


IN THE DEVIL'S WIGWAM — G. B. Marquis
DRY ROT, J. B. Hendryx — WINGED FIREBRANDS, Neil Martin

Short Stories

September 25th

Twice A Month

25c



*An even deeper
mystery of the
mysterious bayou
country*

**JOB ON
THE BEACH**

Richard
Howells Watkins

*"Tear into it, Honey—
It's Infectious Dandruff!"*

Pityrosporum ovale, regarded by many leading authorities as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.



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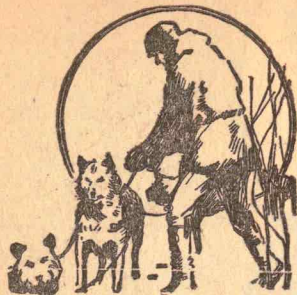
J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4JM, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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HOW TO TRAIN AT HOME TO WIN Rich Rewards in Radio

ACTION, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY



Short

Every author's finest and

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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20, N. Y., and entered as second class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, \$5.00 per year; to Canada, \$6.50; and to all other countries, \$6.60. Price payable in advance. September 25, 1944. Vol. CLXXXVIII. No. 6. Whole Number 930.

WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.*
M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.*
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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories



latest stories—no reprints

SEPTEMBER 25th, 1944

THE THOUSAND DEATHS OF BURMA

(Second Part of Four) H. Bedford-Jones 88

*These Desperate People Were Wreckage From the Wild Wave
of Disaster That Had Swept Down Upon the Malay
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WOTTA SPOT! WOTTA SPOT!

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Swellest Sound in the World—If It Ain't Your Dump*

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of 'Em Was Right"*

WINGS FOR VICTORY Jim Ray 127

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*Whenever the Legit Goes Sour and Grand Opera Nosedives,
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COVER—Benton Clark

*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
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Revealed at Last!

We Ferreted Out
**The SECRETS of ANCIENT
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 AND REVEAL
 THIS AMAZING
 INFORMATION **NOW** FOR THE
 FIRST TIME

THE VOW OF SILENCE HAS BEEN BROKEN!

"The 7 Keys to Power alleges to teach," the author says, "All the Mysteries of Life from the Cradle to the Grave—and Beyond. It tells you the particular day and hour to do anything you desire, whether it be in the light of the moon, sun, or in total darkness."

He claims, "The power to get what you want revealed at last, for the first time since the dawn of creation. The very same power which the ancient Chaldeans, Celtic, Priests, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Sumerians used is at our disposal today.
 He says, "Follow the simple directions, and you can do anything you desire. No one can tell how these Master Forces are used without knowing about this book, but with it you can mold anyone to your will."
 From this book, He says, "You can learn the arts of an old Science as practiced by the Ancient Priestly Orders. Their

mysteries were almost beyond belief. You, too, can learn to do them all with the instructions written in this Book," Lewis de Claremont claims. "It would be a shame if these things could all be yours and you failed to grasp them."

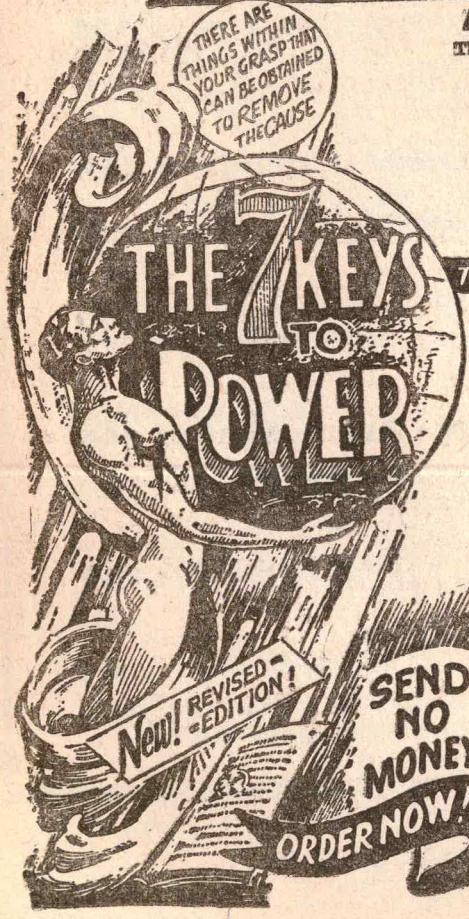
He claims, "It is every man's birthright to have these things of life: MONEY! GOOD HEALTH! HAPPINESS! If you lack any of these, then this book has an important message for you. No matter what you need, there exists a spiritual power which is abundantly able to bring you whatever things you need."

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The Book Purports to Tell You How to--

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- Unite people for marriages.
- Obtain property.
- Make people do your bidding.
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- Make people bring back stolen goods.
- Make anyone lucky in any games.
- Cure any kind of sickness without medicine.
- Get any job you want.
- Cast a spell on anyone, no matter where they are.
- Get people out of law suits, courts, or prison.
- Banish all misery.
- Gain the mastery of all things.
- Regain your youth and vigor.
- Choose words according to ancient, holy methods.



THE ONLY TRUE BOOK OF SUPREME MASTERSHIP!

This is the Power, He says, from which the old masters gained their knowledge and from which they sold limitless portions to certain favored Kings, Priests, and others at high prices, but never to be revealed under a vow, the violation of which entailed severe punishment.

THE VOW HAS NOW BEEN BROKEN

This book, he claims, shows you the secrets of old which when properly applied makes you able to control the will of all without their knowing it. If you have a problem and you wish to solve it, he says, don't hesitate. Advertisements cannot describe nor do this wonderful book justice. You must read it and digest its meaning, to really appreciate its worth.

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This coupon is worth \$1.00 to you. Attach a Money Order for \$1 to this coupon and we will send you your copy of The Seven Keys to Power—Regularly \$2 for only \$1.

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The Story Tellers' Circle

Greatest? Dempsey or Louis?

WILLIAM COX, whose characters throw plenty of leather around in "From the Neck Up," in this issue of *SHORT STORIES*, decides to stick his own neck up—and out—in a famous fight argument.

Take it from us, Bill knows his fights and fighters. We think you'll enjoy the following lusty thoughts on the ring game—we know we did.

Bill Cox thinks our loud:

"This story, 'From the Neck Up,' is about middleweights. Always middleweights are my favorites. They can move around and box. They can hit.

"Flyweights used to be wonderful because of their speed. Bantams and feathers are terrific. But in these classes they cannot punch their way through a wet package of Kleenex.

"Lightweights are good, welters are fine. But middles look best and can sock hard enough to knock over heavies. Witness Joe Choynski and all the others up to Walker. Didn't Walker do pretty well as an overgrown middle against Sharkey?

"Heavies, of course, are mostly bums. Oh, there are a few good ones from time to time, and always one outstanding man who towers above the rest. But they are bums right on . . . including that prize collection of characters who were champions between Tunney and Louis. People like to see heavies because when they fall down they go boom!, which is a sublimation of something or other, it says here. . . .

"Of course I have a weakness for welters, too, going back to the days I placed much dinero on Walker when he was coming up, then on McLarnin. The Irish fighters carried my dough in those days and what in hell has become of the Celts in the ring, anyway? Barney Ross finally kissed me off in that third fight with Baby Face, but Barney was so good by then that it was worth losing the dough to see them box.

"Fight business is a thing people have very strong opinions about. Most of us are wrong, especially ex-experts like me. But

what fun to scream defending your opinions!

"'From the Neck Up' came from thinking about hungry fighters. Also about youngsters like McLarnin, who were thoughtful and careful and usually knew just how to fight their opponents before they crawled into the ring. Also about rough, tough rock 'em and sock 'em boys who are mean in there with the mitts on but very regular when you meet them afterward. Add a double-crossing weasel who never donned a glove but takes his living from the blood and bruises of more gallant men and you have the ingredients of a short story.

"It is always fun to write these yarns because the drama of the prize ring is of higher quality than that of any other sport. The spectacle of two men probing at each other with taped fists may be atavistic, may be degrading, may be brutal . . . but it is dramatic. The feel of its comes to you when you are typing out the story . . . you can smell the ringside smells, the hot lights, the linctament, the acrid dust of resin. It is a good feeling and your fingers fly and you are back in the old Garden, or the Polo Grounds watching one of the old-time favorites, maybe even Dempsey when he was right, the most glorious of all ring animals, brown, unshaven, taut, muscled like a puma, loose as ashes, never looking at his opponent, never still, always eager to start throwing leather, never ready to stop, win, lose or draw. . . . How could there be a draw with Jack in there? It was kill or be killed.

"You can dream, can't you? You can dream it is Dempsey and Louis, both in their prime. You can see the great Negro slipping Jack's hooks, out-boxing him as Sharkey and Tunney did, moving flat-footed and swift, countering with those cat-licks which have hurt so many men. . . . But no one ever hurt Dempsey very much. No one really dropped him to the floor. Now he is the youngster who fought Fulton and Willard. He has a flat nose and a G.I. haircut. He weighs one-eighty-three. He's laughing and ducking and weaving.

"Louis is hitting him plenty. But Demp-

(Continued on page 80)



GEE what a build!
Didn't it take a long
time to get those muscles?

No SIR! - ATLAS
Makes Muscles Grow
Fast!

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?



LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

**5 inches
of new
Muscle**

"My arms increased
1 1/2", chest 2 1/2"
forearm 1/2". -C.
S., W. Va.

**What a
difference!**

"I have
but 3 1/2"
on chest
(normal) and 2 1/2"
expanded." -F.S.,
N. Y.

**Here's what ATLAS
did for ME!**

**John Jacobs
BEFORE** **John Jacobs
AFTER**

**For quick results
I recommend
CHARLES
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showing wonderful pro-
gress." -W. G., N. J.

**GAINED
29
POUNDS**

"When I started,
weighed only 141.
Now 170." -T.
E., N. Y.

**CHARLES
ATLAS**

Awarded the title
of "The World's
Most Perfectly
Developed Man"
in international
contest—in com-
petition with ALL
men who would
consent to appear
against him.

This is a recent
photo of Charles
Atlas showing
how he looks to-
day. This is not a
studio picture but
an actual un-
touched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets

or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through "Dynamic Tension," you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "Dynamic Tension" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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IN THE EARLY DAYS of the West — or any days, for that matter — nothing seemed to tear the thin veil of civilization from men as a cattle feud. They absorbed the relentlessness of the Comanche and Apache who so recently had occupied the ground they now coveted for their herds, and went on the prowl and warpath.

In our next issue is an outstanding novel of those hectic days when the West was young.

“Counting for Something in Texas”

by **JAY LUCAS**



“Just another traffic death in the dimout,” said the police. “A lot more than that,” opined the reporter, when death boarded the tugboat in the fog.

LAST DAWN OF THE “ZELDA ZEE”

A novelette by

Steuart Emery

**BLACK JOHN
GOES OUTSIDE**

*—Showing how he performed
outside Halfaday*

James B. Hendryx

**BILL ADAMS
H. BEDFORD-JONES
VERNE CHUTE**

etc.

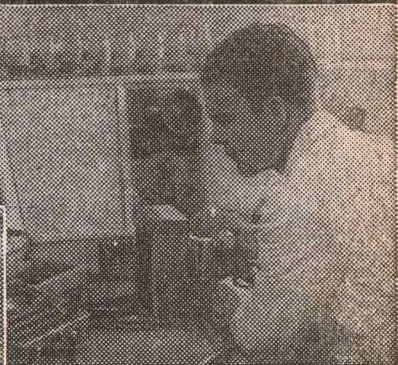
All in next issue

SHORT STORIES—October 10th

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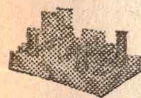


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"I believe National offers the best course to be had. Keep up the good work."—O. K. Ivey, Washington, D. C.

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Men in our armed services—or about to enter—get better ratings and more pay almost right from the start if they are trained in radio and electronics. The government needs experienced men in nearly all branches of the service. Then too, you may study with uniform—prepare for present advancement and a sound future after the war.

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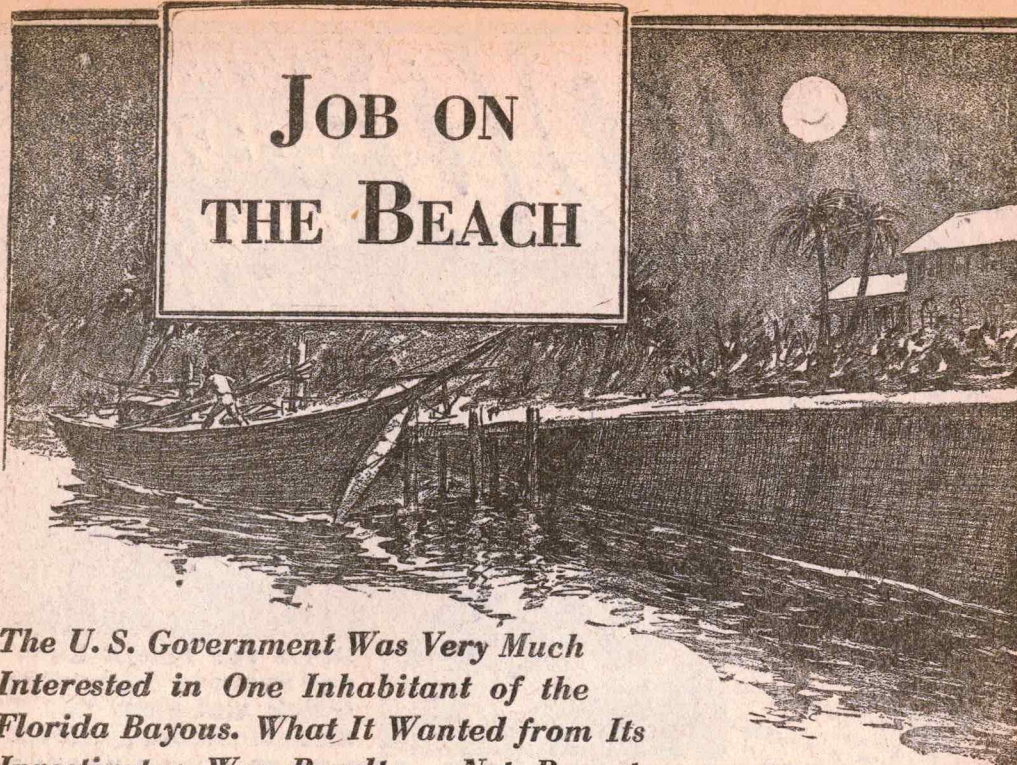
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JOB ON THE BEACH



The U. S. Government Was Very Much Interested in One Inhabitant of the Florida Bayous. What It Wanted from Its Investigator Was Results — Not Reports

By **RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS**

Author of "Tankers Away!," etc.

STEVE LANDIS straightened the wheel of his slow moving cabin cruiser and took a last look at the rough chart. There was still enough light left from the flaming Florida sunset to see the penciled lines.

He strained his eyes to read the number on the next black intracoastal channel marker coming along on the port side. He nodded his red head slowly. There must be no mistake.

A flight of three navy planes, closed up in a tight V, came blasting in low from seaward. Six thousand horses were bellowing their power like angry bulls. The noise pounded at his eardrums, loud as heavy guns, but he did not raise his head from the chart. There must be no mistake.

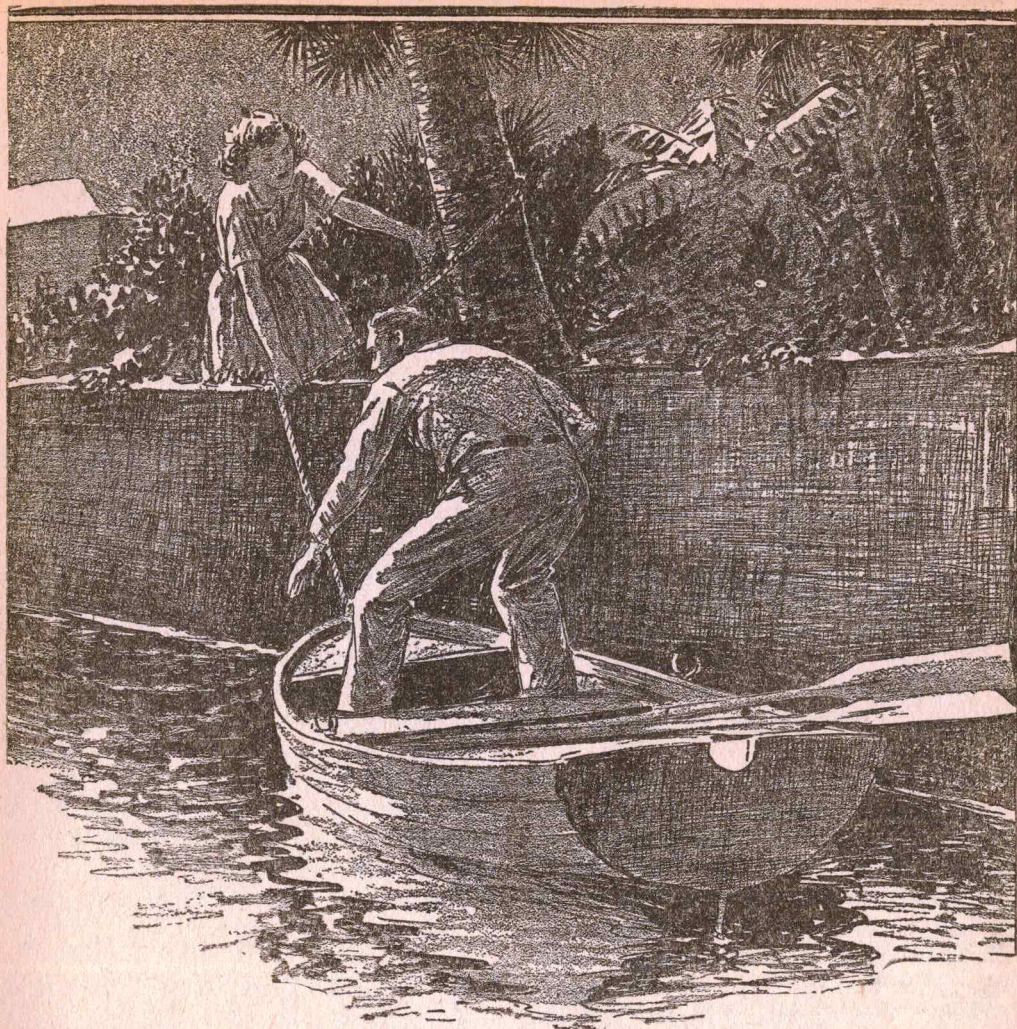
The chart was simple. It indicated the numbered marker he was just passing and mapped in detail to southward of it a great estate on the half mile wide barrier beach between this canal and the ocean. On the

north this tract was bounded by land described "Pendeen's development — practically jungle." To the south an inlet, cutting through from the sea to the canal, made a third watery boundary. The coast road penetrated Pendeen's Jungle but before reaching the charted tract it turned westward and crossed the canal.

That great estate was marked "Grayce's place." Its isolation was complete.

"And expensive," Steve Landis added. "Well, Sutherland Grayce can afford it."

He slowed the boat's speed to a crawl and hurried below. From his trousers pocket he pulled several sheets of flimsy paper, closely typed. Of their typing he could make out nothing in this light. But he needed no light to read the comment, penciled across it in a crabbed and impatient hand: "Some danger threatens Grayce. Handle him like a humming-bird's egg. Best probable approach seems to be Davenport. Results—not reports!"



Carefully Steve crumpled up the sheets, one by one, and shoved them into a saucepan on the alcohol stove.

"Results—not reports!" Steve quoted in the low voice with which he addressed himself in solitude like these. He grinned wryly. "The Old Man will have my ears if that humming-bird's egg, Sutherland Grayce, Esquire, gets smashed."

He stuck his head up to make sure his boat was not headed for the mangroves, struck a match and set fire to the flimsy sheets in the saucepan. They burned smokily, as if suffering from too much typewriter ink.

Results—not reports.

"It took the bird who wrote that three thousand words to say that the Grayce mess beat him," Landis told himself. "He must

have been on space rates some time in his literary career."

WHEN the fire in the saucepan was out he gave the ashes a stir. He brought the saucepan on deck and let its contents flutter onto the dark surface of the canal.

At the wheel again slowly, carefully, he tore the rough chart into little pieces. Without ostentation he fed a few of these at a time into the water. That done, he had a look at the east bank of the canal. With decision he turned a valve, obscurely located, on the fuel line between tank and motor. He stood listening.

Most realistically the motor popped, protested and starved to death. Steve Landis swung the slowing boat in toward the bank of "Pendeen's development — practically

jungle." He made a good landing alongside the rotting remnants of a short length of bulkhead, half strangled by the mangrove roots.

Not a sound or a flicker of movement came from the cabbage palms and tangled growth along the bank.

Steve Landis stood on deck and stared out at the jungle. He could not see fifteen feet into the matted darkness.

"What a place to run out of gas!" he said loudly. "Blast that miserly ration board! Do they think I can run on air?"

As to that, Pendeen's "development" had nothing to say. But at the sound of his voice a blue heron rose from a sand bank further south, stretched out its legs and flew.

He jumped ashore to examine the upright splinter he had lassoed with his bow mooring line. It was the dwindled remains of a stout bollard. He walked alongside his boat, looking for something that would hold a stern line. A land crab scuttled noisily away.

His foot hooked into a slab of stone and he stumbled. He stopped to feel it with the toe of his sneaker. The stone was strangely regular, a long narrow rectangle, disappearing under scrub palmetto. He stared; then scraped away sand with his feet.

No doubt of it. He stood on a concrete street. That thing was an outcropping of curbstone. Peering inland he saw that the undergrowth blocking the sand covered concrete was lower, less luxuriant, than the jungle on either side. This bulkhead was at the end of a street—the sort of street you might expect to run into in ruined Pompeii or perhaps in lava-buried, dead St. Pierre, down in Martinique.

"Practically jungle," Steve Landis quoted. He ran a hand over his red hair. "The man wasted a word. It is a jungle."

He secured his line and went below. But before he lit his alcohol stove he dug out of his bag a nice big .45 automatic and stowed it under the edge of the starboard bunk, where it would be handy. And comforting.

When the moon got up high enough to turn from gold to silver and start shedding a little light, Steve Landis went gingerly ashore.

"This combination of forest primeval,

desolate Pompeii and busted boom has got me jiggery," he told himself. He looked to northward and to southward. He could see the sky glow of Palm Beach and of Miami, newly released from the dimout. And yet—jungle here.

He advanced toward the ocean through the scrub growing in the fertile sand that had overwhelmed this erstwhile street. He felt like the only man left in the world.

Many men had rushed and worked and fought in this tangled jungle around him—red men for food, olive Spaniards for eternal youth and, less than a score of years back, sun-blistered white men for boom money and sweating black men for food, again. You couldn't call it either primeval or civilized. It was where the two stages of life ground against each other. He passed even rusty electric light standards, stumpy without their globes of light.

Of a sudden he came out on a real road—a wide, well kept north and south road, the coast road. It swept along in smug, civilized perfection. But there were no tourists on it. Not this year. Tourists were gone with the red men, the Spaniards, the boomers. Steve Landis appraised the dead road keenly. He crossed it at an unobtrusive lope. The moonlight was getting strong.

HE PLODDED on toward that rising moon and saw it at last glinting on the Atlantic waters. The sea came crashing in on the wide Florida beach as if it intended to flatten the land and did not mean to be long about it. The breeze behind the sea, due east, was balmy enough. It blew right over the Gulf Stream, two miles off shore. Steve's eyes glinted. He loved to fight his way out to green water through a surf like that. The ocean was his country.

Coco-palms, palmettoes and feathery Australian pines, fringing the stubborn coast, bent and swayed under the wind's gusty strength. High above, piercing through fluffy, hurrying clouds, rode the moon, like a general commanding the assault.

"The sea and the wind make all the noise and the land wins all the points," Steve said. "I can't make any noise, either."

With surprise he saw, not far to southward, that in this jungle there was one

house, after all, a small snug house, white in the moonlight. Its back was to the greenery and its face to the sea. He remembered, then, a casual notation on the chart, "Old Pendeen's house."

Even with that dim-lit little building in view the night and the jungle would not free him from a feeling of brooding mystery. He headed south, toward the Grayce estate, detouring around the Pendeen house. It was heavy going through the thicker undergrowth. He strained his eyes ahead, seeking some indication of a gentleman's estate. When the moon rode clear waving branches and fronds threw moving shadows about him.

He heard a crackling sound that was not wind made. Alertly he faced it. A man came bursting out of the underbrush in wild, panicky flight. He was running headlong, stumbling over scrubby little palmettoes but always recovering and scrambling on. Steve stood still, though he stood in moonlight. Very still. Results came out of facts.

A trailing liana caught the man's foot and sent him headlong to the ground. The breath went out of him with a gusty cough of pain. He lay still only an instant. Clutching his winded chest, he struggled up. But he could no longer run.

He jerked his head this way and that and saw Steve Landis. He swerved and staggered toward him. He flung himself against Steve, gasping, and wilted to the ground.

"Don't leave me!" he said hoarsely.

II

STEVE'S hair was prickling on his head in the contagion of the man's fear.

Though small the fellow was powerfully built.

There was a hint of the sea about him. The brown, leathery face he raised to Steve was formless and irregular, full of random lumps, creases and hollows, like a misshapen potato. But what held Steve's eyes were the new marks on it, long furrows in the flesh.

Some great hand had grabbed at this man's head. The nails of four long fingers had cut from left eye to neck. A mighty thumb had dug in below the right ear. The

man's own hand groped over the pain of his face.

"Fingers—like a grapnel," the man panted. "An' just for bein'—in Pendeen's Jungle."

Standing there, trying to make something of the fugitive's words, Steve heard a rustling in the undergrowth. It came in a lulling of the wind. Somebody was moving, and moving stealthily, in a circuitous course around them.

The man at Steve's feet heard it, too. He scrambled up.

"Hutt's tryin' to cut me off!" he muttered hoarsely. "For God's sake, sir—le'me go along with you!"

"Hutt?" Steve said with a wary eye on the palms. "Who's Hutt?"

The beady eyes deep in the potato face gleamed with a hint of craft. "Hairy Mark Hutt—works for Grayce," he said. "Hutt ain't human, Mister."

"Ah," said Steve. "Grayce. Grayce."

He dropped a hand, strong but suddenly most affectionate, on the chunky man's shoulder and gave him a start toward his boat. "We'll go this way—shall we?"

It was a silken command. The fugitive did not object. A bit on the servile side, this stocky little fellow, servile and yet sea-going, too. A queer set-up.

They moved westward, as silently as they could slide their feet through sand and brush. Steve looked back, forehead ruffled, eyes alert. But he kept his man under sharp observation, too. Still panting, the fugitive trotted on with a shaky hand pawing at Steve's forearm.

The menace in the bushes was static.

"I never get a fair wind, sir," the chunky man complained. He had been nudging Steve to northward of due west. Now they came to another overgrown road. They followed the easier going it offered.

The little man began lagging now to stare intently behind.

"Know a man named Davenport around here?" Steve asked. "A friend of mine told me to look him up. Ronald Davenport."

The fugitive twisted around swiftly to peer up at him.

"I've heard o' Davenport, sir," he said. "He's—" He stopped to think. "He's around."

They should be approaching the coast road by now. Steve could not be sure. The moon was riding under a thick cloud. The way ahead grew black. Suddenly the chunky little man gasped and seemed to melt down into the ground.

"Hutt!" he gasped.

Steve heard it, too. A whisper of parted leaves close by grew in an instant to crashing violence. A huge vague form smashed toward them through the black undergrowth.

Steve's companion was gone, down on all fours, diving headlong into the darkness. Steve braced himself, thin-mouthed. fleetingly he felt a little frightened and a little contemptuous of that headlong attack. This giant, Mark Hutt, was coming at him like a bull elephant. There were ways of dealing with charging bull elephants.

Steve thrust out his right hand, grabbing to seize the other man's dimly seen wrist in a knowing grip that would lay him on his back. His fingers closed strongly on a thick, hairy limb.

It was like grabbing at the piston of a moving locomotive. There was no feeling of muscle against muscle, bone against bone. This was man against steel.

Steve went down, smashed to the ground by the power of mighty arms. All the breath and half the senses went out of him. His chest was empty of air, full of squeezing pain.

He was utterly overwhelmed, downed, stunned and shaken. Fear went stabbing through him, fear of this overwhelming, inexorable power. Unbeatable and inhuman power—the power of a savage, sentient being greater than a man.

He was half conscious of Hutt standing over him. The moon burst through. He saw a man of imposing height and massive build, naked save for a pair of trunks and the hair on his pelt. Barrel-bellied as well as barrel-chested though he was, the length of his thick arms and legs kept his hairy body in proportion. But the most daunting factor in this man was the taut energy instinct in his muscled body. He had the formidable, latent energy of a sullen thunderhead.

He turned from a scrutiny of the little fugitive's course to look down at Steve Landis.

Next instant he bent. He dug his steel fingers into Steve's shoulders and jerked him up onto his wavering legs. Steve fought to get air into his tortured and paralyzed chest. He must have air before he could make arms and legs obey him.

Mark Hutt dragged him out of the shadow of waving palm fronds into the white light. His harsh eyes stared down into Steve's unfamiliar face. He cursed in disappointment.

"Keep away from here, you, or I'll break your back!" Hutt rasped at him. He shifted his grip swiftly and Steve felt sudden straining pain in his spine. Next instant Hutt had lifted him high and with a thrust of his arms heaved him into the thickest of the surrounding underbrush. Then he was gone.

Steve, struggling, found himself in the midst of constricting and twisting branches. In his daze they seemed to writhe around him like snakes, fighting every move he made. He stopped for air. He heard a sudden cry.

It was the little man's voice, warning, commanding, imploring somebody. And closer to Steve, though from a different angle, came the crashing fury of Mark Hutt's charge.

Incongruously mechanical in the jungle, a car starter ground, an ancient and erratic starter. A motor rattled into life.

Next instant he saw the glare of yellow headlights. Dodging and peering, he made out a car struggling with whirling wheels through the sand. It burst from concealment in the bush close to the coast road. Behind it, ghostly in the backward reflection of yellow light against waving greenery, a creaking house trailer swayed. Car and trailer went bucketing northward in wild flight. It should have been comic, that sudden flight of dilapidated civilization from primordial savagery.

But Steve Landis, struggling painfully out of the tangle of seagrape limbs, was not amused. He was suffering from shock. Pain, lack of breath, his pounding heart, these were nothing. It was shock, a blow to his brain that made him feel weak. With his hard fists, with his strong body, he had fought and won and fought and lost. But this was different, dauntingly different. He had been overwhelmed.

A force as primitive as this jungle had tossed aside his physical competence. This Mark Hutt was no mere giant, a creature made big by disordered glands. With his size he had sure coordination and swift cunning. Steve Landis felt like a child. Slowly, soberly, he squirmed out of the seagrape thicket.

"I know now why that little rat was frantic with fear," he told himself. "It wasn't the mauling. It was the force back of the mauling that terrorized him."

He stood still, fighting panic, struggling back to reason.

"I've been given a damn good trimming," he told himself. "What of it? I never claimed to be a Hercules—just a five-eleven fellow with a bit more muscle than the next. So what? This Hutt is a tougher customer with his hands and feet. That's all."

But it wasn't all. Mark Hutt's power had daunted him.

Steve stared at wavering shadows. The car and trailer, with the little fugitive and the unknown man to whom he had called, were beyond hearing now.

The jungle was no longer filled with the sounds of crashing pursuit. The jungle was again a mere instrument for the wind to play soft tunes upon, with shadows to sway in rhythm. Mark Hutt was gone—or gone to earth. Which?

Steve was not happy in that spot. But he would not move—not in flight. He could not.

"I'm the humming-bird's egg, not Sutherland Grayce," he told himself sourly. "Grayce is well guarded."

Painfully he got out a cigarette. With dogged defiance he let the match flare un-screened. It blew out before he could cup shaky fingers around it. He lit another. No sound of renewed attack.

The cigarette helped soften that queer shock. It was still with him. He smoked an inch before he moved.

Slowly he walked out onto the coast road. He stopped a moment in the center of its deserted length. Regretfully he stared northward. That way the old car and trailer had fled.

"Did I get my hands on an answer—and then lose it?" he asked himself.

He started back toward his boat. He had

a strong conviction that Mark Hutt was following him. Once, even, he thought he caught a glimpse of him.

Steve stepped onto the boat. He felt a powerful urge to put his hands on his gun, to go out hunting this huge ape as he might any other animal. But Hutt was human, not animal. He was a man. And he had attacked with bare hands.

"Steady!" Steve cautioned himself. "That big gorilla is probably on your side—on the side of the Old Man. He's guarding the humming-bird's egg, isn't he?"

He took his stand on the dock, raking the jungle with watchful eyes. But though he was uncomfortably conscious of being under scrutiny of the ponderous skulker, he did not see him again.

"When he jumped me he figured I was somebody else," Steve reasoned.

After a tense quarter of an hour on board he stepped to the bank, let go his lines and pushed off. He allowed his boat to drift across to the bulkhead on the other side of the canal. He made her fast there.

"It's what any chance stranger would do," he told himself. "Besides, I'll sleep better."

But he did not sleep well.

III

MORNING was a different matter. His body was no longer numb. It ached. Blue marks of Hutt's clutch spotted his shoulders. He crawled out into the warm sun. He found it soothing. But the jolt of Hutt's inhuman power lingered in his mind. He shook his head angrily. Hutt had marked his brain, too.

Swearing at every move, he slid on a pair of trunks and stubbornly straightened his body in a painful dive from the cabin top. In the warm green water flooding in through the inlet from the sea he felt better. Salt water always made him feel better.

And there were eggs to cook and a job to start on. He had the matter of the eggs in hand, on the alcohol stove that smelled vilely, when somebody hailed.

He went out into the cockpit and found a rowboat alongside. In the rowboat, with a brown hand holding onto his rail, was a girl with fluffy light brown hair and eyes

the color of the water off shore. She was clad principally in a pair of overalls, not the kind you get at the Tropic Shop on Fifth Avenue. She looked at him carefully.

Steve regarded her with veiled intensity. He liked her eyes. There was a look about them as if they gazed mostly at far distances, seaward, skyward, across country. Too many girls never saw farther than across a nightclub.

"Married?" she inquired.

That jolted him.

"No," he said finally, in a flat voice. Cracks did not fit.

The girl was disappointed. She shifted her hand from his rail to the handle of her oar.

"Wait!" he said. "What's the gag—the reason for your question?"

"You tied up here to look over the land, didn't you?" she asked. She nodded across the waterway.

"Dad—our name is Pendeen—will sell only in one acre plots to married people with children who'll make it a plain, home-like sort of community."

HE NODDED, thoughtful. "A swell excuse if he wanted to keep it deserted," he said, half aloud.

The girl's ears were keen. They started to turn red and the blue eyes flashed.

"I mean your father doesn't want showy houses bulging out over the boundaries of narrow lots and full of old folks, lively folks or dogs and canaries," he said quickly. "And no speculators, buying for a gamble."

She wasn't too mollified. "You ain't a real estate dealer?"

"I'm a war victim," he said and indicated the boat. "I'm taking my boat to Miami to sell and the ration board short-changed me on gas. Wait just a moment, won't you?"

He hurried below, took his frying pan of eggs off the burner, dropped it in the sink and rushed back. It would be fatal to ask her to come aboard. He leaned over the side and politely picked up the painter of her boat.

"I'm Steve Landis of nowhere in particular," he said. "A Four F—the army dislikes the cut of my gizzard."

She smiled. "I'm Frances Pendeen."

He got down to business, his business.

"Your father has a fine stretch of land," he assured her. "But you won't sell off many plots to desirable families as long as you let a big hairy savage in a pair of shorts wander around on your real estate."

Her lips tightened. She looked at him intently. "That's Captain Mark Hutt," she said.

"A neighbor?"

"He's sort of guard for Sutherland Grayce whose place is to the south."

STEVE laughed loudly. "Some guard—and some contrast! Ever see Grayce—waxed mustache, thin elegant face, impeccable clothes and the gravity of a premier? What's Grayce want a guard for? Just because he's rich?"

The girl frowned. "It isn't because he is rich," she said. "Although he was born rich he is one of the most brilliant airplane designers in the country. He's a mathematical genius and he has proved it in at least two planes for the navy. So—"

"So the Aerodynamical Kid thinks Hitler wants to rub him out? I'd say there were a few others ahead of him on Hitler's list."

"You can't judge a man like that by ordinary standards," she said hotly. "He is high strung, nervous. And the navy kept pestering him by sending people in lots of gold lace to see him until finally he wouldn't even receive them."

Steve was grinning.

"But that's just town gossip," she said.

She reached out a hand to take the boat's painter from him. "I may be able to get a fisherman to give you a tow down to—"

"Look," he said quickly. "I'm not married. Two of my friends, who are, asked me to look into this part of the coast for them. But with this Hutt wandering around—"

"He isn't supposed to," Frances said. "But he's all right. He saved Mrs. Grayce's life two months ago."

"How?"

"Hutt was captain of a salvage tug that rescued her on Grayce's dismasted schooner in a gale. That tragedy is another reason why Sutherland Grayce is so upset. He was swept off deck and got to shore south of here but his young son was drowned."

Steve nodded. "I recall something about that kid," he said. "Hutt was a newspaper

hero, wasn't he? And—something else about Mrs. Grayce?"

The girl's voice was low. "Mrs. Grayce went to Reno for a divorce. And Hutt came here as guard for Mr. Grayce. For some reason the tragedy broke up the family—and nearly prostrated Mr. Grayce. You needn't think Hutt is any good reason for not buying—"

Steve tried to hold her eyes. "But why a guard?" he asked. "And especially a big hairy ape like that?"

"Wouldn't you hire a—afraidable man for a guard if you were afraid of—something?"

Steve leaned closer over the rowboat. "Afraid of what?" he asked.

The girl jerked the rope from his hands.

"Are you sure it was your gizzard, not your head, that the army didn't like?" she asked hotly. "Why are you so interested—"

"I'm an interested person," he said patiently. "Do you want to show me a lot or two—or take me to see your father?"

She lifted her eyes to look him over steadily.

"For a red-headed man you aren't very quick-tempered, are you?"

"For a light-brown haired girl you aren't very slow tempered, are you?"

THEY grinned at each other, but not too frankly on either side.

"Get aboard," she said. "Dad's planting alligator pear trees near this side of the place now. I'm supposed to be his sales manager. I'm not very good at it."

Steve dropped over into the stern of the boat.

"Want me to—" He stopped. She was handling the oars like a seaman.

She rowed northward, under the shadow of the overhanging mangroves.

"Friend of mine told me to look up a young fellow named Ronnie Davenport, who hangs out around here," he said casually.

She lifted her eyes from her swinging arms and looked at him.

"Mr. Davenport is a cousin of Sutherland Grayce," she said.

"I'd find him on the Grayce place, then?"

"No," she said slowly. "He has been staying over in town. He—Mr. Grayce isn't too fond of him."

He nodded without evident interest.

"This is pleasant," he said, with a nod at the canal. "Pardon me if I loll. Anybody besides you and your father live—or stay—on your land?"

"No."

"Not even—trailer people?" His eyes studied her keenly.

"No. It's too wild to attract them. And you can't see the world on two gallons a week. Trailers are scarce."

That's what she thought.

"I caught a glimpse of a stocky little man—" he began.

The steady stroke of the girl was suddenly broken. She let her oars trail. "Look!" she breathed, head turned forward. "There's Captain Hutt now!"

Steve sat bolt upright. It was impossible not to recognize hairy Mark Hutt there on the edge of the canal. Gargantua had an absurdly light fishing rod clutched in his thick hand. But his back was toward the waterway. He was peering intently through the tangled foliage of Pendeen's Jungle. Muscles stood out on his shoulders and neck.

Steve rubbed his jaw, watching with narrowed eyes. Resolutely he suppressed the anger that surged over him. "Easy!" he warned himself. "You don't rate personal feelings on this job. Easy!"

Frances began rowing again, a little more quickly.

Hutt caught the sound of the oarlocks and turned. His eyes put the pressure of his power on them. He stood still, feet wide apart. His square head with its blunt features looked like a hunk of granite. Abruptly he sent his line whipping out half across the water with a mere twitch of the wrist. Power. And coupled with coordination.

The girl rowed on. Her forehead was puckered by a little frown and her face was flushed. Steve watched the sun on her light hair.

They had left Captain Hutt two hundred feet to southward when she stopped rowing.

"Do you smell smoke?" she asked. "I hope it isn't a brush fire. It's so dry it would destroy a lot of Dad's young trees."

Steve sniffed. He caught the tang of wood smoke and nodded. The wind from

the sea brought a faint crackling to their ears.

"It's a fire, all right," he said. "Shall—"

He stopped. Somewhere in Pendeen's Jungle a man was shouting. The voice was high, tense and angry.

Steve glanced to southward. Hutt had swung around again, looking inward.

"That sounds like Dad!" Frances cried. "Whatever can be happening?"

Smoke in thickening clouds was drifting down on them. The voice ceased. Frances rowed hard toward the bank. Captain Hutt went crashing through the bushes.

Frances ran the bow of the boat up on a patch of sand. She cupped her hands about her mouth and called:

"Dad! Oh, Dad! I'm on the canal!"

They listened. The noise of Hutt's body in the bushes diminished and merged with the crackling of the fire. The smoke, acrid and penetrating, stung their nostrils.

They plunged into the jungle. "There's a little path near here," Frances panted.

A man came into sight ahead of them. He was clawing his way blindly through the underbrush. Steve grunted. This was the second man he had seen fleeing in terror through the backsliding jungle. Two! This runner was older, a man with a thick, close-cut head of hair, perhaps prematurely white. His thin features were contorted and his mouth was dropping open with fatigue.

"Dad! What is it?" Frances cried.

The man flung an arm backward in wordless terror. He ran on past them to the boat. Frances sped after him. Steve Landis paused; then followed. The girl was holding her father's arm in an effort to reassure him. He gestured toward the oars.

"Dead!" he said hoarsely. "I didn't mean to!"

"What is it, Dad?" the girl asked again.

Pendeen did not answer. He sat there shaking. His eyes had fixed suddenly on Steve Landis and there was a new fear in them.

"I—I must go to the police—the sheriff—at once," Pendeen muttered.

IV

FRANCES had been watching her father with troubled eyes. With a sudden impulse she shoved the boat off the sand,

jumped in and was at the oars. She did all this so fast that Steve Landis, had he chosen, would not have had time to get back down the bank to stop her. But he merely studied father and daughter with noncommittal intensity.

The girl rowed her father across the canal, bending toward him over her oars to speak softly. Soon he responded to her quiet questioning.

Before the boat grounded on the other side of the waterway a man was shouting on Steve's side.

"Stop! Stop, Pendeen! Somebody stop that man!"

At sight of this newcomer, Steve Landis' eyes narrowed. Quickly he noted salient points—short, thin, jittery looking. Waxed mustache, now sadly askew, below a knife-edged nose. Shirt and trousers quiet of hue but expensive looking even at a range of a hundred feet. This was Sutherland Grayce. The humming-bird's egg. The Old Man's darling. The Aerodynamic Kid.

"Now we've started frying our onions!" Steve Landis told himself. He lifted his voice to call along the bank.

"What's the matter?"

Sutherland Grayce turned and jerked up a thin arm to point across the canal.

"Murder!" he shrilled. His voice was thin, metallic, somehow artificial. "Stop that man! There's been murder done here!"

Briskly Steve moved along the bank toward Grayce. His eye slid in among the interstices of greenery in Pendeen's Jungle. Smoke was pouring past him.

Pendeen had pulled himself up the opposite shore by a grip on the mangrove roots. He vanished westward. The Federal highway and the town lay in that direction.

Already Frances was rowing back toward them.

"You can stop making that row!" she called hotly to Sutherland Grayce. "My father's gone to call the sheriff."

She jumped ashore and faced them. In spite of her effort to smooth out her face her eyes blazed defiance. She kept a hand on the bow of the boat. Steve fingered his jaw. She was set to shove the boat out into the canal if they showed signs of pursuing her father. Except for eyes she looked small and crumpled up.

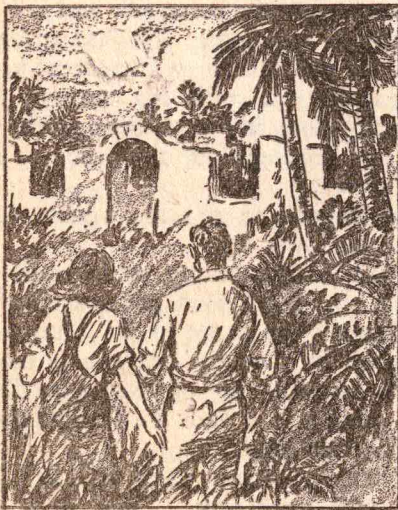
"Take us to the murdered man, Mr. Grayce," Steve said.

Sutherland Grayce was shaking. He took his eyes off the canal and ran his tongue briefly over his lower lip. He coughed as he breathed smoke. He eyed Frances nervously.

"We'd better detour the fire," Steve suggested. He started into the brush; then paused for Sutherland Grayce to lead.

Grayce, white-faced, moved reluctantly forward. Frances followed closely. Her eyes dared Steve to try to stop her. He didn't.

They avoided the worst of the smoke.



Coughing, bending low, shielding their faces from flying bits of burnt greenery, the three worked inland. They came to the edge of a wide outcropping of grayish limestone which stretched, parallel to the canal, across the path of the blaze.

"That ought to stop the fire cold," Steve told the girl.

She nodded. Her face was troubled.

As they passed the limestone a chunky little man came toward them, walking gingerly over the burnt and still smouldering ground. His face was lined with strips of adhesive plaster.

He was Steve's frightened fugitive of the night before, the man who had escaped Mark Hutt in the car and trailer.

"We've got him!" the man shouted at them triumphantly. "Ben Goff an' I got him!"

His eyes slid away from Steve Landis.

"Who?" Grayce asked tautly. "Who have you got, Unger?"

"The killer—your Mark Hutt!" the man Unger said. "Ben Goff's got a shotgun on him. Come on!"

Grayce stared at him.

The girl looked at Steve. "Why, we saw Hutt—" She stopped.

"Yes," Steve said. "But I don't even know who was killed, when."

"Unger!" Grayce said in a thin tone of command. "I want you to go down to my place and telephone the sheriff's office. Also call the doctor over from town."

Unger halted and considered the matter. His small eyes roved to Steve Landis. He gave no sign of recognition.

"I'll do that, Captain," he said to Sutherland Grayce. "Ben Goff's got him cold." He started southward.

They moved on. Ahead appeared low gray walls swathed in vines and creepers. At first sight this crumbling masonry looked like an ancient Spanish fort. They drew closer. Steve saw concrete blocks. This extensive ruin, with its shoulder-high walls, was probably less than twenty years old, an unfinished palace of the Florida boom.

They rounded a corner of the walls and came upon the dead man. He lay flat on his chest in the grass, head sideways. A big, jagged indentation showed above his left temple. The skull was crushed. He had been a tall, small featured man, rather dark. His linen suit was spotless.

"Ronald Davenport, my cousin," Sutherland Grayce said in his harried voice.

It sounded horribly like an introduction, to which the man on the grass was unable to respond. Frances did not approach him.

"He was not welcome at my house but he was staying in the neighborhood," Grayce added.

Steve Landis gave the dead man only a glance. His attention fixed on the two living men there. The half-naked, granite-skulled Hutt, towering at the head of the body, was regarding Steve with black intensity.

Facing Mark Hutt at the feet of the body was a stranger—Ben Goff, no doubt, for he held a shotgun levelled at Mark Hutt's broad body. Saturnine, dark-featured Ben

Goff had deep creases in his concave cheeks and a threatening scowl on his face. A seaman's watch cap was tilted on his head. His feet were planted warily apart. He kept that gun aimed at Captain Mark Hutt. The dead man did not exist for Ben Goff.

Neither, Steve sensed, was the dead man important to Captain Mark Hutt or Sutherland Grayce. Davenport didn't count.

"I got Hutt doing it," Ben Goff said. "You maybe heard Pendeen sounding off just now? Right at that moment Hutt was caving in Davenport's skull with a rock."

Quickly he added. "Pendeen didn't see it. The smoke hid it from Pendeen. But I saw Hutt kill Davenport. I'll swear to it."

Mark Hutt grinned broadly at them. "How about that?" he said to Steve and Frances Pendeen. "Where was I when Mat Pendeen started hailing?"

He had been on the bank of the canal. Steve knew that.

"Maybe not right at that second," Ben Goff said quickly. "And—maybe I didn't get a clear look, on account o' the smoke. But—"

"Stop lying, Ben," Mark Hutt said. His voice was merely derisive but his cold eyes ripped ferociously into the sun-blackened face of Ben Goff. "You're not good at it."

Hutt looked at Sutherland Grayce. "Will you tell them all, sir?" he asked respectfully.

The change in him was startling. He lowered his huge head with humility and looked hopefully at Grayce through his thick eyebrows.

"Hutt did not do it," Grayce said. "I was nearer Matthew Pendeen and this place than Hutt."

Hutt looked at Steve. "Perhaps, sir, you saw something of me—?"

"Hutt was beside the canal when the shouting started," Steve stated curtly. "And, for a short while after that he was in our sight."

Mark Hutt's eyes turned with cruel relish on Ben Goff.

The shotgun shook in the man's hands.

"Unger knows I didn't do it!" Goff cried. "He was with me! If Hutt didn't do it then it has to be Matt Pendeen!"

"That is the solution," Sutherland Grayce's queer voice put in. He looked toward Frances Pendeen, standing white-faced, lis-

tening. "I regret the fact, Miss Pendeen. It was almost an accident, no doubt."

Steve looked down at the body. Ronald Davenport's forehead on the left side was deeply crushed. Quite an accident.

"You tell them, sir," Mark Hutt said softly.

"There is no mystery here," Grayce said. "I saw most of what happened."

He twitched his thin arm at the dead man at his feet.

"For some reason Ronald Davenport was setting fire to the dry undergrowth along a line to the east of this ruined house," he said. "He was using a dead palm frond as a torch. Mr. Pendeen was working even further toward the ocean side and saw what Davenport was doing. Pendeen rushed toward the fire, calling on Davenport to stop. Davenport ran, with his burning frond dragging along in the palmetto scrub, firing it. I saw Pendeen stoop and pick up a stone. He threw it."

He stopped to run his whitish tongue across his lower lip.

"Now you're telling what really happened, sir," Mark Hutt said encouragingly.

"There is no doubt of it," Grayce said. "Though by then the smoke was blowing thickly across my line of vision I saw Davenport stumble and fall. I—I withdrew—to find Captain Hutt."

"I wasn't far away from you, sir," Mark Hutt said soothingly. "You were safe." Again his eyes slid toward Ben Goff. "Well, Ben? Got any more to say against your old skipper?"

Ben Goff jerked at the open collar of his dirty shirt. "I saw you damn near Davenport," he said sullenly. "Maybe I was a little excited when I said I seen you do it."

"There's one question I want to ask," Frances said. She turned her slim body quickly, so that she could face them all before they could make their faces a blank defense. Her voice was small but resolutely under control. "What are you all doing here?" she cried. "All of you—with your secret eyes and hating, dangerous faces? What is it? Whatever it is, this murdered man is part of it. Dad didn't kill him! I know! You who are accusing my Dad—what were you doing on his land?"

Her blue eyes flashed in hot challenge at them all, even at Steve Landis. She stood

alone, defiant, worried, not giving an inch.

"That sounds to me like a fair question," Steve Landis said coolly, as if it did not concern himself. "It needs an answer."

V

UNDER Steve's most disinterested glance Hutt, Goff and Grayce looked around at each other. Furtively their eyes tangled. Not one of the three so much as glanced at the corpse. Davenport was dead—finished. Their game went on. Steve sensed it as surely as if they had spoken. Ronald Davenport didn't count. Matthew Pendeen, straining against the straps of an electric chair or sweating away his remaining years in a cell, didn't count. The game went on. What game?

Why had Ronald Davenport been setting a fire here in this dry jungle? How did that move fit? And how did he, Steve Landis, with his mission, fit into the game? That he was in it he did not doubt. He waited for somebody to answer Frances's question.

Over their heads, ten thousand feet in the air, a service plane went blasting along, one of one hundred thousand, on some unknown mission of the war.

It was Captain Mark Hutt who spoke, as gently as a baby:

"Does a good neighbor like Mr. Grayce need any reason for a stroll through Mr. Pendeen's development? And me, I go along with him?"

He lifted a finger with sudden venom to point at Ben Goff. "Ask that sea-rat what he was doing here." His finger shifted to the direction in which had gone the chunky little man whose face bore Hutt's marks. "Along with Unger, the yacht flunkey that Mr. Grayce had fired off his schooner."

Again Hutt's thick finger flicked, this time toward Davenport's body. "And along with Davenport, that had finally borrowed and pestered himself right out of Mr. Grayce's house. Was Davenport staking you, Ben?"

"I don't know nothing about Davenport," Ben Goff cried. "I and Unger come over to ask Pendeen for a job plantin' trees an' clearin' land here." He jerked a thumb. "We come in our trailer, bringing our tools an' me this shotgun to help clear off the rabbits an' vermin."

He looked Mark Hutt in his derisive face, gritting his teeth in the effort of meeting his eyes. A thoughtful, almost submissive sort of retainer Mark Hutt was this morning. Now he said no more.

Deadlock. A deadlock of silence. With the Old Man's injunctions in the back of his head Steve Landis made no effort to break it. A sheriff was coming who would ask many questions.

With an alert eye masked by a drowsy eyelid he leaned against an Australian pine and waited. His own position was explained now. He was a witness, needed in these parts, not a mysterious intruder.

He glanced at Frances Pendeen. His evidence wouldn't help the Pendeen family. In spite of the girl's attitude of complete confidence there was an aura of loneliness, even desolation, hovering over her.

With unassuming boredom he strolled away from the vicinity of the corpse. Ambling aimlessly he dragged the neighborhood of the ruin. The fire that had swept around it did not help. All his casual strolling brought him was one fact. Somebody had fallen sprawling, with arms wide apart, in loose sand thirty feet or so to the east of where Davenport's body lay. The indentations in the sand, once you saw them, were too regular to be anything but the impress of hands, arms, body, knees and toes. But did that get him anything? And would the sheriff see it for himself? This man had got up. The marks showed that, too.

He became conscious that the three men and the girl were watching him, the only moving object within range of their eyes. He quit. Again he leaned against the feathery pine tree, quite vacuous. Just the sign of a sprawling man who had got up.

STEVE LANDIS was glad to get away much later that day. Sheriff Kinghorn, a transplanted Vermonter, had sent for sandwiches for his witnesses at the expense of the county and put on a long inquiry. It was dull, even though it concerned the extinction of a man. Kinghorn had reached his verdict first and investigated later.

"We got to pick up Matt Pendeen," he had decided after the first five minutes of questioning. He looked over his deputies he had brought along. "Mason, Wyatt, Lane—"

He called them aside and arranged his dragnet. Frances plainly strained her ears. She was white but not quitting, not conceding anything.

After dispatching his men the stringy, sun-dried sheriff settled down to his inquiry. He showed more Vermont determination than Vermont shrewdness. He asked everybody everything he could think of. Steve, resolutely in the background, reckoned that he didn't bear down hard enough on Ben Goff and Unger to crack their improbable yarn of coming to get a job reclaiming Pendeen's Jungle.

"Dad wouldn't have had the money to hire them," Frances had told the sheriff. She had told little else. She didn't know why her father hadn't arrived at the sheriff's office or where he was now. And soon she demanded permission to leave. She had made that demand stick. Reluctantly Sheriff Kinghorn had dismissed her long before he released even Sutherland Grayce.

Frances seemed a tired and harassed girl when she looked Kinghorn square in the eye for the last time and hurried away.

Steve Landis hiked southward to the edge of Grayce's estate, where the coast road, turning, crossed the canal on a timber-faced drawbridge. Near the bridge, in a clump of cabbage palms he saw a deputy sheriff whittling a stick and watching the road. Wearily Steve hiked north along the west bank toward his motorboat. The sun was almost setting. And he was hungry.

Suddenly he caught sight of Frances's old rowboat. Adrift and empty, it was brushing along against the mangrove roots. He slid down the bank, splashed into the water and laid hold of it.

The oars and a bailing can were in it. Nothing else. He climbed in and began rowing against the tide. Looking ahead over his shoulder at his cruiser he spotted Frances' head in the cockpit. Instantly she ducked out of sight; then stood up again. She waited him calmly.

"I thought you'd never come," she said. Steve scrambled aboard. He did not answer. He stared at her warily. She was no longer in overalls. She looked prettier, perhaps, but skirts didn't fit in in this jungle. She had brought a five-gallon can of gasoline with her.

He jerked a hand toward her rowboat.

"I found it drifting," he said.

"Yes—I know." She contemplated her fingernails intently. "I—I set it adrift."

"What for?"

SHE did not answer. She continued to look at her fingers. They were slim but the short cut nails had a look of hard work about them.

"You know," she said at last. "I like you."

"Lots of people like me," he asserted brusquely.

The slender back of her neck, now exposed by her down-turned head, was quite cute. There were little wisps of curls on it.

So what, he asked himself.

"Steve," she said at last, very softly, "I've done all I possibly can for Dad, haven't I? I've helped him escape; I've refused to testify against him; I've even sneaked money to him—all we had in the house. I—I can't do more than that, can I?"

He waited grimly.

"All I could do!" she repeated and her voice rose higher. "Everything!" She let her hands fall though she kept them tightly clasped together.

"And now—I'm tired," she said, again softly. "I'm tired of trying to be a boy to please Dad—of trying to sell this land—of doing all the cooking and washing and housework and never having any fun."

Suddenly her clasped hands flew apart. She flung her arms around his neck and clung to him tightly, passionately.

"I want to go with you, Steve!" she breathed, her lips close to his ear. "Take me with you to Miami! I know about the happy times they have there even with the war on—the gay people—the dancing, the clubs, the racing— Take me with you—now!"

His arms suddenly tightened around her slim body. His lips crushed hers. He breathed in the fragrance of her. The heady, stirring thrill of life made music in his body. She lay limp, utterly limp.

"My bag is hidden—over there—about a hundred feet behind those mangroves," she murmured. "Get it and we'll go—now!"

"Thanks for the kiss," he said. "But I'll stay on the boat."

He wrenched her arms from around his neck and pushed her away. She staggered

back, with brown face showing the rushing blood under it and blue eyes wide.

"I've seen a good many shows," he said, "so I can say with confidence that you're the world's worst actress."

She covered her face with her hands. Then, swiftly, she flung them to her sides. "I'm not acting, Steve, I'm not!" she whispered. "Really I—take me with you—now!"

"Let me show you something," he said. He jerked open the cabin door. He stamped below, through the cabin and on forward, to the bow. The little fore-castle was dark, dark and full of gear and stores. He spoke as confidently as if he could see.

"Please come out, Mr. Pendeen." His voice was harsh.

A dark something under a spare awning shifted and moved slowly into the light. The mild, fine featured face, deep-socketed eyes and short white hair of Matthew Pendeen took shape.

In silence Pendeen followed Steve out into the cabin. Frances was standing there. Steve glared at her.

VI

PENDEEN was shaking. His eyes avoided Steve's. Frances' eyes did not. They blazed.

"We—we were stealing your boat only for half an hour, Mr. Landis," Pendeen said slowly. "I—I wanted to get a little way beyond the cordon of deputies guarding the roads."

He shook his head. "It is unfortunate that you returned."

Frances was still defying Steve. "I had an extremely difficult part to play," she said to him. "No wonder I flopped so badly."

"Well, you tried," Steve said. He grinned at the extreme brilliance of her flushed cheeks.

Pendeen peered uncomprehendingly at them.

"The last time I saw you you were on the way—as I was told—to the sheriff," Steve said to him.

"That was true, at that moment," the old man asserted.

"But—it is hard to explain. I was confused. The shouting—the pursuit—I—changed my mind."

Steve was studying this very mild, most inoffensive old man with grim intensity. Very mild, most inoffensive. Disarmingly transparent. Or was he?

Steve nodded sardonically. "You changed your mind—with some help from your daughter?"

Pendeen lifted a hand and stroked his forehead. His eyes fixed themselves on his land. "I want to go back to where I stood when I first saw Davenport—to go back alone," he said. "I want to think out what happened—what I did—. He was spreading the fire in every direction and the smoke was thick. He wouldn't stop. I caught up a stone and threw—"

"Dad!"

He stopped.

"I want to go back alone before I answer the sheriff's questions," he added with an attempt at firmness.

Silently Steve motioned her to go out on deck. As Frances reached the companion steps he smiled sadly at his daughter.

"Too bad you couldn't somehow persuade Mr. Landis to go ashore again, Frances," he said. "Of course it is impossible to devise a pretext instantly."

Crimson though she was, Frances didn't look in the least ashamed of herself. She kept her small nose in the air and waited.

"Go ashore and start working on the next act," Steve said to her dryly. "I'd like a few moments of private conversation with your father."

"I wouldn't trust—"

"Or I hail the sheriff."

She wasn't prepared for that.

"It would kill Dad to go to a Florida jail," she asserted. "Even if it were only waiting for trial it would kill him. I did persuade him this morning not to—"

"You weakened in the clinch," he said. "However, it was fun."

She whirled on him.

"You merciless beast, you!" she said fiercely. "I—I—"

"You hate me," he finished for her. "Right. Come back some time when I don't look like a sucker to you. I may let your father go in ten minutes—if you aren't around."

She scrambled into her boat. He cast off petulantly and went below. "I guess calling a woman the world's worst actress is the

unforgiveable crack," he told himself.

Matthew Pendeen was sitting wearily on a bunk. He didn't look any too well with his fine-drawn features and transparent skin.

Steve dropped down on the opposite bunk. His eyes were suspicious. He waited.

PENDEEN came out of it with a start. He looked around. "Frances," he said, getting to his feet. "She's gone?"

Steve nodded.

"I intend to avoid Frances, so she may not be accused of harboring me," Pendeen said. "But may I impose on your good nature to take a word to her?"

"You may impose on me," Steve said slowly, "If you're good at it. What's the word?"

Pendeen looked into Steve's face, most worried.

"Tell Frances to leave the beach." He gestured across the waterway toward Pendeen's Jungle. "At once! She must stay in town. My land isn't safe for her—for anyone. There is violence stalking through it. This man Hutt—"

"You can't get away with pinning the killing on Hutt."

Pendeen stared at nothing. "Hutt has spread fear and hate since he came. I do not know why. The very embodiment of brute force."

"Check!" Steve said. He shifted his body and a dozen aching muscles and bones joined groaning in his assent. "Hutt lays on the jungle ferocity pretty thick."

"I do not know how Hutt's savagery concerns my own problem," Pendeen said.

"Perhaps he plays gorilla more to impress his boss than to throw a scare into Unger and Goff. They're tough looking eggs, too. Know them?"

"The man Goff was the wrecking mate of Hutt's salvage tug," Pendeen said. "Sutherland Grayce employed Unger as sailing master and steward when the Coast Guard, having acquired more suitable boats, returned the schooner to him at Miami."

"Unger was aboard when she was dismantled on her way up the coast?"

Pendeen nodded. "You have heard of the tragic death of Grayce's young son?"

"Yes," Steve said. "So Mark Hutt, Goff and Unger were all mixed up with the

Grayce family in that dismasting. How about Davenport?"

"No," Pendeen said. "Davenport didn't turn up until recently. After the—the tragedy Mrs. Grayce left almost immediately for Reno, to sue for a divorce. Captain Hutt came to live with Grayce as his guard. Unger, dismissed after the accident, stayed around, living over in the village. Then Ben Goff turned up. He consorted with Unger. They were reported to be hard up."

"When does Davenport come into it?"

"About two weeks ago. He came down from the North. He visited me many times. He asked countless questions about Grayce. He said the family was worried about him."

"Why?"

"Because Grayce remained here, living as a recluse. Formerly he had been active in Washington and elsewhere on naval aircraft design and construction." Pendeen waved a hand vaguely. "Wind tunnels, drafting rooms, mathematical computations—things resulting in a way inexplicable to me in the production of airplanes of amazing characteristics."

"The family worried because Grayce had quit?"

Pendeen shook his head. "I gathered that Davenport and other relatives were dependent on Grayce's good nature. Suddenly the source of their income had dried up. Davenport came to find out why. He found himself unwelcome at the Grayce place, as were other visitors."

"Why had Grayce's way of life changed so abruptly?" Steve hammered.

Pendeen did not answer. He was looking sadly out a port at his jungle.

"Any connection between Davenport and Goff and Unger?"

Pendeen stirred. "Davenport went to them, too, for information. All three, though usually separately, haunted my development, uninvited." He frowned. "I have a belief that Davenport bought Goff and Unger that old car and trailer in which they have lived for the past week. Oddly they preferred to sleep in a different locality every night."

"Not so oddly," Steve muttered, remembering Hutt.

"How did they feel about Mark Hutt?"

Pendeen shivered. "As Frances and I

feel—the greatest repulsion. Why Grayce has him around—of course, he is a great protection.”

“Could Mrs. Grayce be turning loose on her husband two thugs like Goff and Unger?”

“No. She is a lady.”

“All this,” Steve told himself, “would make a swell report, if the Old Man wanted another report.” Outside, his second sunset in those parts had already flamed and was dying. He looked at Pendeen again.

“And why are you so deeply involved, Mr. Pendeen?”

Pendeen blinked. “I?”

“Why was Davenport setting fire to your jungle?” Steve demanded.

Matthew Pendeen said, “I have no answer for you—or for myself. He did not hate me. Yet he did do it. Unfortunately, I saw him.” He shuddered. “I—I am a hasty man, Mr. Landis.”

Baffled, Steve studied his thin body. “And a damned good hand at heaving rocks,” he said to himself. “Wiry, probably. Is he one hell of a better actor than Frances?”

He spoke up: “Mr. Pendeen, are you sure you hit him?”

Pendeen bowed his head. “Confession is good for the soul. Between ourselves,” he repeated.

“That need not bind you,” Matthew Pendeen said with queer courtesy. “I realize your predicament.”

HIS fingers locked in a grip that whitened his knuckles. “Frankly, Mr. Landis, what the authorities can do to me for my act is insignificant in comparison with what my conscience is doing and will do to me.”

Steve was stopped cold. He wouldn't give Pendeen a clean bill of health, not when he hadn't yet made a dent in the Grayce mystery. But either way, this old man was something.

Pendeen broke the grip of his hands. “My daughter, of course, is concerned over my health, how prison will effect me. It is good of her but—” His voice faltered. “The stigma on her! She has her life ahead—”

“Come on, come on!” Steve said harshly. “Your daughter's able to take care of herself—lots!”

“Not on that beach!” Matthew Pendeen

said. He sat bolt upright. His voice was strong. “Not now. You will tell her to leave?”

“I'll tell her,” Steve said. “And I suggest you surrender now. The beach is thick with deputies. You'd better be going before I catch a glimpse of you, sir.”

Pendeen blinked. “Your conscience will not—”

“What worries me is my brain, not my conscience,” Steve said morosely.

The old man paused in the cockpit to look back. “If the sheriff should discover my call and inconveniences you I will surrender to him at once.”

Steve grunted. “You might, at that,” he muttered in perplexity. He followed Matthew Pendeen to the cockpit. A yellow moon, enormous and climbing fast, showed in the East over the trees of the Jungle.

Steve gestured toward his own dinghy. “Are you headed for the beach?” he asked politely.

“I will not involve you further,” said Pendeen. He stepped to the side of the boat and gathered himself up to spring to the muddy bank. His thin face was bleakly intent on making what was an easy stride. He jumped.

He hit the bank on hands and knees. With an effort he stood up and pushed on into the bushes.

“Blast that whole family!” Steve said with fervor. He opened a deck plate and picked up Frances' gasoline can. He smelled it suspiciously. It was gas. He poured it in.

He went below and cooked himself up a mess of bacon and eggs. “Why am I fighting?” he asked himself. “Just Unger and Ben Goff? Who else is there? But why should even a pallid pantywaist like Sutherland Grayce be afraid of them when he has a gorilla like Hutt at his call?”

He scowled at the world.

“Contriving little spitfire!” he said. “So she thought she could pinch my boat! Or did she? Is Pendeen a saintly old guy or am I a suckery young one?”

With the bacon and eggs he absorbed energy, if not hope. He sat with his legs stretched out on the bunk and stared at nothing through the smoke of two cigarettes.

When he got up he snapped off the safety catch of his big automatic and shoved

the gun into his hip pocket with brisk determination. But on his lips there was a cynical grin. He cut himself several lengths from a coil of line strong enough to restrain the strongest man.

"If I get away with this it'll be a miracle," he assured himself caustically. For a moment, as he cast off the line of his dinghy, he looked around in the windy night to accustom himself to the silver moonlight.

His eyes focused almost at once on a movement across the canal. Somebody was plodding cautiously northward along the bank.

VII

STEVE stared hard. "It's Pendeen," he told himself, noting the slow, dragging progress. "He said he wanted to go back to where he had dropped Davenport. He doesn't dare use the coast road."

He climbed into his dinghy. He sat still, holding to the rail, to give Pendeen time to get past. But suddenly the dim white figure was spotted in a blaze of yellow light. Somebody had vividly illumined the old man in the rays of a powerful flashlight.

"The sheriff is looking for you, Pendeen," the man behind the light said.

Steve knew that deep voice, sharpened with an edge of sarcasm. Captain Mark Hutt.

Steve shoved off. He sent the light dinghy shooting across the waterway.

Sutherland Grayce was with Mark Hutt. Grayce held the light now. He had lowered its beam from Pendeen's face. Mark Hutt had a grip on Pendeen's arm that made the older man writhe in silent pain. None of the three paid the slightest attention to Steve Landis, below them in his boat. He made no bid for their attention.

"Sutherland Grayce won't let anyone get away with murdering his cousin, Mr. Pendeen," Hutt said. He laughed. "You don't know what a tough egg Mr. Grayce is."

"Stop it!" said Grayce. His voice was agonized. "Please—stop it!"

Mark Hutt's huge head turned toward Steve's dinghy. Steve could feel the impact of the man's eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Grayce," Hutt said respectfully. "I'm sorry, sir."

Steve watched in silence as Hutt's fingers, thick and strong as hawsers, slowly, reluctantly relaxed a trifle their hold on Pendeen's arm.

Abruptly Hutt turned his head skyward, and let his voice go in a triumphant bellow: "Sheriff! Sheriff! I've got Pendeen! Over by the canal! I've got him!"

His voice, roaring out over the jungle, seemed to still the quiet rustle of the cocopalms. Both Grayce and Pendeen winced at the volume of it, let loose so close to their ears.

Hutt plucked the light from Grayce's hand. He lifted it high, flashing its rays skyward and on the taller trees around them. Again he hailed, and this time someone answered from the direction of the coast road.

"Forgive me, Pendeen, Sutherland Grayce said brokenly. "I—"

Mark Hutt's voice cut in, still with that overtone of cruel humor. "Don't let us get too soft about justice, Mr. Grayce. It might be me or you that dies next."

Grayce was shuddering visibly as Hutt turned the light full upon him. He covered his face with his hands.

"It's all right," Pendeen said. His voice was deadly weary.

To their ears, rapidly growing louder, came sounds of blundering progress through the bush.

Sheriff Kinghorn broke through, trailed by a deputy.

"Got him, hey?" Kinghorn said. "Looked like I wasn't goin' to get any sleep tonight. You shouldn't ha' run, Pendeen. Makes trouble."

A second deputy, a panting fat man, joined them. His eyes shied away from Matthew Pendeen. "'Evenin', Matt," he muttered.

"Wyatt an' I can handle him, Mason," the sheriff said to this fat deputy with a certain sarcasm. "You do's I've told you while we take him to town. Come on, Pendeen. Don't know's I got to handcuff ye. I'm obliged, Mr. Grayce."

For a moment he stood on the edge of the bank to glare down at Steve Landis. Then he and Wyatt shepherded Pendeen toward the road. Captain Mark Hutt waited for a silent minute or two and Sutherland Grayce

stood on the bank, his fingers twisting and plucking at the sides of his trousers legs.

"We'll be going home now, sir," Hutt said.

With a lethargic nod Sutherland Grayce followed him along the trail the sheriff had broken.

Mason, the fat deputy, left alone on the bank, sighed loudly. "Bein' a deputy gets a man all twisted up," he said to Steve. "I ain't holdin' against you you having Matt Pendeen on your boat. But I had to mention it to the sheriff."

"He knew?"

"He'd ha' run you in for being an accessory if we didn't have to be polite to winter visitors down here," Mason said. "I saw Matt leaving your boat." He shook his head. "Poor Matt! He saved a right smart lot o' shirts here in the twenties after the boom busted. That's why he still owns Pendeen's Jungle. He took back the land he'd sold at good prices and returned Northerners and us local fellows our money."

"Square enough," Steve said. "D'you do much deputying around here?"

MASON shook his head. "I'm a carpenter," he said. "Murder ain't in my line. No! Even if that Hutt ain't killed anybody I'd rather run into six Pendeens than one of him. Hutt stands the hairs up on my spine. Came up behind me, sudden, couple o' days ago when I was in the Grayce house planin' down a stuck door. I like to went through that door 'thout openin' it."

"What's Grayce afraid of?" Steve asked as he sat idly on the bow of his beached boat.

"Plenty—if he has to have Hutt around to stand it off," Mason said. "Not much account as a man, Grayce. Too sheltered, like a termite in a sill. But smart—sure! Sort of lives his life on paper. And rich! Whew! Just sends a telegram when he needs thousands o' dollars."

"How would you know about telegrams?"

"It's all over town," Mason said. "And the money come, too, by express." He shook his head. "That's what makes him soft. Money. Well, got to be going."

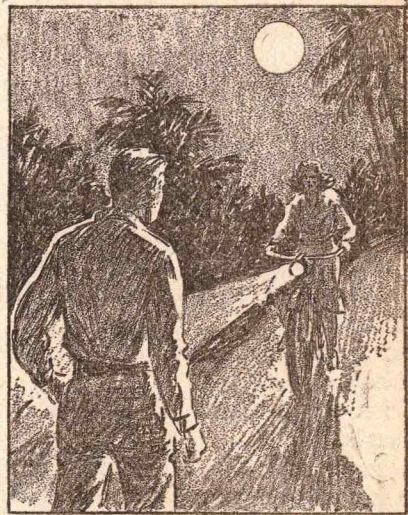
He started toward the road. Steve moved at his heels. Mason glanced back and quickened his pace. Several more times, with

growing discomfort, he looked behind as Steve followed him. Near the coast road he stopped.

"Look!" he said. "You're not s'posed to be following me. I'm detectin' and by rights you're nearly a suspect yourself."

"I was just following you to the road," Steve said. "I'm going to Pendeen's house to see Miss Pendeen. And what could you be detecting? The sheriff's got his man, hasn't he?"

Mason nodded. "But he ain't quite satis-



fied, the sheriff ain't. This beach—it's wrong, somehow."

He flung up a hand to point at flashing lights in the sky to northward, over the ocean.

"There comes the blimp, patrollin'," he said. "I'd feel safer if that thing anchored right over this beach an' kept watch. There's things as evil as Nazis 'round here."

He looked at Steve indignantly. "You talk too much—or make me," he said. "Ads up to loose conversation."

He peered southward along the road. Steve had been watching a small, wavering light approaching.

"Bicycle," Mason said. He was agitated. "Only person with a bicycle over here is Frances Pendeen. I couldn't face her—though maybe she knows her Dad's caught. Might ha' met the sheriff's car."

He hurried northward in the shadows along the edge of the road.

Steve stepped out into the moonlight and

waited. The vigilant patrol blimp had passed, off to seaward, before the bicycle reached him.

It was Frances. She jumped off and dropped the bike.

"You didn't help my father much, did you?" she said. Her voice wavered between anger and tears. "You let him be caught and dragged off to that—horrible jail!"

Suddenly the tears won. They overwhelmed her. She turned from him. Blindly she groped in the road for her fallen bicycle.

He caught up the bike and sent it spinning off the road with a quick shove. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. He did a job on it, despite the soft witchery of her under his fingers.

"Cut it out!" he said harshly. "Cut it out! This is no time to quit!"

She wrenched herself away from him with furious ease.

"Quit!" she said. "I'll never quit! I'll have him out of there—somehow—before they kill him."

"Purely as a side line I'll help you—if you'll bear a hand now."

"What do you want?" she demanded suspiciously.

"A guide and also a lookout," he said. "It makes me nervous to prowl this jungle with the feeling that Captain Hutt is about to climb up my spine."

"Afraid of him?"

"Don't I look even that intelligent to you?"

"I won't move a step until you tell how you think you can help Dad."

"I want to check his story against a thing I saw at that half-built ruin this morning. He started up the road, walking more slowly than Deputy Mason had gone. He had gone only three strides before the girl was beside him.

"The sheriff isn't dead certain your father killed Davenport," Steve said. "That's probably why that fat deputy is still around here."

He shook his head. "When you look at your father and then at that wound in Davenport's temple—"

"Dad just thinks he's guilty," Frances said.

They walked on up the empty road.

"You haven't had any answer to your

question why this queer assortment of men are around," he said. "Any opinion of your own?"

"I don't even know why you're here," she said. Unconsciously she glanced toward the closely patrolled Atlantic.

"No," he said. "It isn't a Nazi plot, unless it's a less heavy-handed plot than most. But something is going on here that is more hurtful than a dozen Nazi plots."

"What, then?"

"Your father's jungle is a grand place to hide something."

"Such as—?"

"It's what is happening to a man here that is important. It's a job for a psychologist. The murder isn't really important—except to Davenport."

"And Dad!"

"Aren't we near that ruin!"

For two hundred feet she walked on and then turned abruptly from the road. He prepared to fight his way cautiously through the waving foliage that glistened in the moon like a myriad of knives. But he found that she was moving noiselessly along a little path, no wider than her own slim figure. He grunted softly in relief and followed closely.

When he sighted the low walls of the ruin he took over. Here the smell of burnt vegetation lingered. Clouds of ashes curled upward like wraiths under their feet. He moved to where he had seen the imprint of a man's fallen body in the sand, thirty feet east of where Ronald Davenport's body had been stretched. He showed it to the girl. Then, on hands and knees, he moved a little further to the east of the impressions. Almost at once he found what he had expected.

VIII

STEVE pointed out to the girl a thick, trailing vine.

"Look," he said. "See this sea-grape almost broken? A man's toe could have hooked into that. He must have been moving fast to sprawl that far beyond."

She nodded, intent white face puzzled. She turned to study his in the silver light.

"Through the smoke and fire your father threw a stone and saw Davenport fall," he said. "Davenport could have tripped here,

sprawled, jumped up and gone on unseen in the smoke—for thirty feet. Then somebody else, with stronger muscles, a heavier stone and a more accurate eye could have brought him down—for good.”

“Why didn’t you—”

He got to his feet. “I didn’t want to attract attention by theorizing,” he said brusquely. “This doesn’t mean a thing—unless we tie it up with more evidence.”

He had started toward the vine-smothered walls of the old house. They entered the rambling shoulder-high enclosure by what might have been a side door. The shadow of the walls made it a checkerboard of black and white. Among rampant vegetation untouched by the fire, Steve pulled out his flashlight.

“Your jungle is embarrassingly luxuriant and confusing for a man who wants a sure hiding place,” he said. “But the ruins of a house can’t be missed. I know a bit about how people hide things.”

HE FLASHED on his light and started examining this end of the enclosure. Sheriff Kinghorn and his deputies had been here and done some trampling. He concentrated on the east wall.

The fine sand, drifting like snow, had piled up against the outer side of this east wall. Inside the concrete blocks were exposed right down to the broad foundation. He crawled along on hands and knees, with torch held close. He worked methodically but slowly toward the main entrance. Once he froze as he heard the sound of a car on the coast road. A moment later he forgot the car.

“Look at this,” he said. He touched one of the big sixteen-by-eight building blocks in the lowest course of the wall. It stirred under his thrust. It was not joined by cement to the blocks around it. Frances caught her breath.

Steve gripped its ends with his fingers and pulled. It slid out easily enough. He threw the vivid light of his torch into the aperture.

Inside the sand which had piled up against the outside of the building had been scooped away to make a hollow behind the block about the same size as the block itself. This had been roughly lined with wood. But Steve and the girl were staring most in-

tently at the one object remaining in this hole.

Spot-lighted by the torch, a twenty-five-cent piece lay in the exact center of the hiding place.

Steve laughed softly. “Two bits for my brain work,” he said. “Before I’m through I may collect more than—”

Frances’ fingers were on his arm in soft warning. He stopped, listening.

The soft clink of metal touching metal came to his ears and then the scuffle of feet in the sand outside. The thud and shuffle were close. He caught Frances’ hand in his and hurried her out the archless side door.

He pulled her around toward the thickest cover near the front of the ruin. Then, as she followed, he released her hand and slid out his automatic. He caught a glimpse through the palmetto scrub of two men filing in through the bush-choked main doorway of the place. Steve had not reached that part in his search. A torch flashed as the men padded in.

The man leading could have been no more than two steps inside the walls when he caught his breath. There was terror and shock in that unrestrainable gasp.

Steve straightened up and peered through a window.

The two inside were standing motionless, paralyzed. At the feet of the foremost, in a clear space, lay a fat, crumpled body. There was death in every angle of the thick and outstretched limbs. Steve saw that, first. Then he recognized the dead man. It was Mason, the fat deputy from whom he had parted less than half an hour before.

The men standing transfixed, heads downturned in the moonlight slanting in over the wall, were Unger and Ben Goff. They still clutched tools enough to tear down the walls.

“Let’s get out o’—” Unger began.

Steve gave them no time to recover. He trust a leg through the gaping window hole and jumped into the building. His gun glinted as it swung toward their turning bodies.

“Up!” he commanded. The tools clattered to the ground as their hands shot up in the air.

“You got us wrong, mister!” Unger quavered. “We didn’t—”

“That blasted Hutt!” Ben Goff said

through his teeth. "He knew we'd be coming here! He caved in that deputy's head—maybe just to plant him on us!"

Steve listened. Unger leaped into talk. His white-taped face moved in ludicrous haste. Words tumbled out of his mouth.

"That's Gawd's truth, mister! Ben Hutt knew we'd be searching here! He left that dep'ty for a sign—a warning. He knew it would make us scam out o' the state—if Kinghorn didn't grab us for this first! He knew we'd—"

HIS shaking right hand stabbed suddenly at the concrete block protruding slightly from its place in the east wall.

"Look!" he said. "There's his hideout! There's where he bunked all that cash. He's taken it—a hundred to one he's cleaned it out—an' left us holding the bag with this stiff—"

His voice broke with the injustice of it. Steve was still listening politely but with unwavering gun. "He didn't leave any evidence," he said.

Unger swallowed, clawed at his throat and went on:

"Look, mister, we didn't have nothing—" He blinked. "You were here before us, mister; maybe you—"

He looked again at Steve's gun and his voice dried up.

"I didn't," Steve said. "How much did Hutt bury here?"

"Plenty!" Ben Goff spat out. "Now look, mate, I don't know why you're—"

"Steve!" It was Frances' voice, low, vibrant, from just outside the window. "Steve! The sheriff—"

Steve turned his head. The tall narrow body of Sheriff Kinghorn, with a shorter man beside him, was framed in the side doorway. Both men had revolvers covering him.

"That'll be all, you!" Kinghorn said. "Drop that gun fast! An' not too close to the other two."

"Right!" Steve said meekly. "I'm glad you've come. Right at your feet, Sheriff Kinghorn!"

With an underhand swing he tossed his automatic across the enclosure toward the ground in front of Kinghorn and his deputy. Involuntarily, both men watched it land, shifting their feet.

IX

STEVE dived for the nearest window. Two guns blared at him. Flying cement chips stung his back as he ducked head and shoulders to turn his dive into a roll. He landed over on his back and leaped up onto his feet.

His toes sent sand spurting as he curved around the side of the ruin opposite Kinghorn. He had to hit that path by which they had come before a bullet caught up with him. The moonlight made the scanty cover near the building useless.

"This way!" Frances called suddenly. She was running, too, near him but turning sharply to the left. Her flying body seemed suddenly to melt out of sight into the unburned side of the jungle wall. Steve reversed and went hurtling toward that impassable foliage. Again a revolver boomed.

Behind, Kinghorn was yelling orders to Wyatt. By the sound of his voice and the thud of feet Kinghorn was standing by to hold Goff and Unger while Wyatt pursued.

Steve ran at the thick bush. His body slid through, scratched but not checked. Another path! He saw Frances, waiting, head turned toward him. Wyatt fired again. Leaves stirred close by.

"Run!" he muttered.

She was already in motion. And this path was tricky. That was why she had stopped. He followed her slim, flying body through this twisting maze. Young stuff, growing fast, had choked up the trail too much for a man to follow at any speed even if he found the way in. And there were forks, too.

"Toward the canal!" he gasped. She did not answer but their course bent more to westward. At last she slowed to a quick walk.

"They'll never follow—or even get to the canal before we do," she said. "Why did you make a break?"

"Things are due to happen tonight," he said. "I can't spend hours explaining incidental murders to a sheriff. We've got to reach my dinghy."

She led on. At the bank of the canal they bore south.

"It was—Mason?" she asked. When he nodded she was silent. He did not try to look into her down-turned face.

They reached the dinghy. He climbed in quickly.

"I'm heading south, to the Grayce place," he said. "You can't—"

She was already in the sternsheets of the boat. "You can't afford a row," she said steadily. "With Dad in jail for murder I'm just as interested in all this as you are, whoever you are. Go ahead."

"I won't have much time to be gallant or protecting," he warned.

"When were you?" she flashed. "I saved your bacon just now."

He swung his oars and put his back into every stroke. The light dinghy leaped along, with an outgoing current helping their speed. He kept close to the east bank, where tall mangroves threw black shadows on the water. The leathers on the oars cut the noise of their progress. He let the tide take them silently under the drawbridge. When he began rowing hard again, there was urgency in every swing of his body.

"We'll land at Grayce's dock," he said, remembering his chart. "I haven't time to be doing any more jangle crawling."

THE Grayce estate was bulkheaded by a strong cement wall. The luxuriant growth along the bank had been toned down to park-like proportions. Concealment was now impossible. Steve turned out into the middle of the canal to catch all the tide there was.

"Dock ahead," the girl said suddenly as the dinghy rounded a bend. She stared into the moonlight. "There's somebody on Grayce's schooner—somebody in white."

He changed his plan at once and swung the dinghy in alongside the stone bulkhead. He took her foot in his hands, balanced precariously, and heaved her up onto the wall. She moored the boat to a cocopalm and with the help of the painter he pulled himself up.

"We'll see who's fooling around that schooner first," he said as they struck out along the bulkhead. "That little ship figured in the start of this. Maybe she'll be in at the finish, too."

"Do you know yet what Sutherland Grayce is afraid of?"

"Everything," he muttered. "Some things more than others."

They fell silent but walked fast. The

schooner, still dismasted, looked forlorn and unkempt without the two tall sticks that should have reached skyward from her deck. The man they had seen on her had vanished.

Soon they came to the point where a gravel path swept in a casual curve through carefully groomed grounds toward the low, British colonial house. Deceptively, the Grayce house did not appear large.

Steve hardly glanced at the house. His attention was on the disabled schooner in which had died Sutherland Grayce's son, his wife's love and his interest in his vital work. Good things had died in that disaster. Something else, vile and repulsive, had been born.

That desolate little ship was the focal point of all that had occurred on the beach.

"I'll bet my braid on it," Steve muttered.

From one porthole of the cabin and then, a moment later, from another, a beam of light flashed erratically.

"We'll board her," Steve said softly to the girl. "I mean—I'll board her."

"You were right the first time," Frances said coolly. "Don't you try to scrape me off now."

He did not answer but pressed on. At a slanting cocopalm close to the dock he slipped off his sneakers. Frances shed her shoes as promptly. Still unchallenged, they skirted the slip containing a smaller craft equipped for deep-sea fishing and approached the schooner. An inviting plank connected her with shore. Steve studied it suspiciously and then trod it without noise. Frances followed close.

The wavering flashlight below deck still showed an occasional errant beam. Steve led the way aft along the white deck past the snapped shrouds and tangle of gear that cried for a seaman's hand. In the cockpit he flattened out and peered down the main companionway. Frances crouched beside him, watching his face.

He straightened up, frowning.

"It's Grayce," he whispered to the girl. "He has ripped up the cabin, looking for something. Now he's working forward. Down!"

She ducked with him, behind the cabin trunk.

Sutherland Grayce was emerging from a hatch by the forward end of the cabin. The

wrinkles on Steve's forehead deepened as he studied the man.

There was something queer about Sutherland Grayce. For a moment Steve thought his slow, studied movements meant that he was drunk. But it was not that. Grayce was more than drunk. He moved with leaden deliberation. It was as if a dead man moved. Steve, squinting to make out Grayce's smallest action in the weird light of the moon, felt that a man might walk boldly up to Grayce, without arousing him from that deep concentration on his purpose.

The thin figure of the plane designer moved forward, unhurried, unstumbling, almost into the eyes of the ship. He bent over the crew hatch, lifted it and descended into the forecabin.

With a sign to the girl Steve crept forward. Beside the ladder leading steeply down into the crew's quarters he listened.

"Searching," he whispered to the girl. "For what?"

"Like a sleepwalker," she breathed. "Why is he like that? Drugs?"

He shook his head. "No. Not drugs. More than drugs."

The sounds below told of a man jerking mattresses off the pipe berths, emptying lockers, pulling sails out of sailbags—searching. Then they heard another sound, less distinctly. It was the clink of chain. Frances slanted her head, completely perplexed.

"In the anchor chain locker right forward," Steve said. "Searching even under the chain for—Aft! Quick!"

The man below was approaching the ladder. Steve grabbed the girl and they ran in barefoot silence back to the after corner of the cabin trunk. In its shelter they prepared to dodge to port or to starboard.

But Sutherland Grayce was not coming aft. He stood beside the crew hatch with a bag, a leather bag like a small attache case in his hand. With a wild, sudden vehemence he hurled the bag from him out into the moonpath on the waters of the canal. It splashed and sank. A sob burst from his throat.

They crouched like statues, watching.

The disposal of that bag had released some deep-hidden store of frantic energy in Sutherland Grayce. His movements now were quick and jerky. He dropped feet first down the crew hatch and came up in an in-

stant dragging with him a grapnel and a coil of line. He stretched out a leg and brought the shank of the small anchor against it. With feverish speed he bound leg and anchor together with many turns of the line.

He straightened up. He stood still, head raised. Then, dragging his weighted leg, he clumped toward the side of the ship.

X

STEVE LANDIS went pelting forward. Grayce was poised to jump, unconscious of sound and movement around him. Steve came flying up. He hooked Grayce away from the side with a sweep of his arm. Both men went tumbling to the deck.

Sutherland Grayce lay still. He stared up as Steve scrambled to his feet. Steve looked him over solicitously, remembering the Old Man's grim orders. Grayce's eyes, bright, bewildered, full of pain, shifted from Steve's face to the girl's.

"Why should you stop me?" he asked Steve Landis.

"Reason enough," Steve Landis said. "My job."

Sutherland Grayce peered up at him. "No!" he said in a thin, weary voice. "I intend to die—to drown, and off this schooner. I have lived too long—two months too long."

He sat up and pressed his two hands to his forehead, a dazed gesture that told of unbearable pain. "Two months too long," he said. "I have paid too much for those two months of life."

"What I'm interested in is a torpedo plane for the navy," Steve said bluntly.

Frances' eyes flashed at him indignantly; she gestured at the bent shoulders of Sutherland Grayce, demanding pity and sympathy for him. Kneeling, she freed his leg of the anchor.

Steve ignored her. He was trying hard to read this man.

"You prevent me from dying by my own volition," Grayce said. "That will not keep me alive."

He shuddered suddenly and glanced fearfully over his shoulder at the shore. It was grotesque, horrible, that such terror could exist for a man to whom death itself was no terror.

"So it is Hutt," Steve Landis said slowly. "To all other eyes he is your guard; to you he is your master."

"Yes, Hutt," Grayce muttered. He was still shaking with fear. "Mark Hutt—with his eyes, his muscles, his power. I tell you I have lived two months too long. The first payment for these two miserable months were my son's life—my wife's love. Too much!" His voice rose thinly. "Too much!"

He peered up at Steve. "Neither you nor any other man will ever know how much I paid."

"Your son's life and your wife's love," Steve repeated. He was thinking fast. "You got panicky when the squall hit," he said. "You grabbed your son's life preserver or you seized him in a drowning man's grip when you were both swept overside. Your wife saw."

Grayce straightened his bent back. His eyes stared wide at Steve.

"You—you know—that secret—"

"It sticks out like a sore thumb," Steve said brusquely. "The only possible reason why your wife should quit in a time of such mutual sorrow is that you were responsible for that sorrow. And of course Hutt, after he came alongside in his tug to take off your wife, was smart enough to see what a hold he could get on you. Your wife talked, I suppose."

"In Sheila's first moments of grief over our son's death and my—cowardice, Hutt got a signed statement from her, witnessed by Ben Goff. But—how could—"

Roughly Steve broke into his faltering utterance:

"I'm still interested in torpedo bombers. Put this at its blackest. Say you drowned the boy in your fright. You still have a chance to square that some by saving the lives of hundreds of men and boys."

He gripped Grayce's shoulder and spoke with hard-bitten conviction. "Your only chance to come back! Give 'em a torpedo bomber that'll get in there, fast and streaky, sending Jap ships under before they can sink ours."

Grayce shook his head slowly. "It is not the same thing," he said, speaking as if he had spoken these same words to himself many times before. "Besides that, the first price I paid for life is only part of my degradation. I have paid more, since then."

Frances was tugging at Steve's arm, frantically yet with care not to rouse Grayce from that concentration on inward thoughts. Frowning, Steve rounded on her.

Frances, crouched close to the hinged cover of the crew hatch, pointed. Steve looked, then ducked to the deck close beside the seated, bent body of Grayce. The cover of the crew hatch, the anchor windlass, the sheer of the deck all gave some slight cover. It wasn't as bright as day; this was only moonlight pouring down in the teak planking.

Once down Steve raised his head to look again.

Mark Hutt! Thick arms spread out along the iron railing, Mark Hutt was standing on one of the balconies of the Grayce house. Even at that distance and in that light it was impossible to mistake that massive body for another man's. Motionless save for his big head, he was looking out over the lawns, shrubberies and canal bank of the estate. Steve had no doubt as to whom he was seeking.

Neither would Sutherland Grayce have any doubt, if he saw that intent and menacing figure. He need only lift and turn his head a little to the right, away from Steve, to see his master, his Nemesis. Once that happened there would be no more words, no more sanity, perhaps, in Sutherland Grayce.

Over Grayce's bent head Steve gestured to the girl. She understood. She moved slowly, inconspicuous as a drifting cloud, between the broken man on the schooner's deck and the man who sought him.

"You have paid more, since then," Steve prompted.

"Much more," Grayce said. "All Hutt wanted was money—first a few thousand, then more and more—a hundred thousand. That was nothing—but in paying it I paid more than money."

Steve had been watching, stealthily, as he listened.

Hutt, without haste, all in one flowing movement, had swung himself over the iron railing and dropped to the ground below. He was crossing the lawn, looking this way and that, but heading almost directly toward the schooner.

Retreat was impossible. In spite of himself Steve spoke more rapidly to urge the

despondent man into further revelation.

"By paying more than money do you mean that Hutt has terrorized you by threats of disclosure or death into obeying him like a slave?"

"Yes. Yes. By threats at first. And then—by his—self."

Steve stared into Grayce's eyes, trying to rouse him from his profound and leaden depression.

"Has he forced you to be silent about what you think or know of how he killed Ronald Davenport and that deputy, Mason?"

Grayce gasped. He lifted his head and returned Steve's gaze with animation.

"You know—Yes!" he said. "Yes!"

Steve's quick hand swept Frances back as she moved to confront Grayce. Hutt was coming closer, much closer, though he did not see that crouching group in their uncertain cover on the schooner's deck.

"How did Hutt kill Davenport?" Steve asked.

"As Hutt ran in from the bank of the canal when Pendeen shouted he saw Davenport with his blazing palm frond. He knew why Davenport had been setting the fire. It was an attempt to make Hutt in his excitement go to the place where he had been hiding the money extorted from me."

Grayce gripped his hands together, one in the other.

"They all knew—Davenport, Unger and Goff—how he was getting that money from me. They dare not intervene, but they had courage enough to watch him. They meant to steal his loot once he had revealed his hiding place. But Pendeen saw Davenport."

His voice was shaking but he was speaking more rapidly.

"Hutt saw Davenport trip and fall; then scramble on through the smoke. In his rage he caught up a stone and flung it as he ran still far off. Hutt can do things like that. Davenport died as the stone struck his head. I did not dare to speak. I—I could only lie."

Frances drew a soft, quivering breath. There was pity on her face.

"Nor did I dare to interfere tonight, when Hutt killed poor Mason," Grayce rushed on. "He killed in cold blood when Mason blundered on us as we removed Hutt's money from the old wall. I believe Hutt killed because he meant to increase his de-

mands on me and wished to increase my fear of him.

He gave vent to a queer, gobbling sort of laugh, a horrible sound. "He need not have done it," he said. "I was already his most abject slave by reason of his sheer physical—I cannot describe it."

"You needn't," Steve said. "I can describe it."

"You?"

"Me!" Steve said. "Besides size and muscle and a furry chest he's a real throw-back to ancient days. He has some atavistic physical power over other living things—"

"Yes! Yes! That's—"

"Probably the sort of power that made it possible for a man with nothing but a hunk of stone in his paw to live in a world full of much more formidable beasts. I can feel it. He's got the Indian sign on me, too."

There was little doubt about it. Hutt was striding straight toward the schooner. To move was to be seen. Steve's eyes fell to the girl's. She was not flinching.

"He has—on you?" Grayce's eyes hung on Steve's face; almost a flicker of hope was in them.

"He has," Steve said sourly. "He could tie me around the stump of that main mast. But it isn't important, because I can't design torpedo bombers."

The animation was slowly dying out of Grayce's eyes.

"Nor can I," he said. "All I can do now is to die—by my hand or by his. I—I have thrown into the canal his hoard of money."

There was sweat on Steve Landis's forehead. He was no psychologist, no master of the minds of men. But he had his job—a big job—and only at this instant, he sensed, did he have a chance to bring it off. Grayce might come back now—or he never would. This night he had plucked up at least the poor courage to kill himself. This was the crucial moment for Grayce—and for that navy torpedo bomber. He could only be re-born now.

"You threw his loot overboard?" he asked. He clapped Grayce on the back and stood up. "Did that take nerve!" he said, forcing admiration into his voice. "Stand up, man!"

"Nerve!" he repeated as Sutherland Grayce climbed shakily to his feet. "Like

25 taking the sabre tooth from a sabre-tooth tiger. We'll show him now."

Steve turned to face the massive figure moving across the grass. He had not seen them yet.

"Hutt!" he roared. "Come aboard here!"

A feeble trumpet blast, that, but better than no challenge.

XI

HUTT stopped; then instantly turned toward them. He came on. He did not run. But his stride lengthened; his pace increased.

Perhaps all that was possible was a quick death in action. Steve felt cold to the marrow of his bones and he saw how badly Sutherland Grayce was shaking. He turned to Frances and took her hands in his. They were cold, too, colder than his own.

"Mission of information for you," he said. "As soon as Hutt boards, run aft and jump ashore. You've got to get to the sheriff. Your mission is information—not screaming, not fighting, not helping us, not picking coconuts. And, Frances—"

"Yes, Steve?"

"No," he said. "No! Just get there! It's your job."

She did not answer, save by a quick bob of her head.

"Hutt!" he roared again. "Move, you!"

There was an instant of silence from Mark Hutt. Then he answered, with a touch of mockery in his voice. "I'm coming—sir." He walked even faster, a padding, unbelievably rapid gait.

Sutherland Grayce was tottering on his feet.

"I have my orders, Grayce," Steve Landis said. "You've faced him like a man."

He gripped the trembling shoulders and abruptly thrust the man down the crew hatch. "You're too valuable to risk in a mauling scrap with this big ape. Secure the hatch."

He swung down the hatch cover on protests from below and straightened up abruptly. Inquiringly, with his bare toe he touched the grapnel Grayce had brought from below. He rejected it. In any sort of rough and tumble encounter on this deck Mark Hutt would be his master.

Hutt was on the dock.

"Landis, I see." Mark Hutt said and a growling laugh sounded in his throat. "And giving orders! I've been wanting to know, Landis, how you'd look with your head twisted square around to see aft when you walked forward. What are you doing with Grayce?"

"Congratulating him on heaving your loot over side," Steve said coldly. "He found it in the chain locker."

"He—" Mark Hutt stopped dead.

In that brief instant Steve heard below him the feeble thump of fists on the crew hatch.

"Let me out!" Grayce was calling. "I am not afraid of him—now. I will fight with you. Let me—"

It warmed Steve. There was something of a man flickering in Grayce. But orders! The humming-bird's egg was not to be broken—if possible. A mighty slim possible that was.

"Remember your orders," he breathed, with a flick of his eyes toward Frances. "I'm obeying mine."

She did not stir nor speak. He moved toward the landward side of the deck, muscles not too taut. A second would decide this thing.

"So Grayce threw my bag overboard," Mark Hutt said through his teeth. He looked across at Steve. "I'm sorry you brought that girl along, Landis, because all three of you are going down tide to sea after that bag—with my marks on you!"

He disdained the gangplank. Steve Landis had reckoned that he might.

Hutt took a quick step forward on the dock and, with bunching muscles, leaped for the schooner's rail.

Steve launched himself as swiftly. His body must meet this mightier body in mid-air. The crux of it was that.

He crashed into Mark Hutt's body. It was like jumping into a wall. But he drove his fist, with more hope than certainty, into Hutt's chest, just below where his ribs met. Not gouged eyes, not torn muscles, not broken bones would lose this fight, as Steve meant to fight it. And only one thing would win—air in a man's lungs.

The greater momentum of Hutt's body sent both men thudding against the schooner's side. They dropped together into the water between ship and dock. Already, as

the water closed over their heads, Hutt's fingers were tearing at Steve as if they meant to tear him apart.

Steve did not fight. He had dealt the one blow he had hoped to get in in this struggle, the blow to Mark Hutt's wind. Now he must hang on and take it—the reading power of Hutt's fingers. Deep in the black water he wrapped his arms and legs around Hutt, flattening his face and neck against the furry chest. That was all he did.

Primitive man was no mighty swimmer. Perhaps this one's talent did not run that way. It was Steve's only chance. Water was his meat—had always been his sport and pleasure.

Hutt was lashing out with fury—oxygen-consuming fury. His first efforts tore both Steve's arms loose from his grip. His throat suffered a searing blow. Excruciating pain shot from a dozen clawed pieces of flesh.

But his legs held against Hutt's kicks. And their heads did not break through the surface. Such bone and muscle as Hutt's must be heavier than water. And there was no buoyant fat on Steve Landis' own five-foot-eleven. He felt the cool smear of bottom mud against his buttocks. They were deep under.

But, God help him, had his fist in Hutt's chest done his breath no harm? The man was struggling like a steel monster. He must need no air.

Again and again Steve was battered, thrust away, punished with pounding fists, jabbing fingers, thrusting knees. He strove only to keep some weighting contact with Hutt's massive body. The man could not bite—not in water.

Once Hutt got his head up through that sealing element Steve Landis was a dead man and Frances— He hung on. He hung on like seagrass to a boat's hull, yielding but clinging.

He was losing this fight. His strength was going. His grip was going. His air was going, burning up, setting his lungs on fire, burning—hold a little longer—a little longer—a little longer—longer.

THERE was water on his face—pelting drops. And somebody was pressing on the small of his back, then pausing before pressing relentlessly again. He opened his eyes.

"I'll take another turn," Frances said. "Go for help."

She was close to his head, crumpled up beside him. Had those drops been tears?

"I'm sure he's coming to," she whispered.

"I—I hope so," Sutherland Grayce said. And, before Steve could protest, the pressing on his ribs went on and on. Slowly he realized that Grayce had gone. He turned his head and tried to see the girl, pressing her hands so fiercely on his back. He could not.

"Hutt?" he whispered and heard her small gasp of relief.

"Dead, Steve," she said. "I—got you out first."

The pressing stopped. "Steve," she said, "poor Grayce told me that he could go on working. He kept saying that."

Steve rested. He was too numb for pain but it would be coming to his tired body.

"And you—how about that mission of information?" he demanded though not very sternly.

"I was going—as soon as I knew I wouldn't have to hit him with that grapnel," Frances said. "And then—it was all over."

"You'll never make a naval officer," Steve said. "No obedience; no discipline. But Frances—they aren't so severe about naval officers' wives—and neither am I."

"You'll have to give me time to think and tell me that when you're fully conscious," Frances said. "And since you aren't fully conscious—"

He felt the pressure of her lips, infinitely reviving, on his lips.

The Old Man, that grim Director of Naval Intelligence, himself chained to a desk on the beach, had promised Steve escape to sea duty if he hatched out this humming-bird's egg. She'd have her time to think, certainly. But there was a promise about those lips. This time she meant it.

he loved everything about it—the crowd, the odors, the limelight, the exchange of blows.

Conover was the cleverest man in the middle ranks. He was two to one to cop Joe Magan's title. Everyone knew this. Big Joe was clumsy and it was the same old rapier against the bludgeon and Joe was doomed.

So Conover moved in, his hands flashing in the style which so many had praised. Many times Rackety Toll had crossed gloves with Conover. It had been fine for Rackety, training with the contender, the coming champion. Slappy had been very proud of himself for arranging it. In time, in good time, maybe when the war was over, it would be young Rackety's turn to have a shot at Conover's title.

Joe Magan's heels came down, touching the canvas. He was bruised and he breathed heavily through his mouth. He accepted another left. Conover drifted, fainting. Joe Magan stood flat-footed, waiting.

Conover came in again. He threw the load, one and two, three and four. Joe seemed powerless, overwhelmed. Conover was covering him with leather, painting him with blotches of red.

Joe shifted. Conover was flailing him. Joe stepped in. Conover's clever feet started away. The inside right dropped off Joe's chest, where it had been cocked for four rounds. Rackety saw it, plain as day. It was a sucker punch, a cinch to slip.

There was a dull boom. Conover's arms flew wide. Conover's mouthpiece dropped out. Into the challenger's eyes came an expression Rackety Toll would never forget. It was a lost, haunted, ghostlike look.

Joe Magan's heavy, stolid features did not change. Only his brows beetled slightly. He stepped easily, throwing that right. It went smack against Conover's face, spinning him. Conover's deft hands pawed without aim.

Joe Magan stopped, considered. He stuck out his left, impaling Conover upon the nose. His haymaker came from away over in Brooklyn. It slammed into Conover's pallid features.

Slappy screamed, as though in pain, "Stop it! The kid's out on his feet!"

Conover went down in sections, as though someone was lopping off portions

of him with a huge, sharp axe. Joe Magan stood, watching, until a knee touched canvas. Then he walked to his corner, still unmoved, the surgeon of the ring, his job done competently if brutally.

Rackety just sat and watched Conover. The challenger had been very decent to him. Now he lay, a crumpled, broken heap, the blood running from his smashed nose. For almost five rounds he had beaten a champion. Now fate and Joe Magan had caught up, and Conover, like so many before him, was through.

The tinsel peeled off, just a wee bit, but Rackety was very young. The referee said, "Nine—ten—and Out!"

Rackety sighed. He said, "Magan is brave and he is very good. Magan is better than I ever thought. Poor Conover!"

"That inside right!" said Slappy Tooker as they edged through the crowd going out of the park. "Last time it was a left hook. That Joe Magan is a genius. He may not look smart, but he is unbeatable." Slappy was very sad.

Rackety adjusted his greenish uniform, made sure of his cap. He wore the globe and anchor on his collar and right now he was doing some recruiting among the Broadway crowd who knew him passing well as a coming and gay young fighter. He was a marine, and that was fine, and some day soon it would be orders to move and he would go to glory or to death, probably on some Pacific isle. But right now he was thinking of Conover, whose occasional sparmate he had been, and who lay beaten in his dressing room.

He said, "I'll see you later, Slappy." He made a detour and walked to the dressing rooms. He saw the crowd at the champion's door, saw the empty spaces about the room where the erstwhile favorite had changed. He tapped and went in and Conover was awake, but weeping a little, tears of rage and humiliation. Rackety said, "You should have had him, pal. You did good in there."

Conover shook his head. His nose was in splints and his teeth had torn the inside of his mouth. He said, "The man's uncanny. He takes all you've got. You smash your hands on him. Then he batters you with that strength."

Conover was a college fighter. He had been a great one, but in his eyes Rackety

saw the end. Rackety said, "I'd like to fight him."

"You!" said Conover. "You're just a kid. You're good, Rackety, but you're not ready. Don't let Slappy fix that one for you! Stay away from Magan until age or something gets him. Go fight Japanese—but lay off Magan."

Rackety said, "Sure, Con. I know you're right. It's just—I'd just like to fight him, is all. Just an idea."

He spoke other kindly words to Conover and left. Out of Magan's dressing room the crowd was pouring, noisy with back-slapping and I-told-you-sos, even those who had laid the odds on Conover. Joe Magan was a bulky figure among them in his sailor's whites.

Somehow they came together in the midst of it all, the marine and the gob. Joe Magan said, "Out of the way, gyrene!" and shoved a little. Joe was feeling pretty good. Joe had a right to feel pretty good, Rackety knew.

But Rackety said, "Go scrub a deck, cheese champ!" and shoved right back.

Joe Magan hurtled into the crowd, having received the hardest push. His round, scarred face turned black. He lowered his head and started forward. Rackety dug in, put up his hands. The white hat was a mark and almost Rackety smashed a fist against it. But at the last moment he paused, swung away, placed an open hand upon the hard skull and bore down.

Hands were grabbing him. He saw a chance and let a short one go on Magan's neck, but there were dozens to stop him and Sam Gazino was frantic at the sight of fight without gate.

Sam bellowed, "Get that marine outa here before my man kills him!"

Daley, the sports writer, said, "That's more than a marine! That's Toll, the fighter!"

There was a sudden silence. Joe Magan, ruffled, his white hat dirty where someone had stepped on it, his teeth showing faintly through his thick lips, said, "I'll see you again, wise guy!"

Rackety said clearly, "In the ring, any time, you bum!"

Then he was outside in the street and he supposed he should be ashamed of himself. But he was not, remembering Conover

and at least two of Magan's punches which need not have cut the challenger to ribbons after his guard was down.

Furthermore, he was thoughtful. He was twenty-one and he had been fighting since he was able to hold up his hands. He had fought a lot of folks, he thought, all along the line. Starting in the Bronx, he had worked his way to L. A. and back, fighting folks.

Slappy had made him a boxer. He had gained fame enough for a young lad, boxing in the clubs. That was why he was so popular along the Stem—because of those pleasing club fights which everyone loves so well, especially the real fight bug, the one who goes not only to the Garden and the ball parks, but to every set of bouts which he can reach.

So Rackety was a boxer, without a mark to show his trade, with two good eyes, ears of normal appearance and hands which never cracked. He had not dropped a bout in a long time, now, almost two years. In the second fight of middleweights, he was on top.

He went thoughtfully to his quarters. He lay awake, going over the lessons of his experience. He thought of the risks involved, he thought of the marines and that he would soon be with the veterans of Tarawa, possibly. It would be pretty nice, he grinned to himself, if he could pull it off. He went into a healthy sleep.

SLAPPY TOOKER wailed, "You are made to order for Magan! You have been boxing with Conover! You are a fancy dan! You have always been a sweet pea!"

"That's what you think," said Rackety. "I was once a good time Charley, too."

Slappy said, "I can't do anything about it! There is no way to get Joe Magan into a ring with you. We have not fought the right people. You are too young."

Rackety said, "I have been fighting all my life. As an amateur, bootleg and otherwise. Through high school, even, I fought my way. I would have made college, like Con, only for this war. Do not argue with me, Slappy. Get me on the bill with Magan. Do like I ask you."

Slappy said sadly, "There is nothing so thick as a stubborn young un."

Rackety said, "Look, pal. Where I am

going there will be bullets. Does Joe Magan throw lead? Do like I ask, pal."

Slappy went out into the marts of Broadway and spoke his piece. It was well known that Slappy Tooker, although a fighting manager, was not a man who spoke idly or with tongue in cheek. He was, in fact, regarded somewhat curiously by other denizens of that world, as an honest and forthright citizen.

The fight world is not a dainty place, not even a very clean place, but what decency there is in it emanates from such men as Slappy Tooker. Manager of more than one champion, he had never stolen from his men, had never taken unfair advantage of a friend or an enemy. Therefore he was listened to, with respect, by the multitude.

Daley, the sports reporter who ran a syndicated column, thought he saw a story. He said, "I was there when Rackety took a punch at Joe. He landed, right where he wanted. But Rackety is no hitter. You saw what Joe did to a boxer like Conover—"

Slappy answered, "We know—we know. I'm just telling you that Rackety and me have worked out a way to beat Magan. You can take it or leave it. But if Magan is going to box in September on the all-star show, who is he going to meet? Some guy he has beaten twice?"

DALEY said thoughtfully, "Let me see—who will he fight? Why, you are right, Slappy! He has beaten every challenger twice except Conover."

"Con won't fight him again," said Slappy, wincing despite himself, "because Con is laid up with a broken jaw and a smashed hand from the last fight."

Daley hesitated. He said, "A system you've got? A secret punch?"

"Nemmine about that," said Slappy. "We are fighting Cab Caltowitz in Jersey next week, Boston Deal in Yonkers the next. If we handle those boys good, will you brag us up for a shot at Magan on the all-star show?"

Daley said, "It's a charity show and you won't get a purse."

"He—I mean we don't want dough," said Slappy, swallowing hard, but loyal to his promise to Rackety.

Daley said, "Following the incident after the Conover fight, it'll make a story. Grudge

fight, and all that. Rackety having been Con's sparring partner—"

"Okay," said Slappy. "That's it, and thanks." But he did not seem elated. He went out and saw other people. He was a man not without influence and in him was the ability to connive to an end. His honesty helped. There were people along the Mazda Trail who began to believe in Rackety Toll.

Perhaps Slappy never believed. He certainly never made suggestions while Rackety trained, in secret, over in a Brooklyn gym. He was in Washington, talking to certain people when Rackety fought Cab Caltowitz in Newark.

Daley got the wire as the bout ended, "Okay for my boy to meet Magan—Slappy." Daley looked at the recumbent form of the redoubtable Caltowitz and pursed his lips. He was the only metropolitan sports columnist present. Rackety was grinning down at him as the referee counted out Caltowitz.

DALEY went back to New York and filed his story. It was a good one, and it scooped the sports world in a mild way. It said that Rackety had scored a sensational two-round kayo over Cab Caltowitz in Newark and that in an exclusive interview the likable young middleweight had challenged Joe Magan to a meeting on the all-star bill, for which permission had been granted that very day to Rackety Toll.

It further related the facts of the slight scuffle between Rackety and Joe Magan upon the occasion of the Conover fight, and how Rackety had said, "Any time, in the ring, you bum!" and how Rackety really believed he had a secret weapon with which to beat the champion.

"Like radar," said Daley semi-facetiously. "Rackety is a clever boy, reminding one of Conover himself in style. But he has worked out something new which at this time cannot of course be divulged." Daley was careful about that. He was a man who would go out on a limb but would be wary of men carrying saws in its vicinity.

Thus are boxing matches made, as all the world knows. Thus is the tinder applied and soon the bonfire is blazing. Imitators of Daley, lesser men who envied his syndication or were jealous and sought to discredit him, picked up the story, garbled it,

reprinted it until the sports pages, lolling in wartime doldrums, awakened to the controversy.

Slappy went to Yonkers with Rackety. Boston Deal, a tough veteran, was a clouter, far from fancy, a man with a small head and big shoulders, a learned ringman. Slappy said, "You were always a good kid, Rackety, but you have gone nuts. If you were not already in service I would not stand for this nonsense. Punchy is no way to go to war, either, now that I think of it!"

Rackety said, "You watch!"

He went in against Boston Deal. For three rounds it was a pretty good bout. Then Rackety somehow was standing in the middle of the ring and Boston Deal was sitting on the bottom rope, holding his head in his hands, and the referee was walking between them, signing for a tko, and somewhat surprised thereat.

Boston Deal did not get tko'd at any time, much less in Yonkers against a young, slim upstart.

Slappy said thoughtfully on the ride home, "It is not plain to me what you do. But I see you do it."

Rackety said blithely, "It is not too plain to me. But I am doing it. Maybe I cannot do it against Joe Magan. But if I could—!" He dreamed again.

Slappy muttered, "It's a lot of hay and you are foolish in the head. Joe Magan plays no favorites, like shooting with a left always—nor swinging that right. Either way it seems right he does it. Magan is a natural, a champ. You are a comer, all right—but a punk kid."

Rackety just went on dreaming.

THE all-star was a big show for the relief funds of all branches and all branches were represented on it. Most of them got good leaves to do their training. Rackety did not ask for leave nor did he get any. All day he recruited men for the Marine Corps and at night he boxed enough to keep his edge and let it go at that.

Daley, looking for new angles, insisted upon seeing a training season. Rackety obligingly went through his paces with four different sparmates. When it was over, Daley was first bewildered, then furious. He said, "You haven't shown me a thing! You are an ordinary young boxer with a fair

punch! You got Caltowitz and Deal to do business! You're a fake!"

Rackety said, "You'd better not print that. It would make you look awful bad."

Slappy said, "Even if it is true, you can't print it."

Daley roared, "I'll fix you! Wait'll this is over! I'll tell enough to fix both of you!"

Rackety said softly, "You're threatenin' me? I got a one-way ticket to the war comin' up, chum. You can't threaten me!"

DALEY went out, raving to himself. Rackety went to the showers whistling to himself, but Slappy sat and held his head with both hands. Then Slappy had to take an aspirin and go to meet Sam Gazino, in a very secret place.

Gazino said, "You know what is done, Slappy. It's the same old deal."

Slappy said, "Sure. If we win, we got to meet you again before we fight any other real contender."

Gazino said, "Us to get 20 per cent of the net of any fights in between."

Slappy said, "No."

Gazino sat back in his chair, his eyes glittering. He was a patient man, not a nice fellow. "Slappy, you are out of your class. You are old-fashioned. We get 20 per cent."

"You get nothing," said Slappy wearily. "After we slap Joe down, there won't be anything."

"Don't give me that guff," said Sam. "We get 20 per cent of anything you take, until you meet us again. That is the story and there ain't no other."

Slappy said, "The fight's made. The odds are about four to one that Joe will win. What are you beefing about? Are you scared of my boy?"

"Not scared. Not over-confident. Just careful," said Sam. "Twenty per—"

Slappy got up, suddenly sick of it all, of the bout which he did not consider a good one for his fighter, of this slick-haired Sam Gazino, of everything connected with the fight business. He said, "Go to hell. If we win, we'll fight you again. That's a gentleman's agreement. I don't go any further than that."

Gazino did not move. He said, "You're a hard man. The fight's made—nothin'

much for me to do. I'll bet you five grand to one that we win, Slappy."

"No!" said Slappy.

Gazino's eyes glazed, he stared at the ceiling.

He said, "I tell you what. There's no dough in this fight. I'll tell you what I will do. For five grand, payable now so that I can get it down at one to five, I will slip Joe a mickey. After all, Joe is in the navy, he could lose this time, then win the next time—what does it make? I need the dough, Slappy. I have got a bad case of the shorts."

He was talking to a blank door. Slappy had gone out and closed it quietly, leaving Gazino to himself. Slappy was quite ill at his tummy, not because he had heard propositions like this before, but at the calm snakelike crookedness of Sam Gazino.

It was four days later that he heard about Gazino's win at the track, and that the manager of the champion had a pocketful of chips to wager on the fight. He went at once to the telephone and called Joe Magan.

This was the week of the fight, which was on a Wednesday night.

RUMORS were flying thick and fast. Daley was doing nothing to prevent them—in fact the irate reporter was willing to have outside influences cover what he believed to be a bad decision upon his part. The odds upon the fight dropped to three, to two, to even money that Rackety would win, which on the face of it was ridiculous.

Money poured in, and the odds went back to three to one and remained there. The betting commissioners had enjoyed a field day and stood to win whoever triumphed in the ring. Rackety and Slappy were worn with the worriment of what might come.

On Wednesday they were in the ball park and the moon rode a cloud high above the mob of fans and down upon second base the ring was a tiny square of light where Beau Jack was leaping about, dealing his opponent a lesson in fireworks and unorthodoxy. Slappy and Rackety stood back and watched, then moved down to the dressing rooms.

There was a colored boy near a closed door. He came forward and said, "It is

okay, gannemen." He had bat ears and a grin and his name was Clarence.

Slappy said sharply, "Are you sure?"

"Yessir. Found it like you say. Thanks, Mister Tooker and Mister Toll. We aims to give you a good one!" The white teeth gleamed and the boy went inside the door.

Rackety said, "If he's right."

Slappy said, "If he's wrong."

Rackety took off his clothing and sat on the table and Slappy bandaged his hands. The bones were small in his fists, but he had taken good care of them. Slappy was very careful with the soft linen.

Outside a boy whistled, "Toll out!"

They waited, and a second named Jonas gathered the stuff and then they went out and down toward the ring. They clambered in through one side as Joe Magan entered across the splattered white canvas and the ovation was tremendous, but it was mostly for the champion, not for Rackety.

Everyone was there, and a lot of club fans, up in the cheap seats, began to tramp it out, shouting for Rackety, but they were lost in the great crowd. It was one of the biggest fight crowds of the war years and for a moment it dazed Rackety.

But Rackety was young. He listened to Slappy and then he went out and touched hands with Joe Magan while the referee droned his instructions. Magan did not meet his eye. Sam Gazino tried to interrupt the referee, got shut up, exclaimed loudly that he was there to protect his fighter and have his rights. But Joe went back to his corner and Rackety laughed and went with Slappy, and leaning on the ropes he listened some more.

Slappy ended, "It's your own fight, kid. You made it. I'll watch him for flaws. You do it your way."

Rackety said, "He's a brave one, remember? It'll take time."

There was a little knot of marines down front, some with wound stripes. They belted at him and Rackety took time to mitt them. Then the bell rang and he was around and coming out, hands high, grey eyes level. Maybe he had one little doubt then, facing Joe Magan, seeing that right cocked, remembering Conover. But if he had, it did not show, and his grin was confident and he went in, dragging his left foot a little, feinting, boxing.

If Conover had been quick, Rackety was a bit swifter. The lances of his straight lefts and dashing rights cut through and over, landing upon Joe Magan's tough and willing countenance. His feet carried him in, swept him away. For a pure moment of boxing he was perfection, landing at will, breaking the skin upon Magan's face.

Joe came on. He was ponderous, but in him was an animal quickness more deceptive than in a smoother man. His short right crashed through upon the ribs and Rackety sucked in his breath. He had never been hit that hard, not by anyone. He had never known a middle could hit that hard. His whole side felt paralyzed for a moment or two.

Joe Magan plodded on. A left hook cracked against Rackety's jaw and he saw stars. Then he saw Joe's head go down, saw the quick weave and feint of the left.

It was a rich temptation. Almost he threw down the right in an instinctive move. Only memory of Conover's smashed small bones, only the practise of the weeks and the piece of his dream it represented kept him from doing it.

He stepped away. He let Joe come in, reached out and tied up the champion. He allowed the stronger man to wrestle him, maul him. He broke loose with ten seconds of the round to go.

He stepped briskly, thumbing his nose with his right, then stabbing the left with amazing-speed. Joe ran himself into the left. As Magan increased the pressure, so did Rackety, calling on every ounce of speed and strength within him. There was a bitter exchange, then Joe fell back and the bell rang ending the round.

In the corner Slappy said, "You out-timed him. Con had him licked in four."

Rackety nodded. He bit on his mouth-piece and went out for the second. Joe was strong and patient, as with Con. He assimilated punches like a sponge. Rackety moved him around with a left, missed a right and caught a short one under the jaw which rattled his teeth. He held, looking straight down into Joe's corner. He saw Gazino's gleaming hair, the white, rodent teeth flashing. He spat deliberately, upon the canvas. He shoved away and boxed some more.

Joe was holding back that right. It was

a move he had made against Con. Rackety found himself coasting, winning each round by a shade on his speed. He found himself watching that right.

The second, the third, the fourth—all went by. Joe Magan was bleeding, seemingly slowing down. It became the fifth round and Slappy was leaning hard against the apron, sweating a little, his eyes hard upon Joe Magan.

Rackety was beating around the bush and the bush was standing there, taking it. The right lay coiled on Joe Magan's hairy chest. Rackety went in, landing sharp blows. He was so like Conover that ring-siders gasped, suspecting the end.

Rackety plunged on. Joe pivoted, waiting. Suddenly there was a commotion in Magan's corner. Gazino said something very loud, then turned pale. A colored boy grinned.

Joe threw the punch. It was not the right. It was a left hook, a swinging, short, club-like left hook. It traveled only about twelve inches and it slapped against Rackety's head like a cannon ball.

Rackety went across the ring and Daley started a line to his telegrapher, "History is repeating itself. In the fifth, when Conover got his lumps—"

Joe Magan was plodding forward, in that deceptive way of his, one foot, then the other. He was a lion seeking a wounded gazelle. He was ready to deliver the coup, to end the agony. He lashed out as Rackety came off the ropes in the rebound from the punch.

Rackety's feet spurned the canvas. Head still roaring from the hook, he was inside. He was close, his forehead upon Joe Magan's chest.

Two hands were plying into Joe's middle. A spitting fighting gazelle had refused to slink to its lair. Joe Magan, his bushy brows up into his haircut, was trying to haul off, trying to get in that punch.

A right stabbed Joe's head back. A left hooked into his jaw. He sagged, his knees buckled. An uppercut from nowhere banged off his whiskers.

Joe stumbled, as though over a stone. He went down on his knees. He stayed there, still expressionless, breathing hard, taking his nine count like the veteran he was. He got up, his courage blooming like a red flower, raising his hands, waiting.

Rackety went in, thumbing his nose, shooting the left, a deceptive, old-time maneuver. His right hand feinted, then shot in. He was flat-footed, not boxing at all, fighting Joe's own game. He was shooting punches and they were unexpectedly loaded with dynamite.

Joe took them. He was fine, taking them. He fought back with a left which spun Rackety around. He tried the deadly right. He was short with it.

Rackety came in over the missed punch. He struck downward, his eyes upon the mark. He landed where he wanted, at the base of the jaw. He saw Joe rock.

He went back, measuring. Joe's hands were up. Rackety feinted him, then put the right to the chin, a free swinging blow, with all he had.

He went to his corner and paused there, knowing he had shot it all. He was limp with the strength he had put out, with the blows he had absorbed. He saw Joe wriggle, saw him start to arise.

The referee said "eight—nine—"

Joe got to his knees, made an awful effort. His neck swelled, his flat face broadened with the strain. He was all courage, he was a brave man. He fell forward and his nose crunched into the canvas.

"Ten—and Out!"

Rackety was going to the fallen man. Slappy was in the ring and the referee was helping. There was no sign of Sam Gazino. After a moment the colored boy came in and said mournfully, "I never thought it would go like this, Mister Slappy."

THEY helped Clarence carry Joe to his corner. Daley was furiously rewriting his story. The marines were bellowing at the moon, roaring pride and defiance.

Rackety got out of it somehow. In the dressing room Daley said, "I take it all back. You had something in there, Rackety. But what? And what happened to Gazino?"

Slappy said, "Gazino bet on Rackety and was going to slip Joe a mickey. But he had propositioned me first and I called Joe, who got Clarence, his colored boy, to watch Gazino and steal the mickey. Some people got wise to Gazino betting on Rackety and

it almost spilled the works. But Clarence told his story to the cops and Gazino got pinched. Right after the fight."

Daley said, "But how did Rackety beat Joe Magan?"

The door opened. Joe Magan walked in, hand outstretched. He said, "Yeah. How about it, champ?"

Rackety took Joe's hand and shook it hard. He said, "I used to be a hitter."

"When?" demanded Slappy. "I never knew you—"

"When I was fifteen and a feather," said Rackety stubbornly. "Then I took to boxing. But I was always a natural sharp-shooter."

"That's no answer," said Daley curiously.

"No," admitted Rackety. "But I saw that Joe could lick a boxer by taking it, giving them his head to break their hands on. So I didn't do any of those things when the chips were down." He looked helplessly around. "Don't you see?"

For a while no one spoke. Then Joe Magan said heavily, "None of them was ever fighters, champ. Maybe they'll never see. But I do." He faced the others. He said defiantly, "This kid don't fight with hands and feet. You see? He fights from the neck up."

Daley said, "You mean he's a genius?"

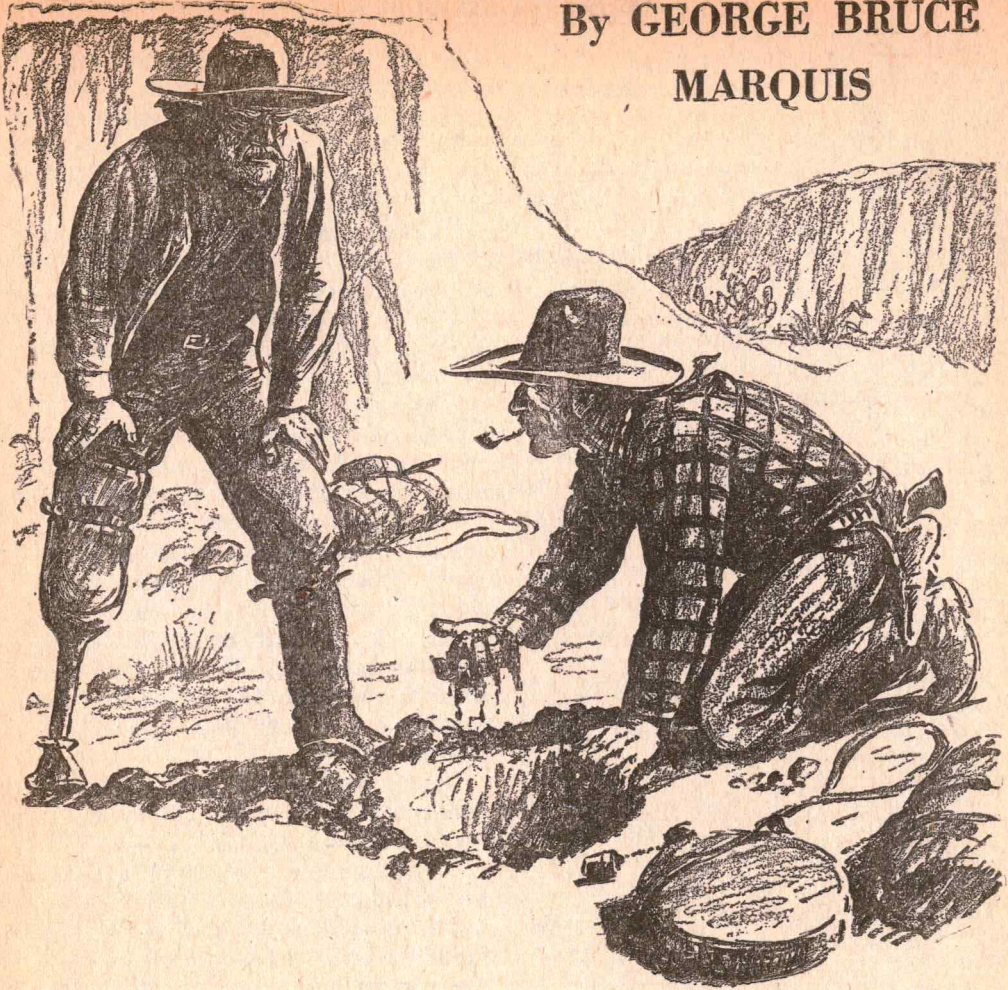
"Phooey," said Joe Magan. "He's a champion, you dope!" He said, "C'mon, kid. Get dressed and let's go out and fight it over again. I got to know about the fifth. I don't remember the fifth—" He laughed deep in his throat.

"From the neck up," said Slappy softly. "Out of the mouths of babes and pugilists!"

He looked at Daley. The newspaper man looked at Slappy. The door closed on the two gladiators and their voices blended happily, going away from the dressing rooms.

There was nothing more to say. They had been in the presence of greatness, in defeat, in victory. Possibly they alone of all the great crowd of witnesses had that glimpse behind the scenes. They were not quite sure that they understood. "From the neck up," repeated Daley, and went to write the best story his column ever ran.

By **GEORGE BRUCE**
MARQUIS



IN THE DEVIL'S WIGWAM

"PEGLEG," Bat Jennison nodded comfortably, "so fur she checks correct accordin' to the old man's tellin'. Undoubted thar stands the Devil's Wigwam."

Pegleg Wimberley made no immediate reply. Rather he ran an appraising eye over the freak of nature that had summoned Jennison's nod. A pillar of rock, wind carved, it towered starkly a good fifty feet, a mimic in stone of an Indian tepee even to

the smoke vent. That was aped cunningly by a slab of bluish rock set edgewise in the tepee's top. Reasonably circular, the skirts of the tepee were whitened rock. It was complete even to an irregular wedge-shaped opening at the bottom as if the door flaps had been hooked back carelessly by an untidy hand. The cramped floor space was carpeted with sand, patterned and wimpled by the capricious desert winds.

"It's a sure enough wigwam," Wimberley

*Bat Jennison and Pegleg Found Themselves Hard Put to It
to Carry Out Their Pledge to a Dead Man*

conceded finally, "but why for 'the Devil's? The old man didn't name it so, not anyway in my hearing."

"The name sticks out as glib as old man Peddog's nose," Jennison chuckled. "Hell can't be more'n a rod down and I figger when the fuel gits low, old Scratch hasta hike some place to git warm. Natural he romps up here. It's his country home, so to speak."

"Reckon so," and Wimberley spat feebly. "This sand is sure hot as the fiery pit."

"Yep," Jennison amplified the thought feelingly. "You and me Pegleg are sure standin' right now onto the stove lids of Perdition." Then he shifted, "I don't see no sign of a mine, but of course he didn't git time to tell us much. Anyway thar's the spring, and the meadow and the wigwam jest as he said. Let's unsaddle our hosses and git supper. In the morning we'll go prospectin'."

Bat Jennison and Pegleg Wimberley were seasoned products of a west that sometimes smiled, more often scowled. Wimberley, older by twenty years, was still a good man to have around when trouble boomed up over the horizon. Despite his peg. For his right leg was missing from the knee down, lost in his youth in a raging blizzard.

The two had done a bit of prospecting, but as desert rats this was a unique venture. It had come about by sheer accident. Three days before, back in the Chipmunk Mountains they had stumbled upon the camp of an old prospector who had spent long years in ceaseless endeavor to tap the gold stream that in imagination he saw flowing beneath the desert sands. And had found it, his matchless samples proved it beyond cavil. Yet its hard-won riches were not for him. Not yet dead when Jennison and Wimberley chanced upon his camp, yet dying inexorably with dissolution very near. They cared for him without a thought of reward, indeed they paid scant heed to his babblings until he showed them the gold. It made no difference.

They had not the slightest intention to dare the desert. But the indomitable old man persisted, finally wooing from them a reluctant promise to follow up his find and that now.

"I reckon," Jennison admitted regretfully when the worn body had been insured sanc-

tuary from prowling animals, "that we're hogtied by that foolish promise."

"I consider it foolish," Wimberley agreed, "but I consider also we're bound to keep it. But we're damned low on grub, and there ain't nothing here."

"A fact," Jennison echoed. "All he's got we can use is these two five-gallon water kaigs. We'll swing 'em across our pack mare. Well yes, thar's this big canteen. Holds a gallon I reckon. Guess we'd best git ready to rack out."

THE old prospector had calculated that they could reach his strike in two days and on this the second day they had arrived. First, if cursory inspection completed, they unsaddled their horses, watered them judiciously, then turned them loose to graze at will.

Supper over, each carried his lozenge of blankets to the crest of a flat sand dune and made his bed—by the simple expedient of unrolling it. Their boots would serve as odorous pillows.

"She's perfection," Jennison gruntingly inventoried their work. "Why do people sleep in beds, I wonder?"

Lighting their pipes, they sprawled on their blankets to talk. A full moon was riding the blue-black sky, and under its mellow light the harsh unfriendliness of the desert was wonderfully muted. Small wonder that the two men spanned their sea of sands with the arch of golden dreams.

It was cold dawn when Jennison awoke, stretched hugely, then shucking out of his blankets like a limp cocoon, stood erect. The little valley was in view, barring its extreme upper end, but he saw nothing of their three horses. No doubt they were there in that tiny obscured corner, but he wished his faith confirmed by his eyes. Waking Pegleg, they went down to the spring and while Wimberley started breakfast, Jennison walked on up the valley. The flat was scarcely more than fifty yards wide, possibly ten times as long. The extreme northern end twisted sharply behind a low shoulder of disintegrating rock and here in this pocket Jennison found the animals. Dead! No second glance was needed to inform him of that appalling fact. Rattlesnakes was his first oath-garnished diagnosis. But that blistering thought held only for a moment. For he had noted the tiny pool of

water cuddled by the splayed base of the shoulder of rock. And he knew the pool for what it was, a seepage of arsenic impregnated water. Jennison looked long and sadly at their three faithful companions.

"And your end ain't no diffrent from a man's!" he moralized. "Nature don't play no favorites. On the contrary. Comes the time man or beast gits into the road of nature and she lams him outen pity or regrets."

He turned back slowly toward their camp. And he was thinking deeply as he faced the appalling situation. For it was appalling. There was no other word for it. To be set down afoot in the heart of a desert and Pegleg a cripple was portentous food for thought. Travelling over smooth ground even was a toilsome process for the old man. In this inferno of burning sand all but impossible. Pyramided above these formidable obstacles was their shortage of food and their unfamiliarity with the desert. Yes, they stood very near to the crossroads of despair.

Pegleg looked up from his campfire and read disaster in Jennison's sober face.

"Horses?" he queried anxiously.

"Dead," Jennison answered. "Tanked up on pisen water. Thar's a little pool up at the fur end of this valley. Probably the old timer didn't know it. Likely broke out since he left. Anyway it 'pears to be fresh."

Now he looked with pity at his comrade's blanched and twitching face. Wimberley was at grips with the terrifying realization of his helplessness. Not for a moment must it remain regnant in his thinking.

"Lefty Steffins—" Jennison grinned fraudfully, "you'll remember I've tootled a lot about him—usta say when the sleddin' got particular rough, 'Boys we've skated more'n seldom onto mighty thin ice and lived to hang up our skates.' Well that's the gospel truth about me and you. Two tough old pelicans like us ain't goin' to be grubbed by no buzzards. Hell, we could *roll* outen this little patch of sand if we had to do so."

His flaunted contempt for desert perils had a notable and instantly steadying effect on his maimed comrade.

"Damned if we couldn't, Bat," Wimberley chortled loudly, "you bet it 'ill take more than a yard or two of sand to hold us down."

Of primary importance was some method of broadening the tread of Wimberley's peg. And Jennison chuckled forth the perfect answer. An empty peach can, that was it! With the awl blade of his jackknife he bored a hole in the end of the wooden leg, nailed the can in place, bottom down, and crimped the upper end tight about the peg.

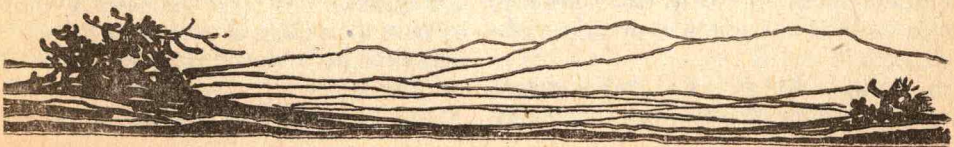
"Lucky we always carry a few extrty horse-shoe mails," said Jennison admiring his cobbling. "That 'ill see you through, Pegleg."

"Yep," Wimberley made qualified approval, "less the old peg splits or something. Sure wish it was that old oak stick that got burned up at Sodom. Not a seam in it. But this fir peg ain't too good. Them weather cracks don't look encouraging 'specially if we've got to drive it full of nails."

"She'll hold, Pegleg," Jennison assured him. "Don't you fret about that. And now," he went on briskly, "cook up what grub we've got whilst I store our dunnage away. Reckon that wigwam 'ill be the proper spot."

So while Pegleg cooked a few thin flap-jacks and fried their skimpy stock of rancid bacon, Jennison carried their saddles, blankets, rifles and meager mining equipment over to the stone tepee. The space within was ample and dry. And then the goddess Fortuna unveiled a golden smile. Jennison for no conscious reason chose to sink the pick into that carpet of sand instead of standing it sedately against the wall. Six inches down it struck something, not hard like granite, yet at that something with body to it. Idly curious, Jennison bent down, scraped away the sand, looked carelessly, then sharply, then avidly. His yell brought his partner on a shuffling gallop.

What Jennison by a whimsy of chance had uncovered, was a ledge of whitish cement rock, crammed with nodules of pure gold, as thickly seeded as raisins in a Christmas pudding! Here in very deed was the old prospector's mine. For a few delirium saturated forgetful moments they trod the



ultimate cloud fields of glory. And then their ecstasy was muted. Harsh realism had obtruded its stern and ugly visage. Wimberley's beaming eye had lighted upon his tin-shod wooden peg.

"Bat," he shook his head wretchedly, "what's the use?"

"Right," and Jennison cut squarely across his partner's coming ode to defeat. "Thar ain't no use fur us to tarry. We've struck it rich beyond the dreams even of Creosote, the Egyptun king or mebby he was a Dago, I'm kinda limber onto that. But and anyway thar it is, and all ourn. We'll tuck away a few nuggets to keep us in mind how rich we are and then we'll *Klatawab*. Soon as we git rested up we'll git ourselves a new outfit and flit back here for some *real* diggin'. Hell though, it ain't achul mining. We can pick these lumps of gold out with our fingers and not even git a blood blister. Here, help me bed it over with sand and then we'll store the rest of our plunder away. He's a smart devil. Sure fixed us up a dandy bank."

So, purposefully, Jennison rattled on, till haunting fear loosened its icy clutch upon his companion's heart.

"He sure did, Bat," Wimberley cackled. "All I've got to say is, he's a good enough devil for me. What are you aiming to do with that water keg? It'll weigh fifty pounds full. All right for a pack mare, but you cain't tote it."

"I figger it at say half full." Jennison told him. "We don't need to hurry ourselves if we've got plenty of water." Artful words! Certain it was that they could not hurry, and the water keg furnished an iron-clad alibi for lack of speed. And now they arranged their burdens. Wimberley carried their meager food supply and their half-gallon canteen. Around his waist was strapped his pistol. Jennison had the gallon canteen, his pistols and their mackinaws, both necessary he asserted stoutly, as shoulder padding against the weight of the water keg. They would follow the old prospector's advice to strike north, rather than return the way they had come. It would be shorter he had said and not so steep. They indulged in more than mild regrets that they had shown so little curiosity as to waterholes on this northern route.

Jennison adjusted his *impedimenta*, glanced toward the graveyard of their faith-

ful animals and jerked out a bitter curse. Vultures those ubiquitous scavengers, had already arrived. Then he glanced at Wimberley to say buoyantly, "Pegleg, if you're set let's mosey."

Wimberley contented himself with an indomitable and breath-saving grunt, "Let's."

FOR half a mile the going was simple, travelling as they did a flat bottomed wash paralleling the one that held their mine. Here, however, they faced a hazard of sharply sloping sand. Jennison turned to his comrade.

"Set down a minute," he suggested, "whilst I scale them heights and take a look-see."

There was more to it than mere desire for exploration. Without ostentation Jennison could scale the barrier, set down his own burdens and after a superficial scanning of monotonous scenery return to aid his comrade climb the steep slope. It was a kindly subterfuge practiced in a variety of forms a dozen times in the course of that first trying day. The fact that it did not deceive Wimberley detracted nothing from its merit.

To paint a complete picture, to etch in



every painful line, to record each panting breath, to detail every stumbling step, to memorialize the withering heat, to set down in cold print the agonizing thirst, is not the wish of this chronicler. It is enough to draw in outline, that imagination may round in the completed tale. Enough then to say that within the course of some hours their feverish thirst had marvelously reduced the weight of the water keg. At long last something more than occasional halts became impera-

tive, and a wind sculptured mass of clay and rock beckoned them to its torrid sanctuary.

"It's hot, Bat," Wimberley wheezed dolorously, as he crept into the minute shade.

"Yes," Jennison nodded, "she's hotter than the seven brass hinges of hell. Wish we dared to snake our boots off, but we'd probable never git 'em on again. Anyway, mebbly I can root down to cool sand. This ain't so worse, Pegleg. Try this burrow and see how it fits you. I'll tunnel me another. Whilst we're restin' let's try fur a nap."

THREE hours later Jennison awoke. Wimberley still slumbered riotously on and leaving him to his gurgling diversions, Jennison scrambled out of his nest. One corner of the rock offered easy footing and presently he stood on its flat top. Out of red-rimmed inflamed eyes he peered northward. Immediately before him stretched a flat plain shimmering white with borax. This for what he guessed was a half dozen miles, then the treacherous sand resumed its reign. Far away he glimpsed a mountain peak or knob of cloud, phantom or reality, he did not know. But they could cross this borax plain at night he concluded, doubly so as there was a moon at the full. Armored with this decision he scrambled down just as Wimberley awoke.

Flapjacks dry and insipid reinforced scrimpily with bacon furnished a meager meal for the ravenously hungry men. The warm fetid rinsings drained from the keg was meager answer to a clamoring thirst. Yet they did not tap their reserve supply, the two canteens. Jennison stowed the empty keg in the undercut lee of the pillar of rock, then they slogged away.

It would be a joy indeed to depict their trek that night as glamorous stroll under a burnished moon. But truth demands that proper accounting be made of biting dust swirled up at every labored step, of thirst, of hunger, of bitter weariness when leaden feet stumbled over obstructions hardly more palpable than shadows. Daybreak brought them to the edge of the borax plain and to a high banked dry wash that barred their way. Jennison peered down wearily into the sandy bottom. That smooth surface seemed discolored. It might be a shadow, a film of mineral pigment, but, it might mask a water seepage!

Yet he steadied his voice when he spoke.

"Let's climb down, Pegleg," he suggested casually. "That sand looks like it was made to bed down on. Here, lemme give you a hand. Fine. Well here we are right-side up an a-grinnin'. Set down."

But now Wimberley had noted the brownish smear.

"Bat," he croaked excitedly, "that looks like—"

"Don't say it, Pegleg," Jennison advised sensibly. "Let's side trail any joy helps till we know."

Down on his knees now Jennison ran an exploratory hand over the smooth surface. Cool he found it, yet his mind scarcely dared to register the fact that it was damp. In tentative way his fingers spaded in to the knuckles, then lingered a long moment. Then he was digging, the increasingly damp sand cascading wildly. A foot down and he could ball the sand into a cohesive lump. Two feet down a thin emulsion of sand and near water trickled out of his clenched fist. Pegleg Wimberley bent above the hot trail panting with expectancy. And then Jennison's clawing fingers clutched dry sand!

A long silence followed. Still without a word Jennison moved down gulch a few feet and renewed his hand drilling. Defeat even more speedy than the first met him. Up the gully next, to rise convinced. An infrequent summer shower had left its passing trace and that was all.

"She's probable jest a fooler dropped by a jokin' thunder head," he diagnosed. "Anyway," he continued, "she's cool to rest onto. Also we've got one full canteen left, which 'ill be plenty, on account it cain't be fur now. Let's eat."

They ate the remaining shreds of super dried flapjacks and bacon and jested as to the meaty possibilities of a somnambulent lizard. Then Jennison persuaded his worn companion to stretch out in the sand while he looked about. The sky was now obscured by sand stirred to still life by the lightest of breezes. So when he had climbed to a towering sand dune and turned his face northward he found that he could not have seen Mount Hood even if it had been set down in the sand a thousand rods away. It might be fifty miles to the break in the desert, it might not be a half dozen. Below him lay the dry wash and now he looked upstream if such liberty of expression is permissible under

the common meaning of words. Here he noted another discoloration in its bed darker and more pronounced than the spot that had marked his recent futile efforts. He decided that he would again prospect for liquid gold.

It was a quest that met quickly with qualified success. The sides of the shallow hole oozed inward to fill the excavation about as rapidly as he dug it.

"I names you sandwater," he christened the dubious fluid aloud. "And I sure wish I had a fistful of moss."

He knew the Indian trick of bedding the end of a tube in a moss filter, but he might as well look for a water lily as for moss in this wilderness of sand. Rocking there on his knees before his mud pool, his mind ranged on from the unobtainable moss to tubes. The ghosts of everything hollow from reeds to tin whistles raced through his mind, a wild ungovernable horde. Then desperation whispered the magic word. Wimberley smoked a corn cob pipe fitted with a cane stem. Moss? Hell, he had far better! In his mackinaw pocket was a handful of wool garnered from a rip in their pack saddle, and thrust into his pocket in a thrifty and unthinking moment. Madly he galloped back to his companion, eager to set up his filtering plant.

It worked. And that muddy gruel flavored with plug cut tobacco incensed with soiled wool and tintured with nicotine seemed to these desert-hobbled men authentic nectar of the gods no less. By even turns they strained and gulped until nausea threatened. Now they worked their comfortable bodies into the sand and fatigue betrayed them to blissful sleep. Yet only a few feet from their miracle water. A dozen yards would have been too distant.

TOWARD mid-afternoon they awoke less water logged and greatly refreshed. Deciding to push on, they first filled their empty canteen by methods heroic yet highly effective. A pale yellow disk that was the sun in its swaddling clothes of dust, was their only guidepost. Yet with its fury muted and with plenty of water their spirits were high as they trudged away. It was an evanescent phase doomed to speedy extinction.

At heavy dusk, they halted. They had come again upon a borax plain whose surface seemed fairly smooth but the extent of

which was anybody's guess. And without a compass or even the guidance of a moon now fully obscured, to advance was to take a useless hazard. The air might clear later for the light breeze had finally whispered itself to sleep. Then they would march. Meanwhile they would don their makinaws and snuggle down to sleep.

"I figger," Jennison said cheerfully, "that tomorrow ends it."

"I figger the same," said Wimberley. "You ain't the only one to harbor hunches."

Something in his tone brought Jennison up straight in his sand burrow. "What do you mean, Pegleg," he queried anxiously, "by 'hunch?'" No hunch is worth a damn. We've mebbly drove too fast a pace. We'll slow up. Hell, we don't hafta hurry frum now on." His laugh was high grade counterfeit, warranted to deceive the uninitiated. But Wimberley was of the elect.

"You believe in hunches, Bat," he answered by the book. "It's too late to try to hoot 'em down now. All I know from my hunch is that tomorrow spells danger, in big letters too."

"She cain't spell out nothin' me and you cain't lick, Pegleg," Jennison asserted buoyantly. "So let's try the effigy of sleep. It's like to slick up purty soon, so as we can traipse on by moonlight. I'll call you then."



But it was Wimberley—not Jennison—who did the summoning. At three o'clock he nudged Jennison awake.

"Clear enough for us to travel, Bat," he stated. Then he appended as an alibi for sleeplessness, "The cold waked me up."

"I'm cold also!" Jennison falsified in true comradely fashion. "Sure a good thing you

waked up. I'm such a damned sleepy head I'd roosted here till I froze stiff. Here, let me give you a hand up and we'll ramble."

Why his companion had been awake at this unseasonable hour was sunlight clear to Bat Jennison. The yeast of worry, that troubling hunch, that was it. So he chattered, there is no other word for it, as they trudged along on aching and swollen feet, to ease the terror in his comrade's mind. Even limping fabrication contributed its feeble tale. He halted suddenly, canted his head, then cupped a well sanded hand behind his unlaundered ear for mythical amplifier.

"Hark!" he said dramatically. "I heerd a coyote yippin'! That means we're at the edge of the desert mebbby."

"I don't hear it," and Wimberley shook his head. "Besides coyotes do their yipping evenings as an almost solid rule. Also when the moon's shining bright, which it sure ain't now. I'd like to set down a minute."

It was daylight, screened doubtfully through an emulsion of sand and air when they cleared the borax flat. New terrain greeted them here; rocky, yet not particularly difficult. It was much as if they were walking an ancient stream floor, ground down to primitive bedrock. The simile was a just one even to pot holes not large but too deep. Wimberley's peg plunged into one as he stepped, the leverage of his advance completed the tragedy. Snapped off squarely in the middle, its splintering-rending fracture had in it the wailing whimper of a lost soul.

Jennison a few steps in advance pivoted around swiftly at the sound. Instantly he realized that the accident was indeed catastrophic, and for a clipped second he paused, too numbed for words or action. Then his indomitable spirit shook the reins over his laggard will. No time for faltering now, nor fumbling. Instead of haste, leisureliness, placidity not emotion, words few if any. And he all but overplayed. Came within touching distance of committing an irrevocable error. Another infinitesimal moment of delay and he would have been alone in the desert with a dead comrade. He had just time to pounce, and with gentle force retrieve the pistol from Wimberley's closing fingers. As Jennison stood up and mechanically dropped the pistol into his side pocket Wimberley spoke to him.

"You done wrong, Bat." He set it out

calmly and without heat. "Dying don't make any difference to me, whether now or ten years. *But* I've got the right to pick my way out. My way woulda been swift, for I know where to hold a gun. The way you've picked for me I'll die slow, choking for water. Bat, you ain't got the right to choose my way for me. Hand me back my pistol and turn your back. It'll be for your good as well as mine. For I know you'll stick by me till you cain't make it out either. There's no sense in that. You've got a lot of things to do yet. My time's run out, that's all. Gimme my pistol, Bat."

Jennison was shaken to the depths of his loyal soul. Against the reasoned and dispassionate argument of his intrepid comrade he had no handy rebuttal. The seeming utter futility of escape, the apparent certainty of a loathsome, lingering death, even Wimberley's cogent insistence that he had the right to choose the method and time of his own exit, found Jennison's mind seined clear of even plausible demurrer. Iron-clad fatalist himself, he could easily have been impaled on the sheep horns of *that* dilemma. Yet Wimberley had not averted to it, though closely skirting its sheer edge. And now the dark and agonizing moment was transmuted into radiance and joy. Jennison had found the one impregnable answer, the one possible solution, the one way of escape.

"Pegleg," he asked sunnily, "did you ever run in a three-legged race?"

The question apparently so irrelevant measured in harsh present realities, caught Wimberley with his guard down. So completely so that his mind responded in unthinking way as he thumbed back over dim memory pages laden with half forgotten yet precious lore. And found and turned down the exact page:

"In Chillicothe, Ohio," he rehearsed the ancient triumph pridefully, "in—lemme see—1847. Fourth of July it was and me and my pard won."

Then the light faded in his eyes. They had fallen on that shattered, useless peg. He looked at Jennison reproachfully.

"Bat," he said slowly, "that's an awful pore joke for a time like this."

"It ain't no joke," Jennison corrected firmly. "That's jest what me and you are goin' to do only 'stead of runnin' we're *walkin'* a three-legged race."

"Lookit, Pegleg," he rattled on, "me and you are the same height, weight too fur that matter, and whilst we never measured I betcha our laigs are the same length. Don't you see it now? Sure you do. Well, we'll strap your *right* laig stump to my *left* laig, and thar we've got it. Your *left* laig and my *right* laig 'ill be our own but the middle 'ill be partnership laigage. After we git geared together at our middles we'll hafta practice some, but hell, in no time we'll be movin' faster a damned sight too than formerly."

"By God, Bat," he okayed fervently, "it *will* work."

AND it did. Through an apprenticeship buttressed on trial and error pedal co-ordination emerged. This established as a workable formula, Jennison shouldered the two empty canteens, added the fork end of Wimberley's peg, this for the straps and padding, without a word passed Wimberley's pistol back into the old man's hands and they were ready to march. Jennison inventoried the gruel-like air with jaundiced and disparaging eye.

"Should the Columbia River be tootling along out thar," he stated, "we'd be swimmin' therein before we'd even see it. Let's hit the trail. One, two, one, two. We've got the swing, Pegleg."

Their roadway presently was along the bottom of a dry wash, its ten-foot banks edged with a fretwork of greasewood, chaparral, sagebrush and an occasional clump of rye grass. Because they guessed that it led in the right direction they followed its sometime sinuosities without complaining, this for the better part of an hour. Very tired from the strain incident to the unnatural "hook-up," they had just decided to rest, when fatigue and discomfort fled into thin air. Two, four, six birds, flushed from their covert atop the bank, at their left, took wing and zoomed away, displaying in their flight a tattling wedge of white tail feathers.

"Prairie chickens." So exploded the doubled barreled recognition of a famous Western game bird. And to them it told a wonder tale. Edge of the desert. Nothing less.

"We've made it, Pegleg," Jennison exulted. "Them blessed prairie chickens don't

fool around no desert."

"We have," Wimberley nodded solemnly. Then he added wistfully, "Bat, I could relish some grub. Mebby if we was unhooked—"

Jennison agreed with plenty of enthusiasm. "Also you can treat yourself to a little rest whilst I rustle up that said grub."

Some of the thongs had snarled into snug little knots, but Jennison's agile fingers soon unscrambled them.

Wimberley sighed down into his sand cushion, and with his aching back braced caressingly by the soft gully wall watched Jennison's foraging tactics with eager eyes. And now as a by-product of his beneficent moment of leisure he noted something of as yet unexplored significance. Beyond the voyaging hunter, the sky was wonderously clear. Then his eyes dropped again to Jennison for he was very very hungry.

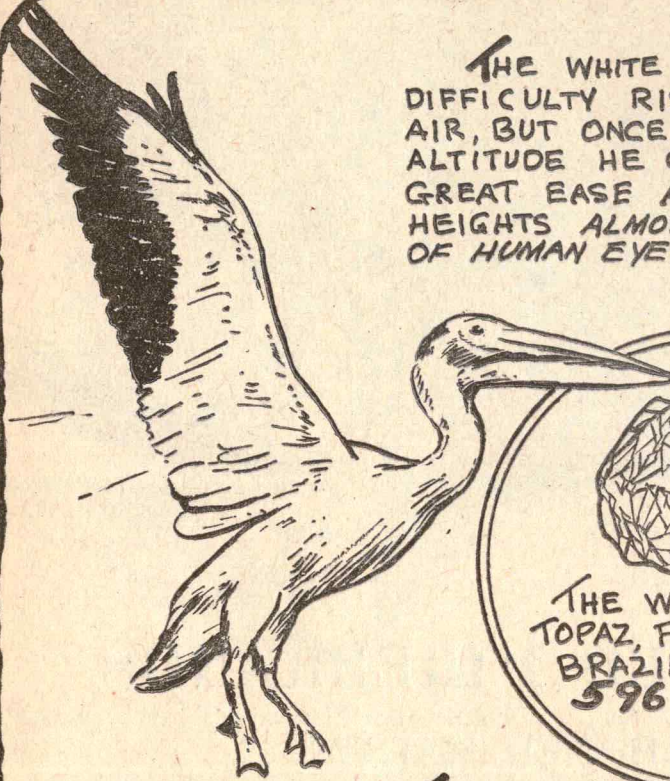
Jennison had padded swiftly down the dry wash for fifty yards or so seeking an easy way to scale the ten-foot wall. Here he found one made to order, a narrow land slip in the side wall affording a steep yet passable ramp up to the top of the dry wash itself. Now Jennison drew a Colt's forty-five, cocked it with supple thumb, then holding it at an instant ready crept up the sandy causeway. Keeping mimic step with his comrade's movements, Wimberley too crouched while his finger was arched alertly about a phantom trigger. They both fired, reality and myth, then Jennison scurried up over the top, straightened up, took two hesitant steps, then whirled about, whooping:

"Trees, Pegleg, miles of 'em. Hallelulah! And thar's millions of sage hens, more or less. Anyway I jest shot one big as a young turkey."

Ten minutes later the two men stood atop the dry wash and gazed northward with shining eyes. Not far away, a scant half mile at the farthest an impressive phalynx of trees cut their line of march, their bases flanked with bushes, these in turn coyly wriggling their brown toes in the verge of a thick grass carpet of greenest green. Behind them the desert, its horrors already a dimming memory. Yet not forgotten. For back there waiting for their certain return guarded by the treacherous sands lay their mine housed cunningly within the bleak walls of the Devil's Wigwam.

CURIOUSITIES BY Weill

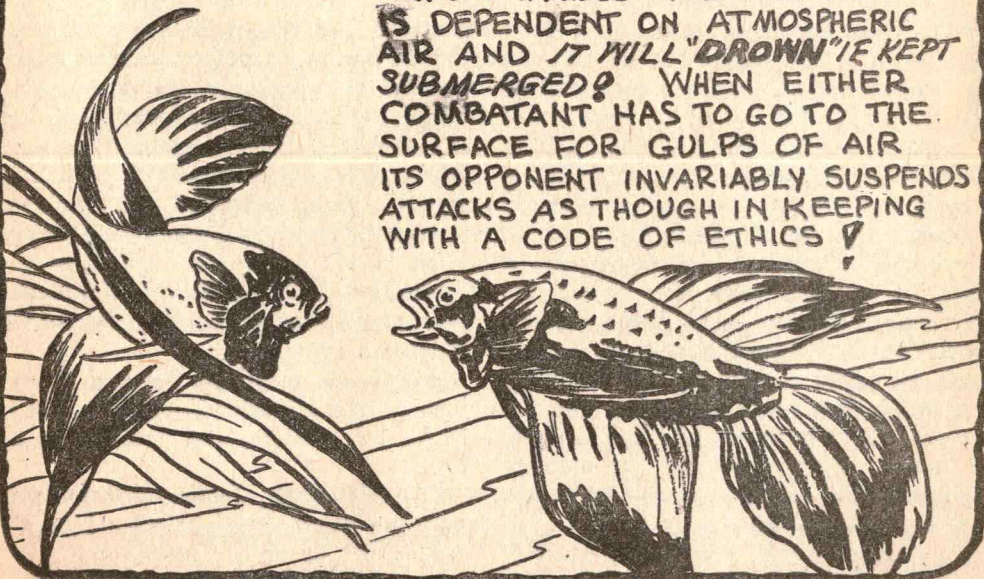
THE WHITE PELICAN HAS DIFFICULTY RISING INTO THE AIR, BUT ONCE HE GAINS ALTITUDE HE CAN SAIL WITH GREAT EASE AND DIGNITY TO HEIGHTS ALMOST BEYOND REACH OF HUMAN EYES

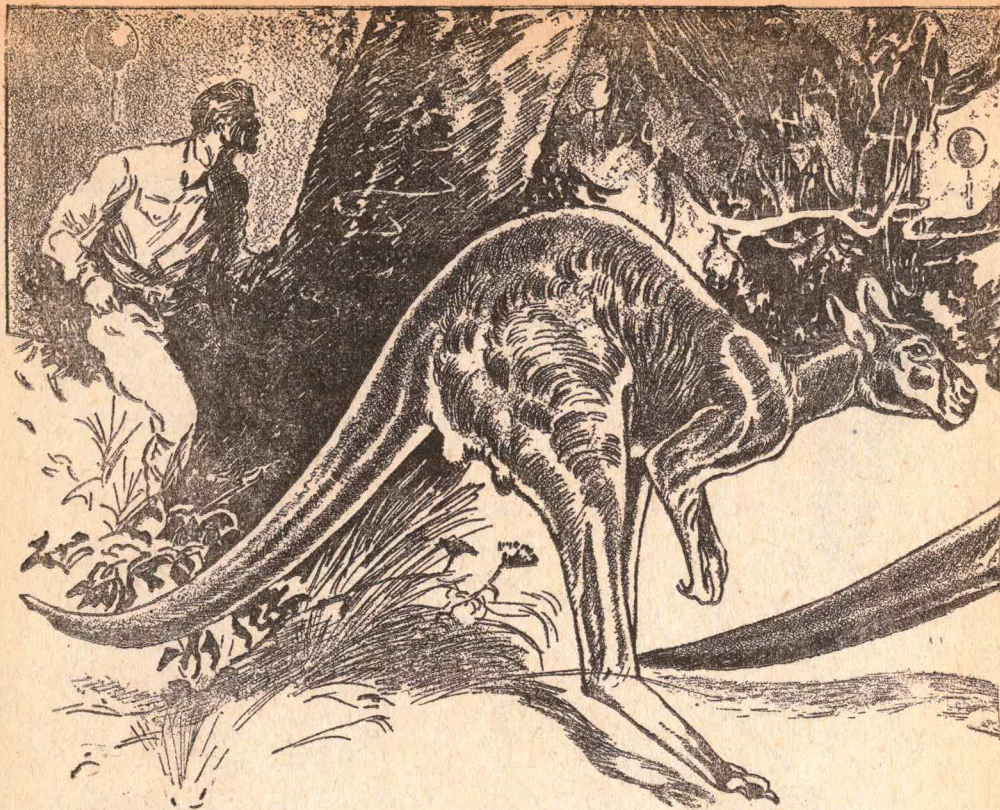


THE WORLD'S LARGEST TOPAZ, FOUND IN BRAZIL WEIGHS 596 POUNDS



THE SIAMESE FIGHTING FISH IS DEPENDENT ON ATMOSPHERIC AIR AND IT WILL "DROWN" IF KEPT SUBMERGED. WHEN EITHER COMBATANT HAS TO GO TO THE SURFACE FOR GULPS OF AIR ITS OPPONENT INVARIABLY SUSPENDS ATTACKS AS THOUGH IN KEEPING WITH A CODE OF ETHICS





WINGED FIREBRANDS

By NEIL MARTIN

Author of "The Bunyip of Opal Wells," etc.

IF Frisco Ed McKinney hadn't been watching the topper "walk" up the smooth-barked trunk of the towering karri with the aid of climbing irons and rope body sling, he might have missed seeing the incendiary bomb drifting lazily beneath its tiny balloon, like a hovering gull against the afternoon sun.

The object floated so high that he saw it merely as a vague, gray blur against the clear blue of the southwest Australian sky. Because staring toward the sun made his eyes water, he failed to identify it. Blinking, he turned back to watch the topper, who was now stationary a hundred and fifty feet above the ground, swinging his axe with mechanical precision as he cut away the top of the huge karri to fashion a spar tree.

The wooded valley, deep in the heart of the Stirling Range, was filled with dust and

sunlight, and rang with the thud of axes, the rhythmic whine of crosscut saws and occasional warning cries of "timber-r!" preceding the crash of some forest giant. Creaking timber wagons, drawn by giant New South Wales horses, were moving in a long, slow line along the rutted, dusty valley road toward the mill in Dangorup, laden with huge "cuts" to be sawn into boards and scantling to build quarters for the American troops now pouring into Australia in a steady stream.

McKinney withdrew his eyes from the busy scene. He eased the strap of his swag to his left shoulder and prepared to move on.

He felt uneasy, fearing that some well-meaning foreman might offer him a job. And a job of timber cutting was the last thing in the world he wanted, for the prob-

The others joined him, some shoveling frenziedly to cut a guard around the spot, to prevent the fire from spreading, others heaping earth upon the sputtering fire bomb until, finally, it was buried beneath a mound of sandy loam, leaving only a taint of phosphorus smoke in the air.

"Phew!" McKinney rested on his shovel and blew out a breath of relief. "That was a close call, if anyone should ask you."

"It was, an' all, matey," a foreman assured him. "Lucky you saw it in time." He looked past McKinney and greeted surlily, "What cheer, Constable?"

McKinney turned and looked incuriously at the state police trooper sitting his horse on the edge of the crowd.

"Just got here," the policeman said. "What's up?"

The foreman nodded toward the heap of raw earth. "One o' them incendiary bombs. We caught it barely in time." He indicated McKinney with a careless thumb and added, "This bloke saw it first. Called it a zepelinite, 'e did."

"He did, eh?" The trooper's cold, gray eyes turned suspiciously toward McKinney. "And how did you know it was a zepelinite, cocky?"

"Saw it floating 'way up yonder in the sky," McKinney explained. "That's the way those things work, isn't it?"

THE trooper made no comment; instead, he kept his eyes fixed on McKinney's face in a cold, unwinking stare. McKinney felt mildly resentful of this ancient police trick; this attempt to make him nervous by staring him out of countenance. Somehow, he felt an instinctive dislike for this particular trooper.

The man's spotless khaki uniform, his rakish hat, tilted at the correct police angle, the brilliant luster of his Sam Browne belt and riding boots were, McKinney felt, an affront to a hard-working intelligence officer like himself.

"Well, shamus," he drawled, "think you'll know me next time you see me?"

The policeman continued to stare at the tall, wide-shouldered figure in travel-stained moleskins, dusty "wide-awake" hat and heavy work shoes, a typical "swagie," a wayfarer of the outback, whose hard blue eyes, deeply set under heavy black brows, were

regarding him with an expression of amused tolerance, as a hardboiled first sergeant might regard an ambitious rookie.

"I might," the trooper said at last, adding, "Yank, aren't you?"

"Canadian," McKinney lied, hating the necessity. "What's it to you, anyway?"

The trooper shrugged. "I like to know who's who in my district." He tightened his bridle rein and looked at the foreman. "You're sure it's all out?"

"It's black out," the foreman assured him.

The policeman started his horse, reined in again and looked hard at McKinney. "Where did you say you worked last?"

"I didn't say," McKinney drawled. "But if you're itching to know, it was in Adelaide."

"Yes? At what?"

"Test pilot in a wheelbarrow factory," McKinney declared soberly.

A laugh rippled over the crowd. Someone yelled, "That's tellin' the cow's son, matey!"

The policeman frowned, studied the knuckles of his right glove for a minute and then regarded McKinney with a grudging smile.

"A back-blocks wit, what?" he drawled. "Well, Mister Bloody Canuck, don't let me catch you loafing in my district. You go to work, or else—" He left the sentence unfinished, wheeled his horse and rode off.

"Snotty cow's son, that jonop," the foreman remarked, staring after the retreating trooper. "You'd think 'e owned this bloody forest."

"What's his name?" McKinney inquired.

"Leavitt," the foreman told him. "What about comin' to work with me, cocky?"

"I'm a mill hand," McKinney evaded. "I'm heading up the valley to hunt a job in the mill. Thanks, just the same."

"You're welcome," the foreman grinned. "Anyone what can tell that cow of a jonop off like you did will always find a place in my gang."

MCKINNEY walked back to where he had left his swag. Slung the blanket roll over his shoulder, he headed up the valley in the wake of a line of timber wagons. Half a mile ahead he saw the erect, khaki-clad figure of Constable Leavitt "posting" expertly in his saddle as he rode at a smart trot toward town, where the tall stacks of

the sawmill cut sharply against the green of the surrounding hills.

McKinney grinned as he watched the mounted figure of the trooper winding among the crawling wagons. The man's arrogant manner had nettled him, for it was unusual in a land where law enforcement officers are never allowed to forget that they are public servants. His grin widened as he pictured himself, half an hour hence, walking into the police barrack in Dangorup, announcing himself and presenting his credentials as a preliminary to demanding the cooperation of the local police detail. He would have taken pleasure in putting Leavitt in his place in front of the crowd of timber workers had it not been the necessity of his maintaining his present role of wandering swaggie.

Filling his lungs with the spicy air of the hills, he strode along the rutted road. Spring was well past; but the chocolate scent of violet-hued fringe lilies still lingered, blending with the perfume of the boronia, which still displayed its brown and yellow blossoms among the undergrowth in company with brilliant rabbit orchids. One thing he missed here was the dry, acrid odor of destruction which had been so noticeable farther north, where he had seen thousands of acres of valuable timber, of giant, stringy-barked jarrah, reduced to blackened skeletons by mysterious bush fires.

The past winter and spring had been wet, usual winter and springtime weather for southwest Australia. Despite the long-drawn rainy season, there had been numerous bush fires. Since fires had hitherto been unknown during the "wet," enemy action was suspected. The state police had put forth their best efforts, but the fires had continued, breaking out simultaneously at widely separated points. So far, a strict censorship had been maintained. To prevent the enemy from knowing the full extent of the damage being done to the war effort, the press had made no mention of the fires.

Irrked by the failure of the state police to unmask the saboteurs, the Commonwealth government had taken a hand, assigning to the aid of the state forces two bush experts of the Commonwealth police, the Australian counterpart of the F. B. I. The two Federal men had gone into the big timber country two months previously. Since then nothing

had been seen of them. Persistent search by the state police, assisted by black trackers, had been unsuccessful. The two Commonwealth officers remained on the missing list.

Bill Tuck, assigned by American Naval Intelligence to work with the Commonwealth police, had then volunteered to search for the missing officers. Accompanied by his big Stevens Island blackfellow, Chappie, he had reported to Chief Inspector Stone, of the state police, in Perth, and had then gone bush.

McKinney, having completed an assignment in Sydney, had come to join Tuck. Reporting to state police headquarters in Perth, he had been given a roving assignment. Since then he had wandered through the big timber region, from Pemberton, in the heart of the great karri forests, to Albany, on the south coast. Walking the roads and carrying his swag, he had swung north again through Bunbury, through Kattanung, making discreet inquiries and receiving vague answers, but finding no clue to the whereabouts of the elusive pair. Now, back south again, he was beginning to suspect that Tuck and Chappie, like the two Commonwealth officers, were on the missing list.

DUSK was falling, and the western end of the valley was deep in shadow. McKinney halted at the side of the road and debated with himself whether to bush it for the night or to go on to Dangorup and take his chances of obtaining supper and bed in the overcrowded settlement.

He frowned in sudden suspicion as his ears caught a faint hissing sound coming from beyond a screen of wattle a few yards away. Moving quietly across the intervening ground, he halted beside the clump of bush and peered through the leafy screen.

The opening bars of "Waltzing Matilda" came to his mind as he found himself looking over a little clearing that had all the appearances of being someone's permanent camp. True, there was no billabong; neither was there a coolibah tree, as in the popular song. But the swaggie looked as if he might have been the one referred to in the ballad as he sat there, waiting for the billy to boil on the hissing, blue flame of a small primus stove.

The camper looked up, saw McKinney's head above the screen of bush and nodded

a greeting. Rising, he stooped over the billy and dripped dry tea leaves into the boiling water.

Pushing his way into the little clearing, McKinney dropped his swag on the ground and gave the customary Australian greeting:

"Afternoon! How's it?"

"All Sir Garnie, matey," the old-timer responded, adding, "Char will be ready in 'alf a mo. Get yer pannikin ready."

"A pannikin of tea will feel good, all right," McKinney agreed. "But how about something to go with it?" He knelt and began unrolling his swag. "A little ham to grease the damper, eh?"

"'Am?" The other chuckled ecstatically. "Well, I should bloody well smile! 'Am, yer sez, an' 'am it is. My bloody word, yes!"

McKinney produced a small ham from his tucker bag. The swaggie removed a damper from a blackened skillet, lying on the ground beside the stove and placed it carefully on a stump.

"Trouble with these bloody gimcracks, now," he said, indicating the primus with a contemptuous nod, "is there never ain't any ashes from 'em to bake a damper in proper, like. The bloody jonops 'ereabouts keeps an eye on me to make sure I don't constitute a menace to the state forests by lightin' a reg'lar fire, as if I was a bloody new chum!" He took the ham from McKinney, cut two generous slices and laid them in the skillet, which he set carefully upon the hissing stove. "Wood," he declared, "is the only thing to cook with. Don't yer agree with me, matey?"

"I certainly do," McKinney concurred.

He studied the other, who must have been close to seventy, for his hair, once sandy, was now like a mop of dirty cotton in which a few streaks of the original color could be faintly seen. His cheeks and chin were covered with a mat of beard the same color as his hair. And above the beard a triangle of face, the skin of which was burned to the color of an old saddle, with two watery blue eyes peering from beneath bushy eyebrows that looked like dingy white awnings on either side of his short dab of a nose. His moleskin trousers were patched in a dozen places, and his cowhide boots were run over at the heels. He wore no shirt, only a grimy cotton singlet that displayed his stringy chest and skinny arms.

He looked up at McKinney and declared affably, "Parks is me name—Ned Parks."

"Johnson," McKinney supplied the name he had used during his tour of the timber country. "Are you a timber man?"

"Me?" Parks regarded McKinney with offended dignity. "Gawd forbid! No, brother Johnson, I'm a prospector."

"This doesn't seem like much of a country for prospecting," McKinney suggested.

"Aye, it doesn't, for a fact," Parks agreed. "But, y'know, matey, gold country seldom advertises itself. I've been prospectin' up an' down this 'ere land o' ours for nigh on fifty year, an' I never seen any mineral country with signs all over it, sayin' 'Dig 'ere! My bloody oath, I 'aven't!"

"Been up north much?" Ed McKinney probed.

"Oh, aye! I've been everywhere—even up in New Guinea," Parks admitted. "I ain't been in this 'ere part o' the country since Ninety-five. I was with Paddy Hannan that year, but split up with him. He takes up with a bloke name o' Flannigan, an' the pair o' them makes the first strike at Kalgoorlie. Crikey! They found a place where they could knock bloody big lumps o' gold right off the outside o' the rock. So 'elp me!"

He turned the ham in the skillet, regarded the sizzling meat contemplatively for a minute or two and then resumed.

"They used to call the town 'Hannan's.' But now it's Kalgoorlie, with the main street called Hannan Street, an' a statue of Paddy himself stuck up in front o' the Town 'All, an' 'e 'oldin' a water bag in 'is 'and. Crikey!" He chuckled reminiscently. "An' 'ere I am, ole Ned Parks, without a bloody deener to me name! But I'm 'appy as Larry, for all that."

McKinney smiled. "I've heard that a man can become a slave to his possessions."

"If that's the case," Parks declared, "I'm the freest bloke in the whole bloody world." He lifted a slice of ham and studied the under side. "Be done to a turn in 'alf a mo, matey."

McKinney produced a couple of huge brown-skinned Australian onions from his tucker bag. "How about these?"

"Mannar from 'Eaven, matey!" Parks gloated. He lifted the ham from the skillet, then peeled the onions into the grease. After

stirring them around, he covered the skillet with a tin plate. "They cooks better that way—steams like, y'know."

"The coppers keep a pretty close watch on you?" McKinney prompted.

Parks frowned. "They do, an' all. Leastwise, that cow, Leavitt does. Orders me to go to work or get out o' the district. My word! I'd like to know what this bloody country's comin' to."

"There's a war on, you know," McKinney said.

"Oh, aye! But a bloke's got certain fundamental rights what no cow of a jonop can take away, 'asn't 'e?"

"I guess so," McKinney nodded, adding, "Is he the only copper in this district?"

"There's another one, name o' Watson," Parks declared. "'E seldom leaves the barracks. Senior constable, I think."

HE LIFTED the skillet from the stove and scraped the fried onions onto McKinney's plate and his own, added a slice of ham to each plate and cut the damper in equal halves, after which he filled the pannikins with tea.

"Now we'll scoff," he chuckled.

McKinney took his plate and sat down on a stump. He watched the old prospector fork onions into the hole in his beard, surmizing that the old-timer's tirade against the local officers was merely a manifestation of the usual Australian dislike for policemen. No more was said until the meal had been washed down with strong, black tea. Then McKinney inquired casually:

"Are there any other prospectors in these hills?"

"Not a bloody one," Parks assured him. "These blokes around 'ere don't know anything but woodchoppin'. Maybe a bit o' farmin', too. But I 'aven't met anyone what could talk my language except one bloke from up north."

McKinney filled his pipe and then offered his pouch to Parks, who accepted it gratefully. When the pipes were going, McKinney said:

"I've been up north a lot. Wish I could have met up with him."

"This bloke didn't talk much, except to ask questions," Parks declared. "Did most o' his talkin' with the big blackfeller what dodged around with 'im. Bush talk, mostly."

McKinney was all attention now. Fighting to hold his voice level, he ventured, "You mean, he spoke to the blackfellow in the native bat?"

"'E did, an' all," Parks affirmed. "'E must 'av thought a lot o' the abo, seein' as 'ow 'e went an' got 'imself pinched on the blighter's account."

"Arrested?"

"Aye!" Parks nodded. "'E was lettin' the blackfeller carry a rifle which, as you know, is against the law. When the jonop—Leavitt, it was—tried to pinch the abo, the ole bloke raised bloody 'ell about it an' got 'imself lagged as well for interferin' with an officer in discharge of 'is duty. Ought to be good for about three months 'ard, without the option of a fine."

McKinney fought back a desire to laugh at the thought of his old comrade in jail. "Perhaps they let him off with a fine."

"They ain't tried 'im yet, so far as I know," Parks told him. "You see, the beak 'as to travel up 'ere from Albany once a month to try serious cases. Drunk an' disorderlies are disposed of by Watson. But this bloke's case will 'ave to come before the reg'lar beak."

"Isn't it against the law to hold a man so long without trial?" McKinney argued.

"Aye! It is, an' all; but what 'ave I just been tellin' you about this bloody country goin' to the dogs, with cows like Leavitt an' Watson runnin' things. It 'appens the beak is ill. So Watson gives the bloke a preliminary 'earin', like, an' remands 'im for trial. 'E may be six months in chokee before the beak gets around to 'im."

He rose, took McKinney's plate and his own and washed them with boiling water from the billy. McKinney puffed slowly on his pipe, wondering why Tuck allowed himself to be held in the town lock-up, when a word of explanation should procure his immediate release. Like McKinney, Tuck was a Naval Intelligence officer, with the rank of lieutenant, which made it seem all the more strange that he would allow himself to be kept behind bars when a telephone call to Canberra would result in his being freed.

He took his plate and pannikin from Parks and put them in his tucker bag, after which he hung his swag from the lower branches of a tree. To the old prospector he

said: "I'm going down to give the town the once-over. I'll probably be back to camp here tonight. But if I'm not, you go ahead and use whatever grub you need from my tucker bag."

"That's a bit of all right, matey," Parks thanked him.

McKinney added, "I'll likely be around this neck of the woods for some time, and I'd like to make your camp my headquarters. If we run out of tucker, I can buy more at the mill commissary. See you later."

He left the clearing and set off down the road toward Dangorup, grateful to Parks for the information which the old man had so unwittingly provided, the first real news of Tuck and Chappie he had received since leaving Perth. Now, having at last solved the problem of their disappearance, he was faced with another puzzle—Bill Tuck's reason for breaking into jail.

DANGORUP, McKinney perceived, as he paused at the end of the town's single street, was just another "duration" municipality.

It consisted of a couple of pubs, a few stores, about two dozen houses and, of course, a police barrack, all of frame and corrugated iron construction, rising like dingy pyramids above a sea of tents in various stages of dilapidation, beyond which were a scattering of native-style gunyahs, flimsy little structures roofed and walled with slabs of stringy-bark. In the center of the town stood the sawmill, with its twin stacks thrusting like attenuated towers above the swirl of galvanized iron and stringy-bark roofs.

Even at night, the mill dominated the town, for its voice blanketed all other sounds; the hiss of steam, the shriek of whirling saws ripping through tough karri logs, the clatter of the chain carriers lifting huge sections to the saw tables blended in a protracted din, while the perfumed night air of the hills was overlaid with the spicy tang of fresh sawdust mingled with the acrid odor of wood smoke from the towering stacks.

The first structure, as McKinney entered the town, was a patched marquee tent occupied by a Chinaman as a combination restaurant and grocery. The place was crowded, as were also the two pubs, with

choppers from the woods and with mill hands off shift. The single street ran east and west, and was dimly illuminated by electric light bulbs strung on poles. McKinney strolled along the crowded thoroughfare, passed the police barrack and then halted on the next corner in the shadow of a spreading coolibah tree and proceeded to give the station house the once-over.

The barrack stood well back from the sidewalk line, and the space before it was overgrown with knee-high grass, through which a beaten path led from the street to the front door. At the rear was a paddock occupied by two horses. Beyond the paddock was the corrugated iron jail. An automobile stood to one side of the barrack, a big car, with the insignia of the state police painted on the front doors, and with a large rumble space for the storage of water and extra gasoline on long desert trips.

McKinney retraced his steps. As he passed the police barrack he glanced through the front window and saw a policeman in his shirt sleeves lounging in a swivel chair, with his stockinged feet elevated on a desk. There was no sign of the trooper who had appeared that afternoon at the scene of the fire.

Wondering how he could communicate with Tuck, McKinney continued his stroll. When he reached the nearest pub, he entered, ordered a bottle of beer and then retired to a corner to think things over.

McKinney looked up as a slender, dark-skinned young man appeared in the doorway. He was clad only in a dingy cotton singlet and ragged khaki trousers, his head and feet bare. Halting on the threshold, the newcomer looked over the crowd.

Catching sight of the man in the doorway, the barman leaned on the makeshift bar and bellowed:

"Nah, then, you yellfeller! You ain't allowed in 'ere." He shook a threatening fist. "*Imshi*, you blasted nark!"

The half-caste cringed, stepped back into the street and made an obscene gesture at the barman. McKinney grinned at the fellow's reaction. Although he realized that the barman was only obeying the law in ordering the half-caste off the premises, he considered him unnecessarily rude. For the moment his sympathies were entirely with the yellfeller, as these unfortunate mixed-

bloods are called, to distinguish them from the "blackfellers," or full-blood aborigines.

At the same time, McKinney's senses were suddenly alert, for he realized that the half-caste hadn't stood there merely for the pleasure of being ordered out by the barman. Glancing through the doorway, he saw the yellowfellow hovering just beyond the rectangle of light slanting through the entrance of the pub, apparently waiting for someone.

Presently a man standing alone a few feet from McKinney laid his beer bottle on the floor against the wall and eased furtively toward the entrance, a short, mouse-like man, with watery blue eyes and a wispy blonde mustache above a weak mouth and chin. Watching, McKinney saw him join the half-caste outside.

Acting on a hunch, McKinney set his empty bottle on the floor and quietly left the pub. As he emerged he looked quickly about him and saw the half-caste and the white man standing a few yards away. He saw the yellowfellow stoop, lift something from the ground and thrust it into the other's hand. Then the half-caste turned and hurried west along the dimly lighted street.

"I figured it was a gag," Ed McKinney mused, smiling in appreciation of the half-caste's ruse. Merely by standing in the doorway of the pub, he had called attention to himself, thus conveying the hint to the other that he was wanted.

Instead of re-entering the pub, the white man hurried east toward the mill, moving with furtive haste, carrying under his right arm a square bundle wrapped in brown paper. McKinney hesitated, wondering if the parcel contained nothing more significant than the fellow's laundry or, possibly, a dozen bottles of beer. But if its contents were anything so harmless as laundry or beer, he asked himself, why all the rigmarole attending its delivery? That was the question which caused his bump of inquisitiveness to itch.

He made up his mind in a flash. Like a needle attracted by a magnet, he drifted in the wake of the other, following him along the street to the mill, through dark passages between huge stacks of finished lumber, and then through a long, straggling alley between two rows of tents to the scattering of gunyahs beyond. He saw the man

halt at last before a hut standing alone about a hundred yards from the others, fumble for a minute at the door and enter.

McKinney darted across the open ground and huddled in the shadow of the lone gunyah. Peering through a chink between two slabs of bark, he saw the man inside moving a canvas-covered cot away from the farther wall, working in the glare of a flashlight laid on a small table.

A-tingle now with curiosity, McKinney watched him kneel, brush aside the loose earth to uncover a wide board. Lifting the board, he revealed a cavity in the earthen floor in which he laid the parcel, handling it with care. He then replaced the board, brushed loose dirt over it, rose to his feet and moved the cot back to its former position. Dusting the knees of his trousers, he switched off the flashlight and approached the door.

McKinney scurried around the corner of the gunyah and waited until he saw the man walk away from the shack, headed, apparently, toward the pub. McKinney's curiosity was now at boiling point, although he realized that the parcel might, at worst, contain nothing more than the fruits of some petty larceny job. Impatiently, he watched the occupant of the gunyah until the man had passed from his sight beyond the huddle of tents.

He moved toward the door of the gunyah, peering about him in the darkness, to make certain that none should witness his unlawful entry. He discovered that the door of the hut was secured by a padlock and chain, which made it impossible for him to break in without wrecking the flimsy panel. Returning to the side of the little building, he pulled aside a strip of bark and squirmed through the opening. Once inside, he groped around for the flashlight and found it lying on a rude table just inside the door.

The only furnishings were the cot, with an up-ended beer case doing duty for a chair, and the crude, home-made table beside the door. Evidently, the gunyah was used only as a sleeping place.

Pulling aside the cot, McKinney went to his knees, scraped away the loose earth and lifted the board. He snatched the carton from the hole in the floor and, with the flashlight shaded inside his coat, untied the string securing the brown paper wrapping.

Beneath the wrapping was a stout carton of corrugated board coated with paraffin, its end flaps sealed with wide strips of tape. He broke the seal, bent back the end flap and emitted an oath of surprise:

"Jee-Christopher! Zeppelinites!"

Zeppelinites they were—a round dozen of them, each one consisting of a slender, pencil-like aluminum case attached to a small, deflated balloon. The weight of the cases told him that they were packed with thermite. Also, each case was equipped with a time fuse which, he knew, could be set by breaking off the tip. All that was needed was the hydrogen gas with which to inflate the balloons. Released on the south breeze blowing in off the Bight, with the time-fuses set, they would drift north through the timbered hills until the fuses set off the thermite, which in turn would ignite the hydrogen gas in the balloons. Then they would fall like flaming comets into the brush of the hillsides, already dry from the summer heat.

"Great Golden Cripes!" he muttered jubilantly. "Isn't this a break? The sort of evidence the boys have been hunting all summer—and I stumble into it just because a yellowfellow thought he was being smart!"

That was it, he realized; the vicious little incendiaries might have gone undiscovered by him had it not been for the half-caste's ruse to attract the white man's attention.

The zeppelinite that had fallen a few hours before evidently had been a feeler, since there had been no reports of fires in the district. He surmised that fires hadn't been started heretofore because of the lingering rainy season. But now, with the undergrowth fast becoming tinder dry in the early summer heat, he supposed that bush fires would be a frequent occurrence.

He sat on the cot, nursing the carton of incendiaries on his knee, and pondered his next move. The logical thing to do would be to turn the carton over to the police and retire into the background, while they arrested the occupant of the gunyah for possession of incendiary materials. But because of Bill Tuck's voluntary incarceration, he felt unwilling to take the local police into his confidence.

On the other hand, he reasoned, if he seized the carton of incendiaries now, the saboteurs would be warned and would scurry

into hiding, while if he returned the carton to its hole in the floor, the zeppelinites might be removed to some other point and set to work, the result of which would be further destruction of valuable timber.

When the solution of this latest problem finally came to him, he chuckled. He bundled eleven of the incendiaries in the paper wrapping and tied them securely with the string. He then broke the tip of the remaining one, setting the time fuse, and replaced it in the carton. He returned the container to the hole in the floor, laid the board over the opening and then shoved the cot back into place. After a final glance around the interior of the gunyah, he extinguished the flashlight and crawled through the hole, carrying the parcel of fire bombs.

With the parcel under his arm, he hurried toward town, outwardly calm, but inwardly feeling like the man who had the tiger by the tail, for the package of zeppelinites was, to say the least, a bit of an embarrassment. Now that he had evidence to show how the fires farther north had been started, he didn't know quite what to do with it. Until he had talked with Tuck, he decided, he must find some secure hiding place for the incendiaries.

He hurried through the tent street to the mill grounds. As he passed through an alley between two stacks of lumber, he ran full tilt into Constable Leavitt.

"Hold hard, cocky!" the trooper commanded, laying a hand on McKinney's arm. "Let's see what you've got there?"

McKinney's reaction was swift. His left came up like a flash from the level of his waist and landed with a dull spat against the meaty angle of the policeman's jaw. He whirled, saw a slender figure in a tight cotton singlet—the half-caste—and let fly a haymaker that caught the yellowfellow in the chest and sent him reeling. Then McKinney ran through a dark passage between two lumber piles, ran as if the devil were at his heels, never once looking back to see if he were being pursued.

WHEN he was well beyond the edge of the town, where the bush of the hillsides came down to meet the tall timber of the valley, he slowed down and looked for a place in which to hide the parcel of in-

cendiaries. He found an alcove in an out-cropping, and in this he placed the embarrassing bundle, blocking the opening with heavy stones as a protection against the possums and the wombats. Fixing the position of the cache in his mind, he turned back toward town, satisfied that he hadn't been recognized by Leavitt or the half-caste.

He was sorry because of his assault on the person of Constable Leavitt. That swift left had been purely reflex action, motivated, possibly, by a reluctance to be found in possession of incendiary materials. Arrest at this time would involve explanations which he wasn't yet prepared to make, at least, until he had an interview with Tuck.

He came in at the west end of the street and strolled back toward the pub. As he passed the police barrack he glanced through the lighted window and saw a policeman—Constable Watson, he supposed—seated at the desk. Of Leavitt and the half-caste there was no sign. Probably they were still hunting him.

Turning into the pub, he ordered another bottle of beer and resumed his former position in the corner, where he could study the crowd. Seeing the occupant of the gunyah standing a few feet away, nursing a bottle of beer, he surmised that the man had returned to the pub, after stowing the carton of zepelinites under the floor of his shack. Sight of the man brought up a picture of the half-caste standing in the doorway, and a recollection of the barman's denouncing him as a nark—a stool pigeon. If the yellowfellow was working for the police, why had he passed the incendiaries to the mousey-looking white man? Possibly he was playing both ends against the middle.

Suddenly the mill siren let go a bellow that blanketed all other sounds. A man standing in the doorway yelled and then pointed excitedly toward the tent town. The policeman whom McKinney had seen in the barrack office went past at the double, buttoning his tunic as he ran. The denizens of the pub flowed into the street, leaving McKinney alone in his corner.

He finished his beer, aware of what had happened. The time fuse of the zepelinite left in the carton had gone off, blowing the board cover off the hole in the floor, setting fire to the canvas cot which, in turn, ignited the flimsy walls of the gunyah.

Setting his empty bottle on the bar, he stepped into the street and looked east. Beyond the mill a sheet of red flame was wavering toward the sky. He smiled at the thought of the saboteurs, whoever they were, believing that their store of incendiaries had somehow gone off and set fire to the shack, which was now blazing like a sun-dried bush.

Everyone was rushing toward the scene of the blaze. McKinney ran with them as far as the police barrack, the front window of which was now dark. Turning, he scurried along the side of the building, clambered over the whitewashed bars of the paddock, and halted beneath the dark square of a window about four feet above his head. Whistling the opening bars of "Waltzing Matilda," he waited.

Presently the querulous drawl of Tuck sounded from the darkness overhead.

"Bloody near time yer showed up! Did yer bring me that terbacker?"

"Sure!" McKinney whispered. "What d'you know?"

"See yer wearin' yer new 'at," Tuck said irrelevantly.

Taking the hint, McKinney removed his hat and held it upside down below the window. Tuck's hand came through between the wooden bars and let fall a package. Slipping the package into his pocket, McKinney said:

"I'm wondering why in hell you had to break into jail. How come?"

Tuck's greasy laugh sounded from the darkened square above.

"Yer don't 'ear me maggin' about it, now, do yer?" he parried. "Me, I'm livin' the life o' Riley. Straight, I am."

"Well, it's got me guessing," McKinney complained.

"It'll all come out in the wash," Tuck said, adding, "What's the shivoo outside?"

"Shack caught fire back on the far side of the mill," McKinney told him, itching to reveal the cause of the fire. "Anyone in there with you?"

"Just a couple o' drunks; nice chaps," Tuck revealed. "That'll be all for tonight. Now *imshi!*"

"Aw, hell!" McKinney swore angrily. "I want to know—"

"Yer ain't goin' to know a bloody thing, till I choose to tell yer," Tuck cut him off.

"Now 'op it before them bloody narks comes back an' chucks yer in the clink."

"Okay, if that's the way you feel!" McKinney retorted angrily.

Just the same, he beat a hurried retreat back to the front of the police station. Since joining Naval Intelligence, he had been instrumental in landing quite a number of people behind bars. But he himself had no desire to be on the inside, looking out. One member of the partnership in jail was more than enough.

He walked down the street to the Chinese restaurant, where he ordered a sim-dim and a cup of tea. While waiting for his order to be filled, he examined the package that Tuck had dropped in his hat. It was an ordinary matchbox, containing a folded paper.

Smoothing the paper on the counter, he read Tuck's laborious penciled scrawl:

"Yank, I think I have stumbled on to the head-center of this fire business. Most of the incendiary material seems to be distributed from this point. As I am not certain about this, I shan't go into details.

"Stay around here, but don't bring in any of your Sydney pals. Especially Clarke, as they might be recognized. Two Commonwealth men have faded out already, and I can't learn what happened to them. Watch your step. Don't carry your gun or identification. Be nobody, just like me. It's safer.

"The numbers below are a code message for the bloke with all the pebbles in his house. You know. Get it off at once and then lie doggo until the mob comes down from Perth. Watch out for a bloke name of Keller, or Kelleher. See what you can find out about him.

"Bill."

McKinney studied the code for a minute or two, then re-read Tuck's note. Tuck's reference to "the bloke with all the pebbles in his house" was merely another way of naming Chief Inspector Stone, of the state police, whose numerous family was a never-failing source of inspiration for the wisecrackers of the force. But the rest of Tuck's message might have been Sanscrit, for all the information it conveyed.

More puzzled than ever, McKinney ate his sim-dim, a patty of fried ground meat rolled in a cabbage leaf—the Australian equivalent of the great American hamburger

—and decided that there was nothing he could do until "the mob" arrived from Perth. His snack finished, he filled his pipe and took the road back to Parks' camp.

THE voice of a kookaburra sounded from among the branches of a nearby tree, a deep, throaty sound, like the reminiscent chuckle of an elderly fat man recalling some humorous incident. The chuckle grew to a racious guffaw, until the valley rang with hilarious laughter as other birds joined with the first in heralding the dawn.

McKinney flung aside his blankets and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Sounds like a lot of buglers with the hiccup trying to sound reveille!" he complained. He looked across at old Parks, who was squatting on his heels beside the stove, watching the water in the billy come to a boil. "Hi, old-timer!"

Parks looked at him over his shoulder. "We 'ad a visitor just now," he declared. He dumped a portion of tea into the billy, lifted it off the stove and set it on the ground. Rising, he looked severely at McKinney and asked, "Yer 'aven't been doin' something yer 'adn't oughter, now, 'ave yer, matey?"

"Me?" McKinney looked like the personification of innocence. "What in Sam Hill are you talking about?"

"That nark—y'know, the yellerfeller what 'angs around the police barrack in Dangorup—e came snoopin' around 'ere just before sun-up."

"Oh, him?" McKinney yawned. "Why should he spy on us?"

Parks grinned. "Can't see where it did 'im much good—unless 'e's got eyes like a cat. Dark, it was." He set the skillet, containing two generous slices of ham, on the stove and sat back on his heels. "I 'eaved a stick at 'im."

McKinney rose, shook the dew from his blankets and draped them over a bush. His eyes were thoughtful as he recalled the indistinct figure of the half-caste in the passage between the timber stacks the night before, and he wondered if the fellow had recognized him. It didn't seem possible, he admitted, unless the half-caste really had the vision of a cat.

He sat down on a stump, drew Tuck's

message from his pocket and read it over again, frowning at his partner's advice against carrying his gun or identification. Since Tuck was the senior man of the two, his advice might well be construed as an order. It was all very well, McKinney thought rebelliously, for him to go without his gun. But for him to travel without his identification in a strange country was a horse of another color.

He removed his shoulder holster and stowed it, with a couple of extra clips, in his swag. Then he sat down again and waited until Parks announced breakfast. As they ate, McKinney ventured:

"That breed might have been snooping to see if we'd built a fire."

"Maybe," Parks conceded. "Still an' all, it looks like them two jonops 'ave a grudge against me. Why, I can't shove me boko past the Chinaman's without one of 'em luggin' me inter the clink an' searchin' me." He chewed reflectively for a minute, then added, "But they search every newcomer, too."

McKinney stared. "They do? Hell, man, that's illegal."

"Matey—" Parks motioned emphatically with his fork—"in this district Constables Watson an' Leavitt are the law. They sez what's what an' what ain't what." He popped a bite of ham into his mouth and mumbled, "Law, me bloody 'at!"

McKinney ate slowly, pondering this newest of information. Constables Watson and Leavitt, it appeared, were running things to suit themselves, and disregarding the letter of the law. Obviously, he decided, they were operating some sort of racket.

Just the same, he decided to get Tuck's message off as early as possible. He knew that the post office wouldn't open until nine o'clock. But he believed that his identification would facilitate matters. He finished his breakfast and prepared to leave, first tearing off the part of Tuck's note containing the code message. This he placed inside the band of his hat, and tore the rest of the paper into shreds. He then set out for Dangoorup, satisfied that if the police took him into the station and searched him they would learn nothing.

The morning mist was still rising from the valley floor when he came in sight of the mill stacks. Log wagons were crawling out from town to begin the day's work.

The hands of his wrist watch were pointing to a quarter of eight when he halted in front of the combination grocery store and post office and through the open doorway watched the postmaster slice bacon for an early customer. When the latter had departed, McKinney stepped inside, displayed his identification card and asked:

"How about breaking a rule, so I can get a message off to Perth right away?"

The postmaster pursed his lips and looked McKinney over. "I suppose it could be done; that is, if it's official."

"It's Commonwealth business," McKinney declared.

"Just a minute, sir!" The postmaster passed through a rear door and returned in less than a minute with a young woman, who studied McKinney critically through rimless pince nez and declared:

"We can afford to break a rule for you, Lieutenant."

"That's fine!" McKinney said. "But forget the title. After I leave here, please forget you ever saw me."

She nodded. "I understand." Handing him a blank, she added, "Write out your message, please."

McKinney took the strip of paper from inside his hatband, copied the numbers on the telegraph blank and returned it to the operator. "Send it urgent rate," he directed. "I'll pay the charge."

She counted the numbers. "Regular rate, two and five pence; urgent rate, double."

"Okay!" He counted the money and laid it on the counter. "Get it off at once."

The girl retired to a cubby hole behind the grocery store. McKinney waited impatiently for nearly fifteen minutes, until the operator returned and announced:

"It's off."

"Thanks!" He stepped outside into the morning sunshine and looked over the almost deserted street, wondering what to do now until Tuck's "mob" arrived from Perth. He thought of Keller, or Kelleher, and surmised that he must be the man who had hidden the incendiaries in his hut the night before.

The clatter of a lawn mower drew his attention. Glancing toward the police barrack, he saw a strapping young aborigine, whose only garment was a khaki trousers cut off above the knees, pushing the noisy

machine to and fro over the grassy plot in front of the building.

"Chappie!" McKinney grinned in swift recognition. "And working!"

He strolled up the street, suppressing a desire to laugh. Never before had he known Chappie to labor; now the big salt-water black was laboring with a vengeance, chasing the lawn mower all over the plot, for the grass was too tall, and merely bent over in front of the cutter bar, escaping the whirling blades.

Pausing in front of the barrack, McKinney said, "That ought to give you an appetite for dinner, old scout."

Chappie halted, flicked the perspiration from his jutting brow with a slender, brown forefinger and looked down his bottle nose at McKinney.

"Billtuck him say me not know you fella," he declared, his thin lips parting in a slow grin that displayed his white, even teeth. "Look, Mickirry—" he patted the lawn mower angrily—this fella no dam' good. All time walk about, do nothing."

"What you need is a sickle to cut the grass," McKinney advised. "Then you go over it with the mower and even it up." He lowered his voice. "Where's Bill?"

"Him stop 'long jail-house," Chappie informed him. "All time sleep. Have'm good time. No work."

"Tell him I got his message off," McKinney whispered.

He looked up as a trooper appeared in the doorway of the police barrack, picking his teeth.

"Now, then!" the policeman bellowed at Chappie. "Keep that thing movin'." He glared at McKinney. "What's up wi' you, digger?"

"I was just explaining that he needs a sickle," McKinney said. "That grass is too tall to cut with a lawn mower."

The trooper stared intently at McKinney, his sandy brows puckered in a frown of concentration. He was a stocky, massive-shouldered man, whose legs seemed too short for his bulky torso. He stepped down out of the doorway and crossed the grass plot, his square, heavy-featured face expressionless.

"When did you arrive in town?" he demanded.

"Yesterday," McKinney told him.

"Well, well!" The trooper suddenly hooked the fingers of his right hand in the bottom of McKinney's left coat sleeve. "I think you're the bloke with the handy left. Come inside!"

McKinney held back. "Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet," the policeman grinned. "That may come later. Come on!"

He urged McKinney across the plot, through the front door into the office and half pushed him into a chair.

"Sit down!" he commanded. He walked around behind the desk, flopped heavily into the swivel chair and pounded on the floor with his boot heel. "Hi, Tommy!" he shouted.

The half-caste entered on noiseless feet and stood in a cringing pose just inside the doorway, his black eyes flitting nervously from the trooper to McKinney.

"Did ye ever see this man before, Tommy?" the policeman asked, a trace of Scots burr in his voice.

The half-caste ducked his bushy head. "See him las' night, Constable Watson. He same fella what knock down Constable Leavitt."

"Good enough!" Watson grinned. "Tell Constable Leavitt I want him."

As the half-caste departed, Watson drew open the bottom drawer of the desk and brought forth a parcel loosely wrapped in brown paper. Setting it on the blotter, he began untying the string, ignoring McKinney, who sat rooted in his chair at sight of the bundle of incendiary bombs which he had hidden the night before.

Watson's small, milky-blue eyes peered intently from under his sandy brows as he inquired in a soft drawl:

"Where did ye get these?"

McKinney pondered the question—a fair enough one, he decided. So far, everything seemed strictly above board, with Watson playing the role of the typical bush policeman. For an instant McKinney was tempted to unburden himself to this representative of the law. But recalling the terms of Tuck's note, he decided to keep his own counsel.

"I never saw those things before," he lied. "What are they, anyway?"

"Don't come that with me, cocky!" Watson snarled. "You heard what Tommy said, didn't you? Well, he followed you in the

dark, until he saw you hide these things. Then he took them from where you hid them and brought them to us." He picked up one of the zeppelinites and examined it critically. "Nice bloody things for a bloke to be hawkin' about in the woods. Looks like you're for it, young fella-me-lad."

"That yellowfella," McKinney declared, "is a liar by the clock. You know damned well no jury would take him serious."

Leavitt strode into the office, his spurs tinkling softly. He looked at McKinney and showed his yellow, uneven teeth in a wolfish grin.

"Oho!" he exulted. "Here we are again!" He sat on the end of the desk and lighted a cigarette. "All right, cock, what have you to say for yourself?"

McKinney leaned back in his chair and stared pointedly at the swelling at the angle of the trooper's right jaw.

"What would you like me to say?" he countered.

Watson rose and came around the desk. Jabbing a thick forefinger against McKinney's chest, he bellowed: "Stand up!"

McKinney came to his feet, expecting all this to be preliminary to a manhandling. He was getting set to whip a left to Watson's jaw when the policeman added, "This is only a search. Resist, an' we'll pound the daylight out o' ye. Raise yer hands!"

McKinney lifted his hands and submitted to a frisking. Wordlessly, he watched them pile his belongings on the desk; his pipe and tobacco pouch, his pocket knife, a few shillings in change, his identity card in its plain manila envelope, and, lastly, his money belt, which Watson unbuckled with eager fingers.

"Now, laddie, we'll know more about you," Watson grinned. Seating himself at the desk, he unbuttoned the pockets of the money belt and carefully examined its contents, his brow puckered in a frown of concentration as he counted the notes and arranged them in a little pile at his elbow. Presently he looked up, still frowning. "How does a damned swaggie happen to have as much as sixty-eight quid?" he wanted to know.

"Is there any law prohibiting a man from carrying his savings on his person?" McKinney countered.

Watson pouted. "No, I suppose not." He

shoved the little sack of notes aside and picked up the envelope. Bending back the flap, he withdrew the card, his eyes widening as he stared unbelievably at the great seal of the Commonwealth. Then, without a word, he passed the card to Leavitt.

"Holy hell!" the latter bleated, after a glance at the card. "Isn't this a nice how-de-do?" He tossed the card angrily on the desk.

Watson lifted the card and returned it to its envelope. "You should have told us, Lieutenant." He looked reprovingly up at McKinney. "It ain't fair."

"I'm not required to report to every back-blocks jonop I run across," McKinney retorted. He returned his belongings to their various pockets, stuffed the notes into the pockets of his money belt and buckled it about his waist. The others watched in silence as he rearranged his clothing. Then Watson said complainingly:

"It could have been avoided, Lieutenant, if you'd played fair with us, instead of lettin' us make bloody asses of oursel's. Now I suppose ye'll smear us in yer report?"

McKinney shook his head. "What you did was in the line of duty. Let's forget it."

WATSON beamed. "Now, that's fine o' ye, Lieutenant." He leaned back in his chair and smiled engagingly at McKinney. "Would ye mind tellin' us where ye got these?" He laid a heavy hand on the parcel of fire bombs.

"Later," McKinney evaded. He lifted his hat from the desk. "Well, there's no harm done. Now that we're acquainted, I might as well make this my headquarters."

"Glad to have ye, Lieutenant," Watson declared, adding, "By the way, I presume ye aren't alone here?"

McKinney's quiet smile was intended to convey the impression that he decidedly was not alone in the district. He said:

"Can't talk about that now."

"But it's only right that we should know, sir," Leavitt complained. "If only to prevent us from making asses of ourselves a second time."

"They won't hang you for it," McKinney shrugged. "So why worry?"

Watson rose and approached a wall cabinet. "Before ye go, sir, what about a little nip to celebrate the introduction?"

McKinney nodded and sat down again. "I'm game."

He decided not to be stiff-necked with them, despite their treatment of him a while before.

Just the same, he realized, as he watched Watson take a bottle and glasses from the wall cabinet, that this was just a prelude to another attempt to draw him out.

"Johnny Dewar—seven years old," Watson boasted as he filled the three glasses. He handed McKinney a brimming glass, raised his own to his lips and said, "Scotch for a Scot—the proper drink. Well, *slainte maith!*" He downed the whiskey at a gulp and smacked his lips.

Leavitt drank his liquor more slowly. Setting his empty glass on the desk, he said:

"Hope the Lieutenant won't report us for drinking on duty, what?"

McKinney swallowed the last of his drink and handed the empty glass to Watson. "Reporting coppers isn't any part of my job," he assured them. "I have bigger fish to fry."

"Of course!" Watson poised the bottle over McKinney's empty glass. "Another wee one, Lieutenant?"

"Some other time," McKinney declined. He glanced at his wrist watch and was surprised to find the hands pointing to ten-thirty. "Reckon I'd better get out and stir around."

He started to rise, sank back in his chair, suddenly aware that a pleasant lassitude was stealing over him. He looked at Watson's broad back, as the policeman returned the bottle and glasses to the wall cabinet, and stared incredulously at the black mist that appeared to be rising from the floor, rising like a black curtain, obscuring the desk, the two policemen, rising to the ceiling and shutting out the sunlight streaming through the window, creeping through McKinney's eyes into his brain.

WHEN McKinney's mind began to function again, he felt as if he were being shaken in a concrete mixer. For a moment or two he thought that he must still be in the police barrack, for the darkness in which he was immersed might well have been the black mist which, it seemed, had closed over his head only an instant before. He tried to sit up and bumped his head. Then he discovered that he was lying in the rumble seat

of a car traveling at dizzy speed over a rutted road.

"Say!" he mumbled. "What's this, anyway?"

He lay still and tried to think. Gradually, memory returned, and he recalled those last moments in the office of the police barrack.

"To think I fell for a gag that went out with peg-top pants!" he groaned. "They had clean glasses for themselves, and the fixed one for me. Hell! Ain't that a laugh?"

Self-recrimination, he realized, wasn't going to help him now. He surmised that the two missing Commonwealth officers had disappeared over the same route he was now traveling. After all, Bill Tuck was the only one of the intelligence mob who was really playing it wise, acting the role of wandering prospector, trusting no one—not even the police. Evidently, old Bill had something on the ball. But what?

"Reckon I've still got a lot to learn," McKinney thought. "But it won't be long before I know what it's all about."

He raised his right hand and stared at the luminous dial of his wrist watch, the hands of which were pointing to a quarter past four, and wondered why it hadn't been taken from him. Searching his pockets, he discovered that all his belongings were intact, even to the money belt about his waist.

Feeling about him in the darkness, he passed exploring hands over various objects in the rumble: two tins of petrol, a spare tire, an old inner tube and a wheel jack. He tried to force the door of the rumble and found it locked. Conscious of a sharp draft on the back of his neck, he squirmed over on his right side and saw that it came through a small hole in the side of the rumble, from which a rivet or a bolt had worked loose.

He applied his right eye to the hole. Through a cloud of dust thrown up by the racing wheels, he caught a glimpse of spindly trees and beyond them a vista of dun-colored hills. The shadows of the trees, he noticed, fell in the direction being traveled by the car.

"Salmon gums," he muttered in recognition of the skimpy trees. "Looks like we're on the dry side of the Stirlings, traveling due east."

He caught a glimpse of the corrugated

iron buildings of a tiny settlement through which a broad highway stretched northward. There was an instant's respite from the bumping as the car flashed across the smooth macadam. Then the swaying and pitching began again as it resumed its rush over what appeared to be a badly rutted road through the salmon gums. He felt the car slow. Presently it stopped. From somewhere nearby there came the gurgle of running water.

"Stopped at an artesian bore to fill the radiator," he surmised.

The springs creaked as someone alighted. Peering through the tiny hole, McKinney caught a glimpse of a short, slender man in civilian clothes passing in front of the aperture, an empty water pail dangling in his hand. It was the same man to whom he had seen the half-caste deliver the parcel of incendiary bombs the night before.

Then Constable Leavitt passed before the hole, carrying a couple of water bags. He paused just beyond the radius of McKinney's vision. At the farther side of the road the little man was holding the pail under the thin stream of water from the well outlet. McKinney heard him say:

"Yes, I know; that bloody tosh goes in one ear and out the other. You know damned well I'd turn up the lot of you, only for the way you rats have gotten me under your thumb. That's straight, and you know it!"

When the pail was filled, he carried it toward the front of the car, making way for Leavitt, who stepped to the bore and held one of the water bags under the outlet. Looking toward the other, the trooper said jeeringly:

"You've got too much love for that mangy little hide of yours to do a bunk on us now. Cripes! If Boardman knew how you go maggin' about all the time, he'd settle your case for good."

"He daren't!" The little man's voice rose shrill above the sloshing of water in the radiator. "I didn't trust him, after the way he bullied me into comin' over here to help you blokes. So I wrote a letter, exposin' this stinkin' business, and left it with a friend, to be posted to Canberra if I fail to communicate with him at least once a month. Boardman knows all about it. That's why he'll go slow about doin' anything to me."

"Nice way for a little crook like you to

talk!" Leavitt grinned. "You must be gettin' religious in your old age."

"Religious, hell!" the other snarled. His pail empty, he tossed it into the car and stood beside the trooper. "I know I'm a rotten coward," he continued. "But even a yell belly can 'ave principles. And, in spite of my association with you blokes, I'm still a loyal Australian."

Leavitt's face was creased in an amused grin as he carried the full water bag to the car. McKinney heard him say: "You know that loyalty thing is just a lot of smooge. You know where your real loyalty should lie."

"I've heard nothing else for the last month," the little man stormed. "I've listened to it until hearin' it makes me sick at my stomach."

Leavitt came back to the bore and filled the second bag. "As I've already told you, Keller," he said, "you can't back out now. You're in too deep."

Keller said nothing. Watching the little man's face, McKinney was reminded of a cornered rat. Leavitt carried the second bag to the car. McKinney heard the door slam, heard the whirr of the starter. Then the car went on, following the rutted bush trail.

McKINNEY withdrew his eye from the hole and pondered over what he had just heard. Keller, he realized, was being dragooned into doing something against his will. Their reference to loyalty, too, puzzled McKinney. It was not until he recalled the episode of the night before that the picture became clearer—and more fantastic.

If, a little over a year ago, someone had told him that Nazi agents were masquerading as state policemen, he would have laughed. But he didn't laugh now. Last night the half-caste, who was a sort of general factotum around the police barrack, had delivered a package of incendiary bombs to Keller, who had hidden them in his shack. Obviously, the half-caste had acted as a go-between, with either Leavitt or Watson on one side and Keller on the other. Again, Bill Tuck had hinted in his note that incendiary material was being distributed from the district around Dangorup. Apparently, Bill Tuck had hit the nail on the head.

No, McKinney admitted to himself, Tuck's vaguely hinted suspicions no longer

sounded fantastic. Recalling some of the bizarre rumors which had drifted south from the New Guinea front over the past year, the suggestion that enemy agents were masquerading as policemen sounded almost commonplace. From New Guinea had come rumors of "missionaries" acting as guides for the Japanese in their sweep south through the Markham Valley; rumors of native children being trained to give the Nazi salute. This last was merely funny, when one came to think about it. But there was nothing funny about the rumors of supposedly loyal Australian soldiers caught in the act of distributing Nazi literature in army cantonments—or of others discovered while sending up meteorological balloons over the jungle to mark Allied landing strips for the enemy bombers. Compared to all that, the spectacle of a Nazi in state police uniform was relatively credible.

Aware of his predicament, McKinney became really uneasy. Given room in which to operate, he would gladly have taken his chances with two men or half a dozen. But locked in the rumble of the car, he felt as a condemned criminal must feel in the death cell.

MCKINNEY peered through the rivet hole again and saw that the daylight was beginning to fade. He glanced at his watch; ten minutes past six! Closing his eyes, he tried to figure by dead reckoning the approximate position of the car.

Assuming that they had started between eleven and one o'clock, and allowing for an average speed of thirty miles an hour over the rough bush roads, he guessed that they must be about one hundred miles east of Dangorup, somewhere between Ravenshorpe and Esperance. The topography seemed to confirm his theory, for they were out of the big timber region and were now traversing rolling, sandy country thinly clad with salmon gums and ti scrub.

The possibility occurred to him now that they might be taking him into the desert. Once across the railway line which reaches north from Esperance, on the coast, to Kalgoorlie, on the western fringe of the great sandy waste, they could angle northeast, cutting across the trans-continental highway, which leaves the coast at Eyre, and be deep inside the Nullarbor by daylight.

McKinney was fully aware of what this would mean. To be set afoot in the silent waste, the ancient sea bed which reaches northward from the shores of the Great Australian Bight to the heart of the Never-Never, would mean a lingering death. Within its area of approximately one hundred thousand square miles the Nullarbor contains not one permanent stream of water, nor even a rain pool, since the porous limestone surface absorbs the infrequent rains as a blotter soaks up fresh ink. For in the Nullarbor only the salt bush and the blue bush and the desert owls and the snakes can live.

Faced with this possibility, he sought desperately for some means of escape from his stuffy prison. He felt with his fingertips around the edge of the door, planning to use the wheel jack to force the lock. But he discovered that the flap opened from the top, which eliminated the jack as an instrument of release, since its stretch was too limited to reach the top of the door, where the lock was situated.

Because of the presence of the two tins of petrol, he dared not strike a match, since the air inside the rumble was foul with gasoline fumes. Desperately, he continued his search, groping blindly over the inner wall of the compartment. Usually, in cars of modern design, the metal of the car back comes only a few inches below the top of the rear upholstery. But in the police car the metal extended clear to the rumble floor, making it an air-tight, escape-proof box.

Baffled, he lay on his side and stared into the darkness, aware that there was no way for him to escape from this iron box, until the flap was unlocked. Peering through the rivet hole, he saw that darkness had fallen. He lay back again, his feeling of helplessness giving place to a determination to see it through. For one thing, his curiosity concerning the fate of the two Commonwealth men was stronger than his desire to be free. If he succeeded in escaping from the rumble, he might wander for days in the bush. Meanwhile, Leavitt and Keller, fearing he might communicate with the police, would warn their confederates, and the gang would scatter.

If that happened, the fate of the two Federal men would remain unsolved.

For the next hour he lay on his back, with his knees drawn up in the cramped place,

fighting off a growing drowsiness, while the car sped eastward through the silent bush.

He was dropping off to sleep, in spite of his desire to keep awake, when he felt the speed of the car slacken. It slowed almost to a crawl, went ahead again in a series of jerks and finally stopped.

Instantly alert, McKinney applied his eye to the rivet hole. He saw only low sandhills thinly covered with ti scrub, with salmon gums growing in the hollows. So far as he could perceive, they were surrounded by trackless bush.

"What now?" he wondered.

The springs creaked as someone alighted. Footfalls scuffed softly in the loose sand. McKinney's muscles tensed as his ears caught a faint tinkle, as if a bunch of keys were being shaken. He felt the back end of the car sag, heard the soft click of the lock. Then the rumble flap creaked downward to a horizontal position, revealing Keller's head and shoulders silhouetted darkly against the moonlit sky.

Lying on his side, McKinney watched through half-closed lids as Keller peered inside the rumble and muttered sarcastically:

"Oh, you needn't be scared he'll cut up: he's still blotto."

Looking past him, McKinney caught sight of Leavitt standing behind the little man, his right hand resting on the flap of his pistol holster.

Reaching across McKinney, Keller lifted one of the tins of petrol, grunting softly as he heaved the heavy container up from the rumble floor. The next instant he went reeling backward as McKinney's right foot struck him like a piledriver in the chest. Still holding to the tin of petrol, he cannoned into Leavitt, knocking the trooper off balance, and then slid to the ground, hugging the tin to his chest.

McKinney erupted from the rumble, like a projectile from the muzzle of a big gun. As his feet struck the ground, he rushed at Leavitt, loosing a haymaker that caught the trooper squarely in the face. Before the other could recover, McKinney caught him by the shoulders and back-heeled him. They crashed to the ground, with McKinney on top, his right knee driving like a battering ram into Leavitt's middle.

Even with most of the breath driven from his body, Leavitt never relinquished his grip

on the butt of his pistol. Using his left hand, he fought like a trapped tiger, clawing at McKinney's eyes, while his muscular body heaved convulsively in his efforts to dislodge the American. Failing in that, he wrapped both legs around McKinney and jabbed him savagely with his spurs.

McKinney retaliated with a series of rights and lefts to the face, permanently spoiling the other's beauty. The trooper's left hand slashed like a knife across McKinney's throat, almost crushing his windpipe. For an instant everything whirled dizzily before McKinney's eyes, and he gagged in an effort to regain his breath. The next instant he found himself staring into the muzzle of Leavitt's Webley, behind which the battered face of the trooper was contorted in a leer of triumph.

Suddenly a hand flashed out of the surrounding darkness, closed about Leavitt's right wrist and dragged his arm to the ground. As if from afar, McKinney heard the voice of Keller announce triumphantly:

"All right, Mister, I've got the blighter's gun!"

In a flash, McKinney's glance took in the spectacle of the little man lying on Leavitt's right arm, pinning the trooper's gun hand to the ground.

"Go on, Mister!" Keller panted. "Finish the blighter off!"

McKinney needed no second urging. The knuckles of his left hand impacted explosively against Leavitt's chin, knocking the last vestige of fight from his mind.

Keller wrenched the pistol from the trooper's limp fingers and handed it to McKinney. "I promised myself I'd upset them blighters' appercart some day," he spat, rising from the ground. "Well, it had to come, an' I'm just as satisfied it's over with. You can put 'em on me whenever you're ready, Mister."

McKINNEY sat down on the tin of petrol and stared at Keller, who stood before him in a pose of utter dejection.

"Put what on you, chum?" he inquired mildly.

"Why, the darbies, of course! There's a pair in the front door pocket, drivin' side."

McKinney rose and walked around to the front of the car. He found the handcuffs, came back and snapped them on Leavitt's wrists.

"Help me stick this wolf in his cage, chum," he suggested.

They lifted the unconscious policeman and shoved him inside the rumble. Keller closed the flap, turned the key in the lock and then handed it to McKinney. After trying the flap, assuring himself that it was really locked, McKinney beckoned the other toward the front of the car.

"Now, brother—" He seated himself on the running board. "Sit down and get it off your chest."

Keller seated himself beside McKinney. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead," McKinney encouraged, feeling for his pipe and tobacco pouch. He looked steadily at the little man and added, "Is your name Keller or Kelleher?"

"Keller," the other affirmed. "My old man came from Austria, way back in the eighties—ran away from a German ship in Sydney, settled down to a job ashore and sent back to the old country for my mother. I was born in Sydney and, well, in spite of—of everything, I'm a dinkie die Australian."

McKinney puffed reflectively on his pipe, recalling Keller's defiance of Leavitt at the artesian bore.

"How come you got messed up with a mob like that, if you're as loyal as you claim to be?"

Keller shrugged dejectedly. "Blackmail, on their part; damned cowardice on mine." He went on, "I was clerkin' in a bookmaker's office in Sydney. Got the idea of makin' a few quid by usin' the boss' name in runnin' a fake on the Melbourne Cup. I raked in on the rhino, all right. But the boss caught on and set the jonops on my neck for fraud.

"I went on the dodge—hopped it to Melbourne—changed my name to Kelleher, an' was workin' in an army shoe factory when a bloke name of Bordmann dug me out. Right off, he threatened to expose me to the jonops—he had all the dope on me, too. Well, Mister, all I could see before me was a seven-year stretch in Long Bay pen.

"When Bordmann saw he had me, he opened up. Said he was head of the A-O for Australia, you know, the *Auslands Organisation*. Claimed he was directin' a sabotage mob for the Axis. Fed me a lot of tosh about a German bein' always a German, regardless of where he was born. Well, I

never considered myself German, seein' that my old man came from Austria, and hated Germans like hell. But Bordmann demanded that I join the A-O and work with him for the glory of the fatherland, and all that sort of thing. Mister, I tell you I was up a bloody pole. But rather than do a stretch in Long Bay, I agreed to work for him. That was two months ago."

"How much do you know about this Bordmann?" McKinney probed.

"He's right from Germany—straight out of the Military Intelligence School, in Prinz Freidrich Karl Strasse, in Berlin. He's been out here since '40, gettin' things ready for the big blow-off. He headed a mob in Sydney until the jonops busted it up. He got clear on account of him bein' workin' as a clerk in a shippin' office in Bridge Street—"

"Hold on!" McKinney interrupted. "Isn't he about five-eight in height, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, with high cheek-bones, and walks with a slight stoop?"

KELLER nodded. "That's him to a T. He goes by the name of Waldron—Harry Waldron. His real name is Axel Bordmann."

McKinney's thoughts flashed back to that day in Sydney, a few weeks previously, when he and Inspector Clarke, of the Commonwealth Police, had stood on the corner of Bridge and Loftus Streets, watching the man he had just described in conversation with the woman who later was to be known as Martha Herren. Bordmann, alias Harry Waldron, had been the only one of the sabotage ring to escape the police dragnet, following the raid on their headquarters in the hills above Palm Beach, eighty miles north of the city.

"Know where he hangs out now?" he asked.

Keller nodded. "Perth. Still works in a shippin' office as a blind. On the q t, he reports movements of timber and grain ships out of Freemantle, also meat packets comin' down from Wyndham and Derby, in the Northern Territory—reports them to Jap subs lurkin' offshore."

"That's how they got their zeppelinites—Jap sub?"

"Right-o! Just now, they're waitin' on a shipment of hydrogen gas, to fill the little balloons. If they'd had it on hand for the past week, the timber country would have

caught holy hell. There's a sub due on Wednesday, with the gas."

"This is Friday?" McKinney reflected. "Seems to me, though," he added, "that this timber burning is small-time stuff."

Keller shrugged. "I see you haven't caught the idea behind it, Mister. You know, we are makin' almost everything the Yanks need in this country—uniforms, shoes, blankets, ammunition and all that, besides providin' billets, all on the lease-lend reciprocity program, you know. More and more Yanks are comin' into the country every week. They'll need billets. If timber-cuttin' is stopped, buildin' of the cantonments will be held up, and there'll be a lot of complaints on account of there bein' no quarters for the new arrivals from the States. That's only part of the plan. Just before harvest a lot of grain fields are to be burned off, destroyin' millions of bushels of wheat and creatin' a scarcity.

Later on, cotton fields in North Queensland will be set ablaze, just as the bolls are ripe for pickin'.

"That'll put the kibosh on our furnishin' uniforms for the Yanks. Sinkin' of meat ships from the north will create a meat shortage. Everything will be done to prevent us reciprocatin' on this here lease-lend business. Think of the shivoo that'll raise in America!"

"It would raise some stink, all right," McKinney conceded. "Especially with enemy agents over there all ready to start the fireworks. But, even so, all that won't help the Axis to win the war."

"That ain't the idear, Mister," Keller argued. "The top blokes in Berlin and Tokio know they're licked. They know they can't win now. But they're gettin' ready for the peace by tryin' to cause dissension between us and the Yanks, like they did after the last war. The same men who worked that are still on the job."

"Where does Leavitt fit in?" McKinney probed.

KELLER chuckled. "His real name is Brasche—Anton Brasche; Berlin-born, London-reared, since he was eight. He was one of Mosley's original British Fascists. Got mixed up in a dirty deal in London, in 'Thirty-eight. Hopped it to Berlin. Came out here a year later, with a Swiss passport furnished by the German MI bureau."

"Cripes!" McKinney grunted. "And Watson—"

"Munger—Axel Munger," Keller corrected. "Born in Glasgow, Scotland, of a German father and a Lithuanian mother. Another of the old Mosley mob. Joined up because he hated labor unions. Berlin MI sent him out here in 'Thirty-six."

"A phoney Cockney and a phoney Scot!" McKinney mused. "They had me fooled."

Keller laughed softly. "We had a phoney Irishman, too. Went by the name of Flannery."

"His real name was Ziller. Born in Dublin, too, where his old man was head waiter in one of the big hotels. During the Black and Tan rough house, he wormed his way into the IRA as a government spy. But the republicans got wise to him, and he had to clear out of Ireland. A few years later he came back and joined up with Duffy's Blue Shirts—you know, the Irish Fascists. Well, after the Irish had laughed the Blue Shirts out of existence, Flannery—or Ziller—hopped it to Berlin, hooked in with the MI bureau and was sent down here. He left last month for the States."

"He did, eh?" McKinney made a mental note to pass on that item of information to the proper quarter. He looked pointedly at Keller and asked, "How do you happen to know all this?"

"Just by sittin' around the barracks in Dangorup and listenin' to Brasche and Munger shoot off their mouths. They thought they were safe because they talked in German."

"In German!" Sudden realization flashed like a signal in McKinney's mind. One of the reasons for Bill Tuck's being assigned to Naval Intelligence was his ability to speak both German and Japanese. And Bill had spent the better part of two weeks listening to the conversation of the two phoney policemen. He couldn't miss hearing almost everything that was said, for the corrugated iron building was a veritable sounding board. No longer was Tuck's voluntary imprisonment a puzzle. "Christopher!" McKinney muttered. "I'll bet old Bill got many an earful."

"Beg pardon?" Keller said.

McKinney shrugged. "I was just thinking. By the way, do you know anything about two guys who dropped out of sight

down Dangorup way about a month or six weeks ago?"

"Brasche and Munger were waitin' for them. They're down on the coast now, prisoners."

"Why weren't they done away with?"

Bordmann's orders were to hold 'em for questioning. You see, he has no line into the Commonwealth Police department. He's tryin' to force those blokes to tell everything they know about their section, who's who, and all that sort of thing. They were planning the same course for you, so as to get the know-all on whoever might be sent into the district before they had their work done and were ready to clear out."

"You talked as if Bordmann had a line into state police headquarters."

"He has," Keller declared. "An old bloke name of Tree. Cleans up the offices at night, after the police mob have cleared out. In this way he's able to get a look-see at all the reports and whatnot. Through him, Brasche and Munger knew how many state police were workin' the district. They got you, all right; but they're still on the lookout for another bloke, who started out from Perth about a month ahead of you."

McKinney smiled, realizing that they were watching for Tuck, while all the time he was under their thumb. "Tell me," he said, "how Brasche and Munger managed to join the police. Or do you know?"

"They didn't join up," Keller told him.

"Tree tipped off Bordmann that two constables, Leavitt and Watson, were being transferred from the north to the Dangorup district. The real jonops were waylaid and killed, their papers taken and their identities assumed by Brasche and Munger. That's all I know about that business, as it happened before I came over from Melbourne."

"So," McKinney mused, "somebody had a hunch that Constables Leavitt and Watson weren't Constables Leavitt and Watson at all, but two other guys. And he had to break into jail to prove it. Well, maybe that isn't as screwy as it sounds."

"Beg pardon?" Keller said.

"Just talking to myself," Ed McKinney evaded. He stood up. "How far is it to this place where the two Feds are being held?"

"It's about thirty miles from here," Keller told him. "But you'll never find it yourself."

"I don't intend to try," McKinney assured him. "You'll do the driving."

"You mean you'll give me a chance to make good?" Keller exclaimed.

"Just that," McKinney nodded. "But don't get me wrong. I can't promise a thing, except to put in a good word for you with headquarters. If I can say that you helped me to rescue those men, why, I reckon the inspector might recommend that any charge against you be quashed."

Keller came slowly erect, his face thoughtful. "Gawd!" he muttered. "If I only could get clear of this bloody mess. If me old man were alive, he'd be ashamed of me. Straight, he would."

"Well," McKinney said, "let's get the gas tank filled and be on our way."

THE smell of the sea was strong in McKinney's nostrils when Keller, an hour later, swung the car off the bush road and followed a line of wheel tracks that wound like the path of a snake through the ti scrub. Presently, he stopped the car in front of an abandoned farmhouse, to one side of which a spreading English laburnum tree waved its ropes of yellow bloom in the moonlight. On the opposite side of the house was an apple orchard fast returning to bush. Some optimist, McKinney thought, had tried to compete with the Tasmanian apple production and had found the going too hard. He turned to Keller and asked:

"Is this the place?"

"This is a sort of outpost," Keller informed him. "There's a private telephone line reachin' from here to the place we're goin'. I've got to call ahead and warn 'em we're comin'." He looked pleadingly at McKinney and added, "I'll have to talk in German. Hope you're still willin' to trust me."

McKinney smiled. "I'll take a chance. Go ahead!"

Nevertheless, he alighted after Keller and followed the little man inside the ramshackle building. Raising a floorboard in the empty living room, Keller lifted a telephone from the aperture. He pressed three times upon the receiver fork and winked at McKinney. "I'm supposed to tell 'em I'm Brasche, and I'm bringin' in a prisoner," he whispered.

He spoke into the mouthpiece in German. Amid the volley of gutturals, McKinney

could distinguish only the names of Keller and Brasche. Nothing else made any sense. If Keller were planning to betray him, he thought, this would be his opportunity.

Keller thrust the telephone back in the hole, replaced the flooring and rose. "It's all right," he declared. "We just go ahead and signal when we get to the white stone. Know anything about Morse?"

McKinney nodded and asked: "Why?"

"When we stop at the white stone," Keller explained, "we sound the klaxon, one short blast, and then switch off the headlamps. When we see a light ahead, we signal with the spotlight 'B,' for Brasche, and his number, seven. Can you do it?"

"Sure!" McKinney declared. "One dash, three dots, for B; for seven, two dashes, three dots."

"That's fine!" Keller exclaimed. "Y'know, I was worried for fear you didn't know Morse. I don't know a bloody thing about it. Brasche or Munger always did the signaling when we came this way before now."

"They don't seem to take any chances of a surprise," McKinney remarked as he followed Keller back to the car.

"They gotter be careful, seein' as how there's only the two of 'em," Keller declared.

"How do they communicate with Dangorup?"

"Public telephone by way of Port Charles," Keller explained. "The bloke who used to own this farm held all the land clear to the shore line in a four-mile strip. He was ruined by drought, and sold out to Bordmann for a song. The telephone was already in when Bordmann took over, and he had it continued in the former owner's name. Scholte and Bremer—the two blokes in charge now—use a code whenever they talk over the wire with Dangorup."

He started the car and drove through a gap in the broken-down fence, following the tire tracks between two rows of blighted apple trees. They passed through an opening in a second fence and were once more in wild bushland, moving at a mere crawl through ti scrub that came level with the top of the car. Presently he stopped again beside a large white stone that gleamed from the sparse grass like a bleached skull. Sound- ing a short blast on the horn, he switched off the headlights.

A rectangle of yellow light showed far ahead, glimmered for an instant and then vanished.

"That means for us to come on to the fence," Keller explained, starting the car again. He chuckled, looked sidewise at McKinney and added, "You oughter get a medal for knockin' off this place, Mister. It's a sort of port of entry for the mob. If it's put outer commission, every A-O bloke in the country will be out on a limb."

"Yeah, maybe," McKinney grunted. "Until they find themselves another spot."

THEY came out of the lane through the scrub and on to open ground, beyond which McKinney could see the moonlight twinkling on the long rollers of the Great Australian Bight. The trail slanted gently downward through a wide gully toward a little flat overlooking the ocean, where a bald knob of rock thrust aggressively above a dense thicket of scrub. At the edge of the scrub stood the house, a long, narrow structure of gum poles planted in the ground, plastered with clay and roofed with slabs of bark battened down with saplings against the wind, its neutral coloring rendering it almost invisible against the leafy background.

Keller let the car coast down the slope and stopped before a brush fence a hundred yards from the house. Switching off the headlights again, he whispered:

"Here's where you signal."

McKinney worked the spotlight: "Dash, dot, dot, dot!" He made a short pause and added, "Dash, dash, dot, dot, dot!"

"When the light shows in the window," Keller said, "it'll mean for us to come ahead."

McKinney waited, his eyes fixed on the black square of the window. Several minutes passed without response to his signal, and he glanced suspiciously at Keller, suddenly aware that the other was trembling as if from the ague.

"What's the matter?" McKinney inquired banteringly. "Your feet cold?"

"C-crikey!" the little man chattered. "I'm cold all over. N-never was w-what you might call h-heroic. B-but right now I'm s-scared—"

He stopped suddenly, peered through the open door panel and then edged closer to

McKinney, as if for protection, while he flung up his right arm to shield his eyes from the white glare of the flashlight that stabbed through the opening like a gleaming sword-blade, shining full into the faces of the car's occupants.

Taken momentarily by surprise, McKinney blinked into the glare, while his right hand swooped toward the butt of the Webley thrust inside the waistband of his trousers. Peering below the light, he caught a blur of movement in the darkness, just as a tiny pinpoint of orange flame blended for an instant with the white glare of the torch. Then he heard the vicious smack of a bullet through the car top above his head.

"Come out, swine—and come with your hands up!" The command came like a snarling echo to the report of the pistol.

McKINNEY ducked, jerked the Webley free, fired through the open door panel, aiming below and a little to the right of the flashlight beam. A second shot roared from the darkness beside the car. He saw the flashlight drop. Then he was out of the car and running around to the farther side of the vehicle, his forefinger tense on the trigger of his gun.

Reaching the back of the car, he halted, staring at the flashlight lying on the ground, its beam focused full upon the huddled figure of a man lying face downward, a heavy automatic still clutched in his outflung hand.

With his pistol covering the prostrate figure, McKinney glanced swiftly toward the house, which was still silent and dark. Stepping clear of the car, he took the automatic from the other's limp fingers, then stooped and felt the side of the man's neck, seeking a pulse beat. Satisfied that the man was dead, he turned the body over, lifted the flashlight and focused it upon the upturned face.

"Gawd!" Keller chattered, peering through the side window, "It's Scholte."

McKinney offered no remark. Searching the dead man's pockets, he brought to light a notebook, a small bunch of keys and a pen-knife. Transferring the loot to his own pockets, he climbed back into the car and laid the captured gun beside him on the sea.

He looked at Keller, whose left hand was clutching his right shoulder, and asked, "What's wrong?"

"He nicked me a bit." Keller showed his left hand sticky with blood. "Listen, Bremer's got a tommygun."

"So he's got a tommygun?" McKinney repeated, adding, "Well, if you want to back out—"

"I ain't tryin' to back out now," Keller declared angrily. "I'm thinkin' about flyin' glass from the windscreen, and—" He paused, almost inarticulate with fear.

"We'll have to take things as they come—including flying glass and machine-gun bullets," McKinney reminded him. "If you want to—"

"Shut up!" Keller bawled. Lifting one of the seat cushions, he placed it against the windshield. "Wouldn't that help?"

"My sound man!" McKinney approved. "Is that what you've been trying to get around to telling me?"

"Sure!" Keller nodded. Encouraged, he pulled the other cushion from under McKinney and held it against the glass. "Now, if them lead pills won't come through, we'll be all Sir Garnie, what?"

"Well, let's hope they won't," McKinney said, grinning encouragingly at the little man, who now knelt on the floorboards, both arms outstretched to hold the cushions in place, his teeth rattling like castanets. "Anyway, here we go!"

He started the motor, switched on the headlights and pressed on the gas pedal. The car started slowly, accelerated with a roar as he shifted gears. It crashed through the brush fence, gathered speed and went racing like a roaring juggernaut toward the house, heading squarely into a burst of machine-gun fire from the window.

The headlights blinked out. The windshield splintered and fell in shards around McKinney's feet. Bullets rattling off the radiator hood made a sound like dry beans being shaken in a bucket. McKinney glanced at Keller kneeling on the floorboards, his lips clamped in a tight line, his eyes bulging in fright. McKinney smiled, suspecting that the little man wasn't as badly frightened as he tried to make himself believe he was.

Peering around the end of the cushion in front of his face, McKinney saw that they were almost to the house. Suddenly the hammering of the machine-gun was stilled. The next instant the car slammed like a projectile into the pole wall, crashed through

and collided with an inner partition before McKinney could bring it to a stop.

He shut off the gas and remained in his seat while he peered about the dimly lighted interior for a sign of the machine-gunner. It seemed as if the house were disintegrating. A heap of broken poles from the outside wall lay across the radiator. Sheets of bark were sliding off the sagging roof. A ceiling beam had fallen through the top of the car and its broken end was jammed against the floor of the rear compartment. On a table half buried in debris a tin kerosene lamp burned undisturbed.

The sound of a slamming door came from the farther side of the house. Footfalls drummed on the packed earth as someone came running around the end of the building. Webley in hand, McKinney slid out of the car, aware now that Bremer had held his post by the window until the instant before the car had crashed through the wall. Now he was running around the house to take the invaders from the rear.

A man appeared suddenly before the hole in the wall, his crouching figure black against the moonlight, a machine-gun hugged to his chest. Catching sight of McKinney against the yellow light of the oil lamp, he brought up his weapon and sent a burst of bullets crackling through the opening. McKinney flung up his pistol and fired. Bremer ducked, then plunged headlong through the hole in the wall, his advance covered by the back of the car.

McKinney fell into a crouch and backed silently around the front of the radiator, admiring the dogged courage of the German even while he maneuvered to draw him into a position that would even the odds between the machine-gun and the six-shooter. Kneeling, he peered under the car and watched the other man's feet move silently along the farther side of the vehicle, like a hunter stalking his prey. McKinney realized that he was at a disadvantage, having the lighted lamp at his back, while Bremer was in comparative darkness.

There was not a sound to be heard now. There was no more noise of falling debris, and even the whisper of the night wind in the surrounding scrub was stilled. Watching the feet of his adversary, McKinney wondered how a man could move so quietly, lifting his booted feet and putting them

down again with a noiseless ease that suggested a stalking cat. He saw the feet come level with the left front door and moved outward, away from the car, avoiding the swinging panel and pause, then, as if he were aiming the machine-gun across the radiator hood. Again, McKinney cursed the lamp at his back.

SUDDENLY a pistol shot thundered in the silent room. McKinney heard the machine-gun clatter on the floor. Rising, his pistol ready, he saw Bremer sink to his knees, paw with his hands at the air, as if he were trying to push himself erect again, and then fall over on his side as if he had been struck on the head with a sledgehammer. He turned over on his back, straightened his legs and lay still, his staring eyes glazing in the moonlight streaming through the gaping hole in the roof.

Aware that Bremer was no longer a menace, McKinney came around the car and picked up the machine-gun. Peering through the open door, he saw Keller kneeling amid a litter of broken glass, in his right hand a heavy automatic, which he held trained on the still figure on the floor. Only then did McKinney recall leaving Scholte's pistol on the driver's seat.

"Okay, chum—the war's over." He spoke gently as he reached through the opening, fearing that the other might run amok, now that he had a gun in his hand. Disengaging the weapon from Keller's lax grasp, he added, "You did very well."

Keller crawled weakly out of the car and stood swaying in front of McKinney, his hands dripping blood. McKinney realized now that the other had been nicked by spent bullets coming through the cushions. Yet, he hadn't uttered a word of complaint.

"I ain't afraid any more," Keller mumbled, his voice rising as he continued, "I'll never be scared again. Not me! They'll probably throw me in the clink for the rest of me life, for me part in this rotten mess—or they may hang me, or shove me in front of a firin' squad. But I won't be afraid. So help me, I won't!"

His voice trailed off in an indistinct mumble, and he keeled over against McKinney, out cold.

McKinney picked him up and laid him on a couch. He straightened, snatching the

machine-gun from the floor, listening as his ears caught a muffled sound of voices. Suddenly he remembered the two missing Commonwealth officers.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

"Down here—under the house," a voice replied. "Can't come out; we're ironed."

McKinney lifted the oil lamp and wandered through the house, looking for the cellar entrance. Like the walls, the floor of the house was of split poles, covered with clay, which gave it the appearance of a dirt floor. He searched the three rooms, tapping the floor with his heel, while his eyes sought for a joint that would indicate a trap door.

Finally, he discovered in the kitchen a closet built beside the clay-and-stick chimney, noticed that its floor was higher by several inches than the floor of the adjoining room. Hooking his fingers under the projecting edge of the closet floor, he heaved upward. It rose easily, revealing a flight of earthen steps leading downward into pitch darkness.

"Hello! Down there?" he called.

"For God's sake be careful with that lamp!" a voice pleaded from the darkness. "This damned place is filled with explosives of some kind."

McKinney smiled, aware that he had discovered the lost ones. Descending the steps, he found himself in a small cellar, the walls of which were lined with cartons similar to the one he had stolen from Keller's gunyah the night before. In the middle of the cellar two men lay on rude cots, their wrists and ankles ironed to the pole frames.

"Thank heaven someone got to us at last!" one of the men exclaimed. "I was beginning to believe that we were the real forgotten men."

"You've certainly been giving the department a headache," McKinney said, using the keys he had taken from Scholte to free them. He didn't need an introduction. From the description furnished by headquarters, he recognized the lanky blond man as Hansen; the shorter, moonfaced man, with quick dark eyes under thick, black brows as Driscoll. Their faces were covered with stubble, and both were naked to the waist, their bodies a mass of half-healed scars. And they stank!

"Phew!" McKinney gagged. "You guys smell like you haven't had a bath since the midwife washed you." He tossed Driscoll's

leg irons aside, lifted the lamp and looked curiously over the cellar. "Zeppelinites! Enough of the damned things to set all the timber in Australia on fire. Reckon this is the place I've been hunting."

"We found it first," Driscoll reminded him. Grinning wryly, he sat up and began chafing his wrists. "Mind telling us who you are?"

McKinney responded with his name and rank. They shook hands all around, after which he set the lamp on the floor, sat down beside Driscoll and told them of his adventures of the past two days.

"It isn't fair, by cripes!" Hanson complained. "Here we stew in this damned hole for—oh, I don't know how long—putting up with all sorts of indignities from those damned gorillas, and you walk in and in two days knock over their damned apple-cart. It isn't right!"

Driscoll chuckled. "The luck of the Irish, you know." He turned to McKinney and added, "I'm worried with the idea that this is just one tiny unit of this damned A-O mob, what?"

McKinney suddenly remembered about the telephone. "I think we can have the boss of the mob behind bars in a couple of hours." He rose and moved toward the steps. "Come topside as soon as you can."

He left them the lamp and climbed out of the cellar, recalling that he had noticed a cabinet telephone on the wall opposite to the one breached by the car. Groping his way through the darkened room, he located the instrument, lifted the receiver and then twisted the crank. After several attempts, he received a response.

"Port Charles?" a woman's voice sounded in his ear.

"State police business," McKinney answered. "I want to be connected with the police barrack in Dangorup. Afterward, I may want you to put through a call to Perth."

"It's rather late," the operator said doubtfully.

"The police never sleep," McKinney declared solemnly. "Now see if you can get me Dangorup, like a nice young lady."

"Very well!" The voice sounded somewhat mollified. "I'll ring you when the connection is made."

"Okay!" He replaced the receiver and grinned at the antiquated cabinet. "Nice

young lady! I'll bet she's the dessicated better half of some back-bush storekeeper." He groped in his pockets and found a box of matches. Striking one, he returned to where he had left Keller.

He found the little man now fully conscious. But the sleeves of his coat were clammy with half-dried blood. He was helping him off with his coat when the telephone rang.

"Got to answer this," he said. "I'll fix you up as soon as I get my report through."

He stumbled through the darkness to the other room, located the telephone and eagerly snatched the receiver from its fork.

"Dangorup answering," the woman's voice announced.

"Okay!" McKinney responded. "Let's have him."

"I say—who is this?" a strange voice inquired.

"Suppose you tell me who you are first?" McKinney stalled.

"Constable Walsh, assigned temporarily to this district," came the answer.

"Swell, Constable Walsh!" McKinney boomed into the receiver. "This is Lieutenant McKinney, of Naval Intelligence. Is Lieutenant Tuck there?"

"Lieutenant Tuck is somewhere east of here, hunting you, Lieutenant," the trooper declared coolly. "He went in a car with two policemen and that blackfellow of his."

"I see," McKinney said. "He'll probably find me before long. By the way, who else is there with you?"

"Chief Inspector Stone is here, sir. Would you care to—"

"Would I?" McKinney interrupted joyfully. "Put him on."

After an interval of several minutes, the sharp, incisive voice of the chief inspector came over the line. "Hello, Mac! Are you there?"

"Right here."

"How can I be sure it's you?" Stone demanded cautiously.

"Listen," McKinney drawled. "How is Mrs. Stone, and all the little pebbles?"

He heard the inspector chuckle and then say, "I see it's you. Very well then, what have you to report?"

McKinney told him of everything that had happened since he had followed Keller to his gunyah the night before. Concluding,

he added, "There's a fellow named Tree—right name probably is Baum—who does the cleaning in headquarters. Right?"

"Correct!" Stone said.

"Okay! Drag him and sweat him. He'll probably give you the address of one Bordmann—Axel, I believe, is his front name. His alias is Harry Waldron. He's presumably fronting as a clerk in some shipping office in Perth. He's the top man of the A-O in this part of the country."

"My word! How did you learn all this?"

McKinney told him about Keller, about Leavitt—or Brasche—still locked in the rumble of the police car. "Keller saved my bacon twice tonight," he added. "In fact, I wouldn't have got anywhere only for him. He was blackmailed into joining this A-O mob. I want him given a break. How about it?"

"I should think so," the inspector said. "In fact, I believe he might prove useful to us. You know, he'd probably jump at a chance to prove his patriotism, what?"

"He's already proved it," McKinney declared. "What about Watson—or Mungger?"

"Watson, as you call him, resisted arrest and was shot," Stone told him. "We were very much upset, because the man whom we knew as Leavitt had disappeared, which left us in pretty much the same position we were when we received Tuck's telegram this morning. However, your discoveries have cleared up everything very nicely. Shall I call Esperance for a detail to relieve you?"

"And tell 'em to bring a doctor along," McKinney suggested. "That Keller guy is nicked pretty badly, and I want him fixed up. You know, he'll be your chief witness against Bordmann, alias Waldron. Now I'm going back to see what I can do for him till the doctor arrives."

He replaced the receiver and was turning away when Driscoll and Hansen emerged from the cellar, with the tall man carrying the lamp.

"I want to report, too!" Driscoll bawled, rushing toward the instrument.

McKinney left them there, took the lamp from Hansen and returned to Keller. He removed the little man's coat and shirt, then found water and whiskey with which he swabbed the blood from the other's arms and chest. Keller was wounded in half a

dozen places, chiefly about the chest and arms, from bullets that had gone through the cushions. Happily, all of them had been spent, and none of them had penetrated far beneath the skin.

"They're sending a doctor over from Esperance," McKinney told him. "Specially for you."

"Keepin' me alive now, so they can hang me later, what?" There was no trace of fear in his voice now.

McKinney chuckled. "Never fear, chum, they won't hang you. Listen, how would you like a job with the state police?"

"Me?" Keller eyed him very doubtfully. "You're coddin', aren't you?"

"No kidding, I assure you," McKinney said. "I've talked over your case with Chief Inspector Stone, and he seems to think like I do. Besides, you've done nothing criminal that I know about, aside from associating with enemy agents."

"And that's the Gawd's truth, Mister!" Keller declared.

McKinney swabbed the last of the blood from Keller's shoulder. Then he filled his pipe and smoked, listening absently to the voice of Driscoll as he talked to far-away Canberra. So far as McKinney was concerned, the case was closed. The state would take up where he left off. Bordmann and Tree would be rounded up and given their deserts. But the fight would still go on against others of the same stripe—the secret army of the A-O scattered throught the world and engaged in all sorts of dirty work

for the greater glory of the Nazi fatherland. War was war; and the enemy would never pause in his efforts to undermine democracy until his power was destroyed.

Hansen and Driscoll, their report made, came into the room. From their gloomy faces, McKinney suspected that they had received a dressing down from their superiors. Disposing his lanky frame in the one surviving chair, Hansen growled.

"In this damned job we get shot, and stabbed, and blown up with bombs, and kidnaped and tortured, and—oh, hell! I don't know what else. And all we get out of it is a blasted wiggling. It makes me fair sick!"

"That's a bloody fact," Driscoll supported him. "This job of ours is the most thankless one in the world. If we fail, we catch hell; if we succeed, all we get is 'Ta!' Just like patting a dog on the head and saying 'Good Fido!' Hell! the blokes in the army have all the fun and get all the medals!"

"And we get 'Ta!'" Hansen growled. "Cripes! I wish I could get into the Yank marines."

McKinney took his pipe from his mouth and blew a cloud of smoke toward the hole in the roof.

"Trouble with you guys," he drawled, "is that you don't consider a good deed is its own reward."

Hansen snorted. "Rubbish!"

McKinney grinned. "It's a fact," he insisted. "A good deed it its own reward. At least, that's what they taught me back home in the States, when I was a Boy Scout."

The Story Tellers' Circle

(Continued from page 6)

sey, wise to Joe's one slight weakness, is throwing his hooks to the head. Louis evades many of them, but they come in a steady stream. Joe puts his accurate right in Jack's face, breaking his already smashed nose. Jack snorts blood, laughs again and puts three lefts and a right to the body.

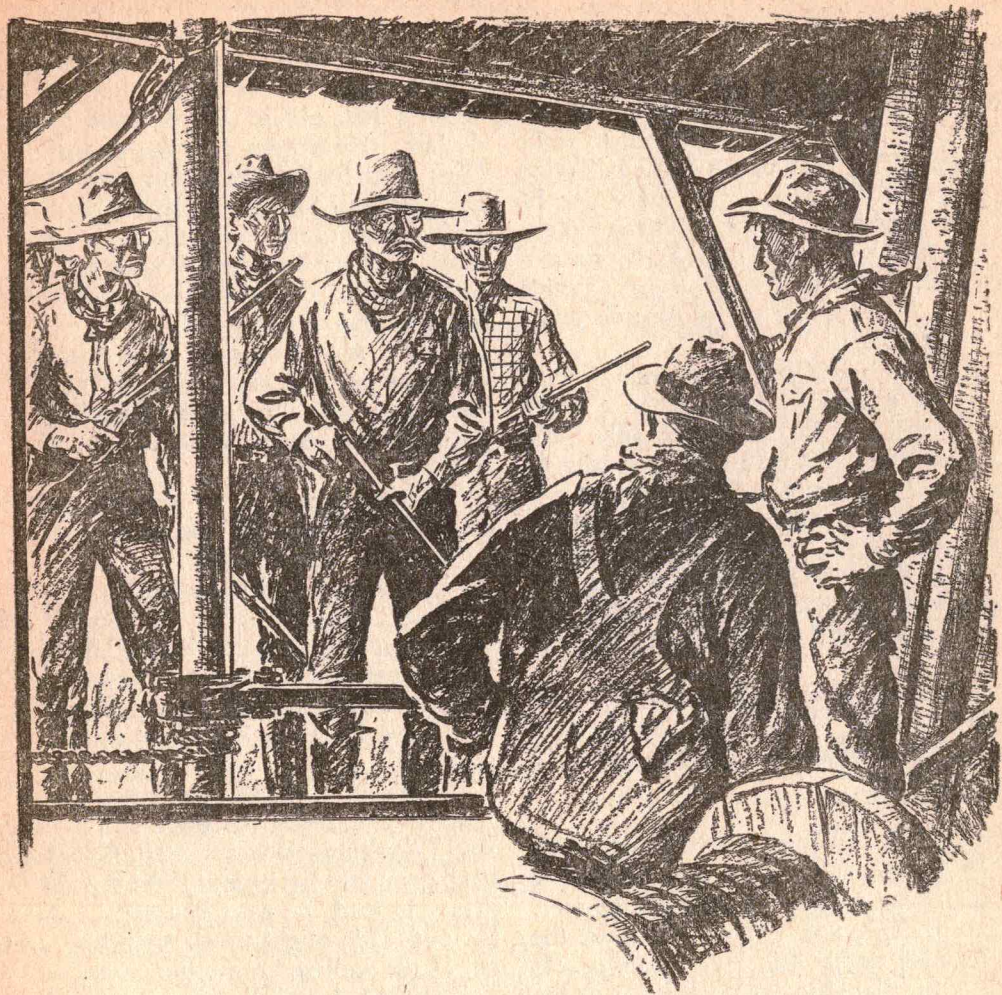
"Louis, as he did against Schmelling once, drops his guard an inch, because he is hurt. Jack shifts with amazing swiftness, quicker than anyone Joe ever saw. He hits Joe on

the temple with a left hook, a right hook, another right, another left, another left.

"Joe is going down, down, down. He sits on the floor, his lips puffed, his eyes blank. Blackburne is there . . . alive and alert, guiding his great pupil. He makes Joe take the long count, motions him to keep his guard up. The referee is having trouble getting Jack to a neutral corner, because Jack wants to go over and kick Joe in the face, not be-

(Continued on page 107)

*You Can Hold a Gun on a Man and Make Him Drill, But You
Can't Make Him Get Oil Where There Ain't Any*



A PROVED CROOK

By RAY PALMER TRACY

MEL JONES, oil well contractor, known to the oil fraternity as "Cyanide" because of the dynamite in his fists, looked at the samples the driller brought up in the bailer.

"This sure beats me," he said. "Now I know the meaning of that crape we've been getting from the grass roots down. We might's well put out the fire, call the dogs."

Bill Severns, the burly driller who had

handled a tower on Cyanide's big drilling machine on many a wildcat well, took off a cotton glove and stirred the sample with a big finger.

"Wouldn't that fry you and board yourself?" he demanded. "The geologist sure went haywire on this. And it don't wonder me none."

He went out on the casing walk and stared at the country. "Never seen a prettier oil structure," he said.

Cyanide joined him. "Sure's a beauty on top," he agreed.

To anyone other than an oil man, the country looked like a dreary bit of Wyoming scenery. Jack Thatcher, on whose ranch the wildcat was—the buildings just over the raise to the south—had attempted to make an irrigated hay field of the location. Trying to get more of a flow out of the spring by using dynamite, he lost the water completely. So the hay field went back to weeds and sagebrush. But to the admiring Cyanide and Bill, the spot was one of nature's greatest works of art.

"If it was bound and determined to blow up on us, it couldn't have picked a better time," concluded Bill philosophically. "We can move the outfit up to Bly and take on that two-well contract for the Peabody Company. That will make old Big Hole Markey bella with pain. I seen one of his truck drivers in Hamilton the other day. Big Hole figgers we'll be tied up here another two weeks and he'll fall heir to the Peabody contract."

"It's the one bright spot about this," commented Cyanide. "It's always a pleasure to jab that crook where it hurts him most—in the pocketbook."

CYANIDE and Big Hole had been bitter rivals, back in the early days, when they had both been drillers, working for the same contractor. They had been enemies since the day Cyanide caught Big Hole stealing hole off him by changing the recordings in the log book. The enmity had continued through their contracting careers.

"Here comes Jack Thatcher," discovered Bill. "Looks like a long, ungainly old buzzard, don't he?"

"Yeah, and them sons of his, Lot, Jake, Ben, and even Abe, the young fella, look just like him," said Cyanide. "I only hope they don't go to acting like buzzards when they find they ain't going to have them cars with diamonds for headlights and rubies for tail-lights like they're counting on."

With his dry, bird-like strut, Jack Thatcher came down the worn trail that led from the house to the drilling rig. He was gray, hard and past sixty. Born suspicious, he had improved it with each year until it was deep seated in his expression. He looked out of small eyes with a light that half hinted

he could read the lowdown trick you were about to play on him.

"Think he'll kick up a muss?" inquired Bill. "Everytime he got to dreaming out loud in millions, I tried to point out that better'n five out of six wildcats come in dusters. He always give me one of them 'You poor fool' looks of his, and said, 'A big company like the Bright Plains outfit ain't spending all this money drillin' my ranch without knowing it's going to get plenty back. I wouldn't do it. No smart business man would do it.'"

"We'll soon find out," said Cyanide as Thatcher reached the casing walk. "Got some bad news for you, Thatcher," he greeted. He extended the sample he was holding.

Thatcher looked at it puzzled, but not worried. "What is it?" he asked.

"Granite," said Cyanide.

"Is that supposed to be bad?"

"Bad?" inquired Bill. "When the drill reaches granite, it means, that's all, brother."

Thatcher probed first one and then the other with his sharpest look. "You trying to tell me I ain't going to get no oil?" he asked.

"That's it." Cyanide had never had any luck beating about the bush. "I'm sorry. And I don't understand it a-tall. We should have gone into the objective oil sand at this depth. Instead, we went into granite. That's the end. We might's well strip the casing out of the well and move the outfit."

"I reckon it ain't that bad," contradicted Thatcher. "You're liable to hit anything in the ground, includin' granite. Why," he went on authoritatively, "I seen plenty of granite up in the mountains west of here. Stands to reason they'd be granite way down here. You can't cram that down me. Just you keep right on drillin'."

"We could drill for twenty thousand feet and it would be the same all the way," said Cyanide. "This is just one of them tricks I was telling you about that nature plays. How it happened that granite got heaved up to where it is, and a nice looking structure got laid down on top of it as a come-on, is something I nor nobody else is going to tell you, not off hand."

Thatcher took a bottle from his pocket. It was about half full of dry hole scum, crape, or, as it is often called, "farmers' oil,"

because farmers scrape it off the sump, fill bottles with it and proudly show it around as a sure sign there is going to be great production in their well. Thatcher shook the bottle.

"With a showing like that," he said, "there's bound to be oil here."

"You find that stuff wherever there's oil shale," explained Cyanide. "Ain't no ifs nor ands about it. We've struck the granite, and we're done."

Thatcher thrust out his long neck and fixed Cyanide with a baleful eye. "Maybe somebody paid you to run into granite," he suggested. "Don't you start pullin' no casing till I look around a little. I figger you'll be glad to keep on drillin' time I'm done." He turned around and went back over the rise to his buildings looking more like a buzzard than ever.

CYANIDE shrugged. "I figgered he'd accuse us of selling him out. He's the type. Well, let him look around. You go ahead and rig up to pull casing. I'll go in town and phone the Bright Plains office we've hit the granite and that I'll be down and settle up soon's we get the outfit ready to roll."

A tall, wide, loosely hung together man, Cyanide got in his car and drove into Hamilton. He telephoned the Bright Plains outfit and then attended to a lot of business.

Coming out of a hardware store, he saw Thatcher and two of his boys, Ben and Abe, on a street corner in close conference with Big Hole Markey. They saw Cyanide and moved on up the street.

Cyanide scowled. He was due to have enough trouble with Thatcher without Big Hole egging him on.

It was late afternoon when Cyanide returned to the location. He was surprised to see Thatcher's four sons, armed to the teeth patrolling the area. From the derrick house was issuing loud, profane and abusive language in Bill's well known roar.

"What the blazes is going on?" Cyanide demanded of Abe who was walking a beat that took him past where the contractor had parked his car.

Abe gave him a sharp, unfriendly look that matched his old man's best. "Go on in the derrick house and you'll find out, you crook, you!" came the answer.

Abe was only around eighteen, but he was sore and had a rifle. Cyanide didn't argue with him. He jumped up on the casing walk and went in the derrick house.

Bill Severns, his face tinged with purple was facing Jack Thatcher and a slight, skinny man with a gigantic Adam's apple jumping up and down his scrawny neck, and dressed in a wrinkled Prince Albert coat. As Cyanide entered, this individual straightened with such extreme dignity his coat skirts gave an audible swish.

"This here ain't a doodlebug," he denied coldly, and held out what looked to be a tubular imitation of a willow fork such as water witches use to locate water.

"Whatever it is, it's a cussed fake like all them things are!" yelled Bill. "How you going to find oil in a solid block of granite, miles square, with an angle iron you picked out of a junk yard?" Only Jack Thatcher with his rifle half trained on Bill kept the driller from throwing the impostor out of the derrick house.

"If you'll point out the toolpusher of this asylum," suggested Cyanide, "I'd like to inquire what in hell is going on?"

Thatcher looked him over with a pair of eyes in which suspicion had congealed into icy certainty. "I ought to put a bullet through you, you crook!" he announced what the sentence should be. "You sold me out like I was pretty sure you had! Don't you deny it! I even found out how much you got. And you thought you could put one over on me!" He showed yellow teeth in a derisive grin.

Cyanide stared at him. "You serious?" he asked.

"You damn know it!" came the hard answer. "You're going to start drilling again and keep at it till you fetch in my oil!"

"There never has been no oil and there never will be in solid granite," said Cyanide. "Who's the gent rigged up for a masquerade ball?" He suspected the answer to some of this lay in that individual.

"This is Professor Decum Hobart, chemist and oil locator," introduced Thatcher.

"How do you do, Professor," acknowledged Cyanide. "What kind of a doodlebug you got?"

"This ain't no doodlebug," denied the professor sharply. "This here is an exact science."

"Fancy that! How's the damned thing work?"

Professor Decum Hobart was eager to oblige. "In this cartridge is chemicals it tooken me years to blend," he explained, exhuming a .45 cartridge from his pocket and fitting it over the business end of the divining rod. He took a stance, feet wide spread, the divining rod pointing up and held breast high, one hand on either prong of the fork. A grim expression of great concentration spread over his thin face.

The rod, apparently of its own volition, turned downward until the cartridge pointed straight down the well.

"See there!" shouted the professor triumphantly. "There's oil down there! They ain't the slightest doubt about it."

"What you got to say to that, crook?" Thatcher demanded of Cyanide.

"I got just one question to ask," said Cyanide. "I seen you hobnobbing with Big Hole Markey in Hamilton, today. By any chance did Big Hole recommend the professor to you?"

"I've done work for Mr. Markey," interposed the professor. "I've found him a very fine gentleman."

"That's all I need to know," said Cyanide. "Thatcher, that lying Markey is the one that's jobbing you, not me. All he wants is for you to hold me up while he gets a contract I have to drill a couple of wells with the Peabody Company."

"Markey told me how you tried to do him out of that contract," nodded Thatcher. "Ain't no use you trying to lie out of it. He told me plenty other things about you. I even got a pretty good idea who paid you a tidy sum to claim there ain't no oil here."

"He's gone plumb off his nut, Cyanide," said Bill.

"Only for a little while," soothed Cyanide. "He'll wake up pretty soon. Down in his heart he knows this gent in the gambler's coat is a fraud."

"I've woke up already," snapped Jack Thatcher. "I told Bill just before you come in what you had to do. Now I'll tell it to you. Start drilling and keep at it till you get oil!"

"You can hold a gun on me and make me drill," said Cyanide, "but you can't make me get oil where there ain't any. And another thing. When I'm through, you'll pay

me contract footage for every foot I drill— if your ranch is worth that much."

The threat made no impression on Jack Thatcher. "I'll pay the bill out of the oil you're goin' to get — if I feel generous. Chances are I won't. You got plenty already for not drilling."

Cyanide saw there was no use in arguing further just now. "All right," he agreed. "You've got a gun and I ain't. I'll drill, but I do it under protest and because I can't help myself. I want that understood."

"Understand anything you want to understand, just so you drill," came the hard answer.

"We're about out of fuel oil," said Cyanide. "If we're going to keep on drilling, I'll have to go to town and make arrangements for more."

"And let you spill the beans?" Thatcher wanted to know. "Me and the boys will see about the fuel oil. Think I'm a fool?"

"Yes," said Cyanide.

"Get busy!" snarled Thatcher.

Cyanide gave Bill the nod. "We got to humor him."

"And you see to it they ain't no accidents, like losing bits in the hole or breaking down and things," Thatcher laid down a set of rules. "You have an accident with the outfit that keeps you from drilling, and you'll have a personal misfortune right afterwards, and don't you forget it!" He stomped out of the derrick house taking the professor with him.

"Genial old cuss, ain't he?" grated Bill. "Don't take no magician to figger who cooked up this mess for us."

"We've got to get loose from here, and quick," said Cyanide. "In three days we'll lose the Peabody contract to Big Hole. And I doubt if Thatcher and his boys can wrangle enough money to pay for a couple weeks' drilling, even if we sell them down to their underwear." He sat down on the butting block to think.

Cyanide had wriggled out of most of the tight spots he had been caught in. This one looked to be foolproof. Drilling business was slack at the time and he needed that two-well contract with the Peabody Company at Bly. The boys whose jobs depended on his contracts were just as anxious to get it as he was. He could depend on a hundred percent cooperation.

The trouble was, there seemed to be no way to get the upper hand of Thatcher. The ranch sat back by itself on a side road where no one ever visited unless on business. It could easily be a couple of weeks before anyone showed up and then they might not get a chance to send word of their plight to the sheriff.

Eventually, someone would want his money for the supplies furnished out of Hamilton.

An interested party was bound to insist on seeing Cyanide. That was the only sure bet Cyanide could think of. But he had to get out of there before three days or lose the Peabody contract.

CYANIDE went to the door and looked out. The only one of the boys in sight was Abe. He didn't believe Abe would shoot. So he sauntered over to his car, got in and stepped on the starter. Nothing happened.

Abe came over and stopped at a safe distance to watch. He seemed to have no objection to Cyanide's driving away, provided he could get his car started.

Cyanide looked the car over, but could see no reason why he was getting no spark. He tried the starter again without getting a kick out of the engine. He was suddenly suspicious. He glanced at Abe.

"You been monkeying with my car?" he asked.

"Yeah, I took a part of the distributor out."

In his anger, Cyanide took a furious step toward Abe.

Abe's rifle flipped hip high. But it was more the hard, cold light in the boy's eyes than the weapon that stopped Cyanide.

"What ails you dumbheads?" he demanded. "Can't you see you ain't goin' to get away with this?"

"All we want is what's comin' to us."

"Don't worry. You'll get it," promised Cyanide. Fuming, he went back into the derrick house.

"Had your car fixed so you couldn't move it?" asked Bill.

Cyanide nodded. "Be careful around them boys, including Abe. They'd just as leaf shoot you as not."

"Big Hole sure done a job on us this time," growled Bill. "Unless we can break

out of here mighty quick, he'll land our contract. One of us might start walking."

"I've thought of that," said Cyanide. "But it's forty miles out to where a fella could contact someone. Any of us would be missed inside an hour, and there ain't a place between here and town where a man couldn't be spotted from five miles away. One of the boys would be out on a hoss and herd the messenger home. Nope, we've got to think of something else."

But no chances developed during the next three days. Cyanide counted the Peabody contract as lost. But he still looked for a way to escape. However, working under guard and sleeping in a locked bunkhouse didn't allow much freedom of movement.

Professor Decum Hobart had taken up his residence in the ranchhouse. He fairly haunted the well. He told Bill, "My professional career is at stake. This well is either going to make or break me as a petroleum scientist."

"By the time you get out of jail it won't matter," said Bill.

The professor looked up at him in great pity. "When the oil gushes forth, who will want to put me in jail?"

Bill raised his brows. "Oil gush out of solid granite?"

"My reading says there is a tremendous pool of oil under this rig." The professor stamped on the floor with his foot.

Since he was determined that Thatcher and his warlike boys were going to pay him as far as their money held out, Cyanide did a good job drilling. It was slow work cutting into granite. But by the end of the week they were in it over six feet. He intended to have a first class granite hole to sell to the Thatchers.

It was at the beginning of the second week that he thought of a chance to escape. It was so simple he wondered why it hadn't occurred to him before.

Ben drove to town every other day after a load of fuel oil with the tank truck. He always left the truck standing back of the boiler house. Cyanide simply hid in the boiler house until Ben got in the truck cab. While the boy was busy getting started, Cyanide dove into the cab and got his powerful hands on him.

A swift uppercut so discouraged Ben from reaching for the gun on the seat beside

him, he dropped into a deep sleep. Cyanide pulled on Ben's hat and hunched down in the cab. He was well out on the road to town before Ben moved. Cyanide then stopped and tied him solidly.

When Ben aroused and discovered his condition, all his cockiness faded. "The old man will kill me," he bleated.

"The sheriff will tend to you without no help from your paw," consoled Cyanide.

"I ain't afraid of Sheriff John Gross, the old tub. It's the old man who puts the cold chills up my neck," worried Ben.

WHEN he reached Hamilton, Cyanide untied Ben's feet, took his rifle and marched his prisoner into the sheriff's office.

Gross, his handlebar mustache and round eyes giving him a perpetual look of amazement, listened to Cyanide's story with his tongue in his cheek.

"Jack Thatcher's a good citizen," he said. "Any of this slush true, Ben?" he asked.

Ben maintained a sullen silence.

"I reckon they ain't nothin' to it," decided Gross.

"All right," said Cyanide, "I'll just telephone the U. S. marshal. Maybe I can get some action that way."

"You don't have to do that," said Gross. "I can tend to my own county. I'll go out and see what's going on." Reluctantly, he took his feet off the desk. "First," he said, "I'll untie Ben. No wonder he won't talk, trussed up like a fowl."

Ben stretched his arms and legs and got the circulation going again. He made a sudden dive for the rifle and got it. "Now," he said to Cyanide, "we'll get that load of fuel oil and go back to the well. You can't fool Sheriff Gross. He knows nobody is making you do anything you don't want to do."

Gross stared at him open mouthed. He got red in the face and then made a quick leap and grabbed the rifle out of Ben's hands. "Oh, you ain't making Cyanide do anything he don't want to do, eh? I reckon I really better go out and see what's going on anyways."

"I was just sort of kiddin'," Ben saw his mistake and tried to turn it off.

"I'm still going out," said Gross. "And you make one more funny move like you did just now and I'll put the cuffs on you. I reckon I'd better take a few men with me,

seeing there's so many of you Thatchers," decided the sheriff prudently."

Cyanide left the tank truck in town and rode out with the sheriff and Ben. They were followed by two cars full of deputies.

When they arrived, Lot and Jake were out scouring the country for the escaped contractor. Abe was guarding the rig. Jack Thatcher and Professor Decum Hobart were just coming out of the derrick house.

Old Jack saw Cyanide coming with the sheriff and Ben. His face drew into stubborn lines and he waited near the casing walk. He made no effort to deny holding Cyanide to the drilling by force. He justified himself by claiming Cyanide had accepted a bribe to shut down the rig.

While the sheriff, Thatcher and Professor Decum were all loudly talking at once stating their positions, Bill appeared in the derrick house door.

"P'sst! P'sst!" he called slightly less noisily than a broken steam valve. He beckoned to Cyanide with his finger. Cyanide saw he wouldn't be missed and slipped away.

"What is it, Bill?" he asked the driller.

"This is the doggonest funniest well I ever socked a bit into," he said. "Look at them last samples of cuttings I just washed out."

"Shale!" identified Cyanide with vast astonishment.

"Shale," affirmed Bill. "I went out of the granite two hours ago. I've drilled close to ten feet of shale. Feels now like the bit was on a lime cap. Must be that. Smell them little puffs of gas we're getting?"

CYANIDE sniffed. "We're coming to a well of some kind," he agreed. "That granite was just another of them non-conformities nature insists on sticking into formations to confuse people. No oil man would have dreamed of drilling this well deeper—not unless he was drilling for the Thatchers."

"You don't s'pose that there contraption of the professor's can actually point out oil, do you?" inquired Bill.

"Not me," denied Cyanide, "It's accidents like this though, that give the doodlebuggers standing. If we make a well of this, the professor's career is in his own hands. People will be paying him good money to locate oil for the rest of his life."

"I ain't so sure there ain't something in it," said Bill.

Cyanide grinned. "You too, eh?" he commented. "Well, maybe I'd get him myself if I was to drill a well on my own. Folks are like sheep, besides being superstitious. But what I'd like to know is how we're going to convince the Thatchers and anyone else who don't know a thing about geology that I ain't the biggest crook unhung? It'll sure look like Thatcher tripped me up and saved his well by a narrow squeak and a lot of quick thinking."

"Anyway, the Bright Plains outfit will be glad to pay for the extra drilling soon as they find out about it," pointed out Bill. "And who cares what a lot of yaps think?"

"That's right," admitted Cyanide. "And the best thing of all is that Big Hole in trying to do us dirt, done us a favor. We've got a ten-well contract here if we get oil, and we're sure going to get it."

Cyanide went back to the heated battle going on just off the casing walk.

"Sheriff," he butted into a long-winded discourse by Professor Decum Hobart, "I've decided not to press any charges against Jack Thatcher and his boys."

There was a moment's dead silence. Then the sheriff began to sputter, "But Jack here forced you to drill at gun's point. He admits it himself."

"I disremember," said Cyanide. "Besides it looks like maybe we're going to get a well here after all."

"What kind of shenanigans is this?" roared the sheriff. "I've a dumed good notion to pinch you for false accusation."

"If you do, I'll come right in and bail

him out," declared Jack. "I'm going to have this well finished."

"You don't need a sheriff." Gross was plumb disgusted. "What you need is a commission of doctors."

"I dunno yet what we do need, but I will pretty quick," said Cyanide and headed back for the derrick house.

The sheriff finally took his deputies and went back to town.

Thatcher came in the derrick house with his four sons all armed to the teeth.

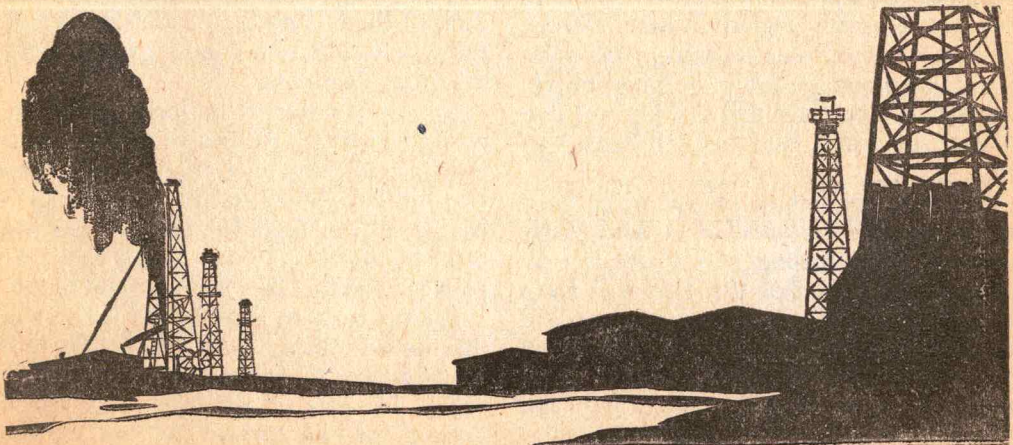
"Lay down your guns," invited Cyanide. "You don't need 'em no more."

"So you're admitting I was right?" demanded Thatcher.

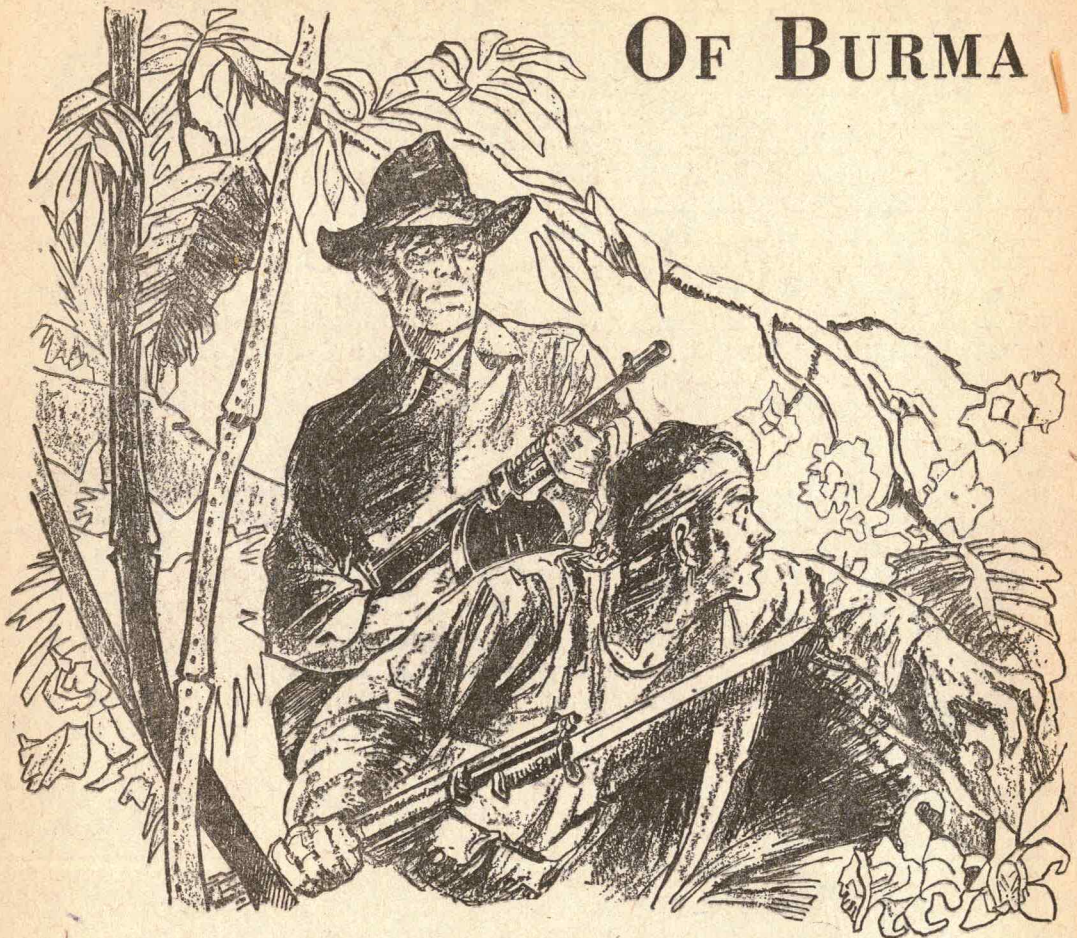
"No man was ever more wrong than you," denied Cyanide. "But the funny part is, it was the luckiest mistake you ever made when you let Big Hole Markey foist the professor on you. Unless I'm mistaken again, in the next few hours you're going to get oil where you ain't got no right to get it. I give up. Maybe I don't know a thing about this business. Seems that oil is where you find it, same as gold."

It was nearly dark when the bit broke through the caprock and oil shot over the derrick. Thatcher's face was aglow with satisfaction. "There," he boasted. "I reckon I learned you not to try and crook a man like me."

Cyanide opened his mouth to explain a few simple facts about geology. He closed it helplessly. What was the use? Thatcher would never understand. He was perfectly satisfied with his own theory and his own astuteness. So Cyanide forced a grin. "Yeah, I reckon you did," he agreed.



THE THOUSAND DEATHS OF BURMA



THE STORY SO FAR

JOHNNY BURTON of the American Tenth Air Force is shot down by a Zero over the desolate regions where Burma, Tibet and China come together. He parachutes into a strange group of white people and natives who have fled the Jap war machine to this lonely land they call Peace Valley.

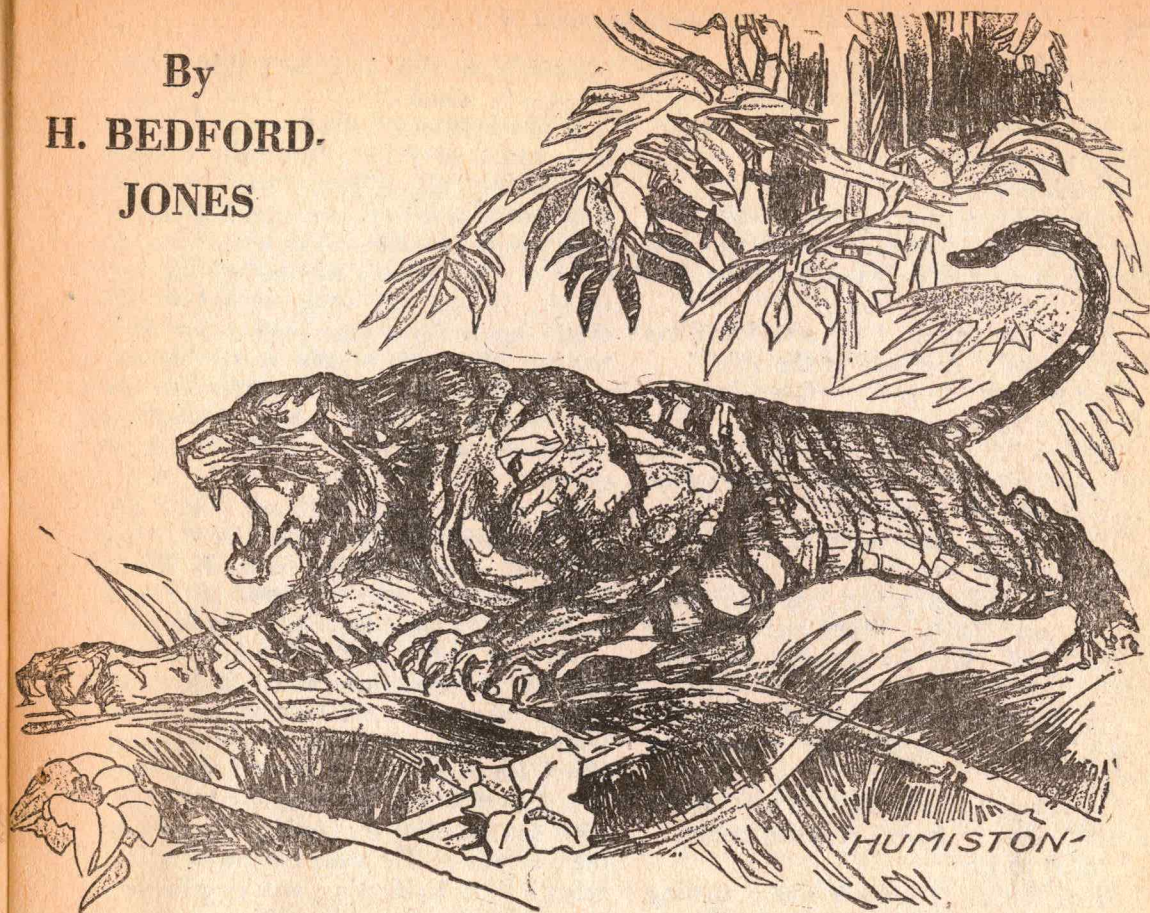
The party consists of several white men, two women and a handful of faithful Malay natives. Their feeling of security is tempered by the fear that the Japs will learn of their presence. In the dangerous and enemy-infested country around them a Nip communications road runs by only ten miles from their camp. This is both a menace and a blessing for they ambush small truck trains

to replenish their supplies. But Burton discovers that whenever a map is found on a Jap officer it is destroyed. He gradually realizes that long ago most of these people have decided there is no escape and to attempt a getaway would mean even greater danger than they face now.

Johnny is attracted to Josie Crawford, a young and pretty Australian girl and Cocky Bolt, a café entertainer from Manila. These two still have hope—unlike the others who, having suffered frightful things and seen unprintable horrors, are just empty shells with passive hope that they may keep on living.

Burton is determined to get back to civilization and plans a way of signalling to the Allied planes that occasionally fly above. He knows his pals of the Air Force will be looking for him anyway and will try to at-

By
H. BEDFORD
JONES



*These Few Had Emerged From a Wave of Blood Where Others
Past Counting Had Gone Down*

tempt to rescue if he can be located. For this bit of independent thinking he is severely reprimanded by the Rajah, head of the Malays.

VI

BURTON got back to camp, with luck. It was not a pleasant trip.

The first person he ran into was Cocky Bolt, well outside camp. Cocky had a spade over his shoulder, and stopped dead at sight of Burton.

"Hullo! What's wrong?"

"Me," Burton replied, and told him what had happened. Cocky chuckled.

"The Rajah makes us step around, you bet! He's a good guy."

"Thought you didn't get along with him?"

Cocky winked. "Don't believe all you hear, feller. He and I understand each other."

"What's the spade for?"

"Oh, the usual. Simpson wanted me to pick out a nice tree for him, and I promised I'd oblige."

"Simpson? A tree?" Burton remembered suddenly what the Padre had said. "Oh, you mean that—"

"Yep. He passed over, as the soft-hearted folk say, an hour ago. Come on and help pick him a soft spot. He always liked trees."

Burton was astonished at this streak of sentiment, and said so.

"I can afford to be a fool at times; makes

me feel good," replied Cocky, as they walked among the trees and finally selected a spot for the grave. "Look here. Tell me something, real honest."

Burton nodded. "Okay."

"About those two Jap motorcycles I've got cached away. Would you like to hop on with me and ride off out of this muck?"

"No," said Burton shortly.

"Good. Me neither. I was afraid that was in your mind. Any luck at the strip?"

Burton told about the flame-throwing truck, and the other whistled.

"Whew! That's bad. These Nips are getting wise. Well, we only got one spade; want to spell me at the job?"

They dug the grave together. It was hot work, for noon was at hand.

"He can wait till sunset, but won't keep longer," said Cocky. "Tony Burke will see to the burial. Get any cigarettes over yonder?"

Jap cigarettes were plentiful. They sat down beside the grave and smoked and rested.

"Who's giving orders you or me?" Cocky suddenly asked. Burton frowned at him.

"What about?"

"Everything. There's a smash coming. You and me are the only ones to give orders."

Burton grunted. "What about the Rajah?"

"He's only sticking while the gov'nor is around. Once the poor chap goes, the Rajah is off on his own. He'd gone long ago, but for the gov'nor."

Burton reflected in silence until his cigarette was smoked out. Then:

"Settle it when the time comes," he said, and rose. "May be a long way off."

Again the Padre's words recurred to him, with ominous significance. With that symbol of old authority gone, the party might break up, or it might not. Hard to say.

They walked into camp together. Peace Valley was very quiet and restful under the brazen sky; not a breath of wind was stirring anywhere. The noon meal, chiefly of yams, was just ready when they arrived.

Burton, faced with explanations, made them frankly. His anger and humiliation were gone. He had broken the rule, deserved his punishment, and said so. The news of the flame-thrower took precedence of all else, and was met with curses and uneasiness.

Lejeune went white as death and his jaunty tongue was silenced.

A smash coming? Burton eyed the men here, and doubted it. The three soldiers were hearty, vulgar, earthy souls, with no more initiative than the once-fat Lejeune. If there was any trouble, Cocky was the one to make it. Si Anthony was full of life and energy, though red spots burned in his cheeks and his eyes were bright; Lady Bess watched him with anxious eyes. No one mentioned Simpson. The six Malay men and four women chattered among themselves; they would do whatever the Rajah did, of course.

No planes passed overhead. Heat and deathly silence filled the crater's bowl. After the meal, Burton pitched in at K P and helped clean up, then wandered off toward the cliffs for a bit of exploration on his own.

An hour of this, and he had his fill. Except for the caves, there was nothing to see except naked rock, old volcanic basalt and lava; everything hereabouts was savagely bare. He made his way down to the water at last, over toward the far side of the little lake, and shedding his clothes, slipped into the cool water. He made for the cliffs, and beneath them lay floating, watching the face of rocks above.

A splash, a deluge of spray in his face, and a clear ringing laugh startled him. There, a yard away, was Josie. He had supposed no one else about.

"Asking for more punishment, are you?" she said merrily.

"What d'ye mean by that, young lady?"

"No ladies any more, Yank; just women, in this world. And this is our afternoon. We are supposed to have the lake to ourselves. Regulations."

"The hell you say! Nobody told me that," he exclaimed. She laughed again.

"Well, don't worry. Lady Bess can't swim; she's paddling about in the cove. But I'd hate to have the end of the world come right now, with the Rajah's harem close by."

"Why?"

"Use your imagination, Yank. Our bathing suits are in Rangoon."

"Oh!" He turned over. "I'll clear out. I didn't know."

"Wait a minute." She came up level with him, as he struck out for the lake-end. "Or

"I'll swim with you. You know what we spoke about the other night?"

"Yep," said Burton, remembering perfectly. She and Cocky both.

"Well, you'd better get set. We had a tough time with the gov'nor last night."

"Why, he seemed perfectly fine today."

"The beginning of the end. When it comes, things will happen."

"Look here," said Burton, "has Cocky been at you with his nonsense?"

She laughed. "Not the kind you mean, anyhow. If you could just find out where we are—where we ought to go! And I know how you could find it."

"Spill it. How?"

"From a Jap officer. They all have maps. We did get a map from one, too, but the gov'nor burned it before anyone saw it."

"That officer yesterday had none," said Burton. "I can swear to that."

He was aware of her white shimmering shape close to him.

"Well, do something; make a plan, get ready!" her voice was urgent. "I might appeal to Cocky, but I dare not. He'd take advantage of it. You're the one. Good-by."

Burton kept going. "So I'm the one, am I?" he thought. "Cocky seems to think so too. I'll fool him there, anyhow!"

HE LAUGHED to himself, and thought of Josie's face beside him in the water, all astream with wet hair. How lightly impish she was, how curious that she had taken on the quick grace and fairylike quality of a water-spirit as she swam there—not bedraggled but touched with strange sunlit beauty! He began to perceive that her hard-muscled body was a shell encasing an odd loveliness and an almost childlike directness.

"A fine splendid creature," he thought as he slid into his clothes.

Dressed, he struck out to go clear around the little lake. There was a creek on the jungled side near camp, and there must somewhere be an outlet. So there was, on the west side, a small rapid stream that gushed away and fell into a patch of swampy marsh.

He kept on, found himself once more amid rocks and lava, and heard laughter ahead. He came upon the cause of it suddenly.

Livermore and Thorne were there among

the rocks, with binoculars, watching the women across the lake under the cliffs.

There was no opportunity for evasion; Burton was upon them before he knew it. They turned shamed, flushed faces to him. He blurted out hot angry words.

"And who be you to talk? 'Strewth, you and Josie were swimming together!" Livermore erupted. "We can have our nuggin' o' fun same as you—"

Just how it happened was not clear. The two red faces were upon him, and he was at them in gusty fury, venting his disgust of the whole sordid mess, the utter impossibility of explaining what he scorned to explain.

It would be nice to tell how he polished them off, but he did not. Thorne crowned him with a pair of binoculars, which smashed, and what happened after that was obscure. Considerable damage was accomplished, but a fist took him under the ear—and he woke up to find nothing but sunlight and two pairs of binoculars, one smashed.

He swore heartily, bathed his bruised features, picked up both binoculars, and then trudged on into headquarters. The two soldiers were long ahead of him and telling their clumsy story to Sir Anthony and Lejeune and Saunders—caught him, they had, a-peeping at the ladies!

Burton fronted the dark looks with fresh gusts of anger, and threw down the glasses.

"To hell with the lot of you! Would I be using two pairs of glasses? I was out for a swim; Josie came along and warned me off. No one had told me this was ladies' day. And then I came on these muckers—"

"That's plain enough," said Sir Anthony. He adjusted his single glass and eyed the two soldiers. "Now, my lads, you're caught. This is something to be handled by a meeting of all hands, when the others return."

But it was not, because just then everything blew off. The Malays came running, their shrill voices piercing the air; with them was another Malay, one of the two who had gone with the Rajah. He was spent and blowing and staggering, having come on the run all the way from the hunting strip.

He dropped in a heap, panting his lungs out and gasping his story. Help was wanted immediately at the strip. A truck, lonely on the road, had been bagged. The Rajah was hurt. Every available pair of hands was

needed. The truck held food and supplies of all sorts and was invaluable.

"We can get there by dark," said Sir Anthony, and glanced around. The women were still away, at the lake. "This Malay will remain here—you too, Lejeune. No protests, please. You're no good at lifting and carrying, old chap. Stay here and keep guard, with this Malay. Everybody else, come along!"

The messenger could not tell how badly the Rajah was hurt. He had been sent back on the jump. There had been soldiers in the truck, and some shooting had taken place; now it was over the edge of the highway among the greenery of the lower side, and out of sight.

They were off two minutes later—the six Malays out ahead, Sir Anthony and Burton, Saunders, Rawlins, Livermore and Thorne and Cocky Bolt following. Simpson had not yet been buried but was lying by the grave, covered over. Everything else had been instantly wiped out of mind by this news—not so much about the truck, as about the Rajah. The Malays were like crazy men. Burton's misadventure had become a trifling matter, of small consequence.

But not so to Burton himself. Saunders, a pawky fellow cut from the same cloth as his mates, was one of them. Burton divined that he had made enemies, and bad ones. Not that this worried him; but the whole affair simply emphasized the conditions here, conditions that could not endure.

Flung together by a common peril, held together by danger enveloping them on all sides and by a common enemy who knew no mercy, this group of whites was cracking fast.

They had accomplished desperately heroic things, and the heroism in them had been burned out. They were empty shells of what they had once been. They had reverted to mere animal instincts, driven back upon themselves so repeatedly that all they now hoped for was to keep on living. Their will to achieve no longer existed.

Lejeune, practically crippled by his terrible hurt, retained a spark of it. So did Sir Anthony, but he was badly beaten down. Of them all, Cocky Bolt and the Rajah, and in some measure Tom Hunter, stood out from the others with Josie Crawford. The others were ghosts left wandering in the daylight.

THUS ran Burton's gloomy reflections, as he paced along behind Sir Anthony. When they came to the trail that branched off to the weapon-storehouse, all halted. The Malays had disappeared ahead. A brief discussion ensued; there was no particular need of weapons, which would only be in the way. It was decided to get to the road as quickly as possible, and Sir Anthony struck off again at once. He was badly in need of rest, but refused the suggestion pointblank. Anxiety was tearing at him visibly.

Burton followed, and found Cocky at his heels. The others strung out behind. The ex-entertainer came up close and spoke in a low, bitter voice.

"You *are* a blasted fool! Here everybody's been trying to keep any trouble from developing, and you have to hop straight into it!"

"Thanks," snarled Burton. "Meaning what?"

"Everybody knew those chaps were sneaking off with binoculars, and why. A lot of harm they could do, across the lake! Besides, the women were tipped off and acted accordingly."

Burton turned on him in angry amazement, then was forced to keep going ahead.

"Everybody knew it? And did nothing about it?"

"Sure. No harm done," replied the other, coolly. "Avoid a fuss at all costs—"

"Be damned to that!"

A chuckle sounded. "Right. That just goes to show what I've been up against. Nobody loves Cocky Bolt. Now you want to take a chance with those two motorcycles?"

"No, blast you."

"Then you'd better get your brain working, if you got one."

"What are you driving at?" Burton demanded. "What is it you want to do?"

"Go somewhere, do something—no matter what! I've got no plan. We don't know where we are. But I'm with you on anything you decide."

"Then we'll get together the first chance that comes."

"Only—mind this! Keep your eye off Josie, or I'll finish what those limeys began! I can handle them, if you can't, and I can handle you too."

Burton raged inwardly, but made no comment.

Because of the pitfalls and defenses that

had to be skirted, and the narrow trail, no speed could be made. Sir Anthony had a coughing fit that laid him out. Febrile, excited, he refused to remain behind and staggered off once more in the lead.

Burton followed. What he had learned today left him appalled. Everything was just a hollow pretense here; anything for peace, anything for quiet, anything just to stay hidden and go on living! Let the men have their fun. Burn any maps that turned up and keep mum about it—be ignorant, for fear somebody would want to start away. Keep them all in the dark; just go on with life in this hidden Peace Valley—

Why, it was absurd, childish, inconceivable! And yet, he knew, these people had suffered frightful things, had seen unprintable horrors, had somehow emerged from a wave of blood where others past counting had gone down. They had survived the destruction of the white race in Asia, and it had burned them out. Probably, unless they could keep themselves concealed, they would break down completely. Even this ambush along the hunting strip was nothing but a childish sniping at unsuspecting foes. It interested them and kept their self-esteem alive, but served little good purpose. They had no purpose.

"Well, you don't catch me coming down to this level," Burton told himself, savagely. "Once I know my way around, I'll do something. Not any wild nonsense, though. Keep cool."

A Malay came to meet them with a word that the Rajah was at the night-shelter. By this time the sun was far in the west. Except for full canteens, no one had any load, and with the Malay guiding they left the trail and struck off for the cranny among the rocks. They reached it at last, and found everyone assembled there except certain Malays who were on watch at the road.

The Rajah, looking very small and wan, lay unconscious on a litter of bamboos that had been hurriedly constructed. The Padre spoke up quietly.

"No, he's in no immediate danger. A bullet in the shoulder, another across his skull; not bad. I gave him a hypodermic and got the bullet. He'll need care."

Sir Anthony tried to speak, and could not. He looked on the point of collapse.

"Now, then, I'm taking charge here. Any

objections?" spoke out Tom Hunter roughly. "You're all in, gov'nor. Get supper first; then you head back to camp with the Rajah and four Malays. The rest of us get to work, and get to work now. Gather around, folks."

Cocky gave Burton a look and a grin, and accepted the situation, apparently glad that Hunter had taken command. All came close.

"We'd better get to it while we've got some daylight left," said Hunter. "Let the Malays watch both ends of the strip. The truck is a big one. It went off the road and is out of sight. Six Japs were in it; they're out of sight, too. Our job is to reach the truck and pass up cases of food and supplies, clear up to here. We've got enough hands to get out a whale of a lot of stuff in a couple hours."

"Is the stuff worth it?" demanded Burton. Hunter fixed him with a morose eye.

"You bet. Mostly canned goods, some medicines, and odd stuff of all kinds. I got a flashlight off the driver and can use that selecting what we need. Won't be seen down in the trees, and anyhow we'll be warned if anyone comes along. Ready? Let's go. Take what rifles you want—plenty of extra ones now—won't need 'em anyhow."

There was no lost motion about Hunter, and Burton felt a stab of acute wonder as to just where this man stood in the question of inertia, how far he, too, was burned out. At the moment, however, Hunter was going great guns, which was all to the good.

"Padre, you're the surgeon; you'll go along back, of course, with the Rajah," said Hunter, and shot a stream of Malay at the dark men, who grinned and disappeared, except the four waiting to carry the litter.

Burton went close and looked down at the immobile Rajah, who was still under the drug. Something caught his eye—a large wallet of leather tucked under the lower end of the litter. He reached for it, as the Padre came beside him and spoke.

"That goes to Sir Anthony," he said. "Papers and so forth from an officer—"

Burton calmly opened the wallet, which was stamped in gold with Japanese characters. He caught a glimpse of money and papers, and a folded map. With a quick motion, he seized the map, drew it out, and shoved the wallet into the Padre's reaching hand.

"Here, Burton—none of that!" said the Padre quickly. "The gov'nor takes charge of all papers. Hand it over."

Burton met his worried eyes. "Careful, now, Padre. This map is at the service of everybody; I'm making sure that it doesn't get burned. Do you want to start a row?"

No one else was paying any attention to them. The Padre looked at him, irresolute, panic in the deep eyes.

"No," he answered uncertainly. "No, but—but—you don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly, thanks." Burton shoved the map into his pocket. He met the dark tortured gaze with firm challenge. "And I'm not having any of it in mine, Padre."

The Padre wet his lips. A summons came from Hunter.

"Come along, Burton!"

Burton went.

So it was true. He would never have believed it, except for what Josie had told him there in the water. Poor people . . . poor shattered, panicky, inept people who had lost their heritage! Unable, yes; that was the word for it. So storm-weary and broken that they were unable to summon up enough force and energy to front the storm further.

They came to the road, where the Malays signalled all clear. Burton looked and could see no trace to indicate where the truck had gone over. Hunter shot forth his orders rapidly and everyone took place, ready to duck for cover at any alarm. Hunter took Burton on across the road, with Rawlins and Livermore, and a chain was established to the truck lying fifty feet below in the cover of the jungle.

With the rapidly failing light to aid, the work was got under way at once. Hunter passed each box out to Livermore, who brought it a short way on to Burton, who in turn took it to Rawlins. It was back-breaking labor, though none of the boxes were very large. The sunset fires died out of the sky, the gray mists came stealing up from the jungle, the light passed into gathering darkness, and still no one had appeared along the road.

Some of the boxes were still sticky—Hunter must be working in a nice mess, thought Burton. Then came the sharp little tap-tap of the Malay warning. Rawlins van-

ished. Burton passed on the word to Livermore, and dropped. Everything stopped.

Lights swept overhead. With a rumble and a roar, half a dozen trucks came along the road. Men in them were singing and laughing. The earth shook. Then all died away, but no one resumed work until the Malay watchers signalled all clear. Then they were passing the boxes again, cursing the sweaty, bloody work. Luckily, the falling truck had cleared a path for the workers; yet so thick was the grown jungle that despite this, no sign of the truck could be seen from above.

It went on and on, apparently endless.

VII

AT LAST it was finished. Hunter appeared, staggering with weariness.

"All done. Come on. We still have to pack it back to the rocks."

"Not at night," objected Rawlins.

Others voiced the same objection, and it was deserved. That mass of food and other supplies was now at the top of the rise above the road. The prospect of getting it all back that long ten miles or so to camp, box by box, was simply heart-breaking. As for moving it at all by night, this was out of the question.

"Well," said Hunter, "let's go back to the sleeping-place and feed up, and settle it later."

"Why not take it back there and leave it—to the niche in the rocks?" spoke up Burton. "Then we can haul it on to camp when we need it."

"That's right," said Saunders. "We may all be dead and have that awful job for nothing. Store it up here, says I."

Too tired even to argue, they stumbled along in the darkness and reached the nook among the rocks, deserted now. There was a little food, not much, in the party; they ate it in the darkness, washed it down, and lay anywhere. Burton, chewed by mosquitoes, scratched and blood-stained, still dizzy with his hurt head, was trying vainly for sleep when a finger touched his arm, and a low voice reached his ear.

"Come out o' this. Got something for you."

Cocky's voice. He got up and strolled away from the others. Under the stars, the

indistinct figure of Cocky joined him, grunted to follow, and passed on. Burton stumbled after. Cocky Bolt went on for some distance and then drew him into a hollow almost completely closed in.

"Now," he said cheerfully, "we're out o' sight and sound, and down wind, so they won't smell us. I've got some brandy mixed in this canteen, and here are real American cigarettes. We got scads of 'em now. I got into a couple of those boxes. Drink, smoke, relax, and to hell with regulations! This is the time to have a chat."

Burton could not resist—did not try, in fact. The brandy and water picked him up like magic. Cigarette alight, he leaned back with a sigh of utter comfort.

"This is great," he said.

"Yeah. Now, my friend, we've got to do some figuring. I was watching your little run-in with the Padre."

"Don't miss much, do you?"

"Come clean. You glommed something. What was it?"

Burton told him all about it.

"Haven't dared look at the map; can't tell what it is till daylight," he concluded.

"Good work. I've suspected that the governor was holding out on us, but was not sure. Don't blame him, poor devil! He looked like a ghost when we got here. Let's get down to cases. Can you signal to any of our planes?"

"Yes. If I have help. And if they come close enough."

"All right; that's point one established. How?"

BURTON reflected. "I'll need those truck tires stored in the war department, back toward camp. They must be got out of there and brought within reach."

"How can you use 'em?"

"Take my word for it. I'm not holding out on you, but I'm taking no chances on having the thing go wrong. It can work once—and only once. It's all a chance that planes will come over. I think they will, any day, because they'll be looking for some sign of me next time they fly the same route, to Haiphong. That's on Hainan Island, the big Jap base."

"Okay, then. Count me in. What good will it do if you signal?"

"None, maybe. They could drop stuff to

us, or else get the situation and later on land to pick me up."

"What about me—and anybody else?"

"I know. That's the trouble. Three or four could be packed in. But . . ."

"But not the whole gang. Well, don't worry about that; there won't be the whole gang by a long shot! Just you and me, Josie, maybe Hunter; maybe Lady Bess. Can't tell about the Rajah. Let that wait. Wouldn't one tire do the work?"

"Might be."

"Very well. I'll answer for one, anyhow."

"Let it all wait," said Burton. "It's disheartening. Nothing sure about it. We'd have to contact the plane on the jump. Yet—with gasoline from your motorcycles, and one tire—yes, it could be done in a hurry, before a plane got out of sight! But it would have to be done with luck—"

"If a fellow isn't ready to act when luck hits, it never hits," said Cocky sagely. "Now look. This plane business is a long shot. Suppose, just for argument, we count it out. What else? If that map shows where we are, and indicates any chance of making our way to safety, are you for it?"

"Without the others?"

"You're damned right."

"Yes," said Burton after a moment.

"Fine. I just want to get lined up. Now let's get back to the tire and a quart of gas—petrol, I mean. If you had your wish, where would you want 'em parked for use in a hurry?"

Burton reflected. "Down by the lake shore; but that's impossible."

"Don't get to talking like the Padre, now; nothing's impossible, brother," came the breezy, confident tones. Burton stirred uncomfortably.

"Look here, Bolt. Suppose we do what's in our minds. Suppose we go ahead, without the general consent. What's to become of the others?"

"Since I left Manila, I've seen a lot of people die. We're all bound to die some day anyhow."

"I'll do nothing that'll cause the fate of the others—I mean—"

"You mean their death. Don't shrink from the word. It's just a word. All right, I'm with you there. I wouldn't want that on my conscience either, so we're agreed."

Leave it at that and let's get some sleep." Cocky Bolt ground his cigarette end into the sand, and rose. "Keep your trap shut about this."

They rejoined the others, and Burton was asleep in ten minutes.

MORNING saw the labor resumed; the supplies had to be brought back and cached among the rocks, broken open, and packs made to take back to camp. The road had to be watched, meantime; there was no longer any thought of Jap-hunting. It was noon before they were ready to pull out.

Burton had no chance to look at the map.

That surreptitious talk with Cocky left him heartened and confirmed his first impressions of the man. Cocky was on the upgrade, the others on the downgrade, most of them. He was not sure about Tom Hunter.

All that long, tiresome, burdened way back to camp, he reflected on the matter. Broad prosaic daylight gave things a different, uglier look. Signals to a plane might accomplish nothing—supposing a plane came and saw them—except bring down the Japs on the whole party. The fears of the Padre, in a measure, were justified; but the idea of being afraid to take a chance found no welcome with Burton. He shrank from the thought of these people, who had struggled so far and fought so desperately, being destroyed by any action or stubborn resolve of his own; the thought was an appalling one. That, unless something happened to make it inevitable, must not be risked.

Remembrance of the trucks that had gone over into the jungle, and the dead Japs, worried him. As the party paused for rest, and to replace rifles in the weapon hut, he spoke with Hunter.

"Those Japs yesterday, and the ones with the flame-thrower—were they buried?"

"Are we in the business of burying Nips?" rasped Hunter. "The jungle does that."

"Oh! Then you don't figure any search will be made for the Japs who have disappeared along here?"

Hunter looked at him for a moment, drew down his shaggy brows, and grunted.

"Hm! I see what you mean, dammit."

"I'm not running your show, but—"

"Somebody had damned well better be running it soon. What's on your mind?" demanded Hunter. "With the Rajah laid out and the gov'nor fading away, somebody will have to take hold. Speak up."

"What would you do if you were the Jap general in this district? Think it over." Burton shouldered his weighty pack. "That's all. Chew on it."

One thing was cheering; two of the Malays were always on watch at the road, and their tap-tap telegraph beaten on trees with sticks could reach a long way.

Stained, sweat-grimed, suffering, they came at last into Peace Valley and staggered into camp, toward sunset. The Padre came to meet them; they dropped their burdens and stood panting questions at him. He shook his head gravely.

"The Rajah's in the clear. Those small-calibre Jap bullets did little damage; he'll be about tomorrow, I think. But I've bad news. Sir Anthony—the trip did him in."

"What?" cried out Cocky Bolt. "It's not the end?"

"Close to it," said the Padre. "Don't have any skylarking around, boys. Burton, I've moved your things into my hut. And I'd like a word with you, later. After supper."

"At your service," said Burton.

The stuff was stacked, cigarettes were passed out to everyone, and there was a rush for the lake to get cleaned up. Josie Crawford and two of the Malay women were readying supper.

Johnny Burton made the most of that cleanup, and emerged a new man, shaven and presentable. During supper the Padre initiated a grave discussion as to who would assume the leadership in case of need. None of the Malays were present. Hunter suggested the Rajah, which provoked instant dissent.

"Take orders from him?" cried Livermore. "In a pinch, yus! But only in a pinch, mates."

He was seconded by Rawlins and others. The Padre cut short any argument and a general meeting was determined on to settle the matter, at eleven next morning. Burton could scarcely credit what he had just heard, but the sardonic glance of Cocky, and the morose, dour mien of Hunter showed him the truth.

"They're mad, all of them—mad, insane!" he told himself, as he went toward the Padre's hut, his new quarters.

There he lighted the shaded lantern, got a cigarette going, and had just produced the folded map when the Padre appeared.

"First chance, I've had to examine this thing," said Burton cheerfully. He spread out the map. "Here, look it over with me, Padre."

The other complied. The map was hand-drawn—a military map entirely lettered in Japanese. Burton stared at it blankly, then in angry disgust.

"Does anyone here read Japanese?" he asked.

"No," replied the Padre gravely, and pointed with his finger. "But look—here's the curve of road, the strip, and it's edged with red as though to indicate danger. Perhaps that is why the truck had so many soldiers aboard, and why they were ready for us . . ."

This implication was the sole fruit to be garnered from that beautifully drawn map, except that it did appear to show the Jap communication lines and advanced posts. If this were so, Peace Valley was indeed hemmed in on all sides by enemy lines, except on the west. No lines appeared here, at least close by, for obvious reasons; west of the crater rose high mountain peaks.

"What lies over westward?" Burton asked.

"Nobody knows."

"You've the nerve to admit that after all this time, you haven't explored?"

"My dear fellow, don't be so impatient! After all, we've done our best. Two of the Malays who went out as messengers, went westward among the mountains. None were ever heard from, remember. I fear this map is of no use to us."

"Right. But it won't be burned." Burton folded and pocketed it. "You wanted a word with me, you said."

"Yes. About the map, about your intentions—"

"I don't intend to jeopardize others. Put your mind at rest."

The Padre, his powerful features graven deep with lines of anxiety, shook his head.

"That's impossible. We're coming to a crisis. We must have a leader. Who's your choice?"

"Cocky Bolt," said Burton promptly.

"God forbid!"

"I'm not going to sit here and argue with you," said Burton, rising. "Here's my say, and you can make the best of it. You people are all take and no give. It's impossible to pick any leader who'll please everybody. That means a split. Face the fact, accept it, don't whine about it. There's no reason we should all hang together. Let those who will, go their way—and hang separately, if fate so decrees. Is Sir Anthony really dying?"

"He won't last the night," the Padre answered in a low voice. Burton's words had been bitter hard to accept. "In one sense you may be right. If we stick together, there are certain to be misunderstandings, even conflicts—"

"Cream always rises to the top," said Burton, and turned away.

HE WAS out of patience with the whole setup, and particularly with the Padre; poor soul, he was too intent upon acting for the best. Burton had no blame for him, but did refuse to accept such an inept viewpoint, and wanted to avoid any troublous discussion. He had come to his own conclusions and meant to abide by them, for good or ill.

At the moment, he wanted to get away from everybody here, and the stars beckoned him out of camp, where the symbol of authority that had held them all together lay dying.

He wandered down to the shore, and on toward the cliffs to the left. Remembering the caves and the ancient gods, he directed his way toward them; at thought of possible ghosts, he laughed grimly. Those people he had left behind were the only ghosts around here. Tigers, perhaps; someone had said that Shere Khan was not unknown in these parts, and was plentiful in the jungle outside the crate. But not ghosts.

It was pitch dark in the shallow cave under the figures of the stone gods. He sat in the warm sand, listening to the night-noises from across the lake; this place had a remote, lost air that was grateful. It was like being in another world, wiping away all oppression and worries.

He stretched out, giving himself to the feeling of utter serenity that folded him in,

away from all bickerings and human struggles. In the presence of the gods, even of these crude old gods of some ancient people, such a feeling usually lingered; those stone faces had seen uncounted ages pass beneath . . .

Burton was asleep before he knew it.

In the camp at the head of the lake, another man was also falling into sleep, with the Padre on one side of him, and on the other the gaunt figure of Lady Bess, clamped in a silent, awful immobility as she watched.

Sir Anthony looked at them and smiled. He was quite conscious and aware of the approaching silence.

"It'll be nice to be just Tony Burke once more," he said, and coughed, and touched the still hand of Lady Bess. "Bear up, old girl—dashed awkward and all that—but you'll make a go of it. I'll stick around for a bit, promise you . . ."

He coughed again, then turned his head to look, as a small shape came into the hut and advanced. It was the Rajah, arm in sling, head swathed in bandages like a turban.

The Padre sprang up, took his arm, and lowered him to the box on which he himself had been sitting.

"I wanted to come," said the Rajah quietly. He put out his hand and took that of Sir Anthony, with a nod and a smile. "How comfortable you look!"

"So I am, old chap. Feeling quite fit, you know."

"Yes," said the Rajah. "It is too bad we cannot exchange places, my friend. I should so like to see what everything is like, where you are going. Will you be kind enough to say a word to my boy Ali? He'll be expecting you, of course."

"Oh, quite," replied Sir Anthony. "What word?"

"Just a cheery greeting, buck him up a bit and so forth," said the Rajah. It was as though Sir Anthony were stepping into the house next door. The Padre looked on with a sort of horror in his face. "You'll know what to say—you'll know what's in my heart to say."

"Why, yes, of course," said Sir Anthony. "I'll be very glad. Sorry to leave you here. A bit awkward, what?"

"Oh, I'll carry on. One does, you know,"

said the Rajah in his best Etonian manner. And yet a tear was sparkling on his cheek. Then he leaned forward. "Burke—tell me one thing. Is there anything . . . anything . . ."

"You're a devilish fine chap," said Sir Anthony. "Anything you can do, you mean? Why, yes, if you'd be so good. There'll be a dashed bloody mess around here, I'm afraid, the way things look. If you'd be able to keep your eye on Lady Bess, for a bit . . ."

The Rajah reached over and took the woman's still hand. She looked up with a start, and what he read in her eyes made his brown features turn a trifle gray. He smiled at her, and with a jerk she took her hand away and looked again at St. Anthony.

"Why, of course, of course," he returned. "I'll be glad to do so . . . at least for a bit. I fancy that I'll not be able to carry on for so very long. You might tell that to my boy Ali; but he'll know. He'll be looking for me. Goodby, my friend."

"Goodby, my friend," repeated Sir Anthony quietly, and closed his eyes.

The Rajah rose and walked out to where his men were awaiting him.

VIII

BURTON wakened to a slow, dragging sound.

He came wide awake in an instant, and reached for his pistol. But he was not wearing it. He had discarded this weight as useless.

He lay listening. Someone or something was certainly in the cave. Panic leaped in him, and visions of dark things crawling out of the lake, and fear pricked at him; then all this died away, and he smiled at his own fancies. The things was silent now. Until a long shuddering sigh sounded under the overhanging rocks . . . so like a human sigh as to be startling.

Burton moved, inching toward the wide opening. He could see the stars reflected in the still water outside. But his movement was heard. There came a swift gasping breath of alarm, and then a voice.

"Who's here—what is it?"

"Oh!" he said, and relaxed, with a laugh. "So it's you! And I was thinking it might be a tiger! What the devil do you mean waking me up?"

"Oh, God! I'm glad it's you. Where are you?"

"Here."

She came close and found his hand. Her firm, hard fingers clamped on his; she was quivering.

"Why, you poor kid!" he exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

"Everything. I'm sort of gone to pieces. Had to get away from it all—"

Josie's voice trailed off into silence for a moment. Then she went on, with gathering strength.

"Thought I'd sneak in here; these old stone boys are sort of comforting. It got too much for me back yonder. He's passing out, you know."

"Who?"

"The gov'nor. Sir Arthur. And then



there's tension all the time, the awful tension, the waiting for something to happen, the fear of what may happen—oh, there it is, and I just couldn't help it, Yank."

"I know." Holding her hand, he spoke quietly, softly, steadily. "All of us go to pieces sometimes, Josie. If we can do it alone and in the darkness, with nobody to know, then it's all right in the end. Queer, I felt the same way you did, exactly; as though these old stone deadpans exerted a peaceful influence. And maybe they do, or maybe it's just the silence."

"We're not the only ones to think so, either," she rejoined. "Oh! He said there was something queer here, like voices—"

"He? Who?"

"The Padre. Did you know he's gone off his head? That's a fact. That's what hit me so hard. The Rajah went to see the gov'nor and say goodby, and after a while the Padre came out and he was talking wild to himself.

"Think of it—him! The last person you'd take to get bust like that!"

"What do you mean, violent?" exclaimed Burton in alarm.

"No; just sort of dotty."

"Poor devil! His brain's been overloaded, that's what. I knew a pilot who did the same thing; same sort of a man, too, come to think of it. He got into a whale of a scrap and was knocked silly, and then was all right. Shocked his brain alive, sort of. Maybe that would cure the Padre."

"You'd better not try it. He's strong as a horse," said practical Josie. "It's good to hold your hand; I had the jitters for fair. Now everything's dinkum again."

Burton sniffed. Something wet and damp. He reached out his other hand.

"My lord, girl! You're all wet—what is it?"

"Not all; just part." She laughed nervously. "Me. I was silly. Lady Bess is with him, you know. I was all alone and went to bits. I walked out into the water. Thought I'd be done with it all; lost my nerve and then put in here to dry off and have a cry . . ."

"Oh, hell! You're cold. Come here, let me warm you." He reached his arms about her shoulders and held her close. "Now, then, shut your eyes and relax. Get rid of all your notions. We're going to turn over a new leaf tomorrow—you and I and Cocky—"

"Not him!" she said sharply. "Not Cocky!"

"Forget it. Cocky Bolt is a swell guy. I may have to beat his head off yet, and I'm not sure I can do it, but he's all right."

"Not with me, he's not."

"Well, that's natural. You'd tempt an angel. All Cocky needs is a firm hand. You and I and Cocky are going places, and maybe one or two others. Are you game?"

"I'll do whatever you say, Yank. If you're along, I guess we can handle him."

"That's the gal. Well, tomorrow . . ."

He checked himself abruptly, as a stone clinked somewhere outside. Josie's arms tightened upon him; they listened intently. Another stone, a dragging step, a muttering voice. A dark blot came against the water and stars.

"It's a delusion, yet I'll speak with them fairly," said the voice. "I'll make one more attempt. It was a terrible thing, how that man died, refusing to accept the consola-

tion of the truth, terrible! That heathen Rajah encouraged him in it."

Then silence, and the Padre came stumbling into the darkness of the cave. Burton and Josie dared not move, dared hardly breathe, but the Padre did not come near them. He flung himself down on his knees in front of the ancient stone idols.

For a little his voice came in muttered ravings of prayer . . . meaningless, wild ravings that made no sense to Burton's ears. Then came silence. Then, in such striking contrast that Burton jumped in every nerve, the man's voice came in slow, sad accents, apparently in perfect sanity; but he felt Josie quiver.

"I know, I know," said the Padre. "I've done my best, I assure you, I suppose you are aware that Sir Anthony is dead? Oh, you have seen him already, eh? Well, Colonel Randolph, I'm sure I don't know what we're going to do now."

Randolph—the name jerked at Burton's memory. The name of the dead officer buried by the lake. A proud, stiff-necked man, evidently. "Next to God," Hunter had said.

"This young man Burton has introduced trouble," went on the Padre. "Sometimes I think we should be rid of him, for the good of all the others. Oh, is that you, Sarah? Dear wife, it is good to hear your voice again! Speak to me, advise me what to do . . ."

Now Burton found himself listening. No voice spoke, yet the Padre made murmurs of assent or negation. The man was certainly out of his head. Just like that pilot, thought Burton. He moved, loosened his arms, whispered at Josie's ear. She seemed petrified with horror, and small blame to her. Burton barely breathed his words, as the Padre struck into a rambling speech.

"Quiet, now. I'll take a hand in this. Quiet."

BURTON moved by inches. He found himself sweating with dread of what he was about to do; and yet he knew it was the one thing that might effect a drastic remedy. He stole along the sand while the sad voice rose and fell, conversing with persons dead and gone. He came closer and closer, moving in absolute silence.

The voice directed him. He held a match ready—matches in plenty now, thanks to

that looted truck! He came close, so close that he was almost touching the raving figure. Then, suddenly, he drew the match along his sole, sent it in a flaming arc through the air, and before the light died, struck home. He put his weight into it. His fist crashed into the hapless man just at the angle of the jaw, and the Padre toppled over.

"Come along, Josie!"

She was up, was holding his hand, was getting outside with him.

"What happened? What did you do?"

"Knocked him cold." Burton rubbed his knuckles. "I feel like a damned heel, too. Leave him alone; maybe nature will assert herself. If he shows up sober sane in the morning, all right. Come along and I'll see you safe back. Get out of those wet clothes and into your blankets, and you'll do."

"You're a darling, Yank," she said, gave his arm a hug, and they walked back toward camp. "What did you start to say about tomorrow?"

"I don't know—oh, sure! There'll be a meeting to make plans. Trust me and Cocky. Now run along—we don't want to go into camp together. There's been too damned much misunderstanding already. Good-night, and sleep tight!"

Presently, berthed in the Padre's hut, Burton fell asleep. He did not waken until daybreak, then sat up. The Padre was there, sleeping peacefully.

Sir Anthony was buried after breakfast; and the Padre was quite his old self, with not the least indication of anything wrong. Burton stared at him in utter amazement. The cure had worked—for the moment, at any rate. Everyone assembled for the burial, and the Padre quite calmly announced a general meeting to take place in an hour, to decide upon future plans. He went on with the service, gave a touching and eloquent little sermon, and the grave was closed in.

Lady Bess stood looking on, dry-eyed, silent, like a stone image.

Burton, standing beside Cocky Bolt, slipped him the folded map.

"See what you make of this, before the meeting. Looks like no soap to me."

Cocky nodded and went swaggering away. They gathered under the trees near the

lake. The bandaged Rajah represented the Malay element. Lady Bess was not there, but Josie Crawford was, and gave Burton a radiant smile. Cocky and Tom Hunter sat with Lejeune, waiting and watchful. The Padre joined Burton. Thorne, Livermore and Saunders were clumped together.

"My friends, you all know why we're here," said the Padre quietly. "We're facing a new crisis—decision. Our friend and leader has left us; we must agree on a policy and a new leader. First, Lieutenant Burton secured a map the other day at the hunting strip. Did it reveal anything of importance, Burton?"

Burton glanced at Cocky, who shook his head.

"Not a thing, Padre," he replied. "It's all in Japanese. Unless one of us can read Japanese, it's quite useless." He looked around. Nobody volunteered. "Then," he added, "until we secure somebody who can read Japanese, check it off."

"Very well. Has anyone any suggestions as to what we're to do?"

"What for suggestions?" spoke up Livermore in his heavy accent. "We're here. We can stop along here. It's a good safe spot. What else is there to do? We'd be fools to strike out into the unknown and run into the Jap net."

"There was a growl of assent. Hunter said nothing. The Rajah's quick eyes darted about from face to face.

"I'm for being a fool," said Cocky Bolt. "With the gov'nor gone, it's different. Sit here and rot? Not any more, thanks."

"We must consider what's the wisest thing for all," began the Padre. Burton intervened.

"Will you folks let me say a word? We have to consider everyone, but that doesn't mean we all have to take the same course."

"Spit it out, Yank," said Thorne. "I allow you know it all, so let's have it."

His mocking make-believe Yankee twang drew a smile or two. Burton nodded.

"Thanks. Then here it is. I'm not staying, and one or two others are not. This doesn't mean that we're leaving you people in the lurch.

"I think that you're in worse danger here than you realize. The Japs are bound to track down dead men and lost trucks to this one locality, and then work it over.

Your little game of ambush has done the very thing you most wanted not to do, brought peril on you all."

"And you want to skip out ahead of it, do you?" sneered Livermore.

"Certainly," said Burton calmly. "I don't want to persuade any others to go unless they so desire. It may be quite hopeless to attempt it, but I mean to attempt it. I'd say that before splitting up, those who wish to leave should stay and help the others get defenses in shape, make everything ready against the evil day."

THE Padre turned to him, with a helpless gesture.

"What more can we do than we've done? We've prepared defenses—"

"And the Japs would walk through them like nothing at all," said Burton. "You have machine-guns and weapons hidden away. They should be set in place for instant use, and left covered but ready, with ammunition and rifles and grenades handy. You should have some way of escape or hiding made ready against disaster. I'd say that the dead Japs should be buried—"

"They're all in that truck," spoke up Hunter morosely.

"Then burn the truck and remove the evidence—let it be thought that it went over the edge and burned in an ordinary wreck."

"That 'ud bring a flood of Japs down on us!" said the Padre sharply.

"Corpses will bring 'em more surely—in time," said Burton. "But suit yourselves as to that. I'm striking out to the westward."

"Good riddance," Saunders observed. Then, for the first time, the Rajah spoke.

"I am going with you, if you'll have me," he said, and paused. His words produced consternation, instant and acute. He smiled, seeing their effect. "Do not misunderstand, my friends. I think it safer here, safer to remain in hiding here; but I am no longer seeking the safest course—for myself. I shall take two of my men with me, and leave the rest here, with my wives. If we win through, we can send aid. If not, we shall end like men, not like jackals. Man cannot avert his destiny; Allah knows all things, praised be Allah! That is all."

"I go too," said Josie Crawford quietly. "What about Lady Bess?"

"She will go," said the Rajah. "I answer for her."

"Then count me in," blurted out Tom Hunter. "Win or lose, I'll let no woman show more spunk than I do! Put me to shame? Not much. I'll go. Who's to pilot us? I suppose you, Burton—or else Cocky Bolt."

Cocky lifted his head. Before he could speak, Burton cut in.

"No. Not me or Cocky or you, Hunter. There's our skipper." He nodded toward Josie Crawford and then grinned.

Her shocked amazement was so genuine that Cocky let out a roaring laugh.

"Good for you, Burton! I second it. Cap'n Josie, you're the boss. You and the Rajah can lead us, and I'll take orders." His arrogant eye swept the soldiers and Rawlins. "You fancy gentlemen don't want to take order from the Rajah—and you damned well don't have to! I'm glad to take 'em from a better man than I am. So sit here and stew in your own juice, and we'll go see what lies over the horizon. Who's with us?"

His gaze swept to Lejeune, who shook his head slowly, regretfully.

"I am good for nothing, at the end of my string," he said.

"I'm staying," spoke out Rawlins.

"Good," said Cocky, and things began to look ugly.

Voices leaped up, but the Padre stilled them.

"My friends, whether you like it or not, I assume command of those who stay—you five men, myself, the women and the Malays.

"Twelve of us men, four women. Let us have no dispute or argument about this division. Those who wish to go, take what they want from the common stores, and go. Rajah, I ask you to appoint one of your six men who remain to act for all six and receive orders from me."

"It shall be done," said the Rajah. The Padre swept a look around.

"Any objections? None—then I expect my orders to be obeyed, mind that. Burton, your ideas are sound about the defense preparations and about burning the truck. Though I hate the peril involved in burning it. The smoke, you know. Could not the bodies be buried and the truck be left alone?"

Burton cocked an eye at Hunter. "Could they, Tom?"

"Might be," gruded the man. "Take a bit of work."

"Then," said the Padre to Burton, "will you take charge of this and of the defenses, getting it accomplished before your party leaves?"

"Yes," said Burton. "Hunter, you and I and four of the Malays could do the job, I think?"

"Might," grunted Hunter. "Only got one spade."

"And six pair of hands." Burton chuckled. "All right. We'll get over there tonight, and start in on it with daylight tomorrow. Padre, that lets you and everyone else go to work at the defenses. You have plenty of men with soldierly experience to lend a hand." His eye touched on the scowling Livermore, Saunders and Thorne. "Come, boys, forget all that's past; we'll all pitch in like good ones, and part like friends. What say?"

A general murmur of assent arose. And then, as though to emphasize the perils of the world outside, came the drumming of engines from the far sky, and a sweeping shape that soared down close above the crater and lake.

A P-38, a Lightning, almost silent—looking, thought Burton as he strained to follow it. Looking for Johnny Burton. And there was time, if Johnny Burton had been ready to act—time to signal those searching eyes above.

IX

"WELL, what about me?" said Cocky Bolt aggressively.

He and Burton stood at the lakeside. The skies were empty now. Most of the men were in the water for a swim before the noon meal. Cocky and Burton stood on the shore, stripped and ready to plunge in. Burton eyed the hard, smooth-musled frame of Cocky. A tough man to down, he reflected.

"What about you?"

"I hand it to you; euchered me out of everything, you did," said Cocky, but his angry voice was belied by his twinkling eyes. "That's all right, let Josie run the show. I'm glad we'll break away without an open row."

"Old man, you and I are going places," said Burton. "Yes, I euchered you out of

taking command; neat trick, wasn't it?"

"So far, that's okay by me. Where do I fit in?"

"Pack boss," said Burton promptly. "You figure out everything we can take with us, all we must take and can do without. I'll swing in on it with you when we get back from the hunting strip and will help make up the packs and so forth. It's a job. What about that map?"

"All Greek to me. But looks like westward ho! is the only chance."

"Then I'll try to bring in someone who can read it."

Cocky put out his hand to Burton's arm. His bold, hard eyes were alert.

"Look, I hate your guts, some ways. Other ways, we'll get on. But don't do this. Don't try to fetch in a Jap. I don't like it. I'm afraid of it."

"Afraid—for whose sake?"

"Yours, you damned lunkhead! You don't savvy these ringtails. You're taking on something more than you can handle. I don't want to see you go under."

"I'll not go under. Thanks all the same. I don't know how I'll do it, but I will."

"If you did, the Nip would have to be shot later."

"Maybe. I'll think about it, Bolt."

"Okay." Cocky grinned suddenly. "I knew the Rajah would chip in with us—told you he and I understood each other, eh? Come on—last one in is a lunk—" and giving Burton a shove, he went into the water with a yell of laughter.

Later, when they were dressing, Lejeune came up, a smile in his soft dark eyes.

"So you would condemn us all to death? Is that kind?"

"I?" said Burton. "Condemn you—what do you mean?"

Lejeune waved his hand. "Oh! You who depart, will perish. We who remain, deprived of the best among us, will languish and fight among ourselves and die."

"Then don't. Instead, live! You're not weaklings."

"No, but all we want is rest. We have eaten the lotos; we want only peace, quiet. I do not blame you who go. You are young and strong. We are old, very old and tired."

"Too much talk," said Burton curtly. "Forget it, Lejeune, and buck up."

And yet it made sense, he admitted to

himself. The Rajah, with stubborn fatalism, expected to meet death, knew it was far safer to remain here, and left his wives here. How far the Padre could keep the others in line, was hard to say. A case of liquor had been brought from the truck and stored away, the same into which Cocky had broken. If he had done it, others could, and would.

Back in camp, he spoke to the Padre about it and advised him to destroy the stuff.

"Thanks, I shall. In the morning. That would bring back Satan, most certainly! Do you believe in the Devil, Burton?"

"Well, I don't know why not."

"I had a very singular experience last night," the Padre said. "Visions, delusions, all that sort of thing; it was actually, no doubt, a touch of fever. I struggled with Satan in the darkness. Then came a flash of brilliant light and a stunning crash. I came to myself. I was alone. I had conquered the enemy; he'll trouble us no more!"

"That's great, Padre; good for you," Burton exclaimed heartily. "Look here, do you think you can handle those men of ours? The Rajah is going to leave his wives here—"

The Padre broke into a laugh and then clapped him on the shoulder.

"When it comes to the human element, have no fear! We'll manage. I'm relieved and thankful that everything was arranged without trouble. While I'm sorry to see so many go to what must be certain destruction, I can't interfere; we're all free to do as we will."

He talked on, and Burton found him quite free of any mental confusion. The Padre was no doubt glad to be relieved of trouble-makers, and was forming his own plans for the future. No more hunting on the strip; just an idyllic existence here among the lost mountains. In short, he was content to rot.

WITH mid-afternoon, Burton and Hunter and four Malays prepared to get off. The others would go at the defenses, which were much closer to home, in the morning. Lady Bess showed up, more gaunt and gray than ever. She betrayed no emotion, spoke only when addressed, and stared into the distances like a lost soul.

Tuan Lingi, as Hunter was known to the Malays, sent the four ahead to relieve the

two watching the strip. He and Burton set out together. The spade, and a rifle each for emergencies, and full canteens, constituted their loads. There was grub and to spare, ahead of them, and no fighting was on the program.

Somewhat to his surprise, Burton discovered that Hunter knew a little of what lay to the westward of the crater. Twice he had taken lonely trips out there amid the mountains.

"It's a hell of a country," he said as they wound along the trail. "Natives have taken refuge there from the Japs; they're just plain savages. The valleys are jungle, the uplands are trackless wastes."

"You're not optimistic."

"Hell! I know the facts. Even if we don't get ambushed by those blasted savages, it'd take us a week to get ten miles ahead. Those mountains are ungodly rough, and all a tangle of rock, with heavy snow in the higher parts. No traveling in a straight line—we'll just have to follow the way of least resistance."

Burton was dismayed. "Then why didn't you say so? Why did you pitch in with us and not utter a word?"

"Bosh." Hunter scowled. "What the hell do I care? So long as we go out fighting, that suits me. What have I got to live for, when I lost everything back in Siam?"

"I didn't know you had," said Burton. "You never mentioned it."

"Son, I don't gab without it suits me." Hunter, who had taken to chewing betelnut paste like the Malays, spat a crimson streak into the bushes. "Slim Thorpe and me, we had a teak mill and a big concession and were going like blazes."

"And you got cleaned out?"

"That don't signify. Money don't matter. I got a pouch of looted rubies like them I gave you, and the hell with 'em. But Slim's dead, and I had a wife and two kids back there, and I seen them shot down like dogs. All I can say is that I've made the Japs pay

heavy, and I'm still operating. Like my grandpappy used to scalp Injuns out west. He never passed one up. I don't aim to pass up ary a Jap I see, neither, unless common sense makes me."

"Well," said Burton, who had obtained the map back from Cocky, "I want to get hold of some Jap who can read that map. If I do, don't scalp him till he's read it."

"You ain't taking one alive, not if I know it," growled Hunter. "Those devils are like cobras—kill 'em or else leave 'em alone. You got the least notion when Mountbatten is going to end the war in these parts?"

"Not the least," said Burton. "The talk goes that he'll aim at Akyab and Rangoon first thing."

"Then we'll be skeletons 'fore he gets anywhere," commented Hunter.

It was distinctly bad news about the mountains westward. There was no backing out now, however. Besides, Hunter took a gloomy view of everything and his opinions were by no means gospel.

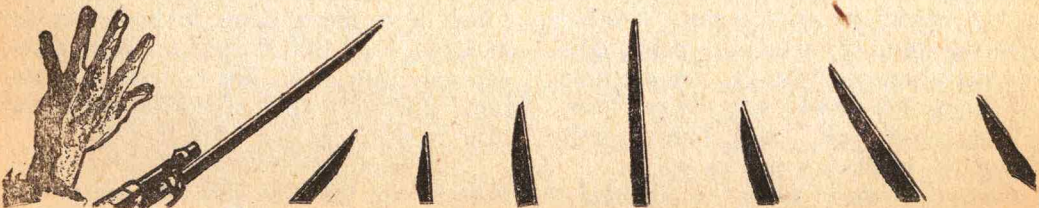
As for the work ahead, he stated, it could be done. One of the Japs had been crushed inside the truck when it fell; hence the blood over the boxes. This one could be left, the others could be buried, and if searchers found the truck there would be no evidence of any bushwhacking.

"We were fools not to get those machine-guns set up long ago," Hunter admitted. "We got two in the hut, and two more out back of it, four in all. Well, I dunno how we'll make out in them mountains with two women along."

"Josie can handle herself and us too," said Burton. "As to Lady Bess, I expect she's got good stuff in her. We'll make out, never fear."

Hunter doubted it, audibly.

They met the two Malays who were being relieved, and who reported all quiet on the road. A number of empty trucks had passed, headed south to the Jap bases, and a convoy of troops going north.



Turning aside to the night-shelter where the boxes of loot were stored, they made a sumptuous meal. Two Malays joined them, the other two remained on guard. Burton recollected the liquor, and Hunter joined him in digging it out and destroying it. At first sight a lucky find, it now promised to make trouble for the Padre if left where Rawlins and the others could get at it.

As they settled down for the night, Tom Hunter mentioned Burton's earlier mention of signaling to a passing plane.

"I s'pose you're all out of that notion now?"

"Oh, absolutely," said Burton, not without a trace of regret. "It might be done, provided everything were ready for fast work; seeing that plane go overhead today convinced me that it was possible. But now that we're leaving, it's out of the question. We'd not be able to do it among the mountains—it's only here, where they'd apparently be looking for some sign of me, that it might be done. Wash it up and forget it."

"Right," said Hunter. "Wouldn't do any good if you did manage it. See you with the sun!"

THE night passed quietly, and daybreak saw them up and ready for the job ahead. The Malays reported the road deserted; nothing had passed all night. Hunter arranged with them to have two men on watch at each end of the curving strip; the other two would lend a hand with the burials, hacking out a space in the jungle beyond the truck, where the dead Japs could be laid away.

Followed by Burton and the two brown men who were to tackle this bit of work, Tom Hunter strode on along the trail to the slope above the curving road. All was clear, and the others followed him across; he and Burton had rifles and the spade, the Malays their *sumpitans* and hacking knives.

They crossed the road and started down the slope to where the truck lay; it had gone down end over end and had fallen upright. Presently it appeared ahead of them, a vague mass engulfed by green shadows. They drew close to its rear end, where the smashed bows stood askew but still formed a hood.

"That's the easiest way in," grunted Hunter. "I'll climb in and pass out—"

He halted abruptly, as clucks came from the Malays. Burton caught a faint tap-tap

echoing along the green walls of jungle; the warning signal froze all four of them on the instant. Then he caught something else, closer and nearer to hand—a low, savage snarl that seemed to lift out of the truck itself. Hunter actually jumped a foot.

Under the hood, something rose—something vivid and horrible, great topaz eyes glaring at them. The head and shoulders of a tiger were framed there, tongue licking red lips, white teeth bared, eyes blazing.

And, from the road above, came the rumbling of vehicles and the laughing voices of Japanese.

Hunter stood absolutely petrified. The two Malays vanished like shadows. Burton half lifted his rifle, then checked himself. To fire, at this moment, was unthinkable; one shot would bring the enemy upon them most surely. Time seemed to stop. That huge symbol of ferocity uttered a loud, tearing cough that ripped through the air like an explosion, then heaved head and shoulders above the tailboard.

"Back," muttered Tom Hunter, sweating and gray of face.

He moved sideways, sidling around the corner of the truck, fingering his rifle yet not daring to use it. Burton joined him in the movement. The tiger heaved up and stood looking at them, great lazy eyes blinking; evidently the withdrawal was fully appreciated as an amicable gesture.

Hunter got around the side of the truck, beyond sight, beckoned Burton, and lifted his rifle. Still came the rumble of vehicles from above; a long convoy, obviously. Burton passed close below the side of the tailboard. He could not take his gaze from those huge yellow eyes. The fetid odor of the brute was sickening. An instant later he was crowding in at the side with Hunter, lifting his own rifle, waiting.

"Got to shoot if he comes at us," grunted Hunter.

The truck lurched and creaked. From the rear launched out an enormous streaked shape, and came to earth—and went scrambling up the slope, straight for the road above. Burton lifted a shaking hand and wiped sweat from his eyes.

"By gosh! What you sweating for?" said Hunter. "Me, I'm all of a shake—"

Yells lifted on the road. Rifles cracked, a machine-gun vomited its staccato roar.

The yells turned to gleeful shouts and loud talk.

"The durned fool started acrost," Hunter observed. "They got him."

A long breath escaped Burton. "Boy! That was a mean moment."

"A meaner one's ahead. He was feeding on them Japs, and we got to clean up."

LOUD voices came from the road, shrill barked orders, then the sound of trucks getting under way again. Presently all became quiet. The two Malays reappeared, with wide grins, and chattered volubly.

"They say he was scarder of us than we were of him," grunted Hunter. "That just ain't possible, but we won't argue it."

He showed the Malays where to chop a clear space, off to one side, and get a hole started. Then he went up over the tailboard of the truck, gingerly, and shook his head at Johnny Burton.

"Nope. You stay here. I'll pass out the stiffs; what's left of 'em. God, this tiger stink is awful! And they been too long unburied already. Yank, you're going to heave your insides out 'fore we get done. So'm I."

His prophetic words were borne out in fact.

Burton thought he had seen some dirty goings-on, but he had never come up against anything half as bad as this. Even tough old Tom Hunter was sick as a dog before the job was completed. Nor did the moist, sticky jungle heat help matters a bit.

It was done at last, the final spade-full of earth was flung over everything, and the two Malays fell to work spreading jungle camouflage over the spot. Burton looked at the older man and laughed. They had both ignored the prohibition against talking, which only obtained when a party was hidden in ambush.

"You sure look like you'd been drawn through a knot-hole, Tom!"

Hunter grunted. "You got no call to talk. You're still green around the gills. That reminds me. I seen a case o' soap in the truck. The camp's perishing for soap. I'll get it, break it out in the truck, and we can divide up the lot among us all."

"And if the truck is found—"

"They'll think the box was busted open in the fall. A couple of others are busted now."

"Go ahead."

With a curse at the smells inside, Hunter crawled into the truck and passed out the soap, and it was made up into four parcels, bound with bits of creeper. Hunter came out gasping.

The Malays in advance, all four men started up the slope for the road. They had nearly reached it, when the two brown men turned with warning gestures. The thin "rat-tat-tat" signal reached them. Burton took cover with the others.

No trucks this time; instead, a small armored car with a driver and two officers swung into sight. Another followed it. Both cars drew to a halt and the officers got out from each, almost opposite the point where Burton lay hidden. No helmets had been brought from camp, and he was thankful for the green cover that kept the sun off him as he lay motionless.

He would have given a good deal to have understood the conversation. One of the officers opened up a map and the others gathered around him. One, a colonel, was the very picture of a Jap caricature, buck teeth, spectacles and all. They were at a point in the curve where they could see out above the country to the east and north, and stood talking and pointing; what it was all about, Burton had not the faintest idea.

Glancing cautiously at his companion, Burton saw that Hunter was sick again—silently but terribly sick. That last visit to the truck's interior had done it. Yet the man made scarcely a sound. The chattering group above broke up and loaded in, and the two cars once more went on and disappeared.

The all clear signal came. Hunter rose, and staggered. Burton went to him, took his rifle and bundle, and they got across the road at a stony spot indicated by the two Malays. Once across, Hunter made shift to scramble up the talus slope to the cover above, then sank down.

"Got to rest a minute. Getting old, I guess," he said grimly, and his eyes bit out at Burton. "Where's the spade?"

Burton frowned. "The spade? Never thought about it — right there where we buried those fellows, I guess."

"Damn!" The word came from Hunter in a groan. "We got to get it."

"Blast the spade! Come along. We can

send one of the Malays back for it later on, if you want it—"

"Condemn it, Burton, use your head! That's about the only tool we got, back in camp! We've dug all them pitfalls and graves with that one spade. But besides that, if we leave it lay there, it's a dead give-away."

Gray and trembling, he came to his feet.

"Send the Malays," repeated Burton.

"Nope. They're funny beggars. Scared of that jungle, especially now after that tiger showed up; they won't venture into it without one of us along. Condemn it, I can't face that smell again!"

"I'll get it, then."

"Good work, son. Gimme your rifle and pack. Mind you walk acrost on the stony part, not the dust."

The two Malay watchers were still in place at the ends of the strip. Burton, relieved of his load, made his way back down to the road and started across. He glanced up and down; there was no sign of the dead tiger, which had no doubt been taken along as a trophy by the trucks.

No thought of danger entered his head. He was cursing the forgotten spade, when something jerked at his brain—the "tat-tat" signal of danger. Almost at the same instant a motorcycle came around the south end of the curve. It was going like a bat out of hell, and behind it came another with a sidecar—

And he was out in the middle of the road, caught. He knew it. He had only one chance, one slim, desperate chance.

He stood still, and lifted his hands, as the two motorcycles roared at him.

(Part III in the next SHORT STORIES)

The Story Tellers' Circle

(Continued from page 80)

cause Jack is a foul fighter or a mean guy, but because this is a fight and all Jack knows is fighting.

"Joe gets up. . . ."

"One of two things happens. He holds his guard high, back-pedals like Tunney at Chicago and lasts the round. Or Jack gets to him right then and no more Joe. That's all, brother.

"And if Joe lasts, he will win. Jack never could go the route with a man as good as Joe.

"But if Joe slips, he is a gone goose. Jack never let a cripple get away from him until Chicago when his legs were gone.

"And just to start a row in the Story Tellers' Circle, how about that decision at Chicago? Did Dempsey lose a round up to and including the seventh? Then, although he was patently finished at the end of the twelfth, how could he have failed to get a draw? Not that a draw, as I said above, seems a good decision for any of Jack's fights, even this one, when he was through and knew it. Not that he would ever have fought Tunney again for all the money in

the world. Jack's eyes were fast following his legs and he is a character with plenty of good sense.

"I keep telling you, this fight game makes more conversation than the War!

"Why don't I shut up? I thought middles were my favorites?

"Okay, I will shut up. But hell, Dempsey was Dempsey. . . ."

William Cox.

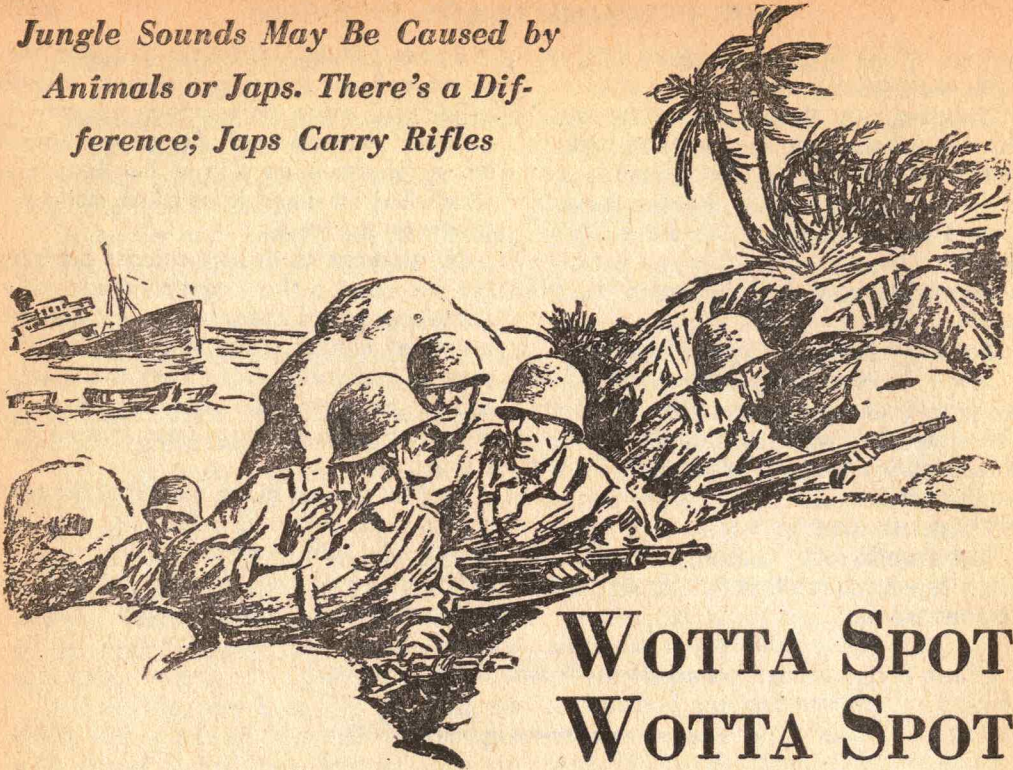
Show People and the A. T. C.

ABOUT his off-trail yarn, "Cargo of Show Business," and that vital and splendid organization the Air Transport Command, whose job it is to see that "enough gets somewhere, soon enough," George Armin Shaftel writes:

"It's generally known that show people are playing a very fine and generous role in keeping morale of our overseas forces at high pitch. I'd like to say a few words about the service which is transporting these groups of

(Concluded on page 111)

*Jungle Sounds May Be Caused by
Animals or Japs. There's a Dif-
ference; Japs Carry Rifles*



WOTTA SPOT! WOTTA SPOT!

By **FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE**

Author of "The Honorable Williwaw," etc.

"**W**OTTA spot to be in! Wotta spot!" The sergeant whispers his complaint because there are sounds of *life* out there in the dark jungle, and the sounds may be caused by animals or Japs. There's a difference. The Japs carry rifles.

The sergeant wipes his face on his sleeve and again moans, "Wotta spot! Japs closin' in on three sides! No grub! Ammunition about gone and us stuck with an ancient history professor for a commandin' officer."

I feel the same way. We're as good as dead and it all happened because some army clerk, with his mind on women instead of war, balled up the paper work and sent Professor J. Kemper Bringhurst to a combat outfit instead of to a university where they are training guys to be military governors.

When the prof first shows up in camp, he don't make sense from any angle. The American Legion button on his coat shows he'd been in the last brawl. In color he

looks like somethin' found in a cave where they age cheese—sort of yellow and mildewed. He has two red corpuscles which rush to his cheeks when he's excited—which isn't often.

Some claimed scientists had made a bet you could get a mummy drafted if you'd warm it up to a 98.6 degrees temperature and make it breathe. And that the prof was the mummy. That was a foul rumor, though you couldn't blame the guys for believing it. J. Kemper Bringhurst got himself inducted.

When he showed up for basic training, the brass hats knew a mistake had been made and started investigating. We expected Bringhurst to fall apart in basic, but he held together. Not a bad guy, either, if you needed a kindly uncle to ship you packages from home, but no good as a commanding officer.

If you've been in the army you know how a flock of links—all bad—can lead into a chain of events. The brass hats hadn't in-

vestigated fast enough, and Bringhurst was our skipper when we were shipped to port of embarkation. The guy on the wharf waving a telegram as we shoved off might have had the prof's recall orders or a pardon from some governor. We never found out.

On the voyage we learned he lived and breathed ancient history. He'd get his pipe going, then start talking in his deliberate way and the first thing you knew you'd be touring Syracuse in a chariot, or telling Archimedes that one about the whiskey drummer and farmer's daughter.

A guy like that had to have a hobby or go nuts. The prof had one—weapons of the ancients. If you'd just mention catapult, the two red corpuscles would leap to his cheeks and a beautiful light would come to his eyes. You've seen the same light in a young mother's eyes when she sees her first baby. "Ah," he would murmur tenderly, "the catapult, not as powerful as the ballista, but more uniform in range. They were used as late as the eighteenth century. One was used by General Melville in the siege of Gibraltar. He dropped rocks on the Spanish. We get our word ballistics from ballista. These machines—the fathers, we might say, of our artillery—lacked mobility, but some were capable of projecting a rock weighing several hundred pounds as much as a half mile. Projecting, by the way, fathers the word, projectile."

HE WOULD pause, take a couple of deep drags on the pipe, then add, "Not all of the weapons devised by the ancients have gone through progressive stages of design that is exemplified by the ballista. I was reminded of that in the last war when I observed the French seventy-fives in action. If one of Archimedes' rather potent ideas had been given the benefit of two thousand odd years of similar experiment and study, I've often wondered—but this is no time for speculation."

The prof never got around to details, and we weren't interested in Archimedes' deals, though some of our boys are throwing the Romans out of his old stamping grounds, and he'd like that.

"Wotta spot! Wotta spot!" the sergeant moans again. "Where's Bringhurst? Out looking for a ballista?"

"We could use one at that," I tell him.

"A quarter ton rock lobbed into that ammunition the Japs are piling up might touch it off. Bringhurst took a detail and said something about going back to the transport."

"Mebbe he *is* after a ballista," the sergeant mutters. "I said, 'Cap'n, on account of the fortunes of war, we're on a spot. What'd we better do? We're about out of ammunition, and we can't throw rocks without a ballista.' That was sarcasm, but he took it in stride, and said, 'When you run out of ammunition, use your imagination, Archimedes did.'"

Forty-eight hours ago the transport had sneaked into the channel. The idea was to set us ashore on an inky black night. We were to take Point X on the chart and hold it. By holding Point X our troops could land themselves and their heavy stuff on a curving, sandy beach, with a minimum of surf. The Japs weren't expecting us to attack this particular island. That's why we were doing it.

About the time we got the landing barges over the side, a Jap task force jumped our main transport group. That was a mistake, because our cruisers and cans just about tore the hide off of the Japs. One of their destroyers, hunting cover, came down the channel and almost ran down our ship. When they recovered from their surprise they eased a spread of torpedoes at us, and two hit.

Our cans picked up most of the boys. With water up to the boat deck, and our ammunition and supplies below, the deal was off. The men who had landed on Point X were done for unless they could hang on until support came. A Jap float plane got a clear picture the next morning, and by noon, they were pouring it to us—the idea being to blunt the point of our spearhead.

Now you understand why the sergeant is annoyed and keeps moaning, "Wotta spot!"

Dawn finds us alive and crouched among heavy boulders. The sun's rays are hot enough to boil coffee—if we had any coffee. We look at the wrecked transport. The tide is low and a couple of decks below the boat deck are clear. There's no sign of life aboard. "Where's our ballista-huntin' C. O.?" the sergeant growls. "Chances are him and the detail was drowned, or the Japs got 'em."

We put in the day watching a seemingly lifeless jungle. There's plenty of life there,

though. Jap snipers ready to pick us off the instant we show our positions by shooting. The pile of supplies they're building up has grown to a dump during the night.

The picture is clear. They know our main body is going to land in that cove, regardless of cost. They plan to wipe out our bunch, take over the point, and be all set with guns, ammunition and supplies. In the meantime why waste more ammunition on us?

Night comes after the longest day any of us had ever known and we get set for dirty work. Nothing happens. The Japs figure it's in the bag and put in the night bringing up supplies. Midnight a sentry challenges and the prof answers. The detail is coming up a cliff, and hauling up several crates with ropes. "You'd think them crates was filled with eggs, they're that careful," the sergeant says. "Knocked-down ballistas, mebbe. Wotta spot!"

The prof and detail drop in their tracks, they're that exhausted. An hour before dawn they're awake and as excited as a bride on her wedding morn. "Whatcha got?" the sergeant asks. "Some kind of a death ray? If it's ammunition you brought, it won't last long."

"This kind of ammunition will last plenty long," someone answers.

BY ten o'clock the gear is all set up, and we're studying the jungle for snipers. The Japs know their stuff when it comes to camouflage. "Ain't that one?" the sergeant asks, pointing. He hasn't made up his mind whether to regard Bringhurst as his captain, or a professor.

"Let's find out," Bringhurst answers.

It looks like a bunch of leaves to me, but suddenly that bunch of leaves comes to life, yells like a painted Indian, cuts loose and drops. The sniper was killed by the fall. Some of us grin, some laugh out loud, but the professor has a class-room expression on his face. You'd never guess he'd been in the last war and had raised hell at American Legion conventions. He mutters, "Interesting and—confirmatory, too." He makes several notes.

"Captain," the sergeant says. The prof is captain for the sergeant's dough from now on. "Captain, ain't that another?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Bringhurst

says. A few minutes later another Jap yells bloody murder and cuts loose. Inside a half hour seven snipers have bit the dust, and you can hear Jap jabber all through the jungle. They figure we have a death ray that works.

"We will now make some adjustments," Bringhurst says. "From the sound of things, I'm confident the Japs are planning to shell us. The point is to cause a maximum of damage in a minimum of time."

"It wouldn't take much of a shellin' to knock the hell out of your Archimedes ballista, Cap'n," the sergeant says. "Wotta spot! Wotta spot!" His tone is different. You can tell he'd rather be on this spot than anywhere else in the world.

The adjustments take about an hour, then Bringhurst says, "You men will retire to points under the cliffs." When he sees some of us don't like the idea of leaving him alone, he adds, "That is an order. Be careful not to expose yourselves. There may be a Jap sniper or two left."

We crawl until overhanging rocks protect us, then we wait.

Did you ever hear an ammunition dump go up? It's the swellest sound in the world—if it ain't your dump. This one was the Japs'. First a few lusty blasts, then one hell of a roar, then a flock of little explosions—sort of after-thoughts.

It rains debris for a half mile in every direction, and sets the jungle on fire. When the last hunk splashes into the sea, the sergeant leads the rescue party. We lift up cocoanut tree logs, slabs of rock and find parts of the Archimedes ballista. Then we find Bringhurst crouched under a tangle of boulders. He's dazed, but he ain't hurt, except for scratches and bruises.

He's half conscious and is delivering a class-room lecture in Greek, which none of us can understand except Nick Pourtales, and he can only understand the words, not the subject. It's something about guys named Eratosthenes and Aristarchus. There's a gag about Archimedes watching his legs float in a bath tub. It don't add up.

After awhile he snaps out of it, and he's all veteran of World Wars I and II. "We got the dump, eh? Good! Good! For a time I wasn't sure. It required minute adjustments to the last to concentrate the maximum—" Now he was a professor of ancient

history again. But what the hell, we'd tossed the Japs back on their fannies, hadn't we? And those planes coming over for a look-see weren't Zeros. They were carrier-based American jobs. The main landing force was over the horizon, and when the boys got ready to land, the way was clear.

"Where'd you get the idear, Captain?" the sergeant asks.

"From Archimedes," Bringhurst answers. "He's one of my favorite people. Invented a water pump by a rotating helix in a cylinder."

"A rotatin'—what? Skip it."

"Watching his legs displace water in a bath tub, he discovered the theory of displacement. He leaped from the tub and went down the street yelling, 'I've found it! Eureka!'"

"Without a towel, sir?"

"Without a towel!" the captain answered. "He knew something about burning glasses, too. When the Roman fleet attacked Syracuse he rigged up burning glasses and mirrors and set the boats on fire. I've often wondered why something hasn't been developed along that line."

"So far as me and the Japs can see," the sergeant said, "there ain't nothing wrong with what you done with some mirrors and searchlight lenses from a torpedoed transport." I've never seen him happier. He couldn't have looked more pleased in a private dining room with a bottle of whiskey and a wild woman. He looks at the hole left by the exploding dump, then at the burning jungle and finally at Bringhurst. "Wotta spot!" he says. "Wotta spot!"

The Story Tellers' Circle

(Concluded from page 107)

entertainers: the Air Transport Command. It is, without doubt, the greatest cargo- and passenger-carrying organization known to history. It has made mere routine of flying the widest oceans and hopping the highest mountain chains.

"One thing I hadn't known about the A. T. C. was that when pilots aren't flying, they're *studying*. When not on a flight, they're in school. Constantly. A. T. C. pilots are composed of civilian flyers, cadets brought in from Army Training schools, and war-weary pilots brought back from the combat areas. All of them, without exception, even former instructors and ace combat pilots, immediately go into training before they are sent out on A. T. C. flights. There are five grades of A. T. C. pilots—and by time a man has worked into the top bracket, he's a real all-around flying man.

"Someday the history of the A. T. C. will be written. It is already being recorded, of course. Among its highlights will be the early flights of exploration made to establish routes: flights over ocean and jungle and desert made without knowledge of fields ahead or adequate maps and weather information. Capt. Harvey's globe-circling flight was one of the earliest. And it was Ferrying

Command planes which made rendezvous with submarines, bringing supplies for Bataan, and which flew the last Army and Navy personnel out of the southern Philippines a jump ahead of the Japs. They rushed supplies for the Flying Tigers. Ferrying Command pilots, using Chinese airline planes, evacuated 5,000 people from Rangoon, packing as many as 72 people into planes built for 24. The last planes took off under fire.

"Perhaps most dramatic of A. T. C. exploits are their 'rush operations.' In 1942, men and munitions were rushed to Dutch Harbor in preparation for the Japanese threat. And at the same time occurred what the A. T. C. calls the 'Battles of the Hours' when 62 4-motored planes were delivered to Hawaii in record time in preparation for the Battle of Midway. Maybe that victory would not have been so decisive but for those 62 planes. And when Rommel was so close to Cairo, the British defense almost broke down for lack of anti-tank shell fuses. The nearest supplies of them were in the United States. The A. T. C. and R. A. F. planes flew through exceptionally bad weather to rush the fuses to Cairo in three days. And Rommel was turned back!"

George Armin Shafstel.



DRY ROT

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of Many Stories of the Outlaws of Halfaday Creek

I

BLACK JOHN SMITH finished cutting the meat from the carcass of a moose he had shot on the bank of the White River, a mile below a long and turbulent rapid, as Old Cush, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, packed it in sacks and stowed it in the canoe.

"There's six, seven hundred pounds of good meat," Black John estimated, as he cleansed his knife with handful of soggy snow. "That ort to last us quite a while."

"Spring kilt meat ain't got enough fat on it to suit me," Cush grumbled. "I like it better in the fall."

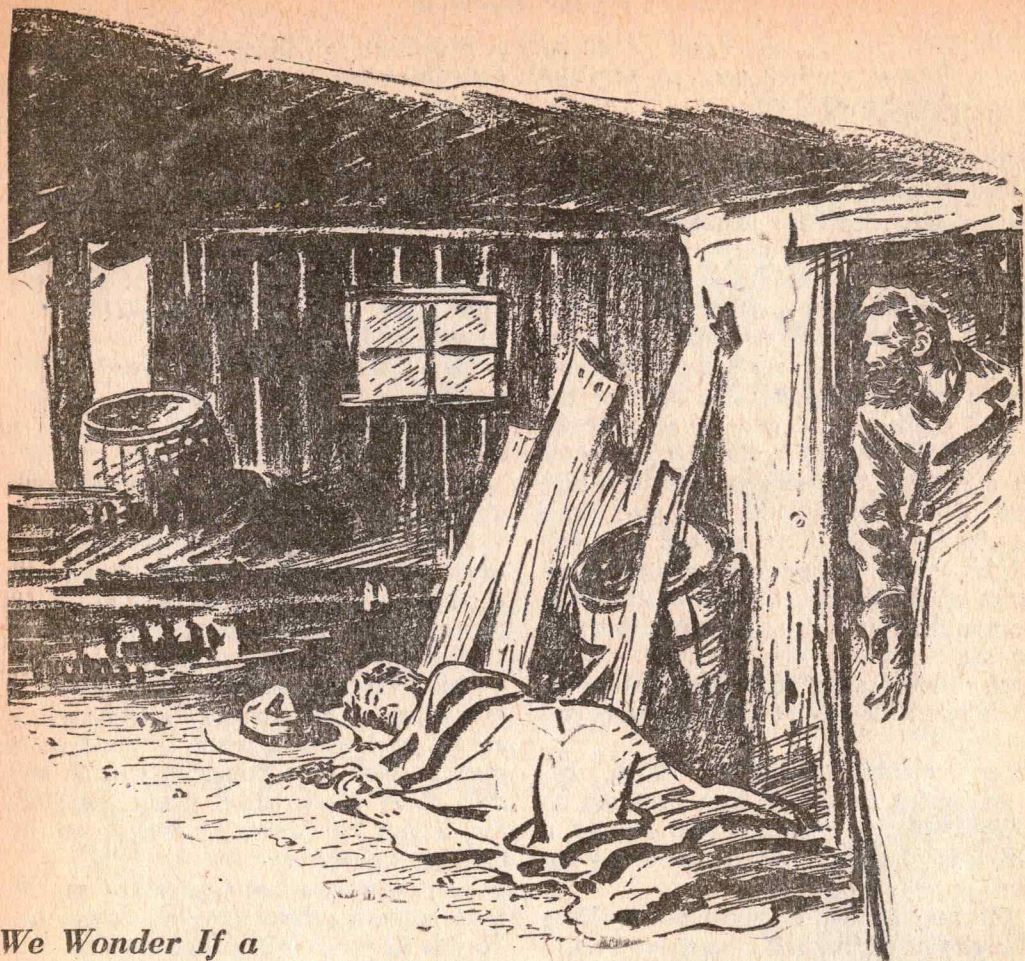
"Oh, shore," the big man agreed, "but this un wintered good."

"An' besides which," continued the lugubrious Cush, "what with the river high as it is we've got to pack it around them rapids, an' what with the trail all slushed up it's goin' to be a hell of a chore."

"Cripes, time we git supper et the slush'll be froze. There'll be a bright moon tonight. 'Tain't only a mile around the rapids an' we can make it in three trips easy. Then we'll slip up an' see old man Hizer. Pore old cuss, things ain't be'n goin' so good with him fer the last two, three years—what with bein' crippled up with rheumatism, an' all. We'll take him some fresh meat."

"Huh," grunted Cush, "the ornery old coot! He could starve an' it wouldn't be no more'n what was comin' to him."

Black John grinned. "Of course, if you



*We Wonder If a
Little Dry Rot Didn't Get into Black
John's Theory About Neither Helpin' Nor Hinderin' the Police*

judge Hizer by the standards that obtains amongst the pious, a man would have to admit that the odds is agin him. Hizer ain't be'n no pillar of rectitude, anyways you look at him."

"I don't know nothin' about that," growled Cush, "but I do know that 'long as he run his tradin' post there at the head of the rapids he sold licker to the Siwashes, an' cheated 'em, an' married four, five of 'em, an' would git drunk an' knock hell out of 'em, an' cheated men out of their claims, an' stoled anything he could lay his hands on, an' kep' his place so damn dirty a white man wouldn't hardly go into it."

"Oh shore. I ain't citin' Hizer as an example of personal probity, nor yet as an apostle of cleanliness. To my certain knowl-

edge he's be'n guilty of everything you mentioned, an' plenty more. But now he's reformed, we hadn't ort to ostracize him."

"Reformed hell! He ain't no more reformed than you be! He's crippled up so he can't get around, er he'd be jest as ornery as he ever was. If anyone else had the rheumatism as bad as what he's got it they'd be dead long ago. Trouble with Hizer is, he's so damn bad he's afraid to die."

"Anyhow," Black John replied, "he's old an' crippled an' friendless. Like you say there won't no white man go into his shack, an' even the Siwashes won't have nothin' to do with him. It ain't goin' to hurt us none to take him fresh meat. He prob'ly ain't had none all winter. I feel sorry for him."

"Anyone that would feel sorry fer him

would feel sorry fer the devil!" Cush retorted. "But if yer hell bent on goin' up there, I'll go 'long."

THE Hizer trading post, never an imposing structure, presented a dismal picture as the two paused for a moment at the top of the bank that slanted steeply upward from the river. The softening effect of the moonlight served to heighten rather than to dispel the air of utter dejection that seemed to hover over the place like a pall of evil. Snow had drifted deep against the door of the unused trading room and lay in a heavy, sodden mass atop the northern exposure of the roof, from the southern slope of which most of the tarpaper had long since been torn by the wind. Light showed in a dull reddish glow through the dirt-encrusted panes of the single window of the little room in the rear that served Hizer as living quarters.

"A dismal layout," Black John observed, "'n' a miserable way for a white man to end his days."

Cush nodded somberly. "Yeah, but Hizer's got it comin'. A man can't run no hell-hole like he done an' not pay fer it someway. I can't work up no sorrow for him."

The two advanced toward the building through the sodden, half frozen snow, trackless save for a trodden path to the woodpile. All about the doorway the snow was befouled with slop filth. Black John's knock was answered by a hoarse growl.

"Who's there?"

"It's Cush, an' Black John Smith."

"Wait a minute!" The words were followed by the rasping sound of a heavy bar being lifted from its brackets. The door opened and the two stepped into the foul air of the filthy interior. Hizer closed the door, dropped the bar into place, and hobbling to his bunk, seated himself on its edge. "Set," he invited, indicating a rude bench. "I allus keep the door barred. The damn Siwashes has got it in fer me sence I quit sellin' em hooch. I was their friend long as I'd sell it to 'em. They know I've got a little left, damn 'em! An' there's plenty of 'em that would sneak in here an' cut my throat to git it if I'd give 'em the chanct." He paused and pointed to a jug that stood on the table amid a litter of filthy dishes. "Rench out a couple of cups an' have a snort.

A man ain't so bad off long as he's got a little licker left."

Black John declined. "No thanks, Hizer. Me an' Cush has jest et. I never could go no licker on a full stomach. We knocked over a young moose a little ways below the rapids, an' we fetched you up a chunk."

The rheumy, drink-sodden eyes lighted at sight of the generous portion of meat that the big man removed from his packsack and placed on the table.

"By God, fresh meat'll go good!" Hizer exclaimed. "I ain't in no shape to hunt. Can't even git around to red up the shack. But come warm weather I'll be all right agin. I'll git me another kloooh, an' stock up the post, an' git goin'."

Black John's glance swept the room where the only visible supplies were a half-emptied sack of flour, and a few tins of canned goods. "Have you got capital enough to start over?" he asked casually.

"No," Hizer admitted, "I ain't. But quick as it warms up the rheumatiz'll let up on me, an' I'll go down to Dawson an' stock up on credick. Hell, I've boughten enough stuff off'n them damn cusses down there so's they'll give me credick to start up on. By God, they gotta!"

"An' in the meantime," asked the big man, indicating the scanty store of supplies, "is this all you've got to live on?"

"Yeah, that's all I've got left. My dust's all gone, too. Easy come, easy go—what I allus claimed, an' I blow'd her in around Dawson an' Whitehorse. I've got one more jug of licker. But that ain't goin' to last long. I kin make out on the grub, all right. A sick man don't need no hell of a lot to eat. But it's goin' to go to be hell when the licker's all gone. It's the onliest kind of medicine does me any good."

"You tried any other kind?"

"Shore I have! I've drunk up a dozen bottles of pain-killer besides part of a bottle of stuff Father Cassatt give me. He come through here a while back on his way to Dawson an' I ax him if he'd fetch me a couple jugs of licker when he come back, bein' as I needed 'em fer medicine. Well, he stopped in agin on his way back—an' you know what the damn fool done? Instead of licker, he fetched me a bottle of medicine which he'd got off some doctor! An' when I lit in on him fer not fetchin' no licker, he starts givin' me hell fer sellin' hooch to

Siwashes, claimin' the hand of the Lord was on me fer the way I'd used 'em, an' a lot of guff like that, till I got mad an' told him to mind his own business an' git to hell outa there 'fore I blow'd his damn head off! An' he called me a blasphemous old retrobate, an' went off without leavin' me no lick—only the bottle of medicine. I tuk a couple of snorts of it, but it tasted like hell, an' didn't have no kick to it so I throw'd it away. What I claim, them damn missionaries does more harm than good in a country. How the hell do they expect a man to make a livin' off'n the Siwashes if he don't sell 'em no hooch?"

"I've be'n in business quite a while up on Halfaday," Cush said. "I ain't done so bad—an' I ain't never sold a drink to a Siwash yet."

"What I claim," growled Hizer, hobbling to the table and pouring himself a cupful of liquor, "a man's a damn fool to pass up a dollar, no matter how he gits it." He turned to Black John. "I got to have grub an' lick enough to last me till it warms up so I kin git to Dawson. That there York boat of mine. I rec'lect you wanted to buy her off'n me, four, five year back. She's a damn good boat—ain't be'n in the water fer the last three year. I ain't had no use fer her, what with bein' crippled up, an' all. An' I figger if I'll be needin' a York boat I kin pick me up another one down to Dawson. She's there in the tradin' room, all chocked up on the slides, ready to slip into the river. I give her a coat of paint three year ago, an' ain't used her sence. You'll find a lamp in there. Take a look at her, an' if you still want her, I might let her go."

Black John pushed open the door to the long disused trading room and lighting a kerosene lamp with a smoke-blackened chimney, inspected the boat. "What do you hold her at?" he asked, when he had returned to the room.

"I give twenty ounces fer her. I figger she'd ort to be worth fifteen. Tell you what I'll do—you kin have her fer ten ounces in trade, if you'll deliver the stuff down here from Cush's—half grub an' half lick."

"All right. It's a trade. Give me a bill of sale, an' I'll send the stuff down, with the onderstandin' that I can leave the boat where it's at till I want it. Make you yer list an' we'll be goin'. We want to ketch us some sleep."

"Shore you kin leave her there—an' to hell with a list. You know what a man needs in the way of grub, same as I do. Only don't go too heavy on the grub—I need that lick fer medicine."

II

ON THE morning after their arrival on Halfaday Cush scowled at the array of food and liquor Black John had selected from the storeroom and turned over to Red John and Long Nosed John for delivery to Hizer. "If you figger on gittin' all that stuff fer ten ounces, you've got another guess comin'," he said, stepping around from behind the bar, pencil and paper in hand. "It comes to twenty ounces," he announced, after checking and totalling the supplies, "so you better put the half of it back where you got it."

The big man grinned. "Hell, Cush, I thought you'd prob'ly take a half-interest in that York boat for them extra ten ounces."

"I don't want no half-interest in no York boat at no price. An' if I did, I could git it fer five ounces. Hizer offered it to you fer ten."

"Yeah, I know. The pore old devil was afraid to ask any more fer fear I wouldn't take him up—an' he's desperate in need of that stuff. Twenty ounces ain't too much to pay for a good York boat. If you don't want in on it I'll write the half of it off as charity. I feel kinda sorry fer the old man. He ain't never goin' to be in shape to open up his post agin—an' he couldn't get credit in Dawson, if he was. He's on his way out."

"Yeah—an' the quicker he gits there the better," growled Cush. "Cripes, if I was huntin' a chanct to blow in ten ounces on charity, I wouldn't pick out no ornery old buzzard like Hizer. There's plenty of Siwashes in the country that needs it as bad as he does."

"Yeah, but them Siwashes are God's pore folks. Ain't that what Father Cassat's always sayin'? An' God's missionaries are lookin' out fer them. But take Hizer—he's what you might call the devil's pore. An' there ain't no one to look out fer him—onlest it's some renegade like me. Jest charge the stuff up agin' me, an' then buy a drink."

Cush made an entry in his book, and set out bottle, glasses and the inevitable leather dice box. "I'll buy a drink if the dices says

I do. Beat them three sixes in one," he added, rolling the dice onto the bar.

They were still busy with the dice box an hour later when a large man stepped into the room, closely followed by two others. They advanced to the bar where the large one swung a small but heavy pack to the floor.

"This here's Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday Crick, ain't it?" he asked. "An' I s'pose you're Black John Smith, ain't you?"

"Both guesses is right," Black John replied, "so, if you'll belly up to the bar, the house'll buy one."

"We heard about this place in Dawson," the large one continued, as Cush set out the glasses. "An' we figgered it was a good place to come."

"A lot of folks had figgered the same way," Black John observed, "an' a few of 'em was right."

"What do you mean—a few of 'em was right?"

"Meanin' that some of 'em is here yet—the ones that was smart enough to settle down an' work claims, an' mind their own business, an' become law-abidin' citizens of Halfaday."

"Law-abidin'—hell! Accordin' to what we heard, yer all outlaws up here!"

"The report was ondoubtless more comprehensive than the facts warrants," replied Black John. "It's barely possible, of course, that at some time durin' their pre-Halfaday existence, the finger of suspicion might have p'inted toward some of the sterlin' characters that abides here. But——"

"What the hell you talkin' about?" scowled the other, filling his glass from the bottle that Cush shoved toward him.

"If someone knows a lot of big words, he's got to keep sayin' 'em so's he don't fergit 'em," Cush grunted.

"The thought I was strivin' to convey," Black John explained, "is that what a man done before he come to Halfaday ain't nobody's business but his own—an' the Law's. After he gits here, he can take his pick between stayin' moral; er gittin' hung. It's all the same to us."

"You mean you don't want no one pullin' off nothin' on the crick, eh? Okay. We got ourn. All we want is somewheres to lay low till the stink dies down. We seen an empty cabin five, six miles below here. How about us movin' in there?"

"That's Olson's old shack," Cush said. "It's onlucky."

"An' on top of its reputation for bad luck," Black John added, "it's situation is precarious in the extreme fer anyone who is bein' sought by the Mounted. An officer comin' up the crick couldn't help but——"

"An officer comin' up the crick!" exclaimed one of the men. "Accordin' to what we heer'd they didn't no police dast to show his face on Halfaday!"

"Yer information was faulty," Black John replied. "Corporal Downey frequently visits Halfaday in the course of his duty. Sometimes he locates his man—an' sometimes he don't. It's accordin' to how his luck's runnin'. On Halfaday, we don't neither help nor hinder the police."

"That's a hell of a note!" the large man exclaimed. "Downey's the one I'm most afraid of, 'cause he's the smartest one of the damn police. 'Course, we could lay in the bresh an' knock him off if he come prowlin' around."

"If you done that you wouldn't live long enough to make the effort worth yer while," observed Black John dryly. "Yer soul would be clamorin' at the gates of hell before Downey got cold."

"Where kin we go, then?"

"Well, there's Whiskey Bill's shack. It's up a small feeder above here. It don't lay no more'n a quarter of a mile from the Alaska line. If Downey should show up, you could slip acrost the line an' be safe from arrest without resortin' to murder."

"That sounds okay," the large man said, tossing a sack onto the bar. "Fill 'em up. I'm buyin' one. How do we find this here shack?"

"You can't miss it. Foller up the crick about four mile, an' turn up the first feeder that runs in from the north. The shack's about a mile up the feeder."

"How about a game of cards now an' then, if we was to slip down here nights? I see you've got tables here."

"Stud is a form of amusement that's favored on Halfaday. A man can find a game most any night."

"That's good. We'll prob'ly show up three, four nights a week. Then when things sort of quiets down, mebbe you an' me kin kinda git together an' figger out a couple of jobs, eh?"

"That's accordin' to what kind of a job

you had in mind. I've got an inherent aversion to manual labor—"

"What the hell's that?"

"Jest some more big words," Cush said wearily. "He means he's lazy."

"I've got a couple of sweet jobs lined up on Bonanza," the large man continued. "It would take mebbe five, six good men to pull 'em. The Excelsior's strong room ort to be good fer six, seven thousan' ounces, if we watch our chanct. An' we'd ort to do damn near that good at the Calumet."

"Sounds like important money," Black John admitted. "But I wouldn't care to embark on a venture of that magnitude with no punks."

"What do you mean—punks! By God, we ain't no punks—no ways you look at us! Didn't the three of us jest take the Monarch Development outfit, on Dominion, fer twenty-five hundred ounces? An' wasn't it me figgered it out? An' me that knocked off the watchman? An' went in an' got the dust whilst these boys stud lookout?"

The two others nodded agreement, as Black John remarked, "There ain't no call to get hostile. I jest said I wouldn't want to go into a thing like that with no punks—an' neither would you. Havin' satisfied myself that you ain't punks, it might be that we could work out somethin' later. But as you say, we'd better sort of let things quiet down before stirrin' up another stink along the river."

III

ONE morning, some three weeks later, old Cush folded the newspaper he had been reading, laid it on the back bar, and shoved his square-framed steel-rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead, as Black John stepped into the saloon. "I see by the paper," he announced, "where some fella claims that mebbe them Spaniards down there in Cuby never blow'd up that there U. S. battleship."

"Who done it then?" Black John asked, picking up the dice box and rolling the cubes onto the bar.

"He figgers some of the *Maine's* sailors might of be'n smokin' in the powder room. Er mebbe her b'iler busted."

"How could he prove it—with the ship on the bottom of the harbor? Beat them four treys in one."

"He don't claim he kin prove it. He jest says 'mebby.' An' there's four fours to beat

yer treys—an' three fives right back at you. But it would be a hell of a note to start a war over somethin' that never happened."

"Never happened! Cripes, if you don't call blowin' up a battleship a happenin', what the hell would be one? Yer three fives is good. Shove out the bottle."

"He never claimed the ship never blow'd up—only that them Spaniards mightn't of done it. An' if they didn't, why should the U. S. start in an' knock hell out of 'em?"

"Mebbe jest on general principles," Black John said. "Most wars is fought over somethin' that could be settled in a couple of hours if a few right-thinkin' men was to set down to a table an' figger out the answer."

"Guess that's right," Cush admitted. "An' it looks like me an' you'd better do a little figgerin' before somethin' happens on Halfaday."

"What do you mean?"

"It's them three cusses up to Whiskey Bill's. I don't like their looks, nor nothin' else about 'em. They're be'n comin' down here two, three times a week an' settin' in the stud game, er else gittin' drunk with the boys. There ain't no harm in that, long as they deal honest an' pay fer their drinks. It might be a good idee to hang 'em. I've noticed 'em sort of lookin' around."

"Lookin' around ain't hangable."

"But what I claim, onct you hang a man, he ain't goin' to pull off nothin'. Them three's gittin' kinda thick with a couple other characters I wouldn't trust no hell of a ways—that there Jefferson Braddock, an' William Henry Van Buren. An' Short John is kinda mixin' with 'em, too. I ain't never suspicioned Short John before. But it's like the Good Book says, birds of a feather is apt to be tarred by the same bresh."

"Er words to that effect," grinned Black John. "But there ain't no cause to worry. The only thing them boys is plannin' is to knock you off an' raid the safe."

"Knock me off, an' raid on the safe! An' that ain't no cause to worry! How do you know what they're up to?"

"That's what Short John reports. When I suspected that somethin' was afoot, I delegated Short John to horn in on it. Jest to make the play good, so they wouldn't suspect him, I lit into Short John a couple of weeks back, an' give him a hell of a bawlin' out where them boys could hear me. Then Short John throw'd in with 'em out of

revenge. It's like this—if they can make a deal with me to pull off them Bonanza jobs, we'll clean them up first. After that they aim to tunk you on the head, raid the safe, an' slip across into Alaska. Or, if I don't throw in with 'em on them jobs—then they'll cool you an' raid the safe anyhow."

"You'd be a damn fool to throw in with 'em."

BLACK JOHN laughed. "Oh, I don't know. Accordin' to how that big one figgers, them jobs would run into important money. But if I don't throw in with 'em, an' they should make that play fer the safe, the enterprise will undoubtedly wind up with a bunch of assorted hangin's."

"Look! Comin' in the door!" Cush exclaimed, as Black John turned to greet Corporal Downey of the Northwest Mounted Police.

"Hello, Downey! Welcome to Halfaday! Come on up an' wet yer whistle. Cush is buyin' one."

"Busy as ever, I see," grinned the officer, hoisting a foot to the brass rail.

"Oh, shore. But never so busy but what we can snatch a fleetin' moment in the interest of frivolity. Was you expectin', perchance, to accost one of the sinful amongst us?"

"Along about six weeks ago the night watchman on the Monarch Development Company's outfit on Dominion was knocked on the head with an iron bar, an' the strong-box robbed of twenty-five hundred an' ten ounces of dust."

"H-u-u-m. Better'n forty thousand dollars, eh?"

"That's right. There must have be'n at least two mixed up in it. The murderer must have had anyway one lookout. The watchman was still alive when the morning shift went on an' they hustled him to the hospital. I stopped in there, but he was unconscious, an' along about ten o'clock he died. The nurse claims he come to jest before he died an' sort of mumbled a pretty fair description of the one that slugged him."

"Did you find the bar he was slugged with? Was there any fingerprints on it?"

"I found the bar, all right. An' the one that used it handled it with his bare hands. But he didn't leave no prints that ain't all blurred up, like he let the bar slide through his hands when he throw'd it away. He was

lucky. If it wasn't for that description we wouldn't have a damn thing to go on."

"What did he look like?"

"Accordin' to what the nurse wrote down, he was a big man—six foot, er better. He's dark complected. Thin hawk nose with heavy black eyebrows that run together across the top of it. An' a thin-lipped, mean-lookin' mouth. Has anyone like that showed up on Halfaday?"

"Yup. Him an' his two helpers. They're up in Whiskey Bill's old shack."

Downey frowned. "Whiskey Bill's! Hell, that's across the line! I'd have to have papers to go after him there."

"What makes you think it's across the line?" Black John asked.

"Why, you told me so yourself! That time them two chechakos shot it out after one of 'em draw'd a mustache on the picture of the other one's girl. One of 'em got shot in the leg, an' you an' Cush cut it off. Then I came along an' was goin' to arrest the one that done it for assault with a dangerous weapon—an' you told me the shack was on the Alaska side, an' I didn't have no jurisdiction."

Black John grinned broadly. "Oh—yeah. You mean that time, eh? Well, Downey, that kid wasn't rightly to blame fer that shootin'. It was a case of two chechakos winterin' together till their nerves got all jangled up, an'——"

"I don't give a damn, now, about the merits of that case. What's botherin' me is that Whiskey Bill's shack, where these damn murderers are holed up, is on the Alaska side."

"Seems like yer sort of jumpin' at conclusions, as a lawyer would say. The fact is Whiskey Bill's shack ain't on the Alaska side—an' ain't be'n sence the earthquake."

"Earthquake! What earthquake?"

"Hell—there ain't but one earth!"

"That's right," Downey grinned, "an' this part of it ain't quaked—that I ever heard of."

"It might not have quoke down around Dawson. But it shore as hell done some jumpin' around up here."

"When was this earthquake s'posed to have come off?"

"When? Did you say 'when,' Downey? Well, let's see—near's I can rec'lect, now, it was a year ago, come St. Swithin's Eve."

"When in hell is St. Swithin's Eve?"

"Cripes—don't the police know nothin'? St. Swithin's Eve is the night before St. Swithin's Day, which is one of them standard dates—like Chris'mas, or Fourth of July, or Queen's Birthday."

"What's all this got to do with Whiskey Bill's old shack?"

"The main thing that earthquake done was to shift the shack's jurisdictional status. You see, Downey, that quake shoved that whole feeder, crick, shack, an' all about half a mile this way. So now the shack lies a good quarter of a mile this side of the line."

Corporal Downey chuckled. "You would not lie to me, John?"

"Me! Lie! Hell, no! Anything I tell you, Downey, is as near the truth as the exigencies of the case warrants. Of course, you've got to allow for a reasonable margin of error—sech margin bein' a variant, as a mathematician would say. Meanin' it's sometimes so narrow as to be practically non-existent—but always remainin' in inverse ratio to the merits of the case, as I see it."

Behind the bar, Cush snorted, and refilled his glass. "By God, there's one thing about John—any damn lie he tells, by the time he gits through with all them big words, it somehow sounds kinda reasonable!"

"So, you think I'd better go up to Whiskey Bill's, eh?"

"Hell, no! There's three of them birds up there, an' they're plenty *kultus*. They've got rifles, an' when they was figurin' on movin' into Olson's old shack, they expressly stated that if you, or any other policeman showed up they'd knock you off. That's the reason I steered 'em up to Whiskey Bill's. If you was to show up on that crick, chances is they'd pot you without givin' you a break. Of course, we'd hang 'em for it. But from your angle, it wouldn't be so good."

"I don't give a damn if there's three of 'em up there—or a dozen!" Downey exclaimed. "You don't expect me to stand here an' let—"

"I don't expect you to stand here an' let yer guts run away with yer brains, if that's what you mean," Black John interrupted. "Let's look at it reasonable. You want to arrest these birds fer that Dominion job. An' we shore as hell don't want no sech characters on Halfaday. Them three is habited to come down here three, four nights a week to get drunk er play stud, as their conscience dictates. So all you've got to do

is to combine the minimum of effort with the maximum of safety by waitin' right here where you'll have the drop on them, instead of goin' up to Whiskey Bill's, where they'd have the drop on you. Are you shore you've got a good iron-clad case agin 'em?"

"Well—we've got that watchman's description of one of 'em. There's nothin' at all on the others—unless the killer should squawk."

Black John poured a drink and watched the little beads rise and rim the glass. "Yer case ain't none too strong, hangin' as it does on words mumbled to a nurse by a man that's now dead. This man only seen the killer onct, an' it was in the dark. You can see what the defense lawyer will do with that. An' if them three stick together on an alibi, they'll all go free."

The officer nodded. "That's true. But that's the way it is—unless some further evidence turns up. If I could recover the dust it would put the case on ice."

"It ain't likely you could," Black John opined. "Damn scoundrels like them would prob'ly cache it where no one could find it. Even if you did get holt of it, they could claim they got it somewheres else. Dominion Crick gold ain't no different from the gold on a lot of other cricks."

"Guess that's right," Downey admitted, glumly. "But I'm takin' 'em back to Dawson, jest the same."

Black John cleared his throat. "You know, an' I know, an' any right-thinkin' man would know that them three damn cusses needs hangin', if ever anyone did. Ignorin' the robbery—which I can't seem to work up no personal sorrow over—murderin' a man with an iron bar is a damn dirty trick. An' not only they done that, but they bragged about it!"

Downey nodded. "You bet it's a dirty trick! An' I'll see that they swing for it if I can."

"Shore you would. But with the case you've got, the chances is, you can't. I've b'n doin' some thinkin', an' if you'll listen to me, them birds will get their hangin'—an no chanct to wiggle out of it."

"I won't stand for any manufactured evidence," Downey said.

"Hell—you nor me neither! The evidence we'd have would be A-Number-One, an' so onassailable an' pristine pure it would hang a saint. Word has reached my ears that them

three are right now plottin' to knock Cush off an' raid the safe, thus bein' guilty of conspiracy—a crime that's plenty hangable, on Halfaday. So, if you'll turn around an' hit back fer Dawson——”

“Nothin' doin', John,” Downey interrupted. “I'm takin' 'em back. You never can tell about a jury. I might get a break of some kind. I will take your advice, though, about waitin' for them birds to show up here. Fact is, I'm kind of pooped out. We've be'n busy as hell down on the river, an' I ain't be'n sleepin' none too good lately.”

“Slip over to my cabin an' roll in,” Black John advised. “I'll tip you off when they get here.”

IV

A COUPLE of hours later a man stepped, rifle in hand, from behind a tree a short distance up the feeder upon which Whiskey Bill's shack was located to greet Black John with a grin. “We've be'n wonderin' how long it would be 'fore you come up to talk things over,” he said. “I kep' tellin' the boys you was waitin' till the stink blow'd over down along the river. You figger it's time we was gittin' busy on them Bonanza jobs, eh? Come on up to the shack, an' we'll dope it out.”

Black John fell in beside the large man whose description Downey had just given him. “It looks like we'll have to hold off on them jobs fer a while yet,” he said. “What I come up for is to warn you boys that the Law showed up, this mornin', at Cush's. It's Corporal Downey, an' he's huntin' the ones that pulled off that Dominion Crick job.”

The other broke into a tirade of curses, and was still going strong when they arrived at the shack. “The Law's showed up,” he informed his confederates. “We've got to pull out.”

“Where the hell kin we go?” asked one of the men. “We ain't got grub enough to hit out into Alaska!”

“That's right,” the large man agreed, and turned to Black John. “How about you slippin' us some grub from Cush's?”

“No chanct. Downey'd spot me in a minute, an' follow me up here.”

“Let him foller you, then!” the large man exclaimed, fingering his rifle. “By God, you'd be the last man he'd ever foller! An' damn good riddance!”

Black John shook his head. “Like I told you we don't want no policeman killed on Halfaday. It would make it mean fer all of us. Fact is, I done some figgerin' while I was comin' up here, an' I believe I doped out a scheme that'll work. Downey's got a damn good description of the one that done the killin'. It's you. That watchman got a good look at you just before you slugged him, an' before he died the next mornin' in the hospital, he come to long enough to describe you to the nurse. An' believe me, he got you right down to a gnat's hind leg. Downey asked me an' Cush if anyone answerin' that description had showed up around here—but he didn't get no satisfaction out of us.

“It's like this—he's only got the description of one of you. An' that description is only the say-so of one man—an' a dead man, at that, who only got one quick look at you—an' in the dark. Besides which he wasn't no more'n half-conscious when he mumbled it to the nurse. Think what a good defense lawyer would do to that! As far as the police knows it was a one-man job, though Downey figures there was prob'ly a lookout er two. So if these two boys, here, was to swear you an alibi the Crown Prosecutor wouldn't have no more case than a rabbit. You could swear that you was all three right here on Halfaday on the night of the robbery—an' if there was enough in it to make it worth my while, I might even swear to the same thing—makin' the alibi practically iron-clad. In that way you'd beat the case, an' we'd be free to go ahead with them Bonanza Crick jobs, if we was so minded.”

“By God, John, yer a wonder!” the large man cried, slapping the other a resounding thump on the back. “We've as good as got the case beat a' ready! We'll pay fer the alibi, all right! How does a hundred ounces strike you?”

“The price seems fair an' reasonable,” Black John agreed. “I wouldn't want to seem hoggish, nor to have you boys think I'd take advantage of you.”

“Oh, we ain't afraid of that,” the large man grinned, “Anyone would have to git up damn early in the mornin' to take advantage of us. It's a deal, then?”

“It's a deal.” Black John extended his hand, palm up. “All I'm askin' is that the hundred ounces be paid in advance.”

"You mean—now?"

"Well, I wouldn't see no p'int in dilly-dallyin'."

"We ain't got that much on us. We'll have to git it out of the cache. You don't need to worry. We're honest men. We pay out debts. So you figger we'd better leave Downey arrest us, an' then beat the case, eh?"

"That looks like your best bet. Come down to Cush's tonight, like you've be'n doin'. Downey'll be there, an' when he arrests you, jest gives yerselves up without makin' no trouble—except to squawk like hell an' claim you ain't never be'n on Dominion in yer life. Tell him you've be'n right here on Halfaday fer the past three months. But before you go into the saloon be shore to deposit them hundred ounces in an empty tin can you'll find settin' clost agin the wall at the northwest corner of the storeroom. It ain't that I'm doubtin' yer honesty. But likewise I ain't takin' no chances on yer forgetfulness. A mere formality—yet one that had ort to be complied with—bein' as you wouldn't have no chancet to slip me them ounces onct you got inside."

"The dust'll be there. Don't worry."

"I ain't worryin'. I know you boys wouldn't double-cross a friend—when that friend could swear a rope around yer necks as easy as I kin. An' by God, I jest happened to think of somethin' else! A man might's well make all he kin out of a proposition. What I claim, a man's got to be thrifty to git along. There's three of you boys, an' that's more'n Downey can handle in a canoe. I'll get him to deputize me to help take you down to Dawson. That way, I'll get my expenses paid fer goin' down to the trial an' back—an draw wages, to boot. How's that fer playin' both ends agin the middle?"

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared the large man. "Yer all right, John! What I mean—with a head like you've got, we're goin' places!"

"That ain't no lie," Black John agreed. "An' the quicker, the better—what I mean."

INSTEAD of returning directly to Cush-ing's Fort, Black John slipped around and watched from a place of concealment among the rimrocks as the men visited their cache to get the hundred ounces with which to pay him. Arriving at the fort, he found Cush alone in the barroom.

"Where's Downey?" he asked.

"Over to your place ketchin' him some sleep, like you told him, I guess." Cush answered, setting out a bottle and glasses. He frowned as Black John poured a drink. "Even ornery as them three damn cusses is, John, I don't see no call fer you to tip Downey off to 'em. After all, arrestin' folks is the police's job—not ourn. It wouldn't look so good to the boys here on Halfaday if they found out we was playin' in with the police."

"You don't need to worry about me violatin' no ethics, Cush," the big man replied gravely. "What I claim, if a man don't stand squarely upon his ethics—where is he? Where is he, I say?"

Cush fidgeted a bit and mopped at the bar with his rag. "Why—why, I don't know, John. Right here, I guess. I don't rightly know what a ethic is. I never seen none. An' I know damn well I ain't never stood on none. All I says—I don't see no call fer you to be tippin' folks off to the police. We could hang them boys when the time comes, ourselves."

"It's true, I done Downey a good turn by tippin' them boys off to him. But I balanced the book by slippin' up to Whiskey Bill's an' tippin' him off to them. I told 'em Downey had a damn weak case, an' advised 'em to show up here tonight an' let Downey arrest 'em. We shore as hell don't want 'em on Halfaday, plottin' like they be, to rob the safe. The way I figure it, we'll be shet of 'em, an' they'll beat the case in Dawson, an' Downey'll get credit fer arrestin' 'em—everyone happy, an' no one hurt."

"By cripes, John—I believe yer right! You do some damn funny things. But they gen'ly turn out all right—even if I do say it myself. How about that dust they got off'n that Dominion Crick job? What'll become of them ounces?"

"Well—off hand, I'd say that the disposition of them ounces is problematical."

"Huh. Does that mean you've got 'em, a' ready? Er, are you jest aimin' to?"

"That dust is ondoubtless cached where it would be damn hard to find. Scoundrels like them three would deposit their ill-gotten gains where no one would be apt to locate 'em—which is further proof of their onderhandedness. "You got a needle an' thread? I bust a button off'n my shirt."

Cush stepped into his living room and returned with a basket which he set on the

bar. "Help yerself," he said. "There's every damn thing in there a woman kin think of—buttons an' tape measures, an' needles, an' pins, an' spools of thread, an' God knows whatnot. I've be'n aimin' to throw the hull damn mess in the stove, but I ain't never got around to it. It's some junk my fourth wife had."

Black John rummaged in the basket, found needle and thread and a button which he sewed in place. As he returned the needle, he picked up a small pastboard box. "What's in here?" he asked, idly fingering the box.

Cush took the box, opened it and disclosed a dozen or more small packets. "Oh, them's sleepin' powders that belonged to my third wife. They musta got throw'd in there. She didn't used to sleep good—an' by God I wouldn't neither if I'd carried on with a B. and O. conductor like she done whilst I was on shift. She finally skipped out with him—an' good reddance. I'll throw 'em in the rence tub."

"Hold on! Sleepin' powders, did you say? Give 'em here. They might come in handy. Don't you rec'lect Downey was tellin' us how he ain't be'n sleepin' good, lately?"

V

WORD of Corporal Downey's appearance on the creek kept many of the regulars away from Cush's. So that evening only a thin sprinkling of customers lined the bar when the three men from Whiskey Bill's stepped into the saloon to be greeted by a brisk command, backed up by Downey's service revolver.

"Reach high, you fellows, an' reach quick! You're under arrest for the murder of John Hawkins, night watchman for the Monarch Development Company, on Dominion Creek. An' it's my duty to remind you that anything you say may be used against you."

The large man retorted with a sneering laugh. "The hell you say! Well, copper, you kin put up yer gun. We ain't nothin' but common prospectors, an' we ain't heeled. An' what's more, yer a damn fool if you think we murdered anyone on Dominion Crick, er anywheres else. So use that agin us, if you kin!"

"You can tell all that to the judge when the time comes," Downey replied, as he frisked the men for weapons. Finding none,

he motioned them to chairs beside one of the cards tables. "You can lower your hands now an' set over there where I can keep an eye on you."

"When was this here murder s'posed to be'n pulled off?" demanded the large man.

"About six weeks ago. I can't name the exact date without lookin' it up. What difference does it make?"

"It makes a hell of a lot of difference, if you expect to hang it on us! Hell, we've be'n right here on Halfaday longer'n that!"

Downey grinned. "That ort to be a p'int in your favor, if you can prove it. You'll get the chanct to tell that to the judge, too."

Black John, who had stepped from the room as the others entered, returned with a hundred-ounce poke sagging his pocket, glanced at the three prisoners, and turned to Downey. "Find anyone that suited you?" he asked.

"Yeah. The big one there is the fellow I told you about. The watchman described him to a T. These other two come in with him an' I'm takin' 'em along. We know he must have had an accomplice or two."

"H-u-m. It's goin' to be quite a chore fer you to take the three of 'em back to Dawson alone, ain't it? 'Course, you could do it by linkin' 'em together an' goin' back afoot.

"But you could make the trip in half the time, an' a damn sight easier by canoe. Why not deputize me to help you take 'em down? You know damn well that here on Halfaday we don't neither help nor hinder the police to locate their man. But onct you've got 'em, I don't mind helpin' take 'em in. With two canoes we could make the trip in ten days."

"Why, sure, John. I'd be glad to do it that way. You're deputized."

"Okay," the big man replied, and turned to the prisoners with a scowl. "An' if you birds is contemplatin' any monkey business you better fergit it—if you want to hit Dawson in good health."

"You don't need to worry," the large man replied. "We don't aim to make no trouble. This damn punk ain't got nothin' on us. The quicker we git to Dawson, the quicker we'll git turned loose."

"In which case, I'll buy a drink," Black John grinned.

"We won't be pullin' out till mornin',"

Downey said. "We'll have to take turns standin' guard on these men tonight."

"Guard—hell! We'll stick 'em in the hole!"

"What's the hole?" the large man asked, a note of apprehension in his voice.

"It's a place we scooped out under the storehouse floor fer the purpose of detainin' sech characters as we deem in need of detention, ontill final disposal can be made of 'em. Once we've got a man in there, an' a bar'l of pork settin' on the trap door, we can forget him till he's needed."

"Don't we git in on the drinks?" asked one of the three.

"Oh, shore. We don't aspire to torture no one. Fetch over three good shots of licker, Cush. An' then we'll put these boys to bed."

"Hey," cried the large man, peering into the aperture that yawned in the floor of the storehouse, as the trap door was raised. "There ain't enough room fer three men in there!"

"W-e-e-l," Black John said, eyeing the pit, "mebbe not three fat men. But you boys ort to make it all right."

"Cripes," exclaimed one of the others, "there couldn't only one of us lay down!"

"Not to onct, mebbe," Black John admitted. "You can sleep in shifts."

"But how about air?" the large man cried.

"Hell, the hole's full of it! Divide it up amongst you. Come on—climb down there! Don't quibble!"

EARLY the following morning Black John lighted his fire, slipped out to the meat cache and returned with a couple of thick steaks which he laid on the table, then he awoke Corporal Downey. "You fry up them steaks," he said, "an' I'll slip over an' have Cush's klooch cook breakfast fer them three birds. We ain't got room enough to feed 'em in here. An' besides, Cush has got part of a tough hindquarter left he'll be glad to work off on 'em. This here's yearlin' meat, an' I hate to waste it."

Proceeding to the fort, he roused Cush, who grumblingly led the way to the bar room and set out bottle and glasses. The breakfast arrangements completed, Black John refilled his glass, and glanced across the bar. "You better git holt of One Armed John, an' tell him to have the boys show

up here tomorrow night fer a miner's meetin'," he said.

"Miner's meetin'!" Cush exclaimed. "You won't be here! An' besides—who the hell would we hang?"

"Them three boys in the hole. That is, of course, in the event of their conviction by the miner's meetin' of conspirin' to knock you off an' rob yer safe. Short John has be'n in on their deliberations, an' he reported the scheme to me in all it's details—an' the hell of it is, it would prob'ly have worked. Besides which, the onmittigated scum had the effrontery to bribe me to perjure myself in their behalf at their trial."

"Buf hell, John—there won't neither you nor them be here! Downey claimed you two was pullin' out with 'em right after breakfast."

"Listen, Cush—you know an' I know, that them three is guilty as hell of murderin' that night watchman. Not only they done it, but they bragged about it. If any three skunks livin' ort to be hung, it's them three. But they'll never be hung in Dawson. Downey ain't got evidence enough to convict 'em. Any defense lawyer would get 'em off in no time. That's the trouble with the law—the jedge can know, an' the jury can know, an' the police can know, that a man's guilty as hell, but if the evidence they've got ain't jest so—they turn 'em loose. There's certain rules that's be'n laid down—an' they've got to be complied with. A legal trial ain't nothin' but a game of chess between the lawyers—an' the prisoner ain't nothin' but a pawn. Innocent men gets hung, an' guilty ones turned loose, accordin' to which lawyer remembers the most rules to quibble over. On the contrary, our miner's meetin's is conducted with an eye to jestic. If a man needs hangin', by God, he gits hung. He gets what breaks he's got comin'—an' no more."

"Shore, I know," Cush agreed. "But how the hell we goin' to hang 'em, if they ain't here?"

The big man grinned. "We could hang 'em *in absentia*, if—"

"Where the hell's Absentia? I never heard of it."

"It's jest one more of them legal fictions. It's a good way to git hung—from the hangee's angle. But we'll ignore it, as bein' inconclusive. The fact is, Cush, I've got a premonition that them three prisoners is goin' to escape from me an' Downey, an' hit

back here. Them three sleepin' powders of yer third wife's give me a thought. So be shore an' have the boys here—an' you tell Pot Guttet John to have them three nooses ready. An' tell him I say to make a good workmanlike job on 'em, too. That last one he tied looked like hell. There ain't anything more annoyin' than to see a corpse danglin' around on a sloppy noose! I'll be gittin' back, now, before Downey burns them steaks."

VI

JUST on the edge of dark, the following evening, the two canoes bearing Corporal Downey, Black John, and the three prisoners beached at Hizer's old trading post at the head of the rapid on the White River. It had come off warm, a drizzling rain had fallen all day, and the river was running bankful with water from the melting snow.

"We'll camp here tonight," Black John said. "Hizer'll let us sleep in the old tradin' room. It'll prob'ly leak like hell, but we can find some dry spots to spread our blankets. It'll beat sleepin' out in the rain all night. We can take turns guardin' the prisoners."

"That suits me," Downey agreed. "I'll stay here while you go an' see Hizer—if he's sober enough to know what you're talkin' about. I stopped in for a minute, comin' up, an' he was drunk as a boiled owl."

"Yeah, the pore old devil. He might well stay drunk till he dies—the shape he's in. Me an' Cush was here couple weeks ago an' I bought his York boat off'n him. Sent him down a bunch of stuff from Cush's to pay for it—half grub an' half licker. He ain't goin' to last much longer."

"It'll be a good thing for the country when he kicks out," grunted Downey. "It's damn cusses like him that raises hell with the Siwashes."

"Yeah—but he's past harmin' 'em now. It's got so he's afraid of 'em—keeps his door barred all the time. He thinks he's goin' to open up his post agin when warm weather comes. But I'm doubin' he'll live that long. He likes me, all right. I give him twict what he asked fer his York boat. I'll go talk to him." Black John departed and returned shortly. "It's okay fer us to sleep in the tradin' room," he announced. "He even told me we could do our cookin' on his stove. But the way it stinks in there, an' the dirt, an'

all, we're better off out here. He give me the key to the tradin' room, so while you rustle some wood, I'll onlock the door an' carry in the blankets, an' see if I can't find somethin' dry fer kindlin'."

After supper, hastily prepared over an open fire in the drizzle, the five entered the trading room, empty save for the York boat chocked on skids that slanted to the water, and a cluttering of old barrels, boxes, and trash. Black John turned to Downey and pointed to a little room, the door of which stood open behind the empty counter.

"I'll stand first watch," he said. "I throw'd your blankets on the bunk, in there. It's where Hizer's clerk used to sleep, when he had one. You can shet the door an' not be disturbed if these boys gits to talkin'. I'll call you at midnight."

When the door had closed behind the officer, the four found a dry spot on the opposite side of the big room, and spread their blankets. "Boys," Black John announced, when they had seated themselves, "we've got to change our plans."

"Whadda ya mean—change our plans?" the large man demanded, truculently.

"Not so loud. Do you want Downey to hear what's goin' on? It's like this. When Downey first told me about you, he give me to understand that the only evidence he had again you was the description that watchman mumbled to the nurse. But last night, after we'd stuck you fellows in the hole, he told me it was a joke—you claimin' you'd never be'n on Dominion. He says he got a dandy set of fingerprints off'n that iron bar you socked the watchman with."

"I don't believe a damn word of it!" the man exclaimed, in an undertone. "He's bluffin'!"

Black John shrugged. "Okay. It'll be your funeral, not mine, if he ain't. Did you wear gloves when you handled that bar?"

"No. I was bare handed. But I don't go much on this fingerprint stuff."

"It looks to me like you might go a hell of a long ways on it," Black John replied dryly. "It's what the jedge an' the jury thinks of fingerprints that counts—not what you think. I'm jest warnin' you that if he has got them prints, there ain't no alibi we could swear to that would do you boys a damn bit of good. I'm an outlaw. It's a cinch my word wouldn't go very far in the face of them fingerprints. An' by the looks of yer two

pals, here, I don't believe theirs would either."

"Damn you!" growled the large man. "You tuk our hundred ounces, an' now yer tryin' to welch."

"Nope. You got me wrong. I took them ounces with the onderstandin' that I was to try to get you out of the clutches of the law—an' I aim to earn 'em. I've be'n figurin' on this proposition all day. You see that York boat over there. Well, I own her. I bought her off'n Hizer a little while back. She's dry rotted till she ain't worth a damn. But I felt kinda sorry fer the old fella, so I bought her fer twenty ounces. If you boys'll give me, say forty ounces for her, so I can show a reasonable profit, I'll let you have her."

"Sell her to us!" exclaimed the large man in a husky whisper. "Why in hell would we give you forty ounces fer a rotten York boat?"

"She'll hold together up here in the slack water, all right. You kin knock the chocks out, an' slide her into the water, an' shove acrost the river in her. Step out on the rocks so you don't leave no tracks, an' then shove the boat out into the current an' she'll go down through the rapids an' smash all to hell on the rocks. In the mornin' when Downey wakes up, he'll figure you stole the boat an' made a getaway in her. He'll take out after you an' when he gets to the foot of the rapids, he'll find pieces of the boat floatin' around in the big eddy, an' when he don't find no tracks on the shore, he'll figure you boys got drowned an' washed on down into Yukon, an' he'll report you dead. Instead of which, you'll be hittin' back fer Halfaday in a canoe I've got cached on the far bank, about a mile above here."

"How the hell could we git the boat out without wakin' Downey? An' how could we find that canoe in the dark?"

"Wait till jest before daylight, an' you won't have to find it in the dark."

"But—Downey'll be standin' guard on us then!"

Black John grinned. "That's right—so it'll be his fault you got away, not mine. Don't worry about wakin' him. He'll be dead to the world. I'm slippin' some sleepin' powders into his eye-opener when I call him."

"I'm fer makin' him dead to the world fer keeps," retorted the man. "What's the matter with me slippin' in there an' knockin'

him off? Then we'll know damn well he can't foller us."

"Nothin' doin'," Black John replied. "You fergit that I'm a deputized officer, an' there's nothin' riles us police like gettin' one of our number knocked off. Any play like that would prove fatal to all three of you."

The other scowled. "We'll pay you them forty ounces when we git back to Cush's. I've heard about them hangin's yer s'posed to pull off on Halfaday. But I don't believe a damn word of it. We be'n there three weeks, an' we ain't got in on one of 'em yet."

Black John shrugged. "Well, yer goin' back, ain't you? We don't like no one to be disapp'nted. You'll get in on the next one. That's a promise."

VII

CORPORAL DOWNEY awoke slowly. Only half-conscious, he vaguely realized that his brain was striving to regain consciousness. His eyes opened and in the dim interior of the trading room, he made out the litter of empty barrels and boxes. From his position on the floor with his back against the wall, he glanced toward the spot where the three prisoners had been snoring in their blankets when he went on guard at midnight. The next instant he was on his feet, his glance darting about the big room. A moment later he crossed the floor, shoved open the door of the little room to find Black John snoring on the bunk.

"Hey, John—wake up! The prisoners are gone."

The big man's eyes opened and blinked sleepily. He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. "Gone? Gone where?"

"How the hell do I know! They're gone—an' that York boat is gone, too. Hell, they're prob'ly halfway to the Yukon by now. Get up! We've got to take out after 'em!"

Black John grinned as he drew on a pac. "They was all there when I called you at midnight," he said. "By cripes, I'm glad it was yore shift they got away on, instead of mine. You might of thought I'd done some connivin'!"

"Oh, it's all my fault, all right," Downey exclaimed. "An' that's the hell of it! I never let a prisoner get away before. I don't understand it."

"Mebbe you went to sleep an' they snuck

out on you," Black John suggested.

"Why sure I went to sleep! You don't s'pose I'd let 'em get away if I was awake, do you? But why the hell did I fall asleep?"

"Well, you claimed you ain't be'n sleepin' so good, lately. Mebbe yer sleep's beginnin' to ketch up on you. Did you sleep good the forepart of the night?"

"Not very. I must have slept some, though. But I felt fine when I went on guard. That eye-opener you give me set me up okay."

"Yeah, but you got to remember, Downey, the human body needs jest about so much sleep in the long run. If a man loses it one time, he's bound to make it up another."

"I sure picked a hell of a time to make it up! Come on—let's get goin'."

"How about some breakfast?"

"To hell with breakfast! We'll portage around the rapids first. Then if we're hungry, we'll eat."

"No use takin' but one canoe," Black John said. "I'll leave mine here. If we ketch up with 'em, we can go on down to Dawson in the York boat."

"That's right," Downey agreed. "That way we can make the portage in one trip."

At the foot of the rapids Downey stopped abruptly and pointed to an object that floated round and round in the huge eddy. "Good God!" he cried. "What's that?"

Black John eyed the object with interest. "Why—it's a boat. Cripes, Downey—I'll bet it's my York boat! The one them prisoners stole! Look at her—the bow an' half one side stove in."

"But hell, John—a good York boat should go down through those rapids like nobody's business! Hell, on this high water what few rocks she'd touch wouldn't knock the paint off her!"

Black John grinned. "That's right, Downey. But them boys didn't have a good boat. The paint was all that was holdin' her together—an' when the rocks knocked that off, there wasn't nothin' left."

"What do you mean?"

"Dry rot. Look here." Waiting till the boat swung against the shore, the big man reached down and grasping a section of planking in his hand, wrenched it loose and held it before Downey's eyes. His powerful fist closed upon wood that collapsed like a sponge as he squeezed the water from it.

"Yes, sir—that boat's like old man Hizer—they both jest laid there an' dry rotted together."

"But—the prisoners!" Downey cried. "What became of the prisoners?"

The big man shrugged. "Oh—them?" His eyes searched the ground. "I don't see no tracks in the slush anywheres," he said. "If they didn't sink, your guess might be right, about them bein' halfways to the Yukon by this time. But I wouldn't see no p'int in fol-lerin' 'em. Let's cook breakfast. I'll build the fire."

"Well—I guess that closes the case," Downey said. "They deserved all they got. The country's sure better off with those three dead. An' my case wasn't none too strong, anyway. They might have beat the law—but they didn't beat justice."

Black John nodded. "That's right. It's like I've told you before, Downey—there's a damn sight of difference between jestic an' the law."

"I'd sure like to recover that dust they got off the Monarch outfit," Downey said, as they sat beside the little fire and sipped their tea. "Do you s'pose we could locate their cache if we went up to Whiskey Bill's?"

"Off hand, I'd say we wouldn't have a chanct. Damn scoundrels like them is mighty cagey with their caches. My guess is that the trip wouldn't be worth yer while." He rose and held out his hand. "Well, so long, Downey. If you'll ondeputize me, I'll hit back fer Halfaday. I've got a hunch that some matter might come up that needs my attention."



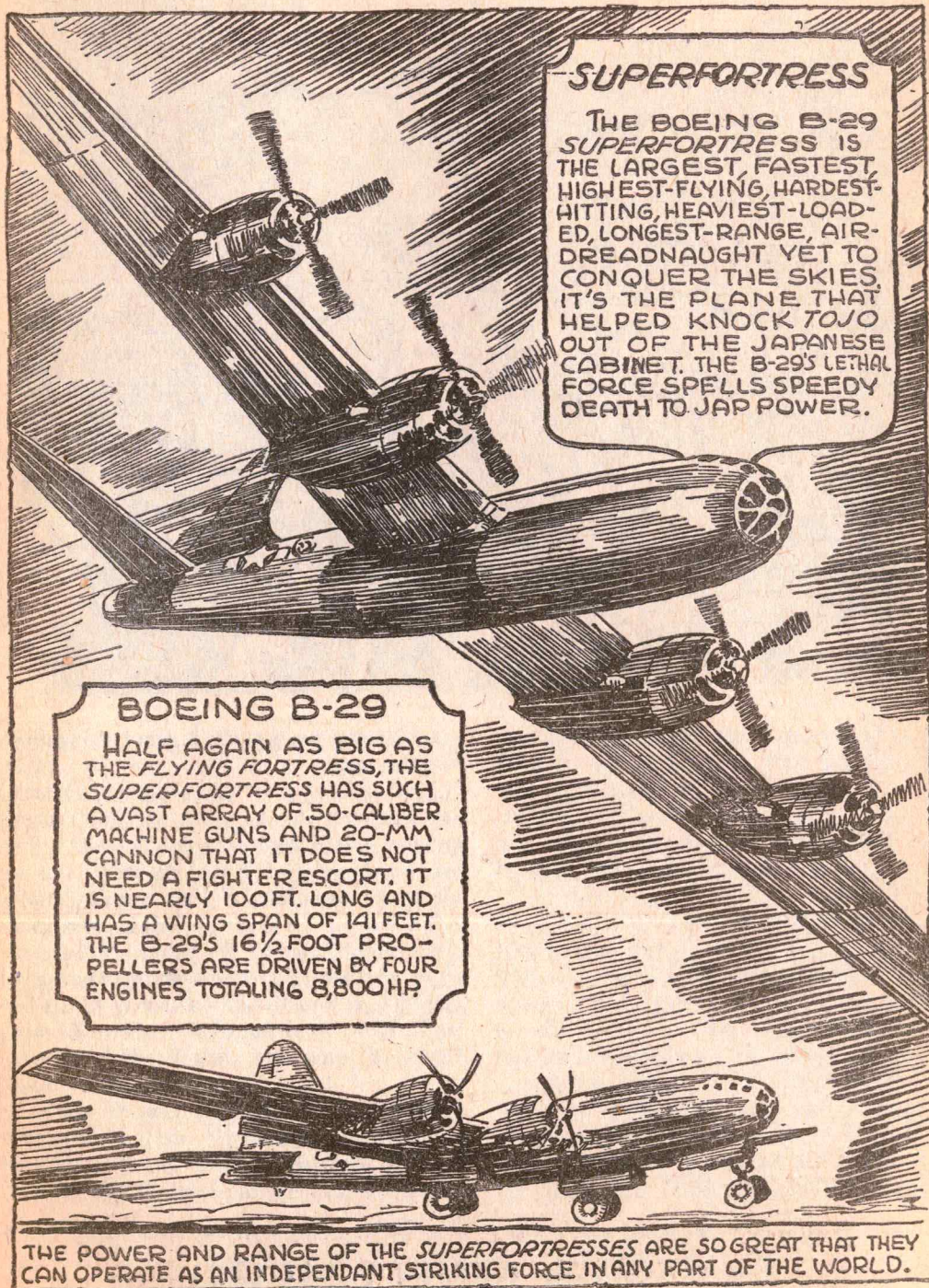
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Wings for Victory

BY JIMMY KAY



SUPERFORTRESS

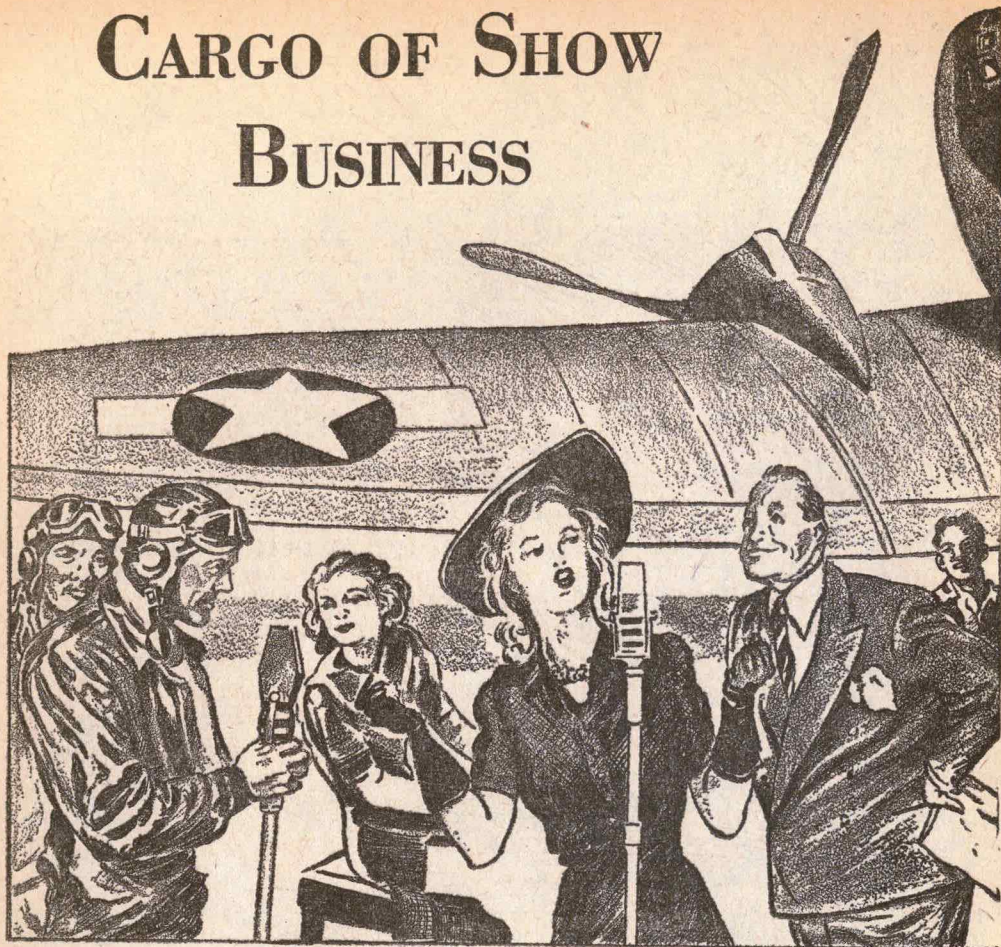
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CARGO OF SHOW BUSINESS



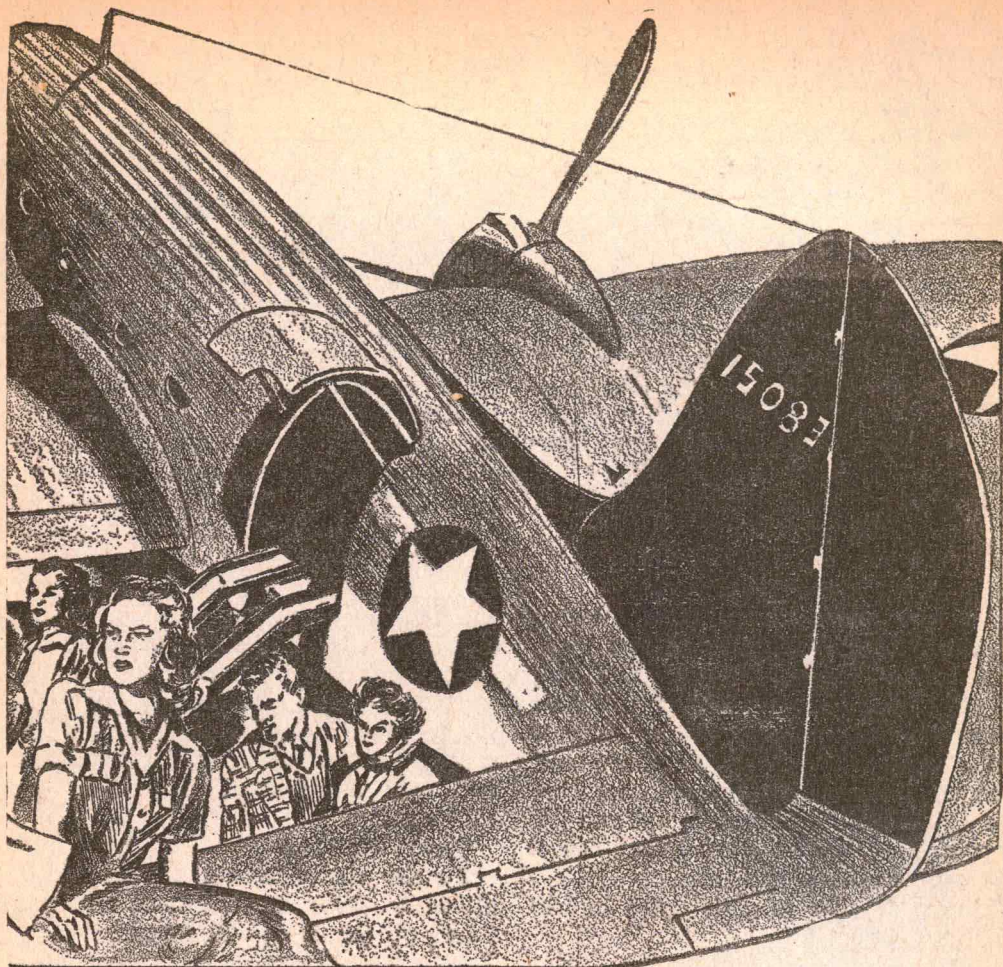
JUST ten minutes ahead of us a big bomber took off from Reykjavik with a bunch of touring brass hats and State Department officials. I still believe that it was because of them that we later ran into the trouble we had, though I can't prove it.

Here in Iceland it was still dark at 8 in the morning. Across the sky the long colored streamers of an aurora borealis were fluttering like a fan dancer's plumes. Lights shone in the windows of Nissen huts bordering the landing fields. As the engines of my big C-47 warmed up, I signed flight orders and made a final weather check and waited impatiently for my passengers to show up. From Reykjavik we were flying south with a load of morale. Sweetness and light for

isolated army posts at the tag end of creation. Entertainers.

My big Army C-47 was assigned to Special Services, ferrying a group of show people to bases where American forces were suffering drudgery and boredom, which cause plenty of casualties if they aren't fought. After leaving La Guardia Field, we'd made a one-night stand at St. Johns, Newfoundland; another at Julianehaab, on the tip of Greenland; and then we'd come on to Iceland. Here we'd stayed four days. Leaving Reykjavik now, we were headed for London—just for a breathing spell before junketing down the west coast of Africa as far south as Brazzaville, then loping eastward to air bases at Khartoum and Asmara and Baghdad. To the boys in the faraway

By **GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL**



places we were bringing a load of gags, gams and jive. Used to be, when *Variety* mentioned "the sticks" it meant the whistle stops along the I. C. and the Wabash, the tank towns where you might find deer in the gallery. Nowadays it's ivory, apes and peacocks you find in the back rows. Or polar bears and pandas.

I didn't ask for this chore. But since I'm a decrepit graybeard of a commercial pilot all of 36 years old, the Air Forces figured I was best fitted for taxi work of this sort. Good old Joe Blake—he'll bring 'em back alive. Oh, well.

"Here they come," my co-pilot, Sammy Hawes, murmured. "Feet dragging and yawning clear to their belly buttons."

He said it fondly. We liked our cargo of

show business. They had hearts big enough to feel the homesickness in the kids they entertained, and they gave their best.

Spry old Pop Daly, as usual, was first to the plane. He was 60 but chirpy as a cricket. He was a veteran of vodvil when Jack Benny was sawing a fiddle on the Orpheum circuit. Pop can be a one-man band, spin a rope, tap dance, juggle pool balls, and take a joke about an old maid in Peoria and switch it to fit a top sergeant in Yuma. He's got the raucous voice and breezy manner of a slightly mildewed William Gaxton. He's MC of our troupe.

I said, "Well, Pop, did you like Iceland?"
 "Why not? Here I celebrated my sixtieth birthday."

He climbed into the plane, and I gave a

"... on the Air With a Solid Hour of Gags, Yarns, and Jive"

band to our opera singer—Madame Roma Fanti. Madame Roma was a slim, quiet woman who didn't seem to have the big-chested vitality you associate with the gals who get three grand for a broadcast—until she started singing, and then she came alive as if 2,000 watts had been turned on.

"You were in good voice here, Madame Roma," I said.

"Not really, Joe. I sang hard because I was afraid. This place is a sort of mild purgatory, where the Valkyries take souls that are only half-dead. So bleak and gray and barren! Joe, darling, take us away from here quick."

I laughed right out; she tickled me with her prima donna ways. She gave me a cute healthy grin, and climbed on into the plane.

OUR two movie starlets came mincing along then: Marice Bryant and Lucia Lane. I didn't christen them, so don't look that way at me. They sang and danced. And though their talent was of the common or garden variety, they were so young and healthy and luscious to behold that they were a double-barreled shot in the arm for the boys. They said hi, tapping back yawns with magenta-colored fingertips.

"How'd you like to settle down in Iceland?" I said.

"I'd rather go to sleep in the Time Capsule!" said Lucia, who can read. But Marice widened her sultry eyes at me and said, as if she were open to suggestion, "With you, Red?"

I gave her a spank as we helped them up the ladder and she squealed delightfully. Both of them wore nylon stockings, up here just under the Arctic Circle; but Lucia had remarked that it was a sheer waste of our scenic resources for her and Marice to wear slacks. She had something there.

"Good morning, Miss Gary. Your migraine better?"

"Oh, much better," Graziella Gary said, lying heroically.

Miss Gary was our dramatic reader. Peace times, she was a lady professor at a women's college. She might have lied herself into the WAC but for her white hair. Since that was impossible, she joined us to read poetry to the boys. It was amazing how the G. I.'s went for her, too. She'd read classics to them, and verse written by service men all over the world about their gripes and yearn-

ings and their pride in P-38's, pin-ups, bazookas and jeeps. Nobody in the troupe rated higher decibels of applause. And believe me, you've got to be mighty *real* to read poetry to the boys.

Behind her came our two xylophone players, Tom and Tim Baylor. Dapper, good-looking fellows, they looked thirty but were fifty.

That was the whole gang, except for Judy Daly—old Pop's daughter, who was our piano accompanist. We carried a tiny aluminum piano along. I looked around and discovered Judy standing behind me, gazing back over the base and the town. I stood and looked at her, my pulse skipping a beat. Judy was smart and pretty. She was so easy and natural and real that when, all of a sudden, you realized that she was an amazingly lovely girl, it was a jolt. I'd never met her before this trip; but I was very much in love with her.

"I want a good last look at this place," she told me, low-voiced. "If anybody had ever said to me that I'd fall in love with a swell guy in Iceland, I'd have burst right out laughing."

"Judy! Say, wait—"

But she pressed my arm and hurried into the plane. Four days I'd been taking her riding on the stocky little Iceland ponies. Taking her swimming in the hot spring. Taking her strolling down the busy modern streets of Reykjavik. She'd been lots of fun. We clicked. She made me feel like a youngster with all the world before me again. But she hadn't once hinted how I stood with her. Until just now.

I walked through the plane to the pilots' compartment as if the aisle was paved with clouds—and just one thing laid a shadow on my thoughts.

I'd have to tell Judy about my Eddie.

FORTY minutes later we saw the first Focke-Wulf *Kurier*.

We had taken off without trouble, and climbed up through fog and come out above it at seven thousand feet. I leveled off into the south.

It looked like a routine flight ahead of us, and my co-pilot hauled out a western story magazine to read. Lieutenant Sammy Hawes grew up on a ranch in Texas, yet he likes to read western yarns, and I can't kid him out of it.

Sammy spotted the *Kurier*.

I wasn't swiveling my neck as I should've been—I was deep in a rosy glow of day-dreaming bout Judy, and wondering how to tell her about Eddie. You see, my first wife died several years ago. Eddie, my son, is twelve. On account of him I haven't remarried. Eddie is a very special kind of kid. He has his mother's good looks and her brains, too, thank goodness.

He thinks I should marry again. He's told me so. And when I brought Amy Barron to see him, he tried his darndest to make her like him. She happened to remark that she loved flying. He got excited and started talking planes to her. But he got off on terminal velocity and power loading and compressibility, and her smile began to wilt around the edges. He's quick to notice, and he got out my checkerboard. Amy brightened up—but practically turned into a pillar of salt when he set out my chessmen on the squares. She begged off; so, trying desperately to be sociable, Eddie got out his beetle collection. But when he got enthusiastic and reeled off Latin names for a choice bunch of bugs that had got into my plane by infiltration tactics during a trip across Africa, Amy claimed that she had an allergy against insects. That simply fascinated Eddie. He's going to be a flight surgeon. He begged her to let him write down her symptoms. Amy suddenly remembered she had a sick aunt she had promised to look in on. She also remembered, next time I phoned, to be out of town.

WITH Bea Allyn, I'd been more hopeful. But when she brightly tried to show Eddie the North Star one night, Eddie corrected her and admitted that he knew by heart the little handbook on air navigation I had written. Bea threw up her hands. But don't get Eddie wrong. He doesn't wear his hair in curls, and I had to fan his britches the other day for hopping freights in the Santa Fé yards. Eddie is a product of the air age.

How, I was wondering, would Judy click with Eddie?

We were twenty minutes past the south tip of Iceland, out over the open sea, when Sammy Hawes happened to glance out his side panel. He grabbed my arm and yelled:

"Joe, look!"

I looked. It was a plane.

"Must be the ship that took off just before us."

"No! This is a four-motor." He brought it close with his binoculars. "Joe, that's a Focke-Wulf *Kurier*!"

"Let me see."

As I made out the tapered wing with irregular trailing edge, the four underslung motors and the torpedo-shaped underturret and bomb bay, set off-center, I knew that Sammy was right. It was a *Kurier*, the long-range bomber that the Germans were using to attack Atlantic shipping.

But I shrugged. We were due to cross the shipping route from the United States to Murmansk and Archangel, so I figured that this plane was just a raider out scouting for a convoy.

"But she is heading toward us," I realized then.

"Let's lose 'er," Sammy said. After all, we carried no guns and no bombs.

I nodded. Below us was fog, and I nosed down to slide into it easy without making anybody's ears pop.

And then, the altimeter smashed before my eyes and something knifed through my shoulder and down my back and I saw tracers spitting past my side panel and machine-gun bullets were ripping in a big, tearing splash into my port engine. Swearing and not even aware of it, I dropped one wing in a hard turn out of the way of those slugs; and the next instant a black cloud of flame-tipped metal hurtled past, and gracefully banked for another run at us.

"Another *Kurier*!" Sammy yelled.

"Good Lord! We were in a pack of them!"

I NOSED down into the fog below like a sub doing a crash dive, then. And once in the white darkness, I banked in a steep turn northward. With just one engine ticking over, my best bet was to head back toward the south Iceland coast. Something warm and moist was spreading down my back; but I could use my left arm all right and I put thought of the wound out of my mind.

"Captain Joe Blake calling Reykjavik," I radioed. "Reykjavik. Joe Blake calling Reykjavik. Come in Reykjavik."

Then I snapped off my radio real quick—for I heard an excited jumble of German, something yelling "*Achtung!*" and reading off a compass course and ordering "*Schnell!*"

The Germans were tuned in on our wavelength, listening for us, and using a direction finder to get a fix. By broadcasting, I was simply guiding them right to me through the fog! I'd better wait, I figured, until the Jerries left us.

Just then we shot out of the patchy fog into an area of bright sunlight. The next instant the glass beside Sammy shattered and Sammy stiffened up in his seat and bullets stitched a line across the panel in front of me. I banked instinctively and nosed down, and then we were in fog again and hidden.

"Sammy, you hurt?" I yelled.

"Couple of slugs in my leg." For a bit then he did some fancy swearing through clenched teeth and I relaxed; he wasn't too badly hurt if he could put that much heat into his language.

"Joe, now the Jerries know we're headed back for Iceland."

"Yeah."

The door behind us opened and Pop Daly said at the back of our necks, "Everybody's got their safety belts fastened. Do what you got to do and don't mind us."

"Thanks, Pop. You catch any bullets back there?"

"Not a one. Hey, you boys are hurt!"

"Help Sammy put a dressing on his leg. I'm not in bad shape."

Old Pop was a cool one in a jam. He tied a first-aid dressing on Sammy. Meanwhile, I stared ahead. We hadn't been far south of Iceland when the *Kuriers* jumped us. We should be nearing land now. If I could find it at all in this fog!

We hit another gap in it, then, and I saw shore right ahead.

But finding a landing spot was something else again. Here the stretch of coast was fronted by jagged bluffs and rough low hills. Not a prayer of a chance to sit down.

I banked westward along the coast, and then I saw a wide cove opening into the bluffs, with a fringe of almost level beach. Not good, but it was all the choice I had. I banked the C-47 toward it.

Sammy had been peering out the side panel. He turned.

"Joe, they've sighted us! Those *Kuriers* are coming like bats' out of hell!"

If we landed in the cove now, the Germans would bomb it from end to end. So I horsed back on my wheel and zoomed across the cove and up over the swell of rugged

hills, into the white darkness of the fog again. For three minutes I held my course. Then I pulled up again as sharply as I dared on one engine and made a wide sweeping turn, cold sweat popping out on my skin. *If I don't smash head-on into one of those Jerries! If I can find that cove again!* I was thinking desperately. *If I don't black out from loss of blood—*

"Thank the Lord," I breathed when we came out into sunlight right over that cove again. "Somebody in this plane lives right!" And I nosed for the beach in a hurry.

The far side of the cove was swathed in white mist. If there the stretch of sand ended abruptly against a cliff, against that cliff I was going to plaster this C-47 like a gory billboard.

Sammy had been getting the wheels down. We hit the beach and bounced and hit again. It wasn't sand under us but water-smoothed pebbles, and our tires flung them against the wings in a deafening clatter. There were boulders, too. I dodged one, then another, and gunned the motor to keep taxiing into the fog-hidden stretch ahead of us.

White mist, then, streamed past my side panel, thickening into pea soup. We were hidden from view again. But just as I sighed with relief and closed the throttle and let the tail wheel touch, my port wheel hit a boulder and crumpled, and the left wingtip touched, swinging us into a terrific ground look. The opposite wing lifted up terrifyingly, and for an awful instant it looked as if we were going to topple right over onto our backs. But the ship balanced, and then settled back, coming down *hard*; and for a miracle the right landing wheel did not fold up. We were down! Battered and helpless, but down.

And I passed out cold.

WHEN I came to, I was outside, lying on the ground and Judy was plastering a bandage on my back, and the crowd was gathered around, sort of huddled close together. Their faces kind of blurred to my eyes and I shut 'em a moment, and reached down inside of me and gathered every ounce of strength and savvy I had left. I was going to need it. Then I sat up.

"Must've banged my head," I said, and managed a grin at Judy. "Say, let's break out the lunch and get comfortable."

"Doesn't this hurt?" She pressed the bandage lightly.

"Of course it does, but those slugs didn't touch bone and I can handle myself all right. So don't worry about me, and don't worry about those Jerries. They won't find us here."

"But will anybody find us?" Roma Fanti asked.

"Of course. I'll radio our position to Reykjavik," I said reassuringly. "Right now, let's eat."

I must have sounded convincing, because they relaxed; but inwardly I was a-crawl with dread. Already the fog was getting lighter about us as the rising sun lapped it up. Once the air cleared, the whole bunch of us were right out in plain sight. Then the Germans, if they returned, could strafe the lot of us.

Pop Daly fetched the lunch boxes and thermos jugs from our wrecked ship and started passing out the grub.

And then I felt Judy lean against me, and saw her stare up into the mist. I heard it too, then, and froze, my sandwich an inch from my mouth. Motors again. Growing louder awfully fast!

"They're coming back?"

"Not exactly," I said.

A *Kurier* passed a little inland of us. There, I guessed, the fog already had lifted. So the Jerries knew we had come down somewhere here along the coast and were hidden from them by the fog. Now they were back hunting for us, systematically sweeping the area.

I shrugged and bit into my ham-on-rye.

And then the second *Kurier* passed almost right overhead, so low that its motor roar lashed at our up-turned faces, though we couldn't see it.

Judy said, "They're awfully persistent about hunting us. Why?"

"Maybe German Intelligence got word of the party of brass hats to leave Reykjavik just ahead of us, and sent these planes to meet 'em. I figure these *Kuriers* think we're those bigshots."

"How long would it take for a flight of P-38's to get here from the Reykjavik base?"

"Twenty minutes, flying time. Something like that."

Sammy said, "Joe, we've got to radio for help. Before this fog blows clean away."

"God! I'm mighty, you think I haven't thought of that? Sammy, the moment we go on the air, the Germans'll take a radio fix on us with their direction finders and come straight back to this cove. They'll drop

bombs through the mist, and circle until the air clears and they can see what's left of us. And if anything is left, they'll mop up. I say our best bet is to keep radio silence and figure that the *Kuriers* will go away soon."

"But up where they are, the Jerries can see that this fog is thinning out. Maybe they're just marking time now, figuring that in a half-hour or so they'll have full visibility?"

"Maybe," I said. Judy's hand tightened on my elbow. It was involuntary. She wasn't panicked, just facing the facts.

Pop said, "Maybe we better head inland?"

"Yes," I said. "Sammy and I will stay by the plane, and after a while we'll radio for help."

"I'll stay with you," Judy said.

"You will not!" I said, setting my jaw.

Pop said to her, "After we get you girls to the top of the cliff, we'll come back for Joe and Sammy."

SHE pressed my hand, then, and went off with the rest. A hundred feet away they were lost to our sight in the mist. I can't tell you what an awful feeling I had then! I was dead sure I'd never set eyes on Judy again. Or Reykjavik, either.

Sammy murmured, "I hope they find a trail to the top of the bluff. With my leg in this shape, I couldn't do any climbing."

A trail in this barren wilderness? A fat chance. But I didn't say anything.

And then I got an idea. It was a wild, risky scheme—but as a last resort I'd have to attempt it.

"Sammy, back at the Reykjavik base they monitor the whole short-wave band, don't they?"

"Yeah, they catch everything on the air. You figuring," he asked dubiously, "to radio for help on a different wave-length than the one the Germans are listening in on?"

"Yes—"

"Shucks, Joe, you know better than that. The Germans'll be fiddling with their radio dials, trying to tune you in no matter what wave-length you change to."

"Just the same, we're going to broadcast!"

"You nuts? You've just admitted that if the Jerries take a fix on us with their direction finders, we're gone goslings!"

"That's right. But I'm hoping that they won't think to take a fix on us."

He stared at me as if he thought I was

slug-happy. But before he out and said it, we both turned abruptly.

We heard voices and footsteps. Our passengers were returning!

Judy sat down beside me without a word. Marice and Lucia looked like they were going to cry. Pop Daly explained: "The bluff is a hundred feet high, straight up and down. And no trail. We can't climb it."

MORALE, definitely, needed a pick-up. "Never mind. I'm glad you're back," I said. "We've got an ace to play. Quick, everybody get their musical instruments."

"What for?" Pop asked.

"We're going to broadcast and we haven't a minute to waste!"

I had them take from the plane the public address rig which we set up when the troupe performed out-of-doors for a big crowd. It operated on a small power plant that used gasoline from the plane tanks. Instead of connecting the mikes to the loudspeakers, however, we tied into the C-47's radio transmitter.

"We're going to put on a fake broadcast," I told them hurriedly. By this time, I guess, I had some fever from my wound. "But it's got to be good enough to fool those Germans. I'm going to say we're broadcasting from Reykjavik, and it's got to seem so real that the Germans will believe it, and not bother to take a radio fix. Because if they *do* guess that we're pulling a phony, they'll ride the broadcast straight to us! All right, Sammy—put me on the air!"

I gulped a deep breath as I squared up to one of the mikes. Sammy nodded—and I started off.

"Hello, everybody! It is exactly nine o'clock, Iceland time, and you are going to hear another program of the Yanks-Around-the-World series put on by a group of Special Services players at the Army base at Reykjavik! We are on a platform in the main hangar, and the personnel of the base is gathered before us and impatient for a solid hour of gags, gams and jive! Friends, this Yanks-Around-the-World program is short-waved to every base, and camp, to every plane in the air and every subchaser at sea, in the Greenland-Iceland area of operations. "All right, here we go! Tom and Tim Baylor, inimitable twins of the thud and tinkle, will give you the Army Air Forces song. Take it away, boys!"

They beat it out on their xylophones, Tom and Tim. In a way, I guess, they knew they were playing for their lives.

I whispered to Pop Daly, "Pop, you'll have to give out with gags. Can you ad lib without hunting up some scripts?"

"Whenever the legit goes sour and grand opera nosedives, show business yells for vodvil. Just leave it to me, Joe."

Tom and Tim pounded to a crescendo, and I broke 'em off with a jerk of my hand, and I said into the mike: "That was Tom and Tim Baylor, folks. And now, Madame Roma Fanti will give you George Gershwin's *I Got Plenty of Nothin'*. Give her a hand, boys!"

We crowded close to the mikes and whooped and clapped like mad. Judy hit the piano keys, then, and Madame Roma took off.

And that great, grand voice of hers almost made me forget the jam we were in. Except that she sang it, 'I've got plenty of *trouble*' instead of plenty of *nothin'*. Which shows what was on her mind.

When she finished, I didn't have to tell the gang to applaud like they were going to bring a hangar down about their ears.

When I got 'em quiet again, I said into the mike: "And now, pals, I'm going to give you that grand old veteran of the vodvil stage—Pop Daly, who claims he was born in a theatrical trunk on the original Slow Train Through Arkansas! Tell me, Pop. Why do radio comics always want to retire to a chicken farm?"

"Because they're used to making money by laying eggs," Pop said into the mike. "Hello, everybody."

"Today I want to tell you about my nephew who's in the Army Air Force, stationed in Alaska. Special Services sent me up there some months ago and when I arrived in Fairbanks I went hunting for him. I found him in a store, where a clerk was trying to sell him a totem pole.

"*'I don't want a totem pole,'* he was saying. *'I want a book on how to speak Eskimo.'*

"*'You'd waste time, studying Eskimo,'* the clerk said.

"*'I'd waste more time kissing a totem pole,'* my nephew said.

"He was sure glad to see me, and showed me around the base, and gave me a present he'd bought to send down to me. It was a watch chain of nuggets of Alaska gold, darn

near big enough to anchor a destroyer. Solid gold nuggets big as marbles!

"'Gosh, boy,' I said, 'is this genuwine gold?'"

"'If it ain't I sure been gyped. I just paid six bits for it!'"

"But don't get my nephew wrong. He's a smart boy and he was studying hard to get some stripes. One evening he asked me, 'Pop, which is heavier, a ton of bricks or a ton of feathers?'"

"I said, 'Neither. They weigh the same.'"

"'Yeab? But which would you choose to drop on a Jap? . . . Me, I'd drop the bricks, and let the Nip sprout his own feathers!'"

And Pop Daly talked on, with some really good gags about the home front; and when he finally finished, and we had applauded, I sent Marice and Lucia, our pin-up girls, to the mike to render their itty bitty ditty they called *I'm Wacky about the Wacs*. It was sub-moron stuff, but their voices were clear and fresh and so *darn* young. When they finished, I introduced Graziella Gary. She recited Bryson's poem about the P-38, *Lightnings in the Sky*, and some Robert Service poems. Robert Service goes over big with the boys in the cold latitudes."

And then I told myself, I'd done all I could do; I'd sent my message. P-38 fighters from Reykjavik should take some twenty minutes flying time to reach us here. Already a half-hour had passed. Maybe no planes were coming! All we could do now was mark time, hoping—and praying, through minutes that were long-drawn agonies of suspense.

Judy took over the mike, with a piano solo, playing *Kitten on the Keys* with a rollicking pep she pumped up out of sheer will power. Pop Daly, then, went back to the mike to stall off the inevitable with more gags.

The others were feeling the strain just as sharply as I was. Madame Roma's big dark eyes looked haunted; Marice and Lucia sat hunched up like refugee kids in a blitz picture, and Lucia was crying. Tom and Tim Baylor stood by their xylophones, watching me, alert to play soon's I signaled; and their lean faces were white and set.

Five minutes more ached past; then five minutes more.

Suddenly the bluff fringing the cove stood out sharp and clear—and overhead the sky was a sun-gilt blue. My innards tautened.

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I felt as if we were all naked and exposed and helplessly targeted here, with the wrecked C-47 lying like a huge billboard to draw attention to us.

Judy whispered to me, "Maybe the Germans've given up and gone away?"

I shook my head. "Judy, right now, I hear planes."

And a moment later, Sammy yelled and pointed.

"There they come. Hooray!"

Faintly, but growing louder by the heart-beat, I heard that motor drone. I looked at Judy, and my own conflicting feelings were mirrored in her lovely eyes. Were those planes the Germans returning? Or was help actually coming? For an instant I let myself hope and turned to look out to sea.

The fog was almost gone, and I could see the planes. Definitely they were racing straight toward us.

And then despair was like the taste of battery acid in my mouth. That wasn't the high-pitched propeller of P-38's I heard. It was the uneven rumbling growl of alien 4-motor ships. The *Kuriers*, headed back to us.

"Stop broadcasting!" I snapped. "Cut us off the air."

"I have," Sammy said, and now his voice was grim.

"Listen, everybody!" I tried to keep my voice calm. "We fooled the Germans for a while, but finally they've got wise to us, and they've followed our program broadcast straight here. Run to the base of the bluff and get flat on your stomachs behind rocks. Run like hell!"

I grabbed Judy's arm. I wasn't fooling myself—the way those *Kuriers* would bomb and strafe the beach, not one of us would ever leave here alive. I wanted Judy close by me now.

WE HADN'T a second to spare. We were hardly flattened down in the lee of boulders before the *Kuriers* were swooping at the beach, their motor thunder a hellish din that reechoed off the bluff at us. There's no terror I know of to equal the awful split-seconds while an enemy plane is diving down onto you. Whether you're in a gun pit or on a deck, when you hear those engines screaming into crescendo and see the planes growing in size so fast, as it seems they're pointed straight down at you, and

as you watch the innocent-looking vanned bulbs drop away from their bellies, your heart nearly bursts inside of you. I put my arm tight about Judy's shoulders and she buried her face against my chest.

But it was at the C-47 that the *Kuriers* were swooping at first. Bombs from the first one's underslung bay bracketed my plane neatly. The beach quaked to the bursts; and when I looked, my ship was torn plumb apart. I ducked then as the second *Kurier* dropped her eggs: anti-personnel bombs that sprayed the beach with a level hail of hot metal.

Zooming up, the *Kuriers* came around for a second try. The Jerry pilots knew that the C-47's passengers must've scattered behind cover. This time the Germans started probing and stabbing at the whole beach with machine-gun fire, to sweep it from end to end while they laid a pattern of bombs to bury everything they scared out of cover. *This is it*, I was telling myself; and I was turning Judy's face toward me, hunting for her lips. *Judy, Judy, darling*—

An odd thing happened. It was so abrupt and unexpected for one wild stunned instant I thought I was imagining it, except that the roar and concussion pressed Judy and me together like the grip of a giant fist. That leading *Kurier* blew up as it was nosing toward us. First it was rocketing earthward, and then, in a brilliant glare of flame, it just tore apart. And an instant later, a twin-tailed pursuit ship flashed over it.

And I saw that the other *Kurier*, in a vertical bank, was twisting out to sea, was veering away in a desperate attempt to escape three other P-38's that were converging upon it!

And then I was standing up, I was yelling like mad—and around me, the others were jumping up and down, screaming their heads off with joy. I hugged Judy, I kissed her, and I shouted, "They came! They came! Look at 'em. Lord, did you ever see anything as pretty as a P-38!"

That remaining *Kurier* made a real try for escape. But she didn't have speed to match the *Lightnings*. Fifty-calibre slugs ripped into her. None hit bombs, as they must have done in the other *Kurier*. But they knocked a couple of her engines out and then set her afire. Suddenly men were dropping from her bomb bay, their parachutes ballooning out; and then abruptly the huge



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German 4-motor slipped off into a wobbly spin and nosed down, crashing into the ocean like a whale thudding out of the sky.

The P-38's buzzed the beach, and the pilots waved to us. Then they lined out for their base.

"Everything's fine now, gang," I yelled. "They'll send a seaplane to pick us up."

THE seaplanes arrived presently, fine big TPBY's. One picked up the drifting Nazi airmen and the other taxied close to the beach, and we all waded out to climb aboard.

It was a grand feeling when the *Catalina* took off and headed back toward Reykjavik. We all grinned at each other.

Lieut. Neely, skipper of the PBV, came to me and Sammy and asked if we needed first aid for our hurts. We told him no.

"We'll be okay until we get to the base. But tell me, Neely," I said, "was it just accident that the flight of P-38's came here in time to tangle with those two German *Kuriers*?"

"Shucks, no," Neely said. "Back at the base, the boys tuned in on your broadcast. Soon's you claimed that you were broadcasting from the very hangar we were then sitting in, we knew something was wrong. Then you identified the various members of your party. We knew that, by rights, you should be far out at sea, en route to England. But you were coming in strong, as if you were very close. Something was definitely screwy somewhere. So we took a radio fix on you and realized that you must be forced down along the coast here. And Colonel Fessenden radioed a flight of P-38's out on patrol to swing past this way. So they did, and caught the Jerries cold."

"And saved all our necks," I said.

"That was a swell program you people put on."

"Of course," said Pop smugly. "Once again, vodvil saves show business."

I moved to a seat beside Judy.

The gun blister nearby had had a section smashed out of the plastic by bullets, recently, so the roar of the motors was pretty loud and wind beat at us. Judy shivered; I put my good arm about her shoulders. She smiled and moved closer.

Words rushed to my lips; I checked them, telling myself to wait. And I did wait—minute after minute, as the plane neared

Reykjavik. But I couldn't hold out entirely; the way I felt, I had to know now, at once.

"Judy, something I got to ask you."

"Yes, Joe?"

"Tell me—tell me, what do you know about b-beetles?"

Her brows lifted but she said matter-of-factly, "Quite a lot. My brother collected them, also stamps, coins, cocoons, shiny clubs and assorted scabs and childhood diseases."

She smiled but I didn't grin back.

"How—how do you feel about model plane building?"

"Swell hobby for kids. Girls, too."

I swallowed hard. It was all or nothing on the next question.

"W-what do you know about small boys?"

She didn't exactly smile, but something awfully warm and tender shone in her lovely eyes. She said, "Lots of theory."

"Like 'em?"

"Crazy about 'em."

"How'd you like a son?"

She gulped, and said, "Do you guarantee a boy?"

It was my turn to gulp. But I rallied and said, "I'm a widower. I've got a boy of twelve. D-does it make any difference?"

"You tell me. I never had a boy of twelve."

"I mean—oh, damn it, will you marry me?"

Her face became radiant.

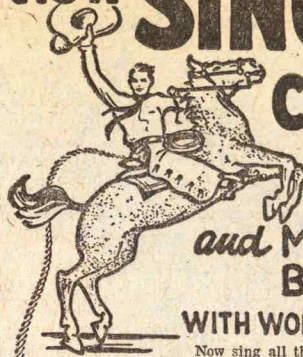
"You bet I will!"

And then suddenly we both realized that the engines had been throttled back as the PBY nosed down for landing, and Judy and I had just shouted in a silence. Everybody was staring at us, and grinning, and applauding, carrying on like everybody approved in a big way.

"Are you a man or a mouse?" Sammy yelled. "Kiss her!"

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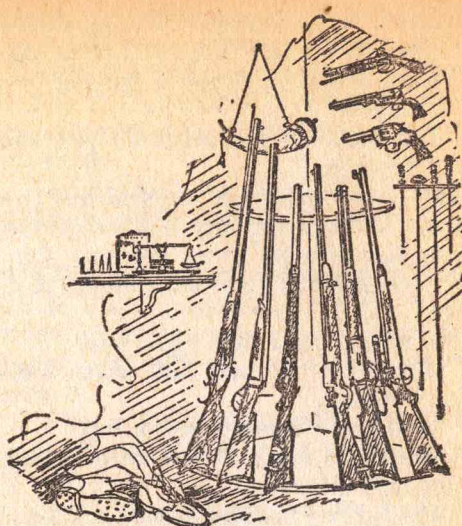
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seven years old and made a thorough study of the one hand gun. Among other things he turned the ancestral banquet hall into a pistol range, where he and his friend practiced.

One or two guns went with him on all his travels and were near at hand until his final illness. They were then taken away lest in delirium he use them fatally.

DID you know that before the present war the shooting of the old charcoal burners was gaining so much in popularity that it was considered to be one of our national sports?

The National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association was formed and a plot of ground purchased on which an outdoor range was constructed where national matches are held.

The Association publishes a monthly paper called "Muzzle Blasts" which is mailed to members.

Membership costs \$1.50 a year—and if you are interested, write to E. M. Farris, Secretary, Portsmouth, Ohio.

DID you know that the old Sharps rifle is the only single shot rifle to have a book written exclusively about it?

This gun is getting to be quite a collector's item—and some of the rarer specimens are in such demand that it is impossible to get one unless you mortgage the old homestead and plunk the whole wad on the line.

It wasn't so long ago that good examples could be picked up for a couple of bucks.

The above mentioned book is called "The Sharps Rifle, Its History, Development and Operation," by Winston O. Smith. It's good, and should be in every gunlover's library. My only complaint is that there isn't enough dope on the various cartridges for which the Sharps was chambered. The book is published by William Morrow & Co.

DID you know that the .357 Smith & Wesson magnum is the most powerful hand gun in the world? It was originally intended for big game hunting (in America) and is really quite a lead slinger. The Muzzle Velocity is 1510 feet a second. The Muzzle Energy is 800 foot pounds which is a little over that of the old .32-40

Winchester rifle which is 760 foot pounds. So judge for yourself—paper ballistics often fool you in the game fields, but just the same I wouldn't want to crack down on a grizzly bear with any pistol—unless I had a good jeep handy!



And speaking of pistols, did you know that the Luger (German Army pistol) was invented by an American? Yes, sir, the brain child of none other than Borchardt (a native of Connecticut) of Sharps-Borchardt fame. It's a fine pistol, perhaps a little "muzzle-light"—but the most natural pointer of all automatics. It has always been a popular gun, but I have never seen one with a good trigger pull, and that's where good shooting pays off, everything else being equal.

DID you know that modern progressively burning smokeless powder has greatly increased the accuracy life of our high intensity rifles?

Inasmuch as this powder actually burns progressively, the pressure in the barrel behind the bullet increases or at least remains constant as said bullet moves toward the muzzle of the gun. This tends to distribute the intense heat through the entire barrel, which due to the progressive action is at a comparatively low temperature.

This doesn't sound too clear to me, so, let's take it from a different angle.

With progressive powder the pressure peak is reached soon after the bullet starts up the barrel and gradually dies out through the rest of its length. Due to the intense initial pressure, extreme heat is generated which tends to wash away or burn out the metal at this point.

So, in order to produce a given velocity the new powders give the gun a break by starting to burn at a lower pressure and consequently with less heat.

If this is not clear, sue me!

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How Increasing Your Vocabulary Will Help You Get Ahead In Life

What This Book Will Do For You

- 1 How you may talk and write your way to greater business success and social position.
- 2 A series of fascinating tests showing whether your language helps or handicaps you.
- 3 Why world-leaders, business heads, successful men and women, all have powerful vocabularies.
- 4 How increasing your vocabulary develops your mind and imagination; leads you to success.
- 5 The explosive power of words; how they can win or lose a friend or dynamic verbs.
- 6 How to add words to your vocabulary, while at movies, listening to radio, reading newspaper, or looking at signs.
- 7 How words can make you appear brilliant or ignorant; and how to turn them into your slaves.
- 8 Why day by day your expanding vocabulary builds self-confidence; lends new color to your personality; increases your popularity.
- 9 Why neither age nor any lack of education need handicap you in gaining a mastery of words.
- 10 Easy, entertaining 30 days, will methods that, in 30 days, will give you more new words than the average person acquires in 25 years.
- 11 Learning scientific words in common usage which everyone should know how to pronounce correctly.
- 12 How to find exactly the right words to express your innermost feelings and ideas.
- 13 Hints on words ending in "ology"; and how using them erroneously can be so embarrassing.
- 14 Seventeen ways to describe what people are like; how to avoid hackneyed expressions when doing so.
- 15 Seventeen other ways to define accurately the faults of the commonplace in your conversation.
- 16 How you help to create the American language; and the way in which slang attains respectability.
- 17 A surprise test that shows the astonishing progress you have made in increasing your vocabulary.
- 18 How to capture personalities in words, making them and yourself more interesting to others.
- 19 Why adjectives add flavor to your language; and how to use them more effectively.
- 20 An easy way to remember the words you learn, so that the progress you make through this book will never be lost.
- 21 Why these Latin word-roots multiply your vocabulary so amazingly.
- 22 Ten fascinating quizzes week's progress.
- 23 You get a quick challenge that will test your wit in guessing at word meanings.
- 24 You learn a group of vital words that describe you and your personality.
- 25 Simple exercises on French phrases which will make your speaking or writing more engaging.
- 26 Ten words that define and describe the kinds of words we use, and how to know specifically into which classification words fall.
- 27 Some interesting examples of how words are built and how they "unfold"; how to use them to impress others, without being a show-off.
- 28 Here are some simple classic "roots" which will quickly and automatically increase your language-power.
- 29 A fascinating sketch showing how words change their meanings; how our language shifts, changes, and grows.
- 30 Thirty tests to prove how far you have come! How to make habit. Complete index and pronunciation key.



Dr. Wilfred Funk is the well-known author and lexicographer; for 16 years President of the famous dictionary firm of Funk and Wagnalls. His collaborator, Mr. Norman Lewis, is a well-known author of textbooks and teacher of English.

IF YOUR vocabulary is limited, your chances of success are limited. The greater your vocabulary the more likely you are to succeed!

The truth of this has been proved time and again, by experts who have given thousands of scientific tests comparing the vocabularies of successful executives with run-of-the-mill employees.

In fact, many leading psychologists use vocabulary tests alone to determine a person's intelligence. Stanford University has found that such tests are 90% as accurate in determining your intelligence quotient as the Stanford-Binet "I. Q." tests.

AND IN BOTH THE ARMY AND NAVY a man's rating in his vocabulary quizzes overshadows any other single test in deciding his advancement!

Regardless of the field of endeavor in which you are engaged, the number of words you know and can use correctly is the most important single measurement by which others judge your ability. Therefore, a better command of words will not only help you get ahead faster, it will also give you assurance; build your self-confidence; lend color to your personality; increase your popularity.

How to Acquire a Larger Vocabulary — In Only 15 Minutes A Day!

However, the proof that you doubtless *already* realize the truth of these statements is indicated by the fact that you have probably always wanted to increase your vocabulary. But, up to now, perhaps you have never found a method which would actually make you eager to do it. That is why you will welcome this announcement of a wonderful new book, "*30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*," which really makes it exciting fun—a fascinating game—to learn new words!

This book is divided into 30 delightful daily chapters. Each day you spend 15 enjoyable minutes with this book—and it does FOR you, and for your vocabulary, the things you will read about in the 30 little boxes shown here at the left.

"I Like This Book Immensely"

Perhaps the best outline of what this new book will do for you is given in an interesting review written for the *Springfield (Mass.) Union* by Mr. A. L. S. Wood. "This book," writes Mr. Wood, "is really something. It goes at the business of giving you a better command of English in something of a novel way. You'll master not only a number of words, but use them properly, and improve not only your speech but your thinking.

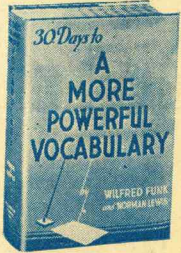
"The more you know about words, the more you know how to use and to understand, the better you will get along. For life depends upon thought; thought must precede action. The clearer our thinking, the more effective our acts. We cannot think clearly unless we think in words.

"I like this book immensely. In 30 days it really would give you a more powerful vocabulary. It will give almost anyone a better understanding of his language, a closer grasp of its infinite variety, and a greater love for this English language of ours."

You'll Enjoy Yourself With This Book

As the review you have just read indicates, "*30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*" does many more things than merely add words to your speaking and writing "toolbox." It digs into your present vocabulary, and roots out the mispronunciations you have been making for years. It tells you the intensely interesting stories behind many of our words, so that you'll understand them better, use them more expressively. You will find scores of tests for checking yourself that will make a lively parlor game for your friends!

If you will enjoy yourself with this unique volume for just 15 minutes a day and for just 30 days—you will (as proven by tests) add more new and useful words to your vocabulary than the average adult acquires in 25 years.



"A First Aid to Better Speech"

"This book not only provides practical ideas for enlarging any vocabulary, but shows up the short-comings by progressive tests. The arrangement of the material in a thirty day course towards a more powerful vocabulary" successfully avoids making the exercises monotonous. The authors show how every day can contribute its quota."—Virginia Kirkus, *Eminent Literary Critic*.

"Simple, Clearly, Directly Written"

"It makes a strong appeal to the reader's own desire for self-improvement and it stimulates him step by step to work through the exercises."—Donald L. Clark, Associate Professor of English, Columbia University, New York City.

"Benefits in An Incredibly Short Time"

"Seldom, if ever, does one come across a book of this type whose many pages fairly bristle with practical knowledge so entertainingly and forcefully presented."—Joseph A. Lovvinsohn, in the *Atlanta Constitution*.

self—even a whole section that will make a lively parlor game for your friends!

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Examine It 5 Days FREE

It costs only a postage stamp to have this book delivered to you for FREE EXAMINATION. No money need be sent now. "*30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*" will be sent to you with the understanding that you may keep it for 5 days. If, even in that short time, you do NOT feel that this book offers you the most interesting way to increase your vocabulary you have ever seen or heard of—then simply return the book to us without the slightest obligation. Otherwise, it is yours to keep for only two dollars, plus the few cents actual postage.

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