake MacNamara and oil his way into the engineer's good graces. Max rang for the steward. When he had given his orders he watched Roddy on the top of the horse-box being lowered overside. He wondered how a man could find amusement in such undignified gymnastics. How could he laugh and enjoy himself, with nothing but a second-rate racehorse and about a thousand dollars between him and destitution? He'd get sunstroke if he wasn't careful.

He'd end in a poorhouse—not a doubt of it, unless he broke his neck first. Gentleman, yes; but what's a gentleman? Happy-go-lucky and popular, yes; but what's the use, unless a man knows how to get work done for him. Imagine a gentleman grooming his own horse. Not a bad chap—stupid—bound to lose out. It was perfectly obvious to Max why some men have no money.

Roddy waved from the scow. He pointed to the gin and magazines and made a foolish crack about The Prophet needing cigars, too, and an armchair. Max called back to him through a megaphone to be sure to keep women and bed-bugs off the yacht, and not to fall for any con game. "Don't even tell 'em your age," he shouted.

Kamarajes, wiping his mouth, made a run for the scow. The scow began slowly little more than drifting toward Zakkum, behind laboring tow-boats, over an oily sapphire sea on which the weed made parallel streaks of mauve and iodine. Roddy used binoculars to study out the problem of getting the horse to dry land. That ruinous jetty had looked good enough in darkness, but he could see now that it was fit for nothing but to dry fish-nets. Its

derrick was a ruin of rusted iron and rotten wood.

"We will lay planks from the scow to the beach," said Kamarajes, noticing Roddy's frown. "What have you in that bag?"

"Oats."

"No, in that other bag."

"Oh, that? Mosquito netting. Flies 'ud drive The Prophet crazy."

"Oh! Is his name The Prophet?" The Greek went into roars of laughter. "That is a hell of a good joke! By Allah, that will make these Arabs cockeyed! I will tell them that you lead The Prophet by the nose—oh, ha-ha-ha-hah!"

HE BEGAN to tell it to the scow's crew and to shout it to the rowers. Arabs don't laugh at a joke of that sort; they take it seriously, mulling in their minds its subtleties and implications.

"They will tell that to each other all night long," said Kamarajes. "There is nothing they enjoy more than to sit on the roof with a pipe and argue is it blasphemous, or is it a good omen."

As they neared the beach the gruesome ugliness of Zakkum solidified out of the haze and shimmered in refracted sunlight. The inevitable yelling conference began among the boatmen. Each of them knew exactly how to get the horse ashore, but no two agreed. The conversation became as vivid as the beach stench, most of it taking the form of interruptions to advice yelled by someone else at Kamarajes, who ignored it, watching Roddy.

The scow was a left-over from the World War; it had very likely been a pontoon in the Suez Canal, and how it ever reached Zakkum was one of those inscrutable mysteries that in the end perish unsolved or give birth to impossible legend. For a wonder, it was decked; the deck was in fair preservation; the horse-box stood erect like a house on a scow in the Hudson River. The rowers having ceased their labor, for the more amusing effort of ob-

scenely abusing one another, the scow swung beam on, about fifty yards from the beach. There was a crowd on the beach; it also had plenty to say and lots of lung-power, yelling contradictory advice, amid swarming flies whose drone was like the hum of billions of bees. It looked like an unpropitious landing place for a horse that had the temper of a dozen devils in him.

"Leave it to me," said Kamarajes.

"Sure," said Roddy. "You arrange it."

Kamarajes raised his hand and filled his lungs to harangue the crowd. Roddy slipped a bridle on The Prophet, opened the front of the box and mounted bare-back as the stallion came ramping forth. The feel of Roddy's heels in his flanks acted like a hammer on dynamite. He reared skyward, lunged out with his forefeet, bucked, took the bit in his teeth and went over the end of the scow as if the fifty yards of sea between scow and beach was the Brook at Aintree.

No matter what theorists say, the Red Sea sharks are dangerous, even close inshore. Roddy knew that, but he slipped off to give the horse more buoyancy, and swam, bare-headed, watching his chance to re-mount in a hurry as soon as the horse's feet touched bottom. He almost missed it; the horse shied away from him. But an Arab waded in waist-deep and gave him a leg-up as The Prophet paused for one second and then lit out for the dry land in a plunging gallop. There was no sense whatever in trying to call a halt in that torturing swarm of beach-flies; in spite of the stallion's drenched hide they were stinging him already—stinging him frantic. Roddy gave him his head. They went up the principal street of Zakkum like Disaster on unshod feet.

There nearly was disaster. Two kneeling camels, rump to rump but overlapping, loaded with piled hides, blocked the full width of the narrow street. The man in charge of them did exactly the wrong thing; he snatched the camels' heads and tried to make room to pass. The Prophet



reached them as they started swaying to their feet. He leaped them, loads and all. For the sheer excitement of feeling his legs at work, he lashed out and kicked one camel sideways into the other, so that they both rolled in the dust. Then on up-street



past Kamarajes' place with a couple of dozen yelping curs in full pursuit.

Roddy sat still and looked around him. Seven furlongs ought to be about the limit for a horse so badly out of training; The Prophet would stop himself in a minute or two; he was blowing already. But the length of the city was much less than seven furlongs, and they were still going strong when they came to the Gate of the Doomed and went under it in a cloud of dust. It was an arch of stone and stucco, patched with gray mud, with broken mud walls to right and left. Vultures used it as a roost; as the horse galloped under the arch they took wing—ink-blot against azure. There was a slaughter-yard beyond, with more vultures; and beyond that stood the naked hell-tree, as white as bone in the early sunlight, vultures on every branch. Then the

dismal looking cemetery, enclosed by a broken wall. Beyond that, desert—aching gray-white solitude as far as treeless hills on the horizon.

**D**OTS on the desert, the size of insects, followed by a dust-haze, the dots growing larger. The Prophet slowed to a canter—presently to a walk. Roddy let him walk, patting his neck. The distant dots became horses—fifteen—twenty. Something followed in a cloud of blown sand. It looked like a field-gun. Roddy knew that Arabs have an instant prejudice in favor of anyone whose seat on a horse is superb. He might be vain about his horsemanship, but he was not conceited. He could ride, and he knew it. He knew Arabs would immediately perceive that, before anything else. True, The Prophet was blown; he had no saddle; Roddy was still wet and had lost his hat; but those were trifles. He made the stallion show off, until the Arabs reined their horses and their leader came slowly toward him.

He was a sly-faced man with a scant beard, in a yellow and white striped cloak and kuffiyeh, on a gray mare. He had a golden dagger at his waist and the last word in modern rifles in his right hand. There could be no doubt who he was—the Sultan Ayyub, on his way home, followed by his Ford car. It was drawn by four camels, and it probably contained some ladies of the harem, but they were well hidden behind awnings.

"Gasoline," thought Roddy, "is the right sugar for this canary." There were several drums of the stuff on the *Blue Heron's* deck, in reserve for the use of the tender; he wondered whether Max would part with any of it, but he knew Max's moods of stupid parsimony.

Stately greeting. "Peace in the name of the Most High. Peace be upon you. In the name of the Prophet, God's peace." Compliments invented in the dawn of time, by people to whom words are the mask of thought, the grace of courtesy—or else vile

beyond limit of possible deed. An Arab's blasphemy is as imaginative as his compliments. They dismounted bowing lordly to each other. One of the Sultan's escort brought a head-cloth, so that Roddy might cover his head and be unembarrassed; only a slave should be bareheaded. There was curiosity and much discussion of The Prophet, none had seen such a huge horse. He was unbelievable. One man, feeling the brute's tremendous jumping muscles, narrowly missed death from a fiery irritable hind-hoof.

Roddy told his story, in remembered Arabic that grew more fluent as he used it. And because one horseman thaws out to another and forgets prudence, he spoke of The Prophet's victories on the turf. But he spoke, too, of the yacht's predicament, not forgetting to praise Max Rector as a prince of good fellows, a father of honor, whom all men praise, whose fame precedes him over land and sea.

The Sultan nodded. He too, used time-honored phrases. All that he had was not good enough. Let the effendi only dignify him with his company as far as the palace; there the horse of horses should be stabled, groomed and fed as if he were that very stallion that Allah's Prophet rode to Heaven.

Roddy felt he was getting the breaks. This was better than being beholden to Kamarajes. True, it was likely to prove expensive; he would have to make a valuable present to the Sultan. But the horse would have expert handling by men who have forgotten more about horses than the West ever knew. Max could lie at anchor safely until the yacht's engines were repaired. There would be no risk of piracy, since friendship was now established. Roddy joined the cohort, breathing dust in their midst as they cantered toward the city.

He was not particularly worried when two of the Sultan's escort led The Prophet through a great gate in a white wall. He would have preferred to enter and see the

horse stabled, but it didn't matter. To have insisted might have been a breach of etiquette; to keep the good start going smoothly seemed all-important for the moment.

The Sultan invited him into a courtyard lined with tired geraniums in tin cans. There was a waterless fountain, one date palm, and a savage baboon on a chain. Roddy and the Sultan drank coffee together from tiny silver cups. They ate dates from a silver dish, and stodgy pastry made with honey. The Sultan lent him a beautiful she-mule to ride away on, and then dismissed him with the gracious formula:

"Deprive me not too long of thy presence."

#### IV

NOW that kind of she-mule is known as a Baghlah, and is notoriously difficult to ride. Perhaps the loan of the glossily lovely, long-eared illegitimate offspring of Balaam's ass was meant as a compliment to Roddy's horsemanship. A slave accompanied the animal; he was supposed to run ahead and clear the way, but he lagged far in the rear until the mule, which did everything except lie down and roll, reached a crowd at a cross-street. The crowd scattered at sight of the beast; no meeting of "reds" in Union Square was ever more efficiently dispersed by New York's "finest." Roddy was dispersed, too, into a pile of thorny camel-feed in an alley between two house-fronts, landing on head and shoulders. He was not hurt. Like most genuine horsemen, he was more amused than annoyed, after he had felt himself all over. The mule had bucked off her saddle and departed in the general direction of the desert in quest of room for self-determination. The sweating slave pursued her with an air of having a long day's task ahead. There was nothing more to be done about that.

Roddy stared about him. He could see at a glance why the Prophet of Allah for-

bade that the sound of women's voices in a dwelling should be audible from without. Neighbors have the right to prevent such a scandal and they normally do, like small town neighbors all the world over. But the Prophet of Allah had not foreseen the coming of radio, or he would undoubtedly have forbidden that also, along with wine and ham and more than four wives. One would have had to bootleg radio sets, like hasheesh, and release their deadly entertainment behind curtains in the dark.

Women in Paris, who had very likely never heard of the Prophet of Allah, were singing a French version of a New York torch song. The unnecessary words were no impediment; the Arabs perfectly understood the meaning of the music that poured through the slits of a Zakkum shutter. It was bad for business. It had emptied coffee shops. The crowd that had been scattered by the she-mule was already returning to be seduced, orally, by exotic rhythm that, according to the Prophet, bars the door of heaven, though suggesting its perpetual delights. Their Prophet had understood them perfectly. They even ignored Roddy, they were so preoccupied. Their eyes glowed with the ferocity of sunshine-incubated passion, censored and forbidden to emerge from the folds of pious dignity. They were being bad boys, all afraid of one another's evil thoughts, each ready to accuse the other. Into their midst rode Kamarajes on a big white donkey. His smile was discreet; it suggested the basis of mutual goodwill and forbearance. He, too, had his little peccadillos; if they had theirs, he could sympathize. He did so. Birds of a feather.

Dismounting, he flourished his slouch hat, offering his mount to Roddy with a bow that would have graced d'Artagnan. But it was not more than two hundred yards to Kamarajes' store on a parallel street. The Greek was evidently nervous about talking outdoors; he even put a warning finger to his lips, so Roddy fell into step with him and they turned a corner

with the donkey's head between them. Even so the Greek said nothing until they had reached his doorway, where he shouted for a servant who came and led the donkey away. The Swahili of the previous night peered through a slit in the door before he opened it to admit them; then he said something sotto voce.

"Bring her," Kamarajes commanded in Arabic. The Swahili slipped out like a white-robed ghost and Kamarajes shut the door. He bolted it. "Everyone in Zakkum is a spy," he said, smiling at Roddy. "If there is no news, they invent it." Then, over his shoulder as he groped in the liquor chest: "I know what has happened to the horse already. Your confidence has been abused, Mister."

Roddy said nothing. In a flash of ghastly realization he almost lost self-control. He, too, knew what had happened to the horse. It dawned on him, suddenly. He stiffened himself. He felt fear at the pit of his stomach. Rather than speak he walked toward a window in the rear and stared at the piles of hides in the courtyard. The blue sky and the brazen sunlight made the whole scene shabbily unromantic; its keynote was the stinking piles of hides and the lousy vultures on the roofs. The wall on one side of the yard was formed by a long shed that might, or might not have a door in the wall at the far end. Beyond the end-wall was another courtyard and another long shed. Beyond that were the backs of houses in the next street; one was probably the house from which the radio music came. It sounded now like the distant dirge of dead hope.

"Have a drink. Take a good long shot," said Kamarajes. "You need it, Mister, after that swim."

"No, thanks." Roddy stared around him. He noticed Max Rector's gin, the bundle of old magazines and his own bags of horse-fodder and fly-netting. They had already been stowed away under the shelves and he resented it without any particular reason. He felt like picking the first

quarrel he could find excuse for. Memory of the exasperating smugness he had had to endure from Max Rector made him grit his teeth. The certainty that Max would make the utmost of this new excuse for airing superior wisdom filled him with fury. The Greek recognized danger and at once poured oil on the troubled water. It might be inflammable oil, but it served the present purpose.

"MISTER, you made that too snappy. I said last night I'd have to tell your business to the Arabs. Someone went off in a hurry to tell Sultan Ayyub. That's why he returned. And now you've *given* him the horse—all Zakkum says it. I'd have warned you, but you jumped off the scow too quickly. If you want that horse back, you and I will have to do some smart thinking."

Roddy eyed him with frank suspicion. How could Kamarajeز possibly know so soon, unless he had known sooner—in advance? If it was a steal, and if Kamarajes was in on the steal, the Sultan might be stingy about commissions and Kamarajes might be planning a coup for his own account. If so, the sooner Roddy knew about that for certain, the better.

"The horse wasn't a gift," he said. "You know that, and so does the Sultan. But what good would it do you if I get the horse back? I've no money. My friend who owns the yacht won't come across. There's nothing in it for you that I know of."

Kamarajes pushed the glass toward him. "Drink up, Mister. I wouldn't take your money; I know a sportsman when I see one. But there's more in this than meets the eye, as the Tammany boss said on election day."

"Are you in on it?"

"Deal me in and then I'll help you, Mister."

Roddy's suspicion was stronger than ever. Like the pious Aeneas of old, he distrusted eleemosynary Greeks on all

counts of any indictment. But he was beginning to regain his self-command and to think without imagining Max Rector's contemptuous comments. If it was true that Sultan Ayyub had already spread word that the horse was a gift, then that proved it was not a mistake he was making. It was move number two of a slick trick, thought of between night and morning. Roddy felt sure Kamarajes knew that.

"Did you say all Zakkum is talking about it—already?"

"You bet. No need for a telephone in this man's town. News spreads, when it's meant to."

"Do they say why I'm supposed to have given him the horse?"

"Sure they say, nothing for nothing. You came and asked protection for the yacht, while sailors mend the engines. What is more, you'll get it, Mister. That's to say, unless your friend gets ugly. Scratch a Red Sea Arab and you find a devil. Treat him civil, and he's all right."

"Smooth work," said Roddy. He drank the whiskey; there was no sense, at the moment anyhow, in quarreling with Kamarajes. He set the glass down with a bang. "Someone," he said, "thought quickly. Whoever carried the news to Sultan Ayyub in the desert, also tipped him what to do about it. He had the plan on ice when he met me."

Roddy felt eyes on the back of his head. Someone had peered in through the courtyard window. He turned. There was no one any longer at the window, but the door opened and in walked Lilly Lee. The Greek bowed extravagantly as if she were almost a stranger, but Roddy intercepted a glance between them. She walked straight up to Roddy and offered her hand, looking not much different by daylight, except that it was easier to recognize the Nordic spirit beneath the gypsy impress. Her face was sunburned, not naturally swarthy; it was clear, smooth, healthy. She had on an Arab woman's costume, but that made small difference; trousers and black cotton cloak



could not hide athletic grace, they emphasized it, though they did reduce her apparent height. She was neat, trim, exciting to the eye, whatever else she might be. She carried in her hand the shawl that should have covered her head, and her dark blue eyes stared at Roddy with a fearless curiosity that disturbed him although he knew no reason why it should. He decided to take the offensive, to startle information from her.

"What do you stand to gain," he demanded suddenly, "by advising Sultan Ayyub to pretend my horse is a gift?"

Her answering smile concealed her thought; beneath it were infinities of unexplorable reserve. He knew he did not understand her. Perhaps he could not. She seemed to wish him to try. Her eyes danced with laughter. Her voice was excited:

"Freedom to leave Zakkum!"

RODDY refused to smile. He tried to stare her out of countenance. He had the white man's almost ineradicable, because almost unconscious attitude of social superiority. She might be white; in fact she certainly was, but she had lost her heritage.

There was a great gulf fixed between them. However, he didn't see that that mattered. He had no intention of getting involved, no matter what her morals; he deliberately bridled an impulse to kiss her and see what happened. He spoke sternly as if to a servant:

"So you thought you'd buy your liberty with my horse, without consulting me?"

Her smile flickered—faded, and her face grew quiet with ambushed purpose—intelligence biding its time. Her silence made him feel he had perhaps guessed wrongly. There was something winsome about her, but nothing weak. She brought to mind the picture of Cleopatra standing before Caesar on an unrolled carpet. She appeared to be deeply interested, perhaps puzzled, but perfectly sure of herself.

"Now I suppose you will be leaving Zakkum?" Roddy suggested.

"How?" she asked. She seemed to think he might know.

"It's usual, isn't it? Tricksters always spring their trap and clear out. Don't Gypsies? You were taught, you say, by Gypsies. Steal and run. Why don't you? Or are you planning to steal the yacht, too?"

She laughed. "Do you want your horse back?"

"I intend to have him."

That was stark bluff. Roddy felt ruined and desperate. He remembered Arabs well enough to know the only way to get his horse from Sultan Ayyub would be by bargaining. He had nothing with which to bargain. Even his thousand dollars was in the form of a personal draft on Bombay; it was not negotiable except at a bank, and there is no bank in Zakkum. He felt violent. Perhaps if he should tempt this girl out to the yacht in defiance of Max Rector's prohibition, she herself might solve the riddle.

She was probably the Sultan's evil genius. How else could she be free of Zakkum, unveiled and free to talk to strangers? Who else, except possibly Kamarajes, could have known enough of the circumstances to be able to advise the Sultan to act so promptly, and so neatly? Why not tempt the girl on board, and then tell the Sultan he could have her back in exchange for the horse?

But Roddy glanced at the rear window. There, in the courtyard, blocked against the blue sky, smiling, stout, secretive, was the eunuch; he had an automatic, a long dagger and an air of not needing to worry as long as he kept awake. From the street came the noise of a crowd assembling at the Greek's door. Voices clamored for admittance.

"And he jumped two loaded camels! What a jump! Mashallah, what a jump!" said the girl. She seemed to prefer to speak Arabic. "Arabs' horses aren't taught

to jump. They never do it—never. They gallop around things."

"Tell me," Roddy asked her. "Did you, or did Kamarajes think of it? I was taking that horse to India to try to make some money by winning races. Now I'm broke to the wide world. Which of you did me the dirt?"

She answered again in Arabic: "I understand. If Paulos did it, you would kill him? But—Allaho-Aalam\*, it was not Paulos. I thought of it. I. Will you kill me?"

"You deserve it," said Roddy. "Will you come with me now to the Sultan and explain there has been a mistake?"

She chuckled. "There has been no mistake. Ayyub loves a horse-race more than song and women—more than prayer—more than all else. He will put his trainers to work to get that horse in condition. Then he will challenge Abdul Harrash, of the Beni Harrash Bedawi, to whom he has lost so many races that he bites his nails. He has lost money and camels and slaves and pearls to Abdul Harrash. He will bet me, this time."

"Oh—you wish to go to Abdul Harrash?"

"**B**BETTER to him than to the fat fool in Mecca. But if I craved an Arab, could I not have made my own choice long ago? I need only to say that I wish to belong to a man, and there is not a shaikh in all this country who would fear to come and rape me away from Ayyub."

"She has pull," said Kamarajes. He went to the door and opened it a trifle, making signs to the crowd to be quiet. He re-bolted the door. "She has political pull I tell you."

She had "pull" of a much less contemptible sort than that. Roddy was becoming thoroughly aware she had it. Without a gesture, without a suggestive word or glance, she was conveying what millions of

women fail to, for all their striving. She was an original, owing nothing to convention; and either because of training or intuition hers was the priceless strategy of telling much less than she knew, in order to accomplish what she only guessed at, and wanted. She was not beautiful enough to rely entirely on beauty; she had to use brains. She was not civilized enough to be afraid to choose between good and evil, as she judged them. Deep in her eyes that saw through surfaces lay scorn of past experience, contempt for the present—and something else limitless, it might be patience, or it might be passion, or perhaps both. She stirred Roddy strangely.

Perhaps she guessed that it was easier to stir him than to turn him from a taken course. Roddy was a neck-risker, reckless of no other neck than his own. The next jump always was his goal; his frequent successes had come of making each next post a winning-post. When he lost, no matter how he felt, he looked indifferent; it was the mask from behind which he judged wild chances. As he stared at the girl he wondered why her eyes were so full of—was it laughter? Excitement? Damned if he knew. He had learned what little he knew about women by being ignored or half-affectionately patronized by most of them. Only the rare ones liked him. His irregular, gray-eyed, humorously rugged face had been browned by the weather and scarred by accidents. He was no Adonis. Not a she-moth's hero. But he could make this girl's eyes glow, and she could make him tremble.

"Your friend who owns the yacht," said Kamarajes, "is a horse's rump. He is a—"

Roddy silenced him with a scowl; the more he let Kamarajes talk, the less he was likely to learn from the girl. The Greek slid him a drink along the table; he accepted it and looked straight at her.

"If Ayyub betted you on a horse-race, and lost, would you go to the winner?"

She answered again in Arabic: "Why not? I am weary of Ayyub. I would claim

\* God knows.

the protection of Abdul Harrash. All his women of course would try to seduce me for him; but in Arabia a man would rather die ten deaths than take a woman by force; and if he did, he could never lift his head again among equals. I am my own, until I give up."

"Then why not leave Zakkum? You said you hate it."

"I am not free. I told you. I may not leave. They watch me." She glanced at the window, where the eunuch stood as patient as a stalled ox.

"Have you no money?"

"No. If anyone should give me money, they would confiscate all that he has. Should I ruin a friend by accepting alms? I may have all I need, but no money. And if Paulos should help me to go away, where should I go? They would beat Paulos; they would draw him between camels and then tie him to the hell-tree. Paulos is my good uncle and the preserver of my life when I was little."

RODDY found he had to govern impulse with an iron will. There was less iron in the will than he felt he needed. He had to remind himself that he wasn't a plumed knight in shining armor rescuing damsels from durance vile; the age of chivalry is over. Neither was he Don Juan; he had to remind himself also of that.

"Let's talk horse," he suggested.

She nodded.

"Do you think you can get my horse away from Ayyub?"

She nodded again.

"Go to it. Get him."

"Then?"

"I will do whatever I can for you and Kamarajes." It was weak, but Roddy didn't know anything else he could have said.

"Don't mind me," Kamarajes interrupted. "I'm a man without a country. I'll stay in Zakkum. I'm all right here, as long as I don't break the wrong rules. There's no such thing as circumstantial evidence in Arabia. If I'm not seen or heard, or don't

confess I helped her to escape, no need to worry about me."

"Would they beat you to get your confession?" Roddy asked him.

"On the feet, you mean? Not if I weren't suspected. Never mind me. Talk horse to her."

"How do you propose to get my horse?" asked Roddy.

"By a horse-race. How else? Winner-take-all is the rule in Arabia. The winner takes the loser's horse, and his bet too."

"You'll be the bet?"

She nodded.

"Don't you want her?" asked Kamarajes. That was a hell of a question to ask a man who was racking his brain for courteous evasions. But the girl came to Roddy's rescue:

"No," she said, "he doesn't want me. Can't you see it?" But she showed no disappointment. Roddy knew that he ought to be glad she didn't.

"Is Ayyub mad?" he asked her. "If he knows the first thing about horses, he must know that mine can't be fit for racing for six weeks, not with the best trainer on earth. D'you mean he'll race him and bet on him?"

"Leave it to me."

"That's right," said Kamarajes. "Leave it to her."

"Damned if I get the hang of it at all," said Roddy. "Where do you live?"

"With the old aunt—the old Ajuz\* Zariphah—in that house." She glanced at the window and nodded a rebellious head toward the house whence the radio music came; somewhere in Europe a band was playing one of Sousa's marches. She shrugged her shoulders. "Zariphah is too fat to walk and too old to live. She has a tongue like a knife on a grinder's wheel, so Ayyub gave her that house. She receives a stipend, and I have to coax her for my clothing."

"There's a flaw somewhere," said Roddy. "You were able to reach Zakkum

\* An insulting epithet—hideous hag.

without money or influence. Here you say you have influence. It seems to me you could escape if you made up your mind, and without getting Kamarajes into trouble."

"Yes," she answered, "I might do it. But where should I go? To be held in an immigration station? Have you seen one? To be asked, who are my parents? Where am I going? How do I get my living? To be penniless—disbelieved—insulted—told to stay in this place, go to that place, to do this, not that? To run away again with Gypsies, *faute de mieux*? Or to live in the slums of Marseilles again, after riding the desert on camel-back? To sell myself to a policeman's protégé to save me from registration in the prefect's book?"

"Is it as bad as all that?" asked Roddy wonderingly.

"Not in Arabia. Women are safe in Arabia."

"But you say you hate it."

She nodded. "I hate waiting."

"What for?" He shouldn't have asked that. He knew he shouldn't.

"I am a woman," she said simply. Then, because Roddy was wondering what to say next, and staring at her in the broken light that streamed through the slatted window-blind, she continued: "Was there ever a woman who did not dream of a man so wonderful and brave that it were paradise to eat his leavings and to follow him to the ends of the world?"

Her eyes glowed. There was no possible doubt what she meant.

"I am not that kind of man," said Roddy.

"Have you a woman?"

"No," he answered. Too late, he wished he had had presence of mind to invent a wife in New York. But the lie would have served no purpose. She tossed her belligerent young head and smiled proudly:

"It is a good thing for her that she is not. If she were, she would be sorry. Because of thee, my lord, I make choice. So may Allah requite thee with good and

make thee my master and lord of all I have."

IT WAS a staggerer. She laid a hand on his forearm, and the light, firm touch sent such thrills through Roddy that he was hardly conscious of anything else at the moment except her eyes, and her lips, and the sensuous, wholesome smell of her body six inches from him. Roddy was no dweller at dangerous fences; he preferred to rush them. That was a time honored phrase she had used and it sometimes means, on certain women's lips, mere loyal friendship, or perhaps gratitude. But not on her lips. It was a hell of a chance. Should he take it?

She put the palms of both hands on his breast and looked into his eyes. He hugged her close and kissed her because he couldn't help it; and he went on kissing her because he liked it. It was something wholly new in his experience. He felt half-guilty, half-ashamed, but reckless—mad—possessive and possessed. He didn't give a damn. Neither did she. For the moment he even forgot the horse.

There came a sudden pounding on the shop door and Kamarajes went to peer through the slit. There was a chorus of voices outside. The girl broke free from Roddy's arms and ran through the back door into the courtyard, leaving Roddy wondering "did that eunuch see or overhear us? Is he one of the friends she refuses to get into trouble? Or is he danger itself?"

The door burst open and a crowd of Arabs flowed in with the golden sunlight. In their midst there was one of the seamen from the *Blue Heron*, hot and a bit bewildered, as delighted to see Roddy as if it meant a reprieve from hanging.

"Owner's compliments, sir. Will you kindly come aboard as soon as possible."

"Sure. What's the trouble?"

"I don't know, sir. The tender's waiting."

"See you again," said Kamarajes, smil-



ing to himself or to Roddy, it was hard to tell which; he looked less mysterious than slyly cocksure of something.

## V

THE tender vibrated to forty horsepower. There was a fool of a big brass binnacle in the stern. It rattled:

"Lillilee — Lillilee — Lillilee — Lillilee!"

The glare on the sea made Roddy's head ache. The distant yacht looked like an explosion of paint and chromium aswim in its own reflection. The certainty that his horse was now no more than live-bait, in a trap set for himself, was made doubly perplexing by other sensations.

That girl had been hair-trigger quick. Roddy admired that; he enjoyed being quick on the trigger himself. But what in the world could she stand to gain? And what was the Greek's objective? Greek traders in Red Sea towns are not altruists or innocent observers of intrigue. The Greek was a crook; not a doubt he was a fugitive from justice. If the girl's story was true, no one could blame her for snatching at any means of escape from Zakkum—no one, that was to say, except people like Max Rector who would find fault with a dog in a trap if it bit him and call it a cur if it didn't. Conviction that she had told the truth about herself might be merely an illusion produced by kissing. She might be just as crooked as the Greek. Suppose she was? What of it? Roddy had to get his horse back somehow. What terms would she exact, though? He wondered. Why had he been such an ass as to let the Sultan have the horse? How the devil could he have avoided letting him have it? All those thoughts surged in Roddy's aching head, along with a familiar sensation, which he knew was the real keynote. He knew he would find some way out of it. Back down? Nothing doing! Jumping fences is the way to learn what's on the far side. But be careful. Watch

that the man alongside doesn't get a foot under your stirrup.

He was in a fine state of mind to meet Max Rector! Max was waiting for him at the head of the bridge companion ladder; he looked important and self-righteous, as if he had just been firing someone. Under that yachtsman's cap his face was like pork; his astigmatic eyes behind the pince-nez were more intelligent than a pig's, but much more mistrustful. However, with his customary tact when he wanted sympathy, he had the steward busy shaking cocktails in the little cubby-hole of a bar behind the wheel-house. The steward had real ears.

"How about a snifter, Roddy Nolan? Sun's over the yardarm. Splicing the main brace is good for a wet skin. I saw you take that ducking. There was a shark within fifty yards of you. Did you know it?"

"That why you sent for me?" Roddy asked him.

"No, I need cooperation." That was Max's phrase for getting someone else to do some dirty work. He glanced at a little fleet of Arab fishing boats that lay almost within hail, swaying their lateen spars to the heave of a slow ground-swell.

RODDY accepted a cocktail from the steward. "What's wrong?" He didn't like the look of those fishing boats; they were too close together, too ganged up and quiet.

"Wrong? I'm sick of Arabs. No wonder they cut no ice in the world. They haven't changed in three thousand years. They look like Solomon and Moses and all the rest of 'em. You'd think their mildest remark 'ud make Omar Khayyam sound like Ella Wheeler Wilcox. All they really say is Gimme-gimme-gimme! Sheiks, eh? They're the scum o' the earth."

"What have you been doing to them?" Roddy answered. He felt another sag at the pit of his stomach. He might have known Max would start something to add to the mess.

"Nothing!" said Max. "I've done noth-

ing to them. Why should I?" He refused a cocktail; he raised his eyebrows at the steward, who should have known he never touched liquor before sunset. "But I don't want smallpox on the yacht, I don't mind telling you. After you left, those filthy looking lepers crowded alongside scratching the paint and yelling for bucksheesh until you couldn't hear yourself think. Gimme-gimme-gimme! I shouted 'imshil' That's good Arabic, isn't it? Means, 'Make yourself scarce,' doesn't it? They should understand that, shouldn't they? Their own language. But they started to swarm aboard. They had to be given the bum's rush. They became abusive. I ordered the bo'sun to give 'em a dose of the fire-hose. Pretty soon they had to scatter and bail the hose-water out of their rotten old boats. But they didn't go back to their filthy beach; they simply lay off there, just out of range of the hose, and behaved like madmen. One of them even fired a shot at the bridge. You can see where he chipped the paint off. See it?"

"What did you do?" Roddy asked him.

"Nothing. I served out rifles to the officers, that's all. I put a couple of cases of tear-gas bombs in the wheel-house. But I did nothing."

"Then what?"

"MacNamara talked to them. He knows less Arabic than decent manners, and darned little manners I don't mind telling you. He couldn't make them understand him; but according to his account of it they were yelling they'd get even. I'm going to weigh anchor as soon as I can, and make for Suez—take a tow if MacNamara can't get us in shape before dark."

"My horse—"

"Sorry about your horse, old man. You were in too great a hurry. "You'll have to fetch him back to the yacht."

"Look here, Max, I've made a bloomer. I accepted the Sultan's offer to put the horse in his stable. Now he's pretending I gave him the horse. I've got to get around that somehow."

Max raised his eyebrows. He adjusted his pince-nez. "Well, well!" he remarked. "Did he sell you wooden money, too? Or did he get you to play cards with him? Did you bet you could find the pea under the thimble?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry."

"Look here, Max. I happen to know the man needs gasoline. Sell me a couple of spare drums. Maybe I can work it that way."

Max snorted. "That's what those boat-men were after—the spare drums on deck. Nothing doing. That's for the tenders."

The pit of Roddy's stomach suddenly felt better. With almost a mechanical click he made up his mind. That was good for his guts. Even his head left off aching. As between Max Rector and that horse there was nothing to argue about.

"I'll go ashore and stay," he answered. No use telling Max the details. "I'll be all right. I'll get the horse back somehow. Perhaps I can ride to Hodeidah later on and pick up a tramp steamer for Bombay or Karachi."

"Oh?" said Max. "The girl, eh?" He fixed his pince-nez again because the sweat made them slip off his nose.

"No," said Roddy. "But the horse is all I have between me and a life of shame. I can't afford to lose him."

"It will be a life of shame if that girl gets her clutches on you."

"Have you a thousand dollars on board?" Roddy asked. "Will you cash my draft on Bombay if I endorse it over to you?"

"See here, old fellow." Max assumed his tolerant-paternal, worldly-wise air. It didn't match with his face, but until that damned investigation, it had served very well at vestry meetings; it had won him a reputation for being tolerant but a great stickler for respectability. "Get that girl out of your mind. Don't let her psychologize you. Read Freud; I've a copy in my stateroom."

"I'm thinking of my horse," said Roddy.

"Very well, forget the horse, too. That's a low price to pay for escape from a Jezebel. You're broke, I know that; I will lend you money to buy another horse. After all, it wasn't your fault that the engine broke down, was it. Perhaps you can buy a better horse in Bombay."

"Good of you," said Roddy. "But I'll stick to The Prophet thank you." It was not in the rules of the game, as Roddy and his sort play it, to insult one's host on his own bridge.

"It was better to ask a favor. He hated to do it, but get a cad to do a favor for you and he feels magnanimous; that makes him a bit less offensive. "Cash my draft, old fellow, into dollars, pounds or francs, and I'll make out nicely."

MAX pursed his mouth. "I wouldn't think of it," he answered. "Roddy, I won't be party to your downfall. You are after that woman. I know it, even if you're not frank to admit it. That horse story wouldn't fool a—"

"You've the cash?" asked Roddy.

"In the safe. You'll be grateful it stayed in the safe, by the time we reach India. Forget the girl. Have another cocktail. Take off that headdress, it makes you look like one of those bucksheesh-begging Arabs. By the way, I wish you'd speak to them. Hail them and give them a bit of your fluent Arabic. I suppose it 'ud only whet the beggars' appetites to give 'em anything—however, perhaps you'd better promise 'em bucksheesh to let us alone. Go along, old fellow—sell 'em some conversation."

Roddy strode to the wing of the bridge to avoid Max's hand that was patting him fatly between the shoulder-blades. Skillful malefactors know that a pat on some men's backs will start almost anything, from a fist-fight to a world war; but Max thought he was being gracious; he was not a conscious malefactor. He didn't know he had snapped the last shred of a sportsman's tolerance. Roddy pulled off the

headdress and waved it to summon the Arab boatmen within hail.

"Don't promise too much. Better be vague," Max warned him.

Vagueness was the last thing in Roddy's mind. He felt like smashing Max in the face—anything definite—forthright—honest. Sure, Max would leave the horse behind; he was the kind of a man who turns a dog loose to fend for itself when keeping him isn't convenient any longer. Roddy harangued the Arabs like one of their own muallim preaching from the Koran, cursing them because he wanted to curse Max. When a word failed him, he invented it, and that made the boatmen think he was very learned. Had it not been for his accent they might have thought him a genuine prophet because of his insolence. Instead of promising them money, he told them he was coming ashore to ask their sultan whether men in Zakkum had any honor. Then he waved them away, and a few boats went. They were convinced there was fun in the wind. Arabs have their own idea of fun. Some of them lay on their oars a cable's length away to watch the yacht. The remainder rowed toward the beach to talk things over.

"There you are," said Roddy, keeping his temper with Max by grinning. "Now I'll pack my duds and go ashore. Perhaps the Greek can use a draft. I'll manage somehow."

Max began to remonstrate, but Roddy turned his back and walked down off the bridge. His stateroom was a small one just abaft the chief engineer's cabin, it being one of Max's principles never to quarter less than a millionaire or a titled sponger in the larger staterooms; those were all locked. Roddy almost cannoned into MacNamara, who had been washing up.

"Laddie," said MacNamara, "I over-hear-r-d yon masterpiece."

"Did you? What of it?"

"I could do wi' a drink," said MacNamara.

He followed Roddy into the stateroom.

Roddy rang for the steward. Having also overheard the entire bridge conversation, the steward brought the cocktail shaker with him; there was plenty in it; he poured, deposited the shaker on the table and went his way. The windows were wide open; the slatted shutters were closed; the chromium-plated hardware outside could stand wiping, and most of the deck-hands were down in the engine-room chiseling time-and-a-half.

"I overhear-r-d ye. I could botch the radio," said MacNamara.

"Why?" asked Roddy.

"**M**AN, ye're less obsairvant than I credited. Ye tak' me f'r one o' yon ignorant eels that squirm an' shak' a shimmy wi' delight at being bawled out by a bag o' deevideends? I'm consair-r-vative by inclination an' necessity, and I'm a fanatical deeciplinarian aboard ship. But when an owner tells me to my face, and in front of a grinnin' gang o' deck-hands, mind ye, that I'm to mind my manners, yon's the leemit. Man, I've pairfect manners."

"Drink up," said Roddy.

"Aye. That's delcerious inspiration. But I hae ma doots about it for a hobby. Is there more in that churn?"

"You were saying—?"

"I was coming to it. I'd a verra strong tip for a chestnut hor-r-se called Cat's Pyjamas, in the Nile Plate at Alexandria. That's several weeks ago."

"Yes?" said Roddy. "I know old Cat's Pyjamas. He won races in England. A friend of mine owns him."

"Man, ye choose y'r friends wi' scant discreemination. That loon should ha' stuck to producin' plays. It would ha' cost me less to watch him lose his money. Cat's Pyjamas tried to feenish tenth. He might ha' done it if there'd been more than nine runners."

"Lose much?"

"Relatively speaking. I was never a Croesus. I have my certeeificate still. Do

ye aim to race yon stallion o' yours in Zak-kum? If so—"

"What?" asked Roddy.

"Spor-r-t and relegeion are much of a muchness. I'm no verra releeegious from a doctrinarian standpoint, but there's sport in my veins. My father was the best poacher in all Argyllshire. Man, I've walked fra' San Francisco to Tiajuana to see a horse run—aye, and walked back. I've lairned many a time what transpor-tation seegnifies when spor-r-t hasn't left ye the change of a dollar. What's the lay-out? Arabs are not such unresourceful boobies as ye might imagine. But I'll no leave ye in the lur-r-ch, if it's a lassie and a horserace that's callin' ye ashore. I'm a sportsman masel'. Yon bag of expedient morals may own the yacht an' pay the bills, but he couldn't move her half a cable's length to please the underwriters—no, nor all the British Navy, if ye say so. Only say so."

"He could wireless for a tow," said Roddy.

"Man, I'll gie ye a brass-bound guarantee he'll no' do it. Leave that to me an' the mate. I know his deefereential calculus. He'll no weigh anchor until we have the Arabs' dollars—or they ours—no matter if the pressure o' his prejudices burrrsts his gizzard. What's the proposection?"

"Did you talk to that Greek?" asked Roddy.

"It was the Greek who did the talking. I lack conversational fluidity. A Greek can tell ye more in fifteen minutes—an' to the point if he sees a pur-r-pose in it—than a whole packed confer-r-ence of inter-r-national ambassadors could put ye wise to in a week. I'm a humanitarian. Get me?"

"No," said Roddy.

"To the last man on the yacht, fra' mate to pantry boy, we're stirr-red to indignation by the domned obscenity o' bein' or-r-dered—or-r-dered, mind ye—to beat up in-offensive Arabs on the yacht's deck. Un-necessary and delceberate violence under the Stars an' Stripes—can ye believe it?"



"Was it as bad as all that?"

"Man, ye should ha' seen it."

"Glad I didn't. Don't you think he will signal for help?"

MacNamara raised his voice a trifle, moving so as to face the slatted window. "Confidential infor-mation might reach him to the speceefic effect that the crew are shairpening pens for signing affidavits. There's no mutiny, ye understan'. If it busts the owner, we're obeyin' or-r-ders. But there's eight an' twenty officers an' men conseederin' the moral obligation to gie evidence, if as and when. Ye get that? Is he cour-r-tin' publicity? D'ye suppose the daily papers wad flatter his vanity, if it was learned he'd run awa' fra' Arabs that he'd assaulted wi'out rhyme or reason, an' had left a r-reputable spor-rtsman stranded wi' a good horse on a dam-bad Red Sea beach?"

"I'm not complaining," said Roddy. He changed the subject and rang the bell for the steward. "How long do you expect to be here?"

MacNamara drained the last drops from the cocktail shaker. He had his eye on the door, where the steward was calculating how many seconds it ought to take him to come from the pantry.

"Man, Diesel-electric engines are as temper-r-amental as a Schenectady judge. There's no predeectin' how many days they'll hold ye, pending an investigation o' the cir-r-cumstances. Times they'll hold ye an' unconscionable peeriod. Times they'll dismiss ye off-hand. It depends on y'r attor-r-ney."

THE steward entered and began packing Roddy's belongings. MacNamara shook his head at the empty cocktail shaker. "Oh, the pity of it, that a man mayn't live wi' such inspir-r-ation; it wad bur-r-n the uni-ver-r-se, but what a spectacle for angels! Well, I'll be goin'. Tak' good care o' y'rself." He paused in the doorway and jerked his head shoreward. "Is she a bonnie lassie—yon?"

Roddy laughed. He tipped the steward, wondering whether he should talk to him; he knew the man had been listening. To his astonishment the steward refused the tip.

"Thank you, sir, but—no, sir, if you don't mind, I'd rather not. We're all for you. We don't like to see you leave us. You keep your money; you may need it. We're all hoping you'll make out."

Roddy returned to the bridge to say good-by to Max. It was on the tip of his tongue to drop him more than a hint, but Max exploded too soon.

"Very well, good-by, Nolan. Rats are supposed to desert sinking ships, but this one isn't sinking, so I suppose you're not a rat. What are you? It's the last time I'll offer a lift to a woman-chaser and incor-rigible gambler. When that woman's through with you, perhaps you'll come to your senses. But it's not too late to change your mind. You may stay aboard and—"

It was no use warning that ass. "Good-by," said Roddy.

## VI

RODDY shrugged Max from mind. On the way to the beach in the twenty knot tender, with his three suitcases, a couple of spare bridles and a favorite saddle, he felt happier than for weeks past. Somehow he would recover the horse; perhaps the girl knew how to do it. Anyhow, he intended to get the horse. He might ride to Hodeidah by slow stages. It would be a bit of a problem to get from there to India, but meanwhile—the binnacle vibrated: "Lillilee—Lillilee—Lillilee."

He had better do some cool thinking about her, and it was a bit too hot to feel cool about anything. She would probably avoid him when she learned he was broke or next thing to it. Adventure? Of course she was. Why shouldn't she avoid him? Who should blame her? She, too, had her future to consider. He would give the girl fair warning, first thing. After

that, with her eyes open, let her do as she chose—provided she chose not to be a damned fool. Roddy told himself he hoped she would avoid him. But he admitted he would hate not to see her again.

He noticed a number of Arab fishing boats, but not particularly; there was such a glare on the sea that he wished he had smoked glasses. It hurt him to try to focus things over the water, so he kept his eyes in the boat except for moments at a time. What a damned liar Max was, claiming to have seen a shark fifty yards from the shore, even through binoculars. Silly ass. But never mind Max. Forget him. Concentrate on how to get The Prophet away from Sultan Ayyub. Horserace be sugared. Silly idea. The Prophet wouldn't be fit to race a donkey without at least ten days' training; he had eaten nothing but hay and a few carrots for about a fortnight. No, no. Better see the Sultan and be straightforward with him. Frankness pays best, even in Arabia. Ayyub was only a rather unimportant shaikh—foxy by the look of him—shrewd-eyed. Greedy, of course—they all are; but a little flattery might make him amenable. Careful, though. Flattery makes some men think you're their inferior. And so you are, by God, if you're willing to flatter 'em too much. No, no. Flattery's out. Take the other line—upstage him, but not too much of that either. Should be no trouble about getting to see him; shaikhs have to give public audience twice daily; they'd be "for it" if they didn't; Arabs won't stand for invisible government.

Roddy didn't turn to look at the yacht until he had waded ashore and a sailor had dumped his baggage on the beach. That fellow also refused a tip. (God, Max was popular!) Boats were clustered near the yacht; Max was probably in the midst of what he would think was awful trouble. Do him good, the contemptible grouch. No harm was likely to come to him; for inscrutable reasons the Almighty seems to look after millionaires with mean disposi-

tions. Several fishing boats were on the way to the yacht; there wasn't even one old boat left hauled on the beach. Something doing. Well, they might give Max a scare, but what else could they do to him? Max had rifles — revolvers — tear-gas bombs. There was probably plenty of juice for the searchlights after sunset. It was hardly likely the crew would refuse to stand Arabs off—searchlight, perhaps deck-hose and a few threats. Max would return to the U.S.A. and bore everyone at the club with a lot of lies about a fight with pirates. To hell with Max anyhow. Hope I never see him again.

Bright fellow that Kamarajes. Must have kept a look-out on the roof. His Swahili servant was there with a donkey to carry the luggage, so Roddy didn't have to waste time on the stinking beach swatting flies with that Arab headdress. Too bad he hadn't a hat, but no matter; the shaikh—beg his pardon, the Sultan—might regard it as a compliment that he had retained the kuffiyeh. Better go ahead at once, and see the Sultan. Learn the worst and get it over with. Make up his mind what to say to him after he got there.

But Roddy hadn't a definite idea, not yet. He merely knew he had no resources behind him and all Arabia in front. When he reached Kamarajes' store he needed no urging to go in and talk things over. Besides, it was nearly high noon—eleven, anyhow—and as hot as the furnace-door of Tophet—no time to call on an Arabian shaikh; he'd be taking a siesta in the harem. Roddy walked in and sat on Kamarajes' table, staring at him. The Greek returned the stare with the curious smile of a connoisseur considering someone's purchase.

"Winner take all," said Kamarajes. Those were the first words spoken by either of them.

"See here," said Roddy, swiping with his handkerchief. Flies kept touching his lips. Like most neck-riskers he was a bit superstitious; it felt as if disgusting fingers were

warning him not to tell the truth. The effort of swiping at flies had the effect of emphasis. "I'm up against it. No use picking me as a winner. Tell that girl to keep away, or I won't answer for the consequences. Understand me?"

"Yes," said Kamarajes. "Any news of when the yacht sails?"

"No. She'll sail without me."

"Oh?" said Kamarajes.

"Yes. The first problem is my horse. Get him, get him in shape, and then ride to Hodeidah, if that's possible. Could I get a reliable guide?"

THE Greek grinned. "Reliable? If you want to be safe anywhere in Arabia, take a decent woman with you. If you like trouble, take along a loose one. Lillilee is on the level."

"Very likely. What do you take me for?" Roddy asked him.

"She takes you for a genuine guy who won't abuse confidence," said Kamarajes. "She could have any Arab she wants. But the sort don't live that she'd put up with. She likes the desert. She likes some of the Arabs' ideas—but not Arabs as a steady diet. She has heard of Rosita Forbes; that's her pattern of a woman—plus some mischief on the side. She don't like insincere folks, and she don't like Holy Joes. She's what the Germans call a Wandervogel. Know what that is? Barring the Bible—she reads that to help her understand Arabs—the only English book she has is called Kim, by a man named Kipson, or Kim-ling, or some such name."

"Kipling?"

"That's it. Kim's her hero. Me, I never read the book. It seems this kid Kim bucked life from the bottom upward and learned India the way a gum-shoe dick knows Harlem. Sort of a Gypsy in his way of looking at things, only you can't bet on Gypsies. Kim was a bird to bet on, so she tells me. And so she is. But bet on her—not on her making a break. She gets 'em. She doesn't make 'em. She's

been propositioned, mind you. She has turned down what 'ud look like a fortune to a girl who didn't know her own mind. That's no blarney about her saving herself for a man she'd be game to go to hell with."

"Let's hope she'll find the right man," said Roddy.

He knew that was a bromide. It sounded like one of Max's insincerities. But he wanted Kamarajes to advise the girl to keep away. The Greek looked reminiscent.

"She'll back her own judgment, Mister. She knows men the way a Gypsy knows horses, only maybe better. If you've come ashore for good, she'll have to think quick."

"Why?"

"She's hell-bent to get to India. That's why she asked the horse's rump who owns the packet, will he stop at Aden. She don't want to be put off at Aden. She sized up Horse's Rump as quick as lightning. He'd put her off at Aden—make a big squawk too, to the port authorities. She likes officials the way God and the Devil like each other."

"The authorities wouldn't let her land in India," said Roddy.

Kamarajes grinned. His ears spread. His eyes narrowed. "Mister, you can keep a wasp out of the honey, if you don't fall asleep on the job. If you've money enough and a lawyer, you can keep most folks out o' Sing Sing. But I'd like to see anyone keep that girl from where she wants to get. She figgers you'd not spike her chances."

"I've no money," Roddy insisted.

"What the hell does money matter? I'd no money when I came here."

"Can't you make her understand, for God's sake, that a fellow in my position couldn't land in India with an unattached girl to explain away? Even if she doesn't realize it, surely you do."

"Well, Mister, are you going to leave her in Zakkum?"

"Damn. I'll talk to her myself. Where is she?"

"She's showing 'em what your horse is good for. Arab horses don't jump. Did you know that?"

"Curse—they'll ruin him. He isn't fit to be jumped."

"She knows horses, Mister. Care to watch it? Come this way."

He found a pair of old binoculars and led the way out of the shop and around three blocks of flat-roofed buildings, in a sun-glare that seemed to weigh like cast brass; the almost motionless air was like a breath of Death Valley with a foul stench added. The call to midday prayer was a thing of the past. Prayer mats had been rolled up and the roofs were deserted. The blind muezzin was groping his way down from the minaret, beside a mosque from which the heat had peeled flakes of cracked lime. There was no one on the mosque steps. Kamarajes whispered to the old muezzin. He gave the Greek his key and walked away to sit down in the shade and meditate.

"Promised him a couple of drinks," said Kamarajes. "They pick 'em blind so they can't look down on roofs and see what goes on. What you don't know can't make you dangerous. He wouldn't touch wine; he's pious. Whiskey costs me more, but isn't mentioned in the Koran. Two shots make the old bird pie-eyed. Wait till you hear him at midnight. Talk about crooners! Shut that door behind you, Mister, or there might be trouble."

It was a tall minaret and the winding stairs inside were steep. The gallery near the summit had a waist-high curtain of hewn and cemented stone that looked unsafe to lean against. One could see all Zakkum—the whole horizon. The yacht in the offing was a colored splurge on a molten mirror; it looked small one moment, enormous the next; sunlight stabbed the polished hardware like flashes of lightning; eyes refused to perceive the yacht's shape, but it was possible to make out a sort of twinkling Pleiades of fishing boats that lay near.

"Take the glasses," said Kamarajes. "That's the Sultan's palace. That's the prison and barracks beyond it. That open space to the right of the palace is the stable-yard. Watch that."

THERE were men in the yard; most of them were squatting in a row beneath a long roof in deep shadow. A high wall shut off the view of about half the yard; it formed a straight line on the near side of two loaded camels that were being pulled to and fro by their head-ropes. One camel knelt just as Roddy got the glasses focussed on him; then the other was maneuvered and made to kneel almost rump-to-rump with the first one, so that their high loads formed one barrier. After that there was a long pause and nothing apparently doing.

"Don't move, or they'll see your head against the sky," said Kamarajes. "Good job you're wearing an Arab head-dress." He had removed his own hat; he pulled the tail of his shirt up over his head, and kept his head low.

Suddenly Roddy saw The Prophet cantering slowly around the yard; there were dark patches of sweat on his withers and foam on his neck where the reins touched it, but he pulled at the bit in the way he did when he felt full of life and energy. He had no saddle. On his back was a slim, bare-legged individual who looked like a boy.

"By God, what hands!" said Roddy. "That fellow can ride."

"Gimme the glasses. Let me have a look," said Kamarajes.

"Go to hell. It's my horse."

The Prophet disappeared from view, then suddenly reappeared at the end of the yard, where he pranced for a moment sideways, held in check by someone who could think horse and compel the horse to think. He tried to take charge and was checked again. Then suddenly he dug in his toes and went straight at the kneeling camels, jumped them easily with inches to spare



and lashed out as he cleared the high loads.

"Damn, I'll have to break him of that kicking habit," said Roddy. "That's a new trick."

Kamarajes snatched the glasses. He watched until The Prophet was led to a post in the shade and hitched there to be rubbed down by the forearms of dark-skinned slaves.

"She could make a horse talk," he said.

"Come on down before we're seen."

"She?"

"Sure. Didn't you recognize her? What's that new radio catch-word? We do our part! She'll do hers, I bet you two old Korans to a hymn-book." His voice boomed hollow inside the minaret. "Will Horse's Rump do his, though—that's the problem."

"Never mind him," said Roddy. "How soon d'you suppose I can get an audience with the Sultan?"

Kamarajes ignored the question. "Horse's Rump know any Arabic?"

"Allah, imshi, salaam. That's all, I believe."

"Good. Anyone else on the yacht know Arabic?"

"MacNamara, the engineer, knows a little."

The Greek turned at the foot of the steps to lock the door and toss the huge iron key into the old muezzin's lap. He grinned at Roddy:

"MacNamara didn't sign on as interpreter, did he? Horse's Rump will need one bad before long. You quarreled with him?"

"It takes two to quarrel," said Roddy.

"What has that to do with you and me and my getting my horse?"

"Mister, it will save you from having to tell some lies. Hell can't be worse than Zakkum, so don't trouble about my telling 'em. When I go to hell, I'll get used to it."

They returned to the store, walking in mid-street, preferring the sun to the flies that droned above the filth near the walls.

Kamarajes produced a bottle from the big chest and slid the glasses along the table.

"Here's to Horse's Rump. He needs all the luck he can get. He'll come ashore soon."

"What makes you think so?"

"Frightened stiff," said Kamarajes. "The Sultan has sent him a letter in Arabic asking why he attacked inoffensive boatmen."

"What of it? He can't read Arabic."

"Sure. Drink up. He can send for me to read it for him, can't he? I read Arabic good."

"Will you go if he sends for you?"

"Sure I'll go. I want word with the engineer."

"What about?"

"That's my business. Oh, what the hell. You're on the level. I'll tell you. Why not? Now and then I have to make up as an Arab and go to Alexandria on business, with an Arab passport. I don't shut my eyes when a chance hits me smack in the nose."

"One night in Alexandria I stumbled over a drunken Scotsman in the dark and busted my nose till it bled."

"I suppose you went through his pockets?"

"I DID. But I wasn't the first who'd stumbled on him. If he'd been a Greek I might have let him lie there. Drunken Greeks are a bad bet. But a Scotch engineer in trouble is a gilt-edge proposition. He's good luck, like a black cat, or a new moon over your right shoulder. Dam-bad luck of course to pass him up. I had to act quick before the police chanced on him. He was in a bad way, was MacNamara. Broke. Lost his job and couldn't get one. In bad with the consulate. I arranged with a good Eytalian friend o' mine, and a couple o' Greeks in the cotton business, and a clerk in a Maltese shipping agency, to do some propaganda for him. References was what he needed. But he needed money, and I had to lend it and take a chance. I had to go away and

leave him. It isn't safe for me to stay too long in Alexandria."

"Why not?" asked Roddy.

It was a dangerous question. The Greek stared. "All right, I'll tell *you*, Mister. They can extradite a man from Egypt. I've U. S. papers."

"Wanted? You must have been away a long time. How about the statute of limitations?"

"None for first degree murder. I bumped a guy off. But they can't extradite you for what isn't against the law in the country where you've taken up residence. There's no law in Arabia against cutting out a bozo's liver if he steals your woman. That's a duty, in Zakkum."

"Go on, you were talking of Mac-Namara."

"Well, you can't lose if you treat a Scotchman right, provided he needs help, mind you. If they don't need help, they'll help 'emself, so watch out. They're slow pay. But they're slow forgetters." Kamarajes held up his hand and listened. "Ah! Didn't I tell you?"

There came an Arab boatman on the run. He was sweating and out of breath, but he paused at the door to invoke Peace in the Name of the Prophet.

"In the name of The Prophet, peace!" said Kamarajes in English. He grinned and winked at Roddy. Then, in Arabic: "Peace unto you. Enter."

The boatman bore an envelope addressed to Kamarajes. The Greek tore it open. "Here you are," he said, "read it yourself."

Mr. Kamarajes,  
Merchant,  
Zakkum.

Dear Sir:

I would like a consultation. Can you come at once? I have sent the tender for your convenience.

Yours truly,

Max Rector.

"Scared stiff," said Kamarajes. "Didn't

dare send a sailor ashore. Will you wait here?"

He rammed on his slouch hat and followed the boatman to the beach. Roddy bolted the shop door to avoid being pestered by inquisitive Arabs, who might crowd into the shop to ask innumerable questions and then go and report his answers to the Sultan. He sat down and lighted a cigarette—got up and paced the floor—sat down again—thumbed an ancient magazine—whistled to himself—thought of his horse and of Lillilee. The flies bothered him. He got up and walked to the window, jerking aside the slatted blind to stare into the courtyard. He stared straight into Lillilee's eyes, blue, eager, wistful.

Something caught in his throat. He couldn't speak for a second. When he found words he was curt.

"Come in," he said. "I want to talk to you."

She came in through the rear door, wearing a Bedouin woman's black drape over almost nothing; at every other step a sun-burned leg like a boy's appeared through the drapery; it was like David's leg by Michael Angelo. Roddy offered her a chair, but she preferred the edge of the table. Roddy was no good at beating bushes. He plunged in.

"Sorry I kissed you."

"Why?" She seemed genuinely curious to know why.

"Because I shouldn't have. As a matter of fact, I'm not that kind of cheap sport."

"Who said you are?"

"Well, I don't want you to get false notions."

"I haven't any."

"Yes, you have. You think I'm a good prospect. I'm not. I have very little money, no influence, and, unless I get my horse, no prospects."

She looked very pleased to know all that. "You shall have the horse," she answered.

"You mean, with your help?"

SHE nodded. Her eyes were baffling. One bare, very shapely arm made passes at the flies, but except for that she sat perfectly still.

"After I get the horse," said Roddy, "how much then will you consider I owe you?"

"Nothing."

"Dammit," said Roddy, "I am trying to get this on a business basis. Don't you understand me?"

"Oh, yes. Do you understand me?"

"No," he answered.

Her eyes laughed, but she kept control of her face. "I'm—what do you call it when you will have, but you can't have yet, and won't be hasty?"

"Patient?"

"No, I'm not patient. I know—practical, that's what I am. You don't know yet what I'm good for. But you like me?"

"Yes," said Roddy. "That's why I'm warning you to—" He hesitated for the right phrase.

"To look out for myself? Do you think I would ask you to do that? I'm not—" She, too, hesitated, then remembered Roddy's attempt to describe himself: "I'm not that kind of cheap sport."

"What the hell are you?" asked Roddy.

"Do you think I'm your enemy?"

"I hope not."

He felt at the end of his verbal resources. He almost wished she had tried to make love to him, or to make him make love to her; he might have known how to cope with that. He might even have hustled her out into the courtyard then and have slammed the door on her, to save them both from worse indignities. But you can't kick a woman who gives you no excuse. And he knew he had to make use of her. He felt like kicking himself.

"Well," he repeated, "I'm sorry I kissed you."

It was a lie. He wasn't sorry. Neither was she, obviously, but she made not even a hint of a suggestion that she would like him to do it again.

"Don't be sorry," she said calmly.

It was her competence that bothered him—the easy assurance with which she took his decency for granted and revealed her own by restraint. He was wondering what to say next when the eunuch, in the courtyard, drew a finger down the slatted window-blind to attract attention; Roddy's ear did not catch the one word that he said in a low voice. Lillilee promptly unbolted the front door. The eunuch entered through the rear door and stood with his back against it. He was big-bellied. He looked powerful but full of philosophic calm. He wore a teacher's turban, but he had as many weapons as a bandit.

There was sudden commotion at the front door—horses—voices. Lillilee gestured to Roddy to open the door and then hurried away from it to stand near the eunuch. She looked excited. She gestured again, so Roddy opened the door. Blazing white light—dust—and on the threshold stood a middle-aged Bedouin, wrinkled and bronzed, with a graying beard and a face neither sly nor cunning, but suspicious, alert, good natured and yet ruthless. He wore two amber necklaces worth a shaikh's ransom. Horses behind him raised a cloud of sun-lit dust as they stamped at the stinging Zakkum flies.

He had a deep voice for an Arab: "Peace in the name of the Giver of Life, and on His Prophet blessings upon blessings."

"Peace," said Roddy. "On His Prophet blessings."

"Peace to this house."

"Peace," said Roddy.

The shaikh entered. His eyes avoided Lillilee. He addressed the eunuch in terms of deep respect. The eunuch bowed gravely. Lillilee came forward and took Roddy's hand, but the shaikh avoided looking at her; he looked at Roddy. She spoke in Arabic:

"My father, this man's name is Roddy, but his other name I know not. I present him to you."

The shaikh bowed.

"Roddy, this is his honor the Shaikh Abdul Harrash, of the Ben-i-Harrash."

Roddy bowed. They looked in each other's eyes, neither of them eager to break silence. There was a long pause. Lillilee spoke, again in Arabic:

"His honor the Shaikh Abdul Harrash, hearing of you, has brought a horse for your use while in Zakkum. It can stay in Paulos Kamarajes' stable. There is also a servant to take care of the horse."

The shaikh bowed. Roddy recalled the proper phrases that a man of breeding and pride should employ in acknowledging a favor from an equal. The shaikh murmured polite responses. They walked out to examine the horse—a magnificent, clean-limbed stallion, with the dished face and intelligent eyes that are the sign of the true strain. A group of the shaikh's attendants stood at their horses' heads in silence. Lillilee, invisible behind the half-closed door, spoke English:

"Coffee for all in a moment. After that, it is polite to ride with him part of the way home."

SHE had evidently summoned one of Kamarajes' servants; there was a rattle of cups; the all-penetrating aroma of coffee stole forth to war with the stink of the street. Coffee, horse-sweat, and the smell of men wholesome with sun and wind—life was beginning to loom large; Lillilee seemed less like a devil's advocate and more like a guide to a high road leading who cared whither? Roddy displayed his knowledge of an Arab horse's points, until the shaikh's attendants grunted approval; but his mind was on Lillilee and his imagination rioted unreined; he thought of life as it might be, but for a man's own self-imprisonment in useless fear — of what?

When he led the shaikh and his attendants indoors for the conventional coffee (in cups that looked like loot from an old-time Turkish pasha's harem) it was

almost with a shock that he discovered Lillilee had vanished. Of course, it would have been bad manners to remain; she had overstepped the ordinary limits of propriety by making the introduction, even in the presence of the eunuch. But she seemed quite capable of ignoring all rules when it suited her purpose. He could not speak of her to the shaikh. They talked horse, until Abdul Harrash asked him how many barrels of gasoline had been brought by the ship. It was a puzzling question—sudden—apropos of nothing—tacked to the end of a discourse on the effect of certain kinds of sand on horses' fetlocks.

"I don't know," said Roddy. Then he read in the shaikh's eyes something like resentment, so he added: "But I think there are ten barrels lashed on deck. They are steel drums—big ones."

The shaikh's eyes changed. He appeared delighted. That was apparently what he was there to learn; he and his attendants exchanged glances. And then Roddy recognized the vague, indefinable signal that invited him to "give them leave to go," so he stood up and spoke the conventional phrase.

It was a good idea to see the shaikh on his way; that girl's head seemed full of bright thoughts. It would not only be the acme of politeness, such as a Bedouin never forgets; a new friend to the good is one possible enemy less. It would be a good way, too, of avoiding Max, if he should come ashore as the Greek expected. To meet Max might lead to a quarrel; worse yet, it might mean reconciliation. But very probably the shaikh might be hesitating to say in Zakkum something that would leap from his lips on the fringe of the desert where there are no spies. Why had he asked about gasoline? There must be something more behind that question. There was plenty of time; there would hardly be a chance to get an audience with the Sultan before four o'clock or even later.

So Roddy followed the shaikh to the street. The loaned horse, unaccustomed



to a white man's smell, reared and tried to break away; Roddy mounted him on the run to create a good impression on the observant Bedouins. He and the shaikh rode out of Zakkum together like dust-devils born of the heat of the street.

## VII

**S**ILENCE is the voice of doubt and mistrust. Roddy doubted the horse he was riding; it had a fair turn of speed, but it stumbled carelessly. He doubted that the loan of the horse could be anything else than a bid by the shaikh for Lillilee's favor. Arabs have their own inviolable code. That the shaikh had avoided looking at her was no proof he was not burning for her. On the contrary, it was almost proof of an intrigue, from which Roddy



more than doubted his chance of escaping alive, unless he was shrewd and lucky. Those who think they see loopholes in the Arabs' code concerning women seldom live to explain. So Roddy shuddered as they galloped past the hell-tree and then slowed to the easy lope that eats up distance without tiring horse or rider.

The Shaikh Abdul Harrash, being a Bedouin, was a skeptic by birth, an incredulous fatalist by tradition, a doubter of everything but Allah's wisdom, and a dweller by force of circumstances in a desert that imposes silence to preserve the mucous membrane from scorching wind. So there was no conversation.

It was proper manners to accompany the shaikh until the shaikh himself should call a halt. The farther one accompanies a man on his journey, the greater the compliment; and the farther along the road he lets his acquaintance ride before dismissing him, the stronger the implication that he enjoys his company and dislikes the prospect of parting. So there was nothing alarming about the distance they rode—mile after almost trackless mile in silence. But every hoof-beat increased Roddy's perplexity. Why should this desert chieftain go to such extremes of courtesy on such short acquaintance?

Zakkum was six or seven miles behind, a graceless scab against an azure sky, when the shaikh at last reined to a walk and then halted as they reached the summit of a naked dune. Even there he said nothing. No one spoke. His followers reined their horses beside him and Roddy, and they all stared at the shaikh's encampment—an irregular cluster of tents surrounding a tamarisk-pole scaffold, over a well in a hollow. There were about fifty mares picketed in groups; about a hundred camels; something like a thousand sheep and goats that seemed to find subsistence in the bed of a *fiumara*\* that wrinkled across the desert toward the distant hills; there seemed to be about a hundred women, and nearly as many children. Men were not in evidence, barring a few who lazed on guard or loafed about the horse lines.

It was evidently not a war encampment. Neither party to an Arab raid molests the others' women, but they leave their women in some remote places. Where were the

\* Dry watercourse.

men? It was risky to ask; the shaikh might consider the question impudent. Yet why did he wish Roddy to observe the encampment? Did he want him to see that the men were not there? Was the implication that the men were where they should be? Very well—where? Why? Silence seemed to be the acceptable comment. But it is always safe, in any circumstances, in Arabia to mention God's omniscience and man's abject wonder. Roddy was good at it:

"Aywah! The Door standeth on its heel," he exclaimed. "None knoweth, save only Allah. That which is written, verily it shall come to pass."

"Yaum mubarak! Even infidels shall praise Thee! Here we are, O Allah! There is none beside Thee. Prosper Thy servants, and may blessings be upon The Prophet," said Abdul Harrash.

But there was a smile in the shaikh's eyes. All Arabs, and especially the reverent sons of the desert, use a definite inflexion when they ask a blessing on Allah's Prophet. Abdul Harrash had not used it, and he had said "the" not "Thy" Prophet. There was a smile in his voice, too, although his lips were solemn. Was it possible that Kamarajes had already spread that joke about the name of Roddy's horse, so diligently that it served to tip the point of a hint, even here in the desert?

The shaikh's men were smiling; they lacked their chieftain's self-restraint. It occurred to Roddy he was being credited with intimate knowledge of some intrigue, of which he actually knew nothing whatever.

Horse sense, which is the same as shrewdness, warned him it might be disastrous to confess his ignorance. Silence, because you have nothing to tell, is much wiser than haste to be told, ninety-nine times in a hundred.

"Allah yahdik!" said Abdul Harrash, and that was another conundrum. "God direct thee" *might* imply "and make of thee a good Moslem"; the phrase is often used with that significance. But it also

might mean "we understand each other. Trust in God and keep your powder dry, eh?"

"Allah rewardeth His friends," said Roddy.

"Mash'allah! Taib! Allaho Akbar!" There was a chorus of approving comment. Then the shaikh dismissed Roddy:

"Nahnu malikin." (We are bound together by the salt.) "La'adamnak." (i.e. come again soon.) "Aywah! That one—he shall be the farrash."

HE threatened the man whom he indicated with dreadful mayhem should he fail in his duty. Roddy rode away feeling that, no matter what might happen now, there would be a man at his back to guard him against treachery. A farrash, in the normal meaning of the word, is a rather mean factotum, who pitches tents and administers floggings; but the fellow who now rode behind him, with a rifle in a sling and a knife at his belt, was a wind-weaned fighting man if ever Roddy saw one. Half a glance at the man was enough to provide a feeling of comfort up the spine. But the same half-glance suggested that danger was on its toes, or the man wouldn't be there.

Roddy rode slowly to save the borrowed horse; like so many Arab horses this was a lazy one, but there was no sense in forcing the pace. It was four in the afternoon before he was near enough to Zakkum to notice riflemen watching the three gates and the broken gaps in the wall from battlemented towers that the Turks had built in the days of Abdul Hamid. There might be no present restriction against entering the city, but the Sultan evidently kept himself informed who came and went. Roddy rode through the Gate of the Doomed that he had used previously. Then he turned directly toward the palace, where the daily public audience, that no Arab ruler would dare to neglect, should be due to commence. As a matter of fact he arrived late, but that was nothing to worry about; to

have been ahead of time, or even punctual, might have suggested anxiety.

There was a man in the courtyard being bastinadoed. It was a good show for the Red Sea littoral; the crowd was being kept back by blows and abuse from breaking the line to get a better view. The writhing culprit lay face upward, with his bare feet held in the air in stocks consisting of two poles lashed to uprights. After every fifth blow on the lacerated feet, the operator of the stripped date-palm fronds paused to repeat the announcement of the crime. The culprit had sold twenty rifle cartridges to a man from the desert. He was to receive twenty blows on the feet for each cartridge.

There was nothing that Roddy could do about that. He entered the bare-walled vestibule of the audience hall. There were only a few Arabs in the vestibule, but he could see through an open door about a hundred of them squatting on a chamber floor facing a low platform. On the platform there were two white-robed secretaries, but no kadi, no Sultan on the seat at the low table. Before Roddy reached that open door his shirt-sleeve was plucked by a black-faced underling who led him toward a closed door in a corner over to the right. He was almost hustled into a small chamber where the light was so dim that he could see almost nothing. The door closed behind him. Lillilee came forward out of the gloom. For a moment he hardly recognized her. She was wearing a burka. She tossed that up out of the way, but laid a finger on her lips, so he asked no questions.

Judging by her eyes, she was half-frantic with suppressed excitement. Her hand, as she laid it on his, trembled. She was dressed entirely in black and it made her look small, although her eyes looked larger. She led Roddy toward a smaller door, at the far end, and through that into utter darkness. When she had closed that door and bolted it, she raised a strip of leather on the wall, and it was obvious then in a moment that they were in a spy-hole

where an unsuspected guard could keep the Sultan under observation; there were slits in the wall, through which to watch, listen and shoot if necessary.

The Sultan, foxy and unfriendly looking, sat on cushions on a red plush settee, from which most of the gilt had peeled long ago. He was smoking an American cigarette, which he seemed not to enjoy very much. Facing him, on a comfortable chair that matched the settee, was Max Rector, hot and very obviously angry; he had one leg crossed over the other and had folded his arms in an attempt to appear judicial and iron-willed. Kamarajes, evidently acting interpreter, stood with his back toward Roddy. MacNamara and the first mate of the *Blue Heron* sat on bent-wood chairs facing Kamarajes. MacNamara looked pious, and the first mate stubborn.

"But my fishermen say you broke their heads," remarked the Sultan, "and by Allah that is a strange way of keeping the peace."

KAMARAJES' translation of that was a masterpiece, without a trace of hesitation. "He says," said Kamarajes, "that your yacht has broken all the regulations. That you have shown no papers, but have thrown his officials overboard. So he will send his men to seize the yacht unless you make an honorable compensation."

"Tell him he's mistaken," Max retorted. "There were no officials—none that I saw, anyhow. A lot of roughnecks invaded the yacht and were merely removed without unnecessary violence."

Kamarajes changed that into Arabic:

"He says: what have you done with my friend, and with the horse that he brought ashore this morning?"

"Tell him," said the Sultan, "that his friend is retained as a hostage."

"He says," said Kamarajes, "that your friend is a hostage, and that he will be thrown into prison unless you make an honorable compensation for the outrage, of which there were many witnesses."

MacNamara clucked with apprehension: "Man, ye canna let that happen. It wad stain y'r reputation f'r a' time."

The mate grunted. "Mr. Roddy Nolan is a white man, tell him. We won't stand for—"

MacNamara interrupted: "Tu-tut — no indiscretions now! Let's find a way oot. I'd suggest we'll put yon jetty and its crane in verra good repair as compensation for an unintentional but seerious affront to his offeecial dignity. Man, that wad cost ye next to nothing. We've a spare spar that the shipwright stuck ye with for no reason at a'. We've twenty or thirty fathom o' one-inch chain ye'll never miss; it mak's rust in our bilge; ye'd better throw it overboard than keep it. We've spikes. And we've plenty o' two-inch teak planks that ye brought for a camp ye said ye have in mind. Ye can pick up all the teak ye need in India, in a buyer's market. Ye'll restore the economic prosper-r-ity o' Zak-kum if ye mend yon jetty."

"The men are needed for work on the engines," Max answered curtly.

"Engines are my responsibeclity," said MacNamara. "The men are in one anither's way, now that the wor-r-st part's over. I could spare ye a fitter and four or maybe five men, if f'r genius f'r diplomatic bar-r-gaining suggested to ye that yon jetty is the key to efficacious—"

"Oh, all right," Max interrupted. "Did you hear that? Suggest it. Say it's much more than I feel he's entitled to. But I'll make that concession if he'll overlook what was after all a very natural and excusable display of irritation on the part of my crew." He stroked his chin. He uncrossed his legs. He felt superior again, and condescending. He was ready to go now.

Kamarajes turned the offer into Arabic without diluting it. There was a rapid flow of low-voiced conversation between him and the Sultan that Roddy could not quite overhear. Then Kamarajes smiled at Max:

"He says, he accepts that offer, because it will be good for the fishermen. They

are his people, and it is they whose heads were broken. But he calls God to witness that his honor has been violated, so he asks what will you do about that?"

"Tell him I'll apologize, if that's what he wants."

Kamarajes used Arabic phrases that artfully exaggerated Max's insolence. Lillilee pressed Roddy's hand in the dark. He could see her smile by the light through the slit in the wall. She was inviting his approval. It was her plan, evidently. She had thought of all this; her expression said so. It was she who had put Kamarajes up to it, and she knew what was coming. Roddy put his arm around her, telling himself he was mad.

He should have stood on his dignity; he should have shown resentment. But he felt none to show. The sensation was of losing all he had, and finding something better. She snuggled closer like a child. Nothing could have gone straighter than that to Roddy's good will. Confidence always touched him. Trust Roddy, and you could bet on him as long as he had breath.

Kamarajes turned to Max: "He says, apology is the rain of fair words watering the seed of eagerness to make amends. But what else?"

"What does he want now?" Max grumbled.

"Gasoline," said Kamarajes.

"How about Mr. Roddy Nolan's hor-r-se?" asked MacNamara.

LILLILEE nudged Roddy with a wriggle of delight that thrilled every nerve in her body, and his too. It was a squeal unuttered, born of exquisite artistic pride, restrained by prudence. She was showing him proof of her genius, inviting his praise, and his only. Her delight was as intoxicating as the scent of her hair. But Roddy had to listen to what was going on. To keep her quiet (said the last of his scruples) he hugged her closer to him; but the man in him mocked that mental alibi.



He was over the fence, and he knew it. No half-measures. To hell with society.

"It is Mr. Nolan's horse, not mine," Max protested.

"The Sultan says it is *his* horse," Kamarajes answered. "Mr. Nolan, he says, gave it to him as a bucksheesh to adorn a request that the yacht might have protection while at anchor. Let me tell you, it is unwise to contradict a sultan!"

Max exploded. "Nonsense! Never heard of such a thing! I wouldn't dream of letting Mr. Nolan pay for my protection, as you call it. Mr. Nolan can't afford anything of the sort. It's ridiculous. Tell him he will give that horse back, if he has any self-respect."

"Chut-chut-chut!" exclaimed MacNamara.

Kamarajes gave another exhibition of his skill as an interpreter:

"This distinguished effendi says his friend begged himself for the sake of friendship by presenting that horse to your highness. It was the act of an over-magnanimous guest, alarmed for his host's safety. Believing that your highness also is magnanimous, as all true Moslems are, he offers to submit to the judgment of Allah."

Roddy held his breath. The bird is usually in the net before a Greek proposes to trust Allah.

The Sultan answered: "How much gasoline will he give in exchange for the horse?"

That was a shock. Roddy gritted his teeth. He would almost prefer to lose the horse than to have Max buy it back. He had had enough of Max's favors; they were too expensive of humiliation. But Kamarajes let himself be guided by his conscience; he interpreted promptly, with the matter-of-fact calm of a neutral who had nothing at stake:

"His highness wants to see that big horse gallop. Borrow a horse, he says, and he will race you for ten drums of gasoline, winner-take-all."

"Spoken like a sporr-rtzman!" said MacNamara.

"Good enough," said the mate. "Can you get us a horse that can beat Mr. Nolan's?"

"Sure," said Kamarajes. "Almost any horse could beat him if the race is soon enough."

"And if the race is long enough," said MacNamara. "Let us fir-r-st know the condections. Winner-take-all means—"

"In Arabia the winner gets the loser's horse, jockey and wager," said Kamarajes.

"Is Mr. Roddy Nolan to ride the other horse?" the mate objected. "If he *should* happen to lose, he and his horse and a bet would all fall to the Sultan? Well, we'd have to ransom Mr. Roddy Nolan. That's no wager for a white man."

"No," said Kamarajez. "So instead of him, you stake the gasoline along with the horse, against the Sultan's horse and jockey."

"And a bet," said MacNamara.

Max wiped the sweat off his face and adjusted his pince-nez. "Do I understand correctly," he asked, "that the Sultan offers this—ah—horserace as—ah—an excuse for returning the horse?"

"Sure. He couldn't surrender a gift," said Kamarajes. "If he gave the horse back, all these Arabs would say he is afraid to keep it. Rulers have to think of things like that."

"Oh, very well," said Max. "I agree, if Mr. Nolan will give his consent. I don't see that it can cost me anything."

"Unless we lose the race," said MacNamara. "Man, ye'll have to post y'r forfeit."

Kamarajes started at once to interpret, turning his back toward Max, giving him no chance to withdraw. He threw a half-heroic pose as he addressed the Sultan.

"Taib," said the Sultan, evidently pleased.

"It's a bet," said Kamarajes. He dictated the terms of the bet to the Arab secretary, who wrote them down and handed a copy

to Kamarajes, to give to Max, but Kamarajes put it in his pocket.

"Can ye place me a bet on the race?" asked MacNamara.

Kamarajes nodded. The Sultan commenced the restless movements that precede the conventional phrases which dismiss an assembled company. Lillilee tugged at Roddy, closed the flap over the slits in the wall, and guided him in total darkness to the door. He was about to speak, but she put her hand on his lips. He put both arms around her, but she slipped away from him. When she opened the door her face was hidden by the burka. She pushed him out almost into the arms of the eunuch, who smiled but made no comment.

### VIII

HOW the failures get their crumb of mercy is more interesting than how the merciless use Success. There is no Red Cross in Zakkum. To befriend a victim of the sultan's anger is even less prudent than to endorse a borrower's note to a money-lender. Roddy mounted his horse in the courtyard, and from that safe position considered the seller of twenty cartridges. The flies were busy with him. He lay in a pool of his own blood. He was a problem in the curiously occult science of minding one's own business without being too hard-boiled.

Roddy's hand instinctively went to his pocket, money being the bait with which to get other people to tempt providence. However, just then two men strolled up with a crude ox-hide stretcher. They made scurrilous comments and invited God to bear them witness that a dung-heap was a proper place for such a vulture's banquet. No one contradicted them, so they threw the unconscious victim on to the stretcher and walked off with him, laughing contemptuously. They were naked, except for twisted calico turbans and thin cotton shorts. They looked like anybody's slaves — perhaps grave-diggers. But Roddy thought he rec-

ognized one of them as Kamarajes' Swahili servant. He was not quite sure, because change of turbans makes a big difference, and one naked, black torso looks much like another.

Then came Max Rector's party, before Roddy could escape without the appearance of running away. So he dismounted and asked the farrash to change the stirrup-length, standing close to the horse to watch him do it. But Max walked straight up to him:

"Why, hello. Got yourself a new horse already? Did you buy or hire him?"

"Borrowed."

"Well, that's splendid. Say, old fellow, I believe we had a slight misunderstanding. We were both upset. I think we lost our tempers. Let's forget it. To show you my real feelings, I've just come from interviewing the Sultan. He thinks you made him a present of your horse and no mistake. Perhaps your Arabic's a bit rusty. You may have used a wrong phrase or something. Anyhow, he needed diplomatic handling. I had to let him save face, you understand. So I suggested a horse-race—winner-take-all. D'you get the point of that? Any horse could beat The Prophet while he's out of condition. All you have to do is to race, and win your own horse back. How about that? Better shake hands, hadn't we?"

Roddy shook hands. What was the use of refusing? Max mistook his smile for gratitude.

"Now, I'll tell you a good joke. It seems the system here is for the winner to take the loser's horse *and* jockey. You'd better ride like the devil or you'll find yourself on the Sultan's pay-roll! I imagine the pay consists of dates and dead fish."

"Well, a job's a job," said Roddy. He was looking beyond Max at MacNamara. The engineer was winking; the first mate was stuffing a handkerchief into his mouth. Max misinterpreted Roddy's effort to keep a straight face.

"No, no, I wasn't serious. I post a for-

feit to represent you; but that's a mere formality. This is the joke: you remember that lad we hired at Port Said, who deserted at Suez? Well, I found out this morning after you left, that his desertion wasn't entered on the yacht's log. Remember, I hired him because he had an Indian immigration permit?

"That's still among the papers in the strong-box. Well, you win a horse-boy who can land in Bombay without any trouble from the port authorities. How's that for a finesse? You won't have to do stable-work for the rest of the voyage."

"You'll be charged with kidnapping," said Roddy. He had to say something to explain the grin he couldn't control.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. Do you suppose there's a slave in Zakkum who wouldn't change his name and give his eye-teeth to go to India on someone's payroll? Who'll complain? Not he, I'll bet you."

Roddy had to appear ignorant, so he thought of another question:

"When's the race to be?"

"The sooner the better. MacNamara tells me they're having better luck in the engine-room than he looked for. Come aboard now and have a cocktail."

"Thanks, I'd better stay ashore and watch points. There might be trickery connected with this race unless I'm careful."

But Max craved Roddy's company. "Tell you what I'll do," he said. "Kamarajes says the Sultan needs gasoline. First thing in the morning you can take him a couple of drums. Come on. I'll wait while you stable the horse, and—"

"No," said Roddy. "I'll stay here and make inquiries."

"THAT damned woman, eh? Well—don't, for God's sake, let her get you into another mess. I think I've got you out of this one all right, but—"

"Would you give her a passage to Bombay?" Roddy interrupted.

"No, my dear fellow. Not even for you. Be reasonable. You can't expect me to carry a woman to Bombay, simply because you lose your head about her. Even if it weren't risky I wouldn't do it."

"No harm in my asking, I suppose?"

"No, no harm asking. I'm glad you did. That leaves no chance for a misunderstanding. Well — you won't come aboard now?"

"Not yet."

Max walked off attempting to conceal his thoughts. The very angle of his yachting cap suggested that men of standing should not expect much gratitude. MacNamara tried to get a word with Roddy, but Max beckoned him and the mate and the three took a short cut to the beach. Kamarajes had vanished, so Roddy rode to the store to look for him. He was met at the door by a servant who told the farrash where to stable the horses. Roddy dismounted and walked in.

On the table lay the victim of the bastinado, slowly recovering consciousness. The place reeked of iodoform. Kamarajes had already washed, and was now bandaging the victim's feet.

"I was a hospital orderly once," he said, grinning at Roddy. "Made more friends by that than you could count. Here's a new one—all ambition and no brains. Thought the Sultan hadn't any brains either. Maybe he hasn't a whole lot. But he knows if the tribes in the desert had ammunition, politics might get too lively for him. So the Sultan keeps a look-out and you have to use brains in the ammunition business."

"Where did he get the cartridges he sold?" asked Roddy.

"Bought 'em from the Sultan's body-guard and sold 'em to a spy. There's talent for you! Rob the rich, and give the poor a chance to help 'emselves, but watch your step, that's my motto."

His two servants returned the victim to the stretcher and carried him out through the back door. Kamarajes produced a whiskey bottle.

"Talk," said Roddy. "You have told me too much or too little."

"Don't you believe it, Mister. What you don't know isn't evidence. You heard tell of my being in Ayyub's prison? It's a mean place. Abdul Harrash, who lent you a horse, used to pay a man to bring me food fit to eat. Do you make friends by beating 'em and starving 'em in a lousy prison, or by taking a chance to do 'em a good turn when they need it? Think that over."

Roddy thought it over. It seemed fairly clear that Kamarajes was playing a deep game, in which Sultan Ayyub was a foredoomed loser. Kamarajes poured two drinks and volunteered some further scraps of information:

"Sultan Ayyub would double-cross himself if he could get away with it. He kids himself he's going to win your horse, plus ten drums of gasoline. He'll fix the race—I said 'fix it,' didn't I?—for day after tomorrow, so you'll feel good and confident The Prophet can't possibly win. Tomorrow morning you interview him. You agree to everything—catch weights—one mile, over the usual course around the cemetery—you to ride any horse you can get; he'll understand you might not trust an Arab jockey. Winner-take-all, remember. But you can't swap tribes, so to speak, the way the Arabs do when they lose a horse-race, so Horse's Rump stands in place of your chieftain and posts ten drums of gasoline as forfeit for you in case you lose. Me—I'm interpreter, that's all I am. I have nothing to do with it."

"But Lillilee?"

"It's her plan. She advises the Sultan. You see—drink up, Mister—she's on the level. There's a eunuch, who'd be bastinadoed and worse; and there's me, who might land in one hell of a mess, if Lillilee should leave Zakkum surreptitious. We're good guys. Ayyub isn't. It's only public opinion that kept him from locking her up in the harem. She'll commit Ayyub in public, so that if she goes away from Zakkum he can't strafe other people for it."

"She can't get away on the yacht," said Roddy. "Max Rector won't hear of it."

"No? Well, I never saw a horse's rump yet that could listen to reason. Has he heard how MacNamara lost his money on a horse in Alexandria, and knows me, and *might* be willing to do me a slight favor, if it made him a bit for himself on the side? There's more to this than luck, Mister. No denying we were lucky to have that yacht turn up at Alexandria. But the rest was head-work. Luck don't interfere with engines—not that kind. Engineers can lie as good as a witness in a law-suit. Luck don't fall twice in the same place so often that it's safe to bet. So we're leaving nothing else to luck. Sultan Ayyub isn't. I'm not. Lillilee isn't. Abdul Harrash isn't—and don't you. Day after tomorrow you ride like the devil, to win, and no mistake about it. Someone has to lose, whenever someone wins, remember. Let them lose who can afford it."

**R**ODDY would have liked to ask a dozen questions. But he sensed that Kamarajes might close up like a clam, or worse, might tell lies under direct questioning.

It was more prudent to seem idly curious about irrelevant matters:

"Why aren't the followers of Abdul Harrash in camp?" he asked.

Kamarajes eyed Roddy over the top of his glass. "All the way from the fiumara to Zakkum they could be seen coming, if they did come, couldn't they?" he answered. "But if they were sent off into the desert, to do Sultan Ayyub a favor, that might make him unsuspicious, mightn't it? And if they were to make a circuit, and come along the bed of the deep waddy to the northward, and along the beach below the dunes, and into Zakkum that way, who'd expect that? It's a custom in Arabia that anyone who owns a horse can get into any horse-race. It's like a fight in Chicago. Get in or stay out. But if you get in, take the consequences."



"Where's Lillilee?" asked Roddy. "I want to speak to her again."

"Mister, she'll abusel no man's confidence. You leave her to her own devices. Tonight she has to dance for Sultan Ayyub. That gives him bats in the belfry. You don't know an Arab the way she does, or the way I do. If a smart girl wriggles her stomach at him, the way *she* can, he's amenable. It's like drink to a buyer from Oshkosh, or a roulette wheel to a policy sharp. It makes him think he can beat any game in the world. All we need is to keep Ayyub flattered and feeling crooked. Then he'll be safe for us who're on the level."

"When do I see the Sultan?"

"Come ashore tomorrow morning, Mister, and I'll arrange it."

## IX

MAX ignored signals from the end of the jetty. That was his way of showing resentment for having had to return to the yacht without Roddy, who had plenty of time to observe that the jetty needed not much doing to it beyond the replacement of some rotted timber. Any competent mechanic could repair the hand-crane in a day, given tools and some iron bolts. The sun went down—a huge disc dropping suddenly below the rim of the world—and the stars shone on the eastern darkness, but there was no sign of the tender. Roddy felt hungry and needed a bath. Both those sensations are irritants. He cursed Max. He felt no pity for him. He hoped Max would get thoroughly stung, whatever else might happen.

Out of darkness behind him a hand touched his. A shadow stole to his side. Amid the stench of rotting fish and seaweed he could smell the aroma of someone clean and healthy. Lillilee's hair touched his jaw. He put his arm around her without turning his head to look at her.

"Angry?" she asked.

"Worried."

"But you know now what will happen?"

"I don't know what will happen to you."

"But you care. So I will make sure it shall happen no matter what comes of it."

It was true he cared. But what the devil could he do about it? He didn't answer. Silently he cursed Max. If only Max were a decent fellow—

"It is for me, not for you to do this," said the quiet voice beside him. "It is not for me to make your difficulties greater." Then she spoke Arabic: "Because of thee I made choice, whithersoever thou goest I will be contented. Such as I am, I am thy friend—aye, in adversity also. Be thy sorrow mine and I will bear it. Thy success is my reward; let me but see it, and that is enough. I ask nothing but to be thy friend and servant."

"Look here," he said gruffly. "I can't help you—not now. It's impossible." His arm held her tight; he hardly knew it. "I can give you some money. You can't come away on the yacht."

"But I promise never to cause trouble—"

"I tell you, you can't come on the yacht."

"But if I could?"

"It isn't my yacht."

"But if it were?"

"I would take you to Bombay."

"Good," she answered. "Ride like the devil, to win, and be surprised at nothing!"

She was gone, out from his arm like a shadow and one with the dusk, leaving a faint scent behind her. He heard her footsteps creak along the jetty. He caught one glimpse of the portly eunuch. Then he heard the throb of the tender's propeller and saw the little electric headlight chasing its own reflection on the dark sea.

MacNamara stepped out from the tender and climbed to the jetty, pretending to examine the broken crane with an electric torch. He spoke low, not to be heard by the coxswain.

"I told you bag o' deevindends I saw y'r signals, but he thinks he's Admiral Nelson. Man, ye smell like a boudoir. Losh, if I

were young again I'd pick a quarrel. Listen. I've arr-r-ranged to mend this jetty at yon lunatic's expense, because one good tur-rn deserves another. Though I credit ye with no intention o' providing for my auld age, there's an incedental by-product o' oor acquaintance, and f'r that I feel beholden to ye. How could ye get that ramping monster of a hor-r-se to yon scow in a hurry, unless I mend the crane and make the jetty safe f'r high falutin's. Had ye thought o' it? Ye had not. However, ye'll find the hor-r-se-box on the jetty. Ride y'r hor-r-se into it. Lower away. We'll have the tender bridled to the scow. We'll tow ye to the yacht too fast f'r any Arabs to follow."

"You seem sure I'll have the horse."

"Man, I know it. But there's one word o' warr-ning I have f'r y'r private ear. Yon loon intends to send two drums o' gasoline ashore tomorrow morning as a bucksheesh f'r the Sultan. He mustn't do it."

"Why not?"

"That's none o' y'r business. But prevent it, or ye'll lose y'r hor-r-se forever. Talk him out o' such foolishness."

"What shall I say?"

"Have ye no imagination? Think o' something. Use y'r char-r-m o' personality and skill o' logic. And not a word in the tender. Mind, that coxswain's talkative."

## X

THAT was a hectic night. Roddy had to pace the deck with Max and listen to an alternating flow of boasting and lamentation. Max was worried about the fishing boats that kept watch on the yacht from just beyond moderate rifle-range. He boasted about the sporting rifles in the chart room, and of his own skill as a marksman. But he had the jitters. Over and over again he repeated he would let the horse go hang and up-anchor and leave, if only MacNamara were not such an idiot.

"That drunken Scotchman is up to mis-

chief, but I can't imagine what his game is. I believe we could get away in a couple of hours if MacNamara saw fit. He says that some infernal spare part doesn't fit and has to be shaped in by hand. But I don't believe him. First it was to be ten days. Now it's perhaps three! He'll have to look for another ship in Bombay. I'm through with him."

Even when Max turned in, Roddy was sleepless and continued pacing the deck. Zakkum under the stars was a blotch of velvet darkness pricked by pin-holes of lamplight. But the white beach was luminous; he could make out to the northward the shadowy mouth of the fiumara, along which Kamarajes had suggested that Shaikh Abdul Harrash could bring men into the city. They would have to ride along the beach and enter where the north wall was broken in several places; and unless expected, they could possibly arrive unseen. But what for?

Speculation about Shaikh Abdul Harrash and his men occupied only minutes; if there was to be fighting, fighting there would be. It might be fun or it might not. No use guessing. The hours were spent staring at Zakkum. There was a light on a roof. Now and then, if one watched it closely, it disappeared for a moment, as if someone passed in front of it. Lillilee? Was she walking the roof? Or was she dancing in the palace? Roddy couldn't see the palace; but he could imagine her, as Kamarajes had described it, "shaking her stomach" at Sultan Ayyub. Roddy considered himself hard-boiled, but he preferred to imagine her pacing the roof.

What should he do with her? Money? The Greek might cash the draft on Bombay. Oh, the hell with money! Sultry Red Sea nights make doubt a torment worse than pain. Roddy stripped to the waist. Later, he stripped naked. He took a shower every twenty or thirty minutes. He wondered what infernal quackery the Sultan's stable-master might be using on The

Prophet to make him fit to gallop. Those damned Arabs would probably ruin the horse. Could the Sultan be such an idiot as to believe he could win a mile race with a horse just landed? But it seemed a curiously roundabout and futile way of returning the horse to its owner.



Who stood to gain what? Lillilee wanted the Sultan's permission to leave Zakkum, so that the friends she would leave behind her might not be punished, as they would be, cruelly, if she should leave without permission. Well and good; there was only one possible deduction from that. With or without the Sultan's knowledge, she proposed to ride The Prophet and lose the race. She would be the legitimate prize of the winner, and all Zakkum would know it. The Sultan would have no one but himself to blame; and probably public opinion would prevent him from punishing Lillilee's friends. But what good would it do? She couldn't come on the yacht. Unless—

Was she proposing to come as horse-boy? Had that old pirate MacNamara planted on the yacht a young lad with an

Indian immigration permit, and kicked him off, or perhaps paid him to desert in Suez, as a move toward getting Lillilee away from Zakkum? MacNamara seemed capable of almost any intrigue that had a sporting flavor. Kamarajes had distinctly hinted that there was nothing really wrong with the engines. MacNamara might go to all that trouble, and risk his certificate, to repay Kamarajes for a kindness. He might. But it seemed a big risk to run for a small return. And neither he nor Kamarajes could possibly have known beforehand that the yacht would touch at Alexandria. MacNamara must have waited there for a suitable ship to turn up. Waited at Kamarajes' expense? Whose else? If so, there must be money in it. That Greek was not in Zakkum for his health; even for Lillilee's sake, he was hardly likely to invest much money without the prospect of a good fat profit.

**B**UT where was the profit to come from? Betting on a "fixed" horse-race? Hardly. There seemed to be one or two unknowns in the equation that had not yet as much as revealed themselves. Funnily enough, the only two clear points were intangibles, like the items of good-will and accounts receivable in an otherwise incomprehensible balance sheet. One was that he, Roddy, was being used in a conspiracy, but was being carefully preserved from guilty knowledge of it, just as certainly as Max Rector was being played without mercy. Somehow Max seemed destined to produce the profit, but it would be as much use warning Max as talking to the back-side of a mule.

The other point was Lillilee's attitude. Roddy told himself again and again, as he paced the dew-wet deck, that Lillilee was simply snatching at a chance that had turned up. It was only reasonable to suppose that. And why shouldn't she snatch? What girl in her shoes wouldn't? If she intended to smuggle herself on the yacht as horse-boy, which seemed probable, her

obvious cue would be to flatter the horse's owner and gain his confidence; the owner of the yacht would then be easier to circumvent, and even should he prosecute her in Bombay she would have a friend to help her through that difficulty. She had talked like a poet, said reason, but poets sell their phrases for the same reason that men sell horses, and "caveat emptor." The groundswell, sloshing around a nearby reef, took reason's view of it:

"Be—ware! Be—ware!"

But reason lost the argument. Roddy stared at the distant roof again. Imagination ceased from inventing ifs and whys. It leaped forward to Bombay and beyond. She and he had spoken to each other on the inside line that is insulated from argument; it communicates nothing but naked fact, in secret, one man to one woman. What should he do with her?

"Wisdom? Max is wise," thought Roddy. "He has a house, a yacht, a bank account and a damned mean disposition. I'm not wise, thank the Lord. What am I? Damned if I know. But I do know a straight insider when I see her. I know when I like a woman. And I know when I'm jolly well game to chance my neck. This is when."

He was pacing the deck at sunrise and saw Kamarajes arrive in an Arab fishing boat. He saw him talking to MacNamara. He had a notion to go ashore in the fishing boat, so he strolled aft to ask the Greek to wait while he shaved and dressed. But Kamarajes had other ideas.

"Don't come ashore, Mister. Tomorrow everything will be ready. I saw the Sultan late last night, and he left it to me to make arrangements. Your horse will be ready for you tomorrow afternoon near the starting post, and I'll come and get you at four o'clock. The course will be marked with flags and sticks, and the only rule is that competitors must keep between the markers; if you pass one on the outside, you have to ride back and pass it on the inside. You're to put the drums of gasoline on to

the jetty, but that's MacNamara's job and he'll do it. Your job, Mister, is to ride like hell, to win—and then collar your prize and hurry back here to the yacht."

"How about Abdul Harrash?" Roddy asked him. "Am I to ride his horse? The brute's a stumbler."

"No matter," said Kamarajes. "You'll win easy."

"What's the betting?"

"Ten to one against you. Want to place a bet?"

It looked too much like a "fixed" race. "No," said Roddy. "Won't Abdul Harrash expect some sort of payment from me for the use of his horse?"

Kamarajes grinned slyly. "Trust him, Mister. He'll get what he's after. Don't you worry. See you tomorrow. So long."

Soon after Kamarajes left MacNamara took an engine-room party ashore to repair the jetty, loading up two of the yacht's life-boats with lumber. He returned after awhile and winked at Roddy. Then Max got up and invited Roddy to tea on the bridge.

"What, not shaved yet? Aren't you going ashore?"

"No."

"Through with the girl, eh? Found her out, did you? Well, old fellow, better late than never. D'you know, Nolan, in the course of my experience I have seen more good men go wrong over a worthless woman than from all other causes put together. I'm relieved. I assure you I am. I can go through with that idiotic horse-race now without imagining you riding off afterwards into the desert with a jinx of a girl who would be your ruin. Have some tea. Cream? Sugar?"

## XI

SO a day, and a night, and a part of a day went by in torment. Max was intolerable. At one moment he complained of the heat and the risk to his health. Then he was afraid of the Arabs, who were keep-



ing a vigilant watch from the fishing boats. When they showed no disposition to attack he became contemptuous and talked in platitudes about the white man's burden. He exploded with irritation when Roddy advised him not to send two drums of gasoline as a present to the Sultan, at any rate until after the race when the Sultan *might* need pacifying.

He strutted the bridge in a yachting cap and pyjamas fanning himself and scanning the horizon with binoculars, afraid some passing British Navy sloop might look in and investigate him. No sloop commander was likely to take his word for what was wrong. The Arabs, questioned, would complain of having been assaulted. That would mean a court of inquiry; and that would mean publicity, which he dreaded as tramps dread soap and water. He would be likely to catch it, too, from Washington; the United States Government isn't exactly affectionate toward millionaires who make trouble with yachts in foreign ports; the subsequent discourtesies somehow seem proportioned to the ingenuity with which the millionaire has avoided income tax. So Max was wrathly.

At the end of a day of stifling heat and glare, with everyone's nerves in a frazzle, Max went to the length of offering a month's extra pay to the engine-room staff if he could weigh anchor by midnight. Damn Roddy's horse; he had had enough of that brute, stinking up the yacht's deck. And to hell with Roddy; he shouldn't have been such a fool as to take the animal ashore. He lectured Roddy on the imbecility of owning horses in an age of mechanism.

"Sport of kings? It's the vice of the unemployable. Kings are an anachronism. So are horses. Racing is gambling. Why not get yourself a job?"

"I'm unemployable," said Roddy. At the moment he almost believed it. He felt he would be as well off in Arabia as anywhere. "Put me ashore," he said. "Clear out as soon as you can. Forget me." By

dinner-time they were hardly on speaking terms.

But morning found Max in a better temper. MacNamara came to the bridge and reported that all would be well in the engine-room by night-fall. But he qualified that good news by remarking that the work on the jetty was not yet finished.

"Let those useless loafers do their own work," Max retorted.

"But it might be verra deeficult to get ten drums o' gasoline ashore wi'out the use o' yon crane," said MacNamara.

"Forget it. That offer of a month's pay stands if we're away by four this afternoon. They'd steal those drums if I set 'em ashore. It's a confidence trick."

"Ye're y'r own judge o' that," said MacNamara. "I'll not gainsay ye. Ye'll recall my advice to tak' a tow to Suez. Ye did gainsay that."

"I don't need you," said Max, "to tell me when to take a tow."

"So I obsairve," MacNamara answered. "But it's on my mind that yon Sultan has made ye a spor-r-tin' proposition, and he'd no' ha' done it but for the Greek having put in a wor-r-d in y'r favor. D'ye realize that the Greek stands to win a bet on the race this afternoon—a quid sized bet.

"Yon Greek's a gambler. If ye call the race off, will ye no' mak' a malignant enemy? Will the Greek no' advise the Sultan to tak' belligerent exception to y'r breakin' y'r wor-r-d. What'll they do? Man, a deck-hand could tell ye. They'll send a camel-rider to Hodeidah; and from there they'll get in touch wi' Aden. And in Bombay ye'll find y'r yacht libelled for the verra seerious offense of a gratuitous assault on peaceful Arabs. It's your ain yacht. I'm no' advisin' ye. But if ye set that gasoline ashore, I'd say they'll then conseeder ye a spor-r-tzman, and they'll race ye for it, fairly, accordin' to Arab standards. Mr. Nolan can win the race. All ye'll need to do to keep the Sultan mollified will be to gie him two drums o'

the stuff. If it were me, I'd send all twelve drums to the beach."

"Oh, very well, have it your own way. If they steal the stuff, I'll dock you for half of it. Put the drums overboard and float them to the beach this afternoon."

MACNAMARA shook his head. He looked fatherly cautious. "Man, ye're too free-handed wi' expensive fuel. Tak' precautions! I've or-dered the hor-r-se-box lifted off yon scow. We'll put the drums on the scow and tow that. We'll keep the scow ready f'r action alongside the jetty. We'll set a guard over the drums while they're on the jetty—not an ar-r-med guard, mind ye; that wad arouse susceptibeelities; but a bo'sun, say, and five or six men, merely to suggest we're no' an eleemosynary grab-bag."

Max insisted it would be safer to float the drums lashed all together. "As long as they're in the water, they're mine."

"Aye," MacNamara retorted, "but the Arab divers are verra effecient. A diver could swim under water an' cut the lashings. Then the drums go adrift and if the Arabs choose to say they're flotsam—well—if ye crave a law-suit—in an Arab law-court—wi' an Arab lawyer—"

"Oh, all right," Max answered. He tried to look and to make himself believe he was not being tricked. But he even eyed Roddy as if he suspected him of being in league with the Greek and MacNamara. However, he did his utmost to appear good tempered. At two o'clock that afternoon he was almost jovial when MacNamara came and told him that the spare part was fitted in place, and he would be able to weigh by sunset.

Max even joked when the tender brought the scow, and the drums of gasoline went overside. When the tender returned for him and Roddy, he was even gracious to the mate and MacNamara, making no objection to their coming ashore with him to witness the race. He gave the mate a cigar.

Kamarajes had quiet mules waiting for them; but even on a quiet mule Max was nervous. His trouser-legs rucked up, and that made him self-conscious. He felt undignified. It appeared he expected to go to the palace. But Kamarajes led them past the Hell Tree, followed by a noisy swarm of small boys, who pestered Max for bucksheesh until his ears became as red as hackles. He was more than ever annoyed when the Sultan treated him with cool aloofness.

There had been an awning pitched beside the winning-post, and the Sultan sat beneath that on a palace sofa on a length of carpet.

He was surrounded by twenty or thirty notables, who took their cue from him and merely slightly inclined their heads in answer to Max's raised cap. Max, the mate and MacNamara joined the gathering beneath the awning and were provided with bent-wood chairs, whose legs sank in the sand; they had to sit at comfortable angles. What annoyed Max most was that the Sultan returned Roddy's greeting with something like cordiality. Roddy dismounted and the Sultan asked him whether the rules had been explained, and whether he felt in good health and fit for a horse-race. But Roddy knew enough Arabic to detect the half-veiled note of sarcasm, and he saw that the notables exchanged glances with one another. There was no use discussing the rules. The race was "fixed," beyond any doubt whatever, and the only doubt was the up-shot. He was to ride a borrowed horse that stumbled from habit. He was probably intended to break his neck. Well, that was the least of his worries; he had risked his neck too often to feel very disturbed on that score. He felt like a gladiator in the arena, without a chance in the world.

He remounted and rode beside Kamarajes down the course, between the little scraps of flags, along the east side of the cemetery. He no longer trusted Kamarajes. There was no conversation. The cemetery

was on rising ground; its low wall was lined with Arab spectators, but there was a swarm of them—almost half Zakkum by the look of it—where the course passed through a narrow gap between two hillocks. There, on both sides of the course, were men on camel-back, overlooking the crowd, but those looked like casual arrivals who had paused on their way to Zakkum; they had four or five riderless camels loaded with hides and bundles.

BEYOND that point the course was reasonably wide until it turned around the corner of the cemetery. There, exactly at the corner, out of sight from starting post and winning post, it passed again between hummocks of wind-heaped sand. There, there was another crowd, but smaller. The course appeared to be a scant mile, but it offered two good opportunities for foul play. Kamarajes broke the silence as the starter rode toward them—a stately, well mounted Arab, who wore two bandoliers.

"He's rich," said Kamarajes. "Count 'em! I could get a dollar apiece, in trade, for ten thousand of those cartridges, if I had 'em."

But Roddy's whole attention was on The Prophet and The Prophet's rider. He almost forgot to return the starter's greeting. Lillilee, dressed as a Bedouin, was having a hard time to control the savage stallion; he was wasting his strength and wind on frantic efforts to break away and get rid of his rider. He was sweating. There was foam on his neck. He lashed out with his heels at several other horses, whose Arab riders kept them milling near the starting post as if their object was to make The Prophet as mad as possible before the race began.

"Anyone rides in any race," said Kamarajes. "Suit yourself and take the consequences. But the rule is that nobody forfeits himself and his horse to the winner as long as he quits on this side of the home stretch—that's the last furlong, on the far side of the gut between those hillocks."

"What's the idea? Interfere with the horse that's not wanted to win?"

"Why not? All's fair in Arabia. Devil take the hindmost. There's your horse, Mister. He's slow, they say. Don't hurry him too much until The Prophet's wind begins to tell on him; after that, it's your race, easy. But remember to keep between the flags."

Roddy recognized four of Shaikh Abdul Harrash's men. Altogether, eight horses lined up for the start, with The Prophet plunging on the outside. There was scant room between the flags, and there would certainly not be room for more than half their number where the course grew narrow. Roddy tried to get next to The Prophet; he wanted to speak to Lillilee. But the farrash seized his rein and hauled his horse into the middle of the melece. There was almost no warning. The starter spurred out of the way and fired his rifle. They were off—two Arabs leading, then The Prophet, and then Roddy, followed closely in a cloud of dust by the four other Arabs. Outside the flags, off the course, in another hurricane of dust, rode twenty horsemen, racing for the corner to view the finish.

They kept that order, with The Prophet fighting for his head in the lead but obviously losing speed, almost as far as the first narrow gut between two sand-dunes. Then the Arabs behind Roddy cracked on speed. They crowded close behind him, hard-breathing, their eyes blazing with excitement above face-cloths. Roddy's mount refused to extend himself; in a moment there was a horse on either flank, almost within biting range of Roddy's knees. They were all gaining fast on The Prophet, who was failing, when suddenly the two leading Arabs reined aside to right and left and the Sultan's trick revealed itself, too late to do anything but ride straight for it.

An Arab horse goes around, not over obstacles. There was a barrier in the gap—a heaped up barricade of hides and bundles that had been hidden behind the dune and rushed into place. The Prophet

leaped it in his stride; even winded, such a jump as that meant almost nothing to him. Roddy felt his own horse flinch and try to turn aside; but there was a horse on either hand. There were two behind him, thundering at his rump. The Arab riders yelled and whacked at Roddy's horse. He saw himself down, in another second, beneath five horses. There seemed no other possibility. But his horse rose at the jump like a bird. He sailed over it sweetly. He pecked on the far side, but recovered and left behind him all four Arabs, planted, with their riders clinging to their necks.

THE race seemed his now. The Sultan had sprung his surprise. He was double-crossed; he probably hadn't guessed there was a horse in all Arabia that could be made to go over instead of around things. The Prophet was winded and easy to overtake now. Lillilee was riding him carefully, throwing her light weight forward on his withers, glancing backward as if she expected Roddy to come on and win. All six Arab riders followed full-pelt, galloping around the dunes and back to the course, hard after Roddy. But they rode like a charge of cavalry. Presumably this jumper wouldn't jump without a cavalcade behind him. Was there another jump, perhaps a worse one?

Suddenly he understood why Lillilee kept glancing backward. They rounded the turn in a cloud of dust almost too soon for the Sultan's second trick to function. Breast to breast, in the narrowest part of the second gap between two hillocks, two heavily loaded camels swayed and sagged to their knees. Lillilee rode straight at them, and The Prophet's ears flattened. He fought for the bit. A yelling crowd surged around the obstacle. It maddened him. He lashed out with his heels in mid-air. A camel raised its head and stopped the full smashing force of the hoof, rolled over on its side and lay struggling with its legs like the flails of the driver of doom. Roddy rode straight at him. There was no other

way than the flick of a chance that those legs afforded. It was neck or nothing, with six horsemen close at his back. He leaped the camel—hit nothing—landed safely—heard a crash and glanced behind him at a scrimmage of horses and men that rolled and struggled amid camels' necks and legs and broken loads, while a couple of hundred spectators yelled with ribald laughter.

The rest was easy. The Prophet was all in. His ears were down. He could hardly canter. Max, the mate and MacNamara were waving their caps and shouting as if they had won a million. The Sultan's notables were clustered around him; there was consternation—a conference. It looked like trouble brewing and no time for the amenities. Roddy overtook and passed The Prophet. He glanced behind him at horsemen coming hell-bent through the crowd that swarmed along the course, and then shouted:

"To your tents, O Israel! To the yacht! To the yacht! Hurry up!"

There was no knowing who was friend or enemy. He turned to grab The Prophet's rein, but Lillilee forestalled that. He only got a glimpse of her face above the folds of a Bedouin face cloth. She rode toward the city, at a slow trot because The Prophet was incapable of better at the moment; but Roddy could not get nearer. The pursuing Arabs' horses were not badly winded. In a moment they were all around The Prophet. Lillilee rode in the midst of an escort that included the starter, with his rifle and two bandoliers, and it looked at least as tough and competent as Sultan Ayyub's group. Max, the mate and MacNamara mounted their waiting mules and followed Roddy, but they were no horsemen, they lagged in the rear of a procession that rode through Zakkum like the advance guard of a conquering army. There was no sign of Kamarajes until they came within sight of the jetty. There was his mule. There he was—shouting and gesticulating to a group of Ayyub's people, telling them the result of a race that he had



not witnessed. He looked worried. He kept glancing northward. There was a sudden rush by Ayyub's people for the drums of gasoline.

The bo'sun and five men backed away; they had no weapons.

Suddenly, from the northward, through a gap in the wall near where it touched the beach, came a hundred horsemen, led by Shaikh Abdul Harrash. There were unloaded camels behind them. They swooped on the jetty. They were loud-lunged—arrogant. They brow-beat Ayyub's people. In the fading light there began an argument that beggared bedlam, with Max in the midst of it shouting at Kamarajes. He had to shout at the top of his lungs:

"Tell him it's mine, all except two drums. They're a present for the Sultan!"

"He says," yelled Kamarajes, "that now it's all his, for the use of the horse! That's true, it's his horse. It's a trick horse—very valuable!"

"Damn him, I'll have the law on him!" Nobody but Max could have thought of the law in that predicament. Kamarajes almost struck him.

**R**ODDY looked—saw—grabbed Max by the shoulder. Down the main street of Zakkum Sultan Ayyub's armed men were coming. On the jetty, someone had opened a steel drum. There was a crowd around it. Eager, sinewy, sweating arms reached out and fought for cartridges that someone on his knees was emptying from the drum, as fast as frenzy could do it. Other men rolled the remaining drums toward the kneeling camels. Max exploded:

"Cartridges, eh? Contraband, eh? *That's* why he wouldn't try to float them, is it? MacNamara—where's MacNamara?"

"To the boats!" said MacNamara in his ear. He was straight-faced. He was stuffing something in his pocket. Kamarajes was beside him. Kamarajes shoved Max,

almost hustled him toward the jetty. Then he seized Roddy's hand and shook it:

"Good-by, Mister, and be good to her. She's worth it. There'll be a new Sultan here when the fighting's over, so I'll sit pretty. Come and see me some day. Good luck."

There were no shots yet. The Sultan's men, jammed in the neck of the street were considering risks and meanwhile yelling insult and retort. Roddy hurried Max along the jetty, where the mate stood in charge of the crane. The Prophet was already in the horse-box, kicking. Max jumped for the scow; he was nearly knocked into the sea by the big box as it swung clear and slowly descended. He jumped into the tender, shouting, "Let go! Full speed ahead!" He could hardly wait for his men to get down off the jetty.

Roddy noticed a pair of Arabian saddlebags, well filled, beside his own saddle and the bag of oats near the horse-box on the scow, but he made no comment. He peered into the horse-box, but whatever he saw inside it, he said nothing. He went back and stood beside MacNamara, staring at Zakkum, where there was already sporadic rifle-firing.

"Oor bag o' deevideends," said MacNamara, "unless ye war-r-n him, *might* come across wi' remar-r-ks subver-r-sive o' good taste an' decent deesciplin'. I hae a premonetion of it. So ye maun remind him that he or-r-dered and paid for yonder drums o' gasoline, by cable, from a firm o' Greeks in Alexandria, to save a wee bit ten per cent of honest graft a reputable agent might ha' char-r-ged him. He hasn't a scrap o' presumptive or cir-cumstantial evidence that I had thought or finger in it. And I'm touchy, o' my reputation. I could gie no evidence in a court o' law that wad remove responsibeelity from him for what was in those drums. But man, man, a dollar a piece for car-r-tridges—just think of it! Tell him the crew won't talk, if he's liberal. A leetle liberality is better than indeegnation. They'll say nothing, not if he

knows the proper uses o' his purr-rse. Man, man, running ammuneetion into por-r-ts where it's forbidden is a verra reesky passion, but I'll grant ye it pays when it comes off. Losh, yonder Arabs are cr-r-ackin' away like a dollar a gross. They're bur-r-n-ing money."

Max went straight to the bridge, and the mate to the fo'castle-head. They weighed at sunset, and for two hours, because of the deadly reefs, Max exercised his one un-failing genius. He could handle his yacht from the bridge as some men drive a car, without much knowledge of its mechanism but with a curious flair for avoiding accidents. He was good in a difficult course on a dark night. Dinner was late. It was long after cocktail time when he came down from the bridge in search of Roddy and found him in the shadow of the horse-box.

"Look here, Nolan, I'd like a little private talk with you before we have our appetizer."

"Talk ahead," said Roddy.

"I've been thinking. Anyone who knows me, knows I wouldn't be guilty of running ammunition. But it might be very difficult to prove my innocence. Can I count on you to hold your tongue about it?"

"Sure," said Roddy.

"I suppose I shall have to pay the crew to keep 'em quiet."

"Probably."

"How about you?"

"I never took a bribe in my life."

It was too dark to see the stare of incredulity behind Max's pince-nez. He hesitated, coughed, and then lighted a cigarette. "Perhaps, Nolan, you can think of something I could do for you that you wouldn't consider a bribe."

"For instance?"

"Think it over. What I want is silence about that ammunition. Let me do you a favor. I know one I wish I *could* do, but it's too late. I'm afraid I'm sentimental.

Up on the bridge there, under the stars, I've been wondering whether I gave you the proper advice about that girl. She may not have been a bad girl after all. Who rode The Prophet?"

"She did."

"I guessed it. I didn't recognize her, but I guessed it. D'you know—as I said, I'm sentimental — I've been wondering what might have happened if you'd brought her away with you. With the aid of that horse-boy's landing permit we might have got her past the authorities in Bombay. She might pass for a boy, with a bit of good luck and some rehearsing. She's an adventuress, of course. But then, you're an adventurer. D'you know, I'm actually sorry you didn't bring her. There's no knowing what a girl like that might not be good for. You and she in India might—"

Roddy knew what he could do in India, far better than Max was capable of guessing. He interrupted:

"Hell, you'd have put her ashore at Aden."

"Not I. I assure you, Nolan. You know—generosity is a strange emotion. There's no accounting for it. I feel I was ungenerous to that girl. I wish I hadn't been. I wish I'd helped her."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes. I feel almost guilty, leaving her behind. I wish you'd brought her."

Roddy reached into the darkness. "It was winner-take-all," he answered. He drew someone toward him—a shadow that moved like a leopard and stayed in his arm.

Max switched on the electric decklight. "God!" he exploded. "What can you do with her? What do you think you can do with him, young woman?"

Lillilee laughed. "Allahu A'alam," she answered. "God knows. But the world is big, and there are many things to do. Is there a law that we may not do them?"

# THE CURIOUS

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

*Nothing But a College Professor Crime Expert!*

# LUCK

OF THE

# UNFORTUNATE

# DETECTIVE~



**B**ILL BLOSS fell into a job at our sheriff's substation, down at San Dimas in the desert, because somebody had demanded a technically trained college man. Bloss was all of that—a solemn, lanky, kindly man who took things seriously and fancied himself as a detective. I had started out as a fingerprint expert, and ended up with a mere deputy's desk job at the San Dimas station. Bloss and I got on fine right from the start, though we were not intimate.

"Mr. Harper," he would say, always mistering me although he was much my senior, "the key to success in this business is knowledge. Keep after it! You ought to learn that book on Physical Evidence, by Gompert, clear by heart. You never know when knowledge will come in handy and you'll bust a big case wide open, and go to the top!"

True enough, maybe, but there was not much chance of it at San Dimas. We had eighty miles of highway and half a dozen towns in our district, from Mexican shacks and outlying ranches to the swank winter colony at Las Quintas. Most of our work was handling drunks and stolen cars and occasional shootings. We had mighty few mysteries; our prowler car and teletype service seldom gave them a chance to get started.

Crandall, the old-fashioned, heavy-handed deputy in charge of the substation,

was an efficient manhandler; he took little stock in Bloss, whose incisive, delicately-chiseled features were usually buried in a book. But the more I got acquainted with Bill Bloss, the more I came to respect him. He had a queer way of doing things; none the less, he had what it takes.

"I've never been a fortunate man in some ways, Mr. Harper," he said to me once. "But, mark me, luck will come my way some day!"

No, fortunate was not the name for Bill Bloss; unfortunate suited him a lot better. He had a pleasant wife, who was a semi-invalid until the dry desert air put her on her feet; he was depending heavily on getting from this job to a better paying city position, but I knew he would never make it unless a miracle happened.

Bloss had too much sympathy and human kindness. He could handle himself, and he could handle a couple of drunks; he spoke Spanish, and was of great use to us in dealing with Mexicans. Everybody liked him. As the modern type of police officer he was all right; but here he was a misfit. You have to be a husky brute out in the sticks. And if Crandall had been here twelve years, Bloss would be here a hundred; or so I figured it.

He did give us a tremendous lot of help, especially with evidence; he was better than any lawyer. Crandall, being in charge, got the credit and made the most

of it. Bloss was not the man to grab. I used to lecture him about it, and he would only shake his head.

"No, Mr. Harper; water seeks its own level. The right conjunction of time and place will take care of things. I don't exactly approve the office routine here, but it's not my place to shove forward. When the time comes, when we get the right break and I'm able to handle some important case in my own manner, then you'll see."

"Hope so anyhow," I rejoined.

I felt sorry for Bill; he was too old-fashioned, courteous and wise for this job. It often occurred to me that he would be wonderful as a police chief of the new type coming into vogue, for he had energy and to spare; but it never occurred to me that he would get there. He would have fitted better in a frock coat and string tie and plug hat, than in his trim deputy's uniform.

It was a good thing for all concerned that the Atkinson case broke when it did, with Crandall away. Crandall had small use for the millionaire colony up at Las Quintas. The polo-playing crowd, he would say, were a bunch of half-wits with more money than sense.

It broke on one of those afternoons of down-pouring rain which sometimes hit the California desert in the rainy season, coming and going suddenly. Crandall, who had the night shift, was away. Bloss and I were making out routine reports, and a dull job it was. The cells were empty. The rain was pitching down like blazes.

A battered old car pulled up at the front door; rather, it ran up clear over the curb. Bloss looked out and smiled.

"Only a woman in a hurry, or else a very nervous woman, or a drunk, would make such a landing?" he observed.

**S**URE enough, a woman climbed out and ducked into the doorway. She was not young; but she was pleasant, kindly looking, and fairly well dressed. She came in and looked from one to the other of us,

and Bill greeted her with his professorial manner.

"Good day, madame! Can we be of service? Here, let me put a chair by the oil heater—"

She thanked him nervously and took the chair he placed. It was clear that she was in the throes of alarm and uneasiness. Her fingers writhed about her handbag, and she seemed unable to find words; at last she plumped it out.

"I'm Emily Fulsom," she blurted. "I—I've got a place up at Las Quintas. A chicken ranch."

They were not all millionaires at Las Quintas, of course. She was one of the ones who wasn't, if you get me.

"There's no haste, Miss Fulsom," said Bloss, with his kindly smile. "Remember the old adage; there's luck in leisure! You're agitated, of course; something wrong, I take it, with your fiancé? Nothing urgent, or you'd have telephoned, but bad enough to worry you."

She gaped at him, opening her mouth and then snapping it shut.

"Forget the Sherlock stuff, Bill," I cut in. "What's wrong, Miss Fulsom?"

She wore a big and obviously new diamond solitaire, so Bill had made a good guess. It seemed that she had a small chicken ranch—anything from one acre up is a ranch—at the edge of Las Quintas. She twisted the ring and blurted out her news.

"I'm engaged to Richard Atkinson. He and his brother Frank have taken the Trincomalee place again this year. They had it last year and we got acquainted."

"Trincomalee?" I repeated. "That's a new one."

"The name of a city in Ceylon, I believe," said Bill Bloss.

"It's the name of a house up the road from my ranch," shot out Miss Fulsom with some asperity. "It's not one of the big places, but a small one. The two of them live there alone. They get Mis' Triggs in every day to clean up and fix their meals.



Frank Atkinson has had real bad sinus trouble. That's why they live down here."

"I see," said Bloss. "Easy, now; tell us about these gentlemen. Are they young men?"

She eased down a bit. "Thirty-five," she said. "The queer thing is that they're twins. You can't tell one from the other. I can't myself, only that they dress different. And then, of course——"

She paused, and Bill Bloss smiled gently. "You are, perhaps, more drawn to Richard?"

"Just the other way! There's something wrong about Frank Atkinson; I've always felt it. Richard's a swell gentleman—well, they've both got money enough to live on, but they're not wealthy like so many folks in Las Quintas. Frank Atkinson was down in Mexico for a long time. Really, they're both quiet, soft-spoken, kindly men! There's something about Frank that repels me, but it don't mean anything."

Bloss flung me a glance. "Identical twins, Mr. Harper; a most interesting study! I have Arnheim's monography on the subject—but pardon me, Miss Fulsom. As long as there's no urgent matter, tell me more about them and about yourself, I beg you."

"I guess I'll have to, if I want to make you understand," she replied. "They live very quietly. The three of us go out to the movies sometimes. I'm sorry I said anything about Frank Atkinson; I haven't anything against him, honest. He used to have a wholesale tobacco business but sold out. He has a pretty bad temper at times; he seems to think the world is all against him, when he gets feeling depressed."

Bloss looked at me and started to speak. I beat him to it.

"Persecution complex. Paranoia. Bad sign. Go ahead, Miss Fulsom."

"Richard, my fiancé, has leased the house," she proceeded. "He has given me to understand that he has plenty of money and that our future is assured; we're to be

married in two months. He is intensely interested in mineralogy and is writing a book on the subject; he is always at work among his stones and specimens. He is left handed, and Frank is right handed—this is really the only obvious difference between them."

Bloss nodded, started to speak, checked himself.

"You said that they dress differently?" I questioned.

She assented. "Frank is careless in his attire. Richard always dresses very neatly in gray."

"Well," I said, "what's happened? Let's get to the point."

"Wait, Mr. Harper!" broke in Bloss. "I take it that Miss Fulsom is afraid of something that may happen—right? Thank you, madame. Therefore, I should like to get the fullest possible information. Do you carry a portrait of your fiancé?"

The lady did, and proceeded to get out a locket hung on a chain around her neck. When I thought of what Crandall would have said to all this rigmarole had he been here, I was forced to grin. However, a very dull afternoon was being filled in, and I was bound to admit that Bill Bloss was laying a careful foundation for—something.

HE PASSED the locket to me. I saw the tiny portrait of a smiling, vigorous man of excellent appearance. I was struck by his white, even teeth, and so was Bloss.

"A fine looking man, Miss Fulsom. There is one point upon which the most identical of twins frequently differ. Do both these brothers have good teeth?"

"Yes, sir. They've often spoken of it," she replied. "Neither of them has an unsound tooth in his head, and they're both quite proud of the fact."

"Pardonably so. And now, what's your business with us?"

"I'm afraid," she said simply. "A week ago today, Richard received a letter. He showed it to me that same evening; he's a

frank and open man. It was from somebody he had known back East, threatening to expose his past unless Richard sent him a thousand dollars. He tossed the letter into the fire and told me about the thing; during prohibition days he had served a short prison sentence for running liquor. That was all."

"Nothing to be ashamed of," said Bloss. "Who wrote the letter?"

"I didn't notice. I wanted him to take it up with the sheriff's office or the postal inspectors, but he said no. Then, this afternoon, I took some eggs over to their house, and Frank opened the door to me, and there was blood on his face. He was all upset. He said a man had shown up suddenly, had taken him for Richard, and had assaulted him. He said that Richard had driven to Los Angeles for the day. This was just after lunch. I had to come to town for the mail, and I thought I'd drop in and——"

"One moment!" interrupted Bloss. "Who was this assailant? What was his name?"

"Frank didn't say," she rejoined. "I don't think he knew him at all. I wanted to phone here about it but he refused to hear of such a thing. Well, I came anyhow," she added, and stared at Bloss in a sudden burst of agitation. "You've got to do something! I'm afraid Richard is in danger. . . . I think it's all terrible. . . . I want him protected!"

"Naturally," said Bill Bloss. "Hm! A threatening letter, attempted blackmail; now a man appears and commits murderous assault. I suppose Atkinson drove him off?"

"Kicked him off the place, he said."

"Good. Let's see; Frank is there, Richard is away in Los Angeles. The man assaults Frank, thinking him to be Richard. All very logical. But, Miss Fulsom, what can we do, unless Frank swears out a warrant for this unknown man?"

"You're police," she said. "You can do something. I think there's something queer

going on, and I'm frightened about it. I want you to send somebody up to talk with me and Richard tonight, when he gets back. Strange men have no business coming around and hitting people; I want it stopped."

"And you're afraid it may go farther than mere hitting," said Bloss.

She broke down at this; the poor woman was indeed afraid. Bill Bloss comforted her and did a masterly job of cheering her up. He promised that one of us would drive up after supper; it was only twelve miles to Las Quintas. He got the exact location of her place and the Atkinson house, and saw her out into her car, rain or no rain, with his old-fashioned courtesy. She drove off, and he came back in, beaming.

"Mr. Harper, what d'you think of it?"

"A lot of baloney about nothing," I said. "This dame has got a man at last, and she's scared she'll lose him. Rum-runners, eh? Probably Atkinson high-jacked someone back in the good old days, and the guy's on his trail."

Bloss fingered his lean, sharp chin, his eyes reflective.

"I doubt it," he said. "This is interesting. Look after the place, will you? I'll run over home and get Arnheim's monograph on identical twins. We may have something here."

He dashed out, came back in ten minutes with the book, which was printed in German, and stuck his nose into it for the rest of the afternoon.

Crandall, who usually ate supper here with us before changing shifts, came in around dark; the rain had stopped, the stars were out, there was nothing on the teletype, and when we reported the visit, he cursed a blue streak.

"I know Miss Fulsom," he said. "She's a fussbudget. This is all a pack of nonsense."

"None the less, one of us must drive up there," said Bloss firmly. "Our business is to prevent crime as well as——"

"Blast it, our business is to stick here and not go flying around on wild goose chases!" exclaimed Crandall hotly. Just then the phone rang, and he grabbed for it.

"Yeah? Sheriff's substation speaking—what?" His voice leaped. "Oh, all right. Be with you in no time, Doc."

He slammed down the phone and turned to us.

"I'll be damned!" he ejaculated. "That was Doc Gray up at Las Quintas. Says one of the Atkinsons has been murdered."

It hit us like a thunderbolt. This was no moonshine, but cold, hard fact. Crandall cursed a blue streak. A murder at Las Quintas meant headlines in the papers, no end of publicity, and unpleasant comments from Headquarters unless the case were closed quickly. And, from what Miss Fulsom had told us, it looked like some sort of gang killing that would be a long time getting settled.

"If you go up there," said Bill Bloss excitedly, "you'll bungle things, Crandall. Forgive me the sentiment, but I fear there's more to this than appears—"

"Oh, you do!" Crandall turned purple, and then cut loose. "You condemned this—and that amateur Sherlock! Bungle it, will I? You have the gall to sit there and shoot off your blasted mouth! All right, all right, you take charge! You take the case!"

Bloss brightened. "Gladly, Mr. Crandall, gladly!"

"And take full responsibility as well." Crandall's fist cracked down on the desk. "Hear that? Full responsibility! By God, I'm sick of your sour puss around this office anyhow, you college professor crime expert!"

"Take the case, and when you come back here with a bee under your hat, turn in your resignation to Headquarters."

"Agreed," said Bloss, looking white and dignified. "Agreed. And if I get the murderer I'll take him direct to Headquarters, not here, and assume full credit."

"You be damned!" said Crandall. "Clear out! Harper, take our amateur friend up

there in the prowler car and be a witness to this agreement."

Five minutes later we were on our way, and Bill Bloss was sad about it.

"I lost my temper," he said mournfully. "So did Crandall. Well, I've never had much good luck, so perhaps it'll turn this time. Why, this may be the whole turning point! Let us hope so."

I was not very hopeful about it, and I was right.

WE MADE a quick run up to Las Quintas. Miss Fulsom lived down the street from the Atkinson place; we came to her house first, and Bloss had me stop, for the front door was wide open and framed in the light was a man's figure, talking to the lady herself. Bloss climbed out, and Miss Fulsom cried out in recognition as the light struck him.

"Here's the deputy now! The one I was talking with, Richard."

I followed Bloss. She introduced us to Richard Atkinson, who gave us a hearty handshake.

"Glad to see you, officers," he said cordially. "Come along, we'll go back to my place. I just ran down to reassure Miss Fulsom that all's well. Good night, Emily!"

Bloss nudged me and I kept quiet. The door closed, and Atkinson turned to us.

"She doesn't know about it yet, gentlemen; I feared the shock. Tomorrow will be time enough. I'm deeply grateful for your coming. Dr. Gray phoned you, I believe?"

"Yes," said Bloss. "Let's have the facts. Drive along with us."

We climbed into the car. It was only a couple of blocks to the Atkinson house.

"I got back from Los Angeles half an hour ago," said Richard Atkinson. "When I walked into the house, my poor brother lay dead in the study. I called Gray at once. Obviously the scoundrel who was here today had returned and killed Frank most brutally. It's been a pretty bad shock,

I admit. If I can tell you anything——"

"Miss Fulsom gave us some information," said Bloss. "Here's your house, I think. We'll discuss the matter later. Don't forget your camera, Mr. Harper."

Mr. Harper, which was me, had all his stuff in readiness.

"To bad you don't know who the killer was," I said, as he approached the door.

"But I do!" exclaimed Atkinson. "It's a man named Bentley, Solomon Bentley; I was associated with him years ago in the days of prohibition. I had a threatening letter from him only last week!"

Things began to look hopeful, all of a sudden.

We walked into the parlor, or rather study, for it was a large room lined with books and shelves of mineralogical specimens. In the chair before the writing desk was the body of Frank Atkinson. His skull had been crushed by a ragged fragment of gold-bearing quartz taken from a nearby shelf.

While I went to work at photos and measurements, Dr. Gray came in. He was a quiet, efficient man, and pointed out various details to Bloss. The victim, sitting with his back to the door, must have been hit from behind before he knew it. He had been smoking a cigar, which had fallen from his hand to the floor. Gray set the time of death as approximately three o'clock in the afternoon. The victim's face bore a scratch and a bruise, the result of the encounter with his visitor.

WHILE I was dusting everything for fingerprints—we got none, incidentally—Bloss went to the phone and called the Fulsom house. From Miss Fulsom he learned that her talk with Frank Atkinson about the assault had occurred slightly past two o'clock; he rang off and turned to us.

"Seems quite clear, eh? This woman who takes care of the house——"

"Mrs. Triggs," said Gray. "She's in the kitchen now."

"Suppose we join her. Notice, Mr.

Harper, that the unfortunate man was struck twice by that lump of rock, on the left side of his head. Therefore, the murderer must have been left-handed; the point may be important. He was in that position when you found him, Mr. Atkinson?"

Richard Atkinson, who was neatly attired in gray, assented.

"Yes. It was slightly past six when I got home. I came in, turned on the lights, saw him there, touched him and realized that he was dead—and phoned Dr. Gray. I disturbed nothing."

We went into the kitchen. Mrs. Triggs was an elderly woman, pretty white around the gills just now, but she warmed up when Bloss took her in hand with his genial, kindly manner. She had come in the morning as usual; Mr. Richard, as she called him, had driven off to Los Angeles right after breakfast.

After lunch she had gone home for the afternoon, as was her habit, and she had returned about five. Thus, she had been gone at the time of the visitor and the assault. When she came in, she had been busied in the kitchen, never dreaming that Frank Atkinson sat dead in the house, until Richard returned.

Bloss nodded and produced cigarettes, and fished vainly for a match. He turned to Richard Atkinson, who struck one for him. With the left hand, I noticed. The dead man had been right handed, and Richard was left-handed.

"Suppose we return to the other room," said Bloss. "Were you in Los Angeles all the day, Mr. Atkinson?"

"Yes," said the latter. "I was hunting for a work on mineralogy in the old book stores. I was tempted to return earlier—God forgive me! If I had only done so!"

"I doubt whether it would have affected matters," said Bloss, rather drily. "Pray don't distress yourself. By the way, didn't Miss Fulsom tell us that you were in the tobacco business?"

Atkinson shook his head, as we came back into the study.



"That was my poor brother. He was in the business for years, but had retired."

"My mistake," murmured Bloss. He stooped and picked up the fallen cigar-stub and sniffed it. "Rather surprising, then, that he would be smoking the cheapest sort of a cigar, eh?"

"He was always one for strong cigars," said Atkinson sadly. "If you don't mind, I'll run upstairs and wash. Haven't had a chance since getting home."

"Oh, by all means!" said Bloss, and Atkinson departed. Dr. Gray, who was interested in the whole affair, remained. I gave Bloss a look.

"Hadn't I better go out to the car, get Headquarters on the radio, and get things started on this Solomon Bentley guy? He probably has a record, and the Highway Patrol ought to be notified."

Bill Bloss gave me a whimsical, amused smile.

"Save your time, Mr. Harper, save your time! I doubt whether the man has any record, and for the best of reasons."

"What, then?" I demanded.

"Because no such person exists."

For an instant I thought Bill had lost his mind. Then, as I stared at him, a horrible suggestion came to me. I did not stop to reason it out, but voiced it, foolish as it was.

"Good lord, Bill! This Atkinson is left-handed—do you mean to say that he killed his own brother, and this story of Bentley is all an invention?"

Bloss and the doctor stared at me, then Bill's lips twitched.

"I assure you, Mr. Harper," he said, "that Richard Atkinson did not murder his brother. Didn't you hear Miss Fulsom say he was the very soul of kindness? However, you've given me an idea; rather, you've confirmed my own struggling notion."

He glanced at the leather-cased handcuffs at my belt. "May I suggest that you get out those bracelets and keep them handy? I think we'll need them."

"What?" exclaimed Dr. Gray. "Do you think the murderer is hanging around here?"

"I do," said Bloss gravely. "And I'd be thankful if you, Dr. Gray, would remain for a little while. I believe the murderer to be a paranoiac, subject to the most frightful fits of homicidal rage. Hm, I can confirm my whole theory in five seconds!"

He went to the dead man, bent over him, examined the drooping head, and straightened up with a nod.

**E**VEN when I saw his beaming face and the exultant light in his eyes, I still suspected that he was off his base; I should have known better. However, I got out the handcuffs, opened them, and slipped them into my pocket. Just then Atkinson came back into the room. He had just lit a cigar, and produced several from his pocket, offering them to us. Bloss took one and beamed again as he held it to his nostrils.

"Ah! An admirable brand, Mr. Atkinson! So you know tobaccos as well as minerals, eh?"

"To some extent," Atkinson replied. "Now, I suppose you want a description of the murderer?"

"It is hardly necessary," said Bloss. He was no longer looking amused, but very intent. "I shall have him in a cell at the sheriff's office before another hour."

"Oh!" Atkinson eyed him sharply. "You know where to find Bentley, then?"

"No, sir," said Bloss. "But I know where to find you, Mr. Atkinson."

The words hit all of us like a bombshell. Atkinson stiffened, then broke into a laugh.

"Bless my soul! I thought for a moment you were actually accusing me!"

"I am," said Bloss steadily, in the dead silence that settled on the room. "A week ago, sir, you wrote a threatening letter to Richard Atkinson, signing it with the name of this man Bentley, whom you had possibly known in the past."

Atkinson looked bewildered. "It's true

that I got such a letter, but this—this charge—you say that I wrote it?"

"Certainly." Bloss regarded him calmly. "Perhaps such a man does exist. This afternoon when you were presumably away, when Mrs. Triggs had gone, you came back and murdered your brother. You dabbled some of his own blood on your face when Miss Fulsom dropped in, and sent her away with the story of the visitor and the assault. You then dressed in your brother's clothes, and changed him into your own garments. Your purpose was not only to obtain your brother's money, but also the woman to whom he was engaged."

"Stop, stop this infernal nonsense!" Atkinson took a backward step, staring in horror at Bill Bloss. "Officer, you're out of your senses! It was my poor brother Frank who was assaulted—it was I who received that threatening letter——"

"Very well played, Mr. Atkinson—Mr. Frank Atkinson, I should say," replied Bloss.

"You schooled yourself to be left-handed, as Richard was, even in the crime that you committed here, even in such tiny details as striking a match for me. When you talked with Miss Fulsom and later saw her drive off for San Dimas, you left the house and in the driving rain no one observed your departure. You went back to your car, having left it nearby."

"Why, this is the most absurd balderdash I ever heard!" broke out Atkinson, his face purpling with anger.

"No, your garments, which you have just now changed, were wrinkled and had dried on you," said Bloss, and shook his head. "I'm afraid it won't work, Mr. Atkinson. Your preparations were carefully made. You can fool almost anyone into believing that you really are Richard Atkinson——"

"I can show complete proof of my identity!" stormed Atkinson in mounting anger.

"Of course I can—why, its fantastic! This left-handed business—of course I'm

left-handed! I always have been left-handed!"

Bloss gave me a glance, and I woke from my stupefaction to stand ready.

"Richard was, yes," said Bloss.

With a tremendous effort, Atkinson got himself under control.

"Now see here," he said, more calmly, "this whole charge is frightfully fantastic, officer; it's a terrible thing! Of course, I know you're only trying to do your duty, and I mustn't fly off the handle. Have you really any intention of arresting me as the murderer of my brother Frank?"

"No," said Bloss. "But I'm arresting you, Frank Atkinson, for the murder of your brother Richard!"

"Can't you see how absurd it is?" exclaimed Atkinson.

IT WAS, for a fact. It seemed to me that Bill Bloss had put his foot into it this time, and Gray's face showed that he shared my misgivings. Bloss had evolved a theory that might seem plausible enough; it was certainly ingenious; all that it needed was proof to back it up.

Of this, there was not a shred, as I could see clearly enough. Bill was sunk. If he had counted on getting a confession out of Atkinson, he had failed completely. There was no earthly way to prove that the dead man was actually Richard, as Bill claimed. There was no way to prove that the man before us was not Richard, as he himself claimed to be. Everything went to show that he really was Richard. I did not doubt that Miss Fulsom herself would swear he was Richard.

"May I suggest, officer," said Atkinson, with a rather forced smile, "that this charge be put up to your superiors? I suppose you're perfectly honest in your wild theory. Well, then, let's go to the sheriff's office; I shall gladly accompany you."

Bloss nodded.

"Right," he said. "You shall go with us, but you'll go as Frank Atkinson,

charged with the murder of your brother Richard."

Atkinson was exasperated.

"Why in heaven's name do you persist in saying that I'm Frank, when poor Frank lies there dead?" he cried. "Why, Miss Fulsom will tell you that I'm Richard!"

"Undoubtedly," said Bill Bloss, giving me another warning glance. "As Arnheim has shown conclusively in his monograph on the subject, certain natural laws govern even the most identical of twins. For example, in every case one is right-handed, and one is left-handed."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Atkinson impatiently.

"Perhaps you did not know that the spiral of the hair at the back of the head is a perfect indication of the 'handedness,' as it's termed, of any human being," went on Bill Bloss. "With left-handed people, that spiral turns counter-clockwise. Arnheim has shown this to be a natural law past dispute. While that wretched cigar belonging to the dead man first suggested

that he must be Richard, the spiral of his hair proved it beyond doubt, as the spiral of your own hair will afford scientific evidence——"

Atkinson had listened with a grayish pallor overspreading his features; suddenly they became those of a maniac, and he flung himself straight at Bloss.

That was my cue; but he fought us with demoniac fury and it took all three of us to get the bracelets on him, and then to get him locked in the belt of the car. As I drove to Headquarters, Bill Bloss made only one comment.

"I knew the luck would turn," he said to me. "The biggest stroke of luck a man ever had, too! It was sheer luck, Mr. Harper, that I happened to recall Arnheim's statement about the spiral of the hair——"

It was not luck that he is Chief of Police in Harmon City today, though. And it's not luck that Crandall still holds down the substation at San Dimas. And me with him.



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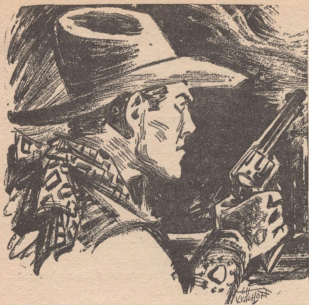
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..... And the Steer  
Had a Brand Which  
Showed Roughly a  
Cowboy in Skirts!

# THE WRONG SIDE OF THE FENCE

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

*Author of "Watchdog of Lonesome Creek," etc.*

"**H**ERE they come now!" Dutch Schuster called out from the middle of the road.

The Ox Bow men lounging on the steps of the old Lamar House moved to the edge of the plank sidewalk and gazed at the dust-cloud racing down the shoulder of Signal Mountain, a mile away. "It's them, all right," soft-spoken Frank Oatwine said. In this Nevada country only old Chad Harvey drove a team so fast and with such utter disregard for the dangers of that mountain road.

A flutter of excitement ran through the crowd waiting on the porch. At least a score of Lamar's first citizens had gathered at the hotel this morning. Jinny Belle Clayton, whose father owned the bank, and half a dozen town girls were there, gay, excited.

Mr. Clayton himself was present, as were several other business men whose financial security depended in no little degree on Chad Harvey.

"I guess everyone is glad that Cape is marryin' Lana," Dutch said. He couldn't find a person in the crowd to disagree with him.

Cape Isbell was a town boy who had left school at sixteen and gone to work for Ox Bow. At eighteen he was straw-bossing the winter range. For two years past he had been Chad Harvey's foreman. And now he was marrying Lana Harvey. Some day, when old Chad passed on, Cape would be boss of the big outfit.

It was a success story that all could appreciate; and no one envied Cape his good fortune. The cheer the Ox Bow men raised as Chad brought his team of high-stepping



bays to a stop in front of the hotel was proof enough of how they felt about it.

Cape, tall and straight and proud, sat in the back seat of the buckboard with Lana. The girls surrounded them, and he was visibly embarrassed. Lana brushed a streak of dust from the wide shoulders of the new suit he was wearing and glowed with happiness. Mr. Clayton and the other men pumped hands with old Chad.

Cape lifted Lana down then. Chad followed, and Oddie Parr, an old Ox Bow man, drove the team around to the barn. Henry Sandusky, the proprietor of the hotel, met his guests as they stepped on the porch and beamed his pleasure. "Everything is ready, Miss Harvey," he told Lana.

Plans for the wedding had long been made. The arrangement called for a brief rehearsal now. At noon, they would be married. Dinner would follow, and then Cape and Lana would take No. 19 to California for their honeymoon.

Lana found the upstairs parlor decorated with flowers and palms that had been brought up from San Francisco. It was beautiful, she said. She thanked Henry Sandusky, and she was very pretty in her excitement.

The rehearsal did not take long. Chad came down before the others. Dutch Schuster hurried in and took him aside at once. Dutch's face was sober and tight. Chad listened to what he had to say, and his own face was suddenly tense. "All right, Dutch," he said. "I'll tell him when he comes down."

CAPE joined him a few moments later, sensing at a glance that something was amiss. "What is it?" he asked in his quiet way.

"Cape—Ben Tapper is in town." His tone was proof enough of the importance of his news. "He's in the Index, drinkin' with Caracas and the rest of that bunch of coyotes he travels with. He's askin' for a showdown. That's the only reason he's here." Chad shook his head soberly. "I

don't know how to advise you. You certainly can't afford to keep out of his way and give the skunk the right to say he put the crawl on you."

Isbell's lips thinned briefly. "I wouldn't mind if it was any day but this. That's what he's counting on." He didn't have to make up his mind about what he must do. "Just don't let Lana know anything about it until it's all over—"

"Not lettin' her know won't help any if that blackleg cuts you down." Anger flowed into old Chad's voice. "You haven't made many mistakes since I've known you, Cape, but you sure made one this spring when you had Tapper dead to rights out in the Burnt Hills. You should have killed him then, just as you'd kill any mad dog, instead of tryin' to warn him out of the country."

Something touched Isbell's face and left it flat and bleak. "You keep an eye on Lana," he said. "I'll take care of this in my own way."

He stepped out of the hotel. Dutch was waiting on the steps. "Cape—" he said, unbuckling his gun-belt and handing it to him.

Cape strapped it on and drew the gun four or five times to get the feel of the holster pull. He started down the street then, and the Ox Bow men fell in behind him.

A shadow seemed to drop across Lamar, and the air was suddenly charged and tense. A whisper or two and everyone seemed to know what impended. Within five minutes the street was deserted.

Chad Harvey took up a position just inside the hotel door, his round face suddenly haggard and desperate-looking as he kept one ear trained on the parlor above, where Jinny Belle and the girls were re-arranging things at Lana's direction, and the other cocked to catch a quick flurry of shooting down the street.

He had been standing there only a minute or two when Miss Abby Harvey, his spinster sister, swept into the office, a tall, thin picture of fury. Well-to-do in her own

right, Miss Abby had lived in town for years, and Lamar had often felt the sharp edge of her tongue.

"Where is Lana?" she demanded so explosively that Chad's head went back.

"Why — why in the parlor with the girls," he stammered. Miss Abby scorched him with a glance.

"A fine father you are!" she whipped out. "You get yourself down to that saloon this minute and put a stop to this shooting!" Without breaking step, she sailed up the stairs.

Chad appealed to Henry Sandusky. "Henry, I can't go down there. Cape would never forgive me if I stepped into that saloon now. This is his quarrel—"

Henry agreed with him. "You're right, Mr. Harvey, you can't interfere. Here, come into my office. We'll close the door."

Lana hurried down the stairs a moment later. Her face was white, but there was purpose and determination in the set of her chin. She looked about the deserted office. A coiled twelve-foot stock whip hung on a nail behind the desk. She took quick possession of it and hastened out of the hotel.

In the Index, Isbell and the Ox Bow men stood at the end of the bar nearest the door; Ben Tapper and his cronies were lined up at the far end. Others were present, but they had moved back, and they stayed where they stood, glued in their tracks. Something was happening here that seemed to drug the senses and make even the slightest movement an effort. It needed only a slurring word to explode the tension that gripped this room.

It came quickly. Whiskey brave, his lean, rocky face wolfish in its intentness, Tapper said, "I'd like to buy a drink for the bridegroom." There was a terrible awareness in his vacant, empty eyes that weighed every swirling current of feeling here. "See what he'll have, Gus," he told the bartender.

Isbell pushed away his empty glass with his left hand; his right hung free at his

side. The Ox Bow men moved back a step to give him room. Without raising his voice, he said, "I don't drink with polecats."

In the moment that he and Tapper faced each other, hands on their guns, the swinging doors of the Index were flung back. Lana stood there, flame in her eyes.

She took in the situation at a glance. With the stock whip trailing behind her on the floor, she marched up to the bar between Cape and Tapper. The pin-drop silence had suddenly become suffocating, for in that day women—good women—did not enter saloons.

"Lana, you shouldn't have done this," Cape said tightly. "You don't know what you're doing."

"Humph!" she retorted. It was a pure echo of her father. "I know exactly what I'm doing. There's a dozen men here who would have been glad to take this fight off your hands; but your pride wouldn't permit it. I happen to love you, and I don't propose to have a worthless, miserable, two-bit rustler interfere with my wedding!"

This was a Lana Harvey that Cape had never known. Speechless, he could only stare at her.

The others did the same, standing so stiff and motionless they might have been soiled statues of men.

"Get back from that bar, Ben Tapper!" Lana cried. It might have been old Chad barking an order.

Tapper did not move. Transfixed, he stared at her as she brought her arm over her shoulder and the heavy whip slashed out at him. She not only had strength in her young body, but she knew how to use a stock whip.

Straight out the plaited rawhide streaked. A twist of her wrist at the right moment and the popper snapped with a rifle-like report. The wicked backlash caught Ben across the face and laid his cheek open.

Tapper did not know what to do. Nothing in the course of his misspent life had even remotely prepared him for such a sit-

uation as this. It was equally true of the others.

The whip flashed out again, and Tapper covered his face with his hands. A piece was lifted out of his shirt. Time after time Lana struck. Finally she stood there, a cold fury shaking her.

"Now get out!" she ordered. "Get out of town and don't ever show your face in Lamar again!"

Tapper bolted for the door, an arm raised protectively. Lana followed him to his horse, and she raked him again as he disappeared in a cloud of dust. Weak, her knees shaking, she turned to find Cape standing beside her, his face stony. His arm went around her as she swayed.

"Lean against me," he said. "I'll get you back to the hotel." His tone was stern.

She went along willingly, but his displeasure with her cut through her pride and suddenly she was not leaning against him.

"You're furious with me, aren't you?" she said. "I suppose you feel that I shamed you."

"A man ought to have the right to settle his own quarrels," he answered, holding himself in.

"I'd do it all over if I had to," Lana exclaimed, her chin up defiantly. "Your life means more to me than what people will say. Those men in the Index didn't seem to mind. They didn't rush out—"

"Tapper's friends left by the back door," Cape informed her. "The others realized that this is my affair." Something touched his face and left it hard and flinty. "I'll have to settle it now."

Lana stared at him aghast. "Cape—do you mean you are going after Ben Tapper? That you won't let this matter drop?" The blood had left her cheeks and the long curve of her lips had become a straight, resolute line.

"I can't hide behind your skirts." There was something stony and immovable about the way he said it. "Tapper won't run far. He'll figure I'm yellow or I wouldn't have

let this happen. The crowd he runs with will think the same."

"And you've got to prove him wrong." Lana's tone was bitter and scornful. "You've got to go gunning for him. It's got to be one or the other of you, I suppose."

Cape nodded soberly. "That's about the way of it." He saw Chad and Miss Abby waiting for them at the hotel door. That news of what had happened had run ahead of them was instantly clear.

"I'm glad to see that someone in this



family has a little spunk," Miss Abby exclaimed acidly.

"Too bad there ain't more of us got a little common sense," old Chad retorted. "A woman ought to know her place—and she ought to know there's some things that only guns can settle." He gave Lana a closer look, and, despite his anger, his concern for her was apparent. "You all right? If you are, you better let Abby take you upstairs."

"Don't let him frighten you, Lana," Miss Abby said tartly. She gave Chad and Isbell a withering glance. "You men are all alike. Some white-livered skunk gets in your way and nothing will do you but you must kill him or be killed."

"That'll do me until someone comes along with a better way of settlin' things," Chad growled.

"I won't have it in my life," Lana said with all the firmness of which she was capable. "I know how it was with mother every time trouble flared up on the range—waiting at home, worrying, afraid to

look up when she heard horses entering the yard lest she see your bullet-riddled body draped over a saddle. Cape, I think we better settle this right here. I thought I meant more to you than anything in the world—"

"You do," was the earnest avowal. Isbell's eyes had a harried look. "I—I didn't think there was any question—"

"But I see that I was wrong," Lana continued. "Your foolish, stiff-necked pride means more to you. Cape, are you determined to go after Ben Tapper?"

Isbell stared at the floor as he hesitated, fully aware of what his decision meant. Then his eyes came back to hers. "I—I can't let things go as they are," he murmured apologetically.

"Of course you can't!" Chad burst out. "The idea of makin' an issue out of this! There ain't no argument about whether he loves you, Lana. He's got his self-respect to think of, too. If he don't settle this, men are goin' to question him—Tapper is goin' to brag that he made him crawl—and he won't be able to live with himself. There's rules to this business of bein' a man, and you can't ask Cape to break 'em!"

"Rules, my foot!" Miss Abby exclaimed contemptuously. "You're no better than savages. You wouldn't give an inch, not one of you. Doesn't Lana's happiness mean anything to you, Chad Harvey?"

"It means so much that I don't want to see her try to make this boy over into somethin' she'll be ashamed of!"

LANA wasn't listening. She had reached a decision, and it was irrevocable. Her young face tense and strained, she stood there giving Cape an unwavering regard. "You're quite sure about this, Cape?" she murmured. "You won't change your mind?"

He shook his head, his throat tight with emotion. "I can't," he said grimly. "If you'd only try to understand, Lana—"

"I understand perfectly—and I think you do, too."

Isbell held his breath as he saw her slip her engagement ring from her finger and hold it out to him. Frightened, his face white under its tan, he reached out a clumsy hand and took the ring.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, his voice hoarse and strange. "I didn't seek this trouble with Tapper. I'm awfully sorry, Lana. I know how embarrassing all this is going to be to you." He shook his head regretfully, utterly miserable. "Just blame it all on me. I—I guess there's nothing else I can say." He turned to old Chad, who was ready to explode. "I'll ask Dutch to fetch my things in from the ranch."

"Why—why, you ain't quittin'?" Chad sputtered. "This misunderstandin' ain't final. Women change their minds. Besides, it ain't got nothin' to do with your job."

"It will be better this way," Cape said, his blue eyes as bleak as a November sky. His back straight and stiff, he walked out of the hotel and back to the Index.

Half a dozen Ox Bow men were still there.

They looked up as he entered, and he read the question in their eyes.

"I might as well tell you," he said. "The wedding is off. I wish you'd gather up my gear and bring it to town, Dutch. You can leave it over at Charlie's stable. I'll want my bay gelding too."

They were stunned for a moment. Dutch most of all.

"We'll go after Tapper together, Cape," Frank Oatwine offered. "We'll ride that rat into his hole and make it final."

Isbell shook his head. "I'll have to handle this myself. I want to get out of town now as quickly as I can. That's the decent thing to do. I'll go out to my cousin's place for the night. Tapper will know I'm looking for him soon enough."

"I'll have your stuff in tomorrow," Dutch told him. "I don't want to tell you what to do, Cape, but just remember it ain't only Tapper you're goin' up against. Caracas and the rest of 'em will be layin'



out for you the minute they hear you've cut loose from Ox Bow."

"They're kiddin' themselves if they think that just because you cut adrift from Ox Bow you ain't got all the backin' you need," little Johnnie Drumm declared emphatically. "Half a nod from you, Cape, and we'll come runnin'."

The others chorused their approval. Dutch glared at them as though he felt he was being left out. "All I was sayin'," he protested, "was look out for a slug in the back. You keep one eye behind you when you ride, Cape."

Isbell recalled the warning more than once as he rode the Burnt Hills and pressed on to Genoa and Wagon Mound. They weren't towns—just wide places in the road with a store or two and a saloon. He got no word of Tapper and his followers.

Moving on, he swung far north to Shoshone Crossing, and the south by way of the ranches along the Vermillion. "Ben Tapper? Caracas? No, ain't seen 'em in weeks."

It was the invariable answer. Ten days later Cape was back in Lamar. He was convinced that the man he sought had pulled out of the country for good.

Dutch Schuster, Oatwine, little Johnnie and Cash Buckingham tramped into the Index as Cape stood at the bar. Buckingham carried a bundle under his arms. It was a freshly-pulled cowhide.

"Glad we found you here," said Johnnie. "Step into the back room with us."

Isbell ran an anxious eye over them. "What's up?" he asked.

"We got news for you," Dutch told him. "Cash found one of your yearlin's in the yard this mornin'."

"Ox Bow?" Cape questioned. Chad had permitted him to run a few steers on his own account, but they ranged miles away from the house.

"Planted there," Dutch said. "A bony, flea-bitten critter that must have been livin' on catclaw and soapweed."

Buckingham spread the hide on the

table. "What do you think of that?" he growled.

With a running iron someone had burned a crude picture of a cowboy in skirts on the steer's side. To their surprise, Cape started to grin.

"Good grief, can you take an insult like that laughin'?" little Johnnie Drumm demanded fiercely.

"I was beginning to think that Tapper had left the country," Cape said.

"You don't think so now, do you?" Johnnie asked.

Cape shook his head. "No. Did Lana see this?"

"No," Dutch answered him. "Cash and me took the critter down the draw. We had it killed and the hide pulled before even the old man got wind of anythin'. He was so daggone mad he had the bunch of us out for the rest of the mornin' tryin' to pick up a trail. We didn't have no luck, of course. He told me to tell you that he's ready to stop the work and turn every man out till we run Tapper down, if you'll say the word."

Cape said no. "You tell him I'm obliged to him, but I'll have to play this my own way. If Tapper's getting this bold, he'll be showing his face soon. Take this hide back with you and destroy it."

As they stood at the bar Bill Whipple, a Cross Triangle puncher came in. They were well acquainted with him.

"If you're still lookin' fer Ben Tapper, I can tell yuh where to find him," Whipple declared. "He's swellin' around Shoshone Crossin' as big as life."

"He wasn't there last week," Cape said. "Where did you get that story, Bill?"

"I stayed at the toll house last night, on the way in. Ma Griner told me a man had stopped there for dinner who said he'd jest come down from the Crossin', and that Tapper was there. She had the whole story."

"And what she didn't hear, she made up, I reckon," little Johnnie volunteered. "She's a gabby old hen with a loose lip if

there ever was one. Who was this gent?"

"A stranger," Whipple answered. "Ma didn't git his name."

"Hunh!" Johnnie snorted. "He musta had somethin' on his mind if Ma wasn't able to get his name outa him." He turned to Isbell. "Do you think there's anythin' to this, Cape?"

"It's worth looking into," Isbell answered. "Tapper used to do a lot of his drinking in Frenchy Sharbot's place at the Crossing."

"But the steer—" Johnnie pointed out.

"He could have had that done for him," Dutch said gruffly. He gave Johnnie a reproving glance for mentioning the incident even vaguely in front of Whipple. "If you boys are ready, let's head for the ranch."

A look passed between them, and they started for the door. As a rule Dutch was the last man among them to be concerned about getting back to Ox Bow; but Cape was too absorbed with his own problem to give it a thought. He walked to the horse-rack with them. At the last moment Dutch turned back for a word with him alone.

"That Clayton girl is visitin' at the ranch," he said. "Lana pretends to be awful gay, but she don't fool me. She's takin' this purty hard, Cape. There ain't any word you'd like to send her?"

"No," Isbell murmured soberly. "It's all over—I have to get used to it, Dutch. Thanks, anyhow."

ISBELL rode into Shoshone Crossing late the next afternoon and left his horse in front of Tim Brady's blacksmith shop. The three or four buildings sat out on a wide flat beside the shallow river, making it impossible to arrive without being seen. Alert, his stride stiff-legged and measured, he started for Frenchy Sharbot's saloon, the distance of a half a block away. With every step he expected the blaze of guns. He had asked for this showdown. He had wanted it in the open—face to face. He

hadn't foreseen it shaping up this way, with the advantage all on Topper's side. He knew Ben wouldn't take a chance if he could cut him down from a window or the corner of a building.

Two men lounged in front of Gabe Paul's general store. They called a greeting. Cape acknowledged it without taking his eyes off Sharbot's door. The hundred yards became fifty, and the lazy silence of the hot afternoon remained unbroken.

"I don't get it," Isbell thought, the finely-drawn look on his face sharper than ever. It wasn't only his failure to draw a shot that had him puzzled. He couldn't understand the lounging men, the frankness of their regard or the absence of that intangible something in the air that seemed to ride with trouble.

Another minute brought him to the saloon door. As he mounted the steps, he saw four men ride out of the willow brakes along the river and race toward him. His hand dropped to his gun, certain that this was Tapper and his friends.

He knew he stood no chance caught there flat-footed. Bent on leaping through the door, he was in the act of reaching for the knob when a cry stopped him. He whirled to see Dutch, Johnnie, Oatwine and Cash Buckingham fling themselves out of their saddles.

"Don't look so damned surprised," Dutch growled. "Did you think we were goin' to let you walk into this set-up alone? Go on in. We'll be right behind you."

Rubbing shoulders they pushed through the door, and their surprise was pathetic as they stood there scowling at Sharbot and his lone customer, a Mexican herder. Frenchy looked up with startled eyes.

"Where's Tapper?" Cape asked.

"Tapper ain't here," Frenchy said. "I told you last week I hadn't seen him."

"Upstairs, perhaps," Johnnie rasped.

"No!" Sharbot exclaimed. "You fellas are crazy—"

Johnnie and Oatwine clumped up to the

rooms above without further argument. They were back presently.

"Empty," Johnnie announced.

Dutch walked up to the bar and fastened his eyes on Sharbot. "Frenchy," he said, "I wouldn't trust you no further than I can



sling a mule. Now you tell me—and if you lie I'll come back to the Crossin' and carve my initials all the way through you—how long ago did Tapper and his bunch pull away?"

Sharbot threw up his hands hopelessly. "I tell you I ain't seen him! He ain't been around!"

"Come on," Cape said, "let's get out of here. I'll speak to Tim. If he says Tapper hasn't been here, we can believe it."

The blacksmith confirmed what Frenchy had told them.

"That takes the cake!" Dutch stormed. "What was the idea of that story Ma told Bill Whipple anyhow?"

"I think I can tell you," Cape said. "This whole thing was framed. Tapper knew that any story Ma Griner got hold of would get around in a hurry."

"You mean he rigged this just to make you ridiculous?" Johnnie asked.

Only soft-spoken Frank Oatwine immediately understood what Cape meant. "This wasn't done for a laugh," he said. "Tapper wanted Cape up here so he'd be out of the way for a day or two. He knew we'd tag along. That was the game—to draw as many of us as he could away from the ranch."

"You're right, Frank!" Isbell's tone was sharp and angry. "We fell for it like a

lot of kids, and when we get back we'll find there's been hell to pay. If the brand has had a bunch of steers run off, it's my fault. Chad Harvey can thank me for it."

"That's takin' a lot of blame on yourself," little Johnnie objected. "You didn't know that—"

"Get your horse," Cape cut him off. "We can be back in the Burnt Hills by daylight if we keep moving."

Ten hours of hard riding, without anything to eat, did not improve their tempers, and they moved through the pre-dawn chill with only an occasional grumbled word. Isbell's mood was savage. If Tapper had struck at Ox Bow he would drive west through these hills. But it was a case of looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, and Cape knew it.

"It's gettin' light," Dutch called to him. "We stayin' up on this ridge?"

"We couldn't do better," Cape answered. "We can see a lot of country from up here. When we get to White Pine Canyon we'll follow the east rim."

White Pine Canyon was a lonely but convenient back door route to Oregon. Rustlers and other blackleg gentry had made use of it for years. That Tapper would try to get across the line was only a surmise on Isbell's part. He couldn't even be sure that Ox Bow had been raided. The hunch was strong enough, however, to leave little room for doubt in his mind.

The sun had burned up the early morning mist by the time they reached the rim. Gazing below, they scanned the long stretch of the curving, twisting canyon visible below. Down there nothing moved. Tall pines and aspens raised their heads to the sky. Between the trees they could see little sage-brush flats and White Pine Creek, sparkling in the morning sunlight as it swung from wall to wall on its zig-zag course.

"If they cut out a bunch of our stuff last night and headed this way, they wouldn't be here yet," Cash Buckingham said. "It's a long way to Ox Bow."

"All the better if we are here ahead of them," Cape replied, sniffing the air for a tell-tale hint of dust. "I don't get anything. But there's moisture enough in the air down there to keep the dust down."

They turned south, following the rim and scrutinizing the canyon at every turning. After an hour and a half of fruitless reconnoitering Isbell called a halt.

"I don't know whether we sized this up all wrong or not," he said, "but we sure seem to be wasting our time here. If we don't spot something in the next few minutes we better cut across country to the Diamond And A Half and see if they've heard anything."

He pressed his knees into his horse, but the animal had only taken a step or two when he drew up sharply, his whole attention focused on the canyon floor. Dutch and the others followed his glance and were momentarily shocked to silence as they beheld a fast-moving herd swinging around a bend. Five men were hazing the cattle along and wasting no time about it. They were putting fully a hundred head over the trail.

"It's them!" Dutch burst out. The steers were not kicking up so much dust but what he and the others could recognize the men below. "That's Tapper himself over there on the left!" Dutch started to pull his rifle out of the saddle boot.

"Keep back so they don't see us," Cape snapped. "And don't make the mistake of throwing a shot at them. We'll sit this out a few minutes."

The herd swept by below as they watched.

"Ox Bow!" Dutch growled. "I'd know that stuff with one eye shut. They been run ragged."

"Cape, what are we waitin' for?" Cash Buckingham queried. "It'd be pie to pick off those gents."

"You wouldn't get them all," Isbell answered grimly. "Look at that!" he exclaimed the next moment as Tapper and his men turned the herd hard against a nar-

row fissure in the east wall. "They're going to hole up for the day in that little side canyon! Let's move back along the rim. I want to have a good look at this."

TEN minutes back they had been forced to circle around the deep, tree-choked cross canyon into which the rustled stock was being driven. It cut back into the rim for two-thirds of a mile or more. The entrance to it was so narrow that Tapper's bunch had a time putting the steers through. Their angry, impatient cursing drifted up to the watchers.

"If they put a man on guard there," Cape murmured, "he'll be able to hold off an army."

"That's what they goin' to do," Oatwine said a minute later. "They're leavin' Joe Caracas there."

They saw Tapper exchange a few words with the man. Caracas then flattened out on a little ledge ten or twelve feet above the floor of the main canyon and thrust his rifle out ahead of him.

"We waited too long," Dutch grumbled. "How you goin' to crack this nut now? We can't pick Caracas off without warnin' the rest of 'em."

"I don't intend to pick him off," Cape said. "When we swung around the head of this canyon it seemed to me that it would be possible to put a horse into it. We'll try it."

They found the task so difficult that the morning was half gone before it was accomplished. Isbell went ahead on foot at once to scout the camp.

"They've changed guards," he reported on his return. "Tapper is taking a whirl at it now. The rest are sprawled out asleep behind a little outcropping. We'll have to leave our horses here and be mighty careful how we close in. It isn't going to be as easy as I figured."

"It'll be easy enough if we sail into 'em and start slappin' lead into their skins," little Johnnie averred with characteristic recklessness.



"It won't be as simple as that," Cape said. "We've got to get them so dead to rights before they know we're here that there won't be any shooting. Otherwise, Tapper will run at the first hint of trouble. He'd be sure to hear a shot."

"You're givin' the orders here, Cape," Frank Oatwine said. "Where's their camp?"

"About halfway down to the main canyon. There's some deep sage in here. The steers are spread out in it. Some of them are down—completely tucked out. They are all pretty spooky. We'll have to keep out of their way. If they start milling, Caracas and the rest of them will be suspicious in a minute. Spread out a little and we'll get going. And remember we've got to be mighty quiet about this. Don't take a step until you know where you are putting your foot. If anything goes wrong and they open up on us, don't hesitate; let 'em have it."

Grim, determined, they moved off through the trees and buckbrush. They could hear the steers bawling. Presently they caught their first glimpse of them. Isbell signaled with his hand and began to circle off to the left.

Ten minutes later, they saw him stop and cock his ears suspiciously. Finally he nodded that all was well and moved on again. The trees and brush thinned and before long they reached the edge of the sage-brush flat. The sage grew head high here. Bent down, they slipped through it until they were within forty yards of Tapper's men. But there they stopped, for between them and the outcropping stretched a narrow grass-covered sward that was as flat and destitute of cover as the top of a billiard table.

"Spread out more," Isbell whispered. "When I give the signal, we'll rush them."

They had barely taken up their new positions when Caracas lifted his swarthy face above the rocks and glanced about suspiciously. Their broncs had been grazing near at hand. The animals stood now with

ears raised stiffly, necks arched. It told Caracas plainer than print that something was amiss. He called a quick warning to his companions.

Isbell knew it was now or never.

"We've got you surrounded!" he called out. "You better give yourselves up!"

Caracas lowered his head in a hurry.

"Come on!" Dutch growled, off to the right. "What's it goin' to be?"

Johnnie put in his oar too. Caracas and his companions recognized their voices. There was no doubt in their minds that Ox Bow was here in force. But though the jig appeared to be very definitely up as far as they were concerned, they could not see what they had to gain by throwing away their guns. Caracas announced their decision.

"We ain't givin' ourselves up so you can stretch our necks!" he yelled. "You want us, come and git us!"

"Wait!" Cape called back. "Give up without a shot and there won't be any necktie party here! We'll turn you over to the sheriff. You've got my word for it!"

It hadn't been his intention to bother the law about this. Certainly Dutch and Johnnie had other ideas about it, too, as their growling displeasure proved.

Caracas and three men with him talked it over. They were not so dull-witted but what they could understand Isbell's game; that he was offering them their lives for Tapper's.

With the stakes that high, they didn't hesitate long about selling Ben out.

"All right, Isbell!" Caracas yelled. "We're comin' out with our hands up!"

Cape told Oatwine to gather up their guns. Dutch, Johnnie, Buckingham and he stepped out then. The prisoners could not hide their chagrin as they realized that five men, not a dozen, had trapped them.

"That all there is of yuh?" Caracas growled sullenly.

"Yeah, and more than enough," little Johnnie whipped back. "I coulda handled you skunks by myself. You're damned

lucky not to be decoratin' a tree. If I had my way—"

He checked himself as he saw Cape disappearing down the canyon. He flicked a glance at Dutch.

"We goin' to let him go alone like this?" he asked.

"Shut up," Oatwine said. "We'll wait here. That's the way Cape wants it."

Isbell was soon beyond sound of their voices. He knew that in a few minutes the issue between Tapper and himself would be decided. Win or lose, he would be done with it. For days he had fought every thought of Lana. It was different now. He saw her as she had been the day she used the whip on Tapper. She had put him on the wrong side of the fence, but there had been something magnificent about her in her white-lipped fury. Even sharper was his memory of her as she returned his ring. He realized it was a decision that bore little relation to how much or how little she cared for him. Believing she was right, she had refused to consider the cost to him or herself.

"That's always been my way, too," he thought. A wistful smile touched his sober face. "No one will ever mean so much to me, but it's plain we were never meant to go double. I guess she realized it."

He saw Tapper's tethered horse then and all thought of Lana was gone from him. He knew his man had not taken alarm and fled. He was here. The knowledge thinned Isbell's face and his jaw set at a hard angle.

A few steps took him past the animal. The canyon walls were pinching close. He could see the entrance, narrow, towering. A few feet more gave him a view of the sloping ledge on which he believed he would find Tapper.

Isbell gave it a careful scrutiny. The ledge curved around the wall. He followed it back to where it came out of the ground. Stepping upon it, he saw the fresh marks of bootheels in the dust. One set marched up the ledge; another set came down. It

was a screaming headline that said Tapper had changed positions.

"It was hot up there; that's why he moved," Cape muttered.

A chill swept him as he realized that he was a target, standing there. Quitting the ledge, a noise in back of him spun him around. Tapper stood there.

Their surprise was mutual, and for a moment they faced each other with a frozen, helpless regard. But suddenly Ben's face was lumpy with fear.

"Why, you dirty sneak, what are you doin' here?" he whipped out with the venom of a cornered rat.

It was just words, not a question. He knew what this meant—that there was no walking away from it. His left cheek twitched nervously, and the deep, still unhealed scar the whip had left flamed redly.

Isbell's eyes were fastened on that scar. It was as though it were a bond between Lana and himself, and his hatred of this man lay heavy on him. Not because Tapper was now a proven rustler; not because he was a blackleg of long standing. It went deeper than that and concerned a woman's dignity and a man's pride and the bond that had been between them.

But this second or two was gone. Tapper whipped up his gun and fired, and then fired again. At that distance he could not miss. But it was blind, hurried shooting that had no purpose but to be first.

Cape felt the sharp burn of the first slug. He rolled his body against the second shot as though bracing himself for its hard slap. His gun spoke then, and its message did not have to be repeated.

Tapper stared at him with an endless surprise that tore his eyes wider and wider. He lifted to the balls of his feet and his muscles contracted as though he were about to spring forward. It was an illusion; there was no will in him any longer. When he fell, he was dead.

Isbell gazed at him and knew a brief moment's satisfaction. But the world was spinning; the canyon walls seemed to bend

down and smite him. His legs seemed to turn to rubber, and he knew he was falling. Arms outstretched in a vain attempt to save himself, he rolled down the slope and fell across Tapper's feet.

Oatwine and Johnnie found them a few minutes later. Johnnie had his quick look. "They're both done for," he said, a great bitterness riding his tone. "It didn't have to be this way. Why didn't Cape let us pick Tapper off from up above as Cash and me wanted to do?"

"He ain't dead," Oatwine said, on his knees beside Cape. He was calm; he could think. "You stay here with him. I'll send a wagon back from the Diamond And A Half and go to Lamar for the doctor. You get Cape to Ox Bow, and don't waste no time about it if you want him to have a chance. I'll have Banning there waitin'."

"What about those gents Dutch and Cash are herdin'?" Johnnie demanded revengefully. "I say this settles their hash!"

"Cape gave them his word," Oatwine said. "That still goes."

BACK at the camp Dutch and Cash Buckingham were waiting with their questions. Oatwine hurried through his answers and swung up on Caracas' bronc.

"Get goin', Frank!" Dutch urged, his homely face stamped with anguish. "Get that wagon here quick!"

As though in a dream Isbell heard Doc Banning's far-away voice saying: "I don't know how he made it, Lana. It would have killed another man. He must have wanted to live awful bad."

"You're sure he will be all right?" she asked, her tone freighted with a deep anxiety.

"With your help he will," Doc answered, blunt as usual. "You're the doctor he needs now."

Chad was there too, hiding his concern behind his gruffness. "He'll be as good

as ever in a few weeks," he prophesied. "It'll be a job makin' him take it easy."

Cape heard him leave with Banning. Memory had returned to him. He knew he was at Ox Bow; that Lana was here. When his eyelids fluttered open, she was kneeling at his side.

"Cape—" she murmured in a hushed whisper. "It was so close. You just made it." He had never seen tears in her eyes before. All the sternness left his face as he gazed at her.

"How long have I been here?" he asked at length.

"It's three days since the boys brought you in. It's been a million years to me, Cape—hoping—praying—blaming myself. Wanting to do so much and able to do so little."

Her voice broke. Impulsively she raised his hand to her lips. "Oh, I was so wrong, Cape—so mistaken!"

"No reason for you to feel like that," he protested. Knowing the pride that was in this girl, he could not bear having her humble herself to him. "I just saw things one way and you saw them another."

"That's exactly why I can't find an excuse for myself," she said self-accusingly. "Your way should have been my way. I thought you belonged to me completely. I wouldn't understand that in some things a man must belong to himself."

She held up her hand for him to see. His ring was back on her finger. Suddenly she bent down and pressed her cheek against his.

"I found it in your pocket, Cape," she murmured. Her young face was very earnest. "Will you give Ox Bow and me another chance? We need you so—"

Isbell's spreading smile was answer enough.

"You don't need a second chance with me, Lana," he told her. "The first one is still good."

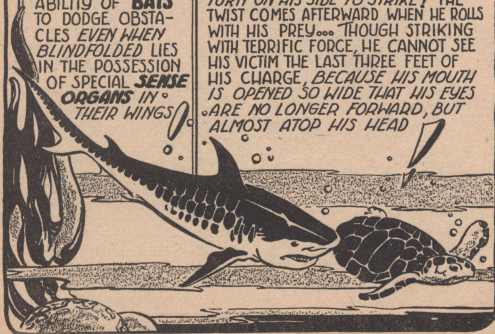
# Curioddities <sup>By</sup> Weill

**WOLVES ARE AMONG THE MOST DEVOTED PARENTS OF THE ANIMAL KINGDOM!** IF A HUNTER APPEARS NEAR THE DEN OF CUBS, THE MALE WILL SHOW HIMSELF DELIBERATELY, HOWL TO MAKE SURE HE HAS BEEN SPOTTED, AND THEN LEAD THE HUNTER AWAY FROM THE DEN BY CONTINUALLY RISKING HIMSELF AS A TARGET!

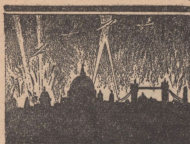


THE AMAZING ABILITY OF **BATS** TO DODGE OBSTACLES EVEN WHEN **BLINDFOLDED** LIES IN THE POSSESSION OF SPECIAL **SENSE ORGANS** IN THEIR WINGS!

A **SHARK** DOES *NOT* HAVE TO TURN ON HIS SIDE TO STRIKE! THE TWIST COMES AFTERWARD WHEN HE ROLLS WITH HIS PREY... THOUGH STRIKING WITH TERRIFIC FORCE, HE CANNOT SEE HIS VICTIM THE LAST THREE FEET OF HIS CHARGE, BECAUSE HIS MOUTH IS OPENED SO WIDE THAT HIS EYES ARE NO LONGER FORWARD, BUT ALMOST ATOP HIS HEAD!







# BLACK- OUT

By THEODORE  
ROSCOE



**S**PANGLER stepped from the stalled taxi, spun the driver a shilling, ducked around the invisible corner and raced, headlong, down the black street. All up and down the street people were running. Some scuttled; others jogged at leisure—soldiers, civilians, women—distinguishable by crumpy hobnails, heavy-treaded loping, or quick-scuffing feminine scurry.

*Wbaaaooooo—!*

Siren-wail scaled up and descended in the darkness; was echoed by another—another—banshees in concert baying at the moonless heavens, warning the city. Spangler sprinted. He could hear his shoe-soles whacking the pavement; the thud-thud-thud of other feet behind him, running. Cars were braking along the curb, blue headlamps and motors simultaneously extinguished, doors making tinny slams as drivers dodged out and hurried for the protection of unseen building-fronts. Spangler brushed and swerved around

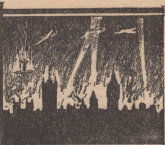
ghostly, half-materialized shapes, with several narrowly averting collision. Running full-stride, blindly, he did not slow his pace. He had a canny sixth sense for maneuvering in the dark.

Besides, he knew the neighborhood as few Londoners. Entries and building-exits; parking lots and side alleys; hydrants, lamp posts, obstructions where the pavement was roped off; the nearest air-raid shelter—he had mapped these in his mind.

There was no light save for the blind-folded street lamps, dim, blue globes fuliginously aloft like balls of witch-shine afloat in inky fog, and here and there a post or curbstone, painted white, faintly visible like radium paint on a watch. In this midnight, darting pedestrians made the hazard. Spangler tangled with a group debarking from an unlighted bus.

Caroming away from a stout man, he stumbled to one knee, almost lost hold of the suitcase he was carrying.

The man complained, "I sye! Watch where you're barging! What?"



*Against the Black  
Backdrop of a  
London Fighting  
for its Life is Set  
Another Drama —  
Tense, Human —  
of Crime and  
Punishment . . .*

A hand pulled Spangler upright. Hooded pencil of light flicked into his face. Recoiling, averting his face from the gleam, he glimpsed the helmet and arm-band of an A.R.P. The glimmer flicked off as the Protective said admonishingly, "Steady, old chap. Easy does it. Nothing to run for. Oh—I say!"

Everyone heard the planes; instinctively looked up. No one could see the sky. But the sound was almost visible, audible as a buzz saw eating through the dome of midnight — loudening — scattering high sparks—followed by a new sound, a rushing wail that developed into a shrieking, drawn-out, appalling whistle, as though down an incline from the black zenith an express train was coming. It drowned out the pulse in Spangler's eardrums; blotted out faint yells that had followed him down the block.

Everybody huddled, crowding him against the bus. He couldn't breathe. He'd heard screamer bombs before, but not this imminent. What was it a news-

paper man at the hotel had said—"It's the ones you don't hear—"

*Whaboom!*

Sound rocked through the darkness like an avalanche, a succession of concussions piling and diminishing. Briefly a distant corner came into view, washed in a pinkish light. The light withdrew, and the neighboring darkness was the darker, but a feverish haze remained behind a not distant church spire, silhouetting some building tops. The bomb's scream, the explosion and the gust of light occupied twenty-four of Spangler's seconds.

"Not even close," the A.R.P. was assuring someone. "Take your time, people. Take your time."

Spangler took his to shoot one frantic look into blackness over his shoulder; then he picked a hole in the night ahead and raced on. He hadn't counted on the street being crowded at this hour; there must be a nearby traffic jam. Another screamer was coming down. He loped through a group of jogging spectres, controlling his pace to

avoid the appearance of panic. There was no panic on the street. At the left a quiet voice called, "In here! In here!" People were running down unseen steps. Spangler broke into a straightaway sprint. He heard the thunder of demolition a considerable distance away, and as he swerved leftward around the next corner-turn he glimpsed the rushing silhouette of fire equipment charging across a black square.

IN mid-square, startlingly invisible, a police whistle shrilled.  
*Creee! Creee! Creee!*

The sharp sound needled into Spangler's eardrums and furred his back teeth. He pulled his head down into the collar of his Burberry; ran in a crouch, the valise bumping maddeningly against his knees. Now he could see searchlights raying up all around, swinging, wheeling and criss-crossing through high darkness, pale lancers in spectral battle-maneuver. On the city's outskirts and along Thames Embankment anti-aircraft opened violent fire, the barrage breaking loose across the zenith as a pyrotechnic; high, bright shell-puffs muttering like gridded popcorn; the guns throwing up a sound that echoed as mile-long, crackling strips of tin. Spangler could hear shrapnel coming down. Basso bomb-rumbles.

Short, vicious explosions of incendiaries. Demolitions which shook the pavement like quarry blasts.

Dogs barking, sirens wailing, emergency cars racing, more planes buzz-sawing the air. Alarm bells, fire whistles, police whistles aided pandemonium. But distinctly Spangler heard shouts behind him; boots pounding as though in unison with his.

Sweat strained down his face and throat; his fingers, gripping the suitcase handle, were numb. Stone gateposts loomed, affording cover; he dived between them frantically, hugged down against an iron grille in recessed night; crouched sweating, panting through his mouth and nose, sav-

agely alert and at the same time almost spent, like an animal run to cover.

He was panting, "He saw me! Damn him! He saw me—"

Then, as his lungs recovered and nothing happened beyond the din, he relaxed to crouch forward, peer around the protective masonry.

"Huh!"

Seen through quick sky-flares, as in the lambence of an electrical storm, the street was quite deserted. Relief unlimbered Spangler to his feet. Nobody in sight save a couple of air-raid wardens standing near an Underground entry, posed with feet apart, helmets tilted, unconcernedly watching the sky.

"Nuts!" Spangler criticized himself. "Imagination!"

Picking up the valise, he canted obliquely across the wide street, holding his pace to a not unnatural trot, keeping his eye on the air-raid wardens. Their attention was that of astronomers remarking new constellations. They didn't see Spangler. He traversed a span of tram-tracks, unobserved, and legged it down a side street to the right. His worry now was that the address he wanted should still be there.

It was there. At the bend of a short, tall-walled street that made a black, elbow-shaped canyon under the fire-reddened sky. Stalking it, sure as a bird dog, Spangler advanced on invisible cobbles; scouted along unseen pavement; halted. A match-flare, shielded in cupped palms, confirmed the brass door-plate.

*Jorgens. Jewelers By Appointment To H.R.H. The King.*

Spangler stiffened in blind darkness, listening to thunder. He murmured, "Get going, stupid. You're safe." Kneeling, he opened his suitcase, swiftly transferred a number of small instruments to the pocket of his Burberry. Then, backing from the door-plate, he found and leaned against a cold expanse of plate glass, waiting, biding his time.

Presently he heard it coming—that

descending express-train shriek—coming down, down, nearer. He waited, counting second-ticks.

*W'ham-bammm!*

He struck, smashed the shop window with a simultaneous hammer-blow. Five blocks away a vaudeville theater, collapsing, shook the district with earthquake spasms; windows were cascading everywhere; the pane falling inward before Spangler's face made a minor, soprano jangle.

Wary of jagged glass, he swung himself up and over the sill; ignored the window-display which he had long since apprised as showy front; stepped lightly down to the aisle behind the counter. Moving among the showcases, he worked at surgical speed, knowing and removing what he wanted, losing no time in hesitations or wasted motion. The door to the shop's rear office was a joke, and a scornful, under-the-breath, "Duck soup!" was Spangler's "Open Sesame" for the iron wall-safe. Its archaic mechanism hardly demanded artistic concentration; Spangler couldn't help a sneer for the stuffy, old-fashioned British—corny equipment like this, they'd never win any war—forty-nine seconds later the door was open, the trays were in his suitcase sooner than the Russians would be taking India.

"But it was a shave," Spangler realized as he hurried back to the front window. "Take all these risks and time—then meet *that* guy!"

Water over the dam, though. He shoved the suitcase ahead of him to the window's edge; climbed noiselessly over the broken glass; scanned the night-black street hastily; then dropped without sound down on to the pavement and turned to snatch out the heavy valise.

**D**ETACHING itself from the blackness of the shop-front, a blacker shadow loomed, bulking, beside Spangler.

"Take it easy, Jerome. Where do you think you're going?"

Spangler reared, hands caught on the suitcase handle.

The shadow in the blackness restricted Spangler's movement. "Keep your hands on that suitcase and answer my question. You couldn't go to Amsterdam; were you thinking of Buenos Aires?" The questioning voice was incurious; neither pleasant nor unpleasant. "Or were you thinking of trying the market back in New York?"

"Damn you!" Passion restricted Spangler's voice to a whisper. He couldn't move; the press of a pistol jammed into his side seemed to have robbed him of his will. "Damn you, McDowd! I knew it was you! I knew you saw me that day at the hotel!"

"At the Russell Square," the voice acknowledged, neither unpleasantly nor pleasantly. Thunder slammed over near rooftops, and the speaker paused for the tumult to dwindle. "Been a long time, hasn't it, Jerry. You haven't changed."

"Neither have you, you big, stiff, dumb-cluck of a copper!" Enraged, Spangler whimpered; gulped; controlled himself to snarl. "I saw your cab tailin' me tonight. I thought I lost you in the black-out. How'd you tail me here?"

The other man said, "I didn't tail you. I got here first. Short-cut. Like the guy who lost the dog. I figured if I was a dog in this neighborhood under these circumstances, this was where I'd go."

"You think you're smart, don't you?"

"Smarter than you," the answer was blunt. "But let's get under way and renew our acquaintance somewhere else. It's getting hot around here. Pull your grip out of there and carry it in front of you, both hands. Walk. Cripes!" the man's voice snapped, biting through a bomb-crash. "You got a nerve running around London on a night like this!"

Spangler, moving awkwardly with the heavy leather suitcase impeding his knees, asked sullenly, "Where we going?"

"Go on," the pistol shoved him. "Straight ahead. Hump! Or next thing



you know you'll be in hell. . . ." Spangler's captor broke off to listen to a screamer bomb. "This beats those raids in September." He was walking lock-step on Spangler's heels, ramming the pistol-muzzle in Spangler's spine.

"You can't do anything to me!" Spangler blurted. "You've got no right to make a pinch in this burg. This is England!"

"I can't, can't I? Start to turn like that, again, and I'll drill your left kidney. Walk faster. Toward that corner. There's an air-raid shelter—!"

Spangler could see it—where the street's canyon debouched into an avenue, the darkness was tintured by a smudge of crimson fireglow—an incendiary bomb was burning in mid-avenue, the fitful smoulder revealing the shelter sign over a cellarway banked with brown sandbags. An air-raid warden was standing at the entry, and Spangler, shying inwardly at the light, snorted like a baulky horse at sight of the uniform. His heart shrank. He had a wild impulse to whirl, attack McDowd, dive off into the night. McDowd apprehended this by stepping up alongside; nudging Spangler's hip with the pistol—Spangler had a slantwise glimpse of McDowd's weather-roughened, strong-chinned, Scotch Irish face, inexpressive, square mouth; inexpressive gray eyes—McDowd's salt-and-pepper gray topcoat, the collar carelessly up—weather-stained gray hat, the brim carelessly down. To Spangler, who attired his lean frame carefully from *Esquire*, the older, heavier man resembled a dumb suburbanite hurry-ing for a train.

Yet it was that careless stolidness which unnerved Spangler as much as the gun; in that glimpse of him, Spangler hated McDowd sickeningly, as a tiger hates, yet fears, an enemy smell. Tears stung his eyes as his resistance collapsed with his hopes, he felt his legs trotting obediently toward that sand-bagged cell.

"Go right down, gentlemen," the air-raid warden beckoned. "Plenty of room."

At the top step of the cellarway Spangler

managed a last baulk. "Look here, McDowd—!"

"Keep going!" McDowd nudged.

"Wait! Is that a pistol?" the air-raid warden stepped close. "We're not supposed to leh—" his sentence ended in an exhale as his head snapped back to look up. "Down!" he screamed.

Neither Spangler nor McDowd had heard the bomb. To Spangler it was as though he were whirled in an ear-splitting wind; flung bodily against McDowd; inextricably tangled with the bigger man, and hurled, spinning, down an endless well of stairs. Then all the world seemed to be coming down on top of them—timbering, cobblestones, masonry, thundering piles of brick.

Two things astonished Spangler. That he should be sitting atop his suitcase in a damp, cement-walled passageway that smelled of plumbing pipes and chill plaster and seemed to lead into a wine-cellar. And that McDowd should be sprawled farther down the passage, while McDowd's nickle-plated revolver lay halfway up a stair-flight that was buried by a mound of dusty trash. Spangler was scarcely aware of these mysteries when, overhead, there was a second crash. In a din as of a thousand falling ashcans, the shelter entry disappeared from view; Spangler leaped to dodge what seemed like a down-roaring coal slide; and now when he turned to peer, the flight of steps, the gun, the whole cellarway had been obliterated.

AT THE lighted end of the passage someone screamed.

Spangler stood stemming a nosebleed, swearing between gripped teeth.

McDowd sat upright, pressing a palm to an abraded forehead.

"You all right, Spangler?" His voice sounded far away.

Then Spangler could feel his mouth spreading in a stiff, hard grin. Setting down the valise carefully, he jammed his right hand into the right-hand pocket of his

Burberry. "Sure, I'm all right," he said thinly, pressing the bulged pocket against McDowd's temple. "I'm fine. Just keep your trap closed, copper, and you'll be all right, too."

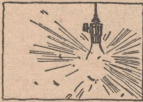
He enjoyed the surprise that formed on McDowd's features as the detective realized the loss of his gun.

Excited voices echoed from the lighted chamber at passage-end. "What's that?"—"Somebody's outside there!"

"You can't get away with this, Jerry," McDowd said quietly. "There's other people down here."

Spangler said softly, "They're shut in, too. This entry's blocked. Turn around and walk into the shelter ahead of me, copper. Make me any trouble, and I'll kill you. From here on, I'll do the talking."

He had sized up the room and its inmates in one astute scrutiny—third rate—definitely, no class. The cellar lacked even the distinction of having harbored wine—a cellar, merely—without exit, windows, or



shelves—an unventilated basement, ten by twelve; lit by a single, raw, electric bulb which dangled from the low-beamed ceiling; furnished meanly by two long wooden benches ranged along either wall; the walls patched with lithographed signs advertising *Bovril*, *Join The Red Cross*, *Don't Talk In Public*; dishevelled newspapers littering the floor; the stale air, the remoteness from the street and its sounds, reminding Spangler of the I.R.T. Subway—fit shelter, he thought, for rats.

There were three, besides himself and McDowd, in the cellar—two other men, and a girl. They sat on the bench opposite, facing Spangler and McDowd. They were, Spangler was gratified to see, content to

sit there. They did not seem to notice how he kept his right hand pocketed; their concern was for themselves and their relationship to the blocked passageway. After the first momentary flurry over the bomb-hit they had expressed gratitude and wonder at their being alive. Now the girl was thinking it over and getting scared. She sat wordless. One of the men was shyly worried. The other—a soldier—was bluffing himself out of it.

The soldier sat talking under the *Don't Talk* poster. He sat with arms folded for heartiness; thick legs outthrust, brogans crossed—a private in the mustard-colored jumpers and khaki tan of the Tank Corps. He had a brown and khaki face with brown eyes and khaki eyelids so that his features blurred into a sort of beefy ambiguity, as though his face were camouflaged.

He was saying, looking at nobody, but obviously for the benefit of the girl, "When they got your number, they got your number, that's all. It all depends on whether they got your number or not."

"I guess that's so," the other man said. He was elderly and timid-looking, with an egg-shaped head on which a few curving black hairs might have been drawn with a pen. He wore a black alpaca jacket, and a gold collar button showed above the tie-knot in his outmoded, chin-high collar.

"Corny!" Spangler thought. "Probably blushes at the sight of his own sleeve-garters."

"Right," the soldier nodded. "If your number's up, it's up. Don't you think so?" he directed the question at Spangler.

Spangler said shortly, "Yeah." Deliberately perfunctory. He sat close to McDowd, hands stuffed in the pockets of his Burberry, hat on the bench beside him, one foot negligently propped on his valise as though he were waiting to get a shine. Never loquacious, he avoided conversation now. Inwardly he was tense, every nerve alert, for the situation was electrically precarious—McDowd was a hair-trigger, for all his stolid look—and the night, itself,

wanted watching. Ashcans kept rumbling around overhead, jarring driblets of cement dust and fine sand through the planking of the ceiling. Sounded like all hell was loose upstairs.

"Well, they ayn't got my number," the soldier was resuming confidently. "Like I was saying before the blast—didn't get me as Dunkuerque, they ayn't going to get me 'ere. Not 'ere in Lonnon." He looked sidewise at the girl. "From the Midlands, ayn't you?"

The girl didn't answer. She sat in a sort of hugged-together position, as though she were cold, staring at some point in the floor beyond her shoes. She just stared. She wasn't homely. She wasn't good-looking. She was plain. Spangler regarded her drearily. He hated plain women. He was thinking, as he remarked the lisle stockings, the cheap black dress and jacket and cheap, pancake hat, that if she'd once had the gumption she might've got herself up to look like somebody.

Too late now. Drabness bleared her features like a stain. She was flat-chested; bony. A strand of hair, lustreless as hemp, hung untidily down over one dull, staring eye for accent.

"Bargain basement," he appraised contemptuously. "Marked down from two dollars."

HE WAS reminded by contrast of women he'd seen along Broadway, smart, trim as new-model cars—an oboethroated torch singer at Lefty's—a Paris catch—a Cuban rumba dancer—the swell, tall blonde (really cultivated and ambitious to go somewhere with her voice) he was meeting up with at Bilgray's when he got to Panama—

"Me," the soldier was confiding as though the girl had replied with interest, "I'm from Tunbridge—Tunbridge Wells. Pretty little plyce near Dover—or, I mean to sye, it *was*. My wife writes our 'ouse was bombed out first off. Then she went to live with a neighbor, and they was

bombed out. Now they—my wife and kiddie—'ve gone to live with my father-in-law in Shropshire. They ayn't got my wife's number, either."

The man with the collar button said, "No?"

"No," the soldier said. He looked across at Spangler. "You're not from Lonnon, sir?"

Spangler said flatly, "No."

"You?" the soldier asked McDowd.

Spangler looked quickly slantwise, but the warning was lost on his bench-companion. McDowd was smiling pleasantly, leaning forward, elbows resting on knees, hands clasped loosely together. His hat was tilted a little to the back of his head to air the raw scratches above his temple; he wore the affable, interested expression of someone among chance acquaintances in a barber shop. He said in a tone that invited conversation, "I'm from America."

"That's what I thought," the soldier said. "Newspaper man?"

"Yeah, we're newspaper men," Spangler spoke out flatly, his tone intended to repel further questioning.

"What paper?" the soldier asked.

McDowd's eyes were amused. "My friend," he moved his head to indicate Spangler, "is covering a story for Scotland Yard."

Spangler flushed angrily. Wise guy! He managed, however, to arrange an acid smile. "Quit kidding!" he nudged McDowd's hip. He said—smiling at McDowd—from the side of his mouth to the soldier, "We're both from the Associated Press."

"Yes," McDowd grinned. "Very closely associated."

The soldier laughed understandingly. "I guess you chaps tyke your chances, too, eh? I guess it's just as dangerous to—"

There was an interruptive bump, a series of clatters as though someone above had dropped a pile of boards. Dust, sand, small gravel spilled down through the ceiling timbers. Spangler, looking up, got

something in his eye. Swearing under his breath, he slid beyond arm-reach of McDowd; turned to face McDowd's profile; withdrew left hand from pocket to scrub angrily at his eyelid. The electric bulb was swaying on its cord and the cellar's wall-shadows swayed.

As the clatter ended the man with the collar button murmured, "I don't fancy that."

McDowd took off his hat and stared interestedly at the ceiling.

All at once the girl was on her feet. She was pale. She stared at the dark aperture of the passage. "I want to get out of 'ere! I don't like it! I want to get out!"

The soldier touched her arm. "Sit down, sweetie."

The girl sat down.

"They'll get us out," the soldier said. "They'll be around in the morning an' fetch us out. Right?" he asked of McDowd and Spangler.

"Sure." Examination of the ceiling left McDowd's amiable features undisturbed. "You're all right, miss. You're safe down here."

"Snug's a bug in a bloomin' rug," the soldier patted her knee. "Lot safer than the dugout I 'ad in the Battle of Flanders. Shell lit on the roof—every blighter in the 'ole but me was killed. Right before my eyes." He turned to the elderly man. "Y'see? They didn't have my number."

The elderly man nodded hopefully. "I should think this was safer than a dugout. Only," he swallowed nervously, "—well, last night I was reading in the paper—a family in the East End, in one of those Anderson shelters—a whole family—" he faltered; gave an anxious cough.

Spangler stared disapproval with his reddened eye. "Why don't you lay off?" he suggested sharply. "Why don't you can the chatter?"

"Can the chatter?" forehead wrinkled in mild bewilderment.

"The talk," Spangler said roughly. "And

you, too!" to the soldier. They were staring at him now, and his jaw-muscles tightened resentfully. "Well, you're giving the dame the jitters. As long as we're in for the night down here, what's the good of a lot of gab. We might as well relax and try to sleep."

McDOWD'S mouth went up at the corners. "Are you sleepy, Jerry?"

Spangler glared. "I thought maybe *you* were."

"Somehow I'm not," McDowd smiled. "But if you want to go to sleep, Jerry, just curl up on the bench and I won't bother you."

Spangler retorted savagely, "You bet you won't!" easing the tone into a semblance of raillery, "or I'd put you to sleep!"

"How?" McDowd's eyes were round, innocent. "With a bed-time story?"

"Listen—!" Spangler began. He closed his lips on the threat, restraining himself with difficulty. McDowd's confidence and composure were disconcerting. "All right," Spangler controlled his voice. "I'll be Uncle Don. I'll tell you about a movie I saw once."

"Crime picture?" McDowd asked.

Spangler cleared a constricted throat. "How'd you guess? It was called—yeah—*Les Miserables*. Charles Laughton was in it. Remember?"

"I didn't see it."

"You should've," Spangler couldn't help edging the words. "He played this cop who tailed a guy—year after year—even after he was out of prison—like a damned hoodoo."

"What happened to him, Jerry?"

"He got knocked off," Spangler snapped. "In a sewer."

"The criminal?"

Spangler flushed. "No, big boy. The bull! Now cork off if you can, and maybe Uncle Don will leave you have another birthday."

He stood up abruptly—the electric light hurt his sore eye, and McDowd's smile was



even more galling—stamped stiffness from his legs, and fumbled a pack of Pall Malls left-handedly from his left pocket, intending to mask his heated face behind a cigarette.

"Nah, then!" the soldier spoke out.

Spangler squinted. More gab from this oaf?

The soldier shook his head. "Against regulations."

"What regulations?"

Blunt finger answering, cocked at a sign. *No Smoking.*

"Regulations? Damn your regulations!" Snapping match on thumbnail, Spangler deliberately fired the cigarette; rounded to catch McDowd's movement—but McDowd had only crossed his knees and clasped fingers over an ankle.

"Nerves on edge, Jerry?" he inquired. "The soldier's only doing his duty. Rules you know. No smoking in this shelter."

"To hell with your rules! It's only dopes who don't break the rules. People who haven't the gimp to go out and do what they want." Spangler jeered a breath of smoke. "That's what rules are for—to hold all the little dopes in line for the benefit of the big shots."

"Maybe," McDowd countered easily, "the rules are to hold the big shots in line so they can't exploit the little people. Ever think of it that way?"

"I told you what I think of it. Your regulations don't tie me. I've the guts to do as I please."

"Guts? To my way of thinking it takes guts to follow the rules. To play the game fair and stick in line. Like these people you see in queues durin' an air raid, each waiting his turn at the Underground."

"Sure. So the big shots can get down first! Well, you don't see me playin' somebody else's game. They'll look out for theirself, and I'll take care of me—little Jerry Spangler. I'm no sucker."

"Suppose everybody thought that way," McDowd remarked. "Society would be worse than a jungle."

Spangler laughed harshly. "If you think it's any better go take a look out on the street. There's your pious society."

"No," McDowd's features were thoughtful, "there's someone breaking all the rules. People slaughtered and maimed. Children blown to bits. Because a fellow named Hitler thinks laws don't apply to him—he's above all human morality—he and his gang are for themselves first and the hell with everybody else—criminals who think only of their own—"

"Look!" Spangler interjected, his forehead plaintive. "Honest. You're breaking my heart. I didn't know you was an evangelist." Then, ejecting the cigarette with a caustic tongue, "But don't give me that mammy song about Hitler. He's not breaking rules, he's making them. He's getting away with it, isn't he? In a hundred years he'll be a historical character—already there's people calling him a genius like Napoleon. Sure, if he skunks people enough they'll some day make a movie hero



out of him, like Jesse James. So you can't make me cry about Hit—"

*Crash!*

The concussion made Spangler sit down. Din overhead was that of a thousand simultaneous strikes in a bowling alley; the naked light bulb swung wildly; the cellar dimmed in a buff-colored haze in which Spangler, McDowd, and the three sitting opposite posed as waxworks in fixed tableau. Then—Spangler saw this as a phenomenon in slow motion—with a ripping, splintering noise one heavy timber broke out of the ceiling, swung sedately

from the hinge of a cross-beam above Spangler's eyes, and bashed down full length, aslant through the dust-haze, sideswiping the elderly man who had hopped up from the bench, and landing, *crush*, on the soldier's ducked head.

The swaying light bulb didn't go out.

Rubble, broken plaster continued to spill from the breached ceiling for what seemed a long time.

When it was over, Spangler, McDowd and the girl sat as statues coated with cement dust; the silence was like deafness; the breached ceiling had been reblocked; and Spangler saw, to his dismay and astonishment, that the clerk's neck was broken at the gold-collar button, and the plank had gotten the soldier's number.

"TRY and jack up that plank," Spangler ordered. "We don't want the whole works coming down."

McDowd, standing in mid floor, put his shoulder under the plank, panted and shoved. Spangler, leaning in the doorway of the passage, sent a quick glance into the darkness where McDowd had deposited the bodies. Huh! No time for sentiment. Spangler switched his attention to McDowd.

"Can't you move that plank?"

McDowd panted, "I might with some help."

Spangler said bleakly, "Just want me to stand beside you and put my hands on that beam, is that it? Okay, copper, if you can't move it. Go sit by the girl over there. Sit down."

The girl was no help. She was crying. For the last fifteen minutes she'd been crying. Silently, lips grinning together, convulsions in her thin throat. Tears streaked down the sides of her bony nose, smearing lipstick on her mouth. Spangler sat down on the bench opposite and regarded her in weary irritation. He thought, "She looks like a turkey."

"Oh, hell," he snapped finally. "Do you have to do that?"

She stared at him, gulping, her expression a mixture of woe and fright, face squeezed up like one of those pinchable rubber toys.

Impatiently he drew his pocket handkerchief, flung it in a ball at the girl's lap. "Turn off the faucets, will you? It's like a morgue down here as it is. Use that."

His gesture, suggestive of grudging sympathy, released a new rush of tears. Covering her eyes with the silk handkerchief, the girl rocked, sobbed hysterically.

"Let her cry," McDowd suggested, meeting Spangler's furious glare. His own face was sweaty, a little pallid; folding his arms, he leaned back tiredly beside the girl. He said quietly, "Crying's good relief for the nerves. Everybody isn't as used to sudden death as you are, Jerry."

"You look like you couldn't take it, either. Want to cry, too? I thought a while back you were talking about guts."

"A kind you wouldn't understand, Spangler."

"No? Say, listen. I can take it. More risks in a week than a lug like you in five years."

"We'll see. When we get out of here—"

Spangler said violently, "Maybe some more of us won't get out of here! Especially when they start digging in the morning. Especially if someone should talk out of turn, maybe, or set up a holler."

"You are a hard one, aren't you, Jerry?"

"Yeah," Spangler said. He rested one foot on his valise; leaned a little toward the other man. "An' you're hard, too, McDowd. You put the lock on me once, but you won't ever do it again. Eight years. That's a long time out of circulation—" he sneered, "—for a newspaper man. Now I'm going to have some fun in my life, at last now I've got the where-with-all. And no half-baked war or guy named Mr. Baumes is going to stop me."

AFTER a pause—a long one in which neither man shifted glance or expression—Spangler added, "So there's no use

planning no last-minute squeeze play, see? Don't go trying to bust that light bulb, or try any kind of home runs. I'm up on you through the ninth inning."

The girl looked up, puffy-eyed. Sniffled. "Say, what are you two blokes talking about so daffy?"

"Never mind," Spangler snapped. "If you don't know American baseball, tend to your own department."

She was crying again, chewing the silk handkerchief. Spangler watched her sullenly. McDowd sat, shoulders against the cellar wall, preoccupied, his gaze on nothing. The second hand circled on Spangler's wrist-dial. There was no sound now save the breathing of the men, coughs and gargles from the girl, an occasional remote rumble that would send another driblet of plaster sliding down the plank.

The shelter was cold—crowded by the down-slanting plank; the bench comfortable; Spangler stirred restlessly, infuriated by the luck which had stymied his plans, shut him up in close contact with the one menace he feared and hated most—its personification in McDowd.

The cellar was oppressive. There was a smell, Spangler noticed, reminiscent of a Dago ditch. Why the devil didn't they air-condition these dumps? No escape exits; no drinking fountain—he glared around, increasingly uncomfortable and angry—no facilities of any kind. Damn the British! The Gents was probably out there in the passage, buried under the stairs.

Abruptly the girl stopped crying, her wrist under her nose, to look at Spangler and ask, "Whu-why d'you keep your hand in your pocket, there, like that?"

"Because I like it there. See?"

"Oh—I thought maybe you—had a bottle—" She began to cry again, working her face, shutting her eyes, and squeezing tears out between the red lids.

Spangler began, "Well, I'll be a—!" broke off with a grunt. Huh! A bottle. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Holding his gaze on McDowd, he drew

the valise to his knees; fumbled at the straps with his free hand. McDowd was sitting, eyes closed, as though asleep. Spangler unlatched the suitcase dexterously, but the leather squeaked as he raised the lid.

McDowd opened one eye. Spangler met the eye's gaze defiantly; deliberately opened the valise, took out a pint whiskey-bottle, uncorked it in his teeth, tilted and swallowed, keeping an eye aimed at McDowd. McDowd, opening both eyes, looked interestedly at the opened suitcase.

"See anything?" Spangler lowered the bottle to sneer.

McDowd reared up a little. "I see you came prepared for emergency. Thought of everything, didn't you. Where'd you buy the gas mask?"

"I didn't buy it," Spangler said pointedly. Setting aside the bottle, he stooped to snap shut the valise.

"Say," the girl edged forward on her bench. Her eyes were on the bottle, avid. "Say! Could you spare a lady a drink?"

"A lady, yes," Spangler said. Corking the bottle with a slap, he stowed it into his left-hand pocket.

The girl stared at him and swore. Luridly. Profanely. A vituperative, blasphemous outpouring, as though she had held pent in her scrawny throat all the pub-oaths, gutter-calls and waterfront curses of London.

Furious, Spangler whipped to his feet. "Shut it off!"

"I want a drink!" she screamed at him. "I want a drink, you blinkin', bloody, blasted—"

"Now, now, sister," McDowd pulled at her sleeve in disapproval. "That's no way to talk. Please."

She turned on him, features mottled; then her face puckered, venom altered to despair; she slumped, face in hands. "I've got to have a drink," she moaned. "You don't know what I been through. That soldier killed like that. Havin' to sit here an' look at 'im. Lyin' there," she nodded

toward the passageway. "His buh-boots—!"

Moaning, she dropped her hands to stare. Her eyes reminded Spangler of fish scales snagged in the sloven tangle of her hair. She was a mess. Skin prickled on his necknape as, following the direction of her stare, he discovered the soldier's brogans, hobnails to the light, visible in the dark aperture.

"Dead, there!" the girl moaned. "His head all bashed—"

"Cut it!" Spangler said fiercely. "You," he aimed his bulged pocket at McDowd. "I thought I told you to get those stiffs out of sight! What's the matter with you? Get in there and drag 'em farther back into that passage, and do it quick. This fluzzy will cry all night—!"

Spangler circled as the detective stepped around the fallen ceiling-beam, wary, keeping his distance as a boxer wary of a foe. He knew McDowd's capabilities included jujitsu, and he had reason to remember and respect this capability. But McDowd followed instructions obediently; entered the passage where his movements disturbed a cloud of ashy dust and Spangler could hear him clambering through loose trash. The dead man's hobnails withdrew from the area of light. There was a dragging sound, a thump, a recessed clatter as though McDowd, stumbling, had dislodged a mound of kindling. Spangler could hear him swearing, groping about.

"Snap into it, copper!" Spangler backed from the dark aperture, uneasy. "If you're looking for a brick or somethin' in there—if you come out swinging, I'll—!"

**M**CDOWD came out of the darkness, hands open at his sides. His knees were dust-covered; there was dust smudged down one sleeve. He looked somehow dazed.

"Those passage-steps are jammed, all right," he told Spangler huskily. "Blocked by at least ten tons of rubbish. May be hours before they dig us out, and—"

"Get back there by the girl and sit down!" Spangler ordered.

"I tell you, Spangler, in that passage out there—"

"Get back and sit down!" Some indefinable change had come over McDowd, some alteration Spangler could sense and didn't like. Fear? A droop to his face and shoulders as he crossed the cellar obediently to his bench? Yellow, Spangler decided. Couldn't take those stiffs. Cowed. These bulls were good at jujitsu, but jujitsu was no good against a gun. Or was he only imagining a peaked look in McDowd's eye? It wasn't like McDowd to fold.

Spangler said, squinting as McDowd sat down, "So you're worried all the sudden about the rescue squad?"

McDowd didn't answer. His stare was focussed dully on the passageway. His hands on his knees were clenched.

The girl drew away from McDowd, frightened by his expression. "Oh, my God!" she screamed. "I can't stand this. We're goin' to die down here. I don't want to die! I can't die! Not after what 'appened to that soldier! Oh, dear blinkin' heaven—!" snatching up her skirt, abstracted, she fumbled frenziedly to loosen a rosette-bordered garter; pulled from the top of her stocking a folded bill; threw the bill wildly across the floor. "I don't want it!" she sobbed. "It's *'is!* The Tommy's! I took it out of his shoe—!"

Spangler gaped down at the folded banknote; then quick blood heated his forehead in a rush of anger. "Shut up!" he kicked the money at the girl. "What's all this crazy talk? What's all this yip about dyin'—?"

"I don't want to! I never meant to take it! I can't die!"

Involuntarily he stepped toward her. "By Judas! if you don't stop that hollerin'—"

"Take it easy, sister. Easy." McDowd reached out to capture the girl's hand. "No use doing it the hard way. Most of Lon-



don—your whole country's in this. I'm in the same boat, kid." He pulled a breath. "The way to go down is with your boots on."

Spangler's eyes narrowed in fury. "What's the Sob Sister act?" he snarled at the detective. "Whatcha mean, go down with your boots on?"

"Well, Jerry, I—I was just wondering if we'd get out."

"Yeah!" Spangler chewed through his teeth. "You're wondering. Can you get out? Just like I used to be wondering. In the Big House. All those months. Eight years, the last time! Wondering would I ever—I!" he broke off, scowling savagely. McDowd wasn't listening. Head reared, body tensened forward, McDowd was listening to—Spangler heard it with a start. *Thump-thump!* Muted, but insistent. Like your buddy in the overhead cell-block, discreetly tapping.

"Huh!" Relief sighed through Spangler's exclamation despite his intended concern. "Well, McDowd, there's your reprieve now. They've started digging. Not that I was worried. Anyhow," hardening his voice, "not about me and the girl. If she blows off when she gets out, I'll say she's been shell-shocked—scairt dippy—the bobbies will know what *she* is. But if you want to see daylight, copper, you'll do as I tell you. I got it all figured out."

McDowd said huskily, "All figured out."

"Yeah," Spangler moved his chin up and down slowly. "You start anything before the miners get here, and you'll be found with those other corpses with your head so bashed they'll never see a bullet hole."

"Start anything afterward, and I'll drop you anyhow, if I hang for it. You're to walk out dumb ahead of me, and I'll tell the Red Cross boys you lost your voice in that bomb-blast. Then you and me will get in a cab—"

"Save it," McDowd said huskily. "It'll take the diggers a long time to reach us." He coughed, bowed forward on the bench,

looking up blearily at Spangler. He muttered, "Maybe too long a time."

The cough, the croupy mutter startled Spangler.

"What's the gag, copper!"

McDowd pointed to the passage from which echoed the muffled thumps. His cheeks were blown; he seemed unable to speak. Spangler became aware of another sound in the passage—a furtive, almost inaudible hissing, like air escaping a leaky tire. He was alarmed. "What's that?"

"Can't you smell it?" McDowd asked hoarsely. "I've known it for an hour. There's a broken main out there. *Gas!*"

Minute after minute—as though the second-hand relentlessly circling on his watch were an mechanism which registered the failing oxygen—the pressure increased on Spangler's temples, the pulse loudened under his ribs, the strain in him grew as if it were being tightened by a key.

The mask-goggles were faintly tinted, continually breath-steamed, so that the cellar became swimmy and a little out of focus like that movie he'd once seen—a submarine view as filmed through the goggle's of a diver's helmet. Spangler paced nervously, head at an angle, worrying the rubber bit in his teeth, like a dog muzzled. The elastic was too tight. The rubber mouthpiece tasted queer, and the nose-clamp felt like the pinch of fingers. Chemically-treated air, straining through the mouth tube, gave him the sensation of breathing through a pillow, smothery, stifling. Hating restrictions, confinements of any kind, Spangler hated the mask. He felt as if his face were in a truss, being vulcanized.

"Damn you, Spangler! I thought you were a man!" The voice, thick, wheezy, painful as laryngitis, rasped through the blur at Spangler.

HE GRITTED his teeth like he did when he heard a nail-file. Resolutely he forced himself to stop pacing; to face the pair across the cellar. Hell! The girl

had come out of her faint and McDowd had her propped up at his side on the bench like a ventriloquist's dummy. She had that look. Hat askew. One stocking wrinkled down. Staring at Spangler, glassy-eyed.

McDowd was staring at him, too. Hump-shouldered, supporting the girl with one arm, he was bowed forward, blinking and staring drunkenly as he juggled with clumsy fingers to loosen his collar and tie.

"You're a rat, Spangler! A dirty rat! They're not going to get here in time—and you know it—and you're a rat—!"

The girl, Spangler's handkerchief pressed to her mouth and nose, stifled a wail.

Spangler chewed the rubber mouthpiece of his mask, soundlessly cursing. All this weeping and infernal jabber! He had to listen to it. The mask didn't cover his ears. It left them exposed, out in the cold. Their helplessness enraged him. He was as conscious of them as when, an urchin schoolboy, they'd had to listen to a bawling out for something he hadn't done. Now, muzzled by the mask, he couldn't talk back, either. Only this time, by God! he held the upper hand. Yeah, he was teacher. He held the rod.

His throat chuckled grimly at this simile—he shifted the automatic in his grip, flexing tired fingers. It had been necessary to produce the weapon in that moment when he put on the mask. No kidding to this business now. McDowd might go desperate, and the gun, visibly in evidence, was reassuring.

"You!" McDowd coughed at him. "You can't do it, Spangler! Be that big a heel! Stand there in that mask like a rat! A murderous rat!"

Spangler's fingers tightened on the gun. How long did this have to go on? He paced again, trying not to listen. But he could hear. Their bodies twisting on that bench, their shoes scraping. The girl's terrified sobs. McDowd's wheezy shouts, gasps, coughings. Then that faint *thump-*

*thump-thump* of pick-axes as from miles at the far end of the passage—and that stealthy, continuous whisper from the blackness, that deadly exhalation of gas.

"Spangler, you can't do it! It's murder—*slow murder*—!"



Spangler wrenched about to shout through the gas mask, "Shut up! Shut up that blating! You had your chance—"

Sure! Was it his fault McDowd hadn't thought to bring a mask? The same went for the chippy. Everywhere in London posters advised people to carry them. And hadn't he ordered McDowd out into the passage to stop up that broken main? McDowd had said it was no use—the burst pipe was somewhere under the stairs, buried, and the gas was seeping up through the rubble. Spangler fancied he could see it wisping out of the darkness; it created a moisture on his goggles. He drew his cuff across the goggles to clear the glass.

"—not even a man!" McDowd's hoarsened words came across the cellar. "No—!" coughing. "Not even half a man—"

Sweat broke on Spangler's forehead; he tried to glare ferocity through the goggles. A little more of that was all he needed. He'd pump something worse than gas down that flatfoot's throat. Slow murder? He'd speed it up for him! That chippy, too. She was crouched forward, hands in her hair, her mouth open like the ace of diamonds in a smudged playing card, emitting meaningless sounds.

Spangler tried to shout at her to keep the handkerchief over her face, if for nothing better than to get it out of his sight.

She sounded like a cat on a roof. The wailing went on. It followed Spangler's pacing. McDowd's hoarse calls breaking in. And the other sounds—that far-away *thump-thump* (why didn't those diggers hurry)—that damned leaking sound—and the bad air of the mask made a buzzy swelling sensation in Spangler's head—his temples throbbed—he quickened his stride, walking back and forth in a tension that was persistent, maddening.

"I tell you now, Spangler—no man could do it—!"

McDowd's face looked puffed; he sat with his hand clutched to his opened collar, hiccoughing. Spangler halted to regard this in cold fascination. Was the guy passing out? It would be the fault of those A.R.P's. If they got here in time the girl and the bull, too, would be saved. Now the girl's face was suffused. Asphyxiation? They said they turned sort of pink. Like that suicide in a boarding house up on Seventh-ninth Street, once—

McDowd, looking up blearily, said through a spasm of coughs, "Not half a man—or you couldn't stand there and watch us die—suffocate—"

Spangler shouted through the gas mask, "Nuts! You wanted to take my life, didn't you? My life! Shut me up permanent—yeah!—slow death!—what's slower death than that?" His shouts issued from the tubing as half-articulate squeaks, and he tried to bellow, infuriated at inability to make himself heard, "There wouldn't be no rescue squad diggin' me out! Like they're tunneling for you! They're coming, ain't they? Up there now! It's up to them—!"

**T**HUMP-THUMP-THUMP. Why didn't the lousy British ever hurry? That gas-sound was hurrying. Issuing from the passage it seemed to crawl up under Spangler's clothes, trickle up through the short hairs of his legs, his spine, exploring his whole skin. In a pall, he saw the girl slide off the bench and thump

down on her knees; grasp McDowd by the knees and appeal up to him in hysterical supplication.

"Don't let me die! Save me! 'Oly God! don't let me die—!"

McDowd looked at Spangler drunkenly. His face was sickish, flabbied, glazed in perspiration so that it shone in the light like one of those shiny, artificial-looking, bilious lemon pies in a Broadway restaurant window. McDowd's voice sounded artificial, too, like a talking Victrola record running down under a scratchy needle.

"Just a punk, you are, Spangler. Guts? You've got no guts! Not even half a man—with guts—would stand there and let a woman die—wouldn't offer a woman his mask—!"

Spangler took a forward step, violently. "My mask?" he forced the shout. "To *that*?"

The woman swiveled on her knees. "The mask!" her outreaching hand shook. "Give it to me—give me a chance—just for a bit, that's all—for a little while!"

Spangler recoiled, gripping the gun. Cheap little gym!

"She's a woman, Spangler!" McDowd husked out. "A woman! But you're no man—no American—not half! A rat like Hitler—that's you—let women and children die for you—cold blood—"

"Yes, yes!" the woman screamed, moving toward Spangler on her knees, scrubbing her knee-caps on the flooring. "My children! That's why I can't die! My five little children! They won't 'ave no mother!"

She made to catch Spangler by the legs, and he sidestepped, raging at her; she fell, head in elbows, beating her toes against the floor. Her tantrum seemed to sway the flooring under Spangler. He was sick of her; hated her; wished she were dead a thousand times. The mask on his face was like suffocation, the sounds in his ears welled to pandemonium, his head seemed on the point of bursting.

McDowd was shouting in a voice strengthened, basso, "A real man would take his chances—of living until those diggers got us out! You'd risk it like a gentleman! You'd give the woman your mask—"

McDowd would do it, probably. Probably he would. A fool like him. "I'm no fool!" Spangler squalled. "I've worked years on this! Mapped it out! Planned every step of it! Chance for a decent living! Security to the end of my life! You think I'd chuck it now? What? I've a quarter million bucks in that bag! A girl waiting in—not any fluzzy! So I'm not going to croak like a smothered dummy in this blasted hole—for no sob stuff. I'm getting out see!"

*Thump-thump-thump!* No nearer.

McDowd gurgling; sagging back on the bench, hand to throat.

Moans from the groveling figure on the floor. "My children—my poor, motherless children—"

That stealthy whispering.

"You'd give her the mask!" McDowd rearing up, panting. "Spangler! She's a woman!"

"Woman be—!" As he tore the canvas from his face he seemed to be tearing loose part of his head. Grimacing, empurpled,



he flung the mask down at the girl. "Put it on, then! Keep it! Cover that face of yours, will you? But don't think I fell for that children stuff. Nuts!"

Stepping over her, Spangler sat down on his suitcase. "And you!" he jeered, glaring hotly at McDowd, "don't think you're the only fathead around here who can take it!"

He reached into his pocket after a cigarette, intending to show the copper that Jerry Spangler could go out in his boots as well as any bull; then he wondered if it was safe to light a match, and while he was hesitating, considering this, there was a commotion out in the passage, a crackle of tumbled kindling and rubble, a gust of fresh air rushing through.

A far-away voice called, "Hi, down there! Are you there?"

Hardly aware of the reflex, Spangler was on his feet; stepping blindly toward the dark aperture, he uttered a relief-born cry.

In that unguarded instant Spangler was caught. McDowd's flying tackle pinned the slighter man with the quickness of jujitsu.

Nailed as by a two-hundred pound trap, Spangler struggled helplessly in a practised grip that numbed and held his arms like a strait-jacket. He knew better than to make an outcry as he felt the pistol twisted from his hand. He merely endured in an agony of hatred, biting an anguished underlip. Then McDowd released him; spun him around to face the gun.

Quivering, white, Spangler raised enfeebled hands.

"All right, stinky! You win."

"Sit down," McDowd said without emotion. "If you jump me, Jerry, I'll break your arm. It'll take a few minutes before the A.R.P.'s get through to us. Keep your lip buttoned. That goes for you, too," he touched the girl's shoulder lightly with his foot. "Peep out of turn and I'll hand you over to the constable for frisking that soldier. From now on I'll do the talking."

**B**IG BEN timing the thinning, sceneless drizzle at five. Two shadows in the graying black-out, strolling. At the corner



where the street-canyon curved like an elbow, the wider-girthed shadow halted.

"This the street, Jerry?"

"I guess so."

"All right," McDowd said. "If I let go your arm and you duck, I'll knock you dead."

"I bet," Spangler's voice came bitter. "You hold all the aces now, don't you, big shot? But I'm tellin' you one thing, McDowd. You're not big enough—the boat ain't big enough that's goin' to take me back to do a life stretch under the Baume's Law."

"Baume's Law?" McDowd sounded surprised. "That's not what you're wanted for, Jerry. We're after you this trip for murder."

Spangler said in a low voice, "Murder—?"

"That's right," McDowd said flatly. "Homicide. Why I came to England after you. Rosa Sharon—the torch singer you use to waltz around—shot in her dressing room at Lefty's."

Spangler snarled, "I didn't—"

McDowd interrupted amiably, "The handbills say you did. Jerome Spangler. Wanted for murder. Your wrist-watch, the strap broken, found in the songbird's room and—"

"So that's where—!" Spangler pulled a breath. Blurted, "It was fixed! It's a frame! I didn't do it!"

McDowd said, "I know you didn't. The busted wrist-watch was supposed to indicate a fight. But Sharon was shot twice through the back. I always figured the killer must've crept up and let her have it. I found out you wouldn't've done that,

Jerry. When I gave you that Third Degree about the gas. It wasn't gas, if you don't mind my tellin' you, but a steam pipe I turned on when I went out there in the passage—only my act made the girl think she was dyin', and with your mask on you couldn't smell, anyway—well, I found out what I wanted. Any man who would give his gas mask to a dame like that isn't the man to shoot a woman in the back."

Spangler's voice was small. "Steam! That's a hot one! But I'll tell you one, you're so smart. There ain't any bullets in that gun of mine. I chucked the clip after I took it off a dead A.R.P. in night-before-last's air raid. I was keeping it for a souvenir. I never carry loaded artillery."

McDowd was silent a moment. Then the pistol in his hand made a *click*. He chuckled.

"I didn't think you killed that Sharon dame."

"Well—?" Spangler's tone implied he was waiting. When McDowd made no response, he asked bluntly, "Where do we go from here, McDowd?"

"I'm going to the Park Hotel, if it's still there, and go to bed," McDowd said pleasantly. "If you care to turn up tomorrow and arrange to go back to New York with me and clear yourself of that murder charge—if you've the guts I think you have—I'll see the D.A. gives you a break. Meantime," McDowd said pleasantly, "I'll stand here by the corner a minute. You better take that suitcase of junk and chuck it back into that jeweler's window. They'll get you with it sure at the Customs if you don't, and there's a death sentence in London for looting."

# CALL HIM MISTER

By B. E. COOK

Author of "Cap'n Hardy Comes Home," "The Greatest Valor," etc.



..... "and Nowhere  
Is the Emergency so  
Great as in the Shipping  
Lanes"

I BEEN a sailor long enough to leave the running o' the ship to the bridge where it belongs. I figure they tell a bosun what's wanted of us on deck and I expect to take orders from him on that account. But I been in this business quite awhile and I've yet to see two bosuns alike.

Take the one we had on the *Chalice*. That guy hooked his elbows and shoved his head for'd every time he showed up to bark. He tore round with the heat on most the time. We A.B.'s knew his kind, we let 'im rave and kept the same old pace; a sailor can't drive hisself to a rust scraper and expect to heave up his share when we get the lines, y'know.

This bosun went too far, though. He

jumped on "Mister" Hines for teachin' a coupla ord'naries how to bend a snubline to a hawser when you've got to lead a bight of it over the capstan. True, they were on the stern to paint deck and Mister was out there splicing a new eye in an old hawser. But greenhorns 'ave to learn and there's no better man to learn from on the *Chalice* or any other coastwise ship than old Mister.

They started callin' 'im Pop till we stopped it. "He's 'Mister' whether you put on the 'Hines' or not," says Ed Gross. Ed could 'ave told 'em why; he didn't bother. Y'see, Mister Hines had been up this way once. The other war had made plenty of good skippers like him, they say, but the Big Let-Down after the boomtimes

ruined 'em. Mister had ferried shells below and about ev'rything else on top to France with the seas rollin' to her guard rails. Pretty big shots had said pretty flat-terin' things to Cap Hines those days when the stuff had to cross the pond quick. I understand the army took a coupla new ideas on cargo stowage from him, too.

But the Big Let-Down about 1930 took, too. It took 'im outa circulation. Maybe it drained the best outa him; it's risky business loadin' explosives and dodgin' U-boats with 'em. Mister might 'ave lost sleep that wore 'im out.

Anyway it's another war we got. It's another big scam for ships and men that knows 'em, and more grain and shells to get past more U-boats, and all that. So old Mister come back into it again and he got in like a magazine salesman—I mean with his toe in the crack o' the door or not at all. He had to come on as sailor.

And this yappin' Bosun Curry ridin' him. Curry never knew he was razzin' a former skipper; if we'd told 'im he'd laughed at us. He watches Mister show the ord'naries what to do with a snubline. He's hiding back o' the corner o' the galley till just the instant, see. Then out he jumps, hooks back his elbows, shoves out his head and yells, "Loafin', eh? Can't turn my back on you. And you, Pop, call y'rself an able seaman!"

"But, Bosun," says Mister in his calm way, "you and I had to learn seamanship. These lads must learn it."

"From me and from the Third that runs 'em here aft when we dock and get the lines. Not from you when you're here to splice a line!"

You can see how they looked. Curry may have passed for a punk bosun but Mister seemed like a veteran givin' two kids the benefits of his long experience. He sat there in clothes as neat as my shore-goin' suit; he never wore the blue dungarees we did. He never wore dirty shirts beyond the next eight bells; he kept clean, dark neckties that looked as dignified as hisself.

You'd 'ave mistaken him for one of the officials in the plant on the dock if you'd come along any time.

Now he took up his fid and went on splicing. He could keep his tongue the best I ever see in any man.

But that was one o' the things that always heckled Curry. He wanted back talk, that guy. It made 'im feel his importance. "Hey, you," he snarls, "I'm talkin' to you."

Mister kept on splicing. "Yes, yes," without even a glance from what he was doin'. "I'll remember what you've said. Sorry."

**B**IG Ed Gross was our union leader. He checked up our claims f'r overtime with the Mate and he usually called our meetings. That night in the fo'castle he says to me, "We gotta make that Curry sick o' this ship. He stinks."

"Ed," says I, "a guy like that is so set up to be ratin' petty officer he'll beg f'r his job if you try it. I mean he'll take the row to the Old Man."

"Not if we was to get 'im drunk ashore and bring 'im back banged all to hell with a quart on 'is hip," Jake throwed in.

"Yeah," I put in, "that has been done—with results to show."

Big Ed objected. "Some of us got A.B. tickets and lifeboat ratings we don't aim to risk on that stuff. And the Old Man on this one's too wise, he'd see right through it."

"See through what?" an ord'nary hol-lered in.

"Quiet, kid. He musta seen Curry's style, he knows who'd beat the pants off o' that scum. 'Twouldn't work, I tell you."

"So what? You're our big shot here; you do our talkin', so what?"

Big Ed grinned only an instant. "I'm for gettin' Mister to quit with us. Hell, they's plenty o' ships in here without men enough. I know, I been up to the hall."

"Okay by me," says I.

"Any ship that old guy signs on, I'll

take the same chance," said Jake, and the ord'naries nodded.

"That means report Curry to Headquarters."

"And that means a rotten crew for the *Chalice*. It's the only kind o' crew'll take his gaff, and next he knows he'll ketch hell from the Mate and plenty soon the Old Man's gonna come in to port sayin', 'Mate, get rid o' that Curry pest in here this time'."

Now Big Ed happens to be big in other ways. He senses that Mister, bein' older'n most sailors, can't walk down one gangway till he sees the welcome sign up another one. So Ed talks to Mister out there on the stern in the night where Mister always sits and smokes on a coil o' line.

Says he to Mister, "I'll go uptown along o' you, see? Together we'll get a shipshape for us and Jeff and Beamis. We'll even spot one for the ord'naries; I know the deskman and that union delegate is a friend o' mine—"

By 'n by, Mister gets up and stretches. He knocks out his pipe and says, "Ed, you are a good hearted man at that, we'd better turn in now. Tomorrow's another long, hot day of chipping rust and I've got to mix the bosun's paint for him." With that for our pains, he quietly went below to bed.

SO WE all turned to at eight next mornin'. The *Chalice* had been in bulk cargo until this time. We'd brought coal to the Public Gas Corp. plant. Soon as it was out, we'd cleaned the hold for—well, that was the question. What would we load and where to? We heard a lotta yam about goin' to the West Indies in a general cargo, and to Florida for rock, and to South America with coal from the Roads. A lotta gab, mind, but no cargo yet.

We hauled into the stream and anchored to wait for orders. The skipper, he stayed ashore to find out about everything. Times were sure gettin' queer; coal was comin' north by rail, they said, and ships were

bein' shifted to new trades. The First came around and talked like a Mate that don't want to have to dig up a new crew. The Second—there's a good guy!—he kidded Ed sometimes like he didn't want us to get sick o' layin' to an anchor goin' nowhere. Once Jake heard the Third say to Curry, "Boy, I haven't been across the Line since I was an ord'nary seaman!"

All this time the Second got just one day ashore. After he'd been back a few hours and talked at mess, we heard one oiler sayin', "The trouble is we've got us one mate whose ticket ain't what's wanted for deep-water runs."

"So that's the delay maybe," I says.

"Yeah," says Big Ed, "and here we've got Mister in the fo'castle with a master's experience!"

"But no license now, you can see that." But Ed's got an idea there and so I keep after 'im till he packs a lotta nerve and trades on the good treatment he's been gettin' from the First. He steers for the First on the four-to-eight watches.

He goes for'd when the First is out on his campchair after sundown all easy and relaxed up there. He talks it to the First to put the bug in the Old Man's best ear and shove Mister into the Third's place if third's the weak license. And what does it get 'im? Well, Ed's the union tops aft so the First doesn't get rough, o' course. At the same time the First just happens to let on that him and that squirt Third are slightly connected by marriage. And the helluv it all is we're layin' to anchor for a technicality—with an old-timer, a sober gentleman skipper in the fo'castle! Can you imagine buryin' a guy like Mister aft in times like these? And keepin' a squawk like Curry to shut 'im up f'r showin' ord'naries how to snub a line?

I saw one of the ord'naries head for the paint locker for'd with his long handle scraper. There goes more trouble for Mister, says I to m'self, but I knew where the bosun was and he could see any move I'd make. I set tight. Pretty soon I saw Mis-



ter in the doorway. He was pointin' away aft. He was sendin' the kid to the bosun instead o' showing 'im how to grind that edge—or even takin' time to tell 'im how it had too much cheek on it. Mister had told Curry he'd remember what Curry'd said to him. He was rememberin' to the letter.

The kid goes to the bosun. Bosun hollers, "You ain't used it enough to know whether it'll scrape or not." They have a few minutes like that because the kid hangs to an argument and this time makes out he can't get the hang o' grinding unless he's shown how.

Next I hear bosun slam things down and stomp for the emery wheel in the lathe room below aft with the kid in tow. He's gonna grind that iron hisself. By 'n by, out they come. Curry, lookin' our way, hands the kid the scraper like an expert and all that. Oh yeah, we got the idea.

About then a bumboat brings the Old Man aboard and we soon find out we're chartered for somewhere in the Gulf. The big thing now is hurry. Bosun Curry aims to have all the scrapin' on the main deck done, all the paintin' on the stern finished. We're gonna sail tonight and, mind, we're s'posed to go on sea watches at noon on sailin' day.

In the rush, the kid puts his beef to his scraper. But the bosun has rounded one corner of it and left the cheek on it and done a cock-eyed job in general. The thing slews out o' the kid's control. It fetches up against Jake's right shoe. It slices along the side, opens the leather and blood comes out.

Believe me, the Old Man hisself had to dress that long cut and he almost prayed out loud when he saw the cords to Jake's little toe and the next one. Later on he had a talk with the First. The First had one with Curry. Bosun Curry had the ignorance to argue till the First got mad and roared, "Never mind your yelling to me. If you can't put an edge on a scraper there must be an A.B. who can.

That old feller—and here Jake's got to steer with one foot taped tight and his weight all on the other one. You're a helluva bosun!"

Most men would 'ave tamed down after that layout. Not Curry. That ref'rence to Mister stuck in his craw. He looked up old Mister, paintin' the black on the red lead aft. He bawled him out f'r sendin' the kid to 'im.

"But you ordered just that, Bosun."

"I—you—Pop, you finish this job."

When I went aft to supper, Mister was paintin'. Says I, "You ought to be in your bunk. Your wheel trick's at eight tonight."

"This has to be done before we sail, you know," says he.

He looked pretty weary to me when I took over at midnight. Says I, after repeatin' his course, "Lay over in the mornin', I'll take your watch till you wake up natural."

"No, you can't do that," says he. "Jake is lame, that's bad enough so that you and I both might have to stand some of his watches here at the wheel. We've got to take things as they come and help where help is needed most."

"Mister," I whispered, "if any other shipmate I ever knew was to talk that stuff to me I'd bust 'im one. You're a fine sailor, sir." I meant it.

**B**UT I didn't forget the dirty trick Curry had sprung on 'im. Nor did the rest o' the sailors anyway. We couldn't all get together to yam it out, bein' on sea watches. Some of us met up at the coffee urn in the galley and that way we come to agree on two things: Mister's not goin' to be the goat because he's an older man, and Curry's gone too far. What to do about this? Stop it. How? Huh, one says sit down when we get to dock; another's for takin' the row straight to bosun in his own room; someone else wants Big Ed should see the First, and so on.

By the time we made it to Hatteras, Big

Ed as usual laid the plan. He calls it "the Denmark treatment" by which he means hold y'r tongue whenever or where you deal with Curry. Say nothing to him. Just obey orders. Maybe this sounds silly to you, huh? Brother, you've never worked aboard a cargo ship. There's only about thirty men in your little world and talk can mean a lot to a petty officer, because he's neither in with the after gang nor in the know with the officers for'd. He's one of four guys in a mess by themselves and the other three are from the engine room. He's the odd one there.

So, whenever the sailors give a sour bosun the Denmark treatment, they work on his nerves. It's been known to drive a guy on a long deep-water trip nuts.



We didn't pass the word along to Mister this time. "He's too damned good to try anything," says Big Ed. "They say the meek'll get the whole earth sometime but this ain't the time. I reckon old Mister's born too soon, for that stuff just don't work nowadays."

Bein' on sea watches and so divided into three lots, we made a go of it and Mister maybe didn't catch on really. When the Second plotted the ship on latitude 27 north, we had Curry's goat; he couldn't get a word outa anybody. So we took the next step; ev'ry time we worked under 'im on deck, we brought ev'ry fool thing straight to him. Mostly we sent the green ord'naries to him.

'Twasn't long 'fore Curry's friend, the Third, took his part. The Third hated our hides because we'd sent Big Ed to the First about usin' Mister in Third's place. Remember? Well, he started to ride us on

deck, out aft. He gives Mister hell on watch about it, because he's got Mister at the wheel from eight to twelve and the Old Man's not there all the time.

Mister makes no talk whatever up there; he's a vet'ran, he knows more about Third's job than Third'll ever know. Mister ain't aboard ship all over again to sell himself to third mates—or to sell out to 'em. He just minds his own business and wears clean clothes and dark ties.

We were somewhere east, they said, of that island Columbus discovered when I noticed a change coming over Mister. He was lettin' his beard grow out and it gradually made 'im over—so it seemed to me anyway. That is, he got more dignified than ever. And I swear I thought he was more comfortable in spite of the heat we were runnin' into.

One night we were s'posed to nose into Mouchoir Pass with a batch o' rocks and small islands to starb'd that the mates called Turk Islands next the Caicos. It was the Third's watch and o' course the skipper wasn't leavin' that guy alone up there. But he did have to watch the chart. Well, Mister had the wheel. Bein' both dark and hazy and the dark o' the moon and few stars out, the skipper was anxious to spot those rocks to the southeast o' Big Turk's. He peered out ahead and to starb'd a lot. He kept checkin' our position as figured on the chart. Back and forth, from chart room to bridge, I mean, he hurried the way any skipper might do when it was his first trip down here in years and almost thick o' fog.

He ducked in for another look at the chart just 'fore the fog really did shut down. It had crawled up on us fr'm somewhere abaft beam—before he got back outside. Now in a case like that, some Thirds would blow the whistle anyway, others'd wait for the Old Man to order it. Our Third didn't even think of it. He didn't so much as call the cap'n outside f'r it. No, he was starin' into the fog and mutterin', "By the jumpin' saints I saw

something—dead ahead—it's gone in the fog."

He wheeled around and they say he looked anxious. The cap'n still had the light on over the chart and that Third, brother, daresn't yell to 'im for fear the Old Man'd think he was less fit f'r 'is job than he already thought. He says quick 'nd sharp to old Mister at the helm, "Didn't you see that big pile of rock ahead close on?"

Mister looked up fr'm his compass. Before his eyes could travel up as far as the Third's face, he saw a dark mass come walkin' at the ole *Chalice's* bows. It came dead on. Mister barked out, "Hard a-starb'd!" and whirled his spokes.

Cap'n Manley heard that voice and came on the run. He found the Third at the for'd rail outside gapin' in awe at the nasty hump o' rock, his hands clamped to the rail, his mouth wide open. And well he might gape because the Old Man had trusted 'im to keep a sharp eye out and he had turned away—in fog he hadn't reported yet—to ask a helmsman had he seen rock close on!

The *Chalice* didn't strike, she rode onto a long point o' that rock comin' out our way under water. Mister by his quick thinkin' had saved us fr'm a head-on smash that would 'ave sunk us in cussed few minutes. But it had been too late to swing clear of the rock altogether. Get what I mean?

So we rode up onto a streak of it. The ship scraped to a gradual stop and the Old Man pulled the telegraph levers down to Stop Engine. We were there. How long?

The Third had no ideas at all now, he was that upset. Fog sneaked through the wheelhouse and the other mates came climbing. Also the Chief.

"What's the matter now?" he asked.

Cap'n Manley sent the First below with us A.B.'s to inspect the cargo and get to the hull plates to see how they'd stood the shock. We found plenty o' work shiftn' all that cargo necessary to get to bottom but she wasn't leakin' bad. Not yet any-

way. When we climbed out, the First reported this o' course and says he, "I'd say she's resting some'at on her keel, Cap'n, and not much of a buckling there either."

"Can't we reverse and swing her off?" the Second puts in.

Cap'n Manley let them do the talkin'. He saw that the Chief had gone back aft. He went to the speaking tube, whistled down it and said, "We'll try to swing her off astern, Chief. . . . That's the way she looks to me, yes. . . . I'd say about half the length of her. With the weight of your engines there aft. . . . I don't aim to shift cargo till I know what to shift and where to."

The *Chalice* throbbed and swung. You could feel the crunchin' of her bottom on the rock. They'd told me you can load salt on Big Turk's, but this wasn't salt rock we'd rid onto. It grated and ground but it refused to let go of her.

Time and again they tried, full astern and swing her tail. Time and again she crunched and pounded and lathered the water out fr'm under the fog aft. Not one inch could anybody see she'd moved off, not one. Once the Third caught the First alone in a bridge wing. He talked to the First like a criminal in a panic and beggin' f'r mercy. The First asked 'im a question. He answered it and talked faster till he was laying out somebody to beat hell.

My watchmate and me were standin' at the head of a companionway and I says to that ord'nary, "I smell more trouble, kid. That rat's found 'imself a alibi."

In those taut times when the engine throbbed and the crunchin' went on deep under us, I saw plenty. Bosun, he came up and got in a few questions to the Third. When the Third split his story, the bosun says loud enough for me to catch, "Oh, sure . . . sure. Didn't I tell you . . . has-been's no business aboard this ship—nor any ship."

By 'n by the Old Man wipes 'is face and yanks at his collar and says, "A fine kettle

o' fish! Night, fog, current bearing to the west'ard, half on and half off, hanging between both weights. Hell!"

He rang off the engine. The safety blew off to add noise to the mess. Over its noise he shouted to the Third, "What're you going to say about this? How're you logging it?"

The Third looked toward Curry and Curry just passed 'im up. He shifted his wild stare to the First and the First, bein' a sort of relative, I s'pose, encouraged 'im with a nod. Anyway he had to answer the Old Man whether he wanted all hands to hear it or not.

"I'm going to log the old man, my helmsman, sir," he spits out.

Cap'n Manley, o' course, was surprised. I was not, because I'd just seen that rat work up this idea to the First over there in the port wing.

"Explain," the skipper yelled. "What the hell's all this silence? Talk."

"I saw the rock. Fog shut in quick on us while you were at the chart. The rock disappeared before I was dead sure it was a rock. It came out into sight again suddenly. Before I could do or say a thing, sir, my helmsman whirled his helm and barked out, 'Hard a-starb'd!' I don't talk that language on the bridge, it's contrary to law. Next I knew, you were coming on the run. We rode onto this rock 'fore you could do anything about it—or me either. And that's what I aim to log, sir."

Brother, I could have choked that slimey eel 'nd expect a crown in heaven f'r doin' it. He was squirming out of his responsibility as the officer on watch on the bridge and dumpin' the blame onto old Mister. Why, if Mister hadn't laid her rudder hard left and laid it a lot quicker'n a man his age is expected to, we'd 'ave all been in the lifeboats a'ready.

I turned to the skipper. Was he gonna let this bare-faced trick get by? He was lookin' from the Third to the First. But the First set his face taut and pretended not to see he was s'posed to talk. I saw the

Second go inside the wheelhouse with a queer look on his face. It was a nasty situation all right.

What would the Old Man do now? Had he been taken in? Why had he come runnin' just as quick as he'd heard old Mister bark? That must 'ave sounded strange because it was the old sailing master jumpin' out o' the past; I figured that Mister had suddenly become a cap'n again for one little instant. Did Cap'n Manley get that or was it too much o' my wild imagination workin' overtime without a cent o' time-'nd-a-half pay for it?

I pitied the old guy. He stood there with his half grown beard hiding 'is face. But the gray eyes were steady, they even had a clear and I-was-right look. Yeah, Mister could take it and he was takin' it.

Cap'n Manley was watchin' him now. I s'pose it was the lack o' good light, anyway the cap'n had to watch quite a while and I almost thought a new look got into his critical stare. But it must 'ave been wishful thinkin' on my part because he talked hard at the old sailor.

"You changed course without orders to do so?" he demanded o' Mister.

"I—yes, sir," Mister confessed. He waved an arm toward our starb'd beam, though, and those of us that looked that way could make out the big dark rock showin' through the fog. That, brother, is what we'd 'ave rammed head-on!

I guess the Old Man didn't look. Says he, "You heard the Third, he says you even did more. You barked out your own order to change course. Right?"

"That is right, Cap'n. I'm sorry."

"Oh, you are! Then you admit—Very well. Since you took on so much, what's your idea for getting off o' this rock you steered us onto?"

I rather guess that Mister remembered the trouble he'd got into by offerin' advice about snublines to two ord'naries. He stands there in his bearded dignity, as Big Ed later called it. He takes plenty o' time to think. Then, when good and ready, he



says with deep respect, "Cap'n, I'm only a common able seaman, I don't offer—"

Cap'n Manley got the drift of what he was going to say. He had a ship on a rock shoulder in thick o' fog. He evidently had made up 'is mind to something and wasn't goin' to stand here arguin'. "I can take ideas from sailors as well as from officers," he interrupted Mister. "What's yours for getting back into deep water with a fairly sound double bottom to go on with?"

Mister seemed to study his face. He chafed at his whiskers. He said very quietly, "May I go overside in one o' the boats, sir?"

That rat Curry let go a horse laugh. The Third echoed it quick to get in on the first sign of a general razzberry. The First watched the skipper and risked about half a grin—but he kept watchin' the skipper, mind, to be on the safe side.

Without a warnin', the Second stepped out o' the wheelhouse and said, "I'll go overside with 'im, Cap'n. We'll use Number One lifeboat."

"Go ahead," says the Old Man, "and for cripesake get about it."

**I** COUNTED m'self lucky to get an oar in that boat. I expected to go up for third mate's exams soon, I was all for learnin' ev'rything there was. I learned plenty. I rather guess the Second picked up sev'ral things about a ship's underwater parts and design and behavior hisself.

And do you know, brother, we weren't down there on the water under the fog three minutes 'fore old Mister was the master o' the situation? All hands seem to 'ave forgot he was a sailor aft.

He had us ease along the port side for'd, then aft. He pointed to the plimsol almost under water because o' the slight list. That for some reason suited 'im, though what the devil old Mister had in his mind was his secret.

We rowed slow round the stern and as far up the starb'd side as—well, the rock

was under us when he sized up the situation there as if it simply tallied with what he'd seen on the port side. Then, to our surprise, he lifted a coil o' light line off o' the sternsheets with a chunk of iron on the end of it. I mean the ole duffer took 'im a few very careful, quick soundings, b' jumps!

Back under the stern, he says to the Second, "Not an Isherwood bottom, is she, sir?"

"No. V-bottom."

"More of a keel than an Isherwood then," Mister says to that.

"That's right. You seem to know—"

"Not so much of her touching the rock then," Mister cut in as though he had no time f'r pers'nals now.

And he hadn't. Somewhere overhead aboard, the First yelled down to us. He wanted to know what in hell— Not one of us bothered to yell back; it might interfere with things.

Out there under the stern Mister insisted we put 'im close to the big propeller. He tried to see the top blade but o' course it was too dark to see that much so he reached for it and his hand was rovin' there under water quite a spell. Finally says he, "Let's get back aboard, sir."

On the way to the danglin' boatfalls he talked a lot o' propeller science I'd never even heard of to the Second. A lot about pitch and thrust 'r scope—all too almighty deep f'r us on the oars—and I'm not so sure he wasn't miles over the second mate's head that time.

When we went up the falls and aboard, the First says, "Hell, we didn't know but you were all lost in the fog."

Nobody answered that.

He turned to the Second with, "What could take you so everlasting long? And us all waiting, steam blowing off, fog getting thicker and——"

They went on up to the bridge while we set the boat down and snugged it shipshape. But I made it to the bridge m'self as fast as I could get there. I arrived to

hear the Old Man shout, "What? Ahead?"

And Mister's quiet voice answered 'im, "In a way yes, sir. Ahead and swing her nose out in a turning motion. I had a V-bottom job in a—" Mister broke off; he had started to break his rule o' not talkin' about hisself. But he got it in time and went on with, "She's riding almost entirely on her keel and the slight list to port is favorable, being on the offshore beam."

"So you think it'd get off this cussed rock by speed ahead," Cap'n Manley said so low and easy that some of us wondered how he happened to take an old sailor so serious anyway.

He could surprise you, and still can, that Old Man o' the *Chalice*. One minute y' see him debatin' to hisself, the next y' know he's in action. He shoved up the telegraph levers to Half Ahead. He said, "Here, Mister, it's your helm, stand by to handle her. We'll give it a try."

Mister looked like a pilot right then. His dignified beard and his sudden responsibility sort o' made 'im appear taller. But he just said, "My helm, sir," and manned the wheel.

He swung the ship's nose to port and turned to see as much as he could o' the length of her. He asked the skipper for full speed ahead.

"She's caught on about halfway the length of her, what?" the skipper asked as he hoisted the telegraph levers to Full Ahead.

"It is slightly abaft the center of weight as I figure it, sir."

"Yeah, but she's hanging like a balanced rod."

"I know," Mister admitted, "but the thrash and thrust of her screw ought to tilt her till she throws more weight for'd than aft." He kept a close watch of the vibrating ship as he talked.

The First stood off there in a wing; he sure thought the Old Man was loco to-night, lettin' one of us sailors experiment this way. The Third said, "Has Sparks showed up yet in this here jam?" The Old

Man resented that "in this here jam"; I never did see a skipper yet that would hear a tough situation called a "jam" without seein' red. He gave that Third a dirty look and set his lips.

But the *Chalice* still was on the rock and her engine shakin' her to beat Lucifer's match factory. After some long three minutes o' that goings on, Mister sensed what was sure comin' into the skipper's mind. Says he, "Cap'n, shall we stop the engine for a look-see?"

Another sudden silence. It was bad. It shouted failure for old Mister's theories. It made the Third bold enough to blatt out, "Well! That's that." It made the Second resent the remark enough to snap back, "Hell, I almost thought you'd taken over, Third."



But Cap'n Manley was a very fair guy and that night he was that plus. He held back 'is opinions while Mister went into both wings and looked down aft and up for'd as though he really hoped to see progress that wasn't there. He came back to her helm and said evenly, "Cap'n, might I have Big Ed Gross to the helm for another try?"

Big Ed was there 'fore the Old Man could say so. Instead he said, "Go on, I'll keep an eye out, try once more; you're doing her no harm I can see and our other way failed. Go on."

"Yes, sir." Mister checked the helm's telltale. "Keep her hard a-starb—hard left till I say," he told Ed. He went to the telegraph and lifted the brass levers. But

he didn't start off with Half Ahead to ease 'er into the fight as before, he called f'r Full Ahead, more than full, ev'rything at one big blast.

The engineer standing by down there aft was sure a quick man. He let 'er engine have it just as fast as it could absorb the steam past the sleeve valves. The screw raised a terrific bust of lather aft and all along the counters. Her stern rose and fell in vicious jumps. She trembled the whole length o' her. Even here up top we could feel 'er when she started to rock 'erself. That rockin' soon got even like drumbeats. It started up that old grindin' noise under her keel, this time at a louder pitch. She began to shake 'erself unmercifully, too—and old Mister said to Big Ed, "Hard—hard right helm."

Her tail swung out from the big rock in the fog, that big smear like a high wall there to starb'd that echoed our noises in the dark. Her nose wore round toward—well, we didn't pretend to know what might be off there. Was it more o' the rock or open water beyond the southeast end of it? They seemed to agree that this rock was the most easterly of the lot.

The *Chalice* lay more degrees over on 'er port side till I heard the First yip out, "Geel!" The Third made tracks into the starb'd wing. The Old Man stood square amidships and watched the change with his face taut an' drawn. That's the devil o' goin' master; live like a prince f'r weeks 'nd months on end, then find y'rself in a fix like this. It sure ages 'em.

All at once old Mister decided the listin' and grindin' had gone far 'nough. He didn't touch that telegraph, though. With that terrific power haulin' tons o' water fr'm under 'er, he ordered Big Ed to crawl her over to hard left wheel.

"Slo-o-ow and easy, boy," he coaxed. Sounded like a doctor.

The move raised a bigger grindin' than ever, under her keel. Instead o' rightin' herself, she stayed sev'ral degrees on that same port list and swung. All at once I

felt another motion underfoot. I saw the First wheel and stare toward the binnacle. I heard the Third clear 'is throat the way he always did in a tight squeak. The Second took a cool look along aft—and old Mister? Well, brother, that good ole guy was actually up on 'is toes!

For the ole *Chalice* was moving. She was doin' a curve over that cussed rock. Sure she lay still farther over on 'er side. Sure she crunched as if 'er keel was comin' through the coal pulverizers. But movin' she cert'nly was! She heeled and rasped rock and Big Ed—with Mister close to 'is left ear, mind—Big Ed crawled those spokes up a few—

"Three more spokes—hold it," says Mister.

She got quieter. "Hard down again. Lively!" says Mister.

With that new shock or change or—or something, the ship got another start on herself. She gave us all a start, too. For she half advanced, what I mean, and half slid herself abeam off the rock. We were back into deep water before I realized. Only when she reeled back onto even keel did I or the mates get another good breath o' fog.

But that Cap'n Manley never once had changed his feet. No, sir. And now it was done, he saw her on through the fog into the southeast till he felt sure we were back into the Pass all right. Then, brother, he—no, you won't b'lieve this one. But I'm tellin' it. He went into the chart room with his left arm over old Mister's shoulders.

NOW there's a lot more to this than clearin' a ship of a nasty rock on the eastern edge o' the Turk Islands. I mean people. Ships 're steel 'nd wood 'nd paint, y' know, and they're important as any one sees by the newest war on the North Atlantic. But men count more. In times like the present the licensed men count almighty big whether their licenses are fresh or old as a has-been

That brings me to Cap'n Manley leadin' old Mister into his chart room like a long lost brother. In a way, Mister was 'xactly that. What had happened was this—Old Mister had let 'is beard grow out.

The other war had made skippers over night, it seems. Mister Hines had rather suddenly found hisself a very young skipper ferryin' munitions below decks and ev'rything fr'm cattle 'nd horses to timber between the bulwarks. The strain was awful and it did something to him. 'Fore he got over the effects the war was done, a fit o' hard times set in and he was amongst the first to hit the beach.

In due time, so he says, he tried his best to get a ship, then to go First, then Second, finally Third. But the owners he'd sailed f'r passed out, sold their ships, junked some more 'nd ended it. Other lines went the same way. All this left Mister so out of things he never did get back in—till this new war began to shout f'r men.

Huh. By then there was no Cap'n Hines. His license had run out years and years ago and he was rather old. Owners are cagey, y' know, about trustin' their ships to has-been officers; also they never have been too hot f'r men that got those quick licenses in the other "emergency." So, all in all, old Mister was out of it f'r keeps.

But he couldn't see it. The sea was in 'im and he had to go. So what? He shipped as sailor. He actually convinced officials he had the stuff f'r that much. He got 'is lifeboat certificate easy. He showed a union delegate he was in the know—and how! Then he got a chance.

Now twenty-three years is a long time. It does things to any man's face and figure and ways o' movin' round. Yet, a man has cert'n little motions 'nd habits that do stick by 'im. Also, fix 'im up just so and he'll remind you of sometime the way he used to look.

That's what happened to Cap'n Manley. When old Mister come aboard—well,

it's the First that hires us; we mean nothin' to the skipper unless, like Big Ed, we go to 'im f'r things. Big Ed didn't go to the skipper but he did talk up old Mister to the First. Remember? And the First give bosun clutly once f'r that scraper grindin'. Remember that one, too? Well, the bosun really started what was to be the makin' of old Mister into a career again.

Yeah, bosun kicked about havin' an old man aft. Him 'nd the First both went to Cap'n Manley about it, one to complain and the other to tell the joke of Big Ed comin' for'd with a huge has-been story about that Hines f'r a mate maybe, if we got a deep water charter.

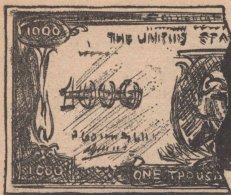
Cap'n Manley, o' course, started to notice this Hines. The man's ways, at times tickled 'is mem'ry. Hadn't he seen that person—somewhere? Under what conditions? Try his best, he couldn't say.

Until, at sea on the new charter to Port au Prince with general cargo f'r a return in coffee, old Mister let 'is whiskers grow. That did things to Mister; most of all, it covered most of 'is face 'nd made 'is eyes stand out. And Cap'n Manley, one night about two bells in the Third's watch, thought he saw Mister again. It was years ago on a bridge. Manley had been a kid ord'nary, Mister a very young cap'n with more Bowditch than experience. But Manley wasn't sure.

That was the night we rode onto the rock. In the second or so 'fore the crash, the Old Man heard old Mister bark out, "Hard a-starb'd!" That was the language of other years; that was the voice of Manley's first skipper.

So, need I say more? Sure we gave Curry the merry razz and when Cap'n Ferd L. Hines—thanks to Cap'n Manley—got a ship in this rush, we didn't let the Third f'rget it either. The only trouble it leaves me and Big Ed is, we don't know whether to stick by Cap'n Manley in the *Chalice* or sign on with Cap'n Hines.





# THE NAVY COLT



PART III

By FRANK GRUBER

*Author of "The Hungry Dog," "The Laughing Fox," etc.*

## SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED

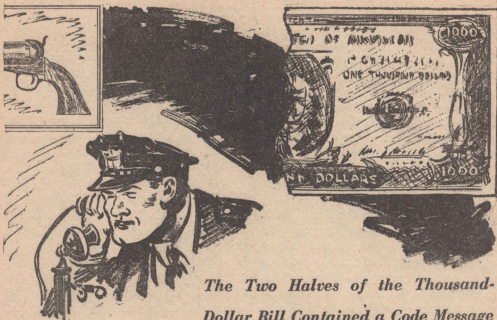
IN Frank Gruber's previous successful novels—serials in SHORT STORIES—*The Hungry Dog*, *The Laughing Fox* and *The French Key*, you met Johnny Fletcher, that astute book salesman and opportunist in any line, and Sam Cragg, his strong-arm guardian or stooge as necessity willed. When *The Navy Colt* opened Johnny and Sam were in Chicago, broke, and so when a young lady offered them \$10 to punch a certain party on the nose, it seemed a god-send.

They essayed the punch, but failed—moreover failed to get the man's red necktie which was to be proof of the assault. Instead, they took an unusual gun away from him—which later they find is a collector's item—a Navy Colt, once owned by Jesse James.

Meanwhile they raise funds by means

of their old game of book selling—learn from the papers that Maxwell—the man they were to assault—has been murdered. Johnny manages to see a Miss Spatz who is the chief witness in the Maxwell murder case—and decides she's a great liar. Rolled up in one empty chamber of the Navy Colt they discover one-half of a thousand-dollar bill and find that Hilda Nelson, the girl who promised them \$10 for the nose-punching, has the other half. And they learn her father is a collector of old firearms.

She wants to buy Johnny's half of the bill, but he is knocked out and the piece stolen before he can make the trade. Then they discover that Maxwell is still alive; then Johnny maneuvers Sam Cragg into reading a scenario he has written (Sam, it seems, has Hollywood aspirations) to a Ladies Literary Society—of all things; then Johnny and Sam are gathered in by the police.



*The Two Halves of the Thousand-Dollar Bill Contained a Code Message*

XV

"U H-UH, Benny doesn't know I'm grabbing you. We never double-cross each other. But Benny's got his job and I've got mine. So come along quietly."

Betty Travis moved out from the chairs. "You kept your word, Johnny Fletcher. You certainly provided laughs. Send me a postcard, will you?"

"Sure," said Johnny. "And will you wait for me until I come out?"

There was another detective behind the wheel of the limousine outside, but Lieutenant Beeler didn't bother to introduce him. He let Johnny and Sam climb into the tonneau, then got in and sat down between them.

"I coulda grabbed you sooner, Fletcher," he said, "but I was interested in hearing that story you were reading. Like to show it to the boys down at the station, if you don't mind."

"Wait until it comes to the McVickers Theatre," Johnny said, "then you can all go at once and see it. Sam'll send you free tickets."

"Thanks," said Lieutenant Beeler, "but I'd kinda like to know about that Navy Colt a little sooner; maybe now, huh?"

"What Navy Colt?"

"The one Cragg was writing about—the Jesse James gun. What say we run over to your hotel and take a look-see?"

Johnny exhaled heavily. "We're not staying at any hotel."

"No? Cragg said you were—in his story."

"That was only a story—a piece of fiction."

"Just the same, let's stop at the Potter House. Save me a lot of trouble if you are staying there and if a certain Navy Colt should happen to be in a certain closet."

"Do you doubt our word?" exclaimed Sam Cragg.

"No," said Lieutenant Beeler contentedly, "but I think you lie like hell." He leaned forward and touched his chauffeur on the shoulder. "The Potter House, Clarence."

A few minutes later the police car stopped in the No Parking Zone in front of the Potter House and Lieutenant Beeler and his driver, Clarence, got out and flanked Johnny and Sam.

"All right," Johnny conceded, then. "We're in Room 2009, but you're going to receive an awful disappointment. We haven't got a gun."

Lieutenant Beeler smiled and they all rode up to the twentieth floor in the elevator. Johnny unlocked the door of their room and said, "Help yourself, gents."

He crowded past Sam and suddenly nudged him in the stomach. Startled, Sam stared at Johnny.

Johnny led the way to the closet. "I'll unlock it for you," he volunteered. He put the key in the lock, turned it and twisted the door knob. But he let the door open only an inch or two.

Lieutenant Beeler reached past him and jerked the door open. Johnny gave him a quick shove into the closet and slammed the door. The lock snapped.

Simultaneously with Johnny's action. Sam Cragg wrapped his powerful arms about Clarence, the police chauffeur. The man yelled and struggled, and in the closet, Lieutenant Beeler kicked savagely at the door panels.

"Into the bathroom, Sam!" Johnny cried.

Sam threw the policeman violently into the bathroom, so that he fell forward over the tub and cracked his head on the tile wall. Sam jerked the bathroom door shut. By that time Johnny was already out in the hallway.

"Hurry, Sam!" he cried.

A muffled explosion sounded in the room; that was Lieutenant Beeler trying to shoot off the lock of the closet. He would be successful, no doubt—but too late.

Johnny and Sam rushed to the elevator banks and jamming buttons brought a car to a halt, within three seconds. Even so, Lieutenant Beeler's first yell was sounding around a corridor, as they stepped into the elevator.

But they were safe now. They reached the lobby floor and departed quickly from the hotel, by the side entrance. Sixty seconds later they were climbing the Elevated

stairs on Wabash and Adams, for a ride around The Loop—Johnny's idea of the best way to escape a police alarm.

When they finally came to the street on Van Buren, he steered Sam to Wells Street, where they boarded a north bound surface car that took them, in a half hour, to Division and Wells. From there Johnny walked Sam to Dearborn Street.

THEY turned north on Dearborn and every other building had a "Rooms" or "Vacancy" sign. Johnny picked out a three-story building that seemed more a hotel than a rooming house.

"All right," he said, "we're back to this. If you hadn't blabbed so much in that scenario of yours, we could have stayed at the Potter House, but now——"

"How was I to know a cop'd be at that club?" Sam defended himself. "Which reminds me, *you* brought that cop down on our necks."

"That reminds *me*," Johnny said savagely, "I'll tell that Beeler a thing or two."

They turned into the hotel, which according to a brass plate beside the door, was the *Ajax Arms*. A frowsy man of about fifty-five sat in a tiny office, reading a copy of *Secret Confessions*.

"We'd like a room for the night, Uncle," said Johnny.

"With a bath?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Sorry, Mister, we ain't got none. All I can give you is a room with a semi-private bath. And that'll cost you six bits apiece—in advance."

"Lead on. We're tired and we want to go to bed."

The hotel man put down his magazine with a sigh and led the way to the second floor. He opened a door, revealing a cubby hole that was just large enough for a double bed, a tiny chiffonier and a single chair.

"Where's the semi-private bath?" Johnny demanded.

"At the end of the hall. Only the folks

on this floor can use it, see—semi-private!"

Johnny gave the man a dollar and a half and a dirty look. When he had gone, Johnny went to the chair and sat down on it. Sam stretched himself on the bed.

"We've taken a setback," Johnny said. "We were riding high. I was reaching out for big dough and now it's slipped out of my reach."

"What big dough?"

"Four-five grand for the Navy Colt and a grand for the thousand-dollar bill."

"What thousand-dollar bill?"

Johnny grimaced. "I was holding that out on you. There was one-half of a thousand-dollar bill stuck in one of the chambers of the Navy Colt."

"Holy horsecollar! But what good's a half of a thousand-dollar bill?"

"I located the owner of the other half—Hilda Nelson."

"Hey!" cried Sam. "Then she musta known Maxwell had it. I'll bet that's why she sicked us after him. She figured if we popped him he'd grab this roscoe and then we'd take it away from him and bring it to her."

"I think you've got something there. Mmm—no——" Johnny got up, frowning. "Just wait here for a minute while I make a telephone call."

"Take it easy, Johnny!" Sam exclaimed as Johnny bounded out of the room.

Johnny ran quickly down the stairs to the office where the night clerk was again absorbed in his confession magazine. "You got a telephone here—and a semi-private one?"

"There's a booth out in the hall, but it takes a nickel to make a call."

Johnny went to the booth and entering called Scarhart 8383. He expected the voice of Martha Beeler, but drew Ben, her husband, which gave Johnny the opportunity to blow off a little steam.

"Listen, you chiseling, double-crossing, henpecked piece of milk toast, if I ever set eyes on you again I'm going to turn you into something even the cat wouldn't

drag in. What was the idea of turning me in to that flat-footed fathead of a brother of yours?"

"But I didn't, Mr. Fletcher! Honest, I didn't. I never double-crossed a client in my life and I resent your attitude, sir."

"Resent, hell. But I paid you for a full day's work and I didn't get it."

"I've been working all evening, Mr. Fletcher. I just got in and I've got a lot of information to tell you, but first of all I think I ought—"

"Never mind. If you've got information, spill it. What about the identification of Jim Maxwell?"

"It was Maxwell, all right. His neighbors in the apartment building identified him. As did his landlord and the superintendent of the building."

"All right, then what about Carl Streeter? Did you get anything on him?"

"Yes, I did, but first I think—"

"I don't care what you think. What about Streeter?"

"A very rough customer. He served time in San Quentin."

"A cellmate of Maxwell's, eh? What else?"

"The autopsy. Maxwell was shot with a soft-nosed bullet of approximately thirty-six caliber, which would fit a Navy Colt. He was shot through the heart, at close range, because there were powder burns, but the peculiar thing is that the doctor gave his opinion that Maxwell was dead for at least two hours before the time the police stated, the time being estimated by when the alarm was turned in."

"Swell!" said Johnny. "Did you have time to get anything on Hilda Nelson?"

"A little, but I think I ought to tell you first—"

"Stop interrupting. Tell me what I want to know, not what you think."

"Yes, but I think you ought to know that my brother is here and has run across the hall to our neighbor and is undoubtedly having your call traced at this very minute."



"Damn it, why didn't you say so?" Johnny howled. "Why, you—" He slammed up the receiver, kicked open the door of the booth and rushed up the stairs to his room.

"Sam!" he cried as he burst in, "come on—on the run! There'll be cops here any second."

"Owoo!" moaned Sam, as he bounced up from the bed and grabbed his coat and hat.

On the first floor, Johnny swerved to the office. "Gimme our dollar and a half back!" he yelled, "there are bedbugs in the room and we're checking out."

"Sir!" said the frowzy night clerk. "We fumigated this place only last week. There couldn't possibly be any insect life."

At the door, Sam cried. "Johnny!" and Johnny gave up the dollar and a half without further fight.

The police car was almost a block away, but its red head-lights were sweeping the street. Johnny caught Sam's arm and jerked him into an areaway next door to the Ajax Arms. They rushed through this into a backyard where Sam knocked over a garbage can, then they hurdled a board fence and escaped through a long, dark passageway that brought them out on Clark Street.

There Johnny flagged a taxicab and told the driver to take them through Lincoln Park.

When they were in the cab, Johnny said, "This being chased by someone or other is getting damn monotonous. I got a good notion to do what you suggested in the first place—blow this town."

"Now, you're talking!" Sam cried. "We got some dough and we'll breeze out to California."

"No, not California. In the first place, we haven't got money enough to go *that* far and secondly, umm, the cops would naturally expect a couple of fugitives from this burg to head south, where it's warm. Where they wouldn't expect us to go is north—Minnesota."

Sam winced. "I don't like Minnesota. We were in jail there once—remember?"

"Yeah, but that was a mistake and anyway, Minnesota is a big state. I thought we might go just to the southern part of the state, say Northfield."

"Why Northfield?"



"Because it's nice around there."

"When were you ever there?"

"Never, but I've heard that it's a swell town."

Sam looked suspiciously at Johnny, but shrugged.

"Okay, one place is as good as another to me."

Johnny leaned forward and slid open the glass door between the tonneau and the driver's compartment. "Take us to the uptown station of the St. Paul railroad," he said, then pushed the glass shut again.

"Northfield!" yelled Sam. "It just came to me—that's the town in the book I read at the library that Jesse James held up. I knew it!"

"Well! It'll be interesting seeing it."

"You knew it," Sam accused. "You've got some damn reason for wanting to go to Northfield, something to do with the Navy Colt—and the mess we're in."

"Shh!" said Johnny. "The driver'll hear."

Sam subsided but glowered at Johnny. He was still sullen when they climbed out of the cab on the northwest side of the city and entered the station. Johnny left him for a moment and when he returned showed Sam two long, green railroad tickets.

"Too late now, Sam. I bought the tickets. We've got to go to Northfield and we reach there with twenty-two dollars."

"Is that all we've got left of the hundred and fifty?"

"Being a fugitive comes high, Sammy. But don't worry, I feel fine about Northfield. I think we'll make some money there."

"Jesse James thought the same thing," Sam said bitterly. "And look what happened to him!"

## XVI

IT WAS nine o'clock in the morning when Johnny Fletcher and Sam Cragg stepped from the train in Northfield, Minnesota. It was twelve below zero.

Sam howled when the icy air got into his lungs. "Where're the Eskimos?"

"In their igloos," said Johnny through his teeth. "This is what I call really bracing weather. There's a hotel right over there."

Sam turned up the collar of his vividly colored overcoat and began running. Johnny followed. They turned into Bridge Street and then Johnny exclaimed to Sam, "Look!"

Sam stuck his neck out from his coat collar, somewhat like a turtle, and blinked at a sign over a building, *Jesse James Cafe*.

"I thought he was dead," he remarked.

"Sap! That's the location of the old bank that the boys stuck up back in '76. It's a cafe now. We'll give it a look later."

They went on to a three-story brick building that Johnny had identified as a hotel, and entering, stamped their feet in the over-heated lobby.

"A little snappy today, eh, strangers?" said a fat, smiling young man behind the desk.

"Nah!" retorted Johnny. "We like it this way. We came up here for our health. How about a nice room?"

"That's our business, renting rooms. Baggage?"

"We left it at the station; too cold to carry over. We'll get it later."

The clerk got a key from the rack and

led them to a large room on the second floor overlooking the street. Johnny went to the window and looked out.

"This'll be fine. We can see the place that Jesse James held up. Quite an event for this old town, eh?"

"I dunno; it was before my time."

"I'd imagine so; but there're old-timers here who remember, though."

"Oh, sure, but don't talk so loud. Some of 'em'll hear you. My uncle, Axel Nelson, for instance. He personally put a couple of bullets into Jesse James and three or four into Frank James and Cole Younger."

"Say, that's interesting. Like to talk to the old boy."

The hotel clerk snickered. "No, you wouldn't. Uncle Axel is the biggest liar in town."

"He was—until I got here," said Johnny modestly. "I tell lies for a living."

"Eh?"

"I'm a writer. Uh—so is Mr. Cragg here. He writes plays. We're collaborating on a story about Jesse James that we figure on selling to Hollywood."

"You're too late, Mister; they made a picture about Jesse James a couple or three years ago. I didn't see it, but Uncle Axel went four times and got madder every time. He figured he should have been in it."

"I still think I'd like to talk to your uncle."

The clerk shrugged. "Well, I warned you. Come on down and I'll introduce you."

"You go, Johnny," Sam said. "I think I'll take a nap and get warm; if I ever can again."

So Johnny followed the fat hotel clerk downstairs. In a worn leather chair facing the wide front window, sat a white-haired old man, with a short square beard and nice, pink cheeks.

"Uncle Axel," said the young man, "I got someone here wants you to tell him how you shot up Jesse James. But go easy, because he's a guest here."

The old man got up from his chair with surprising spryness. "Glad to make your acquaintance," he said, with a slight Norwegian accent. "Set down here. You, Ole, go mind your business."

"My name's Fletcher," Johnny said. "I've been interested in Jesse James for a long time."

"Not as long as me," said Old Axel Nelson, dropping into his chair. "I been interested in him ever since I stood right here in front of this hotel, with a old shotgun in my hand and let him have it."

"You let Jesse have it?"

"You bet. They was a-coming out of the bank over there, the whole passel of 'em. They was ridin' their horses and a whoopin' and shootin'. Henry Wheeler shot big Clell Miller. That made the rest of 'em madder'n hell and they slung lead right and left and up and down. And us, we gave it back to them. I knocked old Jesse off his horse with a load of bird shot and he climbed right back on and I knocked him off again. Then I let Cole Younger have a couple—"

"Without reloading?"

"I reloaded. So I let Cole Younger have it and he looked at me and hollered, 'You got me, Axel, you got me!'"

"How'd he know your name?"

"They captured him and his brothers a couple of weeks later and brought them back here for their trial."

"But that was two weeks later. How'd he know your name the first time?"

"I told him at the trial."

**J**OHNNY swiveled his head to see if he could locate Ole, the clerk, but the fat young man had made himself scarce. Johnny sighed and settled down in his chair.

"How'd you know it was Jesse you knocked off his horse? They didn't capture him."

"Saw his pictures in the papers after Bob Ford killed him. Never forget a face. Don't to this day. Never forget a name.

You wouldn't think I was eighty-one years old, would you?"

Johnny did some quick mental arithmetic. "You were only fifteen when you shot Jesse James?"

"No, I was more'n that. Let's see, it was the year I voted for Rutherford B. Hayes. He had a beard just like mine was at the time."

"But that was sixty-five years ago," Johnny protested. "If you were of voting age then you must be more than eighty-one now."

The old outlaw-killer glowered at Johnny. "I ought to know my own age, oughtn't I?"

"Yeah, sure," Johnny agreed hastily. "But tell me, while this fight with the outlaws was going on, what was Archer Maxwell doing?"

Axel turned abruptly toward Johnny and a frosty gleam came into his bright, old eyes. "Archer Maxwell? Don't ever mention his name to me, young fellow. Archer was a lazy, no-account. He didn't have any more to do with that affair than I did—I mean, he didn't have as much. He didn't have anything to do with it. The big mouthed, blabber mouth!"

"Friend of yours—Archer?"

"Friend? Pah! He wrote a book forty-five years ago. A passel of lies, that's all was in it."

"I read it," Johnny said. "He didn't mention your name."

"That's what made me so blamed mad. He knew damn well that he wasn't anywhere around when the fireworks was going on and then he took all the credit for everything and them that did do things, he didn't mention in his blamed book."

"Well, the old boy's dead a good many years, now," Johnny said, charitably.

"And his whole family, too. There's a rumor around town that his grandson, young Jim, was rubbed out by some Chicago gangsters. He was the worst one of the Maxwell lot. Did time in a prison, they say."

"That's what the papers say. There was some mention, too, of an old Navy Colt that was supposed to have been owned by Jesse James that did the actual killing. Be strange, wouldn't it?"

"I don't follow you?"

"Why that the grandson of a man who took a few shots at Jesse James should be killed by Jesse's own gun."

"Pah! All his life Archer Maxwell bragged about that there gun. Claimed Jesse dropped it here on the street. I didn't see him drop any gun and I'm the man dusted him outta the saddle. Archer Maxwell was such a liar, if you asked him the time he'd tell you wrong, just to keep in practice."

"That's the trouble with some old-timers," Johnny said, with a straight face, "they're nothing but liars."

"They sure are. And there's no liar like an old liar."

Johnny nodded assent, then said casually, "By the way, did you know Hjalmar Nelson, the big railroad tie man, when he lived around here?"

"Wasn't he second cousin to my son-in-law? Hell, I showed Hjalmar how to chop his first railroad tie. Him and young Maxwell."

"Jim?"

"Naw, Jim's father. When I say, young, I mean the son of Archer, young Archie. Him and Hjalmar started in business together. A tree fell on Archie."

"Oh," said Johnny. "I didn't know that. How long ago was that?"

"Just about the time they got going good. They had hard times at first, then they got this big order from the Western Pacific Railroad and right about then, Archie got in the way of this tree. That'd be about twenty-five or thirty years ago."

A FEW years more or less meant nothing to the old boy. John prodded patiently. "Jim Maxwell must have been just a boy then? Who brought him up?"

"No one. He lived with his grandpa

awhile, but Archer got so mean in his old age, no one could stand him and the kid ran away. I guess he was about fifteen or sixteen then. He never came back here."

"He didn't like it on the farm, eh?"

"Farm? What farm?"

"Wasn't Archer Maxwell a farmer?"

"Him? Hell, no. Archer never did any work in his life to amount to anything. His pa left him a farm, but he sold it when he was just a young squirt and moved into town here. Lived here all his life and never did a lick of work. Folks never could figure out how he lived."

Johnny got up and buttoned his camel's hair overcoat. "It's been a pleasure talking to you; we must get together again soon. I've got a little business to attend to now."

"Yeah? What're you selling? Groceries—hardware?"

"Books. I'm working my way through college."

"Yeah? You look a mite old to be going to school."

"I worry a lot." Johnny grinned and stepped to the door. Bracing himself, he opened it and went out into the bitter cold.

## XVII

JOHNNY walked swiftly across the street to the Jesse James Cafe, where he entered and mounted a stool at the counter.

He shivered as a waiter came to take his order. "Hot cuppa coffee," he said.

As he sipped it he engaged the waiter in conversation. "This is the spot where the old bank used to be that Jesse James held up, isn't it?"

The waiter was picking his teeth with a quill toothpick. "Uh-huh."

"It wasn't really this place, though, was it?" Johnny pursued. "I thought the bank was in temporary quarters at the time, in a small store at the side."

"I only work here, Mister," the waiter replied. "I never even heard of Jesse James until I came here."



"The hell you say! I thought this town lived on the reputation it got through old Jesse."

"Nah. There's a couple colleges here, that's what. We get a pretty fair trade from the students." The waiter snapped the toothpick in and out of his teeth. "You're the second guy today asking about Jesse James. More'n we've had in a month. I sent the other one over to Hutch Cooley."

"Hutch is pretty well posted on Jesse James."

"Yeah, sure, I guess so. His office is across the square. But at this time you'll most likely find him at the Bon Ton Millinery Shoppe."

"That's where?"

"Next door to the hotel."

Johnny paid for his coffee and recrossed the street, to the Bon Ton Millinery Shoppe, which occupied a narrow store building. He entered.

A plump, rather attractive young woman in her late thirties was sewing on a woman's hat, behind a low counter. Leaning over the counter was a stocky man of about forty, who wore a long, sheep-lined overcoat and a fur cap. He was smoking a fat, black cigar.

The woman looked up from her sewing.

"Can I help you?" she asked Johnny.

"I'm looking for Hutch Cooley."

"That's me," said the man in the sheepskin coat. He straightened from his leaning position and turned to face Johnny. His coat fell open revealing a bright nickled star pinned on his vest.

Johnny restrained a grimace only with an effort. "Howdy, Sheriff," he said. "I was told you were an authority on Jesse James?"

"Me?" said Hutch Cooley. "Heck, no. I'm only the deputy sheriff, but you can't tell, come next election. Eh, Kitty?"

"After the next election," said Kitty, continuing with her sewing, "you'll probably be out of a job."

"Heh-heh," chuckled Hutch Cooley. "Always kidding."

"I guess I was misinformed about you," said Johnny. "I've been doing some research on Jesse James and they told me——"

"Who told you?"

"The waiter in the restaurant across the street."

"Herman? That few-brains. Because I'm a law officer, he thinks I know all about the old-time outlaws. You're the second man he's sent me today asking about Archer Maxwell's place."

"Maxwell?"

"Yeah, that's what you want to know, isn't it? Where the old boy lived. Over on Gardner Street. But if you ask me, he was a phony. Leastwise, that's what old Axel always claims. Yeah, if you want to know about Jesse James, Axel Johnson is the one you want to see. He'll talk to you about him by the hour. You'll find him in the hotel next door."

"Why, thanks. I'll talk to him. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Have a cigar?"

THE deputy sheriff produced a handful of black cigars. Johnny, surprised by such friendliness, started to refuse, then changed his mind and accepted one. Hutch Cooley instantly struck a match for him. As he was puffing to get the cigar going, Johnny said, "As long as I'm doing all this checking up on Jesse, I might as well take a look at Maxwell's house. Where did you say it was—on Gardner Street?"

"Yeah, that's down here about a half mile. Then you turn right. It's either the seventh or eighth house from the corner. You'll know it. It's a brick house, but falling to pieces. Ain't no one lived in it for mebbe thirty-four years."

"Thanks. For the cigar, too. It's a good one." Which was a lie. It was the vilest cigar Johnny had ever tried to smoke.

"You think so? It's an *El Ropo*. Don't care for them myself."

Outside, Johnny threw away the cigar, then looked longingly toward the shelter of the hotel, but turned in the opposite

direction and plodded down the street, toward Gardner. He buried his face so deep in his coat collar that he could scarcely see, but before he had gone a block he wished that he had provided himself with woolen underwear and socks before coming to this cold country.

He was stamping his feet before he had traveled the second block and before the end of the third he was trotting to keep warm.

When he reached Gardner he discovered that the snow hadn't been shoveled off the side street and there was only a narrow path that had been stepped down by pedestrians.

His teeth were chattering and he was so cold that the effort of returning to the hotel seemed too much for himself and he hurried up Gardner, slipping and stumbling over the rough, uneven footing.

IT WAS farther than he had been led to believe by the deputy sheriff, for the houses were far apart here, only three in the first block and two in the second. There was only a single house in the third block, an ancient brick house. There were shutters over the windows, but they were broken and sagging.

Johnny looked ahead and saw that the fourth block was entirely vacant, so guessed that this was Archer Maxwell's house, despite Cooley's poor directions.

A long uneven mound near the sidewalk, completely covered by the snows of the winter, showed where an old fence had crumpled, long ago.

There was a six-foot gap in the mound, however, and footprints in the snow went through the gap.

Johnny shivered a little and it wasn't altogether from the cold. Drawing a deep breath, he turned in toward the house.

The footprints led to the front door, raised a couple of feet from the ground, by a two-step door stoop. Johnny tried the old iron door latch with his bare hands. It gave and he pushed on the door.

It went inwards, with a loud creak. He entered and closed the door behind him. The broken shutters let in sufficient light for him to see clearly a littered, rubbish strewn floor. A thousand boys had ransacked here through the years and probably a few hundred tramps and hoboies had made it their habitat. The boards of the floor, however, were still stout and firm. They had built sturdy and true in the old days.

He went through the front room, to the kitchen, where there was an ancient wood-burning range, made of stones and sheet iron, the latter rusted and broken. There were charred embers in the stove, but they were dust covered.

There was a small bedroom off the kitchen, which contained a rusted iron spring and a filthy, ragged blanket that had been deserted by some tramp at least twenty years previously.

Johnny came back to the kitchen and regarded a staircase that led to the second floor of the house. It was dusty and grimy, but there were comparatively recent footprints in the dust.

Johnny tested the first step. It creaked, but seemed solid enough to hold his weight. He climbed slowly to the second floor. When he reached the top of the flight he found himself in a small hall. A door opened off it on both sides. There was more light in the back room so he looked in there first. It was empty.

He stepped back into the hall and moved to the front bedroom. The shutters on the windows here were in better condition and the room was not as light as the others in the house. Johnny almost stepped on the body, before he saw it.

He forgot about his cold feet.

He stared down at the huddle on the floor, breathing hoarsely. He wanted to depart from the room in the fastest possible way, but for a moment his feet seemed rooted to the floor.

It was the body of a man, a man wearing a dark blue overcoat. An almost new

overcoat. His black felt hat lay on the floor a foot from his head.

An icy hand seemed to touch Johnny's spine and slither up to his neck, causing his entire body to shiver. He moved, then, taking a step to the side and caught a glimpse of the dead man's face. A startled exclamation was forced from his throat.

THE dead man was the man he had once believed to be Jim Maxwell, the man from whom he had taken the Navy Colt several days ago and who had held up Johnny in the Chicago alley and taken away the half of the thousand-dollar bill, on which had been the five words that had brought Johnny to Northfield, to this very house.

Johnny Fletcher wanted more than anything in the world to leave this house, but he couldn't. Not now. He had to stoop and examine the dead man's clothes.

He touched it and cold sweat broke out on his face. It was bitter cold in this house and the body was already frozen solid. It was a gruesome task that Johnny gave himself. He would think of it many times in the future. But he searched the body.

And found absolutely nothing. Not a scrap of identification, not even a key or piece of change. Someone had searched the man before him and had removed everything. Even the label from the overcoat and suitcoat.

When he finished his task, Johnny stared at the body and moistened his lips with his tongue. The words of the code message from the half of the thousand-dollar bill ran through his mind:

fourth north bedroom seven gardner

This was Gardner Street, and it was a bedroom. But what did "fourth" "north" and "seven" mean?

In the midst of his ruminations a sound penetrated Johnny's consciousness; the crunch of heavy feet on frozen snow.

He stepped quickly over the body on the floor and peered through the broken shut-

ter. Hutch Cooley, deputy sheriff, was coming in from the sidewalk to the house.

Johnny recoiled. He was trapped. Unless—

He rushed out of the bedroom, took the rotting staircase to the kitchen, three at a time and—

"Hold it, neighbor!" called Hutch Cooley, opening the front door.

"Hi," Johnny said, feebly. "This is Maxwell's place, isn't it? I just stepped in."

"You shouldn't a-done that, Mister," said Hutch Cooley. "That's trespassing. Got to thinking after you'd left, two fellows in one day asking about old Archer Maxwell's house—thought I'd better come see what's up."

"Nothing that I know of," Johnny said. "Just curious, you know. Brr! it's cold; guess I'll run back to my hotel."

"Uh-huh, in a minute. Have a cigar?"

Hutch brought out one of the vile black cigars. Johnny shook his head. "No, thanks, one in a day is enough for me."

"Me, too," said Hutch, "especially these *El Ropos*. They stink."

"Then why do you smoke them?"

"I got to. I had to buy them on account of the wrappers. You have to send them with your contest entries."

"Huh?"

"They got a big slogan contest. Five hundred dollars first prize and 104 smaller prizes. I got a honey entered in the contest that I figure'll cop first prize."

"Swell," said Johnny, "tell me about it some time."

"Sure, I don't mind. Listen— 'It takes a man to smoke an *El Ropo*'. Heh-heh, it does at that, eh?"

"You said it, Sheriff. And if you don't mind, now, I'll run along. I'm freezing to death."

"Sure, sure, but let's take a look upstairs first. Huh?"

Hutch advanced and crowded Johnny up the stairs. Johnny moved reluctantly. When he reached the second story landing

he said, desperately, "Hutch, old man, prepare yourself for a shock. There's a dead man up here!"

"Hey! I thought so." Hutch popped around Johnny and dashed into the front bedroom. Almost immediately he exclaimed: "It's him—the guy who asked the way here this morning. Mister, you're under arrest!"

"What for? I didn't kill him."

"No? That's for the judge to say. Throw up your hands. I'm armed, I'm warning you."

Johnny raised his hands shoulder high. Hutch produced a .38 nickel-plated revolver from the depths of his sheepskin-lined coat.

"You're making a mistake, Sheriff. I can prove I didn't reach Northfield until an hour ago. That man's frozen stiff. Touch him and see."

### XVIII

HUTCH COOLEY touched the body with the toe of his high top leather boot. He grunted and kicked the body a little. Then his revolver went down.

"Yeah, he musta been killed two-three hours ago, to freeze that solid, even in such cold weather. Mmm. You can prove you didn't get to town until an hour ago?"

"I have a friend at the hotel who'll vouch for that. And I imagine the station agent will, too. He saw us step off the train. Wait a minute—here's my ticket stub!"

Johnny fished it out of an inner pocket. Hutch took it and examined it closely. He handed it back, reluctantly.

"Chicago. What's your business, Mister?"

Johnny took a deep breath. "As a matter of fact, Sheriff, it's the same as yours—practically. I'm a private detective, investigating the murder of James Maxwell."

"But he was bumped off in Chicago. I read about it in the papers."

"That's right. But this man here isn't

a local resident, is he? He's probably from Chicago, too."

Hutch frowned. "I don't like the idea of Chicago gangsters invadin' our territory. This is a law-abidin' town."

"That's what Jesse James thought, back in '76."

"What's Jesse James got to do with this?"

"Perhaps, nothing. But do you remember reading in the Chicago papers that James Maxwell was killed with a gun that was once owned by Jesse James?"

"That crap!" snorted Hutch. "I been hearin' it all my life. It's a lot of poppycock."

"What is?"

"That business about Archer Maxwell having helped Jesse James make his getaway. Archer didn't work much and folks said he had a stash of money that Jesse slipped him, back in the old days."

"Oh," said Johnny, "is that the story? Then where does the Jesse James gun come in?"

"Search me, that was the first I heard about it, reading about it in the Chicago papers. Archer Maxwell never had any money. This shack wasn't so much of a house even when I was a kid."



"But if he didn't work, how did he live?"

"He wrote a book once, maybe he made some money offa that. The hell with it—let's get out of here, before I freeze my feet."

Johnny headed for the stairs with alacrity. But as they left the house, he



asked, "Is it wise to leave the body here alone?"

"What's the dif? He's dead, ain't he? I'll have the coroner come over afterwards. If this fellow's body is frozen stiff you can be sure the murderer ain't still hanging around. We can gab in my office, where it's warm."

Johnny wondered if he could walk all the way downtown without freezing his feet, but when they reached the main street, Hutch hailed a passing automobile which gave them a lift to his office, on the square.

Inside the warm, stove-heated deputy's office, Johnny took off his overcoat. Hutch shucked his own and again tried to pass Johnny an *El Ropo* cigar.

"A little snifter won't do any harm, though, will it?" the deputy asked.

Johnny smiled and said, no. Hutch opened a cupboard and a shower of soap bars fell to the floor. The deputy sheriff grinned sheepishly. "I entered the Buck Soap contest. I bought enough soap to last me fourteen years."

"How much did you win?"

"Nothing, but I had a couple of beauties entered. 'Use Buck for luck' was one. Not bad, huh?"

"Not bad at all," said Johnny. "In fact, it's terrific. I think you should have won."

"Me, too. Now, let's talk about this Maxwell business. Which reminds me, I better call the coroner."

He picked up the telephone and called a number. After a moment, he said, "Luke, Hutch. Better run over to seven eighteen Gardner—the old Archer Maxwell house. You'll find a corpse on the second floor, frozen stiff. Aw, cut it out! I had to go there in the cold, didn't I? Yeah. Lemme know what killed him, huh? Any time. No hurry."

He hung up and grinned at Johnny. "Shoot, mister. What's your name?"

Johnny thought of his name on the hotel register across the street. "Fletcher," he said, reluctantly. "I work for the—the Beeler Detective Agency in Chicago."

"Wait a minute," said Hutch. He picked up the telephone again. "Hydia, this is Hutch Cooley. Get me the Beeler Detective Agency in Chicago. Official business. . . . Yeah, I'll hang on."

He looked up at Johnny. "I don't doubt your word, Mister, but we might as well make it official, then we can be friends. . . . Hello, Beeler Detective Agency? This is the deputy sheriff at Northfield, Minnesota. We got a man here name of Fletcher, says he works for you; that right? Uh, wait a minute." He reached over the telephone. "They want to talk to you."

That was decent of the Beelers, Johnny thought. He took the telephone.

"Fletcher talking. . . . Hello, Mrs. Beeler. No, no trouble at all. What?"

"Mr. Fletcher," Mrs. Beeler cut him off, "are we still working for you, or aren't we?"

"Oh, sure," said Johnny.

"For how long? This case is becoming very difficult and may take several days to solve. I think it's no more than fair—"

"Sure," said Johnny, "shall we say, a couple of extra days?"

"Six days," said Martha Beeler, firmly. "And a bonus of one hundred dollars in addition. If you agree to that, I'll talk to the sheriff who's holding you."

"Swell," said Johnny. "That'll be—fine!"

He handed the phone back to Hutch, who said, "Yes? You say he's your best operator? Sure, sure. I'll let you talk to him again."

Johnny again took the phone. "Yes, Mrs. Beeler—anything new?"

"Yes. Amos—Amos, that's Benjamin's brother—is very angry over what you did to him last night. Swears he's going to arrest you on sight. Now, Benjamin got a rather complete history of this Carl Streeter. He showed up in Chicago about a year ago and gave Hilda Nelson a big rush. Everyone thought they were going to get married, or engaged at least. Then, all of a sudden, Hilda began hitting the night clubs

with your friend, Jim Maxwell. Streeter didn't like it and got into a fight with Maxwell. That was about six months ago. Since then Hilda hasn't had much to do with either one of them—until about a week ago, when she went to see Maxwell. Some woman next door to Maxwell gave a pretty fair description of her as having visited Maxwell."

"You're giving me a lot of general stuff," Johnny cut in. "Things I knew or could guess. You haven't given me a thing about S—Carl. I want his background."

"We told you that; he served time in San Quentin."

"For what? Same as the other fellow?"

"Maxwell? No. Streeter was in for robbery. But let me tell you about Hilda Nelson."

"Shoot! But it better be good."

"We don't make information, Mr. Fletcher," Martha Beeler told Johnny. "We only gather it. Miss Nelson was being blackmailed. She paid out more than twenty thousand dollars in the last six months."

"To who?"

"We don't know, but we suspect that it may have been James Maxwell."

"What was the reason for the blackmail?"

"We don't know—yet!"

"Find out. I'll give you a jingle later in the day. I'm looking after some things up here. And remember—tell Benny to keep his brother away. Understand?"

He hung up. Deputy Sheriff Hutch Cooley immediately picked up the phone. "Lydia," he said, "how much was that call? Uh-huh. How much over the three minutes? Thanks!"

He put down the phone. "Your share of that call was six-fifty."

"What?" cried Johnny. "I didn't make the call."

"No, but you talked your private business. Our county can't pay for private telephone calls. But I'll tell you what, though. Tell me what you know about

the guy over in Archer Maxwell's house and I'll call it square on the telephone bill."

"That's a deal, Sheriff. I think his name is—was—Carl Streeter. He served time in San Quentin. You can get his record by telegraph."

"I could save time if you'd tell me about him."

"That's all I know."

"Yeah? How d'you know his name is Streeter?"

"I met him in Chicago. Johnny rubbed his jaw reminiscently. "He smacked me a couple."

"What for?"

"He thought I had something."

"What?"

"That's what puzzled me; I don't know what I was supposed to have."

"You don't tell much, Fletcher. Why'd you come to Northfield?"

"To get some dope on Jesse James' gun. Jim Maxwell claimed he had one that belonged to Jesse. I hoped to get verification."

"What difference does it make what gun he was killed with? He was killed."

Johnny sighed wearily. "Didn't it ever strike you, Sheriff, that a gun owned by Jesse James might be worth a great deal of money?"

"You think so? How much?"

"Five, maybe ten thousand. I figured maybe Maxwell was killed for the gun."

"If he was and if the killer got the gun why should you—and this Streeter—come up here to Northfield? You didn't expect to find the gun here, did you?"

Johnny frowned. Hutch Cooley was a bit more astute than he'd guessed, up to now. He floundered for a moment. "Why, uh, not exactly. But if there was a gun of Jesse's around loose, I thought maybe—"

"Maybe he'd left the boodle with Archer Maxwell? Don't be silly."

Johnny smiled indulgently. "After all, people buy treasure maps. It's fun looking for treasure, even if it isn't there."

"Your agency let you go treasure hunting on their time?"

"I have a financial interest in the agency. I'm not exactly a hired man, you know."

Hutch Cooley clasped his hands together and cracked his big knuckles. "If you don't mind my saying so, you sound screwy as hell."

"After all," said Johnny pointedly, "some people write slogans."

"People make big money from contests. I won one myself only a couple of months ago. The Happy Home Kitchen Klenser."

"Yeah? What'd you win?"

"A hundred cans of Happy Home Kitchen Klenser. Come in mighty handy when Kitty says the word."

"Kitty's the little lady in the millinery shop?"

"Uh-huh, we been engaged for fourteen years. Kitty's the best——"

THE door of the deputy's office opened and a man in a huge bearskin overcoat that touched the floor came in and stamped his feet.

"I got the stiff, Hutch," he said, "but I can't make no autopsy until he thaws out. But I can tell you right now what killed him. A bullet behind his left ear. About a .32."

"Well, I should think that'd be about enough, Luke. This is Mr. Fletcher, a detective from Chicago. Luke Dingwall, the county coroner."

"Fletcher?" said the coroner. "The name's familiar. Seems to me I've read it in the papers, not so long ago."

"Probably," said Johnny. "They're always printing something about me. Glad to have met you, Mr. Dingwall. I'll be at the hotel across the street, Sheriff, if you should want me."

"Yeah, sure."

Johnny walked briskly across the street to the hotel. Old Axel was still sitting in his big chair by the window, but Johnny ducked past him.

At the counter he saw a thin stack of

Chicago newspapers that had evidently come in since Johnny's departure. He picked one up and dropped a coin on the counter.

He started to read the papers as he headed for the stairs. He looked merely at a two-column head on Page 1:

*"Maxwell Suspect Escapes Police."*

His name was in the first paragraph. Johnny wheeled and going back to the desk picked up the entire stack of papers. He dropped two dimes and four pennies in their place, then with all the papers under his arm, went upstairs.

## XIX

SAM was sound asleep in the big bed. Johnny glowered at him, then going to the chair by the window, sat down and read the latest development in the Maxwell case as of the night before. It concerned his own misadventure with Lieutenant Beeler.

"There is no question in my mind any longer," said Lieutenant Beeler, "that the murder was committed by Fletcher. He admitted having the murder weapon and his desperate break showed conclusive guilt. I expect to apprehend Fletcher inside of 24 hours."

"Wonder if that coroner got one of these papers," Johnny muttered.

Sam Cragg woke up suddenly. "Hello, Johnny. I must have dozed off for a minute. I thought you were going out."

"I've been out. I've got some bad news for you."

Sam groaned. "Couldn't you have some good news, for a change?"

"Maybe later. Carl Streeter's been killed, here in Northfield."

"How come? I thought Streeter was this guy back in Chicago that we poked in the nose."

"He was. But he's here in Northfield now—with a bullet in him and frozen stiff

in a vacant house. The old house that Jim Maxwell used to live in."

Sam frowned uneasily. "Why don't we go to California, Johnny?"

"Maybe we will—later. Come on, put on your coat. I want to take you down to this house."

"What for? I'll take your word for it."

"The coroner's taken the stiff by now."

Sam got his plaid overcoat and put it on. But he followed Johnny reluctantly and complained bitterly when the cold hit him outside.

"Why don't we go to Alaska, Johnny? It's a lot colder there."

"Save your breath, you may need it."

As they turned into Gardner Street, Johnny looked at a house number. He nodded. The number was 420, so Maxwell's house would be in the 700 block. That checked.

"Fourth north bedroom seven gardner." He had fitted the last three words of his half of the code. All he had to do now was figure out the words "fourth" and "north" and then figure out the missing words that were on Hilda Nelson's half of the thousand-dollar bill.

The secret was here, Johnny felt sure.

The street was as vacant as it had been on Johnny's first visit that morning. The house seemed as deserted, too. The snow was crunched down a little more leading to the house, but otherwise there were no other signs of trespassing.

Sam shuddered as Johnny led him toward the house. "Looks spooky, doesn't it?"

Johnny shrugged and opened the door. He led the way through to the kitchen and up the stairs.

The body of Carl Streeter was gone. Where it had lain was a patch of dark, frozen blood. Johnny stepped over the spot to walk to the window. His foot came down on a board and it seemed to him that it gave off a hollower sound than it should have.

He turned and stopped. It was the

fourth board from the wall—the north wall. Johnny exclaimed softly. His code was completed now.

fourth north bedroom seven gardner

He could even fill in the words that were missing: fourth *board* north *wall* bedroom *upstairs* seven *eighteen* Gardner.

The words in Hilda Nelson's code by themselves were unintelligible: *board wall upstairs eighteen*—but matched with Johnny's code they made sense.

This was the board. He examined it carefully. It was as dirty as the surrounding boards, but did not have quite as much dust on it. That meant that it had been raised recently.

He pried at the board with his finger nails, broke one badly and then raised one edge of the board a fraction of an inch. After that it came up quickly.

Sam Cragg came over, breathing heavily. "Gee, Johnny, a cachel!"

"An empty one," said Johnny, in disappointment. It wasn't quite empty, however. There was a rusted metal box in the compartment under the board. But the box was empty.

"Damn it," said Johnny, "if we'd only taken an earlier train last night."

"We always miss the dough," groaned Sam. "We see it once in awhile, but when we reach out to grab it in, it ain't there. Nuts to this place, Johnny. Let's scam out of here."

Johnny got to his feet and brushed off his camel's hair coat. Then a sound made him leap to the window. "It's too late, Sam, that damn sheriff is here again and he's got the coroner with him. This may be embarrassing. In fact—there may be rough stuff."

"I need some exercise to get warm," Sam growled. "Let 'em come."

The door downstairs opened and Hutch Cooley's voice called: "Come on down, Fletcher!"

"Come on up, Sheriff," Johnny called back. "I want to show you something."

"Yeah?" There was anticipation in the



sheriff's voice and Johnny heard him and the coroner come rushing up the stairs. As they burst into the room, Johnny pointed to the empty metal box on the floor, beside the cavity in the floor.

"What do you make of that, Hutch?"

The deputy exclaimed and dropped to his knees.

"It's empty!" he yelled. Then he plunged his hand into the floor and explored the hole. There was chagrin on his face as he got to his feet.

"Come on, Fletcher, where is it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Hutch."

"No, it isn't," said Dingwall, the coroner. "I placed your name after you left. It was in this morning's paper. You're not a detective at all; you're—"

Sam stepped quickly forward and plucked the revolver from the sheriff's hand that the latter brought out from somewhere in his sheepskin coat. He tossed the weapon to Johnny, who caught it expertly and pointed it carelessly at the coroner. The sheriff meanwhile wrestled with Sam, but didn't get very far.

Sam applied a hammerlock on the sheriff and held him so that Hutch was compelled to stoop over to relieve the pressure on his arm.

"Cut it out," he gasped, in pain.

"Behave yourself?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah."

Sam released Hutch and stepped around to Johnny's side.

Hutch looked at Johnny with an injured expression. "That's a fine way to treat a fellow after what I've done for you."

"What'd you do for me, besides make me listen to your slogans—and smoke one of your contest cigars?"

**H**UTCH grimaced. "I let you talk six dollars and fifty cents worth of long distance."

"That's right, I'll send you a check for that."

"Like heck you will. You can't get away from here, you know. Outta this

house, yeah, but where you going to go then?"

"We'll take our chances on that. We can tie you up, hand and foot. The both of you."

"No!" exclaimed Dingwall, in alarm. "We'd freeze to death inside of an hour."

"Well, you suggest something then."

"I'll give you ten minutes head start," said Hutch.

"The idea's all right," said Johnny, "but the time isn't. We'd need ten hours."

Hutch scowled. "You're a couple of murderers, what d'you want?"

"We're not murderers, Hutch. We're as innocent as you are."

"Yeah. That's why the Chicago cops are looking for you."

"They're as dumb as you are, Hutch."

"Just for that, you don't even get the ten minutes. And there ain't no rope around to tie us."

"We could tear up your clothes—wait a minute, I've got a better idea. We'll take off your clothes."

Hutch cried out in horror. "You can't do that! It's too cold!"

"Okay, Sam," said Johnny.

The sheriff tried to back away, but Sam made a quick jump and in a flash had peeled off the sheriff's sheepskin coat, despite the latter's struggle. He threw it across the room.

Hutch began shivering. "Gimme my coat. I got a cold—honest!" He sneezed, whether a natural or a forced one, Johnny didn't know. But it was an enthusiastic sneeze.

"His sweater, Sam," Johnny said. "And then his shirt."

Hutch Cooley bleated. "Cut it out! I'll do whatever you say."

"Promise? One hour's head start?"

"Yeah, sure. I promise. Honest."

"And you, Mr. Dingwall?"

The coroner frowned. "You're hoodlums, but—I promise!"

"Swell!" Johnny nodded and the deputy rushed to retrieve his overcoat.

"Now, listen," Johnny said. "We didn't kill this man and we didn't take anything out of that box. We were too late for both. But I haven't got time to convince you, so we'll be going now. And remember your promise, Hutch!"

"Sure, but couldn't I go back to my office and remember? It's too cold here."

"I wouldn't want you to freeze, but give us ten minutes."

Johnny dropped Hutch Cooley's revolver in his coat pocket and headed for the stairs. Sam followed on his heels. As they hit the street, Sam exclaimed:

"Where can we go in an hour?"

"Plenty of places—if we had an hour. Hutch might wait out the hour, but I doubt if Dingwall does. Let's make tracks."

They trotted to the main thoroughfare of Northfield, but instead of turning north, toward the hotel, Johnny swung south.

"It's the open road for us, Sammy. And I only hope someone takes pity on a couple of hitchhikers in this cold weather."

A truck came rolling along and Johnny gave him the thumb.

The driver looked impassively ahead.

"Oh-oh," said Johnny. "This isn't going to be so good. Here comes another truck; don't signal."

It was a big ten-ton truck job, covered with a tarpaulin. Johnny waited until the driver's cab had passed him, then sprinted for the rear of the truck. He caught the tailgate and let the movement of the truck jerk his feet off the icy street.

He swung up, so that his knees were perched on top of the tailboard. Then he looked over his shoulder.

Sam was galloping along behind the truck, losing distance. Johnny groaned and dropped back to the street. He landed on hands and knees and picked himself up, shakily.

Sam lumbered up. "It was going too fast, Johnny."

Johnny gritted his teeth. "We'll never make it, together, Sam. They'll be looking for two of us, anyway. We'd better split."

"But where'll I meet you?"

"In Chicago."

"Where? I can't stand on the corner of State and Madison for two-three days."

"The public library, then. It's warm, there. You'll need some money. I've only got twenty dollars, but here's fifteen of it."

"Ten is half of twenty, Johnny."

"Yes, but you'll need more than I will. Take it and grab this slow truck. I'll go in a different direction."

Sam still protested, but the truck was up to them now and Johnny fairly shoved Sam after it. The big fellow made a tremendous leap and caught the tailboard. Johnny did not wait to wave at his friend. He trotted back to the corner of Gardner Street, less than fifty feet away.

Hutch Cooley and Luke Dingwall were already in the middle of the first block. They saw Johnny, yelled and turning, rushed back toward the Maxwell house.

That was why Johnny had sent Sam off alone. Turning off Gardner he had taken a quick look back and seen the two county officials bursting out of the Maxwell house, in violation of their pledge. That meant pursuit—and they would be looking for two men.

So now that they had seen him, Johnny started uptown. They'd remain a block or so behind him, for a little way. Johnny ran desperately.

One block closer to Bridge Square a battered jalopy skidded into Main Street. Johnny rushed toward it, saw that a boy of nineteen or twenty was behind the wheel and yelled:

"Buddy, I'm in one heluva hurry to get to Minneapolis. Can you drive me there for five bucks?"

"Five bucks? Sure. Hop in!"

Johnny jerked open the car door and leaped in. Looking in the rear vision mirror he saw Hutch and Dingwall finally turn into Main Street. It would be a block or two before they could commandeer a vehicle. By that time Johnny and his driver would be at Bridge Street, a half mile ahead

of the pursuers. From then on—it would be a chase.

"I just got word that my brother's dying, in Minneapolis," Johnny said to the boy beside him. "If you could step on it."

"Sure, oh, sure. Sorry to hear it, Mister. This buggy don't go so fast, but she's just as good as a Cadillac the way the roads are so icy."

Hope sprang up in Johnny. What the boy said was true. On a clean pavement the jalopy wouldn't do over forty-five, but it could do almost that much on an icy road—as fast as any big car would be apt to go.

THE flivver raced to Bridge Square, skidded into the turn across the bridge and in a couple of minutes was clearing Northfield.

Johnny, watching through the mirror, still saw no pursuit. But that didn't mean that one wouldn't be coming shortly.

He leaned back and relaxed a little. "How far is it to Minneapolis, son?"

"'Bout thirty miles to downtown; what part did you want to go?"

"As a matter of fact," said Johnny, "it's St. Paul."

"Huh?" the boy shot a startled glance at Johnny. Johnny took Hutch Cooley's revolver from his pocket and held it in his lap. "I'm a desperate character," he said sardonically. "I took this rod from your sheriff, Hutch Cooley."

"Holy cats!" gasped the youth, pushing his foot down on the accelerator. "Won't this be somethin'? Wait'll the fellas hear about it."

"Uh-huh," said Johnny, "you'll be a hero. Henry Wheeler wasn't much older than you back in '76 when he killed Clell Miller, winged Bob Younger and dusted Jesse James."

"Yeah," said the boy, suddenly becoming thoughtful.

"But don't go getting ideas," Johnny added, pointedly.

"Gosh, no! On'y I was thinkin'——"

"Don't! Just drive this flivver as fast

as you can to St. Paul. I'm headed for Canada."

"Canada? Holy cats! You gonna make me drive you all the way?"

"Think this jalopy would hold up?"

"Sure. The roads might be tough up north, but this car can go anywhere. Only we'd have to get gas at St. Paul. There's only about a gallon in the tank."

Johnny frowned. "We'll see when we get to St. Paul."

After a few miles the boy turned the car right on a paved road and after a short distance Johnny saw a sign: St. Paul, 16 miles. They passed a few cars on the road, but none caught up to them. The cars were moving cautiously. The snow ploughs had cleared the roads, but had been unable to remove the sheath of ice underneath. Thirty miles an hour was about as fast as it was safe to travel. The boy kept the flivver going at better than forty, with only an occasional skid.

Johnny was glad to see the outskirts of St. Paul, finally. "Tell you what, buddy," he said. "I'm a little short of money. I promised you five bucks to drive me here, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but——" The boys' eyes fell to the gun in Johnny's lap. Johnny broke it and letting the cartridges fall into his hand chucked them out of the car window.

"You need some gas to get home. I'll give you a dollar—and this gun. You make Hutch Cooley pay you four dollars for it—or more, if you can get it from him."

"You don't know Hutch, Mister," declared the boy.

"I do know him; so you whisper to him if he doesn't give you the money you'll tell folks something about him walking barefooted in the snow."

"When did he do that?"

"He didn't. But he almost did. Just whisper that to him and I think he'll give you the money. Okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

"And if he doesn't come across, drop me

a postcard, General Delivery in New York and I'll send you the money."

"I thought you said you were going to Canada?"

"I am, but I'm going to work across Canada and then down to New York, where I figure to catch a boat to South America. There's the bridge, better let me off, then you beat it home. And no funny stuff!"

Johnny gave the boy a dollar and Hutch Cooley's gun, then as the car stopped at the bridge, he shook hands and waving, hurried into the crowds on the street.

## XX

ST. PAUL was a nice place to lose himself for a few days, but Johnny Fletcher couldn't afford it. He had unfinished business in Chicago and the four dollars he possessed was none too much to take him 350 miles. It wasn't nearly enough for a train ticket, he knew even without inquiry. He did, however, go to the bus office, where he learned that the bus fare was \$7.50.

He compromised by buying a bus ticket to Hudson, Wisconsin, just across the state line. The ticket cost him forty cents, which left him with \$3.60.

It was shortly before dark when he stepped off the bus in the Wisconsin village. He entered the depot and studied a large road map pasted on the wall.

The shortest route to Chicago, it seemed, to Johnny, was by way of the U. S. Route 12, through Black River Falls, Baraboo and Madison, a distance of approximately 330 miles.

The problem was a serious one. It was much too cold for hitch-hiking and the weather also ruled out the freight trains. He didn't have enough money for either bus or train, yet if he went to a hotel he would merely deplete his finances still further. Obviously, he had to raise more money, or find a cheaper mode of transportation.

He looked around the bus depot and saw a driver standing by a window, picking his teeth with a toothpick. Johnny sidled up to him and said out of the side of his mouth, "Look, pal, I'm in a jam. My grandmother is dying in Chicago and I've got to get there, but I haven't got enough money for a full ticket."

The bus driver shook his head in sympathy. "Gee, that's tough, Mister, but I dunno what you can do. This company I work for ain't got no heart. They check on us drivers so many times we don't dast do a thing. How much dough you got?"

"About three dollars."

"That ain't very much. Mmm, if you had about four or five—"

"Yeah?"

The bus driver looked around, then dropped his voice to a whisper. "Mind you, I don't know a thing, but if you should happen to go up the street to the Red Star Drug Store and tell Pete Schweneker what you told me—about your grandfather dying and all that, why it's quite possible he might know somebody who's driving to Chi."

"Thanks, buddy," Johnny said gratefully. "I'll run right over."

"You do that—and tell Pete that Larry sent you. Be sure and tell him that; Larry."

Johnny thanked the driver again and hurried up the street to the Red Star Drug Store. He found the druggist alone in the store.

"Larry sent me. He thought you might know somebody driving to Chicago. I got to get there by tomorrow on account of my mother is sick and dying and I haven't got enough money for bus fare."

"Sorry to hear that. Of course, I'm not in the transportation business, you know, but it so happens that I do know a fella who's driving to Chicago tonight. Matter of fact he's going to start in just a few minutes. But this fella'd expect you to pay your share of the expenses."

"Oh, sure. I've got a couple of dollars I'd be glad to kick in."



"That wouldn't be enough. You'd have to have about five dollars. The bus fare is seven, you know. You'd be saving two dollars this way and ride in a regular limousine."

"But I haven't got five dollars. I've only got two dollars and fifty cents and I haven't eaten anything all day. I'd like to keep out enough to buy a ham sandwich on the way."

The druggist rubbed his chin. Then he shrugged. "Give me the two-fifty. You take this card and stand on the next corner up here. In about five minutes a black car will pull up and the driver will ask you if he's still on Route 12. Then you give him this card."

"And then what?"

"That's all. You get in. You keep your mouth shut and you'll be all right. These big bus companies got a lot of money and they keep after the state police so you won't even be able to give a friend a lift in a car one of these days."

"You said it," Johnny replied.

He stuck the card—a plain business card—into his pocket and adjourned to the street corner. As the druggist had told him, a limousine pulled up in a few minutes and the driver, rolling down the window, called to him, "Say, Mister, am I still on Highway Number 12?"

"You certainly are, pal," said Johnny, giving him the business card.

"Okay, climb in!"

Johnny started to open the rear door, then discovered that there were already three people crowded into the compartment, with luggage piled all over them. He climbed in beside the driver.

The car started off, but stopped at the edge of town. "Now look, folks," the driver said. "Let's have an understanding right now, so there won't be no trouble later. This *isn't* a wildcat bus. It's a private car, see. I own it and am driving to Chicago. You folks are my friends. We're sharing expenses. Understand that?"

The four passengers, the three in the rear

and Johnny, replied in the affirmative, but Johnny added, "You figure the cops might stop us?"

"I think it's too cold for them to be out tonight, but you can't tell. I've been stopped. Which reminds me, we'd better give each other our names, so it won't look funny if the cops should *happen* to stop us and start asking silly questions. I'm Joe Jackson."

"I'm John Smith," Johnny said. The other passengers gave their names as Talbot, Farquhar and Seibert.

THE car left the town behind and started on its long trip. After a half mile or so Johnny shivered. "Mind turning on the heater, Jackson?"

"It don't work," Jackson replied shortly.

Johnny groaned. "I should have brought my earmuffs—and a hot-water bottle."

"Maybe you shouldda brung snowshoes, too," Joe Jackson said sarcastically. "Let's not have no trouble. I'm the guy's taking all the risk, you know."

Johnny turned up his coat collar and slumped down in his seat. It was bitter cold in the car. Normally the body heat of five men would have taken off the chill, but the doors and windows fitted poorly and icy puffs of air seeped in.

The car swished through the night, skidding now and then on an icy curve, but making good time, nevertheless.

But after traveling a little over an hour, the left rear tire blew out. Jackson, the driver, kept the car on the road with difficulty, but once he brought it to a full stop he began swearing luridly.

He got out and jacked up the car. The passengers remained in the car, except for Johnny who tried to help Jackson. The latter did not require it, however. He went at the tire changing with the air of an expert. He took off the flat tire, looked at it and rolled it into the ditch.

"Nobody'll patch that baby."

Johnny frowned. "But suppose you get another flat? You haven't another spare."

"You're telling me!"

Johnny touched the tread of the tire Jackson was putting on the wheel. It was perfectly smooth. Alarmed, he went around the car examining the other tires. All were smooth. He returned to Jackson.

"Your tires are in lousy shape. I'm surprised you took a chance on such a long trip."

Jackson grunted. "You want to take chances hitch-hiking?"

"Uh-uh, it's too cold."

"Then keep your trap shut. Now, get inside. I've got to make time."

The wildcat bus rolled on to Eau Claire, through which Jackson drove with extreme caution. Twenty miles beyond the right rear tire blew out. Fortunately it was a minor blow-out and Jackson was able to mend the tube with a cement patch. But they lost an hour while the tire was being mended and pumped up with a hand-pump. The several passengers took turns with the pump.

At Black River Falls, Jackson pulled in at a roadstand and everyone had a cup of coffee. Halfway between Black River Falls and Tomah the patched tire developed a leak and some more repairing was necessary.

When everyone got back into the car, Jackson made a little speech. "Folks, I'm hoping to get you to Tomah, but I'm afraid that's as far as I can go on these tires. They're as thin as tissue paper."

All the passengers exclaimed in alarm. "What do you mean?" Johnny cried. "We paid you to take us to Chicago. You can't drop us at Tomah."

"Oh, can't I? I warned you all at the start that this was a share-expenses trip. If you want to kick in for a new set of tires, okay, I'll finish the trip, but it simply can't be done on these hunks of rubber."

"How much would four new tires cost?"

"I can get some new, re-treads at Tomah for about six bucks each. That's twenty-four dollars, split five ways——"

Johnny's own roar was drowned by that

of the other passengers. "That'll make the trip cost us more than the regular bus!"

"I know," said Jackson doggedly, "but you knew you were taking chances, didn't you? Can I help it if the tires blow out? Maybe I can knock this guy down to five dollars each."

"Count me out," said Johnny. "Gimme back the four-fifty I paid for my passage and let me out at Tomah."

"What four-fifty?" sneered the driver.

"I didn't get the money, did I?"

"No, but your boss did."

"All right, ask *him* to give it back to you."

The passenger named Farquhar said, "Men, we're four to one. Are we going to let this man get away with it?"

Jackson surrendered gracefully. "Okay, boys, if that's the way you feel about it. Hold tight!"

They saw the lights of Tomah, when the right front tire blew out. It was burst beyond repair.

"Climb in, fellas," Jackson said cheerfully. "I'll drive in on the rim. This tire place is only about a quarter of a mile."

A FEW minutes later the car bumped in at an all-night filling station and Jackson climbed out and went in to talk to the proprietor. That gave the passengers an opportunity to talk things over.

"We can't get our money back so we might as well make the most of it," Talbot said bitterly.

"But I can't afford it," whined Seibert.

"I've only got about five dollars with me."

"That's five bucks more than I've got," Johnny said, cheerfully. "My suggestion is that we stick tight. He can't *throw* us out of the car."

"I'll give him two dollars, that's all," said Farquhar, firmly.

"You're a fool if you do," Johnny said.

"It's still a long way to Chicago."

Jackson came back to the car. "Boys, I got some good news. He'll let me have the tires partly on credit. All I've got to

shell out is twelve-fifty. That's two and a half apiece."

"I've got twenty cents," said Johnny doggedly. "I'm saving that for grub."

"You kick in two-fifty or you get out," growled Jackson.

"Yeah? Who's going to put me out?"

"I will," snarled Jackson, "and the others. Won't we, fellows?"

"He'll pay like the rest of us, or he'll stay here," snapped Farquhar.

Johnny climbed out of the car. "Fine. I'll just step inside and telephone the cops. License Z2-4560. A wildcat bus, heading south on U. S. 12. Since I won't be in the bus, I've got nothing to lose."

That turned the trick. It earned Johnny considerable abuse, but he was impervious to it. An hour later, the car was off, with a brand-new set of retreaded tires.

The new tires drove fine—until just beyond Baraboo, when the left front went out so suddenly that Jackson wound up with one wheel in the frozen ditch.

He examined the tire and swore luridly. "They're retreading these tires too deep."

"You mean the tires are too thin when they retread them," Johnny said, caustically.

"Nobody asked *you*. You're a dead-head."

Jackson had been cautious enough to bring along one of his old tires and he put that on the wheel, but at Madison, which they reached at three in the morning he balked and insisted on purchasing another retreaded tire. It cost five seventy-five, of which Farquhar, Seibert and Talbot contributed three-fourths, Johnny still remaining oblivious to threat and entreaty alike.

It was shortly before six in the morning when the wildcat bus finally pulled into Lake Geneva. "Last chance to eat before we reach Chicago," the driver announced.

Everyone, including Johnny, went into a roadstand and headed naturally enough for the washroom. There was considerable confusion and when they came out, Johnny looked around and discovered that Jackson, the driver, was missing.

Exclaiming in chagrin, he leaped to the door. The wildcat bus was gone!

"He's stranded us!" he cried. "I was expecting this earlier, but I didn't think he would pull it this far along."

Farquhar, Seibert and Talbot went into a loud lament. "I'll report him to the police," Farquhar cried.

"It won't do you any good now," Johnny said, "since he's rid of his passengers, he's just a private driver. Unless you fellows all want to go back to wherever they catch him and prefer charges. Me, I think I'll mosey along the road."

He received some black looks from the others, but went cheerfully to the lunch counter and had a sandwich and cup of coffee. His fellow travelers lined up along the counter, too, and he was glad to note that all ordered substantial breakfasts, indicating that they were no worse off financially than he.

Finished eating, Johnny went outside and looked at the thermometer. He discovered that a comparative heat wave was on the way, the mercury registering at six above zero. It would undoubtedly go much higher when the sun came out.

Heartened, Johnny started down the road toward Chicago. At the edge of town a truck with a load of hogs slowed down behind him and the driver yelled, "Lift, Mister?"

Johnny sprang into the cab beside the driver and then wished he hadn't when the odor of the hogs hit his nostrils.

"Going far?" he asked.

"All the way to Chicago. Glad to have you along."

*(To be continued in the next SHORT STORIES)*

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*Both in the next **SHORT STORIES**—August 25th, out August 10th*

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There also is a Kappie De Vries story in the next issue. With trouble boiling up in the East, Kappie finds the police are expected to play second fiddle to the Army. Second fiddle? Kappie?

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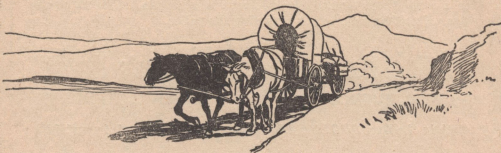
*176 pages of the finest adventure fiction*



# GILA RIVER PIRATE

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

Author of "Uncrowded Country," etc.



**T**AUT with suspense, Lieut. John Morton waited in the little *cantina* just off the plaza of Santa Fé. When the fat New Mexican proprietress set frioles and carne before him, he made only a pretense of eating, for his nerves were knotted with strain. Capt. McDevitt should have arrived by now. McDevitt had insisted that promptness was vital.

Anxiously the young lieutenant peered out the doorway into the dark street. Music came from across the plaza, from a fandango at the home of the de la Noriegas. Behind the barracks, a caisson mule brayed hoarsely at the stars. So calm was the evening that John Morton could hear the regular tread of the two sentries pacing their beat in front of the *Palacio*. His lean, pleasant young face tightened with increasing concern.

Capt. McDevitt was chief of Army Intelligence for operations west of the Mississippi. McDevitt had sent word for Morton to meet him in this *cantina* an hour after sundown, *not* in uniform, and prepared to ride south. Ordinarily, they would have met in Fort Marcy, which commanded Santa Fé. Meeting secretly like this meant

that McDevitt feared that there were soldier ears in the Fort which would eavesdrop, and soldier tongues which would relay what was heard to outsiders.

"McDevitt has learned something on which we can act," Lieut. Morton told himself.

Military Intelligence was busy tracing a group of thieves who had painted themselves up as Apaches and had robbed and murdered an Army paymaster and his escort on the Cimarron Cut-off of the Santa Fé Trail. There was much traffic on the Trail now. Part of the vast migration headed for the gold diggings of California was flowing by way of Santa Fé and the Gila River-desert route. It was the Army's job to safeguard wagon trains from all marauders, red or white. Cunning and fierce as were the Apaches, it was the white desperados whom Army men most despised and dreaded.

Abruptly Lieut. Morton swore to himself in relief. Capt. McDevitt was coming into the *cantina*.

With the wry, quizzical smile so characteristic of him, the gray-haired captain eased his tall, stoop-shouldered frame into the chair across the table. He gave a brief

order to the proprietress. And as she waddled off, McDevitt leaned across the table and spoke, a crackle of guarded excitement in his low voice.

"John, we're starting for California."

The young lieutenant caught a sharp breath.

"Why? Those thieves heading west?"

"Forget those paymaster thieves. They're small fry. We're working on something a damn sight more important. We're going west with the Howland wagon train."

"More important than the Army payroll!" John Morton blurted. "Captain, I just can't believe it. Explain, for Lord's sake."

Capt. McDevitt grinned again. Long afterward, John Morton was to remember the smile on McDevitt's shrewd, kindly face and the way his big-knuckled fingers grasped a tortilla to scoop up frioles from Morton's plate—and the way McDevitt's stoop-shouldered figure stiffened suddenly, and his weathered face contorted in agony; and how the dull report of that pistol outside the nearby window seemed to linger for a stunned eternity upon the night quiet as Capt. McDevitt slumped forward onto the table.

And then Lieut. Morton was leaping to his feet, springing for the door; and the fat proprietress was screaming.

Outside, pistol in hand, Morton raced around to the side of the *cantina*, nerves taut against the possible smash of a bullet into his own body, gun leveled to return in kind.

Reaching the window through which that treacherous shot had come, he stopped and peered around. He saw no one in the dark alleyway. He found no sign of the killer who had been waiting here; though the acrid bite of powder smoke was still in the air.

Running footsteps drummed across the plaza as dragoons, who had heard the shot from their barracks, came on the double-quick. John Morton hurried to meet them and set them searching for a skulker with a gun. Then Morton ran back into the *cantina*.

Capt. McDevitt opened his eyes for a moment as John Morton worked to revive him.

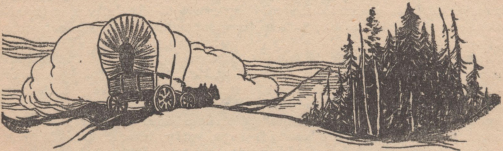
"John, the Howland caravan—"

"Yes, sir? What about it, sir?"

"You go—California."

"I will, sir. What shall I be on the lookout for?"

But McDevitt was slumping, his deep-set eyes fading. He did not speak again. And in the lean young lieutenant burned a fury of avenging anger—and a baffled, bitter hopelessness. He must go to Cali-



*Wagon Train Girl—an Epic of the Pioneers*

fornia, McDevitt had said. It was vastly important. It was his task to follow a foe across the heat-tortured hells of the Gila and the Mojave, to expose and capture an enemy so dangerous that beside him the thieves who murdered an Army paymaster were small fry too unimportant to waste time on.

But who was that foe? And *why* was he a foe?

IT WAS a fine, big caravan, the Howland wagon train.

Mordecai Howland had organized the outfit here in Santa Fé, buying a hundred fine ambulances and six hundred of the finest California mules, baggage and provision wagons, a corps of cooks, herders, and hunters, commanded by quartermaster, commissary and wagon masters, with mounted men as outriders, flankers, videttes and rear guards. It was an unusually fine wagon outfit—and brawny, red-bearded Mordecai Howland had sunk more than a half-million dollars into it. The outfit was not a rich man's whim, either, but shrewd business.

For every man of energy and money-hunger in the States who could shake loose from job and family, was now going to California to seize for himself a portion of the golden hoard of the Mother Lode. Mordecai Howland had outfitted this great wagon train *to take passengers*. And each passenger had paid—in advance—the good round sum of \$250 as fare to Sacramento City.

From Santa Fé, this morning, the wagons rumbled southward in a long file, down along the Rio Grande, past San Felipe, and cliff-bound Angosturas. Behind Howland's outfit followed a dozen or so small wagon parties. Mordecai Howland had shrewdly exacted \$100 from each driver for the "privilege" of trailing the big outfit for the sake of sociability and protection.

And behind *these* wagons followed Lieut. Morton.

"You might pay fare and ride along as a

passenger with Howland," the Compondant at Fort Marcy had suggested to John.

"But the man who killed McDevitt saw me plain. He might shoot me in the back before I ever ferret out who he is. No, I'll follow along behind the caravan."

"Want an escort of dragoons?"

"Would an Apache horse-thief take a brass band along on a raid?"

"Guess they would hinder more than help, in the kind of work you'll have to do. Got any idea of just what kind of trouble McDevitt was looking for in the Howland wagon train, Morton?"

"No," the young lieutenant admitted ruefully. "I've wondered if there are gun smugglers among Howland's passengers, taking rifles to sell to Indians. Or if the wagons were headed into an ambush. Whatever the trouble is, I'll ferret it out. And when we reach California, I'll get a few dragoons from an army post to help me handle the matter."

If he had spoken less serenely and confidently, his words would have been boastful.

Instead, they carried conviction. John Morton had come to New Mexico five years ago, with Kearny's Army of the West. He'd been a brash young shavetail just out of West Point; but the hard service along the Trail and against Chihuahua Mexicans had toughened him. At twenty-six, now, he was a veteran; but still rash and rollicking enough to find challenge in hazards and hardships at which an older man would swear in dreary resignation. Desert-wise, unquenchably light-hearted, he had been Capt. McDevitt's quick choice for a junior officer to aid him in risky Intelligence work.

As he rode southward after the Howland wagons today, however, John Morton's gray eyes were stern and absorbed. For he was realizing that someone in the wagon train had known that McDevitt planned to accompany it to California. Someone in the long file of wagons had not wanted McDevitt to come along. Had not wanted it

so desperately that he had murdered Capt. McDevitt to prevent his coming.

At Bernalillo, the wagon train went into camp for the night.

After the early moon had set around midnight, John carefully stole in among the Howland wagons.

SOME of Howland's mulewhackers were men John had known along the Trail. It was his plan to take several of them into his confidence. To ask them to report to him anything they saw or heard that looked suspicious. Whitey Jones was driving a cook wagon for Howland, and Whitey was a man to trust. So John circled camp toward the commissary. He moves carefully; he didn't want to draw a shot from one of the guards.

He located Whitey Jones, stretched out in his bedroll beside a low-burning camp fire. Cautiously John approached him. The drivers were sleeping close together here. Reaching Whitey Jones, John bent to waken him with a hand on his shoulder.

He shook Whitey. Whitey's snores continued. But the man sleeping next to him abruptly sat up startled.

"*Thief!*" he yelled, snatching up a pistol.

He would have shot pointblank at John. To save himself, John swung his fist and knocked the man flat on his back. But a guard had heard the man call out—and from beyond the commissary wagons the guard came running, leveling a rifle and shouting, "Halt!" Though he could have dropped the guard in his tracks with a pistol shot, John whirled and lunged away.

Behind him, the guard's rifle lashed fire with a report that seemed to cannonade over the sleeping camp. John spun from the smash of a bullet into his shoulder and plunged headlong in a twisting fall.

Springing up again, he darted in among the wagons in a lurching, unsteady run; for blood streamed from his shoulder and pain stabbed weakness into his muscles. Behind him thudded running feet, and yells of alarm rippled over the camp. John was

almost to the edge of the camp ground, and in the darkness beyond the wagons he would be safe. And then a man came sprinting around an ambulance and ran right into John's way. John knocked him down, staggered, and veered off to the left, and fell headlong over a wagon tongue. His temple hit the metal tire of a wheel, and blackness shrouded his senses.

He returned to consciousness with a sudden shock, his throat swelling with panic. How long he had been out of his senses he had no way of knowing; it seemed a long time. It was daylight; yet he was in darkness. Suddenly he stiffened convulsively, his eyes starting from his head. A crowd of men surrounded him, staring at him, *staring*—silent, unblinking, awful. "What d'you want? You got me. What you going to do?" he raged hoarsely at them. None answered. And suddenly he realized they were just half men, just torsos. And on top of that realization came another—the earth was quivering, shaking, rumbling. "Good Lord, am I crazy?"

His head felt twice its usual size. His left shoulder was swollen—no, padded with a thick bandage. And it was a thick bandage that made his head seem so large. That was sunlight above him, slanting in through a window. He was lying on a cot. In a wagon. In a moving wagon. And those faces staring at him—they were just pictures. Rows upon rows of daguerreotypes in velvet-and-gild cases and silver-filigreed albums. And beyond the rows of portraits at the rear of the wagon were lockers and benches with materials and apparatus for taking pictures.

He understood, then. Following Howland's wagons, yesterday, he had noticed a huge, gaudily-painted van on which was a sign: "*Neile Wayne, Daguerreoon. . . . Send pictures to the folks at home. Portraits our specialty. Scenic ambrotypes, 50c.*"

"So that daguerreotypist picked me up," John realized.

He started to sit up, and a wave of nausea hit him so that he reeled and



clutched out to support himself. His hand caught a drawer and pulled it open and spilled its contents onto the floor with a crash—watches and necklaces and brooches and heavy gold chains that shimmered in the sunlight, blurring to his throbbing gaze.

"Dad, rein up! Something's wrong."

The van halted. A door in the front of it opened. John forced himself to sit up.

"Are you all right? Wouldn't you like some hot coffee and a bite to eat?"

It was a nice voice, a friendly voice, an anxious voice. With a shock he suddenly realized that it was a *girl's* voice. He squinted against the sunlight to look at her.

She was a tall girl, a slim shapely girl with lovely blue eyes and red-gold hair that shone in the sunlight.

"Y-yes," he stammered. "Some coffee—Say, you picked me up last night?"

"Father did."

"But the guards were hunting me—"

She smiled, dimpling, and said solemnly, "I told dad that maybe you were the thief the guards were hunting for. He got mad, the easy way he does, and snorted that you were hurt and in need of help, and those damn guards—that's the word he used, *damn*—were a pack of fools who'd lynch a man for stealing a two-dollar horse or a bottle of four-bit whiskey. Father doesn't hold with lynching a man for stealing a two-dollar horse or a bottle even of good whiskey. Father," she said, "thinks this is awful crude country, out here."

"Not the *country*!" rasped a voice from the front of the van. An arm reached in the door, holding a bottle.

"Not the *country*," the girl repeated, with her grave little smile. "It's the people he thinks are crude." She took the bottle reached into the wagon. "The country makes such lovely pictures. Father wishes he could say as much for the people. This," she said, reaching the bottle to John, "is not coffee. Judging from its color and aroma, I'd say it was whiskey. I don't know.

Father doesn't approve of young females who drink whiskey. Suppose you drink some of it and find out what it is."

John couldn't help but smile back at her. Her loveliness and her quiet, dry humor were heady tonic to him. And a good long pull at the bottle that was not coffee braced him wonderfully.

From the front seat of the van came that rasping, irascible voice, "Young man, are you a thief?"

Solemnly John answered, "I certainly am not. I was looking for a friend in camp." John thought fast. "I—wanted to borrow some money."

"Want a job?"

"Why, I couldn't do much work, with a hurt shoulder—"

"You can shoot a gun with one hand, can't you?"

"You want somebody shot?" John asked.

The girl couldn't pretend solemnity any longer. Her laughter pealed out, sweet and young.

"It ain't funny," her father rasped. "I mean it. Young man, I want somebody to sort of help guard the wagon, and the team. The other night, somebody fed locoweed to my mules. Not another team got into the stuff—only *my* animals poisoned themselves. And early last night, when I was drawing water from the river, somebody threw a knife that shaved my ear and buried four inches into a tree just beyond me. Wasn't *you* did that?" he demanded fiercely.

"No, sir," John said. "But why should anybody want to harm you?"

The girl answered that. "We just don't know," she said, and this time her voice was serious and worried.

"I know," her father snapped. "Least-ways, I got an idea."

"What is it, sir?" John asked.

But the daguerreotypist didn't answer. The girl leaned closer to John, so that he caught a faint whiff of perfume from the bosom of her dress, and whispered, "Dad can be so provoking! He says it's a crimi-

nal thing ever to accuse another person without positive and damning proof. He does swear an awful lot! He won't tell me what's been preying on his mind."

"Not until I got that aforesaid positive and damning proof," came the calm reiteration from the front of the wagon. Her father had heard her words. "Young man, you taking that job I'm offering?"

"Yes, sir," John said quickly. An idea had been forming in his mind. "Just one thing—mind if I keep hid in the wagon, day times? That guard who shot me might see me, and—"

"Take another shot at you. Until your arm's healed, son, you ride in the wagon. But when you're fit again, you'll fight your battles. Right?"

"Right!" John agreed, with satisfaction.

Things were working out nicely. He wouldn't have to return to Santa Fé on account of his wound, but continue with the Howland caravan. At night, he could slip out of this van, and scout around, make contact with Whitey Jones eventually. Also, the girl and her father would be pleasant company—*very* pleasant company. His pleasure and admiration were so frank on his lean face that the girl colored, and drew away.

"I'll get you something to eat," she said, and patted his arm and smiled in friendly reassurance.

THE Howland caravan went into camp, that night, at Zandia.

The daguerreotypist stopped his van at a distance from the other wagons. John felt it safe for him to eat supper at the camp fire with them, keeping on the lee side of the van.

Ellen Wayne was not only lovely, she was capable. Her quail and hot biscuits made soldier cooking seem like punishment for sins. John said so. She dimpled prettily and said that all she knew, she had learned from her father.

"That's right," Neile Wayne said. The daguerreotypist was a small man with a bris-

ling gray beard, a loud harsh voice, and keen blue eyes with depths of humor and understanding that won John's instant respect. About him was an artist's scrupulous neatness and an artist's frank, outspoken courage. John thought to himself that he had never liked a man so quickly and so completely on first acquaintance as he did this "dag" artist. And he liked Ellen Wayne, too. Everything about her was sweet and fine. He liked the way she brushed her red-gold hair back off her forehead. He liked the proud, easy way she carried herself. He liked her grave, quiet humor, so full of rich enjoyment.

After supper, Neile Wayne mumbled some excuse and climbed into the van. John remained by the camp fire, talking to Ellen.

"When did you leave the Army?" she asked suddenly. "When you heard the stories of gold in California?"

"What makes you think I was a soldier?"

"Officer." She smiled. "West Point puts a stamp on a man."

He said, "I haven't left the Army."

"Oh." Her eyes widened a trifle. "Why are you here?"

"Because my superior officer was murdered—but why he was murdered, and who did it, I don't know. I'm hoping to—"

He didn't finish. Because a wild yell came from the van then. And Ellen's father jumped from the van, holding something aloft.

"I've found it! I *knew* I had it somewhere in my collection!"

"Found what, Dad? You've scared me so I'm shaking!"

"Look!" Neile Wayne said dramatically.

He held a daguerreotype close to the firelight, so that they could see. Ellen and John bent close.

"Why, it's Mr. Howland," Ellen said.

"Mordecai Howland, but looking a damn sight younger and pleasanter than he does now," John said.

"It's *not* Mordecai Howland," Ellen's

father said, his thin, bearded face excited and yet grimly, deeply troubled. "I worked for Rue and Percey, the leading daguerreons in New York City for several years, and I took pictures of a number of important people. One day some of the French family, who own a packet line on the Hudson, had portraits taken. And this is a picture I made of Parker French!"

"The young man who got into trouble, Dad?"

"Yes. It seemed that he couldn't buy enough champagne and lose enough at cards on the allowance his family gave him. The first couple forgeries he committed, his brothers hushed up. But finally he had to disappear to keep out of prison—and now he shows up in Santa Fé, under the name of Mordecai Howland, with letters of credit on the firm of Howland and Aspinwall and organizes one of the richest wagon trains that ever hauled out on the trail for California."

John put in, "You're suspicious about that, aren't you?"

"Lad, when I first saw Howland in Santa Fé, I walked up to him and asked if I hadn't met him in New York, he looked so familiar. He told me he'd never been east of the Ohio River."

"Maybe, then," John said, "he was responsible for your first team of mules being killed. He doesn't want you to come along on this trip. Maybe he's afraid you'll expose him as Parker French."

"He's afraid of more than that! Consider, he outfitted this fine caravan on letters of credit on the firm of Howland and Aspinwall—"

"Good Lord!" John burst out. "You think he *forged* those letters of credit?"

"What else can you think?" Wayne retorted. "When you know that he's not Mordecai Howland at all, but a fugitive from justice named Parker French."

**E**XCITEMENT flared within John Morton then. Here was the answer to so much that had baffled him. Capt.

McDevitt had discovered Howland was a forger named French. McDevitt had planned to accompany the Howland wagon train, to get evidence on French, to seize him. Somehow French had found out. In all probability French had had McDevitt killed to shut his mouth.

"When we get to California," Ellen was saying, "we can tell the authorities and have French taken into custody."

But her father burst out, "That's just it! I don't think Parker French is going to risk that at all. I don't think he'll *go* to California."

"But his passengers, Father? How about them?"

And John said, "All those people who've paid French \$250 apiece to take them to Sacramento City—they won't stand for being taken anywhere else."

"Haven't you noticed," Wayne pointed out grimly, "how many hired hands Parker French has got? Cooks and herders and hunters and wagon masters and drivers and mounted men? Some of 'em, maybe, are honest."

"But I bet most of 'em ain't. If it comes to a showdown, Parker French, alias Mordecai Howland, has got the forces to handle his passengers any way he wants. Another thing. Everyone of his passengers is somebody who could pay \$250 for the trip, and who's got money to live on in the diggings where grub and shelter are expensive as rubies, damn near. You add it all up to the same answer I get?"

"Good Lord," John blurted, "I—I hate to believe it. But you figure that somewhere along the Trail Mordecai Howland will loot his passengers of all their money and valuables and set them afoot. Then he'll take his loot and these fine mules and wagons and—head into Mexico, probably where he'll be safe from United States law."

"Yeah, he'll be safe," Neile Wayne grated, "but his passengers won't be safe. They'll buck heat and thirst in the desert—and along the Gila, Red Sleeve's murder-

ing Apaches will be on the lookout for easy picking!"\*

Ellen said, "Dad, we've got to spread word among the passengers about this."

Lips tightening, her father shook his head.

"I'm afraid. Ain't no way of knowing who among these passengers are part of French's own outfit. Besides, spreading word of what may be ahead of them will be spreading panic. Warning the passengers will be our last resort, because the minute that Mordecai Howland guesses that we're wise to him, he'll order his men to attack the passengers. Then he and his thieves would just scatter on south into Chihuahua."

"But we're not going to just set on our secret like a banty hen on a China egg!" John retorted.

"Of course not. I'm riding back to Santa Fé to fetch enough United States Dragoons to handle Mordecai Howland's thieves!"

"I'll go," John said. To himself, he realized that Capt. McDevitt had probably planned to have a cavalry escort.

"No, son," Neile Wayne said. "You're hurt. Hard riding would set your wound to bleeding, and hot sun would addle your senses. You wouldn't get through. You stay here with Ellen."

"You'll have to ride fast, sir. Maybe

Howland plans to jump his passengers just a short ways farther south."

"More likely he'll wait till they reach the Gila."

"But we don't know! I'm thinking that it would be damn smart of us to *delay the wagon train*."

"Right! More you could delay the wagons, lad, more chance I'd have of bringing the dragoons in time to help."

Ellen said, "But it would be dangerous, John. If Howland caught you at it—"

"He'd shoot you," her father put in.

But John said, "Sooner you start for Santa Fé, the better. I left a good saddle horse tied in my camp a mile north of Salida. You find him, sir, and ride 'im hard."

"I'm starting at once. Ellen—"

"Don't worry about me, Dad!"

"I'll look after her, sir," John said.

"You're good youngsters, both of you," Neile Wayne said. He sighed. "Lord help us if our plans misfire!"

John said, "He'll help us if we help ourselves."

THE wagon train's big herd of mules and horses were grazing along the river flats. An hour after Neile Wayne started for Santa Fé, John left the van and walked carefully through the darkness toward the grazing herd.

Mounted guards circled the animals, alert against horse-thieves.

John spilled gunpowder in a long line on the ground.

Waiting, then, till no wrangler was near him, he set fire to that line of gunpowder. And he emptied his pistol into the air, and yelled like a coup-counting Sioux.

That line of gunpowder blazed up into a streamer of flame that streaked across the ground toward the mule herd. It terrified the animals. It panicked them. That herd blew apart like a bomb. In bunches they fled pell mell into the night, smashing through willow thickets along the river and across the cornfields of the Mexican

\* The place where the Parker French case actually happened was not Santa Fé but San Antonio, Texas. Parker French arrived in San Antonio in 1849 with a letter of credit from Howland and Aspinwall of New York, for \$750,000. He organized a wagon train (just as described above) to take passengers to California. After the caravan pulled out on the Trail westward, it was discovered that the letter of credit was a forgery. U. S. Cavalry were sent from San Antonio to catch up with the wagon train. French got as far as El Paso before the soldiers caught up with him. At that, he fought the cavalry and, with some of his men, escaped into Chihuahua. His luckless passengers scattered. Some returned to Texas. Others pushed on afoot to San Diego—some got through, some were killed by Apaches. Parker French later turned up in San Francisco, where he joined reinforcements sailing to Nicaragua to join William Walker, the filibuster. And Parker French actually climaxed his career as Ambassador of Nicaragua to the United States! Rumor says that French proved even too much for Walker's strong stomach, and Walker made him ambassador to get rid of him. When Walker's star set, Parker French was lost in an oblivion richly deserved.



*paisanos*. A couple of riders fired guns at the spot where John had blazed into the air, and bullets whipped over his head as he flung himself into a greasewood clump. But the night wranglers didn't waste time hunting him—they spurred headlong after the stampeding mules to catch them before they ran themselves to death.



Not till middle of the next afternoon were all the mules rounded up, and the caravan moving again.

"A half-day gain for us!" John exulted to Ellen.

She was driving the van, and he sat back inside it.

She nodded. "But when I heard the shooting, I was sure you'd got killed."

"Tonight there won't be any shooting."

"You got another plan to delay the wagons?"

"I sure have. And a better trick than last night's."

John waited until an hour after supper, that night; then he left camp, circled the Howland wagons in the dark, and hiked on ahead. He wasn't too steady on his feet, and each mile he walked put an added reel into the stride. By midnight he neared Albuquerque. Here the wagon trail crossed the Rio Grande River.

Cloudbursts at the headwaters had filled the Rio Grande so high that it could now be crossed only at the ford. A crooked line of stakes marked the ford.

John worked fast in the moonlight—

He was staggering with weariness when he got back to Ellen and the big van. She had to help him into the wagon. He col-

lapsed on the cot. The bandage had pulled loose on his shoulder, and the wound bled. Ellen re-banded it, brought him hot coffee, and roasted venison. But he was too beat-out to eat, and slumped off into hoarse-breathed sleep like a man sliding into a pool. Ellen sat there beside him, her lovely face anxious, till daybreak.

At noon, the Howland caravan reached the river ford at Albuquerque.

Ellen and John watched with bated breath.

Howland's lead team swung into the river, the long file of ambulances following behind. Alongside that curving line of stakes marking the ford the drivers reined their mules.

Abruptly the leading team sank into water over their heads, and came up swimming. They tangled in their harness. Struggling, the half-dozen mules further entangled themselves. Three of them were dragged under the surface, drowning. The driver jumped into the current and slashed with his knife to cut the mules loose; but a frantic animal, pawing the water, struck him with a forefoot and knocked him senseless. A passenger had to grab the driver by the hair and haul him to the bank.

The second ambulance driver tried to stop his mules and turn back. But already they were in swimming water, and the vehicle and team swept down-current. The third driver, swinging his team back toward shore, pulled into quicksand. And a fourth wagon got stuck in the sucking bottom. The long line of ambulances crowded together on the shore in milling confusion.

Mordecai Howland stood on the bank and roared commands at his men, cursing and flinging his hands aloft in his anger and disgust. A towering, burly six-footer with unkempt red hair and a heavy red beard, Howland had a furious temper and a rasping, heavy voice that carried. It would have taken a cool, shrewd head to untangle the chaos in the river. His shouts and oaths worsened the confusion.

It took most of the afternoon to haul the mired stock out of the river, and to find the real ford over which the outfit could cross. By the time the wagons did reach the far side of the Rio Grande, the sun was low, and Howland had cooled down enough to order his outfit to make camp.

John grinned at Ellen as she brought him supper.

"The trick worked! I bet Howland hasn't even guessed that the stakes marking the ford were shifted last night."

Ellen shook her head. "A mean man is a suspicious man, John. You've got to be awfully careful from now on."

"A couple more delays like this, and your father'll be arriving with dragoons from Fort Marcy!"

"I'm hoping and praying," she said simply.

And then, from outside the van, somebody called.

"Miss Wayne! Hey, Miss Wayne!"

Ellen's face tightened. "Stay in here," she whispered to John. Then she went out the front door of the big van, carefully closing it behind her.

John moved to the door and opened it a fraction of an inch.

Outside, the light of the camp fire on them, were two mounted men who wore buckskin and carried rifles. They were two of Mordecai Howland's meat hunters. One of them held the reins of a third horse.

And seeing that third horse, and the burden swung across its back made John stiffen in sudden staggering, unbelieving shock—as Ellen cried out, as Ellen darted toward that horse, toward the man lying slumped across the saddle like a bag of meal, arms hanging limp and head lolling against the horse's side.

"Dad! Dad!"

"He's dead, Miss," one of the meat hunters said. "Somebody shot 'im in the back, back up the trail a piece. We found 'im lyin' there."

And the other meat hunter said, "Must've been some greaser, wantin' to

steal his hoss. Miss, they's a preacher in camp. We'll send 'im over here later."

But first they lifted Neile Wayne's body off the horse, and carefully laid him on a tarpaulin upon the ground. Then they rode off, with a curious, cornerwise look out of their hard eyes at the weeping, heart-broken girl bent over the limp, quiet figure.

From within the van, John swore in profound regret and anger. His keen eyes studied those two hunters' faces, fixing them in his mind. For he was suddenly sure that it was no greaser horse thief who had shot Wayne, but likely these very two men—whom Mordecai Howland had probably set to watching his back trail, to make sure that Wayne would not ride back to Santa Fé to tell his suspicions to the authorities.

JOHN climbed out of the van. With a blanket he covered Wayne's body. Ellen was sobbing inconsolably. He lifted her off her knees, and his big arm tightened about her shoulders as she turned her face against his chest.

"You'd better get inside and lie down," he whispered.

He lifted her into the van, put her on the cot and pulled a robe over her shoulders. Face against the pillow, she let herself go, her slim body convulsed with her grief. And John sat there, silent. Light from neighbors' camp fires glowed through the van windows, flickering on objects that spoke so eloquently of Neile Wayne. His bunk.

The rows upon rows of daguerreotypes upon the walls. The cases of jewelry for sitters to wear. The velvet and gilt albums. The paraphernalia for picture making. It was hard to believe that Neile Wayne was dead, actually dead.

Noise from the big camp seemed unusually, unbearably, loud. John's nerves crawled as singing came from the nearest camp fire, where some of Howland's passengers were making an evening of it.

"Hangtown gals are plump and rosy,  
Hair in ringlets mighty cosy,  
Painted cheeks and sassy bonnets,  
Touch them and they'll sting like hornets!"

They were putting on an impromptu minstrel show, too; and John cursed them fervently as they Jim-Crowed with clog and shuffle and shouted ancient jokes—"Why is a dead duck like a dead doctor? Both are done quacking!"

Damn them, it was largely on their account that Neile Wayne was dead, anyhow. Leaning forward, John put his hand gently on Ellen's soft bright hair.

His efforts to delay the Howland wagon train—those efforts were wasted, John realized.

For Ellen's father had not reached Fort Marcy with word that Mordecai Howland was a criminal named Parker French—who was taking a wagon train of passengers into the desert to rob them and set them afoot in a heat-blasted wilderness harried by Apaches.

So now there was no cavalry racing down the Rio Grande in pursuit of the wagon train, lashing their horses in a desperate attempt to arrive in time to prevent looting and murder. There was no help coming, and there would be no help coming—*unless I go after it*, John told himself.

"Ellen," he said, "listen to me a minute."

It took an effort, but she checked her sobbing, lifted her head. "Yes, John?"

"I've got to leave you. I feel like a dirty dog to do it, but I've got to start for Santa Fé, to bring help."

"Y-yes, John. I understand that."

"I wish to God I could take you with me, but I can't. If Howland discovered that this van had turned back, or was left deserted, he'd send men after us—"

"And he wouldn't wait any longer to loot his passengers."

"That's it!" he said, inwardly blessing her for her common sense and unselfish-

ness. "Howland doesn't know about me. I'll try to slip out of camp unnoticed. Along the road, I'll buy a horse from some *paisano*. I'll ride for Santa Fé as fast as a bronc can leg it. But even so, by the time I reach Fort Marcy and get dragoons headed back this way, this wagon train will already be near the Gila. Chances are damn good that I'd arrive with help just to discover that Howland had already turned loose his wolves—that his passengers were already robbed and set afoot and jumped by Apaches. That's why, honey, I've got to ask you to help out."

She caught a shaky breath, and sat up straighter, as if gathering her reserves of strength and courage.

"How can I help, John?" she said simply.

"Pick out a man you can trust among Howland's passengers. Somebody older, somebody decent and honest. Tell him the whole danger. Tell him he's got to spread warning among the passengers. Tell him they've just *got* to delay the wagons some way that won't make Howland turn his gunmen loose."

"But, John!" She instantly saw the weakness in this move. "What if I tell it all to some man who's really working for Howland? Why, that would be the worst thing I could do."

"It would be. So be careful. Now, one thing more—day after tomorrow is Sunday. Here's what I want you to do."

Low-voiced, he talked on for twenty minutes.

Then he got ready to leave. He made sure his pistol was loaded. Outside, the camp fires had burned low, and the big wagon camp was quiet. He would get no better chance to slip away unseen.

"I'm leaving, Ellen."

She stood up, moved toward him; and he enfolded her in his arms, kissed her. He turned away then. Jumped out of the van, and lunged off into the darkness.

He did not buy a horse from some *paisano*, though.

For, mid-morning, as he was striding along the wagon road paralleling the Rio Grande, he saw two horsemen ahead of him. *Gingos*. In buckskin. Across their saddles they carried antelope they had shot. John's first impulse was to dodge into the brush beside the road. Then he recognized the two men. They were meat-hunters for Mordecai Howland. They were the two hard-faced hunters who had brought Neile Wayne back to camp, dead, shot in the back. John's quick temper flared hot within him.

He stopped there, in the middle of the road.

And he called to the two men to halt. "You're under arrest," he snapped at them. "For murder. For shooting a man in the back. You're going back to Fort Marcy to stand trial." And he swore at them, lashed at them with every vile epithet he could lay tongue to.

The two men looked at each other—and then swung up their rifles, and kicked their spurs home.

That was what John wanted. His pistol kicked in his hand. His bullet caught one hunter between the eyes and knocked him lifeless from saddle. A rifle slug almost creased John's throat. He sprang sideways as the horses bore down on him—and his second shot knocked the other hunter sprawling from saddle with a bullet in his side. John leaped to the horses' reins and checked them.

Some minutes later, John was galloping northward up the trail. The dead man lay buried in an irrigation ditch behind them. The wounded man was tied across the saddle of the other horse, loping along beside John's mount.

THE next morning was Sunday. Even before the yell of "Catch up! Catch up!" rang over Howland's big wagon camp, Ellen Wayne was busy, going from group to group of the passengers. She spoke to white-haired Mrs. Latham, who belonged to a missionary society. To the

Grosch sisters, who were school teachers. To thin, gaunt-faced Hiram Beecher, who was a minister of the Gospel traveling to a call in the big camp of Sonora. He had helped Ellen bury her father.

"It's Sunday morning," Ellen told them. "It's our first Sunday on the trail," she reminded dark-hued Ira Westcott who wore a crucifix on a gold chain across his vest. "You sing so beautifully, Miss Barnes," she said; and "Mr. Longstreth, I heard you say grace last night, and I wonder if—"

There were violins in camp, and harmonicas.

And presently burly Mordecai Howland came storming from his wagon at the far end of camp to see why there was such delay in loading the ambulances and stretching out upon the trail. His red-bearded face turned apoplectic as he found a number of his passengers congregated in the center of camp, as he heard the violins leading half a hundred fine voices in the stately, sonorous words of the Wyndham hymn:

"Deny thyself and take the cross"  
Is the Redeemer's great command:  
Nature must count her gold but dross  
If she would gain this heavenly land."

And the group sang "Old Hundred" and "Wells" and "Coronation"—hymns that were fine, ringing, marching songs.

Mordecai Howland waited till the music ceased and Reverend Beecher climbed to the seat of an ambulance. But then Howland shouted, "All right, folks, a little hymn-singing is a mighty fine thing. But let's get started now. After all, it's a long, long way to California."

The Reverend Beecher said with solemn dignity, "Mr. Howland, we do not travel on the Sabbath."

Howland's jaw dropped and his hard, bold eyes bulged.

Beecher was already starting a sermon—and Howland, choking back his rage, paced back and forth at the edge of the crowd as Beecher's wise, kindly words gave gener-



ously of his strength of faith and optimism to his listeners.

It was a good sermon, and a heart-felt one, but long—*endless*—to Howland. And when the final Amen went up, Howland let out a bellow.

"All right, everybody, jump into the wagons. Blast it, we've lost hours, and we got to make up for it by—"

But his words were drowned out as Ellen's clear young voice led the crowd in a resounding:

"Praise God from Whom all blessings flow,  
Praise Him all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host,  
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost."

And Ellen led the singing of other hymns. But finally the services had to end. And Howland had the ambulances all drawn up and ready, and most of his passengers climbed aboard.

A group around the Reverend Beecher protested. They said they would not travel on the Lord's Day.

"All right! You can stand right here till you rot!" Howland yelled. "We're going on."

And he climbed into his four-horse dearborn and started on.

The little group around the preacher began to melt away. Finally but a dozen remained with Ellen and Beecher. He looked at her and shook his head sadly.

"We'll have to go on," he said.

Ellen blinked back tears of dismay and failure. John had asked her, *begged* her, to try to keep the wagons from traveling today. But now the long caravan was stretched southward down the trail—

Ellen hitched up the four mules to the van, and followed the train down along the Rio Grande. Beyond Sabinal, the river crowded so close to the sand hills that the trail climbed up onto the tableland on the west side. The sand made going tough, but Ellen's mules were strong.

On to Socorro the outfit rolled. Slowly,

steadily, on southward. To a late camp that night—an early start next day.

Reaching the last settlement on the Rio Grande, the caravan met *paisanos* fleeing north. "Apaches!" the country people called out. So panicked were they by news of Apache forays on outlying ranchos that they would hardly stop to talk. Mordecai Howland paid little heed. His outfit was strong enough to handle any passel of stinkin' horse-thievin' Injuns they encountered. To hell with 'em—keep the wagons rollin'! On south the wagon train moved, past the turn-off where the road to Chihuahua ached in a waterless *jornada* around the Fra Christobal Mountains.

The road thus far had been an ancient highway for pack trains—first, of the *conquistadores* who came seeking the golden cities of Cibolo, then of the merchants of Old Mexico bringing their wares from Chihuahua City up to the great annual fairs at Taos. And of later years, gringo traders who came from the Missouri to Santa Fé, sent wagons over the Chihuahua turn-off into Mexico with Yankee textiles and hardware and gimcracks.

But the road *beyond* that turn-off—the road which Howland was now taking—few wheels had ever marked.

Just three years before, General Kearny and his victorious Army of the West had passed this way, bound for the Gila and California. Behind him had come the heroic Mormon Battalion. And they drove the first wagons ever to travel this route. These Mormons opened up a wagon road to California, finding fords, building trails aslant the cliffsides, hewing a way through chaparral and barrier rock to force their wagons through.

It was rough going, but Howland's mules were tough, and his vehicles sturdy. On down along the Rio Grande they traveled.

Leaving the river finally, the train swung west below the Mimbres Mountains. And still Ellen's backward glances caught no dust-sign of the cavalymen whom John

Morton was to bring from Santa Fé. Her worries became unceasing anguish. *Had Howland's gunmen caught John?*

On westward the wagon train rumbled over a dry, sun-blasted basin, rimmed by barren mountains.

It was a region ungraced by water and bereft of life. And yet, something watchful and dangerous brooded over it. Smoke columns lifted from the range to the north. And in mid-afternoon the caravan scared a flock of buzzards from a tiny camp where two luckless Mexican traders among the Indians lay spread-eagled on the sand, stripped and mutilated. And down the length of Howland's wagon train passed the breathless word, "*Apaches!*"

A dust storm crept up out of the barren reaches of Sonora. It blew relentlessly. Mordecai Howland angled the wagon train northward into a canyon of the mountain chain. There, in a grassy cove watered by springs seeping from the hills, the outfit found shelter.

Ellen decided that she must delay no longer in telling a responsible man among the passengers that Mordecai Howland was a thief who would rob them and maroon them in the desert. So that night, Ellen went to the Reverend Beecher's camp fire. Calling the preacher aside, Ellen told him the whole story.

It stunned Beecher. He just could not accept it. "I can't believe it," he said over and over. "Mr. Howland isn't exactly a gentleman, but a *thief*—"

"He had my father murdered!" Ellen said vehemently. "But even if I'm mistaken, are you willing to risk it? Are you willing to have on your conscience the trouble we'll have if what I say is true?"

"No—no. But I don't know what to do."

"Get together men you can trust. Tell them about it. You've got to jump Howland and his men before they jump you. Talk it over tonight—but *do something* by morning."

The preacher nodded wearily.

ELLEN slept fitfully in the van that night. Before dawn, she was awake. She lay taut-nerved in suspense. If the Reverend Beecher had aroused a group of the passengers to fight in self-protection, they should attack Howland's wagon men *now*—before the thieves were up and alert.

Abruptly a man yelled. A gunshot rolled over camp.

A scream swelled in Ellen's throat. But almost immediately her feeling was of heartfelt relief.

The preacher *had* aroused the other passengers to put up a fight. Hastily Ellen drew on her dress, and jumped to the ground outside.

Beecher's wagon was near hers. She saw the tall minister protesting to Mordecai Howland and two of his drivers. Howland held a gun. Lunging forward suddenly, he smashed the barrel to Beecher's head and the minister slumped unconscious to the ground.

"Search his baggage," she heard Howland command.

And then a gun roared again, and four-five guns blazed answer. Off to left of her van, Ellen saw that three passengers had barricaded themselves behind a commissary wagon—but Howland's men were converging toward it, shooting as they came. And looking around camp, Ellen saw that it was Howland's meat hunters, Howland's herders, Howland's wagon men who held guns in their hands—and it was the passengers who were being pulled out of their blankets on the ground, it was the passengers who stood with arms held aloft while their weapons were taken and their pockets turned inside out and their baggage emptied for the thieves to loot. Here and there a passenger drew a gun; and each time the answer was the same—a swift and merciless gun shot or a blow with a gun barrel that laid the protesting man crumpled upon the sand.

*Not the passengers, but Howland's thieves had struck first!*

Two of Howland's wagon men stalked up to Ellen.

"Stand aside, Miss."

One watched her, while the other climbed into the van. Ellen heard him pulling drawers open and dumping their contents onto the floor. He came out presently, grinning, his hands laden with the gold chains and watches and brooches and rings which Ellen's father had kept on hand for people sitting to have their portraits done.

And Ellen thought bleakly, "Yes, the Lord helps him who helps himself—to *OUR* belongings!"

THE fine mules were hitched to the ambulances again—but not a passenger was aboard as the long file of wagons moved briskly out of the canyon. Even Ellen's van and team were taken. Not a vehicle, not a horse or mule was left behind. Of food, a few sacks of flour, some coffee and some haunches of venison had been tossed out of the commissary wagons. Enough to last the crowd of passengers two days. But not a gun, not a bullet, had been assigned for them to use.

Some of the women were sobbing hysterically. Of the men, most seemed dazed by the suddenness and the cynical heartlessness of what had been done to them. Just how desperate their plight was, only a few seemed aware, Ellen realized. Without food or water, without horses or mules, they could never cross the desert either to California or back to Santa Fé.

Beecher, the minister, came up to Ellen. His lean head was bandaged, the cloth stained with red.

"I wasn't careful enough," he said, an agony of self-blame in his low voice. "You warned me. You warned me to be careful how I talked. Some of Howland's men must have overheard me when I spread the word that he was a thief. So he decided to attack us before we got ready to resist him."

From the mouth of the canyon, the stranded passengers watched the wagon train rolling onto the trail westward. Lightly laden now, the ambulances rolled and jounced along behind the six-mule teams at a lively clip, skirling tawny dust in a great banner against the heat-glazed sky.

Down a long alluvial flat leading from the canyon mouth, the line of wagons moved, down to the floor of the great oval basin. Westward, then, the caravan swung, toward California—and wagons and loose stock and flanking out-riders dwindled in distance.

The wagon road led between a group of ochre-colored buttes rising like great lava bubbles from the basin floor. Toward the buttes Howland headed his train. Nearer and nearer to those buttes the big outfit approached—

Ellen saw the thing happen. Men standing nearby her in the canyon mouth saw it, too. Ellen's scream, their sudden hoarse shouts, brought the rest of the stranded passengers running to look.

Far 'cross the basin they stared, at the wagon train nearing that group of buttes—*at a massed horde of horsemen sweeping around those desert buttes.*

They came from two directions, from left and right flank. And they charged upon the long wagon train, guns lashing fire, arrows arching in a cloud from bows. Their lean, oiled bodies burned coppery red in the sun, and their yells came faintly on the wind to the watchers in the canyon mouth.

"Apaches!" someone near Ellen gasped.

Howland's wagons had no chance to "fort up" wheel-to-wheel in a square, the onslaught was so sudden. Instead, drivers poured the lash into their teams, while mounted men blazed lead at the attackers.

But arrows and bullets dropped mules dead in the traces. Falling, they tripped mules behind, who plunged headlong, snarling up teams in bawling confusion. Wagon piled onto wagon, overturning,

crashing in wreckage, catapulting drivers headlong. A group of the Indians had charged the herd of loose stock, had shot herders from saddle; and now they were whooping in triumph as they stampeded the loose stock. The other braves were sweeping in a racing circle around the stalled caravan; and Howland's men, lying prone behind dead mules, standing back of their horses to shoot over the saddle, were fighting for their lives. Already a number of them lay sprawled in death or writhing with agony of wounds.

The Apaches formed in a solid mass and swept, suddenly, in a break-neck charge upon the shattered wagon outfit. Down onto Howland's men they charged, and pounded over them in a whooping, shooting, smashing wave of destruction.

It was more than Howland's followers could stand. Survivors who had horses leaped into saddle and spurred away.

Apaches galloped in pursuit. Their rifles lashed fire. White men slumped from saddle. An Apache leaped down upon each who fell, knife bade glistening in the sun. On into the gap between the buttes the remnants of Howland's outfit fled, their pursuers whooping at their heels.

Overturning the wagons, the Apaches searched, taking everything of value that they found. Every man of the wagon train who lay on the ground was stripped; and the luckless few who moved, received arrow or knife blade. Then the wagons were piled together and a torch set to them. Flame presently engulfed the wreckage.

Near Ellen, a man groaned.

"Keep back here in the canyon," another man warned in a hoarse whisper, as if voices might be heard by those Apaches down in the long basin. "For God's sake, don't let them devils see us!"

Ellen didn't move back. Ellen just stood there, gazing, thinking, realizing—if they had all been in their usual seats in Howland's wagons . . . they would most of them now be lying dead . . . out

*there on the sand in the hot blaze of the sun . . . near that flaming heap of wreckage . . . while the Apaches whooped and danced over their loot. . . .*

THE Indians had a number of uses for stolen mules—to ride, to trade, and to eat. They got busy roasting mule meat; and then gorging themselves. Watching from the mouth of the canyon, Ellen and the Reverend Beecher talked in anguished worry.

"They're stuffing themselves into a stupor," the preacher said. "Maybe that's lucky for us."

"But they're not fools. Some of them will realize those ambulances had seats for a lot of men, but were empty. Maybe they'll start looking for the rest of the wagon train people."

"If they do, the wagon tracks'll lead them right here into the canyon, to us," Beecher realized bleakly. "And we haven't a single gun among us."



"We've got to pretend then," Ellen said. "We've got to make a *show* of strength. There's so many of us here. We can cut long sticks that'll look like rifles from a distance."

He nodded. "We can put up a barricade of rocks. I'll start the men doing that now."

But even as the gaunt preacher gathered the passengers close to give orders, Ellen's heart was wrung with despair. Fake guns and a rock barricade would be no more protection than a wall of dust if the Apaches charged.

It was water which brought the Indians. Having gorged, by sundown they got thirsty and needed water. Evidently they



knew of the springs in the canyon, because a dozen of them came up the long alluvial cone toward the gorge, carrying water gourds to fill.

Seeing them approaching, panic swept the crowd in the canyon. The lanky preacher gathered them all back of the rock barricade; and over it, he laid a row of sticks.

Ellen whispered to him, "It might be awf'ly smart if you'd go to meet those braves, if you'd warn 'em we're strong enough to beat them if they come at us."

The preacher looked at her, respect in his haggard eyes, and nodded.

Resolutely, then, he strode out to meet the marauders.

They stopped short as he walked out of the canyon mouth. A couple of them turned and ran back to the main body of warriors. Others waited as Beecher came on, hand uplifted. For a while he harangued the Indians. Ellen, behind the rock barrier in the canyon, with the other whites, could not hear Beecher's words. But finally the braves turned and started back to their main band, and the preacher started back toward the canyon.

Suddenly one of the Apaches yelled. He turned, and flung a knife that whipped in a steely blur through the air and thudded into Beecher's back. Whooping, the braves then sprinted away toward their band.

Some of the passengers ran out of the canyon to pick Beecher up. But he lurched to his feet and came on to meet them.

"The Apaches won't attack us tonight," some of the more experienced whites assured the crowd. "They're gorged with meat, and it's already sundown and they don't fight at night."

"But they *do* fight at daybreak!"

Ellen stared through the dusk at the leaping campfires of the Apache band. Chanting, the warriors were whirling in a dance of victory, celebrating battles won and greater coups and spoils at hand for the taking.

Among the men in the group near Ellen,

there was excited palavering. Why not try, while it was dark, to sneak past the Apaches and head for the Rio Grande? Because it wouldn't work! The Indians were watching for such a move. Besides, come daylight, mounted men could swiftly overtake men afoot. And anybody not killed by bullet or knife would go mad with thirst and sunblaze.

The two Grosch sisters, arms locked around each other, sat staring in a kind of numbed horror at the campfire. Little Mrs. Barnes was crying silently, her throat convulsed and tears streaming down her face, while her husband tried to comfort her. Mrs. Latham, tall and flat-chested, paced angrily to and fro as if rehearsing the scolding she was going to give to the stupid person responsible for all this trouble. Some of the calmer men squatted in the firelight to write letters. Letters disposing of their property; letters of farewell—which would probably, Ellen reflected, never reach those for whom they were intended.

Mrs. Barnes was getting hysterical. Sobbing wildly, she begged over and over, "Tom, if they capture us, you'll shoot me, you won't let them take me, promise you won't let them." And poor Mr. Barnes was trying to tell her, "But I haven't a gun," and then saying, "I promise, you try and maybe sleep now." Some of the men had knives. They lashed them to the ends of sticks. The men so armed stationed themselves at the rock barricade.

And Ellen, hunched by the fire, resting her forehead on her knees, kept wondering: "Did John ever get to Santa Fé?" Or had Howland's men shot him? If he were dead, she didn't care what happened to her.

The moon set, and the Big Dipper swung low toward the horizon. Daybreak was near, and at daybreak the attack would come—

It was *before* daybreak at all, it was when dawn was just streaking the east

with amber, that the first pounding rumble of hoofs was heard.

Ellen had dozed off. She woke with a violent start when a man near her yelled, "*They're comin'! They comin'! You can hear their horses!*" And the crowd behind the rock barrier in the canyon milled in panic. Ellen, her heart in her throat, looked out the canyon mouth toward the camp of the Apaches in the center of the wide, twilit basin.

Vaguely she could see warriors lunging to their feet, silhouetted against the low-burning camp fires. But she could not see any mounted braves headed this way toward the canyon. She could hear hoofbeats, though. Pounding hoofbeats.

And then, on the clear air of early dawn, a bugle sang out a ringing, brassy challenge. *The command to charge!* And those hoofbeats were drumming thunder.

Apaches yelled. Rifles spat crimson streamers from their camp. Warriors milled in confusion. And then against their camp fires was silhouetted the smashing charge of a solid mass of horsemen who streamed over the Indian encampment like a hooped tidal wave. Hoofs kicked showers of sparks from camp fires. Swinging steel flashed crimson in the flares. Revolving pistols stuttered their coughing roar.

And in the first gray light of dawn, the crowd of people in the canyon saw the scattered Apaches racing southward, toward sanctuary in Mexico, fleeing ahead of mounted men in the blue uniform of the 3rd United States Dragoons. And from the stranded passengers of the Howland wagon train rose hoarse yells of wild, heart-lifting relief. Ellen's eyes filled with tears of thankfulness.

John Morton had got through. John had brought help as he had promised.

THE stranded passengers swarmed out of the canyon mouth, shouting and waving their arms to get the attention of the cavalry.

They were seen. A bugle blared out a recall order. The dragoons left off pursuit of the Apache raiders, and re-formed, and came posting briskly up the alluvial slope to the canyon.

Ellen saw John then, his lean figure erect on a big roan horse. He saw her, and his gaunted face lighted up and he reined toward her. And as he came near, her throat tightened and tears stung against her eyelids. John was haggard. Worn out. He was trying to keep his lean figure straight, but he reeled in saddle.

The bulky bandage on his wounded shoulder was stained red. He should never have attempted the ride back to Santa Fé. And, having done it, should never have come racing back with these troops, hurt as he was.

But he *had* done it—and her heart choked up in her throat with joy in his coming.

He reined up before her, calling to her, "You're all right, Ellen?" And he swung his leg over saddle to dismount—and fell, crumpling, so that if she had not caught him in her arms he would have sprawled upon the ground. And then she saw the seeping red stain on his trouser leg. "My leg," he gasped. "Got an Apache slug into it, I guess." He tried to grin reassuringly at her, and fainted dead away from loss of blood and exhaustion. She caught him in her arms.

A medical orderly accompanied the dragoons. He probed the ball from John's leg and wrapped the hurt.

"He's not hurt bad," the orderly told Ellen. "Some good sleep, Madame, and your husband'll be all right."

Ellen blushed, the warm color rising to the roots of her shining red-gold hair. She was sitting on the ground, John's head on her lap. And now she noticed that he had come out of his faint, that he had heard the orderly's words—and was grinning up at her. Her blush deepened.

John said. "Army wagons'll reach us

here by tonight. These stranded passengers of Howland's can ride back to Santa Fé if they want to. I was going back, too, but I could get transferred to California, if you'd like that better. Would you?"

Her lovely face was still warm with color; but her eyes met his steadily, and she said, "Santa Fé would be just fine."

Solicitously he grasped her hand. "You've had a hard time, dear?"

She nodded. "Y-Yes. Everything you asked me to do, I f-failed in. I tried to keep the wagons from traveling on Sunday. But I delayed them only an hour or two. Finally I told the Reverend Beecher that Mordecai Howland was a thief who'd

loot his passengers. But instead of preventing the robbery, Beecher actually brought the attack on." And she explained what had happened.

But John reassured her. "Gosh, dear, you didn't fail! If Howland hadn't left all his passengers stranded here in the canyon, think of what would have happened. You'd all have been in the wagons when the Apaches jumped the train—and most of you would've got killed! You see? You *did* help yourself, after all—and the Lord helps him who helps himself. Though sometimes," John admitted, grinning at her, "He *does* move in a mighty mysterious way His wonders to perform!"

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# GOLDEN BARRIER

By  
E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Author of  
*"A Clipper Is A Lady," etc.*

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*There Was No Hurry. A Missing  
Man Either Returns or He Stays  
Missing . . . . .*



## I

THE American Consulate had moved to temporary quarters on Bucareli, which was a joke on the mob that stoned the building Tuesdays and Fridays, ten A.M., sharp. But Borden found the right place, and without asking any questions.

The consul, Hardy, was a big blond man who sat at a mahogany desk which was well out of line with any window. He said to Borden, "If I were you, I'd move over a bit."

Borden glanced at the electric clock. "It's only 9:50. I'll be done by then."

The consul gave him a funny look. "Haven't I seen you before, somewhere, Mr. Borden?"

As a matter of fact, he had not. No one ever remembered Borden, who was thin and leathery and a little stooped. He did not look like a stranger in Mexico simply because, wherever he went, he was an inconspicuous part of the background. The consul had seen quite a few of that kind; department store clerks who never became

buyers, and bank tellers who never became cashiers. They all looked alike, and while there actually were differences, no one ever noticed them.

Borden answered the consul, "You're too young by fifteen-twenty years. Everyone I knew down here is dead, or traveling for his health."

Then Mr. Hardy saw that Borden's indefinite colored hair was beginning to thin a little, and that it must have taken nearly half a century to put that crepe pucker on the backs of the hands. "You used to be a——"

He usually could tell, but not this time. Borden said, "Newspaper man. That's what brings me back. *San Antonio Times.*"

The consul brightened. "Oh, *that*. I got the letter. Well, I am sorry, but I can't help you.

"Except to tell you that Ernst Holzhauser is not an archeologist, and is not looking for Aztec treasure, and that I have not the foggiest idea as to what happened to Sam Garrett."

Borden should have looked disappointed, but he merely looked indefinite. "You're



sure about Holzhauser? The one down in Coyotlan?"

SOMEHOW, this did not irritate the consul, though cross questioning usually did. "I checked, you know. He'd have to have a permit to dig, and there'd be inspectors, swarms of them, ready to snatch the first bit of anything worth keeping."

Borden added, "Or melting down into ingots."

"Of course." The consul chuckled. "Especially that."

"We're worried about Sam Garrett. He hasn't cashed the past five pay checks, so he can't be too drunk to report. He was supposed to look into Holzhauser's diggings. That treasure rumor."

"Of course, of course." Hardy ruffled the file of papers he had on his desk. "Your office mentioned that." Then, sympathetically, "I know how you feel. Pal of yours, and all that."

"Not especially. Finding him is just another chore. He was another expert on Latin American affairs. They always get into jams."

"Was?" The consul frowned.

Borden shrugged. "Dead now. That is a cinch. Ever hear of anyone staying in Coyotlan for fun?" He glanced at the clock, and shifted his chair, quickly but without seeming to hurry. "Not in Coyotlan."

The consul started. The old duffer wasn't half asleep, after all. A rock smashed through the window. There were yells below; more and more voices joined, until the uproar in Bucareli drowned the rumble of traffic that honked and blasted up and down the six lanes of the Paseo, a block away. Another rock, coming at an angle, shattered the consular water cooler. Fragments tinkled as they glanced off filing cabinets.

"How long has this been going on?"

The consul answered, "Past-six-seven weeks. That's why the other building is

being repaired. Joke was on them Tuesday, I wasn't there and they gave it hell."

Borden cocked his head a little, to pick individual voices from the howling, now that there was a temporary shortage of rocks. "We want bull fights! We want lotteries! Down with the big-foot Gringos!"

The man from San Antone smiled quizzically and said, "Why don't you give them their lottery and bull fights?"

The consul threw up his hands. "I always did say Mexicans are crazy. These damn *pelados*, I mean. Someone's been spreading rumors. Such as, that if the brutalizing bull fights aren't stopped, there'll be no more tourist permits issued, which'll kill a major industry. That American reform societies are agitating to stop the National lottery. That American interests are going to take over the National Lottery, run it crooked, and use the profit to square off the oil expropriation business. Try and deny rumors like that—try and argue with the kind of people who believe them—"

More rocks whisked through the gutted sash. Borden yawned, rose, reached for his middle-aged gray hat. "I never saw such punctuality before—rioting at ten sharp, Tuesdays and Fridays. Thanks a lot, Mr. Hardy, maybe I can find Sam Garrett myself."

"Hey, you'll get your head knocked off, going down there now!"

Borden scuttled along the wall, below the level of the sill, and passed under the barrage, which now included bottles. He went down the stairs, and stood in the doorway, watching the mob of men in ragged shirts, duck pants, petate hats. Some few wore *guaraches*; most were barefooted. All—all, that is, who were not actually throwing rocks, rotten oranges, and assorted rubbish at the temporary consulate—were waving red handbills. Someone was passing them through the crowd; Borden could see the flash of red paper spread like a slow fire.

He strolled up to the nearest Mexican,

lifted his hat, and said, "Your pardon, señor, but one did not give me a paper this time. May I read yours?"

The Mexican's mouth sagged. He applauded the leather shoes, the store clothes. Not to be outdone, he raised his own hat. "Take mine and welcome, señor. I cannot read the accursed thing anyway. Now you will pardon me, I am busy."

He bowed, very low. Never in his life had a man wearing shoes, factory made shoes, lifted a hat before addressing him. He took rotten oranges from the fiber haversack slung from one shoulder, and resumed his bombardment of the consulate, bawling, "Down with the Gringos!"

Borden folded the handbill, put it in his pocket, and headed for the Paseo de la Reforma; he went deliberately, but he made very good time. The riot was well behind him when the police arrived, blowing whistles and shouting. The mob broke up without an argument.

THE handbill interested Borden. First, it was meticulously printed, and that was odd in a land where such a job usually would have every known typographical error. There were no broken type, none out of alignment; the impression was clean, and black, and even; the make-up was good, the text was perfectly centered. Shame to waste that on *pelados* who couldn't read.

Second, the Spanish was bookish. It wasn't Mexican journalese.

But Borden had no time for fine points. He had left a comfortable home in San Antone to find a missing "expert" who had apparently fallen into some new and probably fatal phase of Latin American affairs. "I bet Sam tried to disguise himself as a native," Borden argued. "With his voice, too!"

Though Borden did not look or sound like a Mexican, it never occurred to anyone to wonder what he was. There were many Germans, British, Italians, long resident in Mexico, and they had become part of the

scene. Only the Gringo and the Tourist-Gringo had to dodge mobs.

Borden spent the remainder of the day in *cantinas*, beer joints, and *pulquerias*. Since he could not cover them all, he methodically went into every fifth place in the zone surrounding the Zocalo, the city jail, Army headquarters, the National Palace, and the Museum. He drank *tequila*, beer, or *pulque*, as the situation demanded; he saluted the house when he entered a place, though no one noticed that, or even thought it odd that a man with shoes drank *pulque*, which is smelly, and looks like paper-hanger's paste, and tastes worse. When someone asked him for a light, he offered his cigarette tip-foremost, which, being proper, was inconspicuous.

In several *cantinas*, which had radios, Borden heard the substance of the inflammatory handbills coming in over the air, but he did not notice the wavelength; he was too busy listening to those who were, and those who were not alarmed at the threats to their bull fights and their beloved lottery. Before the day was over, Borden decided not to go to Coyotlan as a hunter; it would be better to be a trader. So, the following morning, he was tramping across the ancient causeway that separates Lake Texcoco's salt flats from the fresh waters of Lake Zumpango: and he was driving a heavily laden burro ahead of him.

Cars whisked down the highway at a hundred kilometres an hour and better, making up for the time they would lose once they cleared the 8,400 foot crest at Zimapan and got into the mountains which surrounded the flat floor of the Valley of Mexico. Borden was in no hurry; a missing man either returns, or he stays missing.

He looked out over the stretches dotted with maguay. He saluted the Indians who trudged along, twirling spindles of henequen fiber as they went to market. Borden was just another peddler carrying a load of calico, and cigarettes and gadgets and gewgaws. Nobody took the trouble of wondering whether he was a Mexican, or one

of the many Arabs and Syrians who work the desert and the mountain trails. He still couldn't understand why Americans had the world's record for getting into trouble, when even a Chinaman did well enough in Mexico.

It took him a week to reach Jacala. The two hundred mile hike had not lightened his pack, but he had to replace his shoes with *guaraches*; and he had started out with his head thrust through a *serape*. Somewhere along the line, he had traded his necktie for some jerked beef and tortillas. Aside from those trifling changes he still looked very much like the man who had questioned the consul about Herr Ernst Holzhauer's treasure hunting.

And as he descended the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre, he began to hear of Holzhauer, and of the Golden Barrier. That was when a dish-faced Otomi pretended to ignore the jackknives spread out on the blanket, and fingered one of the scarlet rayon scarves, and said, "Señor, is it that I have the yellow-haired man's treasure finding machine? Do I know where the priests hid the golden chain?"

For the past half hour, the unsaddled burro had been grazing at the edge of the village plaza, while stocky men and barefooted women gathered around the display of exotic goods. There was still a difference of something like seven *centavos* between bid and asked price, and until that deal was finished, the other villagers were patiently waiting their turn.

Borden said, "It is clear that you do not like this beautiful scarf, señor. But a yellow-haired man hunting the lost chain—is that possible?"

There had been talk of this in the capital, and then for two hundred miles, no mention of "*a chain of solid gold, of such length and weight that two score priests were needed to stretch it across the entrance to the temple of Quetzalcoatl.*" In the National Museum was an ancient manuscript, written by one of the priests who had accompanied Cortez; Borden remem-

bered it. Some claimed that it had been stolen by one of the conqueror's officers, and hidden for future reference, while others asserted that the Aztec priests had taken it beyond the reach of Spanish avarice. At all events, it had never reached Spain, and anywhere between Durango and Chiapas was fair hunting ground. And now Holzhauer, judging from the Otomi version of it, was using some electromagnetic device to find that ton or so of gold, no matter how much earth or rock concealed it.

"German thoroughness, German routine," he said to himself, and then learned that the Otomi was mildly interested in the price of the knife; after all, what would one do with a scarf?

They had just slaughtered a pair of young goats in one corner of the small plaza which had been painfully leveled off on that steep mountainside, and though the flies had first dividend, Borden ate fresh *cabrito* from that messy scattering of guts and hacked joints. When he left, two days later, he concluded that Sam Garrett must have gone by rail to Veracruz, and then come inland toward Coyotlan. No one along the trail had heard of him.

Coyotlan was only a day's march downhill. The convincing move would be to trade through the village, go to the coast, then with a replenished pack, retrace his course. This would give two looks at Holzhauer's prospecting. The man might be looking for mineral veins; leave it to the mountaineers to conclude that his object was Aztec treasure. After all, a lot of high grade loot had come from Monte Alban, ten years previous, and Garrett's home office had paid him to trace this new rumor.

"Unless he found the Golden Barrier," Borden told the burro, "he couldn't stay drunk all these weeks."

This was plain, plodding work. The only time you had adventures was when you bungled something, or went out of your way to be spectacular. That was Borden's credo; only a chump looked for ad-

venture when he traveled. Travel was work enough. He sighed; if it hadn't been for too much *tequila* and too much girl, twenty years ago, he'd still own a piece of the mine he discovered, and he could stay at home, and maybe play a bit of golf, and belong to the Rotary Club, and perhaps brag about a son's football record. Adventure, hell!

The belfry of Coyotlan's one church was just visible through a rift in the jungle which hid the village when Borden saw the freshly heaped cairn beside the trail. A cross, lashed together with rawhide, rose from the heap of rocks. Since it was the custom of the country, he raised his hat out of respect to the dead traveler who lay under the cairn; then he picked up the handiest stone and added it to the heap. A passerby who did not observe *la costumbre*, as the natives termed their code, would be conspicuous.

The burro, psychic as all his kind, had already halted, knowing that for some moments, his rump would not be whacked. He was right. Borden, after adding the stone which good breeding demanded, stood there, frowning; judging from the rawhide that bound the cross, the lack of creepers growing about the base of the cairn, the stranger had not been buried very long. Had he been a resident of Coyotlan, he would certainly have been carried to the churchyard. Had he been a native of any village along Borden's route, there would have been mention of a disappearance.

"It is a pretty good bet," Borden said to the burro, "that Sam Garrett is planted there. With strangers as scarce as they are, it must be Sam; the damn fool would get into trouble."

He whacked the burro's rump. The answer would be found in Coyotlan, though not by asking. Borden could have removed stones from the cairn, and settled the question, but for several reasons, he did not. First, the idea was unpleasant; second, he would be conspicuous, by daylight; and

third, he was so certain that all he now needed was circumstantial verification to convince the office in San Antone.

## II

SOMEWHAT south of the village, gray masonry rose above the jungle. Even at that distance, Borden saw that the stone was sculptured. It was another one of the stepped-pyramids built by the half mythical Toltecs. He could now easily account for the rumors about Holzhauer. No matter what the actual object of the German's exploration, its proximity to that mountain of masonry would make treasure the inevitable answer.

Coyotlan, Borden soon learned, was further away than he had realized, and thus, much nearer to sea-level. The trail wound through dense growth. Mangoes and papayas filled the humid air with their pungent odor; here and there, wild orange trees made startling splashes of color to relieve the monotony of a hundred subtle shades of green.

Presently, he felt as if he had stepped into a Turkish bath; the overhead canopy, while it kept out the direct rays of the sun, also kept out any possible breeze. The air was rank with the vapors that steamed from broad-leaved clumps of wild plantain and *jacarandas*, and over all was the odor of decay. Overhead, small monkeys chattered; parakeets made flashes of blue and gold and purple as they darted about, scolding. And undersized deer minced through the brush nearby, their delicate nostrils flaring.

It took Borden something like four hours to reach the bottom, and then scale the long, stubborn rise that brought him to fresh air and the level of Coyotlan. The village was partly on a level shelf, and partly on the northern slope. Its houses were of stone and hand-squared timber; some had a second story. These substantial buildings faced the small plaza, hard won from the forest. The *tienda*, whose scanty stock of groceries was hauled from the



coast by porters or burros, was of wood, with a thatched roof. And at the far end of the square was an old church, its stucco peeling. *Zopilotes*, perched in black ranks on the eaves of the belfry, now used it as a watchtower; others weighted the branches of a dead tree, and these were near enough to make Borden shiver a little.

Their snaky eyes followed him. Like every other living thing, he was reserve rations, and they were patiently waiting for him to drop. And that cairn, up there beside the backtrail, made this appraisal uncomfortably personal. He could not help but wonder who would be next. He began to tell himself that if he did not watch his step, he would be blundering into an adventure.

But Borden whacked the burro, asked a scabby-headed brat where the *cacique* lived. Before trading in a village, you called on the chief, and gave him presents, or you became conspicuous and did not find customers.

He drove the burro into the walled court of the *cacique's* house. Chickens scattered, squawking. A lean old dame in red calico came out of the narrow doorway, and greeted him in labored Spanish. Her hair was white; she was barefooted, and her thin arms were weighted down with heavy golden bracelets. She gestured, and he stopped into the dusky room, whose roughly squared columns were smoke blackened; cleats lashed to one made a ladder to the attic.

"This is your house," the *cacique* said, rising from a stool hewn from a block of mahogany.

"It is in good hands, señor."

The old woman set out a stool for Borden, and then went back to the hearth to make coffee; wild beans, freshly roasted and freshly ground on the beveled stone *metate*.

Borden drank and smoked, and answered questions about the road, the weather, the villages in the higher mountains. He remembered all these things be-

cause he had not had anything else to occupy his mind. A trader has to bring news; but finally, he got his pack and spread it on the packed dirt floor. It was not yet time to ask about the yellow-haired man and the Golden Barrier, for while both were part of mountain gossip, this was the source, and to mention the subject would savor of conspicuous eagerness.

Neither did he mention the cairn, nor Sam Garrett.

That was not necessary. The *cacique* wore an American wrist-watch. His shoes were American. Over his white shirt, whose tails hung outside his pants, he had a shoulder harness and a Colt .38 automatic, a caliber practically unheard of in Mexico. Sam Garrett had been murdered and stripped; no other conclusion was possible.

THAT night, Borden slept on a *petate* mat stretched on the main floor. Rather, he tried to sleep, but instead, he thought of ways to avoid adventure. He had had enough of that thirty years ago. It was damn-fool business. A man did better to remain inconspicuous, to keep his nose clean. Garrett was a plain bungler, running around with a gun and a breezy manner. He'd never cared too much for Garrett. But those *zopilote* eyes, and that cairn beside the trail were undermining Borden's resolution.

He ended by getting up, once the village was asleep, which was early enough. And at the risk of being conspicuous, he began to run, when he was clear of Coyotlan. Circumstantial evidence was not enough. He had to have a look.

Unhampered by a burro, he reached the cairn in a little over two hours. Without pausing to give his qualms a chance, he set to work, tearing the heap down, a stone at a time. Before he finished his task, the moon had risen, but for all that, he struck a match.

Sam Garrett had been drilled above the ear by a small caliber bullet, probably a

seven milimetre, or thereabout. It had come out on the other side at practically a corresponding spot; there was little if any slant, either up or down. As the match scorched his fingers, Borden rose, and looked at the further slope of the valley. "Precision work," he said, and began to replace the stones. "Nice shooting, even with a good scope."

And telescopic sights were museum pieces in Mexico.

The sniper must have fired from the far side of the ravine, somewhere near the Toltec pyramid. With the trail skirting a steep slope, no one shooting from nearby could have drilled Garrett from ear to ear.

He was glad when the cairn was erected again, and the cross in place. And as he hurried back toward Coyotlan, he told himself that the job was done. In view of the number and the quality of the experts on Latin America, it is not news when one is bushwhacked. Borden was not a detective; his job had always been to phone in the police findings on a casualty; but before he reached the village, he decided to stay a while. Not that the story was worth the stay; there was another angle, and he could not talk himself out of it.

In the morning, he ate fried eggs with pepper sauce, and corn cakes tough as rawhide. He fished a long black hair out of the gravy, but he made a show of mopping up the very last bit with his *tortilla*, and the señora beamed and made show of readjusting the new scarlet scarf. Then Borden took his pack out into the plaza, for he had won his license to trade.

Coyotlan was busy at dawn. Children went down jungle trails to gather eggs. Men set out with hoes to till the maize patches on the steep slopes. Others took freshly killed chickens, young goats, and turkeys toward the pyramid, where a rising thread of smoke told Borden that Holzhauser's camp was nearby. Judging from the quantities of meat and the oranges and bananas, there must be quite a handful of explorers.

It was around ten in the morning when Borden heard the far off *wback* of a high powered rifle, somewhat to the north. Just one shot. An hour later, there was a crackling in the surrounding jungle, and the natives about Borden ceased their sing-song Otomi, and their halting Spanish. He turned with them and saw the tall man who stepped from the screen of oranges and coffee; a blond man who carried a Mauser equipped with a telescopic sight.

### III

THE newcomer wore polished leather puttees, spotless Bedford cord breeches, and a chamois brush jacket. A beaver tan Stetson was cocked at a confident angle on his round head. He stood there, big and broad and ruddy, one hand holding his Mauser at the balance, the other hooked in his belt. Neither by word nor gesture did he acknowledge the greeting of the villager; monocle screwed into place, he sized up the plaza.

Behind him came a porter carrying the morning's kill, a deer.

It was not until the *cacique* came from the *tienda* that the big blond man said, "*Buenos días*, Don Tomas," and ceremoniously lifted his Stetson as the old chief's *petate* hat rose. Then, very benignant, Herr Holzhauser saluted the admiring villagers.

Borden appraised the arrogant face which matched the man's gesture and upright bearing. "That bow is phony. But he has sense enough not to boot the natives around."

Holzhauser pointed and asked the *cacique*, "What's this, Don Tomas? A peddler from the coast?"

The monocled eye gave Borden the scrutiny merited by a new zoological specimen.

"No, from the Valley, Señor Holzhauser. *Es Árabe*."

Holzhauser chuckled. "These Arabs! Where don't they go!"

His ready acceptance was natural enough, nor was the *cacique's* guess unreasonable. There were straight-nosed Arabs, some with gray eyes, some with red hair. Many are lean and wiry, others as big as Holzhauer; Syrians, Egyptians, Moors, with Crusader blood, and ruddy Circassian mixtures. To the *cacique*, any nomadic trader, not a Mexican, was some sort of Arab; and a city man would have made the same guess, for Borden was not definite enough for sharp classification. The conspicuous man regarded the inconspicuous, and said, patronizingly, "*Keef bhalek, khwaja!*"

Borden knew that this was a greeting, that the important man was giving him an amiable pat on the head, so to speak, by addressing him in what Borden suspected was Arabic. His guess was right; it was colloquial Christian Syrian, not the implied benediction of the Moslem salute that all true believers exchange. However, Borden had never heard of this distinction. He knew only that he was supposed to answer, and he had not the slightest idea of what to say.

He looked up, startled and perplexed. Not being an Arab when one is supposed to be should not embarrass anyone, or arouse anyone's suspicions; but Holzhauer had murder on his mind, and that is a load even for a man who has a mission in life. That Mauser with the telescopic sight, that beautiful weapon which had just brought down a deer, must have settled Sam Garrett.

One could say in Spanish, "Not even my grandfather could speak Arabic, señor, he forgot what little his father taught him."

But that was not what Borden said. He fumbled, then answered, "*Sehr gut, mein Herr.*" This was his entire stock of German, but it clicked; it was the return compliment. And then he picked up a red scarf, which he offered in both hands, saying, "Very cheap, señor. Your *querida* will be pleased."

Several of the plump and pleasant faced girls giggled and exchanged glances. Bor-

den wasn't sure whether to conclude that Holzhauer had no *querida*, or that he did. And he felt very much better when Holzhauer moved on, crossing the plaza to pick up the trail that presumably led to the camp.

But as he traded, that afternoon, he lived that encounter over again, every few minutes. Had he really fooled Holzhauer?

One way of finding out was to stroll back into the mountains, along that trail. The Mauser with the telescopic sight would clear up doubts.

Later in the day, Don Tomas and Borden were eating mashed beans, a delicacy that is no more palatable for being called *refritos*.

The *cacique* spoke of Holzhauer's half dozen fellow country men. "They go about the jungle, would you believe it, with boxes and cords and drills. The boxes have glass on them, like a watch, and things go around, but one does not tell time."

"Probably looking for gold, Don Tomas. The Germans are smart people, they know everything."

"I wish I had his rifle," was the wistful comment.

"How about his men?"

"They have nice shoes, but no rifles." This put them in a lower caste. "If he finds the Golden Barrier, possibly he will give me that Mauser. Figure it for yourself—did I not tell him, when he came here to do these things, that somewhere about here there was more hidden than he suspected? He had never heard of the chain so heavy that twenty priests had to carry it."

"He should be grateful," Borden agreed. "You're sure he'd never heard of it?"

"Señor, would I know or would I not know the gleam in a man's eye when he learns of something new and fine? It made itself clear at once that they had come here for another reason."

Borden's hunch about the methodical rioting in Mexico City was proving up. "Such as oil, or a mine?"

"Who knows what people seek in the ground? Many things."

"You've never looked for the Golden Barrier?"

The old *cacique's* smile was indulgent, a little superior for being turned on a naive man. "Consider the work, señor. These Germans, have they found it with all their boxes and things that go on the ears? How would I find it?" He regarded his withered hands for a moment. "Even if I knew where to dig. Anyway, the Aztecs were a bloody people, and, manifestly things belonging to their gods would carry a curse."

This rang true; all of it. Porters and the drivers of burro caravans must have carried rumors of the supposed treasure hunt to the capital.

Don Tomas went on, "Doubtless the Germans are in some respects crazy, though it is good to have them here. They pay well for supplies, and then the *cargadores* who bring them things from the coast come to us with news, for we feed them."

The *cacique's* people were more interested in stories than in profit; the wilder the yarn, the more enjoyable. "Just like all savages," Borden said to himself, and then added, "Just like us. Sending Sam Garrett to get a story. Whole damn fool country saying, daddy, tell me a story."

He was not impressed with the importance of newspapers. They were just another way of making a living.

That afternoon, he heard the thudding of hoofs, the shouts of natives. The villagers came running out to the plaza, to watch the caravan that swung from the trail, and went into the jungle, toward Holzhauer's camp. Each burro carried two crates which contained a pair of five-gallon tins apiece. The drivers, stocky little men who wore *petate* hats, were barefooted, and their pants were short enough to expose their knotted calves. They were mountaineers, but not from this village, judging from the exchange of hails.

This was Borden's chance to be a thorough fool. He packed his kit, loaded his own burro; and before the sound of the caravan had died out, he was ready to take the trail toward Holzhauer's camp. As he passed the hedge of coffee shrubs and oranges, he looked back. This had been a pleasant village, and he liked the people. The nearest *zopilotes* were eyeing him in a way that made Borden wonder if he should not have given old Don Tomas and the señora a farewell present.

But he could not turn back for that. Now that he was moving, he had to keep on, lest he change his mind.

Leaving Sam Garrett lying beside the trail was not, he had already concluded, either carelessness or brazen indifference; certainly not the former. A far-off sniper, seeing the man drop and roll from sight, could easily assume that the body had toppled over one of the many sheer bluffs along which the trail wound. It would be wasted effort, going to investigate. The police concentrate, very efficiently, on the cities; the highway patrols watch the main roads; and what happens in the jungle is left to God and the Holy Saints. As for the villagers, the fate of a foreigner was just another one of those things.

There was no practical reason to urge Holzhauer to try to hide the corpse. No native, even if questioned, would admit having the least idea as to who had fired the shot.

BORDEN'S upgrade march was through a mile or so of jungle. Presently voices, German and native, came from not far ahead. The wind brought him the headsplitting reek of Mexican gasoline. And already, he could see masonry; a succession of truncated pyramids, with broad stairs leading from one terraced stage to the next.

Borden's memory supplied many of the details, for this great heap had not been cleared of its five-century accumulation of debris. Whatever was going on, Holz-



hauer's interest was not in the exterior of the heap.

Then he saw the barbed wire stockade which girdled the clearing about the pyramid. The iron gate was not guarded, but several men, dressed very much like Holzhauer, watched the drivers unloading their burros. All carried themselves with the self-conscious stiffness of German military tradition; though ranging from blond to swarthy, from fat-faced to spare, there was a uniformity of expression. Each had the serious, the religiously maintained smugness of crusaders and superior people. They were unpleasant caricatures of Johann Schwartz, the Uvalde blacksmith who had enlisted in the artillery with Borden, years ago, to make the world safe for democracy; of Albrecht Beiter, whose beer garden was the jolliest spot in San Antone; or the Reverend Friedrich Ritter, whose father remembered the Comanche raids in Texas.

The inclosure was a confusion of squealing burros and chattering Indios. This disorder pained Holzhauer's pistol-armed men, but they patiently put up with natives who did not goose-step as they entered the stockade. This seemed to be the patience of men who would not suffer forever.

Under any other circumstances, Borden would have laughed at the thought of regimenting Mexicans, city or rural or mountain, but this would have been conspicuous, especially for an Arab trader. Holzhauer was coming out of one of the sheet-metal houses that made a neat, jarring row along the near face of the pyramid. He turned to the clerk who checked the cargo. The native drivers carried their freight into a tunnel whose buttressed entrance broke the masonry slope.

"Werner, have a case of that beer chilled."

"*Ja wohl, Herr Oberst.*" He saluted, and addressed someone who was in the tunnel.

An *oberst*, Borden knew, was some military rank. That detail did not matter, although others were interesting. Some-

where in the pyramid, a generator was whining, and a well muffled gasoline engine purred. Incandescent lights spotted the darkness of the tunnel, and there was a sound just blurred enough by echoes to have fooled him, had he not smelled printer's ink. A press was at work.

Borden, half way across the inclosure, had learned enough to explain just about everything. But he was conspicuous, not dressed like the drivers; and he was under Holzhauer's eye. So he whacked the burro, and when clear of the other animals, he unslung the pack.

From it he took a knife, opened it, and lifted his hat as he approached the frowning Holzhauer. "With my compliments, señor. I am Isa Aswad, who kisses the hands of your excellency. I beg permission to trade with the mule drivers, they love to bring gifts to their women."

Holzhauer accepted the knife, then seemed to resent having reacted to another man's suggestion. He snorted, snapped the blade with his heavy fingers, and dropped the pieces. "I have a good one," he said. "But go and trade when they are unloaded."

Borden picked up the clasp knife and pocketed it. An Arab trader wastes nothing. He lifted his hat, and said, gropingly, "*Danke schön, mein Herr.*"

Holzhauer did not hear this, for he was thinking of beer from the coast. Neither did he hear what one of the mule drivers said, and if he had heard, he would not have understood, for it was a phrase that universities ignore in their courses on Hispanic languages and literature. Holzhauer's contemptuous gesture had made him conspicuous and the native indignant.

Borden gave the man the knife; it still had one good blade. "God puts truth in your mouth, my friend."

Presently there was a chance to trade, for some of the drivers were free by the time that the contents of the packs had been laid out on an old *serape*. In spite of the friendly welcome that waited for them at

the village, the caravan men wanted to bargain a little with this trader; mainly because he was a newcomer, and there might be some novelty in his pack. And, he might have a story, incredible and ear-filling. Moreover, the girls back home always like a ribbon or comb brought from afar, even though the same article—made in Germany, or Japan—was available in any trader's kit.

The haggling did not last long, for the men were hungry, their shins were freshly scarred, their calloused soles cut by rocks. Some said, "Be pleased to show us your goods at the village, sir. We sleep and eat there."

They had lingered mainly out of politeness, not wishing to offend a man by brusqueness. Borden began to roll up his goods, for already some of the drivers were following the little burros down the trail.

Holzhauser, however, came out and stood there for a moment before speaking. The big shadow seemed to weigh a ton on Borden's shoulders.

"Let me see some of those things," the *oberst* said.

"With much pleasure, my Colonel," Borden answered. "For your *querida*, no?" He held up a bolt of yellow cloth. "Since you do not like knives—this, I make it cheap."

The gate of the stockade was closed now, and three of Holzhauser's subordinates stood by, at a respectful distance.

"What's your name?"

"Isa Aswad, señor."

"Jesus Black, eh?"

That answered Borden's earlier pondering, and all too well. Colonel Holzhauser might only know a few words of Arabic, but those were far too many. Borden had borrowed a trader's name, but not the man's vocabulary. The officer laughed, heavily, turned to his men. "This fellow's color doesn't match his name," he said with irony that no one could miss. They chuckled, obediently, and came nearer. "You're staying here awhile, Isa Aswad.

There may be Arabs whose parents do not hand down the language, but I never heard of one. *Keef ash-shugl?*"

Borden did not know the answer. Holzhauser said to his men, "I thought so. Can't even tell me how business is."

The German dialogue was unintelligible to Borden, but he did not need diagrams to clarify the situation. Holzhauser said in Spanish, "Your German was wretched. Even if an Arab knows only three words of a language, his pronunciation is perfect. The world's best natural linguists. Who the devil are you, and what are you after?"

"Trying to make a living. And Arabs have the most luck, so I went as one. To bluff the natives."

"You should have confined your efforts to Indios! You are staying here until I find out what your business is. If nobody sent you to snoop, we'll let you go, and you'd better get out of sight—over the mountains—in a hurry, do you understand?"

"*Si señor.*"

Holzhauser's gesture and the specification, *over the mountains*, was a reflex from having disposed of Sam Garrett; that was practically certain. Borden, marched into the tunnel by two guards, did not see much chance of wearing out his new *guaraches* on the road to the capital.

#### IV

THE ancient passages had been cleaned out. One of the crypts was a storeroom, and in another, a man set type, while a second cleaned up a press. Borden's side-glance gave him only the familiar headline, MEXICANS, BEWARE! But that sufficed; the pyramid was a propaganda factory. Absurd, bungling propaganda for *pelados* in the capital, but if the mob stoned the American consulate often enough, there would be a diplomatic clash; a knife twisted in the not yet healed expropriation wounds. And then, an occasional tourist would be roughed up, perhaps killed

Once the American equivalent of the *pelado* became outraged by "atrocities" across the border, and began roaring for reprisals, there was no telling what would happen. In any event, the unpleasantness would win the Nazis a friendlier reception.

Borden's captors halted at the end of the main hall, and gestured toward the cross passage. One said, "Doubtless you have slept in worse places than this. We will bring you food later. Meanwhile, do not try to leave, now or tonight." He tapped his pistol butt. "The stockade is guarded at all times."

The other said, "Better search him." Or so Borden guessed, for that was what they did before they left. They did not notice the three-inch piece of knife blade in his pocket, and if they had, it would have got not a second glance, for it had absolutely no value as a weapon. Certain that their captive was harmless, the two stepped back and reassured him, rather needlessly. "You are here only for investigation. If you are what you claim, you will undoubtedly be released."

Very little indirect light reached into Borden's quarters. He made a circuit, most of the way feeling along the masonry wall. At the end, he stumbled over debris, and landed on all fours, clawing a heap of dislodged stones. When he picked himself up, he fumbled for his cigarettes and a box of wax matches: *cerillos*.

He had not had a smoke for some time. He was tired, and shaky, but not enough so to waste his light. The passage extended some distance beyond the cave-in that had checked him. The flicker of the match flame, and the chilling of his sweat-soaked shirt convinced him that the tunnel led to the outside of the pyramid. There was no other way to account for the draught.

Borden sat down, nodded, and said to himself, "Leaving the pyramid is no accomplishment, or they'd have tied me. But we get nowhere fast, particularly not through the stockade."

The printing press had been shut down,

and as far as Borden could judge from sounds, no motor was running; he heard no whine of one picking up a load, but as he looked back toward the main passage, he saw the lights go dim; then they slowly brightened, though not to their original intensity.

Having nothing else to do, he observed trifles, things inconspicuous as the small slip that had betrayed him to Holzhauer. It must have been fifteen minutes later when the lights brightened again.

Borden, now at the T made by the main and the cross passage, saw a man come out of the one crypt which had a door. It closed with a soft, solid sound, like the shutting of an ice-box. That was odd.

They didn't want snoopers, but they gave a suspect his head. Not the best omen in the world; not after the slug Sam Garrett had stopped. But this did not spoil Borden's appetite when one of Holzhauer's crew brought him a mug of coffee, and an enameled plate loaded with venison and potatoes. These last were, as far as he could judge, canned or perhaps dehydrated. No native cook had prepared this.

"When you are through, set the plate in the hall," the guard said. "And here's a blanket for you."

That was luxury, for the mountain chill penetrates an old *serape*.

LATER that night, as Borden lay there in the half-darkness at the edge of the lighted patch, Holzhauer and one of his men came up the hall, and turned into the crypt with the heavy door. Soon after it closed behind them, the lights dimmed, for perhaps half an hour. Then they regained their original brightness.

The two came out, speaking German. They went into the print shop, and then left the pyramid. At around ten, the hall lights went out, but the generator hum continued.

Getting past guards and between tight, closely spaced wire was quite impossible. And since he had to do something, Borden

investigated the draught he had noticed earlier in the day.

It was slow work, particularly getting over the further cave-ins. In one spot, he could barely wriggle through. Tree roots had displaced slabs of masonry, and the rammed earth behind it had yielded. When he did risk a match, he saw stairs ahead; and they were bad going.

Finally the intense gloom thinned. There was a suggestion of glow which presently revealed its true nature—the lights that were spotted along the stockade. And soon Borden emerged on the first terrace of the pyramid. Not far from him was another opening, very much like the one in whose shadow he crouched. Below, two guards paced briskly along the barbed wire fence.

Their vigilance was the routine of discipline, an expression of the habit-ridden military mind. Certainly it could not have been in anticipation of trouble. While Holzhauser, according to the American consul, had no archeological permit, he must undoubtedly have some kind of license appropriate to his alleged business. Prospecting would be a good guess. For white men to snoop, and then comment on the unusual details of such as electric lights, and printing presses, would conceivably embarrass Holzhauser. No wonder Garrett had stopped a slug!

It was clear and crisp on the terrace, and silent, except for the smart pace of the men below. Someone was snoring in one of the sheet iron houses, but not all were asleep; the smell of a cigarette came up. Borden ascended to the second stage, and took his time about it, carefully picking his way up the dirt-clogged treads of the exterior stairs. This was pretty much like Teotihuacan, and almost as high—that is, a little over two hundred feet.

Borden made that estimate when he reached the small square space at the crest, the fifth stage. Rubbish and outcropping blocks of masonry, along with height, kept him from being conspicuous, unless a sentry actually looked up and caught a sign

of motion. And by now, Borden had the timing of their methodical march.

Once there had been a shrine; now its remains almost hid the squared sacrificial block, which faced the east. Whether Aztec or not, this ancient structure had been drenched in blood, and many a body, minus heart or skin, had been hurled down the steep steps.

The moon was rising. That checked Borden's sight seeing, which he called futile until, ready to retrace his course, he noted the dull sheen of tarnished metal. It was an expended cartridge, and not far from the sacrificial block which a marksman could well use as a rest. Now that the mountains were black against the brightening sky, he oriented himself more accurately, and made one good guess. A man with a telescopic sight could from this elevation pick off one who plodded along the trail which led inland from the village.

On his way back to his blankets, Borden figured that in spite of the distance on the ground, the air line range was not beyond a first class marksman. Escape would have to be by night.

His last thought before going to sleep was, "Holzhauer probably used the other stairway. I would have to pick the blocked one!"

IN THE morning, Borden ate in the compound, though not at the table where Holzhauser sat with his six men. After breakfast, four shouldered heavy kits, and marched down the trail which skirted the Indian village. Three carried the leather cases which were of weight and quality to suggest that they contained valuable instruments; the fourth kit was a webbing sling which was packed with lengths of metal tubing whose ends had collars and locking clamps. And there was a considerable coil of bronze wire.

Holzhauser asked his prisoner, "Aswad, does *that* mean anything to you?"

Borden answered, "Who but a man of science would know? Though behind



Tampico, they have such things to pick the place where one drills for petroleum. But I assure you, I do not work for any oil company. Believe me, señor, there is no one to whom I would speak of these things."

"Perhaps not." Holzhauer waited for the click of gate and lock, then went on, "You may have to stay till our work is over."

"I am losing money, but there are worse places."

Borden spent the forenoon dozing in the shade of the pyramid. The burro found enough to eat in the clearing, as a burro would.

And while no lights were burning in the tunnel, since the sun for a while reached into it, the generator still hummed without intermission. Considering how gasoline was hauled, this seemed extravagant.

Before the four men returned, Borden began to understand what was going on. Holzhauer's voice came from the tunnel, very clear, very clean in its enunciation; deliberate, and oratorical, and somewhat bookish in its diction. Though it was quickly cut off, the answer was plain—Holzhauer was broadcasting.

The lack of any antenna had at first dulled Borden's suspicions, but now he was able to reason a little further. The Sierra Madre caused interference, and to avoid using a conspicuous amount of power, a directional antenna was necessary somewhere far up the slope, and probably in some spot difficult of access. Once cables were strung from there to the pyramid, men could carry portable equipment to the favored place where interference was the least.

Guesswork, of course. But it dovetailed with the old *cacique's* story, about men prowling in the hills with "boxes and wires"; hunting, not for mineral, but for a spot from which a low powered station could reach the capital, and yet be almost impossible to trace.

Interesting, but how to get away with the

story? Holzhauer and two men were always on guard. And when the weary four returned from the mountains, the odds were worse.

V

HOLZHAUER came out of the tunnel, that mid-afternoon, perhaps an hour before the shadow of the Sierra Madre



would reach east and touch the pyramid. He said, "Doubtless I was wrong in detaining you, Aswad." His smile was amiable, and he added, in Spanish, "Go with God."

Borden answered, "Who does not make mistakes?" He lifted his hat, bowed ceremoniously. "Remain with God, señor."

The two guards unlocked the gate. Holzhauer went back into the passageway, instead of to his sheet-iron house. And Borden was certain that the German did not intend to broadcast. Ten to one, he was ascending the inner stairway to the top of the pyramid, carrying his rifle to the spot that commanded the trail.

A man could, perhaps, cut through the brush, and evade observation, but that would leave a trail which anyone could follow; a trail that certainly would be followed, if Borden did not in reasonable time pass across the vertical hair of the telescopic sight. And he was not certain that he could outrace from four to six men who knew their way about the world. Some men at fifty are athletes, but Borden was not.

By the time he had his burro loaded,

he realized that the fragment of knife blade might turn the trick, the damn-fool, adventurous enterprise which something had compelled him to consider. Sam Garrett's bones and the shock of finding them had haunted him; so had Holzhauer's self assurance, his contemptuous gestures.

"They know—he knows—I'll get out, like that! No more trading in the village. Too happy to get on the road."

So, just at the gate, he said to the guard, "Señor—" He made a pretense of dismay, of fumbling in his pockets. "Be pleased to let me go back. I lost something—in there, where I slept—that wallet, all my earnings this poorly paid trip—"

The German shrugged, gestured. "Go ahead, go ahead. But hurry!"

Borden ran.

They despised him too much to watch him. That was what gave him his chance. He stopped at the middle alcove, just beside the pressroom. One of the gasoline tins was leaking. The odor had gradually suggested the one thing he could do, and now he did it, with that seemingly useless three-inch piece of knife blade. He cut his fingers, but he also pierced the tin container. The fuel ran over the rammed earth floor.

He gouged another, and then he struck a match.

There was a gusty roar, a sheet of murky flame, a swirl of black smoke. It might be low test, but it was far from sluggish. Then Borden ran, not toward the compound, but to the cross passage.

Where he had slowly crawled over debris, on his first exploration, he now lunged like a rabbit darting for a hole. He tore and battered himself, but he scarcely felt the pain. With wrong timing, he was finished, and this was a dance that allowed no rehearsals. So he picked himself up, and scrambled over the second barrier.

Borden was dizzy with pain when he reached the foot of the stairs. He could no longer hear the roar of blazing gasoline,

but he smelled the fumes, the burning grease, driven by the draught. And with the first glimpse of daylight from the bottom stage, he heard the yelling of the guards. One fired his pistol, three times, in the tradition, and bellowed, "*Feuer!*"

Borden crouched in the doorway of the almost blocked passage that had left his face and hands a bleeding, dirty blot. He had a chunk of rock perhaps a foot square, secured in a slip noose of rawhide from the pack saddle. There he waited to find out whether he had won victory or a quick finish.

From a hundred feet above him, a man bawled, "*Was ist los?*"

A hell of a question, with blazing gasoline flavoring the air! Holzhauer was at the top of the pyramid, roaring in German to his two men, and doubtless cursing them for careless fools, though Borden could not understand a word.

THE steps were steep, far too steep for a man to descend in a hurry; particularly not a man with a costly rifle equipped with the finest telescopic sights. And Holzhauer's entire plant was in danger, for liquid fire was pouring out into the compound. A can must have burst, perhaps two or three. Still bellowing orders, he came down the steep treads. That he did not fall and break his neck was a wonder, for debris made the course even worse than the Toltec architect had.

Borden dropped the thong with the chunk of rock, for Holzhauer had carefully set his precious rifle down to make better time. He was soldier enough to respect the splendid weapon. When he reached the next stage one of the men hailed him: "You cannot get through!"

Flames blocked the inside stairs, and those on the outside were debris loaded, but Holzhauer had to get on the ground level, to join his men. Whether by now they suspected sabotage, Borden never learned. Fumes choked him, hot air singed his growth of beard. He was not sure

whether he could remain conscious until Holzhauer reached the first stage.

The men below tried to use portable fire extinguishers, but that was wasted effort. Blazing fuel was running into the stockade, and the burros were crashing through the jungle.

Then Holzhauer showed his nerve; he slid down the steep face of the pyramid, enduring all the lacerations and stunning impacts of the irregular slabs. It was not clear to Borden how the man had got that start, how he kept from rolling, dashing himself to pieces, for Borden, singed and dizzy and choked, flung himself from cover.

Clouds of smoke muffled him as he scrambled up the steep stairs. He had abandoned his original plan of swinging on Holzhauer with a rock and trying to take the man's pistol. What he now wanted was that Mauser rifle. If he had not been half crazed with heat and the fumes, he would never have passed up a fairly sure thing for such a risk.

When he reached the second landing, the men below saw him. A pistol crackled, and a shower of fragments slashed his cheek. They knew now how the fire had started. They would have suspected sooner, had it not been for "Isa Aswad's" conspicuous incompetence, and his naive assumption that he was being released in good faith.

But Isa Aswad had heard of the Mexican *ley de fuga*. The stupidest Indio would anticipate the chances of being "shot while escaping," particularly if his release from captivity were just a shade too simple. This was one bit of native psychology Holzhauer had not learned.

They were good marksmen, down there in the compound, but firing at such a steep angle is tricky. Borden's stride broke as a slug bit him, tearing his hip instead of drilling his back. The dancing air, the gusts of black smoke helped him, so he reached the stage where the Mauser lay. And with a little luck, a bungling marks-

man can do more with a rifle than a good one can with a pistol.

It was not a pretty shot, but it did the work. Holzhauer spun, dropped his pistol, and crumpled up. Most of his stomach was spattered against the barbed wire fence.

That cracked discipline. The other two ran, with Borden's slugs kicking up dust and zinging from the iron uprights. Since the gate was not locked, they both escaped. And already, the old *cacique's* villagers had heard the noise, had smelled the fire; they came running, Don Tomas in the lead. He had Sam Garrett's pistol, and he blazed away as he ran.

The *cacique* was not aiming. This was his first gun, and it made a brave show.

When Borden saw the villagers, he raised the Mauser above his head, and shouted, "It is nothing, pray do not distract yourselves."

His legs were about ready to buckle, but he managed to get down the debris-clogged outer stairs with the Mauser, and without falling. He said to the *cacique*, "Señor el Coronel Holzhauer accidentally shot himself while cleaning his rifle. It is not clear to me how this fire started. But before he died, he begged me to give you this costly gun."

Don Tomas reverently took the Mauser. When he could finally speak, he said, "Who would have thought that that *cabron*, that *borrego chinga's* had any generosity in him?" He sighed, turned to his people. "You see, my little brothers? Even if we had been able to kill this fellow, we could have got no more than this."

Then Borden said, "Be pleased to have someone hunt my burro, while this bullet hole in my hip is plugged up a little. I am in a hurry to go to the coast."

They did all this, and more. They carried Borden to Veracruz in a litter. And as he reached the steaming *tierra caliente*, he grumbled, "All this hokey about Aztec gold; poor Garrett was a damn fool, and so was the guy that sent him." For Borden still didn't believe in adventure.

# THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by  
**PETE KUHLOFF**

## *Charcoal Burners*

**“WHAT’S** the idea of wasting time fooling around with that old piece of scrap iron?” A member of our shooting club made this remark to me about three months ago. I was cleaning up an old muzzle loading cap lock rifle and having quite a tough time unscrewing the breech plug.

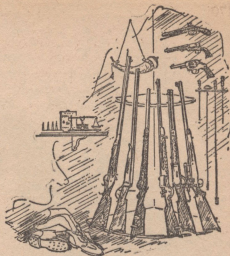
Now this same member spends most of his leisure time polishing a recently purchased charcoal burner and moulding bullets and cutting patches to use in it. I’ll try and tell you why.

In the first place, early American history is so closely allied with the art of using the muzzle loading firearm that it is only natural for any American shooter to be interested in the doings of our early pioneers and to hold these guns in a most romantic light.

Secondly, I don’t believe there is anything much more pleasing to the eye than an excellent example of the so-called Kentucky rifle.

For item number three, we’ll say that it is only natural for a person interested in modern shooting to want to find out just how these old smoke sticks compare with the brethren of more recent vintage.

Another point in favor of the old job is the fact that modern guns and ammunition for the same are getting mighty scarce,



due to the factories all running night and day turning out supplies for our growing military machine.

Also the cost of shooting a muzzle-loader is very small.

Now let’s say that you’re slightly interested in these alleged antiques, and it happens that you discover one in the attic, in an antique shop, or even in a pawn shop. It’s a cap lock rifle. You take possession and finally decide to clean it up just for fun. And anyway it’ll look good over the fireplace if you never get around to shooting it.

First of all you want to find out just how badly the inside of the barrel is rusted so you give it a good scrubbing with a brass brush that has been dipped in a good solvent, then wipe out with an oiled rag. It looks pretty good but you don’t seem to be able to see very far into the darned thing, so you decide to take it apart and really give it the works.

You carefully remove the stock which may be very dry and brittle due to its age, and take off the lock and all metal parts. Remove the old finish from the stock and if it is cracked or broken you make the necessary repairs, using hot glue. Refinish with fine sandpaper and then give it a good soaking with linseed oil.

If you’re lucky, the action won’t need a great deal of attention other than a good cleaning. If there are any repairs or re-





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placements to be made, be sure and use a good grade of modern steel.

The small cylinder that projects from the barrel near the breech end is called the drum. Carefully remove it. The little snout that is screwed into the drum is the tube or nipple on which the percussion cap is placed when you're ready to fire. Clean the drum, remove and clean the nipple. It's certainly amazing how sharp the threads are, after all these years. By the way if these threads are in poor condition, they may let go when the gun is fired, so be sure they're good.

IT'S A LOT OF FUN SHOOTING THE OLD MUZZLE-LOADER — IF YOU'RE NOT IN A HURRY!



Next, remove the breech plug which generally has a right hand thread. Be sure and pad your wrench and vize with lead or brass.

Now you can look through the barrel and see exactly what's what. If your luck still holds you will find only a layer of rust, which can be taken care of with a lap. If it is too badly pitted it can be re-bored or relined.

To do the lapping job you first push a cork about five inches onto a thin rod that is long enough to reach all the way through the barrel. Then center said rod in the bore by wrapping it with string at several places. Set the barrel cork end up and pour about four inches of melted lead into the bore on top of the cork. The lead shrinks as it cools so you can easily push it out. Charge the plug with fine emery dust or similar abrasive mixed with water. Pull the plug back and forth through the bore, rotating the plug one groove after each twenty-five or thirty strokes (to keep the bore round). As the rust is removed new casts will have to be made. The

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SHORT STORIES is very proud to offer in this issue a long Talbot Mundy story—*Odds on the Prophet*. Probably no author of adventure fiction was so well known and popular as was Mundy; his colorful tales appeared in favorite magazines and his books had an assured sale. We felt very fortunate in that this story was discovered among Talbot Mundy's literary effects and that we were able to bring it before our readers in its entire length; cutting would have spoiled its drama, a smaller magazine could not have fitted it in. Therefore, congratulations all around! Not only is *Odds on the Prophet* one of the last Mundy stories—but one of the best.

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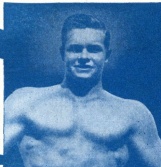
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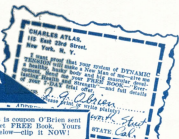
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the title, "The  
World's Most  
Perfectly De-  
veloped Man."

## CHARLES ATLAS

Dept. 9H, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension"  
can help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky  
body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE  
book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." No obligation.

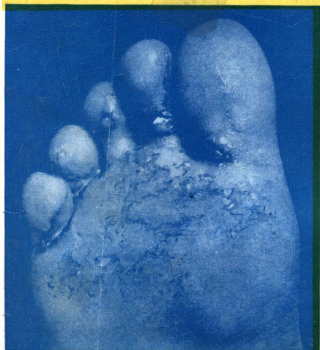
Name .....  
(Please print or write plainly)

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City ..... State .....

# FOOT ITCH

## ATHLETE'S FOOT



### WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as *Tinea Trichophyton*. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ *Tinea Trichophyton* within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

### ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

### H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

## PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

### Send Coupon

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28 at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

## BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



**GORE PRODUCTS, Inc.** N.F.  
847 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....