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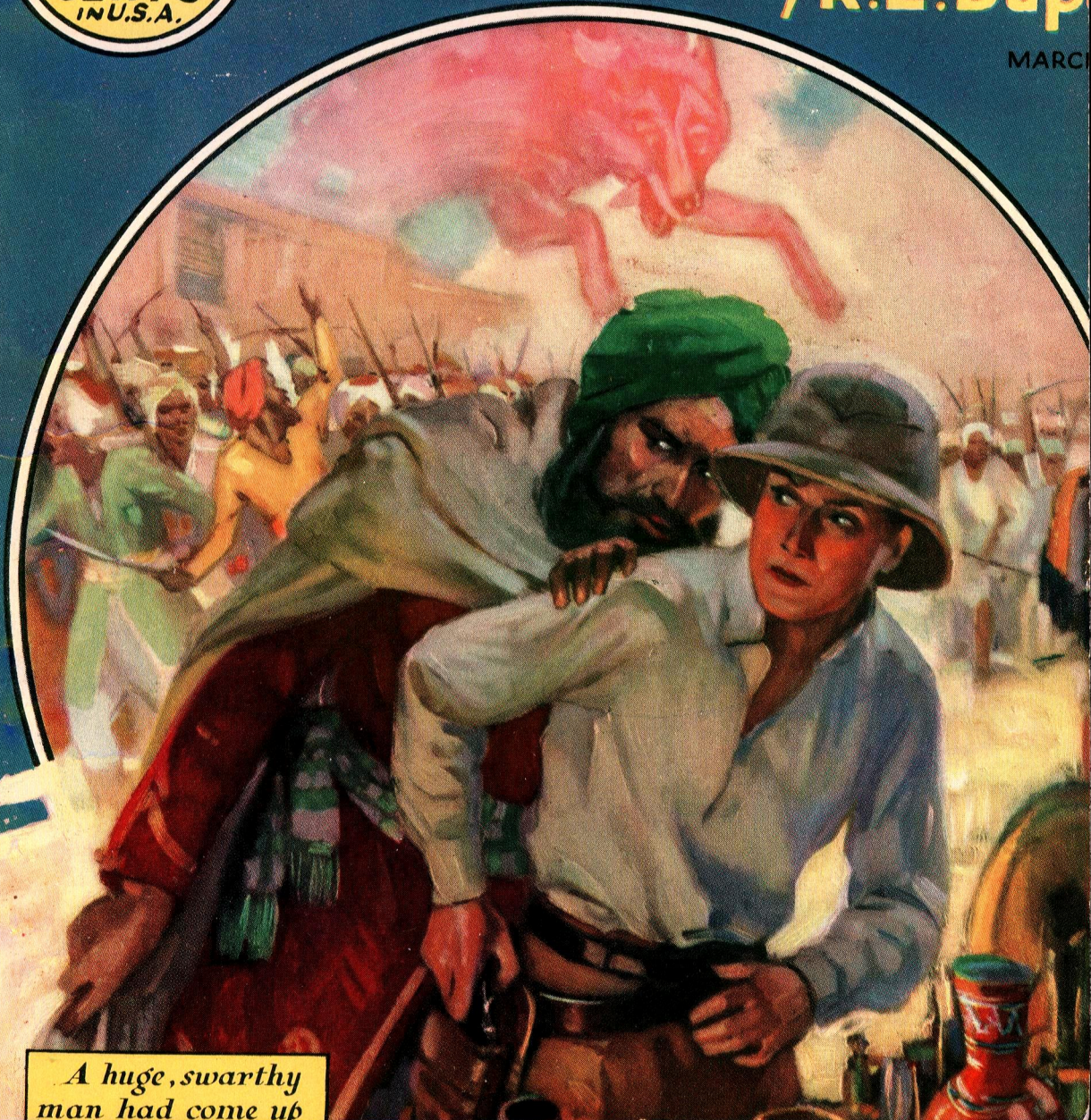
Top Notch

10
CENTS
IN U.S.A.

SHADOW OF THE WOLF

By R.E. Dup

MARCH



*A huge, swarthy
man had come up*

On sale the third Friday of each month

STREET & SMITH'S

Top-Notch

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Volume XCII

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CONTENTS FOR MARCH, 1933

Cover Picture—Scene from "Shadow of the Wolf" . . . *John Coughlin*

Complete Novel

Shadow of the Wolf *R. E. Dupuy* 4
Two Yanks versus the Soviet secret police.

Novelettes

Conjure Cay *J. Allan Dunn* 67
Jim Dean sails adventure's seas.
Ozar and the Jade Altar *Valentine Wood* 88
Ozar the Aztec risks all.

Short and Short Short Stories

Smoke Talk In San Miguel *Galen C. Colin* 57
But Lazy Lucas didn't do much talking.
The Key *Alfred I. Tooke* 115
A cool half million—that turned red-hot.
The Freedom Of Red Dawn *Harry R. Keller* 117
Wild horses on the range.
Trail's End *Victor Blaine Wright* 119
Vengeance can be original.
His Brother's Keeper *Hal Field Leslie* 122
Bad blood—and good.
A Letter From Fanchette *Alan Grey Mayne* 124
Lars Swenson's death romance.
At The Top-Notch Mike 126
Station WTN on the air.

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Shadow of the Wolf

By R. E. Dupuy

Two former American secret service men found death at every turn on this—their biggest job

CHAPTER I.

THE NAME OF A DEAD MAN.

DEEP pains shot up the man's legs, the protest of aching muscles—shrieking complaint at each plodding step of jog trot over the rough-plowed earth. Iron bands, it seemed, wrapped themselves about his chest with every sobbing intake of tortured lungs.

He cast an eye on the girl who ran

beside him, hand clasped in his as they fled from the five dark forms spread wide behind them in the fields below the slope.

He caught a glimpse of a wholesome face—a face preserving its piquancy beneath the mask of straining effort. Her opened mouth, the lips writhing back as she fought for her breath, could not take away the beauty. Above purplish fatigue signals, two widespread laughing, courageous eyes looked up full

in his. A fluff of golden hair crept from under the little black hat. Game, this girl, he reckoned; game as they make them.

Something whispered past their ears—once and again; nasty little *whceeps!* accompanied by thin snaps, and, after the eternity of a plunging stride, faint pops from below.

A four-foot stone wall rose before them, barring the way. Leaning against it, the girl shook her head with a wry smile. Pawing savagely at her soft slim body, the man fairly flung her over it, following with a supreme effort of will that stung his faltering muscles into momentary power. Atop the coping he turned his head.

One, two, three men he counted almost directly behind them, and about a hundred yards away. The others he could not see, but they must be there. He flung himself down on the far side, weakened knees betraying him, to land on all fours. And as he rose, the girl's hand dragging him, a gasping message of reassurance left his lips.

"Nearly there now—few—yards more."

"There," it would seem, was a small graystone house—a substantial two-story Normandy farm cottage, looming not fifty yards away.

The door opened, and a man stepped out, attracted probably by the sound of the shots. His eyes fell on the couple scrambling toward him, and he disappeared inside. As their shambling feet struck the flagging by the door, a window above banged open, and a shotgun stuck its wicked double-barreled muzzle out. A quick-thinking person, this cottager; one who wasted no valuable time in asking foolish questions.

THROUGH the doorway the pair rushed, the man sending the heavy door slamming to behind him, the rasp of the wrought-iron lock as its bolt shot home a draft of mental

wine to jaded senses. For an instant, man and girl stood panting, facing one another in the big kitchen, with its roaring fireplace.

Wham! The shotgun in the upper room crashed its defiance. Still struggling for breath, the man turned to the one window and brought the oaken shutter swinging in, his nervous fingers fumbling with the screeching bolt handle for a second, until the fastening caught.

He pulled a chair to the side of the fireplace, and, settling the girl there, busied himself with filling a huge pot from a cistern pump by the sink in the corner. This pot he swung over the flames by a crane, then poked the fire into a roar. This accomplished, he perched himself on a three-legged stool to the opposite side of the fireplace, and unlimbering a pipe, sat looking at the girl.

"All set," he remarked. "We may need this pot later, if they steal up on our blind sides and try to break in when it gets dark. Boiling water might make that unhealthy. You see," he explained, "there are only two windows upstairs, one at each end. The sides are blind."

HE puffed away for a moment, his gaze resting on her. She returned his stare, frankly, appraisingly. He was not hard to look at, this man, now that she had time to gaze at him. An American type—tall, lean, with an outdoor look to the slightly high-check-boned face. A firm jaw, lips that suggested an upward twist of good humor, blue eyes laughing from the surrounding crinkle of wind wrinkles. Black hair, with just a suspicion of a curl.

"Let's go into this thing," said the man. "We should have, I believe, a good half hour. No one wants to rush in on a place which produces a shotgun out of a hat, as one might say. Fay, upstairs, will keep his eye peeled; he'll call me if I'm needed. And even if

they did sneak, the door and windows will resist anything smaller than a battering-ram. So here we are. And who, one might ask, are we?"

"You are trying to buck me up—to reassure me," was the girl's remark. "Isn't there some help near by? A village? A neighbor?"

The man shrugged.

"Quite frankly, no," he responded. "The nearest village is two kilometers away, the nearest police post five. There is no nearest neighbor; the villagers are our only touch with civilization. As a matter of fact, I picked this spot because it was the loneliest spot I could find on the Normandy coast. I don't suppose you need to be told that there is no telephone. The main road is the closest contact with the outside world, and that is too far away to expect any help from the few passers-by. Add to this that dusk is falling, and one may reckon that our little party will probably not be disturbed—much."

"But I must get on—get through, some way. I must be in Paris to-night," she protested.

"Well, you can't, so that's that," he returned briskly. "Let's take up the more pressing subject of introductions. Suppose I start. Name, Norton; Frank to my friends. Age—thirty-eight. Profession, artist. American, as I suppose you guessed. The man upstairs, Fay, was formerly my orderly. Now he has graduated to the position of friend and general handy man."

The girl leaned forward, and her eyes gave emphasis to her words—if, indeed, any emphasis had been needed.

"There's one thing that you must know, Mr. Norton," she said. "When I rushed in on you, I had no idea that there would be any one in that clearing. I was panicky—trapped. You heard and saw the men after me, you yanked me with you to safety. For that, the best way I can thank you is to ask you to unlock that door and let me walk out."

NORTON sat staring, puffing great clouds of smoke. The girl rose and turned with a sudden movement toward the door.

"It's me they want" she said over her shoulder.

The stool went over with a crash as Norton sprang at her, spun her around with his hands on her shoulders, and fairly forced her into the chair again. His words rasped as he bent over her.

"What sort of a mush do you take me for, you little fool?"

"But you don't understand," expostulated the girl. "You don't understand, and—I can't explain." Her voice rose. "Let me go before it is too late. I bring death, I tell you! I bring death!"

"I understand this, young woman," and Norton's voice had lost its half-jocular tone. "I understand that the men who have treed you—and me—were not out hunting for truffles. Whoever they are, and whatever they want, they're outside, and are dangerous. Maybe they only wanted you at first, but you may be sure they want us both, now. So come clean."

The girl twisted her hands. She was plainly nervous.

"I'm sorry," she sighed at last; "I'm sorry, but—but—oh, I can't explain. I can't break faith."

A moment's hesitation, then, under the steady stare of the man's cool eyes she tossed her head; a gesture of defiance.

"All I can do," said this girl with the frank blue eyes, "is to ask you if by chance a certain name means anything to you—the name of Dzerzhinsky?"

The man Norton straightened with a jerk.

"Dzerzhinsky?" he echoed, his face a steel-framed mask. "That's the name of a dead man!"

It was the girl's turn to shrug her shoulders.

"Do you mean the man who directed

the Red Terror in Moscow?" demanded Norton.

"That's the man——"

Wham! The shotgun upstairs roared again. Some one—a male voice—shrieked, outside. Fay's voice floated down to them.

"Got that baby, skipper! Got him right!"

Norton had heard shrieks like that one outside before. He knew Fay was correct in his boast. That was the way they shrieked when one got them right.

He rushed up the stairs to rejoin the man above. The girl after a moment followed. As her head came above the floor, she caught sight of the two men crouching, each by one of the two windows. Norton, turning at the sound of her steps, motioned her back.

"Keep down!" he warned. "They'll shoot! Lie down on the floor."

"All right," she answered; "but I can't stay down there—alone. Please let me remain here," and she groped her way toward him on hands and knees.

"Can't I do something?" she queried.

"Nothing now—that is—yes—get downstairs again, and see that that fire keeps going. When it gets really dark, they'll be back, and we'll need that water."

TIME crept. Hours passed, somehow. A clock somewhere below clacked off the seconds audibly. And then a call from Fay brought Norton to his window. "Down by the road, sir. Look! An automobile!"

Through the fast-fallen cloak of night the twin lights of an automobile flickered down the hillside; flickered, then turned toward them, the rays fluttering as the machine bumped over the ruts of the farm road.

Nearer they came, the motor laboring low now through the heavy going. A sharp turn brought the glow directly on the farmhouse, the beams playing

through the open window behind which both men sank to avoid detection.

Suddenly the lights winked out. Silence. Norton cautiously peered over the sill once more. What did it mean? Help, possibly. But help for whom? A car door slammed, a raucous voice bellowed in French beneath the window.

"Three men about the house! Brigadier, patrol the road with the remaining two!"

"Very good, *Monsieur le commissaire!* Bertrand, Duclos, follow me," and boots scuffled on the roadway.

"Cops!" growled the man Fay. "We're all right now, sir!"

But Norton clutched his arm. "Wait!"

"Hello! In the house!" The bellow rose again. "In the house, I say! Open in the name of the Republic!"

"Who is there?" called Norton quietly, menacingly. "Show yourselves, or take the consequences!"

"Open up, Frank," came the startling response in English; "it's Bunny!"

Norton with a yelp of pleased surprise went bounding down the steps to the door.

CHAPTER II.

FRENCH LEAVE.

NORTON turned the key in the door, gave one look at the two men standing outside—one of them in a chauffeur's uniform—half urged, half pulled them inside, and slammed and locked the door.

Then his hand grasped the hand of one of the men—he was a ruddy-faced, square-shouldered, rather blocky-built man with prematurely white hair.

"Bunny Sharp!" Norton exclaimed. But where are the rest of the men—the police?"

"Bunny" Sharp's blue eyes twinkled. "That's what the guys outside are beginning to wonder, I expect," he answered. "This is us—all of us. I saw those fellows out there skipping around

in the heavy rain—and with guns, too. And I saw your house tightly closed. Thought there was some funny business on. So I faked all that byplay about the police."

The twinkles went out of Sharp's eyes and left his face stern. "And now I see that you *are* besieged. What's the idea? Thought you'd renounced war and fighting and rough stuff for the pleasure of spoiling canvas."

"Come upstairs," Norton suggested. "Fay and I have been fighting a little private war for several hours. We—What's the matter?" he asked, for Sharp was peering at something behind him. Turning, Norton saw the girl standing in the doorway between the rooms, her face plain in the firelight.

"Yes—yes." Sharp's voice trailed in an odd, absent manner. "Well, let's go up. Gustave"—to the chauffeur—"remain downstairs. Keep the door locked. Come on, Frank."

They clattered up into the darkness. "Keep down low," Norton cautioned Sharp. "There's a gang outside—an outfit that wants that young woman. It's a long story. Fay and I are besieged here with her. Well, that's our story. How in the name of all that's lucky did *you* happen in?"

"That's a long story, too, Frank. The gist of it is—well, we're to take the trail together again."

"Are you kidding, Bunny?"

"Never more serious in my life. General Dragovitch, head of the White Russian refugees in Paris, has disappeared. Supposed to have been kidnaped by Soviet spies. I've been engaged to find him, but I made one condition—that my old buddy in Uncle Sam's secret service should be engaged to help me. I made my terms—then motored here from Paris in record time for such a night."

"But why is Dragovitch—or any other one man—so all-important?" Norton asked. "There'll be some other big-shot

White Russian to succeed him in his duties, won't there?"

Bunny Sharp shook his head. "No. I'm working for Rothsmanns, the big bankers. Rothsmanns himself insists that only Dragovitch held the threads of the White Russian information service. Dragovitch had some secret-service system of his own which appeared to function despite all the efforts of the Soviet secret police."

"Where does the house of Rothsmanns come in?" Norton asked.

"That's just it! Dragovitch was absolutely essential to Rothsmanns—kept the house supplied with information on world movements to protect itself and its clients. He was in the middle of some very important negotiations with Rothsmanns when the blow fell—when he was kidnaped. The sky's the limit—no end of expense money for us, and we have a free rein. I looked forward to our taking the trail together again—until I saw that woman below."

"Why the crack like that, Bunny?"

"Well, I've got to know what that girl's doing here."

"That I can't tell you," answered Norton, "for the very good reason that I don't know!"

Sharp grasped his friend by the hand.

"On the level, Frank?" he asked.

"Absolutely! When I reach the point where I've got to lie to you, Bunny, it's going to be a cold day. What the devil's up?"

"Frank," whispered Sharp, "this is big stuff—high stakes—all the possibility for an international fracas. And I wanted you in—with me. You're the only guy who can handle this. But it looks to me like you're on the wrong side."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean that that girl downstairs is the slickest agent of the OGPU—the Soviet secret police—in all Europe today!"

BELOW, a door banged. Norton and Sharp, guns in hand, bounded down the steps into the kitchen, to see the woman's form slip out of the outer portal which she slammed behind her. The door between the rooms opened, and Gustave, the chauffeur, staggered out, hand on head.

Sharp locked the outer door again, while Norton stared. The chauffeur began to stammer.

"Spit it out, man!" ordered Sharp.

"She—she called me in, said some one was trying the window there. While I was searching, she slammed the door and ran. Before I could get clear in the dark——" He shrugged. "Well, messieurs—you saw her go!"

Outside, the motor of the Panhard roared into life. Norton leaped for the door, but Sharp flung himself in front of him.

"Let me go, Bunny—she'll be caught!"

"Over my dead body! Don't be a damned idiot. Let her go! If somebody shoots her, so much the better. Help me, Gustave!"

The pair struggled with the raging Norton for an instant. The motor outside roared, calmed, gears clicked, it roared again—a clever driver was jockeying the big car in a confined space—and this time they heard it move rapidly away. They ceased their struggles by tacit consent, to run upstairs to the window.

The car, its twin beams penciling the narrow roadway, was racing downhill.

Somewhere a pistol cracked, again, and again. The car sped on. They saw it lurch through the gate, swing into the main road, almost careening into the ditch, to disappear in the night.

"Bunny Sharp," rasped Norton, and there was a world of dreariness in his voice—"I wish to hell I'd never seen you again!"

But Sharp clapped him on the shoulder.

"Come, snap out of it, old son," said Bunny Sharp. "What right have you or I to illusions? Red Russia's once more aflame. The Wolf is on the rampage. Its shadow is over us. There's work—man's work, to be done. Let's go!"

There was no time now for explanation. Mechanically, Norton took up his share of the duty. Whoever these men outside might be, whoever the woman might be, the place had to be guarded. They divided themselves into watches—Norton and Fay in one, Sharp and his chauffeur in the other—for the remainder of the night.

While Bunny Sharp stood his watch, sucking his unlit cigar in the darkness, his mind was filled with a multitude of thoughts.

INSEPARABLE buddies during the War, and during the two years of the aftermath, when they had battled against the Red Terror, Sharp and Norton had drifted apart. Both left the service—Sharp to take up the more lucrative task of heading the private investigation of the banking house of Rothsmanns—the detective bureau which every big financial house to-day maintains for the protection of itself and its clients—Norton avowedly to enjoy life.

His thoughts shifted to the woman—Sonya Gritzenka, lately come into the Communist circles of the Russian quarter of Paris. What could she have been doing here? Could it have any connection with the Dravovitch affair? Could she be mixed up in this matter which might eventually shake Europe to its foundations? He wondered.

Silent, each pair took their respective share of guard, by the upper windows, waiting; waiting for an attack that never came.

Dawn, the slow, chill, foggy dawn of northern France, broke late, at last, showing a deserted countryside.

CHAPTER III.

NORTON DRAWS CARDS.

A CAREFUL investigation proved that the mysterious attackers had left as they had come—without a trace. Only a few ominous stains on the flagging at the corner of the farmhouse showed where Fay's shotgun had taken toll the previous afternoon.

"They all pulled out in my Panhard, I suppose," was Sharp's growl. "We'll not see that machine again right away."

He would have said more, but Norton's thunder cloud of a face deterred him. Sharp was wrong, however, for Fay, who had sallied forth by bicycle to St. André with a telegram, returned driving the Panhard. He had found it abandoned and undamaged a few hundred yards outside of the village.

They sat down to a bite of breakfast. In a few words, Sharp explained the events of the afternoon before in Paris, and his interview with his employer.

"Frank," he concluded, "you know the OGPU of old. You fought Dzerzhinsky in '20 and '21, when we were both in the Intelligence. You know the maze of intrigue in the Near East. I know the Paris end. Dzerzhinsky's dead now—but his agents are still in the game, and you're needed. I need you, Rothsmanns needs you."

"Bunny," and Sharp peered at Norton's face, his tone was so odd. "Bunny, do you think that Dzerzhinsky would be—alive?"

Sharp laughed. "No one ought to know better than you, Frank. You saw him die—the Polish renegade! And good riddance."

"Y-e-s," Norton slowly assented. "I saw the viper die. At least I thought I did." His eyes gleamed coldly at the recollection. "And yet——"

"Don't be silly, Frank. Are you getting childish in your old age?"

Norton leaned back in his chair. Fay

was still out—the chauffeur, Gustave, was busy by the fire.

"Last night, Bunny"—Norton's voice quavered a bit—"you accused that girl of being a Soviet agent. Now—look here!"

His extended palm held a small metal object—a shield of red enamel, on which was embossed an odd emblem; a silver sickle and hammer. Sharp took it up and examined it closely. On the back was a stamped number—31.

"I told you," said Sharp. "I knew that she was running around with a nasty gang in Paris. But this—this—where did you find it?"

"On the bed where she had been resting."

"Well, you know as well as I do what it is—the badge of a Soviet secret agent."

"Yes. And Bunny, she—she mentioned Dzerzhinsky's name. Asked me if that name meant anything to me. What does that mean?"

"That I am right."

"Bunny," reiterated Norton, "that girl's on the level. Listen to me."

He explained his adventure of the previous afternoon.

The pair sat looking at each other for what seemed to Norton an eternity. Fay's approach with the recaptured car broke the spell. Sharp stood up and played his trump card.

"Whatever she was doing, Frank, it had some bearing on this business, take it from me. She is in the game, and so are the men who chased her, or you, whichever it was. Perhaps the OGPU know where you've been rusticating, and want to blot you out, now that they're actively taking the field again. Anyway, if you want to know all about it, there's only one way. Buy into the game."

Norton's reply was characteristic.

"Fay!" he called. "March order!"

And to Sharp: "Bunny, I'm drawing cards in your game!"

CHAPTER IV.

A COUNCIL OF WAR.

NOON was sounding from the Sainte Chapelle clock when the Panhard, containing Norton, Bunny Sharp, and their two retainers roared over the Pont du Change, swung past the Palais de Justice, and turned left through the Rue de Lutèce, to halt in front of the Prefecture of Police in Paris.

The noon hour is sacred in France, under normal conditions, but this was one of the rare exceptions. Hence Sharp and Norton were speedily in conference with Inspector Legrand of the *Sûreté Nationale*. Legrand had charge of the file of papers connected with the Dragovitch case.

Legrand's red-lipped smile broke under the protecting curtain of well-groomed black beard when the two Americans entered his private office.

"A thousand welcomes, messieurs."

"And now, inspector," Sharp said, after the greetings and small talk were over, "just what do you know?"

"The French police know this"—and Legrand consulted a bulky file of papers on his desk—"General Vladimir Dragovitch, head of the Czarist group in Paris—the man upon whom the mantle of the late Grand Duke Nicholas Nicolaivich had fallen—stepped at precisely noon on January 26th into the Rue Rousselet from his residence, and walked twenty-five steps to the corner of the Rue de Sevres. Pausing for an instant to light a cigarette, the general turned to his right in the direction of the Boulevard Raspail—his daughter was watching from the window of their house—and has not been seen since.

"It was not until after two p. m. that his wife and daughter, becoming anxious at his nonappearance for lunch, telephoned to the club of ex-Russian imperial officers whither he had been bound, to find that he had not been

there that day. At two thirty p. m. the police were informed, and set its machinery working at once, at the same time clamping the lid of secrecy down."

LEGRAND paused to look up. "I may add that the police, through sources which may not be disclosed, but which are absolutely authentic, know that General Dragovitch never entered the Soviet embassy that day."

Sharp and Norton nodded.

"We have, then," continued the inspector, "a period of almost exactly two hours and a half during which time the victim was being moved—somewhere. Now—is he dead? The answer, I believe, is 'no.' A dead body cannot be eliminated in that time in Paris——"

"Permit me," broke in Sharp. "Information in our possession would indicate that his death is the last thing his kidnapers would desire."

Legrand bowed.

"Then, gentlemen, you know some motive for this, which is more than I do. I take it that is one of the things you do not wish to discuss, yet."

He continued:

"If he is alive, there are two possibilities: he disappeared of his own volition, or despite it. Of his own volition, again, frankly, no. There is absolutely no reason. Even the possibility of a voluntary disappearance to rouse public opinion against the Soviet government has been looked into. No. Hence we come back to a kidnaping."

"Ah!" Norton exclaimed. He poked his pipestem almost in Legrand's face.

"If he isn't here he's been taken out. From what we know—Sharp and myself—that seems to be the more logical conclusion. Now, coming right down to cold facts, which means of egress from Paris would you consider as the more probably one through which he may have slipped—air, water, auto, railroad?"

"Railroad, of course," admitted the

Frenchman. "Yet, not a loophole has been left. And, of those known or suspected agents of the Soviet government whom we have on our list, not one has left Paris by rail during this time."

"Has it occurred to you, Legrand, that this man may have been smuggled out as a dead man, or as an invalid?"

"But that is kindergarten stuff, my dear Norton. Of course, we have investigated that." Legrand again tugged at the tape and rummaged in the file of documents.

"Here——" He pulled out a paper. "There were shipped out of Paris since noon, yesterday, three dead bodies. Permits, authentications, all correct. In addition, inspection of the caskets to make certain that sanitary regulations of air-tight sealing had been carried out. And as for invalids, we have scared several old ladies almost to death, shocked dozens of relatives, irritated doctors and nurses. Let me see—yes, seventeen sick persons left Paris by train or by auto in that time. All have been investigated; new departures will be investigated. The search is still on, you know."

"Do me a favor," Sharp asked him. "Let me have a duplicate of your sick list. As for the dead, knowing the formalities necessary for shipment of dead bodies, I think they can be eliminated."

"But certainly. I will have a duplicate list for you in two hours."

"We have kept you away from your luncheon long enough, Monsieur Legrand. To a speedy reunion, and success."

CHAPTER V.

ON TO ISTANBUL.

WALKING over the Pont du Change, the pair went into a restaurant on the Place du Chatelet at the corner of the Avenue Victoria. Sharp led the way to the second floor, where they took their

places at a table by the window, so situated that no eavesdropping waiter could hang about without being seen. Their orders given, Sharp took up the topic in which they were interested.

"Frank, my plan is this. Dragovitch, as you may remember, was one of General Wrangel's generals in the last fight of the White Russians in the Crimea. They were all evacuated to Constantinople—Istanbul, that is. From there they've scattered. But, if there is any White Russian secret organization, surely Istanbul is one of its principal clearing houses. The Grand Duke Nicholas's connections were all with southern Russia. The Crimea was the last stand. His mantle has fallen on Dragovitch. I want you to go to Istanbul—you know the place of old, and I don't; at least, not well. What you're going to do there is your business. You there, myself here, digging into this mess, looks to me to be the best layout."

The waiter returning with their order interrupted the conversation for a moment. When he had gone, Norton took up the thread of discourse.

"You feel satisfied that they haven't got the old general laid out in the embassy cellar, eh?"

Sharp took a mouthful of food before replying. His shrewd eyes fixed on Norton.

"If you wanted to kidnap a guy," he demanded, "would you try to hide him in this city?"

"Knowing the Paris police system as I do," Norton admitted, "it doesn't seem reasonable."

The other man snorted. "Of course not. And what's more, of all the dumb places to hide any one under these circumstances, the Soviet embassy in Paris wins the fur-lined cuspidor. Legrand was not boasting when he hinted the French cops had some one lined up in that dump—some stool pigeon."

Norton burst out laughing at his companion's serious expression of coun-

tenance. Sharp had a keen outlook on life, and Norton loved to hear him talk.

"Right you are, Old Broadbrim," he said. "Where do you say they've got him?"

"I never said they've got him. He may have flown the coop by himself, for all I know—though I don't think so. What I said was if any one kidnaped a guy here, they wouldn't keep him in Paris. New York, yes; London, perhaps. Paris, nix!"

"Continue, Nick Carter," gibed Norton. "Assuming that the Reds have nabbed this bird, what are they going to do with him?"

"They'd take him out of town, of course."

"Just a minute. Suppose they put him on the spot? Isn't that possible?"

"That's out. If they were going to do that, his body would have turned up. Murderers don't hide bodies much—in Paris. No, they'd pop him quick and make a lightning get-away; their only chance against the French cops. Why do they want him? Probably to twist out of him what set-up the Whites have, in addition to preventing him from blabbing to Rothsmanns the news of what the Reds have got up their sleeve. For the latter, all they need to do is kill him. And then his body would have been found. No—they want him alive."

"All right," Norton argued. "We know, or feel reasonably certain, that they want him alive. They take him out of town. Now, how in the name of the holy seven-toed prophet could you, Bright Eyes, smuggle a live man—a man who did not want to be smuggled—out of Paris?"

Sharp considered the question carefully.

"Automobiles and planes are out, it seems," he finally admitted. "But you called the turn on the railroad possibility. Now, let's see; where would the Reds want to take this guy, anyway?"

"Why"—Norton rubbed his head—

"I don't know—I——" He whistled. "Of course—take him right through to Russia, not keep him anywhere in Europe, where sentiment is against Red Russia."

Sharp nodded like an animated Buddha.

"Sure. And all the wires in Europe are humming with the thing—all the police wide awake. Whichever way they go, the news is bound to precede them. If it's a kidnaping—you mustn't forget that *if*—then the victim must go out in the most casual, open manner possible—not the unusual way; not secretly, but wide, wide open."

"But think how hard it would be to get over the Polish border, or up through the north. Some one would be sure to think of that way."

A suspicior, struck Norton.

"Suppose—just suppose that they were bound up to the Normandy coast, to transship him to a Russian boat, lying off there waiting for them. Suppose that gang by my place was the advance guard, smoothing out the way, and that this girl was trying to wreck the scheme? Does that click?"

Sharp shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "That would mean transshipment from train to car, or run-out from Paris by car—which we've dropped from the probabilities—and you're not going to find a harbor on the coast of France—that coast, anyway, where there is not at the very least a fishing village. The customs people must be in on this. Cruisers and torpedo boats will be taking a hand, too. Anything like that would be a false trail. No, whatever means they used it was open, watertight, foolproof, and it isn't going to change until they are over the border of Russia."

He stopped and stared at Norton.

"Has it occurred to you," he suddenly declared, "that Russia still borders on the Black Sea?"

NORTON gazed at him, from under narrowed lids. He held up a hand as if to prevent the other from interrupting his chain of thought. Then, with a swerve in his chair which startled Sharp, he beckoned a waiter, and asked that railroad time-tables be brought.

"I've got a hunch, Bunny!" Norton's eyes were sparkling with the old fervor of the man hunt—the glint that Bunny Sharp knew so well from the past. "You've called the turn when you mentioned Istanbul!"

"I'm following you—right with you, old man!" And Sharp leaned forward. "You think they've got him now on a train bound there!"

"Right! And what train would be the most likely? The Simplon-Orient, of course." Norton poured out the words, answering his own question. "Now, why can't I go by air, catch the Orient express that left Paris last night somewhere along the route, and carry on from there? There's nothing to lose, everything to gain, even if he's not on board."

The waiter returned with the bulky volume of consolidated European time-tables, and Norton buried himself in it for a moment, while Sharp looked on, his fingers drumming the table. Norton pulled pencil and paper from his pocket, and made a few hurried calculations.

"Here it is," he finally snapped. "The Simplon Orient that left Paris last night at eight fifty gets to Trieste this evening at eight thirty. That's cutting it too short—couldn't make it. But it pulls into Zagreb, in Jugo-Slavia, at two forty-five a. m. to-morrow. Allowing for the two-hour difference in time, that gives us"—he glanced at his watch—"it's one thirty now, roughly eleven hours.

"There's a flying field at Zagreb—that's why I picked that place—it's the western terminus of the Balkan airways. And also, the train is not yet

split. The Athens and Bucharest section is still on. A special plane—it would have to be that, for the main airway course is Vienna-Budapest-Belgrade—could make it in a little more than seven hours. Allow two more for fueling. That makes nine, and gives me two hours' leeway. Can you get that special plane with a pilot who'll fly at night, and rig me up with passport visas?"

"Frank, old son," Sharp said, "Rothmanns has a way of getting what they want. I'll rig you out with money and passport in thirty minutes; then you're off for Le Bourget. The office will take care of plane reservations at the same time we're working on the passport. Leave Fay with me—I'll be working on this end, and we may run across some of the gentlemen who engaged in that argument with you in Normandy. Fay will be handy in that case for identification purposes. Also, I'll get the list of invalids from Legrand, and work that up. If there was any one on the Orient last night, well—there'll be a wire from me waiting you at Belgrade. And now, let's go! We're off in a cloud of dust!"

"One more thing, Bunny; the girl—"

"Pick up her file at the office, take it with you. Good reading matter on the plane, and if you have any doubts about her activities after that, you're more dumb than I think you are."

CHAPTER VI.

MURDER IN BERCY.

DOWN in Bercy, the warehouse district of Paris, and at the corner of an alley just off the drab Rue de Charenton, squats a dingy zinc-countered wine shop, known to the roistering roustabouts of that hard-boiled district as "*Chez Zouzou*."

Evil-eyed individuals who squint sidewise drift in and out. The police keep a watchful eye on it. There is a smell of countless years of stale alcohol

about the place, and an undercurrent of sullen hostility which strikes the infrequent visitor in the house like a blow between the eyes. Not a cheerful place, nor yet a safe place for the unwary.

While Sharp and Norton were confabing in their restaurant, there arrived into *Chez Zouzou's* snuffy atmosphere an untidy young woman of the neighborhood, who, with a friendly word to the gross proprietor, scuffed her slippers through the sawdust to the rear-most of the tiny tables where a hawk-faced longshoreman was sipping his drink and lazily nursing a cigarette under his drooping mustache.

The man, without taking his right hand from his glass, extended his left hand in the casual "shake-hands" of his class, the girl giving it a queeze as she seated herself.

The proprietor, with a knowing leer at the crony draped over his bar, poured out a grenadine and waddled with it to the table, then returning, picked up the thread of his discourse. Old customers, these.

For a few moments the pair at the table chatted casually in French. Low-toned, their conversation merged in the murmur of the others in the place. Then, had there been some one within hearing, some one who understood English, he would have had a jolt.

"Oh, Jerry boy! You must pull up," the girl was saying. "They're suspicious—they'll get you here. I've been hunted on the way back; trailed since I left London, and almost trapped in Normandy. And I'm afraid that they've shadowed me down here. You must pull up—I'm so afraid!"

The man's face hardened.

"I don't give a damn, Glad," he told her. "But you—that's different. You don't mean that the people here in Paris had anything to do with chasing you?"

"But of course I do. Who else could it be? They trapped me yesterday afternoon, on the road from Honfleurs—I

had to leave the car and run for it. Five of them. If it hadn't been for a very gallant gentleman—an American—I'd not be here now. And I'm so afraid—for you, Jerry, not for myself!"

Her hands played with the black worsted shawl covering her head.

The man blew a cloud of smoke through his nostrils. Leaning back, he chuckled as at a rare joke. Actually his whispered words cut like whiplashes.

"If the wind's that way, my dear, you're the one we've got to worry about. Cut and run. You'd be in a nasty mess if they ever cracked down on you. And never mind about me. That's all in the game, d'ye see? Never should have dragged you into the beastly thing."

"It's a terrible mess, Jerry. I feel that Dzerzhinsky suspects me. That's why I ran up to get the Ind—the other stuff—to feed him. And then I get back here and find the whole thing in motion. Jerry, the police have been pulled in on this, and if——"

"Never mind, old girl. There's nothing to fear from that quarter. What bucks me is to have been on the scent for months this way, and then to have 'em pop the thing off right under our noses. Must be a new crowd imported for the job. I'll——"

The girl's leg reached out under the table, and her slipper nudged his foot. A keen observer might have noted that ankle and foot, disguised as they were by the heavy woolen stocking, were far from the usual ankle and foot of a French servant.

"Jerry! At the bar!" she hissed. "I can see him in the mirror behind you. That man's followed me this morning ever since I reached Paris!"

JERRY'S sharp face never changed. Out of a corner of his eye he was observing the individual who had just come in—an ordinary dockyard loafer, it would seem, who draped himself casually against the bar.

"I'm off," said the hawk-faced Jerry. "I'll pay at the desk, and give this chap-pie a good lookin' over as I go. You stay till I'm clear, then come out through the rear. I'll be around the corner, in case any one tries a job on you when you leave."

The girl was laughing now, but there was an undercurrent of strain. She leaned over toward him as the man rose, and to the casual onlooker she was making a flip remark.

"God keep you, Jerry dear. Be careful—do!"

The man swaggered to the bar, slapped down some silver on the zinc, exchanged a pleasantry with the fat proprietor, and stepped out into the street.

A taxicab a few doors down began to move toward him. Two loafing pedestrians sauntered from the other direction.

The cab came abreast—and then its window suddenly belched a succession of nasty reddish flashes. The roar of a fusillade reëchoed in the Rue de Charenton.

THE tall, hawk-faced man reached for a pocket, jerked crazily as the bullets thudded into his body, clawed the air for a split second, and crashed to the pavement in a clumsy, spinning fall.

The taxi shot into high and disappeared around the corner of the Rue Nicolai.

The two pedestrians huddled for an instant, bent over the stricken man, their hands racing over his clothing. Then they bounded to the curb, screaming for the police. The street swarmed on the instant as men and women came running, to mill around the body. A *sergeant de ville* strolled up, elbowed his way through the throng, took one look, and gave an impressive shrug.

"Dead as St. Denis," said the policeman. "Who saw this?"

A murmur from the crowd. Two men had been near by; one of them had

raised the first alarm. Here they were—no, devil take it, where were they? And the crowd milled still closer. Shrugs, gesticulations, and—no information. They don't give much information in the Rue de Charenton.

As the roar of the shots echoed into the wine shop, the girl rose, a shriek half choked on her pallid lips, her fingers convulsively twisted in her shawl. She made one step as if to rush out the front door, then turning, ducked through the rear of the room.

The man who had just come into the bar followed, to find himself in a dark passage. A door slammed somewhere ahead of him. When he brought up against it, feeling his way, he had lost valuable seconds. His scrambling hands at last fell on the knob, wrenched it open, and rushed out—into a blind alley.

Facing him, a door gave into a tene-ment; to the right more doors, to the left the street. Through these doors excited people were pouring, attracted by the shots.

The girl was not in sight. The crowd swirled about the man, sweeping him toward the main street. Impossible to buck that excited mob—to fight his way in the wrong direction now would only arouse suspicion. Growling a curse, the searcher moved on out with the stream.

CHAPTER VII.

THE KING'S MESSENGER.

WHEN Norton reached Le Bourget air field, he found a Bleriot cabin plane on the line—a roomy, comfortable ship, the prop lazily turning over as she warmed up.

The operations office turned him over to the aviator, a smiling-faced young chap who led him to the ship after he had checked in his papers and gone through the usual formalities.

As he was about to enter the machine, Norton heard his name called.

The operations man was running toward him, with another man beside him—a tall, well-dressed man.

"Monsieur Norton, this gentleman, whose business is quite urgent, has requested permission to ride with you. I have explained to him that your ship is privately chartered. He would beg an instant of your time." His introduction finished, the clerk walked off.

The other man handed his card to Norton, who read:

Major Walter Gerald Hanford
Scots Greys

Norton eyed the newcomer keenly, while he explained his mission in a well-modulated English voice.

Norton saw a man of about thirty-five years, of cleanly put-up, typical British army-officer type.

"Please forgive this very irregular request, Mr. Norton," Hanford said, "but I'm in a most awkward position. I'm from our embassy—trying to get a ship at an instant's notice. I must be in Istanbul in the shortest possible time, and they tell me here you've got the only ship they can spare right now."

His voice dropped as he took a step nearer, and, fumbling for a moment in his vest pocket, pulled out something which he held before Norton's eyes in such a way that the pilot could not see it—a little silver greyhound, beautifully modeled.

"If you should happen to know what this means—ah—you see," he was evidently rather embarrassed. "You're off for Zagreb, they tell me—and I could pick up a ship there for the rest of the way."

Only one class of men—and they are few—carry the little silver greyhound—king's messengers, officers of his Britannic majesty's army, carrying urgent dispatches.

"I do know the emblem," agreed Norton. He stretched out his hand. "Do you mind?"

TN-2

The man Hanford dropped it into Norton's palm. After a moment's scrutiny Norton handed it back.

"It's genuine, all right," he said.

Who was this man? Was he in fact a king's messenger? To all outward appearances he looked the part. Could his popping up here be part of the protective plot unfolding, as it seemed, to prevent any interference with the Soviet plans? That would be most far-fetched.

"Hop in, major," said Norton. "I'll give you a lift. Is it all right with the air people?"

The Englishman's face beamed.

"Topping of you, Mr. Norton; I certainly appreciate it. Yes, they told me it was entirely up to you. My papers are quite in order."

"Let's go!" said Frank Norton.

THE pilot revved up his motor, the ship strained at the chocks.

Then, at the signal, the blocks were cast aside, and the Bleriot danced her way over the field to take the air in a long, gentle zoom. The two passengers were in opposite chairs in the roomy cabin.

The Englishman had brought on board, in addition to a light bag, a briefcase, which he now opened and, taking out a book, settled himself.

Innsbruck, in Austria, would be the next stop—a run of more than four hours.

Frank Norton composed himself for the long trip. In his pocket was burning a carbon copy of the record of the girl whom Sharp and Inspector Legrand had referred to as Sonya Gritzenka.

Who the devil could she be? The name, of course, was Russian—but there was not the slightest doubt in Norton's mind that the young woman was English or American born and brought up.

His usually analytical mind was in a turmoil as regarded this girl. The circumstances of their meeting, her actions

in the cottage, what she had confided to him, were so entirely foreign to what Sharp had intimated she was.

Much as he wanted to, he did not take out the envelope containing the record of Sonya Gritzenka. It would be difficult in that confined space for him to so hold the papers that they could not be seen by his traveling companion, and he did not desire to let the other man feel, on the other hand, that he was hiding something from him, by looking at them covertly.

Well, they would keep; they *must* keep.

Slowly the hours passed by while Norton went over in his mind, step by step, the occurrences of the night before and of that day. They did not jibe. There was some vital, missing key.

What could that key be? Again, before Frank Norton's vision ranged the events of a certain night six years ago—a night when the king-wolf of the Red pack, overreaching, had come to grief, brought down by the lightning counter stroke of his quarry.

To the world the Kremlin had told the tale of mortal illness—there were only three men outside of the Lubianskaya who didn't believe that story, Norton reflected. Himself and two others. Could it be possible that the tumbrel had rumbled away with the body of a living man instead of a corpse? A vague unrest stirred Norton's senses.

From that his mind, like a squirrel in its treadmill, moved to Dragovitch. Did this Dzerzhinsky business have anything to do with him? Was it but a weird coincidence?

They were swooping down into the glare of the floodlights at Innsbruck before he realized the passage of time.

A routine inspection of pilot and passengers, a new ship on the line, then reëmbarkation.

Night flying is the exception in Europe, but Rothsmanns had cleared

the way by wire, and there was no delay. Twenty minutes after they arrived, they were off once more, this time in a Fokker liner.

Back again in a comfortable seat, Frank Norton, despite himself, began to doze.

Aroused by a pricking sensation in his thigh, he woke with a start to see his companion nodding in the chair opposite.

Norton's leg seemed asleep from his cramped position. He stretched, and drowsed off more soundly.

CHAPTER VIII.

COPS THINK ONLY SO FAR.

WITH Norton on his way by air, Bunny Sharp ran back to have another talk with Inspector Legrand, whose attention was momentarily diverted by a report of an obscure murder in a more obscure bar in the Belleville district, picked up the list of invalids who had been shipped out from Paris on the previous afternoon and night, and returned to his office on the Boulevard Haussmann in the old-fashioned building which sheltered the great banking firm of Rothsmanns.

Here, in two little rooms on the top floor, Bunny Sharp, former treasury agent, and sometime head of the little corps of secret-service men who guard our presidents, had for several years held sway over a small, but carefully selected, group of agents which Rothsmanns, like every modern banking house, found it necessary to maintain to protect their own interests throughout the world, and to safeguard, when necessary, those of important clients.

Here Sharp had built up a "morgue," or confidential file of information, on the agents of the Soviet secret police, operating on the Continent. The destruction of this list would have been worth a large amount of money to the Soviet Russian government.

From his conversation with the French detective, it was plain that practically none of the known agents of the Soviet secret service in and about Paris had moved from their normal orbits.

Only one—the girl Sonya Gritzenka—had been absent from her usual haunts for fully two days. If the Soviet secret service had anything to do with Dragovitch's disappearance, then, an almost entirely new corps of agents had been employed in it. And there was no police record of any new gang of Russians in Paris.

Enough of that for the moment. He spread before him the list he had obtained from Legrand. His first thought, of course, was for the Orient-Simplon. Ah! There *was* something:

Philipescu: first name, Valter; Canadian citizen. Toronto. Rumanian by birth. Helpless invalid, aged man, attendant physician asserted going home to birthplace, Constanza, to die. Apparently man of means. Accompanied by Doctor Oranul, of Bucharest, by female nurse Reilly, Genevieve, American Hospital, Neuilly; by attendant Smith, John, of Toronto. Passports in order. Doctor Dubois, Armand, No. 22, Rue Murillo, Paris, arranged for nurse. Verified at the hospital and at the office of Doctor Dubois.

The neat script of the report stood out to Sharp's eyes. Everything above-board, there. Doctor Dubois, gilt-edged physician of the fashionable Parc Monceau section; nurse from the American hospital—they didn't send their girls out on fly-by-night cases. Plain, open-and-shut case. No trick stuff. Verified. And yet—how deep had the *flics*—the detectives—gone?

"Cops only think so far."

Let's see—he had said that himself, and so had Frank Norton. They had found it so before; many times.

Calling in one of his assistants, Sharp turned over to him the checking up of the others on the list. This group he would investigate himself. He turned to the telephone.

The American Hospital, first. Yes,

Miss Genevieve Reilly was an American registered nurse, living in Paris, often called on out cases. Yes, she had been sent with an urgent case to Constanza. The physician making the request of Doctor Dubois. O. K. so far.

The doctor next. Doctor Dubois was at home. Indeed, he did remember the case. But the patient was not his.

"I did not even see the patient," the doctor's suave, rather bored voice explained. "I received a letter from the Docteur McDonald of Toronto, in Canada, whom I do not know, but who, it would seem, knows me, and requesting that, as a matter of professional courtesy, I make the necessary arrangements for his patient to obtain an American woman nurse."

The Canadian physician's initials were H. D. And now, if monsieur would excuse him, the Docteur Dubois had many demands upon his time. Sharp hung up.

So! What an easy thing it would be, ran Sharp's thoughts, for some one to have a letterhead set up, to write a soft-soap letter about knowing his name to swell the Frenchman's head, to slip it by hand, with a generous fee. But—why?

Suppose one wanted a gilt-edged surface alibi—a reference that would give a clean bill of health to one who did not dig. And, in addition, what better method of avoiding suspicion, if anything were wrong, than to have an American nurse?

That straight, clean-cut check-up did not seem so straight and clean-cut now. There was an element of doubt.

Only one thing to do—follow up. If this thing were not on the level, and one went back far enough, there would be a break in the chain—a missing link somewhere in the background.

How far back? Sharp glanced at his watch. Three o'clock. In Toronto it would be only ten in the morning. An urgent cable would get through and back within business hours. He reached for a blank.

The message dispatched, Sharp leaned back.

THE telephone bell tinkled. Inspector Legrand on the wire. "A peculiar thing has occurred. You will be interested, for Rothsmanns is involved. The man murdered in Belleville this afternoon has been identified as a Major Hanford of the British army, a special courier attached to the embassy here. He had a letter of credit on Rothsmanns, and this, the embassy says, is missing."

"Anything else taken?"

"His passport and the little silver greyhound which is carried by these couriers as an identification to their own nationals."

"But I heard you receive the first report. The dead man was supposed to be some stevedore or workman in the warehouses of the district, from his clothing. He was known by sight in the local cafés. What would one of these couriers—king's messengers they call them—be doing disguised as a laborer in the Belleville district?"

Sharp could almost feel Legrand's shrug over the telephone wire.

"He had been making a rendezvous with a woman of the neighborhood for some little time. We have not caught the woman yet. When we do, that will probably explain matters."

Legrand rang off. Sharp began drumming again on his desk. It didn't sound right. British army officers didn't make a practice of dressing up as laborers to meet women. And they didn't go to districts like Belleville for female companionship.

LESS than two hours passed before Toronto's answer to Bunny Sharp's cable was laid on his desk. It was short but sweet.

Government passport bureau disclaims Philipescu. No Doctor H. D. McDonald this city.

Bunny Sharp gazed out of the big window onto the hurly-burly of the boulevard with unseeing eyes. Frank Norton had called the turn, then. And he would be, shortly after midnight, on the same train. It looked as if the Dragovitch case would come to a quick close.

He picked up the phone, then, struck by a sudden thought, put it back again. What would be his action if in the place of the persons who had done this job, and if overtaken by the police?

There was only one answer to that, for one who knew the ways of Red Russia. Dragovitch would die, then and there. And Rothsmanns wanted Dragovitch alive.

No, he reflected, there was no use letting Inspector Legrand in on this; it must be done by Norton and by himself. Then the cops could come in.

He hurriedly coded a wire for Norton, and prepared to take the Simplon-Orient of that night. He would be twenty-four hours behind Norton, but it would be preferable to go that way rather than by plane, as he would have plenty of time during the trip to keep in telegraphic touch with both his own office and with Frank, who could be trusted to map out a plan of action.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DOUBLE CROSS.

NORTON woke. Some one was shaking his shoulder. His senses came back slowly—painfully. Gosh, how his head throbbed. And some one was shouting in his ear—the pilot of the plane.

"Wake up, sir. We're here—Zagreb!"

To Norton's blinking eyes everything was blurred. What the devil was the matter? And then he remembered. Funny how a little nap could have put him out. Must have been the stuffy atmosphere in the closed cabin.

He staggered slowly to his feet, rubbing his face vigorously to drive his functions to normal. Subconsciously he rubbed the heel of his hand against his breast pocket, sensed the comforting feel of his passport and other papers. The suddenly taut thread of suspicion sagged again.

Half dazed, Norton followed his fellow passenger out into the icy night air and the dazzling beam of the ground flares. He turned to give the smiling pilot a gratuity, but the Englishman was ahead of him, pressing a mille franc note in the young man's hand.

"I've fixed it," said the major. "Allow me to do that much. And I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"I feel rocky as the deuce," grumbled Norton.

"You surely slept soundly," his companion agreed. "Thought you'd never come out."

An automobile was waiting, beside it a form which emerged into the light sufficiently to disclose the reddish-brown Russian-blouse tunic of a Jugo-Slavian soldier.

An airport attendant assured them in broken French that their passports would be visaed at the railway office, and they piled into the open car, the soldier riding the running board. Apparently his duty would be to see that they did not disappear into the night before the commissar of police could check their papers.

A short run brought them to the station, deserted and dismal at this time of night. Across the tracks a long train lay, dim glow in its corridors, occasional flickering of polished brass work winking back the lanterns of the trainmen. There was no mistaking that long line of vestibuled *wagons-lits*—sleeping cars. The Simplon-Orient was in.

Norton's quick glance at his watch showed four thirty, startling him for an instant until he remembered the change of time. It would be only two thirty

here—and the Orient left in fifteen minutes.

Their soldier-guard went clattering down the platform in his clumsy hob-nailed boots, leading the way to an office where lighted windows gleamed. The lamp over the door showed the sign in Russian characters—KOMECA—Commissar. The soldier flung open the door and motioned them in.

Inside the room, sitting at a desk facing the door was a police official, the three little stars on the red collar facings betokening the rank of a captain. Standing beside him was a burly station master in blue uniform.

A sleeping-car conductor in dove-colored livery lounged against the wall. It seemed to Norton that the trio snapped into attitudes of suppressed excitement when he and his companion entered—that the atmosphere tensed.

"Your passports, gentlemen?" queried the commissar, in French.

The Englishman, with a graceful gesture, waved Norton forward.

"After you, *mon commandant*!"

Norton blinked. Why should this man suddenly switch to French in addressing him? Why the loudly spoken military title?

Irritated, he put his hand in his pocket, and, pulling out his passport, handed it to the police official; handed it, and realized—too late—that it had changed from red to blue!

Not only that; between the commissar's fingers closing on it the gold-embossed unicorn and lion of the British coat of arms winked.

"Wait! Here—that's not mine—there's some mistake——" stammered Norton, flabbergasted. He half turned to his traveling companion. "I say, this must be yours."

"Not mine, major," came the astounding response.

Double-crossed! His deep sleep—the twinge in his leg. What a dumb bunny he had been! But why?

The commissar shouted something, two more soldiers moved out from another door. One of them had Norton by each arm before he could move. And what was this the commissar was saying? Norton's scalp prickled.

"You are under arrest—request of the French police—murder——"

For the instant, Norton lost his usually well-controlled temper, and by so doing made his case worse.

"You idiot!" he shouted at the commissar. "Look in the passport! Compare the photograph! Make this man show his passport—he must have mine!"

WITH the insolence of petty authority enthroned, the official twitched his thumb across his lips and flipped over the booklet. One cold glance he gave, then turned it toward the prisoner. Frank Norton saw his own photograph staring at him from the leaf! Not a perfect job, for the edges of the seal stamped across it did not jibe with the rest of the seal on the page.

"The photograph has been changed," Norton yelled. "It is my photograph, but taken from my own passport and placed in this one. Look at the seal—it is all wrong! Compare the signatures!"

He struggled to free his hand to point out the defect, but the soldiers held on to him like grim death.

"Keep silent, you!" rasped the police official. He spoke to the station master, whose hands began fumbling in Norton's pockets. He called something as he pulled out a little shining object from Norton's vest pocket, and held it before the commissar's eyes. The silver greyhound!

"Enough of this nonsense! Hold still," the commissar ordered, and Norton knew that the jig was up.

This brass-bound policeman would not worry about such a small thing as an incomplete seal on a passport, with this

other evidence before him, and with Norton's rash outbreak of temper to lash him to a personal grudge against him.

"You are formally accused," announced the commissar, reading from a lengthy telegram, "of the murder of an English official, Major Waker"—he pronounced it Valtair—"Gerald Hanford, whose passport and diplomatic token the Paris police informed us you would probably have on you."

The station master retrieved something else from the prisoner's pocket, which the commissar gravely inspected.

"Also a letter of credit," he continued, "which I have here. You will see, although I may be in your estimation an idiot, that you must be a bigger one to think that you could so deceive the Jugoslavian police."

He turned to the erstwhile Hanford. "And you, monsieur, are, I presume, the gentleman also mentioned herein—the Monsieur Norton, whom we are to expedite. You have your papers?"

Norton felt that he would explode as he saw his own passport handed over by the impostor—caught a glimpse of a photograph pasted therein—cursed the kindness of Legrand, who had, by his very explicit urging the expedition of one Francis Norton, gummed the game all the more.

What had happened in Paris? Who was this Hanford who had been murdered? Why? And who was this suave individual who had taken him for a ride like some hick from the tall timbers?

The sleeping-car conductor snapped his watch suggestively. The station master picked up his hand bell. The commissar banged a stamp on Norton's passport.

"The Orient Express is about to leave, monsieur," said the commissar to the bogus Norton. "Your place is reserved. A pleasant journey. Here is your passport."

"Hold that man!" roared Norton. "He is the impostor. I demand that you hold him also!"

"The word of the French police is sufficient for us," answered the official pompously. "We police, you will find, work together for the destruction of such as you."

Cops only think so far!

The station bell clanged. The false Norton waved a hand at the real one.

"Ta, ta, old chappie! My advice is to pull out for Normandy again," he called jovially, in English. "You're not quite up to this game."

And the door banged behind him as he picked his way across the tracks to the waiting train, escorted by the attendant.

CHAPTER X.

WEAVING THE WEB.

THE Orient Express gathered motion very slowly, almost imperceptibly, then gaining speed, clicked over the switch points, and rattled into the night. The bogus Norton, sitting in the compartment reserved for him, rubbed his hands together.

"Get me a whisky soda," he told the obsequious train attendant. "And then tell me in what compartment is a certain Monsieur Jones, an American, with his party."

"But yes, monsieur—the gentleman you speak of is just below you in the next compartment. He and his friends are"—the attendant shrugged his shoulders—"that is to say, the gentlemen have been having a very convivial time all the way from Paris. And now, if monsieur will give me his ticket and his passport, so that I may hold it with the others for the inspections at the Bulgarian and Turkish borders?"

The bogus Norton handed over the documents without question. To have hesitated would have been to invite all sorts of suspicion. The sleeping-car conductors, or porters as they really are,

always handle the passports of their passengers.

The man sat a while, smoking thoughtfully. He chuckled inwardly several times. All in all, he had done a good night's work. But there was still much to be accomplished.

After he had taken the drink the attendant brought him, he stepped out into the corridor and stopped at the door of the next compartment. The attendant on his little spring-up seat in the far corner of the passage, was dozing. The train was racketing along. From the door before which he stood came a reek of alcohol. He turned the knob. The door was unlocked.

"Who's there?" called a voice in English as the intruder swung it wide. And as he stepped in, some one gave a whistle of surprise.

Four men, in various stages of undress, were in the compartment—three of them sitting on the lower berth, the fourth on the seat opposite, while the little table between them held a collection of glasses and bottles.

The door to the washroom, which is shared between each pair of compartments in Continental sleeping cars, stood partly open, as did the one beyond. It was apparent that the passengers of these two cabins were in one party.

That the four were startled by the intrusion was evident. Before they had time to speak, however, the newcomer laid his finger upon his lips, then closing the corridor door, locked it.

Stepping through the washroom, he locked the corridor door of the other compartment, then returned. The man on the seat made place for him, and, sitting down, the fake Norton put elbows on the table and stared at the others, his chin in his clasped hands.

"Before I explain," said he, "what brings me, tell me: Is everything going smoothly?"

"Perfectly," answered the middle man of the trio sitting on the bed. He

spoke in Russian. "We have established our reputation as a party of drunken Americans—the others are unsuspected, and the change will be made in a little while. There is plenty of time—we do not reach Vincovce until eight in the morning. That damned American nurse is a nuisance," he continued; "Brodsky tells me——"

"Keep in character," ordered the newcomer. "You mean John Smith. And there is every reason why we should speak English. You can keep your voice down."

"As you wish," responded the other, rather peevishly. "Well, John Smith tells me that she wants to do everything for the patient. He has all he can do to keep her out. But she seems to suspect nothing; she has had no chance."

"Good. Our friend here," and the bogus Norton turned to the man beside him, an elderly person with gray—almost white—hair, "is prepared?"

"They look like twins. And the imputation of being drunk all the time already rests upon him. We have lost no opportunity for the attendant to see him sprawling about, half seas over."

"Now, pay attention!" The newcomer's face was grave, his voice tense. "There is trouble—much trouble—in Paris. Some one, some traitor, a woman, has been communicating with an English officer—a special man about the embassy. Both of them had been meeting in disguise down in a café in the Belleville district. That anything definite is known of this affair is not probable. We trapped them, yesterday. Him we got—in true American style, thanks to some of our friends. She got away. We will get her again, of course, but there may be some difficulty. With the man out of the way, and his papers in our hands, the worst has been staved off in that direction. But there is more!"

He paused and lit another cigarette.

"For some reason or other, the banking house of Rothsmanns has entered

the game. Their man, Sharp, who used to be in the American secret service, and whom we know of old, has become very active. He went yesterday, bringing with him an individual named Norton——"

The man he had called Jones leaned forward.

"Norton?" he repeated, his eyes narrowing. "You mean——"

"I mean that same person. The man who everybody tells me trapped our brave Dzerzhinsky. He has been living in retirement in Normandy."

He sneered. "A painter he is, now. There was some mix-up. Some of ours went up there after this woman—it's too long a story to tell now, but Sharp rushed up there by auto, dragged him out, and they were both in conference with the police to-day. Norton is back in the game, it is evident."

"So much the better," growled the man Jones, rubbing his fingers and thumbs together. "I itch to get that one where I want him."

"Shut up!" one of the others said. "Shut up and let us hear what has happened."

"After this conference, Sharp and this Norton went off together, then a little later, we were able to find out from Le Bourget that a special plane had been ordered, to fly to Zagreb, on behalf of the Rothsmanns, carrying Norton. At the same time, the erasure of this Englishman had taken place, and his papers were in our hands. I felt it was necessary for me to join you at once—see this thing through—for it is all-important, and at the same time get the information that the dead Englishman had upon him, to Russia. Incidentally, the police were hot on the trail. I followed Norton, posing as the Englishman, asked him to take me with him, and he did. Here I am."

At some length he told how he had drugged Norton, stolen his papers. And had the American detained at Zagreb.

The others looked at him admiringly. "And now," said the newcomer, "I am going back to my compartment—it is the next door to this one. You will proceed in accordance with orders. Do not disturb me until morning; better yet, pay no attention to me or what I do. We will meet in Istanbul. Till then—success!"

The man went out, glanced up the corridor again to where the attendant still dozed, opened the door of his own compartment, and stepped inside.

That is, he took one step. As he passed the edge of the door, he caught a glimpse of some one standing behind it, and at the very instant something crashed with terrific force against the side of his partly bent head.

Carried by his own momentum, the fake Norton plunged headlong to the floor, unconscious. The door closed.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ORIENT GAINS A PASSENGER.

THE commissar had told Frank Norton: "You will be locked up safely for the night. In the morning, when the telegraph is working again, I will report to Paris that you have been captured. That is all."

Norton shrugged. It was maddening to have been tripped up in this simple fashion. But while there is life there is hope, and Norton had been in too many tight places to engage in useless protest.

The thing to do now was to sit tight—sit tight and at the same time not miss a trick.

At the worst, he would not be detained more than forty-eight hours. But every minute of those forty-eight meant that whatever mystery was at the bottom of all this would be so much older, the trail that much colder. And he would have given much to be able to turn the tables on this smooth individual who had taken him in.

"I must be getting into my second childhood," said Norton to himself, as his guards pushed him ahead of them out the door. They marched diagonally across the tracks. Apparently the jail was at the other side. They got to the crossing just as the Orient Express began to move, and halted in the glare of an arclight to let the slowly moving express slide by.

"Cigarette?" asked Norton of the soldiers—simple peasants—over his shoulder.

They grinned an assent. That word they knew.

He put his hand in his pocket and, pulling out his case, which his enemy had thoughtfully left him, handed it to one of the men.

The soldiers still had their rifles slung behind their shoulders. The man took the case, fumbled with it, and, as it opened, held it toward his companion, paying no attention to the prisoner.

It was surprisingly easy. Norton's right jab to the chin caught the man standing at his left. Norton's left fist, starting in a long swing from the ground as he recovered from the impetus of the first blow, smashed on the jaw of the right-hand man.

The pair toppling backward fell away from the track. Norton, himself, turning, caught at the first brass rail that slid past, and swung himself on the car steps.

The *wagons-lits* cars, while vestibules, are slightly different from our own. Instead of the platform coming out over the steps, with a trapdoor which prevents ingress, the door is at the top of the steps. If it is locked, one can still find footing and hand hold on the steps. Not pleasant riding, but perfectly possible.

Norton was prepared to find the door locked, in which case he would have a nasty, cold ride to Vincovce, with all the possibilities of more trouble when he got there.

He was willing to take the chance; it would bring him along in company with his opponent just that much farther, possibly give him a break, somewhere, and in any event he would have a glimpse at the Bucharest section before it was cut off.

All this ran through his mind as he wrenched at the doorknob. To his great gratification, it was open. The attendant had not yet come around to close it.

Norton slid in, opened the door to the car proper, and slipped inside the door of the main washroom, which he latched. He was safe for the moment.

Steps passed his hiding place, rang on the metal plates of the platform. He heard the inner bolt snick on the vestibule door. He was just in time. The steps passed again, receding.

"The rabbit's foot is working," Norton chuckled to his reflection in the mirror. "And now let's hold a council of war."

What to do?

THE Simplon-Orient Express, perhaps the best known train in Europe, if not in the world, is the fast, through link between Paris and Constantinople that was—Istanbul that is. A train verily de luxe, it is made up solely of sleeping cars, a diner, and one baggage car.

This train not only guarantees through service between Paris and Istanbul, but also to Bucharest and to Athens. Cars bound for those places are cut off the main train at Vincovce and at Nis, respectively. The rest of the train carries on, to Sirkedji station in Istanbul. In other words, the Simplon-Orient feeds all the large cities of the Balkans.

This, then, was Frank Norton's problem: How could he, without passport or ticket, carry on to Istanbul, across two frontiers guarded by suspicious officials of three wrangling nations? In addition, how could he ferret out

whether or not there was on board this train any one connected with the Dragovitch affair, before the Bucharest and Athens cars were cut off?

To accomplish his purpose, one thing was essential—a passport. Money he had, for Norton was too old a campaigner not to be well provided. In addition to the pocketbook which the mystery man had filched with his other papers, Norton carried on him a money belt, well lined.

The robbery in the plane, of course, had not included that, for any such thorough frisking would have attracted the pilot's attention. But money, though it will smooth the way, will not replace a passport.

A passport! Well, his own was on this very train. The thought tickled Norton. To get his own passport back would be a stroke of tactics making up for his clumsy lapse in the plane. In all probability the man masquerading as Frank Norton was already in the state-room reserved for him by wire.

Norton knew the usual procedure in traveling on international trains—to turn over tickets and passports to the attendant who was in each car, occupying the same position as the porter in our own Pullmans, but nevertheless called the conductor.

This man checked in the tickets to the train conductor, showed passports to frontier guards, smoothed the traveler's way generally. After one handed him one's credentials at the beginning of the voyage he did not ordinarily see them again until the conductor turned them over at the end of the trip, with hand outstretched for his tip.

Only in exceptional cases was the traveler himself bothered, except perhaps a query at the Bulgarian border as to money one might be bringing in or taking out, and at the Turkish border a check to ascertain if the passenger by birth belonged to a race or nation frowned upon by modern Turkey.

IN which car would passenger and passport be? Certainly in one of the Istanbul cars. What car was he himself in now? How would he best go about searching? The attendant in each car would be riding—dozing probably—in one of the little spring-up seats that are scattered along the corridors of the sleeping cars.

A stranger, properly dressed, might stroll by any of them once, each man deeming that the intruder was a passenger of another car. But to ask would be risky, and the cars carry no interior numbers or signs, although the compartments, of course, are plainly numbered. On the outside of each car is a sign giving the vehicle's destination. But so far as Norton was concerned, these signs might as well be in China. He had had no time to look in boarding the train, no way of doing so now.

There remained one likely probability—that the sleeping-car man who had been in the commissar's office at Zagreb was the attendant of the car Norton wanted. Him he would recognize—and by the same token the man would recognize him, which, he reflected, was not so hot. And this man would have the passport that Norton needed so badly.

Nothing was to be gained by waiting any longer. To make his wanderings in the early-morning hours more casual, Norton discarded overcoat and hat, took off his necktie, and slipped it into his pocket, turned up his coat collar, and unlaced his shoes. Nothing would be more natural to the average train attendant than to see a partly dressed passenger moving about in the middle of the night, whereas a fully dressed man, if a stranger, might be asked questions, particularly just after leaving a station. This lack of clothing would not add to his comfort, were he to be thrown off the train, but it was necessary.

However, with but one scheduled stop—Brod—before Vincovce, Norton did not fear being thrown off before then,

even if caught. Certainly, unless by a miracle, no telegram regarding his escape would leave Zagreb before morning. He knew Central European wire systems too well to fear them.

CHAPTER XII.

NORTON TAKES A TRICK.

STEPPING out, Norton cautiously peered down the corridor of the car. Which way should he go? There would probably be four sleepers, two for Istanbul, not more than one each for Bucharest and Athens, at this season of the year.

When he had swung himself on board, it had seemed that at least two, if not three, cars besides the baggage car, had slipped by him. He would make certain.

He turned back to the vestibule, crossed into the car behind, and peeked down its corridor. At the far end a conductor was sitting, half drowsing. He had a white mustache. Not his man—he had had no mustache.

Norton cudgelled his brain. His first view of the train, on the way to the police office, he had counted five cars besides engine, tender, and baggage car. One of these would be the diner, and he had recognized that at the end of the train. Norton's recollection was that when the masquerader and the conductor had left the office, they had turned toward the right—toward the front, then, of the train. This car he was now in, then, in all probability, was the last of the sleepers. Norton, turning, retraced his steps.

Back at his original point of departure, the American glanced down the corridor of this car. The attendant was sitting at the end nearest him, his face pressed against the window. The man's back being toward him, Norton could not identify him. It seemed that he waited there for an hour—in reality it was not more than five seconds before

the man leaned back, giving the observer a partial view of his features, and of a very high celluloid collar, which made him look like Charlie Chaplin. Not the man!

Making no attempt to conceal himself or deaden his footsteps, Frank Norton pushed past the man with a muttered apology, and walked boldly down the aisle. The conductor, glancing up, pulled aside to let him pass, and lazily watched the shuffling, partly dressed passenger go the length of the car.

Once Norton tripped on his shoe lace, and he heard a slight, quickly choked snicker behind him. Norton gained the far vestibule to breathe a sigh of relief. Two cars done. He moved on into the third, and again peeked around the corner, to dodge back and grab at the wash-room door. It was open, fortunately, and Norton quickly closed and locked it.

A sleeping-car conductor, whose face Norton recognized as that of the one in the commissar's office, had stepped out of one of the compartments, coming toward him. In that instant Norton caught sight of something in his hand which resembled in size and shape a passport booklet. He was in the same car with his quarry, he reasoned, for the conductor would already have the passports of the other passengers.

He waited for a perceptible length of time—more than would have been necessary for the man to pass by if he were coming straight through. Then came the steps, the click of the car door. The man had first stopped, it would seem. What for? To put the passport with his others? And now he had gone on. Perhaps to the buffet to get something for his new passenger.

"Press your luck, old man," whispered Frank Norton to himself. Like a flash, he was at the end of the little spring-up seat—where, if he were lucky, he might find what he was looking for. Yes, there in the corner, where your European sleeping-car conductors usu-

ally stick them, was a little bundle of passport booklets—red, blue, and brown.

Norton's hand flicked down, he hurriedly sifted the booklets out, and found his own! His own, that had, pasted in it, the other man's photograph.

Back into the washroom again. Carefully Norton peeled out the stranger's photo, slipping it into his pocket for future reference. He fumbled in his clothing, reached his money belt.

In this belt Norton carried always—like many old travelers, who know the sudden need, frequently, for extra photographs for identity cards—two extra copies of his passport photo.

WITH the aid of a little water, some soap powder—the Orient Express does have soap in its washrooms—and the paste remaining on the other man's picture, Norton was able to get the new photograph to stick on the passport.

He had a pen, and he scrawled his signature across the picture. He was finishing when he heard footsteps once more. With his finger nail he roughly graved the circle to complete the outline of the seal.

The attendant was coming back. The steps passed, and Norton popped out. The man was entering a stateroom, a tray in his hand.

Like a flash Norton's passport was back in the pile under the seat, and Norton himself had ducked once more for his refuge. The creak of the little spring-up seat, as the attendant pulled it down, came to his ears. The man was settling himself.

Waiting a few moments, Norton sallied forth once more. The attendant was sitting, eyes closed, gently snoring.

Below, a stateroom door opened. Norton counted. No. 5, that would be his room. He remembered the number on his ticket. Flattened against the wall in the shadow, Norton saw a man come

out, look up and down, then step to a neighboring door farther down, and go in. That was interesting. Why should he go visiting at this hour?

What to do now? Norton was pretty sure that in the stateroom he had intended to occupy there would be no one else. When they stopped at the sleeping-car office the previous afternoon to make reservation, they had been told there was an empty compartment in the train, and booked it.

Unless the attendant wanted to make a little extra money for himself in tips by slipping some one in the unoccupied compartment, it would still be empty. And it was improbable that the man would take such a chance until after Zagreb had been passed; also, it was improbable that the question should come up. The Orient does not take many local passengers—that train costs too much for central European pocket-books.

Empty, eh? Suppose that when his kind friend came back, he found it not so empty? Then what? The thought fascinated Norton.

Softly, carefully, he slipped past the sleeping attendant, moving as light as thistledown on his feet, reached the door, and—in.

Phew! So far, so good. His eyes twinkled as he caught sight of the roly-poly soda-water bottle on the table. Handy little clubs, those soda bottles, built like duck pins.

Norton's hand clutched it; then he settled himself for a long wait, directly behind the door, where he would be hidden, until it would be too late, from any one walking in.

He could not hear, through the steel partition, what was going on in the next room, and he pondered on who might be in there. No friends of Frank Norton, certainly.

Time went on; five minutes, ten minutes. The train rattled and lurched through the night. Then the doorknob

clicked, the portal swung back against his hiding place.

Norton's right hand went back just over his shoulder. He recognized the head as it popped in, and in that split second swung down his arm with wicked force.

CHAPTER XIII.

BIG GAME.

FRANK NORTON'S first care was to close and securely lock the door of the compartment. He then proceeded to secure his victim by means of strips torn from the bed sheets. The man was stunned, but was already showing signs of returning consciousness. So the American, as soon as he felt he could do so without danger of suffocating him, also gagged him by jamming a patch of bed sheet in his mouth, then secured it with a twisted strip about his head and neck.

In an instant, Norton had opened first the man's light bag, and then the brief case he carried. In neither of them were any incriminating papers; the only papers, in fact, he found at all were several manuscripts of fiction stories. These he set aside for later and more careful perusal—there might be something there in cipher or code. Deliberately Norton sat down opposite the bound form of his victim and, lighting his pipe, went in for a bit of serious thinking.

This man had left Paris in a hurry. Apparently he had something to do with the murder of the supposed British dispatch bearer.

Otherwise he would not possess the man's greyhound insignia and his passport. A dispatch bearer would carry dispatches in all probability, and unless he had been done in for private and personal reasons, the only logical conclusion to be reached would be that he had been rubbed out because of something he was carrying.

Where would a man stow something

valuable—size, shape, and contents unknown—which he would want to keep hidden? It must be remembered that Frank Norton was a trained detective. His mind ran in certain lines, based upon past experience. Off came the bound man's shoes. Not inside, not under the inner soles.

The heels? One cannot snap heels off and on to make hiding places, at a moment's notice. Heels, then, eliminated. Clothing? A hurried but careful search, down to the skin. Apparently nothing in linings, waistband, collar. No hidden belt.

In the pockets Norton's own money and papers, including the dossier, or record, of Sonya Gritzenka. A neat Luger pistol in a shoulder holster, which Norton appropriated. The holster, weapon itself, and the pistol magazine were explored. Nothing.

Norton picked up the cartridges he had dumped out on the table, and started to stuff them back in the magazine. One, two, three, four—what? This particular little metal cylinder was not heavy enough for a cartridge. He examined it, close to the light, then scratched it with his thumb-nail.

Wax! So that was it, eh? Norton wrenched the wax bullet out of the shell. Inside, instead of powder—paper. He pricked it out carefully with a pin, for it was tissue and very delicate. Very neat, that!

MUFFLED gurgling came from the bed. His opponent was conscious, and was doing his very best to make a noise through the gag. His most violent efforts, however, could not produce anything capable of being heard six feet above the rattle of the train. Norton looked him over to make sure that the fastenings were still all right, then calmly turned his attention to the tissue paper.

The writing was in Russian, a language which Norton, of course, under-

stood. It was very closely written, however, and much abbreviated. Time would be necessary to decipher this. And, in the meanwhile, what could be done with this captive? He must be got rid of before morning—the sooner the better, in fact.

The paper was not addressed. It appeared to be a collection of notes—swiftly jotted down—notes to understand which the reader must have some previous knowledge of the things mentioned therein. A few words caught Norton's eye.

"Nadir Khan—Haji Tur." And directly below—"Peshawar."

This had to do with India, it would seem. Then:

"Turksib—Jaafar—London fears but uninformed—Hanford removed—Sonya knows——"

What a jumble! "Bezesten—at once."

No doubt about it, this needed careful study.

Norton went to the window. They were moving slowly now. He opened the window and peered out. They were climbing a grade, and the speed of the train could not be much more than fifteen miles an hour. What better solution than to drop him, minus passport and money, out on the roadbed? It would be doing no more to him than he had tried to do to Norton. True, there was some risk that the man might be permanently injured, but Norton was no sentimentalist. This man, he felt, was a dangerous character.

Norton snapped out the compartment light, his decision made. The windows of the European sleeping cars have not the double panes of American Pullmans, so his task was easy.

Dragging the man from the bed, he pushed him out, feet first, gradually slipping the weight out until he had him clear—his own hands under the other fellow's armpits.

One heave, outward, so that his victim would not fall under the wheels, or

be struck by outjutting projections of the train—for Norton was no cold-blooded murderer.

The man's body left Norton's hands.

Leaning forward, Norton heard the slight thump on the gravel as the other's feet struck the ground, saw the body sway outward, and fall into the darkness.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CONDUCTOR'S PROBLEM.

IT was eight o'clock in the morning. The Simplon-Orient Express, on time, was rocketing along through Slavonia. Vincovce would be reached in fifteen minutes.

The conductor of the second Istanbul car, busy with making up the staterooms of the few early risers who were already in the diner, heard his buzzer. Faking his head out of the door, he saw the telltale semaphore had dropped over compartment No. 5—that occupied by the passenger who had come aboard at Zagreb.

Glad that it was No. 6 or 7, which sheltered the uproarious party, who had spent their time all the way from Paris in guzzling, he made his way down, and, knocking discreetly, opened the door and peered inside.

The passenger was sitting up opposite his bed, fully dressed.

"Monsieur called," the conductor began to say. But he only got to the "Monsieur——" his voice dying away in an odd little gulp. For the man sitting there was not the passenger he had brought on board at all. He was the man the conductor had last seen in the grip of the police back in Zagreb!

"Come in," said the passenger in a pleasing voice. "Come in, I want to talk to you." And the trainman noticed that this passenger was stroking a yellow-backed United States bank note, with big "20's" on it—five hundred francs, that would be. Where was the other man—the one he had personally

placed in this cabin, and had served with a drink? His eyes flitted about the little room in vain.

"Monsieur," and the conductor's voice stuttered, "this is most irregular, monsieur—the police—I will have to notify them that you have no right here—that a passenger is missing——"

The stranger lifted his hand.

"Before we go any further," said the passenger, "go out and look at the passport you took from me"—and he emphasized the last two words—"from me when I came on this train at Zagreb. Look at the photograph; compare it with my face. Look at the signature on the photograph and on the passport. Come back, and I will write you as many signatures as you want, so that you may compare them. Go ahead, now." And he kept stroking the bank note.

THE conductor backed hurriedly out, and returned a moment later, utter bewilderment on his features, an open passport in his hand.

He glanced from the photograph in it to the man sitting there, and back. The passenger pulled out a pen and began to scratch off several times his signature: "Francis Norton."

The conductor looked at the passport again. He squeezed up his left hand in an odd way—the fore and little finger pointing outward toward the passenger, the thumb and other fingers closed.

The passenger, noticing it, smiled.

"That's right," he remarked approvingly. "One never knows when the Evil Eye will strike one."

"Now," went on this peculiar passenger, "bear in mind that this bank note may be yours—wait a moment, not so fast. It may be yours, and when I get to Istanbul, another just like it, in addition to your ten-per-cent tip."

Norton smiled and continued:

"On the other hand, if you should be so foolish as to relate to the police of Jugo-Slavia, of Bulgaria, or of Turkey,

any silly thing that you may have dreamed during the night, they would probably think you were drunk, or they might ask some very, very embarrassing questions as to how you kept the watch in your car from the time we left Zagreb up to the present—questions that I am sure your employers would also ask, and which would materially interfere with your obtaining any more service stripes similar to those I see on your arm."

The conductor stood silent, his Adam's apple sliding up and down in his suppressed excitement.

"Now, of course, it was dark this morning at Zagreb. One cannot see well in the dark, and any one can make mistakes. Should questions ever be asked, under those circumstances, you would be much better off than you would be had you rushed to the police at first with a fairy tale. The passport alone would be a fine defense. And, of course, tellers of fairy tales get no tips. Also, I want a place in another compartment. You must have some vacancies."

He held the twenty-dollar bill out.

"I think that this is yours, isn't it?" he queried pleasantly. "Get me some coffee and rolls, please."

"But—but—but, yes, yes, monsieur," stammered the conductor, and his hands closed on the bill. "A thousand thanks, monsieur," and he bowed himself out.

TEN minutes later he returned with a tray, and laid the odd passenger's breakfast on the little table. "I will move monsieur to No. 3 after we leave Vincovce," he announced. "Anything more, monsieur?"

"Only one little thing," chirped Frank Norton. "I was just wondering if you had cashed that bank note of yours with the dining-car steward. Yes? I thought so. It may interest you to know that I have an odd hobby. I collect bank-note numbers. Wouldn't it be awfully embarrassing, for instance, if I

should be detained by the police anywhere along the line, and an investigation of some sort followed, and it should be proved that a bank note originally in my possession had passed through your hands sometime after this train left Zagreb?"

His laughter rang in the conductor's ears as that worthy stumbled down the corridor, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Name of a thousand devils!" whispered the conductor to himself as he tucked Frank Norton's passport back in the little pile.

Looking at the bundle for a moment, he carefully picked the package up and stuck it in his waistband, bulging his blouse out like some inhuman tumor.

The locomotive began shrilling for the right of way into Vincovce yards.

When the Orient Express came to a stop at Vincovce, Frank Norton sat in his stateroom and looked out at the Bucharest car after it was cut from the train and was shunted to another track. There it was to be coupled to the train which would pull it on the long haul through the Banat, across the Carpathians, by the pass of the Iron Gate, and thence to the Roumanian plains, and on to Bucharest. To the casual observer carefree and casual, his mind was working on a curious problem.

Why should a man, even if very drunk, go wandering from one car to another in the night, just to change his shoes?

CHAPTER XV.

THE WRONG SHOES.

NORTON had heard a commotion during the night when the elderly drunk in the next compartment down the corridor had made his pilgrimage, breaking up the slumber of the conductor.

Peeking through a tiny crack in his compartment door while lying full length on the floor, Norton watched the man stagger through the corridor, to dis-

appear beyond; had seen one of his companions hurry after him; and had seen them return in a minute or two, the drunk literally hanging in his friend's arms.

Nothing remarkable in that. And if the fellow had gone out shod and returned shoeless, that, too, would have been explicable. Drunken men do odd things, and one of the commonest fancies of a guzzler is to shed his foot-gear.

But this particular drunk had gone away wearing tan shoes and had returned wearing black shoes—and on both occasions the shoes in question were fully laced.

Added to this unexpected transformation was the fact that only a Houdini could have made the change in so short a lapse of time. For the rest, on each appearance, the man had had no coat. He had been clad in a white shirt, and trousers of dark hue. These might or might not have been the same.

The man's features Norton had not been able to see going out, so no comparison was possible there. But the shoes! There was no adjusting that factor. Those shoes just would not fit into the picture.

For some reason, Norton figured, there had been a substitution of passengers on the Simplon-Orient that night—or morning, rather. In fact, and he smiled grimly at the recollection, there had been two substitutions. But the one in which he was interested was the one between the Bucharest and Istanbul cars. And he felt fairly certain he knew who was concerned therein.

That fact, Norton felt, relieved him, at least for the present, of wiring Bunny Sharp in Paris that he would have to drop out of the Dragovitch affair for the present. For certain knowledge had come to him during his tenancy of the compartment originally occupied by his mystery man, that at first seemed to indicate that necessity.

TN—3

Now it looked again as if he could follow parallel trails for a time, at least. He would hear from Sharp anyway at Belgrade—get the latest developments from the Paris end.

When the train started again, Norton occupied another apartment. Locking himself in carefully, he proceeded to complete the research he had started shortly after regaining his original berth, research which occupied his time until the train pulled into Sirkije station, at Istanbul, at three o'clock the following afternoon, with but one interruption—his going to the telegraph office in the Belgrade station to get a telegram waiting there in his name.

On time, the Simplon-Orient Express arrived at Istanbul. Frank Norton followed unobtrusively the party of four convivial souls who had occupied the staterooms next to his original one.

Three of them were singing as they went out through the customs and past the Turkish police. The fourth man, the elderly one—was still far gone in liquor; or so it seemed. His companions fairly dragged him along.

Winks, nods, sneers, followed the four men as they struggled through the red tape at Sirkije. The policemen on duty after a casual glance at their passports shrugged their shoulders, and allowed the alcohol-reeking quartet to stagger into the nearest taxicab.

Norton, noting the cab number, went about his own business. Having no baggage, he was quickly on his way. He had retrieved hat and overcoat from the other car through the offices of the conductor, so that he was fully attired.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEW TRAILS.

AT three o'clock sharp, the afternoon of the day following the arrival of Frank Norton in Istanbul, another Orient Express slid to a stop in Sirkije station of old Stamboul.

Among the passengers piling out was the stocky, white-haired, ruddy-faced figure of Bunny Sharp.

Once through the red tape of Turkish officialdom, he went out on the steps of the dingy station yard, and beckoned a taxicab, shaking off the clustering, whining dragomans and hotel touts.

As the machine swept out of the yard, a loafer more importunate than the other beggars, jumped on the running board for a second, and before Sharp had driven him off with an indignant roar, had slipped a closely folded slip of paper in his hand.

Sharp waited until his cab was crossing the crowded Galata bridge on the way to Pera and the Tokatlian Hotel, before he unfolded the slip.

Restaurant opposite the entrance to the Bayazid Mosque—the Pigeon Mosque, at 7:00 o'clock this evening—I'll be sitting at table by the stairs.

There was no signature. Bunny Sharp needed no signature; he knew who had handed that note to him.

PROMPTLY at seven o'clock, Sharp sauntered into the restaurant, looking over the room casually. At a table for two by the stairway leading to the upper floor was his man.

He dropped into a chair opposite Frank Norton—a Frank Norton whom it would be rather hard to recognize at first glance. His clothing was of the ill-fitting ready-made type that the present-day Turk buys in the bazaars, his face slightly darkened.

They struck up an inconsequential conversation for a moment. Then Norton said: "I brought you to this place because we could talk freely. Here's the news in a nutshell: First, I had looked over your friends in the Bucharest car, and what you said in the telegram I got later in Belgrade may have been O. K. once, but it was all wet

when the Roumanian section was cut off."

Sharp's face expressed his disappointment.

"Deuce take it, Frank!" he expostulated; "I told you plainly that Toronto cabled there was no Doctor H. D. McDonald there, that no Walter or Valter Philipescu was known, and that no Canadian passport had been issued in that name. You missed a bet, boy. You should have got off at Belgrade and flown to Bucharest. We'll have to fly over to Bucharest to-morrow, and try to pick up the trail there. It's certainly too bad——"

"Hold up, Bunny," Norton interrupted. "Dragovitch is in town—right here. But that isn't all. It's bigger than that—bigger than the treasure, bigger than Rothsmanns. And, old son, I may have to exercise the privilege that I exacted when I started this thing with you—to drop out. Wait a minute"—for Sharp had thrown himself back in his chair with a snort of disgust. "Wait a minute.

"Bunny, you know my feud with Red Russia. You know how Dzerzhinsky, after getting the Soviet secret police running, dropped ostensibly out of it in '21, actually to take charge of the Third Internationale's world revolution program. You know how he was trapped, and executed by Polish patriots, in 1924. That ended my fight."

Frank Norton's clenched fist thumped against the table top. "Bunny," he whispered, "Felix Dzerzhinsky is alive—he's here. He's at the head of a gang gathered from all over. They're ready to break something big—something that will shake the world. And we're going in after them!"

For a long quarter of an hour the pair lingered over their Turkish coffee, discussing Norton's adventure on the way from Paris, and going over ways and means of their proposed exploit. They then separated.

CHAPTER XVII.

OPEN SESAME!

DOWN a narrow street, just west of the Sultan Bajazid Djami—the so-called Pigeon Mosque—Frank Norton sauntered. A dingy street this, dimly lighted, with overhead a trellis of grapevines—bare and barren in this winter season. It is a street lined with shops, most of them shuttered—it was eight o'clock at night.

Here and there on the right side of the street arched doorways, closed, marked the entrance to the alleyways between the houses, which in the daylight hours led into the labyrinth of the Grand Bazaar, close-locked at night.

Several years had passed since Norton had walked this street, and he scanned carefully the houses. He halted in front of a shop through whose dirt-incrusted windows a light still shone—a lamp shop, from the stock. He peered at the sign, which bore the Roman lettering of Mustapha Kemal's régime:

ABRAHAM KISHKIN

Norton pushed open the door and entered. A venerable Jew rose from behind a counter and peered through spectacles at the newcomer.

"*Sholom Alechim*, Father Abraham," greeted Norton.

"*Alechim Sholom*," returned the ancient, puzzled. "But where—that voice—stand close to the light, my friend!"

Smiling, Norton pulled off his cap and placed his features so that the yellow light fell full on them. The old man clasped his hands together, then threw them wide.

"But you? Welcome! Welcome indeed, under this roof, my son!" He would have said more, but Frank Norton put a finger to his lips.

"Quiet, please," he requested. "I am here to ask a favor."

"My house is yours, Francis *Effendi*." Thus the old man, still all of a flutter,

using the Turkish title. "And who should have more right than he who saved us from the massacre at Novorossisk? You have but to ask, my son."

"I want but two things; first that you pass me through into the Bazaar; second, that you forget that you have done so."

The old man's eyebrows arched high.

"A curious request, my son. And yet—and yet—but of course. Have I not said that what I had was yours?" He hesitated, frankly inquisitive, then seeing that Norton volunteered no information, he wagged his head.

"Follow me."

The ancient picked up his lamp and led the way through the house, out into a court, and through a sort of covered way, where he paused to produce a huge key from his vestment. With it he unlocked a little door, through which he passed, holding the lamp for Norton to follow.

They were in another shop, the front door of which was firmly bolted and barred. The fastenings were softly opened. Norton blew out the light.

"It must not be known how I got in, father," he stated. "I will slip out into the Bazaar street, and you will lock and bolt the door behind me."

"But you will need to get out—the watchman may find you otherwise."

"No, I will not get out this way, father. Open to me, and dismiss me from your mind."

Through the open door, Norton slipped into darkness. Behind him the locks and bolts clicked. He had burned his bridges behind him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE LAIR.

THE Grand Bazaar of Istanbul is an odd place. A labyrinth of streets, roofed over—a one-storied department store housed in a conglomeration of buildings, where one

may purchase from a needle to an elephant.

Teeming with people in the daytime—its alleys and shops crowded with an ever-moving throng—at night it lies an empty place of drear shadow.

The Bazaar closes one hour from sunset. The shops are shuttered, doors and windows locked and barred. The merchants have gone their ways.

Some, like old Abraham Kishkin, live on the edge, with another shop opening on an open street. Most of them live far away. And no one stays inside, save the few ancient watchmen hired by the merchants' guild, who shuffle, lantern in hand, through the deserted place at infrequent intervals.

Into this maze—silent, black, and chill with the wintry air—Frank Norton stepped cautiously, his feet making little noise as he picked his way along the uneven pavement. Years had passed since he set foot in the Bazaar, but he retained a good general idea of the direction in which he desired to proceed.

Inside the Bazaar, like box puzzles, fitting one into the other, is a central block—the Bezesten—where in the daytime may be found the oldest merchants, the oddest and more authentic antiques; things that hail not from the factories of Germany or the glass works of the United States and of Czechoslovakia, but are of genuine Eastern origin. And the Bezesten had been named in the documents he had found on the train.

There are no "pullers-in" in the Bezesten—one looks, one asks, one discusses prices with the quiet old men behind the counters.

It is a sort of holy of holies—sacred to deliberation, to dignified argument, to all the ceremonious give and take which is the joy of the Oriental merchant, without the raucous turmoil of the cheap-john salesmanship of the outer Bazaar. To the Bezesten Norton was bound.

Once, twice, and again he stopped, at

street corners, where, after making sure he was alone, a cautious flash of his electric torch and a glimpse of the little map he carried, set him on the right path.

A fourth time he halted—brought up by the flicker of a distant light. Was it a watchman? So far he had encountered no one. The light bobbed about, coming nearer, then was swallowed up. Norton waited. No sound.

Up to a certain point, Frank Norton had a very definite plan of campaign. There was to be held, somewhere in the Bezesten, a meeting of an inner circle of the Third Internationale—a meeting which for some reason he did not understand, must be held outside of Russia.

He intended to make his way into that meeting. Who would be there he did not know. How he could force an entrance he did not know. Experience had taught him, however, that if one made oneself Johnny-on-the-spot, ready to take advantage of events as they occurred, one might often make one's own breaks.

FRANK NORTON had become a man with a single purpose. From the moment back there, when Sonya Gritzenka had voiced the name of Dzerzhinsky, the flow of events had carried him on in a remorseless whirl.

Jammed in an angle of the wall formed by an outjutting shop window, Frank Norton stood in the darkness, his body motionless, his mind teeming with thoughts that, at first whirling about like a flock of startled birds, came at last to perch in ordered rows.

Dzerzhinsky was alive! Dzerzhinsky, whose Red minions had engulfed in the reign of terror Frank Norton's youth and faith in human nature. Dzerzhinsky, against whom he had matched his wits, first in Siberia, later on the Polish frontier and still later in Russia itself.

Dzerzhinsky, whose death he had welcomed in a dispassionate way as the removal of a menace to mankind in general. Dzerzhinsky, who had paid the price, he thought; whose emaciated body, riddled with the bullets of Polish revenge, he had seen sprawled in his secret headquarters at Novirossisk. Dzerzhinsky was alive!

Once more the light flared out—the quick flash of an electric torch in the hands of an approaching person. The light spread to the corner behind which Norton crouched. To one beyond him, his outline must have been plainly visible for a second.

A crushing blow on the head brought before Frank Norton's vanishing senses an outblazing golden billow shot with purple flames. He slumped unconscious to the cobblestones.

A harsh-voiced challenge, the flare of another light, and a group of figures milled for a moment about the sprawling form. A quick exchange of question, answer, and order. Somewhere a door creaked ever so slightly.

Rough hands lifted Frank Norton's body, half bearing, half dragging it out of the alley.

The door clicked to, and the Bazaar street fell silent. Frank Norton had attained his desire, had gained entrance to the Bezesten—the center of the Bazaar.

CHAPTER XIX.

SHORT SHRIEF.

SEVERAL men gathered about the unconscious Norton, stretched on the stone pavement in a low-arched room, the ceiling of which was black with the smoke and dust of centuries. A large table, a round dozen of chairs, and a bookcase against the side wall, were the only furniture.

There were no windows. The atmosphere, damp and musty, was rendered still thicker by the fumes of tobacco, through which two electric bulbs over-

head, fed by wires strung in temporary fashion along the ceiling, shed a faint glare that left the corners of the room in murky shadow.

A buzz of questions, out of the midst of which came the voice of one apparently in some authority:

"How did you find him?"

One of the men, typical in dress and mannerisms of New York's racketeering confraternity, spoke:

"I gets a slant of him sneakin' up the wall, when I comes around the upper end of the street. Then he hides into a corner. I comes up, slow; the rest of the gang's movin' in, some one pulls a flash, an' he's right in front of me with his back turned." He patted a blackjack in his hand.

Practiced hands frisked the unconscious man.

"Nothing," growled one, straightening up. "He's just one of them dam' snoopin' guys—looking for what he can pick up."

"Bump him off," suggested another.

A conference, in several tongues, was decided in the end by the man who had first spoken. Still speaking in English, with a lisping accent, he negatived the suggestion.

"We wish no mess—no foolish killings. Not in here, anyway. This way—it is best."

Striding to the bookcase, he pulled it out. The thing swung. It cleverly fitted on a door which disclosed a yawning black entrance.

The body was picked up and carried to the exit. The men bearing it peered into the inky darkness beyond.

"Straight out," ordered the same man who had opened the door. "A good heave."

The pair who held Norton, one by the arms, the other by the legs, stepped onto what seemed a sort of platform beyond the door. Straightening up, they gave a preliminary swing back, then out.

"Now!"

At the word they released their hold. Norton went sprawling into the void. A second later, a splash resounded, re-echoed. The men trooped back, and the bookcase door was closed.

"Better so," announced the master of ceremonies. "We have thus no trouble, hiding unpleasant traces."

CHAPTER XX.

THE RED WOLF'S FANGS.

SEVEN men were gathered in the room—seven men of as many different characteristics. They draped themselves on the chairs and about the table, evidently waiting. The knob of the main door turned, the portal swung open, and an eighth man stepped inside. Those already there rose and stood respectfully at his appearance.

The newcomer bowed, walked to the head of the table, and motioning, spoke, in a mild tone.

"Greetings, comrades; please to seat yourselves." He stood, waiting until all had found their places, his keen glances flitting from one to another.

This man's delicate features were those of a person of a high order of intelligence. His high temples, marking the base of the inverted triangle which was his countenance, were fringed with wisps of fair hair; his well-kept, short-clipped brown beard heightened the ivory pallor of his skin, the prominent cheek bones tinged with the hectic flush of tuberculosis.

Behind his slightly drooping lids, eyes of misty brown smoldered. The lips sensitive, thin, were coldly cruel. A frail man, a forceful man; such was the impression he radiated.

From his pockets this man took a memorandum book, which he turned open on the table. Again his eyes flitted in turn to each of his companions.

"One of our number is missing, unfortunately. He left Paris with important news, but"—and there was an

undercurrent of suppressed anxiety running back of the calm mannerism—"some mischance must have befallen him. This is our final meeting. Time presses. I will run rapidly over the instructions, that all may have at their fingers' ends the situation.

"Dragovitch, as you know, is in our hands. He will leave to-night for Russia, where he will be questioned, and the details of the White counter-revolutionary movement to break the five-year program will be found out. You, comrades, going forth, must preach always the fact that the five-year program cannot fail—the industrial rebirth of Russia. Upon the successful broadcasting of that policy throughout the world our immediate future rests.

"You, Sher Khan," and the speaker bowed to a dark-skinned bearded man, "return to your India. Mahatma Gandhi's plans must be fostered. Thus we put the labor government in Britain on the horns of a dilemma. If they use force, they are discredited. If they do not, the Conservatives come into power. But by that time the Transsib railway will be completed, Russian troops will be ready, and with the flaming of India, our masses will roll through the Afghan gateway into the Punjab, supporting your revolution."

The frail leader turned to the well-dressed gangster, who had taken the principal part in searching Norton.

"To you, Comrade Boris," he said, "all our thanks are due. You and your friends brought to Paris the latest American ideas in eliminating our enemies. You supported the taking of Dragovitch, your comrades have removed the one man who had found out—through treachery—our plans. And you go back to America, prepared to start the intensive campaign which is to culminate May 1st. I leave to you the details of the three important things—constant stirring up of convicts throughout the country, inboring politically by

taking advantage of the present Prohibition situation, and, specifically, the work in New York."

Not a person moved or fidgeted as he continued:

"The popular viewpoint toward the police there must be changed. By clever incitation, prodding the police to acts of aggression, the bourgeois population must come to feel that its police is a brutal force. Appeal to the American love of fair play and sympathy for the under dog. Our women must play their parts in that. They must lose no opportunity to bait the police; whenever one of them is touched by a policeman, she must shriek aloud that she has been assaulted. That will arouse the bourgeois."

Somewhere in the room a buzzer sounded—three long, three short. The chairman, reaching under the table, brought up a telephone. Into this he spoke guardedly. The person at the other end seemed to be asking for instructions.

"Bring her here," finally ordered the frail man, and put the instrument away.

"That is all, comrades," he announced. "We scatter to-night. Success!"

Rising, he shook hands all around, and the seven departed.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DAY.

THE frail man, alone at last, flung himself into his chair and lighted a cigarette with twitching fingers. He seemed to be under some suppressed excitement. Lighting one cigarette after another, he sat and wriggled. Finally he began to pace the room. Then the door clicked, and a man poked his head in.

"In accordance with instructions, comrade——" he began.

"The woman is there? Good. Bring her in at once."

Again the frail man flung himself in his chair. The door swung open, and a woman entered. A young woman. The woman of Normandy, and of the Paris café. Sonya Gritzenka.

The man at the table smiled—a rather terrifying smile, which disclosed his regular teeth shining white against his red lips.

"Enchanted, Comrade Sonya," he said. "And what good news for the cause are you bringing here?"

"Something that I believe will fill you with much pleasure, my dear chief. Nothing less than the Indian army plans for the Northwest Frontier Force, giving the strength and plans of operation of the various garrisons under any conditions of unrest along the Afghan border."

The man whistled.

"A nice bag, indeed. A very, v-e-r-y nice bag!"

"I thought you would like it. And, in addition, I have some interesting dope upon several of the intelligence officers; information which, I hope, you will allow me to use personally."

"Sit down, comrade."

The girl took from her bag several papers which she spread before the man with the red lips. He whistled as he read them.

"You are sure of this?" he questioned.

"Absolutely. I received it from London; made the abstracts myself from War-Office files."

The man looked at her from under half-shut lids.

"I wish I knew what to make of you, Sonya," he murmured. "You know, some of our people wonder about you."

The girl shrugged.

"Actions speak louder than words, chief," was her retort.

The telephone buzzer rang again. The man picked it up with an apologetic gesture. Then he snapped up as if galvanized by an electric shock.

"What!" he called. "In the corridor?" A steady thumping came to their ears. "Yes, yes! I hear them. Set the switch, and come in here." He turned to the woman. "Police breaking in. We must go. Well, everything is set."

They stood up, Dzerzhinsky drawing a revolver from the desk. Into the room from outside two men came rushing.

"All set, chief," they reported.

The four turned to the bookcase—turned and stood, frozen into immobility. For the door swung open, disclosing a man standing barring the way.

"Just a moment," said Frank Norton—a wet, bedrabbled Norton.

With lightning leap he had wrested the pistol from the Soviet leader's hand, and shoved him back against his followers.

"Push 'em up—way up!" called Frank Norton, with leveled gun.

"Norton!" cried the frail-appearing leader.

"At your service, Dzerzhinsky," Norton responded. "We meet once more. And don't attempt to move. I'll shoot, as you know."

A howl went up from the men with Dzerzhinsky. And to Norton's astonishment, they flung themselves at almost certain death. Why, he was to know in an instant.

His pistol spoke once, twice. One man sprawled clumsily, but the second assailant reached him, clawing desperately at his gun. Dzerzhinsky, whipping out a knife, dodged behind him to give the death blow.

NORTON, wrestling with the clutching Russian, saw Dzerzhinsky duck behind him, saw the glitter of his knife out of the corner of his eye, saw Sonya, screaming, clutch at the frail Red leader's arm.

Craaaaash!

The roar of an explosion! A belch-

ing roar that wrenched the outer door from its hinges and sent it dancing crazily into the room on the crest of a puffing smoke wave.

"Don't wait, Dzerzhinsky!" screamed the girl. "They'll get you!" And she tugged at his knife arm, while Norton, hanging on to his gun, twisted and kicked at his own frantic, clawing assailant, striving to keep the man's body between himself and Dzerzhinsky.

"Damn it, you've spoiled my stroke!" cursed Dzerzhinsky.

Voices bellowed in the outer corridor. The Russian leader, turning, dragged the girl by the hand toward the secret doorway leading to the cisterns.

Norton's assailant, with a superhuman burst of frenzied strength, shoved him back against the bookcase door, just as a segment of masonry, loosened by the explosion, came crashing down.

A brick caught Norton on the head. He felt himself floating, saw the distorted forms of the trio go dodging past him, and collapsed, just as Bunny Sharp, leading a file of Turkish police, came stumbling through the smoke and debris of the outer door.

NORTON sat up in bed later, with bandaged head and burning slash along his arm, where Dzerzhinsky's knife blade had slid. Bunny Sharp sat beside him.

"Bunny," Norton said. "I muddled it up in fine shape! I'm sorry. Tried to make a grand-stand play, instead of getting them as they went into the tunnel. What happened?"

"They got away," said Sharp. "The place was mined, of course. Those cisterns, you know, extend for a great distance. It's the old water supply of Constantinople. They had a boat and got through a hidden passage, then up into a house, and out to a machine. We traced them, but it was too late. They beat it over the bridge and through Pera, out to the end of the motor road, at

Bouyouk Dere, and made a fast launch. They're on board that Russian ship, the *Lenin*, now, and on the way to Novorossisk."

"Hell's bells! I hadn't figured on a second get-away. But you got Dragovitch?"

"Yes. Your friend, Achmed Pasha, of the harbor police, played with us as you arranged, and threw a net about the house in Bebek, where they had Dragovitch. But cops only think so far."

"What do you mean, now?"

"Why, instead of waiting until the Reds took the old general down to the water front to put him in the boat that was to take him out to the *Lenin*, which steamed to-night, Achmed jumped the house. Bagged everybody there, of course, but—Dragovitch was dead when they got in. The Reds killed him, naturally, when they knew they were caught."

Norton groaned. "Listen, Bunny." He related what had happened to him.

Sharp grunted when he told of being slung into the cistern.

"I wasn't half so stunned as they thought," Norton said. "And the cold water shocked me into consciousness. I managed to scabble about, found their boat and landing stage, and instead of wrecking the boat, which I suppose I should have done, I crept up and lay at the door listening. I got an earful." He told him what he had heard.

"So they're going to start things both in New York and in India," was Sharp's only comment. "Well, we can spike the New York end. And the British will be glad to hear about the other thing, if they don't already know it."

"But we don't know the details, Bunny. So far as details go, we're just where we were when we started."

"Except that you ought to know where to put that damned girl on your list."

"I still don't get that girl, Bunny.

She pulled Dzerzhinsky's knife arm, I tell you. He'd have had me cold, if it hadn't been for her."

"Well," said Sharp, "I'm going to wire a report to Rothsmanns. So far as I can see, our work is done."

"Bunny," responded Norton, "maybe your work's done. But"—and his teeth clenched—"mine hasn't started yet. Just now I'm going to have some rest."

CHAPTER XXII.

NO THOROUGHFARE.

MAJOR the Honorable St. John Paget, D. S. O., assistant staff officer for intelligence, Peshawar, Northwest Province, leaned back in his chair and puffed a vague column of cigar smoke into the air.

"Absolutely impossible, my dear fellow," he said.

But Frank Norton, sitting opposite, was still unconvinced.

"But," Norton persisted, "I'm not part of the Frontier Force; I'm a civilian. Why can't I travel by airplane over the border into Afghanistan, up to Kabul? I take the responsibility. What happens to me doesn't mean anything to England. And if I do go farther still, reach Samarkand, or even Tashkent, anything of interest that I may find out is at your service."

"Again answering your question, you cannot fly up, for the simple reason that no civilian airplanes are allowed into Afghanistan. And military planes only in emergency. Of course, we couldn't take you up in a military plane. And as for your getting farther, the Russkys would gobble you up, if you didn't have a knife slid into your gizzard in Kabul."

Outside of the comfortable quarters in Pashawar cantonments, two miles from the city, the cool winds of the Kindu Kush, whirling from the crags of the Kyber Pass, swept violently. Major Paget pulled at his cigar again.

"Look, here, Norton," he said. "Just what is this all about, anyway?"

Behind his pale-blue eyes and leatherish skin, Major Paget carried more than one would expect from the first impression of almost babyish innocence. As a matter of fact, Major Paget carried there, among other things, that fixed impression of the military intelligence man.

"Major," Norton answered, "I believe that my letters of introduction must be the answer to that."

"Come now," Paget urged, "don't let's beat about the bally bush again. Of course, your papers are in order, and all that sort of thing. Besides, you've been knocking about in Peshawar for more than a week. Intelligence has had a bit of a whack at you in that time."

"You know, or should know," he went on, "that sometimes we British are not quite so wooden as you Yanks think. It might surprise you to learn that headquarters, Frontier Force, has quite a jolly little file on you."

"And then there was something further back—when you were in Russia—some yarn about that chap Dzerzhinsky. And didn't we hear that he wasn't dead, after all? You know, we've got a bit on our hands here now, with all this Gandhi stuff and what not. Why do you come breezin' up here, what?"

Frank Norton pondered. This Englishman did know quite a bit. But Norton did not feel he could give him further details.

Of course the May 1st riot in New York had happened—promptly to be crushed in Union Square by the nightsticks of the police, warned by Norton's cable. But that could be put down to coincidence, or desire to make a cock-and-bull story ring true.

Then there were other reasons why Norton did not want to give his full story to the British. He was not fighting England's battles. It would deprive him of the pleasure of continuing his

fight with Dzerzhinsky, and it might mean failure to trace Soya Gritzenka.

Dzerzhinsky—Sonya. Sonya—Dzerzhinsky. Find one, the other must bob up. Norton wanted to find both. Coming to India from Istanbul, Frank Norton knew that those two had got to southern Russia.

India was their goal. In all probability they would come in through the north, which would mean from Turkestan through Afghanistan. Hence his itch to get to Kabul. He would get there, by hook or by crook.

Dzerzhinsky! Inclination and duty compelled Frank Norton to ferret out that man. Under cover of his apparent death—and Norton could have sworn until he saw the man with his own eyes that night in Istanbul that Dzerzhinsky was dead—Dzerzhinsky must have been spinning the net by means of which Red Russia—the Communist party—was planning world revolution.

"No," said Norton, "I have nothing to add to my credentials. I'm investigating trade and commercial interests in general. And you won't let me fly up?"

"No. But the way is free, so far as we are concerned, for you to go up the normal way, through the pass. That is, unless the civil authorities——"

"They have," interrupted Norton. "Told me to-day at civil administration headquarters that no permission to pass the Indian territorial limit would be granted."

His gaze directed out the window, toward the bare brown peaks which bar India's northern gateway, Norton, calm on the surface, but boiling inwardly, became aware of an approaching automobile—coming from somewhere up the line of quarters, bound for Peshawar, evidently.

A woman was sitting beside the driver—a woman the tilt of whose head aroused memories. Idly he watched it sweep by beside the window.

Wing Commander Paget saw the machine, recognized the passenger, and leaned out of his chair to wave a greeting. Norton looked full into the upturned face of the woman waving back.

She was Sonya Gritzenka!

CHAPTER XXIII.

PITFALLS OF PESHAWAR.

NORTON glanced at the officer. Paget turned back to his visitor, unruffled. Apparently this girl was accepted as a part of the cantonments so far as he was concerned.

Knowing the British reserve, Norton asked no questions. He might get himself disliked as a bounder loosely querying a pretty face, or, on the other hand, he might divulge something about this girl which would put her in a bad light. Gosh, what a dilemma! At all events, he must get out of here, and do some tracking on his own!

"I'm going back to town," he announced simply. "Do a bit of looking about. Surely, there will be no objection to that."

"Quite right!" Wing Commander Paget dismissed him politely. "Sorry we can't help you. And don't let those rascals in the Bazaar tempt you to buy too many souvenirs."

In two minutes Norton was in the machine he had hired to run him between the town and cantonments, and was whirling back to Peshawar, eager to catch up with a certain person of golden hair and brave blue eyes.

Who in Heaven's name could this girl be who ran with the Soviet rats of Paris, yet seemed equally at home in a British Indian cantonment?

Two minutes was too much of a start. As they neared the gate, Norton saw some machines parked outside, but the young woman was not in view.

Dismissing his own machine, Norton entered the gateway of the "City of a Thousand Sins."

Peshawar—gateway to Afghanistan; hill capital of the great northwest frontier of Britain's Indian empire.

Peshawar, through which runs the highway from the north, the road from Kabul down which from time immemorial the swaggering Pathan has come to plunder the Punjab; up which British Tommies and the native soldiers of the Raj have marched to sweep the Khyber Pass.

Even Frank Norton, hardheaded, cool-eyed, could not resist the thrill that comes to him who treads the byways of Peshawar, who sees the human tide sweep through the Kabuli gate—listens to the clamor of tongues along the Kissa Khani, the justly famous Street of Story-tellers.

He was in the Street of Story-tellers, that multicolored open-air bazaar of the hills. Rugs, brass ware, bright-colored cloths—a multitude of things, the usual miscellany of a native *souk*, spread before him.

Shopkeepers—Hindus these from down-country—assailed him. Other merchants, grave-faced Pathans, kept their places, sitting immobile inside their shops, smoking, chatting with acquaintances from the hills.

The glaring sunlight bathed the open spots, illuminating brightly colored turbans, casting thick blocks of shadow, velvet-deep, under the shop awnings. A medley of languages—soft syllables of the Hindus and the guttural vowels of the hillmen among them—smote the ears.

ALL this was strange to Frank Norton—a part of the world in which he had never before set foot—and his keen eyes and ears drank in the strange sights and sounds as he wandered, dodging vehicles, camels, horses, donkeys, and pedestrians, the while he hunted for a certain face framed in golden hair.

And then he saw her—striding ahead

of him, just turning a narrow cross street with that free, graceful swing he now knew so well. And jostling his way through the crowd regardless of the growls and curses his rapid progress brought forth, Frank Norton pursued.

The girl proceeded through a winding alleyway to pop suddenly inside the building line. Norton, marking the place, arrived to find himself facing a closed door—a door of heavy, time-worn timbers, strapped with great metal hinges, barring further progress.

Now what? Norton stood for a moment irresolute. Regretfully he gave up his first thought of pounding on this door until it swung back. One did not push one's way uninvited into strange houses in this section of the world, he realized. And much as he wanted to confront Sonya Gritzenka, he also wanted to trace down Dzerzhinsky.

Better mark time, he decided. This girl would come back to the cantonments.

Mentally photographing the locality with trained eye, Frank Norton turned back to the Street of Story-tellers, wandering in seemingly aimless tourist style.

And at the very instant he did so, in the cantonments beyond the city bugles were blowing frantically, and soldiers were flying from barracks and tented camp, rifles in hand, to the clamoring notes of the "Call to Arms!"

And at that same instant another civilian, a slight American of about Norton's age, who had arrived there within a day of his own coming, but between whom and Norton no word of recognition had passed, was rushing in a machine to Peshawar.

"Strange and wonderful sights, Sahib!"

A huge, swarthy man had come up close behind Norton, and murmured the words in his ear.

Turning away from the tray of brass work in front of him, Norton faced the speaker. He saw that the man was a

Sikh in flowing robes, with beard and whiskers neatly plaited and turned over the cheeks to tuck inside the equally huge turban.

"See, Sahib!" the man went on, picking up a hammered brass pot, and waving it in Norton's face.

The shopkeeper, a plains Hindu, fluttered out, jabbering something at the intruder, who squelched him with a rasping snarl.

Dropping his voice to a quick whisper, he continued:

"Follow me, but softly. I lead you to Sonya." Again he repeated the words, parrotlike—"To Sonya." And turning, strolled slowly down the street.

Frank Norton, his mind a whirling conflict of emotions, checked his first impulse to rush after the man and demand an explanation.

Appeasing the shopkeeper with a smile and a shrug, he slowly elbowed his way through the gathering, marking the giant Sikh's form ahead of him.

"I lead you to Sonya."

Then he was on the right track! But—was this an ambush? Who was this East Indian, who knew he wanted to find Sonya? The bright flame of adventure flickered in Frank Norton's eye.

The man ahead had halted momentarily, and now, after a casual glance behind him, which Norton felt sure had taken in the fact that he, Norton, was following, turned down an alley corner. The American strolled on, and when he arrived at the spot, turned also.

But Norton was destined to follow no farther. Behind him he heard a confused shouting. Some one was running, frantically, through the groups of curious, and a name was called:

"Captain Norton! Captain Norton!"

And out of the throng broke the figure of Fay, his faithful servitor—Fay, who, arriving at the same time, had kept aloof by strict order not to hold communication with his old commanding officer, unless in emergency!

Norton swung. Fay came panting up.

"There's hell to pay!" gasped Fay. "Troops all turned out—Afridi attack on the cantonments; the Hadji of Turangzai is up with his tribesmen! And they're calling all Europeans out of the bazaars now!"

Behind Fay, Norton could see a rapidly swelling crowd, angry faces, shaken fists.

In the twinkling of an eye, natives were pouring out from houses, from shops. A Sikh policeman, caught in the mob, bobbed for a moment like a shingle in a seaway. Norton could see his turban, his arm with flailing stick. And then the crowd washed over him.

Something whizzed by. A brick crashed on the wall beside them. The side street down which the big man who had coaxed him had gone was blocked with rushing men, some of them wearing red shirts. The big man was now nowhere to be seen!

The storm had broken in Peshawar!

BATTLING against angry natives who buzzed about them, yet feared, seemingly, to close, Norton and Fay struggled against the house line.

The crowd was all working in the same direction, it would seem, its efforts directed more on getting somewhere than on damaging this white flotsam and jetsam thrown into its midst. Why?

Just inside the Kabuli gate, the street widens. Poured through this funnel, the crowd spread, and the three fighting men for a second found themselves in fairly open territory.

In front of them the gate guard, a detail of the Yorkshire Light Infantry Regiment, was scattered, bayonets fixed. A noncommissioned officer was threatening the crowd with his pistol.

A red-shirted Indian who seemed a ringleader, screamed something. An officer beside Norton and Fay tugged at their sleeves.

"They want to seize this gate! There's something terribly wrong here!" he shouted, rushing toward the soldiers.

As he did, a swirl of the crowd brought the natives down on the flank of the guard, and a scattering of rifle shots rang out.

Men dropped on all sides, the attackers giving way at the volley. The officer was halfway across the open space when a redshirt leaped at him, knife in hand.

Norton's pistol had slipped from its shoulder holster into his grasp by now, and as the rioter's knife poised over the officer's back, he fired.

The attacker sprawled. Next instant the three were within the ring of bayonets.

"Thanks!" called the officer over his shoulder. "Sergeant, fire at will! Keep them back at all costs!"

He peered out the open gateway. At his shocked exclamation, Norton stared. Down the road, a scant five hundred yards away, was coming a rushing mob of gayly-colored turbans, red flags waving over their heads, Afridi mountaineers, racing for the gate.

No wonder the crowd was trying to gain possession! Under cover of the attack on the cantonments the Afridis were charging around the other side to take the city. Could the gate be held open until this mob reached it, Peshawar was lost!

What to do? A couple of men were tugging at the heavy wooden doors. The remainder of the gate guard were scattered on the inside—every man Jack of them needed to stem the tide rushing them from that point.

Norton, calling to Fay, rushed to the nearest door, and together, shoving from the outside, they managed with the gatekeeper to jam it into place. Heavy bolts chugged into their lugs as it slammed.

The officer caught the idea. Norton, turning from the door he had been manhandling, saw the young chap pushing

at the other. He joined him, Fay, too, shoving with might and main against the heavy timbers. Slowly, hinges shrieking protest, the portal swung. Swung to within two feet of closing—and stuck!

"Inside!" roared the officer at his assistants.

Fay and the soldier slipped through the opening, tugging at the door handles from the inside.

"Come on!" called Norton.

From over his shoulder he caught sight of the oncoming Afridis—not more than two hundred yards away now. But the officer—a lieutenant of the Yorkshires, a blond boy with chubby features—waved him inside.

"Like hell!" cried Norton, and side by side they pushed. The timbers gave a little.

"All together, now!" called Norton again, and they flung themselves, their shoulders thumping against the stubborn wood. Inside, they could hear the other men panting as they tugged.

A squeak, a rattle, a sudden give. The door clanged to. Bolts and bars rattled inside. The Kabuli gate was shut. But outside, two white men, a soldier and a civilian, their task accomplished, turned their backs on the weather-beaten wood and waited. Their work was done.

A glance, an understanding grin, a flick of hands together, the touch of comrades at the last. That was all.

Norton had his pistol, the Englishman only a swagger stick. And a stone's throw away a thousand bloodthirsty tribesmen rushing at them in a tidal wave of death.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I BRING DEATH!"

THROUGH Norton's mind ran thought of all that had gone before—of the girl Sonya, whose sudden appearance in the Norman field that Sunday afternoon had seemingly

started all the whirlwind of circumstance into which he had been thrown. What was it she had said?

"I bring death!"

Death! A man had died that afternoon, from Fay's shotgun. The next day in Paris another man had died. In Istanbul, as soon as their trails had crossed, a third had gone down, under his own gun. And old Dragovitch had died.

Now, not half an hour since he had seen her face from that window in the cantonments, dead men were scattered through the streets of Peshawar. And death was leaping upon him—Frank Norton—now.

Leveling his pistol, Frank Norton blazed again and again at the nearest forms of the ferocious Afridis, now a musket's length away. And at that instant he felt a frantic clutch behind him, felt himself jerked backward from his feet, felt the Englishman's body beside him jammed against him as he, too, was gripped.

Tumbling rearward, the pair went spinning, to crash on stone pavement, breathless, to see men over their sprawling bodies jam shut the wicket gate—the little doorway cut in the great Kabuli gate, which they had overlooked in that desperate sacrifice, but which the faithful Fay's eye had caught, the faithful Fay's clawing hands dragged them through. Safe!

Norton, his head ringing, staggered to his feet. The gate guard had the situation in hand now. Outside, the tribesmen might rant and roar, might shoot and batter as they would against those massive gates. Artillery only would break them open.

And inside, the mob had no stomach for bullets and bayonets in the hands of hard-shooting, disciplined British soldiers.

They milled about for a few moments in the square, then the Street of Storytellers belched a clump of mounted men

—hard-faced Sikhs, who laid about them with their sabers, not trying too hard to use the flat—and behind them again rank on rank of tin-hatted British infantry.

"The Guides' Cavalry!" screamed the boy officer in sudden relief. "And there are our own Yorks!"

IT seemed hours, though actually only about ten minutes, when Major Paget was talking to him again, a Paget whose shrewd mind was working fast, although his voice had not altered its leisurely drawl.

"We've you to thank, Mr. Norton," Paget was saying, "according to the lieutenant here, for very gallant assistance—in the nick of time."

"Never mind that," snapped Norton. "What do you know about the women of your garrison? Are they all safe?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you, Norton," was the response. "We made a quick check, of course, as soon as the trouble started. And it seems that there is one young lady unaccounted for. Did you see a woman——"

But Norton broke into his drawl.

"The girl who passed your quarters when we were talking—Sonya Gritzenka——" and could have bitten off his tongue at the blank stare the Englishman gave him.

"Really, I don't quite understand you. What was that outlandish name? We've no one by that name with us. The lady I meant was Miss Hanford. She did pass, now that I think of it."

"Miss Hanford?"

"Why, yes." The Englishman was looking at him curiously. "But why the wonder? She's the sister of——"

"Hell's bells, man!" blurted Norton. "Don't let's waste time reciting family trees! I don't give a damn whose sister she is! That girl went down a side street here. I know the place. Let's go!"

Deserted was the Khissa Khani now,

blank the doorways, the windows, as Paget and Norton, with a file of soldiers, went tramping through.

Peshawar had holed in, to lick its wounds and growl from its kennels at the master who once more had shown the iron hand, had cracked the whip. The British Raj, it seemed, was not so shaky, after all.

Around the corner they sped, down the winding alleyway. "Here it is!" called Norton and pointed.

The great wooden doorway hung open. Frank Norton rushed inside, the others on his heels. A courtyard, other doors, also swinging wide.

Picking the nearest one, at random they hurried inside, down a passageway. And Norton tripped over something, sprawled before a curtained portal—tripped and stumbled into a great room with divans and silken hangings—the room of a woman of quality.

The place was empty and in confusion. Furniture was scattered about, up-ended; hangings and drapes ripped and torn. And a chill fear gripped Norton's heart.

Behind him the others were wrestling with the object over which he had tripped, were dragging it into the room—the body of the great Sikh—the limp body of the bearded man who, in the Bazaar, had whispered in his ear the words, "I lead you to Sonya!"

Galvanized by some last flow of strength, the big man shook off the clutching hands, rose to his knees, looked about him with staring, half-glazed eyes which flickered at the sight of the British uniforms.

"Accan Khel, Sahib!" cried the big man in a great voice. "The citadel of Accan Khel!"

His chest heaved, his right hand, palm out, came to a salute.

"*Hookum hai*—it is an order," he murmured, in a whisper, and crashed at Paget's feet, dead.

Norton stood, dumb, while Paget

drew himself up, fingers at his head-dress.

"Go in peace, Rachpal Singh, faithful soldier," said he soberly. And to Norton: "This man was Hanford's bātman—Gladys Hanford's bodyguard. Hanford's snuffed out. This man is dead. And Gladys Hanford—" He hesitated.

"Talk, man, talk!" implored Norton. "What did he say? What does it mean?"

"It means," said Major Paget, "that while this rumpus was going on, Gladys Hanford's been sneaked out of Peshawar to the stronghold of the bloodiest, most ruthless tribe of the Afridi crags—the Accan Khel!"

CHAPTER XXV.

ONE CHANCE IN A THOUSAND.

AGAIN Frank Norton and Major the Honorable St. John Paget faced one another in the latter's quarters in Peshawar cantonments. Over in the hills the bombing planes of the Royal Air Force were singeing the whiskers of the Hadji of Turnagzai and his turbulent followers.

British infantry—the Royal Ulsters—and loyal native troops, were driving in another direction, through the orchards of Peshawar suburbs, the Afridi force which had so nearly nipped inside the Kabuli gate.

Inside the city, hard-faced Sikhs and burly Jats, with their brethren of the Yorkshire Light Infantry, were hunting down the red-shirted Communists of the Young Indian party.

Up the hard-surfaced roads to the edge of the Kyber Pass tanks, armored cars, and squadrons of the Guides' Cavalry, and Skinner's Horse, were patrolling. England still held the Afghan border fast.

"Let's get down to cases," Norton was urging.

"Right, oh! Here we are, then. Gerald Hanford was a very gallant officer—

old Indian army family—whose father, while British consul general at Moscow, married a Russian woman. Gerry and his sister Gladys were born in Russia, and spoke the language like natives. During the mess after the revolution, their mother was killed there—by the Reds. Gerry volunteered for secret-service work against the Soviets. He was murdered a short time ago in Paris. What did you say?" For Norton had grunted.

Hanford—that name had been haunting him. Of course! Hanford was the king's murdered messenger under whose name his opponent of the Orient Express incident had masqueraded.

"After that," Paget was saying again, "Gladys took a hand. It appears she had been helping her brother, too, in Paris. She ran down to Istanbul, and found out something about this coming border trouble. So she came here. Officially she was stopping with old army friends—resting up from the shock of her brother's death. Actually she was in touch with the Russian efforts through the wife of the man from whose house she was taken—Gholam Khan, a Pathan intensely loyal—who has far-reaching connections with the hillmen. She'd promised me news about the latest developments, figured something big was coming off. Now it's broken—and she's gone."

"My turn, now," said Norton.

In tense words he related his meeting with Sonya Gritzenka, the Dragovitch affair and its ending at Istanbul.

"This thing clicks like two and two makes four," ended Norton. "Sonya—Miss Hanford, I mean—dragged up to that place, spells to me that that's where headquarters for all this northern revolt is. How far away is it?"

"About twenty miles due north."

"Let's go, then!" cried Norton, jumping to his feet. "We'll nab the crowd and rescue her. Let's go!"

"My dear chap," responded Paget

wearily, and his face was drawn and haggard. "I'd willingly give my life for Gerry Hanford's sister. But you don't realize that to take the stronghold of the *Accan Khel* would be a task for the entire Peshawar garrison—horse, foot, and guns! Not that the O. C. wouldn't turn out everything in such a case, but—dammit, man! We're holding on by our teeth here now! We can't draw a column from this garrison under present conditions—the whole Afghan nation would be down through the gap, and raising merry hell in central India like a flash! And that, of course, would mean the flame of rebellion throughout all India—the end of British rule, the beginning of a massacre which would make the Mutiny of 1857 seem like a school picnic!"

"Paget," snapped Norton, "if England can't get that girl out, I'm going up there! At least I can die trying!"

He began pacing up and down the room like a caged animal. And Paget shook his head mournfully.

Suddenly Norton whirled. "Listen, Paget! How about this for a scheme?"

Paget listened while Norton poured out his plan.

"You'd have one chance in a thousand," commented the officer at the end. "But—if the commanding officer approves, it might be done. And it would be the only way that would have any hope of success."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ACCAN KHEL.

RAM RUKKA, trusted lieutenant of Akmet Khan, leader of the *Accan Khel*, stood on the parapet of the mud-walled citadel of the tribe, which hung over a precipitous cliff of the Kyber hills, and glanced to the southward.

The apology for a road, winding up the mountainside to pass directly under the range of riflemen along the walls

before it turned into the single gate, was crowded with soldiers.

Ram Rukka shielded his eyes against the sun.

"Wah! Men—soldiers—coming up the road!" he said to his hook-nosed crony Abdullah Khan.

The pair leaned over the wall. Ram Rukka shouted a warning, and the parapet began filling with armed men.

"British soldiers—no, by the Prophet, these be Gharwalis. I can see their turbans and facings, and behind them others. And—yes—Allah be praised, they are fighting amongst themselves!"

The word passed down the line. The tribesmen thronged the walls, watching. The leading group of soldiery, footsore apparently, and in disorder, were fleeing from the others. As they got nearer, the men on the walls could see that the second group were Englishmen.

"This will be good!" roared Ram Rukka. And as the chieftain, Akmet Khan, appeared: "Ohé! Akmet! We will have a fine performance! They will kill each other under our walls, and at the last we can sally forth and get their arms."

From the hunted native detachment below—there could not be more than fifty of them—came shoutings.

"Ohé, brothers! Help us now!"

"Help you! Help you to die," quoth Ram Rukka. "Rajput pigs!"

But Akmet Khan was whispering with a fattish man, a Bengali who now appeared beside him—a man who looked at the Afridis with misgivings in his eye.

"Open the gate," ordered Akmet Khan.

Ram Rukka demurred.

"It may be some stratagem," he expostulated. "Better that they kill one another outside the walls."

"Nay, let them in. They be but fifty. Tell them first to throw down their arms outside."

"If we let them in at all," said Ram

Rukka, "let them bring in their arms. We will soon have their arms, and then—well, I have seen men hurled from these walls before. What a joke to hurl them down on the British!"

THERE was some little argument, but in the end they compromised. The gates were to be opened, the hunted ones allowed in with arms, and then what to do with them decided.

The pursuing British, they knew, could not storm the place—it was too strong for that, and they had no cannon with them. They could only sit down outside and yap at them. And if they stayed until night, there would be good picking among the rocks.

The Gharwali rebels were now directly under the walls of the citadel, firing in a desultory manner at the English, whose answering bullets began rapping on the mud bricks. The English apparently feared an ambush.

Accordingly, they deployed carefully among the rocks. There was only one battalion of them.

The gates swung open. The English redoubled their fire, and made some effect on the fugitives streaming through. Half a dozen of them went down directly in front of the gate, their bodies remaining sprawled outside the oaken portals that slammed on the last of the fleeing Gharwalis.

Inside, in the great courtyard, the Gharwalis halted, irresolutely, covered by the rifles of five times their number of the Accan Khel.

"Lay down your arms!" ordered Akmet Khan, and the rifles clattered on the ground, the web belts and bayonets following, and the men huddled together in the far corner, while the grim-faced Afridis glared at them. The fat *babu* hurried over to the deserters.

"Welcome, oh, my brothers, thrice welcome," called the *babu*. "We brothers of India must stand against the

British rule! From the mouth of the Ganges to the peaks of the Himalayas, India must be free, a Soviet republic!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

UNDER THE EARTH.

DURING the disarmament of the Gharwali mutineers in the courtyard, a different scene was taking place in a room deep beneath. Sonya Gritzenka—or perhaps she should be called by her right name, Gladys Hanford—disheveled, but still a good-looking young woman, was sitting at the end of a rough-hewn table, bound to her chair by rawhide thongs.

In front of her sat Dzerzhinsky, the former head of the Soviet secret police, considered dead by the outside world, and who had revealed himself in Istanbul as the secret head of the world machinations of the Third Internationale in Moscow—the Communist party, in reality the governing body of Soviet Russia.

Pallid as always, the renegade Pole who had won his way on a river of blood to high places in the Soviet government, sat smoking a long cigarette. Dzerzhinsky was nervous—it could be seen in his facial twitchings.

"We have come to the end of the ways, Sonya," stated Dzerzhinsky. "The Soviet secret police may pardon inefficiency, after proper punishment has been administered, but the traitor—never. I will say this for you—you have been clever. But we are more clever still. It may give you something to think about—the fact that for months your loyalty has been doubted. But the amount of information you produced which was of real value, and the importance of having a link directly into the high councils of the British intelligence service, compensated for the risk. And so Hanford was your brother? That we did not know—until after he had been removed."

"Oh, get it over with!" The cool voice rasped Dzerzhinsky's nerves.

"Shut up! Hell cat that you are, close your mouth. I am speaking; Dzerzhinsky."

Gladys Hanford shrugged.

"Now I can offer you this," the man went on in his purring monotone. "Be reasonable. Do one more task for us, and your death will be easy. Refuse, and you will be tortured."

The girl's blue eyes stared at him, unwavering. She made no answer.

"I just want one more thing, really. And that, if you do not answer, we will soon obtain, anyhow. Actually, I am doing this for your benefit. It is not much. I want a letter written by you, arranging a meeting with this man, Norton. I have a bone to pick with Norton. Write what I shall dictate, and all will be well."

He stroked his mustache nervously.

"You see, my dushka—my darling," he continued ironically, "this Norton, in whom you seem to have taken interest, is an old acquaintance. Back in Moscow, years ago, when I—Felix Dzerzhinsky—was organizing our secret service, this Norton, with two companions, in the service of America, had the temerity to cross our path. There were certain Americans in Russia whom they desired to rescue. And one of this trio was so impudent as actually to defy me. Ho! Ho!" He chuckled reminiscently.

The girl shuddered. She could picture the scene.

"And so, after he had died—oh, yes, he took a long, long time—your friend Norton took up the work. And he was dangerous. He would not be stopped. And he was not satisfied until he managed to work in with some of my former Polish associates. They do not like me, the Poles. Well, to make a long story short, through the negligence of some Red guards, they trapped—or thought they trapped—Felix Dzerzhinsky."

The man snarled at the recollection.

"I carry bullet scars to-day from that. But they are not thorough, the Poles. Felix Dzerzhinsky was not dead when they left him. And he dropped from sight, so far as the world knew. It was much better thus, from the standpoint of the Soviet, to continue the great work."

Dzerzhinsky threw down his cigarette.

"And now this man Norton knows that I am still in the saddle. And that is why, dear blue-eyed one, you will write a nice little note—to Norton."

Still no answer.

"You'll answer, my pretty one, I wager, when the acid drips into your eyes." Dzerzhinsky's red lips parted to give a glimpse of his teeth, his tongue licked at his chops.

THERE was a knock on the door. Dzerzhinsky called, and the door swung open to admit a blond white man.

"Sit down, my dear fellow," said Dzerzhinsky. "We must be on our way in a little while, but there is no reason why we may not have a pleasant conversation in the meantime. Sonya, it may interest you to know that it was Comrade Cartright here who thought of the brilliant scheme of using our American gunmen to execute your brother. A bright thought, that!"

"Oh, just an idea, what?" the other tossed off airily.

Gladys Hanford's hands clenched. The hot tears of anger gleamed under her lids. Her brother's murderer! Well did she know this man—an army traitor—a renegade Englishman. She shuddered within her bonds. What she would have given to be free at that moment!

The man Cartright observed her emotions and laughed.

"Always the little hell cat, what?" he jeered. "I saw the chap who brought you in—the fellow whose cheeks you

ripped up with your nails. But I have something good to tell you, chief." He grew serious. "There's been a mutiny down in Peshawar. The Gharwali regiment—and a detachment of them got away and just landed here. Our friends took 'em in."

"Good! Good!"

"That's a lie!" snapped Gladys Hanford. "Our troops are true to their salt."

"It's a fact, though. That Peshawar scheme didn't quite go through, but the English have got a lot to worry about. And now, with the native troops going up, well—the gentry like your brother'll have something to think about," said Cartright.

"Well, we must get ready. We've got quite a journey, my dear Sonya. A trek into the country a way, then by plane—you'll enjoy it—up to Tashkent." Dzerzhinsky rose, rubbing his hands. "Think quick before we start. Will you write that letter?"

"Never!"

And as if in echo, there came a shivering concussion that jarred the room, a ripple in the solid masonry that set the great table dancing, and the dull roar of an explosion outside rumbled an instant later to their ears.

A cloud of dust, the accumulation of years, sifted slowly in the room. The girl sat up in the chair. Dzerzhinsky and his jackal gazed at each other thoughtfully.

Far above them came a confused murmuring—the shouting of many throats—the mad shrieking of humans in desperate conflict!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ONE SORT OF SEAT.

WHEN the Gharwali rebels, saved from the pursuing British soldiers, streamed into the gate, and the massive doors which had resisted invasion for centuries

clanged shut upon them, they left a group of their dead and dying outside—victims of the concentrated fire of the pursuing troops.

The gate guards, their duty done, turned to look at the scene below them in the courtyard. And with them Ram Rukka and his crony, old Abdullah Khan.

The disarming of the mutineers, the acquisition of good arms and the possibility of executing their bright idea of hurling these mutineers back over the walls upon the British, amused them, as did the efforts of the fat Hindu to preach brotherhood of Hindu and Moslem. Had they been gazing over the wall outside directly beneath the gate, they would have seen something else of interest.

Two of the "dead" men suddenly came to life, springing over the last ten feet that separated them from the gate, pulling flattish packages from under their blouses—packages which they piled at the exact center of the two doors of the gate.

The other four—there had been six in all—also came to life to the extent of rolling on their backs, with rifles raised to shoot any head which might be poked over the parapets above.

These two piling the packages by the gate had been stoutish chaps when they first lay there. But now, after fifteen seconds of work, their clothes hung loose about them. They wasted not a fraction of a second. Suddenly they straightened up and dived for the protection of the walls, away from the gate, flinging themselves prone when they had got a hundred feet away. And as they started, the other four, abandoning their arms, also leaped wildly for shelter, crouched as if they would worm themselves into the ground by main force.

Inside the gate the confusion of the disarming of the men inside brought a faint rattle, and the Hindu's whining voice drifted thinly to the waiting six.

Outside, a keen ear might have heard a faint sizzling, rushing sound, a keen eye might have seen the faintest trickle of smoke from a short length of smoldering fuse—all else was quiet for another fifteen seconds. Then——

A sheet of flame ripped out from the gate, a cracking, rending detonation! The ground shivered, shook. The massive woodwork of the great gates crumpled inward—splinters of wood, showers of brick from the gate towers, spun dizzily in the air, débris belched from the portal of the stronghold of the Accan Khel!

One hundred pounds of TNT can accomplish much.

The ground where the English battalion had gone to earth below swirled with sudden life. Even while the débris was falling in a hail of disaster, racing men were leaping forward, a frantic bugler screaming the "Charge!" as the loose lines of skirmishers converged on the gate.

Of the six men crouching on the very lip of the crater, five staggered to their feet, ears ringing, faces and bodies covered with dust and blood from fragments. One alone—a jagged lump of masonry squatting where his head had been—lay still.

Inside, the Afridis and their Gharwali prisoners—such of them as had not been stunned by the sudden shock, or felled by fragments—rose from the pavements stupidly.

Somewhere a whistle shrilled, and the Afridis, still numbed by the unexpected, saw the mutineers, with the machinelike precision of the trained man, reach back to their neck cloths, saw each man drag a naked bayonet from between his shoulder blades, and before they could realize what had happened, the bounding Rajputs had leaped for the open gateway, stabbing, shouting, slashing. Gharwali infantry held the gate of the Accan Khel!

Several black objects flew over the

heads of the swaying, stabbing mass about the entrance, to fall in the road of the Afridis.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Bursting hand grenades in rear, British rifles and bayonets in front, the raging tribesmen snarled. And then a man with a Lewis machine gun climbed part way up on a jutting piece of broken masonry. Behind him another. Before any fierce-eyed sharpshooter saw them, the pair leveled their weapons.

Tack-a-tacka-tacka-tat-tat!

Ram Rukka paused for an instant before hurling himself into the mass. Verily, Azrael the angel of death, had laid his finger on the Accan Khel. So be it—he could at least die with the rest of his warriors!

But a clawing hand gripped Ram Rukka's shoulder, a snarling voice rang in his ears. Old Abdullah's single eye gleamed in his as Ram Rukka turned his head.

"It is over, Ram Rukka. The Accan Khel must lay down their arms and pay the price of blood! But first, those others below—the Russki and his man, who tricked us into this with their lying tongues! By the beard of the Prophet, shall they go free?"

Ram Rukka understood. He nodded. And the two Afghan hill wolves dived down a little dark doorway opening on a passage, which led to the very bowels of their stronghold.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHITHER?

FRANK NORTON, deafened by the concussion of the blast, rose from his lair by the foundations of the wall as soon as the first show of débris clattered down, and ran for the open gate.

His scheme had worked! As he reached the opening, he cast a glance down the road. The English troops were dashing up! Beside him the little lieu-

tenant of Royal Engineers who had shared the task of laying the mine and setting it off, loomed.

Three of the other men were on their feet. The five, clad in the garb of the Gharwali Rifles, rushed through the gate, pistols in hand.

Norton leaped over the gaping crater into the courtyard, to join the first rush of the Gharwalis inside, fighting to obtain possession of the gateway.

Close upon them, the warriors of the Accan Khel plunged, fully five times stronger than the little band who had volunteered for the forlorn hope.

Bayonets, knives, swords, rose and fell. Here and there an Afridi rifle blazed as one of the tribesmen found sufficient room to level it. And Norton understood why his suggestion that the rebels carry hand grenades had been negated.

"They'd probably not have time to throw 'em," Major Paget had said. "And if anything went wrong, we'd only be arming Accan Khel against the main body. Those chaps know what hand grenades are for! No, we'll leave the grenades for the battalion coming in if the first chaps can hold the gate."

Surging with the crushing impact of the hand-to-hand fighting, Norton used his pistol as he got the chance.

The Gharwalis held the gate. Their task now was to keep possession until reinforcements could come up. The five survivors of the bombing party, with their Webleys, acted as supports, bringing down a tribesman here and there as the swarming Afridis pressed too strongly on the sturdy Rajput soldiers of the crown.

Back of Norton's head was the one fixed idea—to reach Sonya Gritzenka wherever she might be hidden in this stronghold.

How the devil could he win through that howling mass of men who hurled themselves upon the holders of the gateway?

The defenders of the stronghold increased every second, as every available warrior of the Accan Khel came pouring out to swell the Afridi strength. And the handful of Gharwalis decreased as quickly, under the Afghan blades.

Fortunate it was that many of the men of Accan Khel had paused by the pile of rifles and web equipment that the Gharwalis had shed under orders, to seize the loot—paused and fumbled and cursed, hurling the pieces aside as they realized that these were antiquated guns with the bolts removed, and that the ammunition pouches were flat and empty!

Countless hours passed in Frank Norton's estimation—actually about two minutes—as he emptied clip after clip into gibbering brown faces storming down on that thin Gharwali line.

Then, beside him, around him, flowed a tide of tin-hatted, khaki-clad soldier men, shouting in English voices.

Behind and above him came the chatter of the Lewis guns. Ahead hand grenades boomed, their fragments whining crazily. And the tide of battle swayed backward into the widening courtyard. They were in! In!

Frank Norton dodged around the flank, hugging the inside wall, searching, searching.

Where would the girl be hidden? In front of him now loomed a sort of inner stronghold, an open doorway. And as he looked, two Afridi warriors of the Accan Khel, each with drawn blade, rushed into its enveloping shadow.

By the time he reached the doorway, the two he had seen were out of sight. Before him stretched a flight of stone steps, leading—where?

Frank Norton halted and listened. His ears were still ringing with the roar of the explosion. He could hear nothing. Breathing a prayer that his hunch was good, he sped down the steps into gloom.

Then through the buzzing of his ear-drums rang a single shriek—the shriek of a woman, a shriek of pure horror!

CHAPTER XXX.

GOOD HUNTING.

DZERZHINSKY and his jackal, the man Cartright, gazed at each other for a moment following the explosion, while the girl Gladys Hanford sat motionless. The Red Russian leader first broke the tension.

"Get up and see what's happening," he ordered. "I'll take the girl down to the postern, where the horses are waiting."

Cartright rushed from the room. Dzerzhinsky loosened the thong holding the girl to her chair, and half dragged her, her hands still bound, toward the door, the girl fighting as best she could, in silent struggle.

They had reached the doorway when Cartright came running toward them.

"The gate's been blown up, there's fighting in the courtyard. Those damned Gharwalis! Slit this she-devil's throat and let's get out, Dzerzhinsky!"

But the leader shook his head stubbornly.

"My plans can't fail. They never fail. We save her for two reasons—information and a hostage. Come on!"

"You're a fool, Dzerzhinsky," retorted Cartright. "I know these Indian peoples. The Afghans will turn on us if this thing miscarries. Damn it, man, we must get out!"

In Dzerzhinsky's eyes were burning the fires of fanaticism.

"The OGPU never fails! And I am the OGPU. No more words!"

Pattering of rushing feet outside. Cartright, his back to the door, half turned his head in time to see a vision of a rage-distorted face—a face across one cheek of which extended a jagged scar, from the midst of which a red and empty eye socket gaped; the face of Abdullah Khan!

That much Cartright saw—no more. For the dripping blade of Abdullah

Khan crashed down through his skull bones in a horrid chuck—as a butcher's cleaver hews through beef carcass! And Gladys, horror-stricken, screamed shrilly!

Dzerzhinsky, hurling the girl from him so that her body went spinning across the room, jerked from his clothing an automatic, shooting as he drew.

Three times the stubby pistol flared, full in the face of the old Afridi struggling to disengage his blade. Abdullah Khan silently slid over the half fallen body of Cartright, and the pair collapsed on the floor.

Dzerzhinsky, crouching behind his pistol like a snarling timber wolf, glared through the haze of powder smoke. Through the drifting haze, like the form of a djinn of Arabian tales, swelled a vision—a vision looming above the weltering pair in the doorway.

"*Allah-ul-allah!*" roared Ram Rukka, and leaped over the corpses at Dzerzhinsky, flaming blade whirled upward.

Again the stubby automatic spoke. Even Afghan bravery—the bulldog ferocity of the hook-nosed hillman of the Kyber—cannot ride over a smashing steel-jacketed bullet.

Ram Rukka, his soul sliding out to follow Abdullah Khan's to the Paradise of the true believer, crashed heavily upon the floor beside the other dead men. And Dzerzhinsky, snarling viciously, fired shot after shot into the mess, until the emptied pistol clicked, and he straightened up, the light of madness in his eyes.

At last he holstered the empty gun, and, turning toward the corner where Gladys Hanford stood, clenched his hands.

"You did all this," hissed Dzerzhinsky. "The Soviet secret police sentences you to death—and I will carry out the sentence with my bare hands."

"Aren't you just a bit previous?" queried a voice, and Dzerzhinsky whirled.

FRANK NORTON stood in the doorway. "Dzerzhinsky," said Norton, "the whistle has blown for you. No, keep those hands just where they are. Back up. That's right. I should shoot you, now. And I will, if you make the slightest move."

The Red drew back as Norton indicated.

"I've just thought it out this second," Norton went on. "Ten years ago, you remember, you murdered a man—an inoffensive youngster—because he wouldn't tell you where two of his pals were. And those two swore they'd have revenge. Two years later, you were trapped by a group of Polish patriots who had decided you had done sufficient damage to the world. And I was the man who hunted you into their hands. Bunny Sharp and I—the pals of the boy you shot, thought then that you were through. I saw these Poles trap you. I saw them shoot at you. We thought you dead. The world thought you dead. Red Russia officially stated you were dead.

"Then you sprang up again, and we found that you had been at work all this time, plotting against world security. So I drew cards in the game against you. Your American scheme missed fire, because I warned our police. And now your Indian scheme won't work. And the bitter thing to you, I know, will be that you're going to be turned over to England."

No more cruel punishment could Norton have decreed for the ambitious, bloodthirsty Soviet chief—drunk with the wine of power.

The pallid face flushed red. Disre-

garding Norton's leveled pistol, Dzerzhinsky drew his gun and pulled trigger again—the useless, sagging trigger of his empty automatic.

Stupidly, he looked down at the empty gun. Norton, realizing the situation, smiled. Dzerzhinsky's left hand—the man was still regardless of the threat in his enemy's pistol—fumbled for an instant in a vest pocket, moved to his mouth, dropped.

Outside, ammunition boots clumped in the corridor. The room filled with British soldiers, stepping gingerly over the horrors on the floor.

"There's your man, lieutenant," said Frank Norton. "Dzerzhinsky the Red. He'll look good dancing on air in a hempen collar."

"Felix Dzerzhinsky is dead," said the Pole thickly. "He died some years ago—the records of the Soviet secret police will prove it. No one can ever say that Felix Dzerzhinsky ever failed, that Felix Dzerzhinsky fell into British hands."

And the man collapsed, white froth on his lips, his limbs stretching out in the muscular twitchings of death.

Norton flung himself on his knees, sniffed. A slight odor as of crushed peach pits came from the dead mouth.

"He's right," said Norton, rising and dusting off his knees. "Prussic acid. He probably had it in a capsule—crushed it in his mouth as he spoke."

Norton turned to the girl, fingers working at her bonds.

"I have a lot of things to tell you," said Frank Norton, as, one arm supporting her, they moved out of the darkness into the sunlight of the future.

RACCOON FUR FARMS

AMONG other good things that the colleges have done is to make the raccoon-breeding industry thrive as a result of raccoon fur coats having become a fad among college young people. Fur farms have been established in Alaska and on islands along the coast. There are fish and shellfish along the Alaskan coast, these being good food for the raccoons. They have their dens in willow, cedar, cottonwood, and fir trees and among rock piles.

***The indolent young range
detective lets others make the
speeches—he gets the results***



Smoke Talk In San Miguel

By Galen C. Colin

A "Lazy Lucas" Story

THE broad shoulders of "Lazy" Lucas were hunched indolently, and his deep-set blue eyes were almost closed as he leaned against the wall of the Panamint Bar. His high boot heels were hooked over the lower rung of the chair, and his knees doubled almost to his chin.

But behind that mask of laziness, a lightning brain was keyed to high pitch. There was something in the air of the Panamint Bar to-night—something that crinkled his spine with a hint of danger and excitement.

He surveyed the long, low room from beneath lazy lids. The air was filled with

the haze of smoke and the reek of cheap tequila.

Big as the room was, the fifty or more hard-bitten men filled it to capacity. The rows of chairs against the wall held a dozen of them. Another dozen stood at the scarred oak bar, downing the Panamint dynamite.

The four card tables held their full quota, and the rest milled about, their rowels clanking and their boots thumping on the slab floor.

On the narrow platform at the far end, a thin, pasty man banged out a ribald tune on the tin-panny piano with one hand, while the other lifted a glass of tequila to his lips.

Not in the week since Lazy Lucas rode into San Miguel had such a crowd thronged the Panamint Bar. But then, this was the first Saturday night.

Lazy Lucas shook his head almost imperceptibly. Such a crowd as this only made his task more difficult. Beyond a doubt, the man who had brought him to the wicked little town was among the milling throng. But picking him out was a different proposition.

A WEEK before, the six-foot blond waddy had ridden into San Miguel. His coming had caused no sensation in the evil huddle of drab buildings. Sharp eyes had watched the slouching figure astride the rangy black horse, as he ambled slowly up the dusty street. It was impossible to get into San Miguel without being thoroughly studied and catalogued.

Evidently these watchers had placed him as a wandering cowpoke, who would rather ramble than work. There was nothing in Lazy's indolent appearance and manner to suggest that he was the shrewdest range detective on the Cattlemen's Association rolls. There was not a hint that beneath that slothful exterior lurked the muscles of a catamount, that those dangling hands were lightning with six-gun or rope.

That was as Lazy Lucas would have it. More than once this very manner and appearance had lulled some crook or murderer into false security.

Nor was Lazy's attitude entirely a pose. He had won his nickname fairly, according to range county standards. The routine of ranch life bored him to distraction. Only danger and excitement could arouse him to action.

Barry Hildreth, old secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, of all the men on the range, had recognized the ability of Lazy Lucas. Barry Hildreth was trained to judge men, just as cow-men judge stock.

Barry Hildreth sent Lazy Lucas only on missions that promised plenty of excitement—on missions that demanded shrewdness and patience as well as cold courage.

This was one of them. Two weeks ago old Ben Hatch of the BH spread had been bushwhacked, and robbed of five thousand dollars.

Dirk Briscoe, owner of the Box B, had brought the news to Pyrite. He told his story to Barry Hildreth as a matter of course.

"Alberto, ol' Ben's half-breed wrangler, 'lowed thet new rider of Ben's done it. Said he saw the hombre drag down on Ben from behind a clump of soapweed, on top of a sand hill where the trail bends. Saw him take Hatch's wallet, an' hightail it south."

"But Ben—was he carryin' much money? Somehow thet don't sound like ol' Ben Hatch," muttered Hildreth.

Dirk Briscoe nodded grimly. "Five thousand. He was headin' for my place in his buckboard. I hold a mortgage on his place—an' he was figurin' on payin' it off."

"We'll take the trail," said Barry Hildreth evenly.

Barry Hildreth gave the assignment to Lazy Lucas as a matter of course. The suspect's name was unknown in Pyrite. He had been riding for Ben

Hatch for just a month, and had never been in the little town.

Even his description was hazy. All Lazy Lucas knew was that the man was of medium height, broad of shoulder, narrow of hips, legs slightly saddle-bowed. All—except that the man's otherwise coal-black hair held a single wisp of gray.

For a week Lazy Lucas combed the hills to the south of Pyrite without a trace of the killer. Then word came by devious ways that he was holed up in San Miguel.

With this meager information, Lazy Lucas took the trail. A full hundred miles by the twisting, rugged path—a hundred miles devoid of human habitation. Lazy Lucas rode it leisurely.

Then San Miguel huddled beside the trail, like a hungry coyote on its haunches. Lazy Lucas knew of the town, but had never seen it before.

Plenty wicked, according to range talk. The six-gun was law in San Miguel. No questions were ever asked. A man's business and his name were his own.

Lazy Lucas knew what he was up against. If his profession should become known, his life would not be worth a dobie dollar. He'd have to snake his man out of San Miguel without fuss or feathers—once he found him.

And that bade fair to be the hardest job. It seemed that half the men in the Panamint Bar answered the description of the killer. Lazy Lucas looked for the lock of gray hair—but almost to a man, the hangers-on of the saloon wore their broad Stetsons.

For almost a week the blond C. A. man loafed in the Panamint Bar, bedding down in one of the six rooms on the second floor of the rickety building. Sight of him, hunched dozing in his chair, became common. No one paid any attention to him.

Then came this night, and the electric tingle in the air. For no apparent rea-

son, Lazy Lucas had a hunch that something was due to happen.

BENEATH his slouching mask of indolence, his nerves and muscles tensed. He felt the comfortable weight of his six-guns, dragging at his thighs. Then a swarthy man, sitting beside Lazy Lucas, jogged him with a sharp elbow.

"Stranger in San Miguel, huh?" queried the man in an oily voice.

"Been here a week," drawled Lazy Lucas.

"Longer than that since I been to town. No wonder I ain't ever seen yuh before. But I wouldn't miss to-night for a hundred yearlin's."

"Something special, huh?"

"Special? I should say there is! Yuh're goin' to see the prettiest Mex gal this side of Juarez. But yuh better not try no flirtin'—for Brazos Dalbert is almighty jealous."

"I ain't lost no Mex gal," grinned Lazy Lucas. "It's tirin' enough, jest lookin' out for my ownself."

"I'm jest warnin' yuh, seein' yuh're a stranger," grunted the other. "Brazos Dalbert is plumb bad medicine."

Then he turned toward the platform, as the pasty-faced piano-player struck up the first chords of "La Paloma."

The door from the stairs swung wide. A slender, darkly pretty girl stepped out upon the platform. Her face was set and her eyes were wide. In spite of the fixed smile, Lazy Lucas thought he could read fear on her dark face.

Close behind, six feet tall, "Brazos" Dalbert, owner of the Panamint, faced the crowd. His black eyes were narrowed, and his mouth was a thin, straight line.

Lazy Lucas could almost feel those eyes boring into his, and the electric thrill coursed up his spine again.

Something *was* going to happen. And somehow Brazos Dalbert was mixed up in it. Strange, too, for he

had hardly exchanged half a dozen words with the owner of the Panamint.

Now the girl's eyes strayed around the ogling throng, as if she were looking for some one. Her gaze stopped at Lazy Lucas. He sensed a warning in her eyes, an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

He could see Brazos Dalbert's lips move, but could not make out the words. The girl's face paled still more. But she widened her smile with an effort. Then she flipped a paper rose from her hair out to Lazy Lucas.

Lazy Lucas caught the rose deftly.

Apparently Lazy Lucas was the only one in the Panamint to sense that this was all a bit of prearranged play. For he heard the swiftly indrawn breath of the crowd.

Then Brazos Dalbert, shoulders hunched and fingers crooked about the butt of his gun, strode to the front of the platform. He slapped the girl aside, and glared down at Lazy Lucas. The gun leaped from its holster. It barked sullenly, but Lazy Lucas was a breath faster. The bullet spat into the wall where the blond waddy had been sitting but a split second before.

LAZY LUCAS had hurled himself to the floor, and rolled to the scanty protection of the platform. The crowd surged back out of the line of fire. Once more the gun roared. A heavy slug plowed into the slab floor, no more than three inches from Lazy's head.

Brazos Dalbert swore luridly. Then Lazy Lucas, glancing up from the floor, saw the man's gun muzzle raise swiftly. The blond waddy lifted his head to see who it was that was due to stop the bullet. It was some one out in the crowd.

Crack! Crack! The two reports came almost as one. The glass chimney on the big swinging brass lamp crashed into a thousand pieces. The

Panamint was plunged into sudden and complete darkness.

Lazy Lucas, gun in hand, crouched for a swift race to the door. A hand dropped softly on his shoulder, and a man's voice whispered in his ear.

"Yuh can never make the door. But hang onto me. This here window looks plumb invitin'."

Lazy Lucas and his unseen guide threaded their way through the milling, cursing throng. They reached the half-opened window. They threw it wide, and dropped through to the ground outside.

"Snake yore brone outer the string," whispered the stranger. "We've got no time to lose. Got to put plenty miles behind us pronto."

"My hoss is in the livery stable," drawled Lazy Lucas. "An' why should I run from Brazos Dalbert, anyhow?"

"Ain't got no time to argue," grunted the other. "All I can tell yuh is thet there's more behind the deal than jest jealousy. I've got a note thet Mex gal slipped to me. An' thet note needs some studyin'."

Lazy stood undecided for a moment. There was smoke talk he wanted to make with Brazos Dalbert. But good sense dictated that he put it off to a more opportune time.

"Let's get goin'!" whispered the stranger. "I've got a cabin, three-four miles up in the hills. We can hole up there, until we talk it over. This deal concerns me as much as it does yuh."

In the darkness, Lazy Lucas turned toward the livery stable. The two men kept to the shadows, slipping like a pair of phantoms through the night.

They snaked Lazy's black from its stall. For an hour they rode into the hills, with only the sound of their horses' hoofs to break the silence.

At last they drew up in front of a squat cabin set back a hundred yards from the trail. They slipped from their saddles, and strode to the door.

WHEN the oil lamp was lighted, Lazy Lucas had the first look at his rescuer. He was a man of medium height, broad of shoulder, and with legs slightly saddle-bowed. Deep brown eyes looked from beneath dark lashes, fearless but friendly.

The stranger turned to Lazy Lucas. A smile flicked across his sun-bronzed face. "Bob Bruce is my name—an' I welcome yuh to my shack."

Lazy Lucas thrust out his hand. "Lazy Lucas, I'm called—an' I'm thankin' yuh plenty for thet shot."

Once more Bob Bruce grinned. "Brazos Dalbert was plannin' on gettin' me, too. For why, I don't know. This here note from the Mex gal don't tell much."

He pushed his hat back from his brow, and thrust his right hand into his pocket. He pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper, and handed it to Lazy Lucas.

But the blond waddy did not see the paper. His eyes were fixed on the single lock of gray hair that showed in startling contrast in the stranger's black thatch!

Lazy's hand dropped to his holster. "Bob Bruce, much as I hate to, I'm arrestin' yuh for killin' Ben Hatch, an' robbin' him of five thousand dollars."

"Killin' Ben Hatch! Robbin' him! An' yuh're an officer! I was kinder lookin' for one, ever since the posse chased me away from the BH spread."

"Posse? What d'yuh mean, Bruce? There never was a posse after yuh. The C. A. don't call out a posse for a single man."

"No posse? Then thet half-breed, Alberto, lied to me. He rode out to the west pasture, the day I left the spread. It was jest before noon. Said they was a posse huntin' me with a rope—thet I'd best high-tail it."

In spite of his better judgment, Lazy Lucas felt that the stranger was telling the truth—and it didn't check up right.

"Then yuh're meanin' thet yuh didn't do it—thet yuh didn't have no reason to leave the BH spread?"

Bob Bruce shook his head. "Didn't dream I was branded as a killer. Suppose yuh tell me about it, Lucas."

Lazy Lucas dropped into a chair across the slab table from Bob Bruce. He spoke slowly, as he related how Dirk Briscoe had brought the news of the killing to Pyrite.

For a long moment Bruce was silent. At last he shook his head in puzzled bewilderment.

"Thet story sounds kinder crazy. Alberto said thet Hatch was killed near sundown—but he warned me to high-tail it right nigh noon. Of course I never killed the ol' man. Don't think Alberto would lie, though—not unless he was scared into it."

"Supposin' thet's true? Who done the killin'? Ben Hatch is dead—an' the money's gone. Alberto said he saw yuh drag down on the ol' man from behind a clump of soapweed, on top of a sand hill."

"Might have been somebody thet looked like me. But thet wouldn't check up with Alberto's lyin' to me. It's shore mixed up—"

Lazy straightened with a jerk. "Let's see the note from thet Mex gal. We been plumb forgettin' thet—an' it might clear up the whole deal!"

Bob Bruce spread the crumpled paper on the table. Together, the two men read it.

Brazos is plan for kill you an those yellow-haired stranger tonight. He have force me to flirt with the stranger to give him the excuse. It is because of the note those half-breed boy have bring him just about dark. You must be prepare.

PALOMA.

Lazy Lucas grunted, as he finished reading.

"So Brazos Dalbert got a note—and decided to kill us, the moment he read it. Thet seems to prove thet there's some one who wants us both outer the

way. I've got a hunch thet if we can get thet note, we'll be on the trail of the real killer of old Ben Hatch."

Bob Bruce nodded. "An' Brazos Dalbert thinks we've high-tailed it. To-night would be a good time to tackle him."

"Jest what I was thinkin'," said Lazy Lucas evenly.

THE blond C. A. man and his dark-haired companion entered San Miguel with the caution of marauding Apaches. Only a single light flickered in the little town. But they circled, and came in from the opposite direction, not taking any chances of meeting men set to guard the trail.

In a roundabout way, they edged toward the Panamint Bar. The single light came from the second floor of the ramshackle building.

"Thet's Brazos Dalbert's room," whispered Bob Bruce.

Lazy Lucas and Bob Bruce ground-anchored their horses fifty yards from the saloon, in the deep shadow of a rickety old shed. They catfooted toward the shapeless structure and stopped in its shadow.

Directly below the window was a lean-to shed with a sloping roof. A tall man might see into the room from this roof. And Lazy Lucas was tall.

From Bob Bruce's shoulders, he clambered to the sloping slabs. Slowly, with infinite caution, he raised himself and peered through the dirty glass.

After a long minute, he dropped to the roof, and whispered down to the man below. "He's there—an' alone. Seems to be countin' his day's take."

"But how we goin' to get to him?"

Lazy Lucas dropped lithely from the roof. He whispered his instructions to his companion.

"Yuh bring up our horses for a quick get-away, whilst I'm doin' a little house-breakin'. I know the lay of the Panamint. Bedded down up there for a

week. I'll be waitin' at Brazos Dalbert's door when yuh get back."

"An' what's my part? What-all yuh want me to do?"

"Gather yoreself a handful of pebbles. Heave 'em against the window. When Brazos Dalbert decides to take a look at what's makin' the noise, I'll drop in on him. Plenty simple."

Bob Bruce whirled on his heel, and headed back for the spot where they had left their horses. Lazy Lucas made for the back door of the Panamint Bar.

It was barred from the inside, but he remembered that the glass had been none too solidly fastened. After all, Brazos Dalbert figured that no one in San Miguel would dare break into his establishment.

With the blade of his knife, Lazy loosened the glass still more. Cautiously he lifted it out. He thrust his hand through, and lifted the heavy bar. The door swung open noiselessly.

Lazy tiptoed inside. The bar room was still rank with tobacco smoke and stale liquor.

Feeling his way, circling tables and chairs, he reached the narrow, twisting stairs. Testing each slab before he put his weight on it, he made his slow way upward in the darkness.

Now he was in the long, narrow hallway that extended between the rows of rooms. Brazos Dalbert's was at the far end.

Even as Lazy silently traversed this hall, he heard the clink of pebbles striking on glass. He clenched his teeth, and lengthened his stride.

He reached the door beneath which a narrow line of light streaked across the floor. He placed his ear against the heavy oak door.

He heard a chair scrape backward—then the pound of heavy feet. He waited until the sound died down. Then his hand shot out to the latch. He lifted it noiselessly, and the door swung silently wide.

Lazy Lucas swept the room with swift gaze. His eyes darted past the heavy table in the center, swung past the bunk against the wall, and came to rest on the back of a man who crouched in front of the window.

Brazos Dalbert was intent upon what was going on outside—what had made the clinking sound against the pane. Lazy Lucas took three long, silent strides into the room.

He stood before the table, his six-gun trained at Dalbert's back. A faint smile flicked across his face.

"Stick 'em high—an' turn slow an' careful!" Lazy Lucas's drawling voice was low, but it carried more than a hint of authority.

BRAZOS DALBERT jerked erect as if he had been clubbed. Instinctively his hands went toward the ceiling. Then he pivoted slowly upon his heel. His black eyes glittered, and his mouth twisted into a snarl as he recognized the man behind the steady smoke-wagon.

"Walk slow an' easy to yore chair. Reckon yuh can talk better settin' down—an' talkin's yore next job."

Cursing at every step, Brazos Dalbert strode forward. Lazy gestured toward the chair with his gun.

"Now, flop, hombre. Take a load off yore feet."

Brazos Dalbert slumped into the chair, and glared up at the blond waddy across the table.

"I didn't come back to plug yuh—although yuh got it comin'," drawled Lucas. "I'm ainin' to have a look at thet note yuh got this afternoon. After thet, yuh an' me will part company—I hope for keeps."

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about!" rasped Brazos Dalbert.

Lazy Lucas smiled slowly. He shook his head. "A waddy thet's already got as many sins on his head as yuh hev shouldn't add lyin' to 'em. I'm speakin'

of the note thet the half-breed kid handed yuh to-night."

"Yuh're dreamin', hombre! Yuh're plumb loco!"

Lazy Lucas's face went grim. His thumb reached for the hammer of his six-gun, and pulled it slowly back.

"I hate to plug yuh—but yuh don't leave me no choice," he said softly.

Brazos Dalbert's dark face paled. "Take yuh finger off the trigger. I'll tell!" he grunted.

"Thet's more like it. I'm waitin'—an' in somewhat of a hurry."

Brazos Dalbert reluctantly pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket. He handed it to Lazy Lucas.

"Read it to me," snapped the blond waddy. "I'm too busy watchin' yuh. But be sure yuh don't miss none of the words."

Brazos Dalbert's eyes dropped to the note. Slowly he began to read:

"A lazy, actin', sleepy blond waddy headed for San Miguel a week ago. He is a C. A. man. He's hunting for another hombre with a slash of white in his hair. There's a thousand dollars in it for you, if you see that neither one of them ever leaves San Miguel."

Lazy Lucas listened with little sign of interest. But the words were burned deep in his brain.

"An' who signed the note, Dalbert?"

The saloonkeeper shook his head. "Signed by an X. Don't know who the waddy is. I've done several jobs for him—an' the pay is good."

"Where does he hole up, then?"

Once more Brazos Dalbert disclaimed knowledge. "I never inquired. Ain't none of my business."

"Never mind. Reckon I know. Hand me thet note, an' we'll get goin'."

"We?" queried the thoroughly startled Dalbert.

"Yuh didn't think I was leavin' yuh here to raise a rumpus, did yuh? Yuh're goin' along for a mile or two, until I'm shore yuh can't set none of your lobes on my trail."

TWO miles up the trail toward Pyrite, Lazy Lucas and Bob Bruce released the cursing saloonkeeper. It would take the man almost an hour to walk back through the darkness. By that time they would be too far for pursuit to bother them.

For the remainder of the night they kept to the Pyrite trail, urging their horses to a ground-covering fox trot. But when the first streaks of dawn pinked the eastern sky, they angled from the trail, and stopped in a spruce-choked canyon.

"I'm right tuckered out, an' needin' sleep," drawled Lazy Lucas. "We ain't in no particular hurry to get back to Pyrite. Fact is, I'd rather take my time. Give me longer to kinder puzzle out this here deal."

"Yuh aimin' to jail me until yuh get the straight of it?"

Lazy Lucas shook his head. "No jail, feller. I'm puttin' yuh on parole. Reckon yuh won't mind holin' up in the BH headquarters for a spell?"

"That means yuh don't think I shot the ol' man?"

"Got to suspect yuh—until I find out different," declared Lazy Lucas evenly. "But suspectin' never hurt anybody. Spread yore blankets an' get a little shut-eye. I aim to sleep some, myself."

For half the day the two men kept under cover in the canyon. Bob Bruce slept, and Lazy Lucas dozed fitfully. But always he kept his ears attuned for the beat of hoofs on the trail.

The sun reached the zenith, and started down the western sky before Lazy Lucas aroused Bob Bruce.

"Time to be movin', feller. Reckon nobody from San Miguel is on our trail."

Mile after mile unreeled beneath the hoofs of the black and the sorrel. Midnight came before Lazy Lucas and his companion pulled to a halt near a dark huddle of buildings.

"This is to be yore home until I come

for yuh," said Lazy Lucas. "If things go right, it shouldn't be long. Remember, I'm trustin' yuh not to high-tail it."

"I'll stay put, Lucas," declared Bob.

NOW Lazy Lucas turned his black's head toward Pyrite, ten miles farther north. He entered the little town at two o'clock in the morning. Not a light shone anywhere. He made his way to his own shack at the outskirts of the town.

He pulled the saddle from his horse, and turned it into the corral. Then he sprawled on his bunk, and slept. But he awakened at dawn, and pulled on his boots.

He made his way up the dusty street, stopping at the little office of the Cattle-men's Association. It would be a full hour before Barry Hildreth showed up, but he slouched indolently in the rough chair on the porch to wait.

Apparently the blond waddy slept. But hardly had Barry Hildreth's stocky form hove into sight a block down the street when Lazy Lucas's eyes popped open.

The old secretary caught sight of the lazy, slouching figure in the chair while still a hundred yards away. He stopped short in amazement—then hurried forward.

"Where did yuh drop from, Lucas? We heerd yuh was dead—plugged in a saloon brawl in San Miguel. Was plannin' to send some one to investigate."

"Who brought yuh the news, boss?"

"Stranger, ridin' from the south, told Dirk Briscoe. An' he sent word to me by Alberto, his half-breed boy."

"Uh-huh, sounds reasonable. An' I know how the mistake happened. I was in a kinder yuh might call it brawl. But the feller missed me."

"Was it Ben Hatch's killer thet tried to down yuh? An' did yuh bring him in?"

Lazy Lucas shook his head. "Thet was a wild-goose chase, boss. The killer wasn't in San Miguel, after all. But I reckon I'll bring him in."

"Then yuh know where to find him?"

"Ain't real sure," said Lazy Lucas. "But I got a hunch. But first, I'd better ride down to Dirk Briscoe's Box B, an' let him know I ain't dead. He'll be right interested to know—especially when I tell him I'm plannin' on bringin' in the killer. For the polecat has got five thousand dollars thet Ben Hatch was goin' to pay Briscoe on his mortgage."

"The money ain't worryin' Briscoe none," grunted Barry Hildreth. "But he's appeared right interested in yore doin's."

With a lazy grunt, the blond waddy heaved himself from his chair, and slouched off the porch. He turned to Barry Hildreth, a faint smile on his lips.

"Yuh might clean up a cell, all nice an' shipshape. I'll likely bring yuh some one to occupy it right soon."

AN hour later he topped a ridge that overlooked the drab buildings of the Box B spread. Here he pulled to a halt, and studied the lay-out for a full fifteen minutes.

Apparently the ranch house was deserted, for he did not see a single human being down there in the clearing.

But when he prodded his black ahead, he did not keep to the trail. Instead he circled, and approached the Box B headquarters through a tangled thicket of juniper and spruce.

He ground-tied his horse at the edge of the thicket, and made his way forward afoot. He kept to the cover of boulders and clumps of brush until he was within fifty yards of the house.

Behind a jagged boulder, he crouched for ten minutes. Still no sign of any occupant of the sprawling house. Lazy Lucas drew a longer breath of relief.

He straightened, and strode confidently to the house. He lifted the latch on the front door, and tiptoed in. The windows were closed, and the air was stale with tobacco smoke.

Seemed like the house must have been closed for a day or two, was the thought that ran through Lazy's mind. Maybe Dirk Briscoe and his men were out on the round-up.

Didn't seem right, though. He must have been home yesterday at the latest, for he had sent word to Barry Hildreth in Pyrite then.

Lazy Lucas took another step forward. Then he came to an abrupt stop. For the mumble of low voices reached him. They seemed to come from the room that opened to the north of this one.

Lazy catfooted to the door, and placed his ear to the wood. The words reached him faintly, but plainly.

"Yuh're ridin' south to San Miguel again, Alberto. If Brazos Dalbert can show yuh proof, yuh're to hand him this envelope."

"But me, I'm scare', boss," came the half-breed's whine. "San Miguel, she ees wicked town. Een thees town they no like men weeth brown skin."

"D'yuh want a dose of what happened to Ben Hatch?" rasped the other.

"I'll ride, boss—but jus' the same I'm scare'," whimpered Alberto.

Now footsteps sounded in the other room. They seemed to be coming toward the door, and Lazy Lucas flattened himself against the wall.

The door swung wide, hiding the form of the blond waddy behind it. He peered through the crack at the hinges. His face was grim, as he saw Dirk Briscoe and the half-breed, Alberto.

"When yuh get back, report to me at the line camp up at the west end of the range," growled Dirk Briscoe. "The round-up is headquarterin' there."

But now the door crashed shut be-

hind the two. They whirled, startled—to look squarely into the unwavering muzzles of Lazy Lucas's six-guns.

The half-breed's face went gray. "He's—he's alive—or I'm see hees ghos'!" he muttered through trembling lips.

"Plenty alive—an' honin' to draw down on the worst pair of skunks thet ever infested this range!" said Lazy Lucas evenly.

"What—what yuh doin' here, Lucas? I thought yuh——"

"Yuh thought Brazos Dalbert had plugged me, huh? Thought he'd earned thet thousand yuh promised!"

"I don't understand. I don't know what yuh mean," stammered Briscoe.

"Yuh understand, right enough. Yuh figured on usin' the money yuh got off a man yuh plugged to pay for havin' two more killed. But yore plan mis-fired—an' yuh an' yuh half-breed dawg are headin' for jail."

Dirk Briscoe seemed to sense the fact that his hand had been played to the limit. Apparently he saw nothing ahead but prison—or the rope. Desperation was written on his face.

"Yuh'll never be able to prove it!" he rasped, as his eyes narrowed. "Yuh're follerin'——"

Suddenly he whirled and dived to one side. His hand streaked for his holster, and snatched out his long-barreled six-gun.

But Lazy Lucas had been looking for just such a move. He ducked, as his own gun swept toward the man on the floor. He squeezed the trigger. The heavy slug caught Dirk Briscoe in the shoulder, half rolling him over.

Lazy Lucas leaped toward the man. He swooped, and snatched the gun from the slackening hand. He straightened, and whirled toward Alberto.

The half-breed was streaking for the door. But the blond waddy's sharp order brought him to a halt. Then Lazy Lucas addressed Dirk Briscoe.

"We're headin' for Pyrite—but first I'm aimin' to find the rest of thet five thousand. Yuh can get to a doctor a heap quicker, if yuh tell me where yuh got it hid."

"Under the pad on my bunk," groaned Dirk Briscoe. "Hurry! I'm bleedin' to death fast!"

"Thet would save the State a length of rope," grunted Lazy Lucas. "But yuh'll live to stretch it."

TWO hours later, Lazy Lucas was slumped in the big chair again, on the porch of Barry Hildreth's office. A man had been sent to the BH spread to tell Bob Bruce he was free of all suspicion.

"I still don't see how yuh happened to get on the right trail, Lucas," said the old secretary, puzzled.

Lazy Lucas grinned slowly. "Yuh ain't seen Bob Bruce, in the first place. Yuh'll know by lookin' at him thet he ain't a killer. An' thet note to Dalbert proved thet Bruce was innocent.

"After thet, it was only a matter of decidin' who was the right hombre. I figgered thet Dirk Briscoe was due to gain more than any one else by Ben Hatch's death. Yuh see, he'd get both the five thousand an' the ol' man's spread.

"An' anyway, Briscoe an' thet half-breed seemed too danged much interested in the whole deal. Did yuh stop to think thet they was the ones thet brought the news of Ben Hatch's killin'—thet the killer was holed up in San Miguel—an thet I had been plugged in a saloon brawl?"

Barry Hildreth shook his head. "I know all thet, Lucas. But I still say thet it took a right good head to figger it out—an' plenty of sand to carry it through."

Watch for another thrilling adventure of Lazy Lucas, the range detective, in an early issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch.



**Jim Dean and his Seminole friends fight through
a terrific storm to find breath-taking
adventure on**

Conjure Cay

A "Jim Dean" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "Drowned Men's Gold," etc.

CHAPTER I.

BLOW, WINDS, BLOW!

THE schooner that had followed the *Spray* out of Miami three hours before was making heavy weather of it. She was still slowly gaining, and there was no question in the minds of the three owners of the *Spray* that they were being chased with a definite purpose.

Jim Dean was at the wheel of the sloop. "Tortuga" Sam, his bronzed, muscular body stripped to shorts, glistening with spray that came over their

own bows, was watching the laboring schooner.

Twilight was approaching, with the eastern sky very clear but pale. The low coast of Florida showed like a brush stroke of deep purple along the western horizon. The prow of the two-master flung up spouts of foam.

"That schooner, she's *La Paloma*. Better she reef," said Tortuga Sam. "Too much wind and, bimeby, more coming. Pretty soon we head into wind, go south of Andros, keep in deep water. Big wind in shallow place blow water clean off bottom."

He did not advise a reef in their own sail as yet. With a comparatively small jib, bent to a short club-boom, they were more buoyant than the schooner with both jib and staysail forward, lunging into the choppy seas that slammed against her bows as if trying to delay her and give the smaller vessel the advantage.

Just what the tactics of the schooner's crew might be was hard to guess. They might come alongside, even try to effect a boarding. The men aboard of her were a hard-boiled lot; the schooner *La Paloma* had a reputation that was far from spotless.

Probably they would merely try to keep in contact, though it was likely that they might use threats. They could not know the destination of the *Spray* or they would have used their superior speed and held a different course. But even if they had not heard of Drowned Island they clearly considered it worth while to keep in touch with the sloop.

Now, the sloop pointed higher than the schooner; and the latter, not wanting to split tacks with the *Spray*, with night coming on and the possibility of being out of sight by morning had elected to buck the seas, both craft close-hauled. Dean wondered whether the pounding she was getting would not sooner or later spring her seams. They were getting showers of brine on board the sloop but the *Paloma* was taking it aboard by the liquid ton.

Jim grinned at Tom, Sam's brother, and Tom grinned back. This was sport royal. The chance of interference did not lessen it. They had been interfered with before and had given a good account of themselves. They were prepared to do so now. But it looked as if they were going to make a race of it. Darkness was coming, the wind was already half a gale.

Their mainsail was stiff as curved steel, without a quiver or a wrinkle. The wind pennant stood out hard. The

boom strained against the short sheet and the foam seethed along her leeward side, brimming to the rail. Their self-baling cockpit got rid of what water came aboard.

Sloop and schooner both had engines, but they were sailing faster than propellers could drive them. Much of the thrust would be lost in these short channel seas, there was a long stretch ahead and gasoline was precious.

Drowned Island was a narrow islet some twelve miles long, surrounded by the coral barrier of Hurricane Reef. A few people were said to live upon it, mostly, if not entirely Carib Indians, descendants of the natives who greeted Columbus when he landed on the shore of the New World. They raised goats and made salt.

When the seas thundered on Hurricane Reef the spume swept so thickly over the narrow cay that it could not be seen, save by the gulls, or from a plane.

Legend said there was mineral in the rocks of Drowned Island. Nothing definite was known about it. It might be gold or silver, nickel, or cinnabar. Some whispers claimed there were gems there. It was a mysterious spot. Certainly it had once been the haunt of buccaners and the legend of the mineral ores persisted, though the only gold and gem so far dug in the Caribbees came from pirate hoards, few and far between.

It was what Jim Dean had always craved for in the days when he worked for a travel bureau in New York and gave luckier tourists advice or sold them tickets for the Spanish Main, the hunting ground of Blackbeard Teach, of Kidd and Sir Henry Morgan.

EARLIER that summer he had been one of the army of unemployed, seated on a park bench in New York with nothing ahead but the prospect of sleeping out and living

off wind-pudding or what a breadline might bring him.

Luck had been just round the corner for him, though. He had been able to perform a service that proved his courage and speed in thought and action. This had led to a confidential position on a pirate expedition to the west coast of Florida, where ancient pirate loot had been successfully unearthed and Dean had made the close comradeship of Tortuga Sam and his brother Tom, both proving their valor as fighting men, aside from their other ratings as sailors and true adventurers.

They were Seminole Indians, with a mixture of the ancient Mayan stock, magnificent specimens of manhood, to whom bravery and fidelity were traits as natural as walking.

After that trip, Dean and Sam and Tom had joined forces on a treasure hunt of their own, seeking and finding drowned men's gold in the hull of a sunken galleon off the beach of a little known island geographically connected with the Bahamas, led there by the golden coins Sam had picked up on that lonely strand when the vessel of the sponging fleet on which he served put in for water.

They were comparatively rich now, the three of them, but their sudden wealth had not spoiled them nor blunted the keen steel of their spirits for adventure and exploration. They could have bought a larger vessel, but they preferred the sloop they had first got out of their pooled earnings.

They had spent money on her. Now they had an extra suit of sails, the cabin fittings were more than comfortable, and a small galley had been installed, though they still preferred to cook and sleep in the cockpit when the weather allowed.

There was an expansion tank under the narrow after deck for gasoline, and the compact engine, metal hooded, was powerful. They only used it in emer-

gency. Dean had known something of launches but nothing of sailing vessels, now he was becoming rapidly a blue-water man and, like Sam and Tom, he preferred canvas to power. There was something to the tug of the helm, the leverage of muscles pitted against a full sail and a straining keel, that appealed to them.

There was a fine stock of provisions aboard but they liked to live simply, to catch their meal and broil the fresh fish to make a meal fit for the gods with Tom's salt bread or corn pone, topped off by fruit they had gathered themselves.

Their compass was an expensive one, recently adjusted. The chronometer and sextant were the best. They had the latest charts, and Dean was mastering navigation. Tortuga Sam steered by stars and sun; he set his courses for the right landfall with a precision that proclaimed him a natural genius, born to the sea. He knew the northern groups of the Caribbean best, and he had not sailed as far south and east as the present trip called for, but that made little difference to his sailor's skill and instinct.

Now he sniffed at the air; he looked at all quarters of the compass, watched the run of the sea and even tasted the water. He nodded sagely at the schooner, a little closer now, still diving into it. He gazed at their own stout mast, at the taut stays. The wind was so strong and steady the reef points lay like heavy lengths of wire.

"How about it?" asked Jim. "Want to put in a reef?" It was against his own judgment. To do it they would have to throw the sloop dead into the wind and lose progress, with the pursuing vessel entirely too close for comfort.

Sam shook his head. They would chance carrying on.

Quietly as they had lived in Miami, silent as they had been about any of their plans, the whisper had passed that

here were the three who had found the drowned men's gold; fought for it against Parrados and his gang of Greeks; smugglers, runners of contraband, up-to-date pirates under as ruthless a leader as any black-flag skipper who made his hapless victims walk the plank or marooned them on a waterless cay with no provisions but a keg of salt pork.

Parrados was dead now. His bones lay with the coral, and small fish swam through the eye sockets of his skull. His memory was not lamented. But the whisper about the three partners who had bested him grew to a newspaper tale and they found themselves the object of entirely too much attention to suit their purpose.

They were confidently certain that the schooner followed for no other reason than a belief that they were on the trail of more treasure, and that those aboard meant to arrive with them, to claim a share. They could do this if rich mineral should be found, unless Jim and Sam and Tom could sufficiently disguise their prospecting.

None of them knew anything about native ores. The best they could do would be to secure promising samples and have them assayed. This they expected to do in Trinidad or one of the larger of the British islands. But they did not care to be spied upon.

Since their affair with Parrados, they were amply armed and munitioned. They had even secured a quick-firer from a rum runner who had become discouraged by the too persistent attention of the customs craft. This they had not yet mounted forward. It was at present concealed in a tarpaulin cover in the forepeak. They were not looking for a fight, but they were ready for it.

The *Spray* looked like nothing more than a well-built and well-outfitted fishing or sponging sloop, and the three of them like ordinary seamen and fishermen.

Jim Dean was tanned almost as dark a bronze as the two Seminoles. Their clothes were coarse, aside from what they had in the lockers for special occasions. They had anticipated having little trouble shaking off the schooner after dark, but she had proved faster than they expected and steadily overhauled them until, now, she was carrying too much sail for safety.

"How about a reef?" Tom suggested.

Jim was actually, if not nominally, the skipper. He had shown himself a leader, and the brothers ranked him for his brains and his superior education, though there was never any suggestion of superiority or inferiority among the three. Each had his special merits, which the others recognized without envy. Sam had the strength of a giant, Tom was not far behind and was a marvelous cook. Dean was a good swimmer, but the brothers swam like loons. They had a native knowledge of the sea and of the cays that Jim Dean could hardly gather in a lifetime. All three were owners of first-class health and humor, and they made a perfect outfit. But Dean's brains, and perhaps the prestige of the white man, made his two comrades look up to him. It was a responsibility he took seriously.

It was a wonderful life they lived as rovers seeking strange adventures and he hoped it would continue indefinitely. He asked Sam's opinion about the reef.

"I think we go close haul", sail close to wind," said Sam. "Suppose they see us reef, they reef too. If they not reef pretty soon, they get in trouble."

He sniffed the wind with flexible nostrils. His nose was not flat, but shaped like those on Aztec monuments. What he smelled, Dean could never duplicate. It seemed to him that Sam could smell depth of water, the far off hints of weedy reefs. He certainly could smell land before it was in sight.

"I don't like too much," he said. "That wind come from long way. What

we get now just in front. Plenty mo' come, plenty strong. I think we sail into it. Pretty soon too much to take on beam, too much to run befo'. Mo' better fight that wind, get out to deep water. Then we can staht engine, let down sail. Too many reef, too many cays. Better not get too close."

It was sound advice. Dean had studied the chart. He knew that, west of Andros, was a deep trough that reached far south and east in the direction from which this freshening gale now blew. And he had seen squalls that actually scooped up two fathoms of water, whipped it into spume and showed the bare bones of coral on the bottom.

Big steamers pile up in the Caribbean when the wind gods let loose their full furies. Dean was reading books on navigation written by the wise men of the sea. He had some of these volumes aboard. And, full-rigged ship to sloop, battleship to tanker or lumbering freighter, one rule stood out—*get sea room in a blow*.

THIS was going to be more than a blow. The clouds in the west gathered, swollen and congested, centering about the crimson orb of the sun as if it were a magnet for their vapors. But, from where the wind blew, all was clear, luminous; to the expert eye, alarming.

Even to Dean, it suggested that the sweep of the wind had cleaned the sky of all vapors in its pioneering rush, clearing the way for the blasting power to come that would flatten the waters, tear the crests apart into flying foam, uproot even the pliant palms. Now even his nose could detect certain elemental odors, apart from the clean scent of the brine. There were hints of sulphur, the suspicion of foulness like that of rotten vegetation and seaweed.

It left a metallic taste in his mouth as he headed into the teeth of the gale, while Sam inhailed the sheet, with Tom

to help him, the mighty muscles bulging, rippling in their backs.

The short, crisp seas banged against their bows with the sound of great drums. The sloop tossed her bow like a nettled horse would toss its head. Then it settled down to it as Dean set his muscles to the helm, rejoicing in the tilt, holding her up until the sail shivered, keeping her there; while the sunset smoldered and died, its clouds faded to lavender and gray, melted into the loom of the Florida coast, ever more distant.

The wind swooped down into the cockpit and Tom dived into the cabin to prepare their supper on the new stove in the galley.

Suddenly Sam chuckled.

"They quit!" he said.

CHAPTER II.

MIAMI MATTHEWS.

JIM DEAN looked astern and saw the schooner plunging in the trough as she came about and fled before the breeze, back for Miami. They were putting in a reef in the forsail, and then the main, as they went.

"Now we put in reef," said Sam. "I staht the engine."

It was none too soon. The screw kept the sloop up to it while Sam and Tom—summoned from his cooking for the job—reefed down to the second row of points. They shut off the engine, saving gas, and Dean felt the gallant lurch of her like a galloping stallion in the lists as they suddenly met the true might of the gale.

Overhead, the stars showed like tiny points in a sky that was unnaturally light. Now, full ahead, black vapor was rising. A scud screened off the starlight, itself invisible. Their stays began to strum like a harp, there was an angry hiss in the sea as if it expressed its contemptuous rage against them for daring to brave the weather.

The black bank of cloud grew and lightning gleamed along its parapet. There was no thunder. The sea darkened. Night began to assert itself. Dusk sifted down until sky and sea blended save where the torn crests flew like snow, horizontally. The blackness mounted to the vault of heaven, smuttled all the dome while the lightning flickered in it like veins of fire.

The sloop staggered now and then, and Sam gave his strength to add to that of Jim at the helm. Tom brought them food which they swallowed while the wind sought to snatch it from them. It was exhilarating; their blood tingled while their bodies were continually bathed by warm seasuds. They had to fight away into deep water, against the moment when they might be forced to strip sail and run, unless they again used their engine, with the fuel they could not easily replenish.

Tom took Sam's place at the wheel with Dean while the giant crept forward and lowered the jib, substituting one half its size. While he did it, the sloop bucked and veered, but they held her to it, fighting for footage. They defied the wind, then used its violence to claw themselves on.

At midnight Sam declared they were off the most northerly island of Andros, and Dean took his word for it. They fought on and on and the *Spray* was rechristened a score of times within a minute. When dawn came, they saw the flattened but tremendous seas, piling up, only to be leveled, slate-colored like the sky that had lowered until it seemed to touch the plunging mast.

Foot by foot and fathom by fathom, they crept against the teeth of the tempest, striving to get south of the long line of land that formed the isles of Andros, whose jungles and morasses have never yet been entirely explored, close as they lie to the American continent. The natives live to-day as their remote forefathers did.

It was noon before they were clear of the final headland and four o'clock in the afternoon before they dared think of easing up. The sloop had taken a tremendous buffeting which only increased their respect for its builder and designer. They had not been forced to use the engine again and now they set a sea anchor and rode to it with their pole bare. The seas ceased to break aboard and, while they still tossed, they rode more evenly.

Sam smelled the weather and predicted a change by sunset, though Jim Dean could see no indications in the scowling sky save that its flying vapors seemed to be higher. Usually seabirds were seen, since the flights between cays and to Florida were short ones for their untiring pinions, but they had all sought refuge from the storm.

As if the gale sensed that it was nearing climax it seemed to summons up its rear-rank forces to complete the rout. For the first time thunder sounded and lightning stabbed jagged amid the wrack like javelins flung from the battlements of the sky. The wind increased and howled. The blunted seas bowed before it and seethed about the sloop.

They did not want to have to run before it and lose the hard-earned distance they had won and Tom, who was at the engine, stood by to start it at any moment. The cone-shaped sea-anchor held them up well, though they drifted back, little by little, toward the lee where Andros showed up like a shadow.

MEANWHILE the schooner *La Paloma* had limped back to Miami. She was in trouble. Holding on full-canvased in the gale, the mainmast had racked in its step. The upper seams had opened so that her bilge overflowed and they had to pump to keep it down. The water swashed above the boards and short-circuited the engine, putting it out of commission.

They had a radio outfit aboard, but they could not send the message they wanted to until they got back into Miami.

That message was to the runner known as "Miami" Matthews though he no longer operated out of that port. He was still powerful there, said to be a partner with a certain Floridan property owner—now languishing in a federal prison—in various nefarious and daring enterprises.

Miami Matthews levied tribute from the men who landed contraband, whether that was liquor or live stock; he gave them protection which, if it was not complete immunity, at least reduced their penalties to a minimum, through political power.

Matthews himself was a temporary refugee while Uncle Sam's enumerators prowled among bank accounts and other records to know why he had not paid as much income tax as his mode of living indicated he should have done. Some said he was in Venezuela, where extradition is unknown.

Wherever he was, he still wielded his authority and kept in touch with all that was going on. It was certain that he was not inactive, certain that he was up to some form of profitable deviltry, though he had announced that the liquor racket was all shot these days, liable to be buried. Matthews was keen to see th handwriting on the wall.

He had heard of the death of Parrados and the triumph of Jim and Sam and Tom to acquire treasure that Matthews, in his arrogance, considered should have been his own. He had been radioed news of their refitting of the sloop at Miami and therefore he had ordered some of his underlings to find out where they were bound and why?

Lacking direct leaks from the trio, the *Paloma* had tried to follow, and now all they could send to Matthews in code that they knew he would pick up was that the *Spray* was last seen by them heading into a stiff gale, south by

east, while they had been forced to put back.

It was not a message to be pleasantly received by Matthews, who did not like failures and was apt to punish them severely. He sent no answer back to the offenders beyond a code word that told them he had got their report. This meant that he would attend to it himself, or through other aids.

In his extradition-proof hideout, Matthews fumed. This might be a minor matter, but he hated to be balked and, when he was, the smallest setback became great in its challenge to his supremacy. These three had bested Parrados, and Parrados had been able to stand against him. Therefore, he was convinced that this trip of theirs amounted to something well worth while.

Yet the only way in which he might now locate them, with their start, was by means of a seaplane, and no pilot was going to take one out in such weather. Even the mail schedules were broken. It would be sheer folly to start on a scouting trip of uncertain range until the gale blew out. That might not be for two or three days. One never knew. Night flying—looking for a small sloop where hundreds of others would be out as soon as the wind and sea permitted, bound for fishing, turtling or sponging grounds—would be like seeking a needle in a haystack.

The affair chafed Miami Matthews; it assumed undue importance. The sting of a gnat may seem insignificant, but it depends upon where it punctures and the mood of the receiver. Matthews cursed, and made a vow to get these three adventurers before they completed their adventure.

He did not provoke British authority; he levied only on enterprises which were not strictly commercial and more or less outside the law. He thought himself a modern Sir Henry Morgan. That two Seminole Indians and an American

stripling should be gaining anything that he had overlooked angered him, as a hungry lion is angered who comes upon a fleshless carcass where the tracks show lesser beasts have feasted.

Enforced inaction did not improve his temper nor lessen his determination to teach these interlopers a lesson which would be final. Human life, to Miami Matthews was about as sacred as it is to a ravenous shark.

CHAPTER III.

BREAD ON THE WATERS.

AT sunset, Sam's prophecy proved true. In the west the low sun broke through barred clouds that looked like furnace bars. Overhead, the vapors scudded north, thinning and breaking so that purple patches of sky spangled with bright stars appeared. The wind blew in lessening gusts, veered westward, struck the sloop just abaft the beam. With her sail respread, unreefed, she danced along at her best rate of sailing; between nine and ten knots, on the favoring breeze.

In the twilight, sea birds wheeled and swooped in swift squadrons. Flying fish leaped. Sailfish showed their brilliant blue dorsals, tuna rushed and barracuda harried. Dolphin hurled themselves out of the waves that now were lively once more. Their pace was too fast for trolling, and Tom prepared a meal from the larder.

When the full moon rolled up, the sky was clear. The air was fresh and sweet with the tang of the brine. The sloop reeled off the knots like a running doe. Tom got out his guitar, and he and Sam sang snatches of Seminole songs while Dean handled the wheel between two spokes. They had gone through a strenuous time, but no one thought of turning in. They were exhilarated by the change of weather.

At midnight, out of sight of all land, Dean glimpsed a flare that rose and fell

on the port bow. He gave the wheel to Sam and focused the powerful night-glasses he had added to the *Spray's* equipment.

There was a strong current which they were crossing and the light paled as it moved into the moon path. Dean made out what was evidently the wreck of a small boat, deep in the water, with a stump of a mast and, clinging to it, a solitary figure that desperately waved a cloth and then fell down as the flare died out.

"Light a flare!" Dean cried. "Some poor devil on a sinking ship!"

Sam ignited the regulation signal and the light flared bravely, sending a message of hope to the despairing man. They held up for him, sailing fast, then coming into the wind deftly on the windward side of the wreck and cleverly drifting alongside. Sam leaped aboard, barefooted, called Tom to follow. Each bore a line and lashed the two craft temporarily together.

It was high time they arrived. The hull was awash. It could not remain afloat much longer. It was a fishing craft that was too old to have withstood the tempest it had encountered, probably far more heavily than the *Spray*, which had sailed into the storm.

There was only the one man left of the crew of three. He was a Negro, possibly partly Carib, and his leg was broken. His brother and his son had been washed overboard when the mast snapped short.

They got him aboard and made him as comfortable as possible in the cabin and gave him food spiced with good liquor, not contraband in these waters. They cast off the wreck and saw it sink.

PETE was the name of the rescued man. He did not give a surname, and they did not press him for it. Their sympathies were all for his plight, the loss of the boat that was

his livelihood. As best he could, Dean attended to his leg, making splints of bare sail battens. It seemed badly broken on both lower bones. He asked if he could be put ashore on his native island of Andora, where there was a doctor, and his wife could tend to him.

It was off their course, but they did not hesitate. The man was so infinitely grateful and he gained their sympathy by his tale of the dire loss he had suffered. Dean gave him a stiff bromide before an injection of morphia.

The new course eased off the motion of the sloop and soon the sufferer was dozing in a bunk, Tom beside him to see he did not move too much. Sam and Jim held a consultation in the stern.

"We've got plenty," Dean suggested and saw in Sam's instantly flashing grin that he understood and backed his meaning. What Jim Dean or Sam said, Tom subscribed to.

They had the derelict's island on the horizon at dawn. It was not a large cay but they saw the clustering houses of what seemed a prosperous community. Their charge awoke feverish but coherent. Again he thanked them.

"I use the lamp oil on my shirt," he said. "All I have. It not burn so good but you saw. God not let the shark take me, like it take my boy, my brother. You good people. I wish you luck. I pray fo' you. My wife she pray fo' you. Where you go?"

Dean looked at Sam. The cay was isolated. This man was born there, he might know something about the place to which they were bound.

"It is a secret," said Dean. "We know you will not speak about it."

"Nebber," said Pete. "They cut my tongue out firs'. Then I no can talk."

But his eyes bulged and his dark skin grew gray, sweat stood out upon it when they mentioned Drowned Island.

"You no go along dat place!" he said earnestly. "That place full ob debbils an' ghosts. That cay voodoo. Too

much conjure. If you go theah you die, suah. Me, I hab seen the ghosts rise up an' moan. I hab see the debbil fiah. Nobody lib that place no mo'. Plenty people drown along that place an' the conjure keep their ghosts theah. Dey try to leave, but debbils drag dem back. Dey howl an' shriek, dey ris up high, but debbils drag dem down. Dey drag you down. Dey say gol' theah, but it am debbil gol'. De reef run all aroun'. Suppose you try to cross, you get wreck. Den debbils git you. No fish along that cay!"

He was plainly in dead earnest, fixed in his belief. Jim Dean saw Tom goose-flesh and even Sam's eyes roll, though Sam claimed to defy all Carib voodoo. Despite himself Jim felt a prickling down his spine and in his scalp. Then he reacted. Here was a bigger adventure than he had expected. Supernatural happenings were only natural phenomena that people failed to understand.

"That's all right," Jim said. "We know how to handle ghosts and devils too." But, even as he spoke, he wondered what might await them on Drowned Island. There must be some definite basis for Pete's terror—some reason why Drowned Island was avoided.

THEY left the cay in mid-morning. They had to refuse many of the gifts pressed upon them, fruit, chickens, alive and ready for cooking, fish and vegetables. They saw Pete settled in his own house with the doctor in attendance, who refused a fee.

Pete's wife gave Dean a charm in a small bag of snakeskin which seemed to hold pebbles and Dean, in turn, gave her a parcel of canvas wrapped in marlin, which she was not to open until mid-night of the following day. He knew her superstition would cause her to abide with his conditions. In the

parcel was a hundred dollars, wealth for that family. Dean called it bread on the waters. It came from their mutual funds. Sam insisted he should wear the charm.

"You can't tell," said Sam. "Mebbe that is good magic. Sure it is not bad. They live along this place. They should know what is good voodoo, good conjure, an' what is bad. You say bread on waters. That is in the White Man's Good Book. I have read it. That kind of bread come back when you most want. I know when you do good it come back, like echo. An' she an' he, they wish good fo' us. I think now we git good weather. I think now we git break. Mebbe when we come along Drowned Island, we need some good luck."

Tom seemed equally content with the gift of the charm. Dean wondered whether the chief significance of such things was not a symbol for an expression of the spirit of the givers that might, in some mysterious way, create a confidence, and so, a strength, to offset threatening hazards.

It was, after all, a visible and tangible expression of good will for a deed of mercy that might, as Sam had said, reëcho in their favor, following unwritten and dimly-visioned universal laws.

CHAPTER IV.

DROWNED ISLAND.

THEY came to Drowned Island in a stiff breeze. It was charted, and Dean was delighted that his new-learned navigation had brought them to it unerringly. Sam had also smelled the landfall. It was early morning, the sun just above the horizon.

They saw a spouting reef, geysering spray and water high in rainbowed jets. There seemed no opening in the coral wall, though one was marked on the map, on the eastern shore. It was an ebb

tide and they dared not risk a crossing of the reef, even if they had been able to see a passage.

The island rose sharply to a central height that might be a crater. It was certain that, if there were minerals here, the land was of volcanic rather than coral origin, though the coral insects had been busy on the lava upthrusts to tide mark.

The lower levels of the island were barren, where they caught a glimpse of them through breaks in the cliffs. These looked like masses of salt-water taffy, a honeycomb lava know to science as pahoe-hoe, full of gaseous blowholes and often, on the surface, looking like the entrails of monsters twisted and tossed in great tubes.

On the highlands, above a belt of yellow grass, palmettos, cactus and agaves, thick verdure showed, with palms and an upper forest of tall trees, many of which were mahogany. They saw no indications of the island being inhabited, unless it was the goats, curious and timid, who gazed at the sloop from rocky crags.

In broad daylight, under the shining sun and blue sky, the place did not seem conjured. But there were curious things about Drowned Island. It was protected by the spouting, smoking reef whose passage they did not dare to tackle until the rising tide assured them ample water beneath their keel.

The reef was wide, from fifty yards to two hundred. It was low and at high tide would barely prove a break-water to the rollers that would surge past, over the interior lagoon, and break on the beach or against the cliffs.

They coasted the island, to spend the time until high water, keeping half a mile off shore. It seemed at first a little Eden, placid and inviting and remote. But presently they noted that not a single fish leaped; there was neither the rush of small fry nor the fierce chase of the devourers. That in itself was strange

in such prolific waters. Stranger still was the fact that there was no showing of guano on the cliffs or on the small islets off shore.

Dean's binoculars could discover no sign of any birds about the forest and there was not a single gull, noddy, booby, or frigate bird. The goats, bearded like fauns, gazed at them with topaz eyes set between their horns and tossed their heads, as if in contempt, before they galloped away on their sharp, divided hoofs.

A strong current set about the island, baffling and irregular. Such a thing was not too unusual. It was born of irregularities of the bottom, with its deep rifts and chasms; but there were times when it held them back with the wind full in their mainsail, as if it sought to hold them off, to discourage them, to warn them that here was an eerie land.

No other land was in sight. The sky was cloudless, deep blue above, paling at the horizon, but clear as a lighthouse-keeper's lenses.

IT took them seven hours to circumnavigate the isle. When they came again to the charted entrance the flood was running through it like a mill-race, the reef on either side was a welter of foam as the great waves were rent and shredded.

Dean took the wheel and Sam climbed to the spreaders, handling his great bulk as nimbly and far more gracefully than an ape, perching there, to con the way in.

The passage was zigzag, and the chart showed no bearings. Dean had a Marine Directory aboard but it said little of Drowned Island, which it seemed to deem insignificant, unless for the "reported" mineral deposits.

There was one tense moment when Dean spun the wheel sharply in answer to Sam's imperative gesture; when they seemed like a chip in a mill race. Spumy water raced and roared on either side of

them, rearing threateningly. The full force of the flood combined with the wind to urge them on. Poor judgment would bring tons of water down, swerve them to the jagged coral across which no man could make a way without having the flesh stripped from his bones.

Then they were inside, but the lagoon surged with the only half spent force of the seas. They cast a lead, found six fathoms, and dropped their hook, putting out a second anchor to make sure.

While they furled and made all ship-shape, preparatory to landing in their dinghy, they surveyed the land. There was a tiny, crescent beach fringed by mangroves, through which a sluggish stream oozed to the lagoon. On either side were the "taffy" cliffs. Now the half broken waves swept up to them, rushed into their caves and fissures and made the "spouters" that went geysering up like the blowing of mammoth whales, or like excess steam from boilers. The latter idea was heightened by many of these whistling and moaning, as the compressed air escaped through small outlets.

These were Pete's "ghosts," Dean reflected. Seen by moonlight, like wraiths, giving out weird sounds, it would not take much imagination of an illiterate mind, inclined to superstition, to believe them the ghosts of drowned sailors and fishermen.

When they landed, there was an even grimmer and more concrete suggestion. All along the inner arc of the little beach were skulls, placed on the top of stakes. Skulls that were moldering and scaly, skulls that seemed fairly fresh from massacre or the grave or the cooking pots, all of them lacking the lower jaw. Grisly, grinning objects that seemed to regard them derisively and mutely suggest that their own heads were in danger.

There was only one path that led up through the mangroves, the stream

not being navigable for even their dinghy, and over this narrow trail there dangled two more skulls on slender poles.

It was plainly a warning. It could not be otherwise interpreted. Tom suggested that they all stick together against the first idea that one of them should stay aboard. Dean and Sam both agreed. There was something about the place, perhaps caused by Pete's warning, that hinted separation might be dangerous.

The skulls might be only a bluff. They might have been gathered from old graves to scare off intruders, as the dried crows are hung, head down on sticks, to keep live crows from newly sown corn. Those who had set them up might not be at all responsible for their state. But the three were glad that they were well armed, as they went warily up the track between the hooping mangroves.

Still there was no sign of life. Not even the universal land crabs. There was something about the island that prevented or warded off ordinary life. When they rowed over the translucent water of the lagoon in the dinghy they had seen nothing of the usual shoals of fish. There were no limpets or mussels on the boulders of lava or coral. But the forest waved in derision of the idea of conjure that crept over them, against their wills. Somehow the suggestion persisted that here was something waiting for them, lying in wait for them, in ambush!

SOME possible solution of this showed when they got to higher land. To Jim's eyes the lava tubing and the cracks here and there looked fresh. What he at first thought heat waves had a steamy sulphurous smell. Though the vegetation still flourished, he thought there must have been a recent convulsion—not a violent one but enough to kill off the fish and all the

spawn, with steaming water, to dismiss the birds to less irregular quarters.

There was no sign of mineral, except sulphur, and that looked valuable to Dean. He realized his ignorance in such matters. Then Sam picked up a rough crystal of light green and called it an emerald. Jim knew better than that. He had been doing a lot of reading lately, and proclaimed it an olivine, a minor gem, sometimes used for cheaper jewelry. He knew that there was not a hundred dollars in a gallon of them.

They held on up over the crisp and crumbly lava finding now and then a wall of the black volcanic glass to cross. They crossed the belt of palmettos and cactus and entered the cool forest. There were orchids here, scented ferns and vines that wreathed about the trees, but no birds, no insects.

"This is suah 'Conjuah' Island," said Jim.

They all talked in whispers. There was an uncanny feeling about the place that called for caution.

Suddenly they came to a clear space, cut like a swathe from the heights amid the trees. Lava had rolled here and destroyed everything in its path. Gazing up, they could see burned parapets and jagged crests that looked like the brink of a crater. There was a hint of steam above it.

They halted, irresolute. There would have been a prolonged survey of the island if they hoped to find the more or less legendary mineral deposits. That would mean a camp ashore. They were resolute enough, but the eerie stillness, the lack of life, was seeping in.

Suddenly a shot rang out, imperative and challenging. Dean felt a bullet whistle past his cheek. It slugged into a tree trunk. Another and another followed, from unseen enemies, shooting from the higher slopes.

Sam cried something in Seminole. Lead had torn through his shirt. Simul-

taneously they took cover in the brush, flinging themselves to the ground.

They all had rifles, as well as automatics holstered to their belts; with extra clips. But they had no visible targets, and now bullets whipped through the leaves, severing twigs, searching them out in a venomous fusillade.

They returned the fire at random and the volleys against them ceased as a gruff voice shouted hoarsely in an order.

"Quit wasting cartridges on them rats!"

CHAPTER V.

ENTOMBED.

DEAN'S blood boiled. All three had been under fire before. But here there was nothing definite to aim at, or encounter. But there was life on Drowned Island, and invaders were not welcome.

He knew where Sam was, though the Seminole had screened himself in blending sun and shade. Dean hissed at him.

"Get back to the sloop! Tell Tom."

Bushes rustled. Something like a baseball was flung through the trees, followed by another missile. They fell with a dull thud and a slight sound and flash of explosion. Dean felt his eyes smart and sting as if acid had been flung into them. They filled with scalding water from his irritated tear ducts, leaving him practically blind and helpless.

This was not the sort of greeting they had expected. These were tear bombs. Here were white men who were not content with warning them but were desperately in earnest to harm them, to kill them, if necessary.

More shots sounded as Dean went blundering and stumbling amid the trees, tripped by thorny vines that interlaced like nets to ensnare them. He barely heard the sound of Sam or Tom. It was each for himself, the only thing left to do was to get down to the sloop.

They would have to cross bare rock and lava, but so would their unseen foes if they tried to carry the attack to the boat.

Then they could use the quick-firer on them. Now their staggering progress, falling on hands and knees, crawling, running bent double, made them poor targets, though the shots came unpleasantly close. Dean felt a sudden sear in his left arm between elbow and shoulder. He knew the blood was flowing, though he could not see it. They were out of the gas zone, dodging amid the cactus and palmettos as the effects of the irritant began to wear off, leaving their eyes inflamed but no longer blind.

Dean's anger rose as he ran. These snipers were no better than murderers, potting at them in the forest—murderers and also cowards. He made up his mind that he was not going to be driven away so easily. There was a mystery here that was being guarded. If these men had found mineral wealth they might be justified in warning people off but not in killing them without a warning. The law would protect their claims unless they wanted to hold more than their share; which was quite likely.

He caught sight of Sam as both of them emerged to where the ropes of tan-colored lava lay as it had cooled after the hot cores had rolled on and left tubes. It was treacherous stuff to travel over, with the crust constantly breaking underfoot, brittle as blisters of sun-dried mud.

There were no shots now. The forest seemed to be the place where no trespassers would be allowed, though it did not seem the likeliest locality for rich ores. Dean remembered the old saying of the miners: "Gold is where you find it." They might even have discovered something far more precious. Where there were olivines, there might be diamonds.

Sam yelled something at him, and Dean stopped to hear better. Sam was

asking if Dean had seen or heard anything of Tom.

Tom was missing. They waited and searched a little, hoping any moment he would come out of the cactus or palmetto thickets. They risked shouting for him, though it might bring more bullets and bombs. But their cries only came back to them in broken echoes that sounded as if their enemies were laughing at them, mocking them.

"You hurt?" asked Sam, seeing Dean's sleeve drenched with blood. The shot that had gone through his own sleeve had not even nicked him.

"I guess not," said Dean. He rolled up the sopping, crimson cloth and looked at the gouge in his flesh, raw and ugly. But it had not touched bone. Yet it had bled freely and he felt a little weak from loss of blood.

"You go back along boat," suggested Sam. "You fix that arm. No lose more blood. You fix, and I look fo' Tom."

There was a good medical kit aboard. Iodine or mercurichrome would do away with the chance of infection, always a big risk in a tropical climate. A sanitary bandage would help. But Dean laughed at him. He was not going to let Sam go alone. He was not going back to the ship without Tom.

"I'll bind it up with my handkerchief," he said. "I'll be right after you." Sam, impatient, plunged back, racing over the lava and disappearing in the cactus, calling his brother's name, rifle in one hand, his automatic out and ready in the other.

Dean sat down on a lava chunk and set aside his rifle while he made a combination tourniquet and bandage. He felt slightly dizzy as he got up again, longing for a drink of cool water. Sam was out of sight and he started after him, knowing the general direction the other had taken, angling off, himself, to cover a wider territory. He was worried about Tom, afraid he had been

shot and was now lying dying or dead in the dense forest.

The great ants would—

Dean checked himself to remember that he had not even seen any insects on this Conjured Cay. It seemed to have a curse upon it. His anger flared up and he broke into a run up the barren terraces of lava.

Suddenly he broke through the brittle crust. He heard the stuff crackle as he fell, clutching at bits as he dropped his weapons in an endeavor to prevent disaster. He could not judge how far he fell, but he had a flash of realizing he was dropping through a mammoth tube, he caught a glimpse of blue sky high above him—and then he struck heavily, clumsily, twisted up.

His head smashed against something that might have been rock or his rifle and he lost consciousness.

WHEN he regained it the sky was no longer blue, it was a dark spot only to be distinguished from the rest of his surroundings by the three stars that showed in it, like brilliants set in ebony. He was stiff and sore, his mouth was parched and his tongue seemed swollen. Besides thirst, he felt faint from hunger and, he supposed, loss of blood. The back of his head ached and throbbed and felt sticky.

He slowly gathered himself together and memory came back to him. He had banged his head pretty badly, his side seemed wrenched, and his arm had started bleeding again, but the blood had clotted. It could not be really cold, but he shivered as he sat up and searched for matches.

By their light he found rifle and automatic, and felt the better for them. But he saw also that he was trapped in the tube formed by the outflow of the boiling core of liquid lava that had flowed on while the outer surface of the great rope cooled off. This interior was tol-

erably smooth and perhaps twenty feet in diameter. He was like a frog in a dry cistern with no chance to get out unless, at some place where the tube was smaller, there should be an opening he could reach or the ceiling would come down near enough for him to break through it, like a bird chipping at its shell.

To find such a spot, he would have to go up the tube toward its source. He got to his feet and, with the aid of matches, clambered along the tunnel, hoping against hope that he could escape, wondering what happened to Tom and Sam. They might have searched for him for hours without finding him, or thinking where to look for him. The fracture of the crust would not look new and there had been plenty of places where the tops of the tubes had fallen in.

He was no longer cold but sweating as the tube grew steadily smaller. The air was heavy, or seemed so, hard to breathe. He had only a few matches left when he finally found he could touch the unbroken roof. He had no idea how far he had come, knowing only it had been continually uphill. He persevered and lit two more matches before he came to where he could pound at the roof with his automatic's butt and, better, his rifle. But he could not break through. The ceiling was thicker and tougher.

Suddenly he staggered. There was a distinct ground tremor, a slight earthquake shock followed by a heavier one. The second flung him down. He heard bits of the brittle stuff all about him, tinkling as it fell. The horror of being caught there in a quake almost threw him into a panic. Porous rock had fallen from above without leaving an opening. It blocked his retreat.

Almost frantically, he smashed with the rifle butt and broke through at last. He climbed on the fallen fragments and got head and shoulders through the

opening, laying rifle and pistol outside while he drew deep breaths.

He had worked out close to where the cactus and palmetto brush began. He saw the sailing moon and under it, the white spouts of foam as the sea rushed into the blowholes and sent the spray whistling and moaning out. Here and there he saw steamy jets that might have been started with the tremor or might have been invisible by day. They were lit by the glow of subterranean fires. There was a steamy vapor over the central cone and that, too, was lit from beneath by a pulsing crimson. The smell of sulphur was distinct.

Here were Pete's ghosts and "debbil" fires.

Then, though he hardly believed his ears at first, he heard music. The strains of an orchestra playing an operatic selection. It seemed incredible but it was true. These men might have a phonograph, or they might have a radio set, and be receiving from Havana, or from Miami.

Where that music was, they must be living. Sam and Tom might be there, prisoners, if they were not dead.

Jim Dean crept out and saw the sloop in the lagoon, without lights. His wrist watch was smashed in his fall, but he read the stars and figured it was not far from midnight. He was still badly shaken, but he pulled himself together and climbed, led by the music. It stopped, changed into song, died away and started up once more as he worked up to the forest where the moonlight checkered vaguely through the trees.

IT seemed to him that he was making a lot of noise but he was not challenged. The music at its source covered his approach. He came again to the point where the lava had spilled out of the crater and burned the forest, and he ventured into it, for the sake of better light and easier going, since the music was still well above him.

Once more he was suddenly flung down as the whole island seemed to twist, the trees bowing fantastically in a spasm of the earth. Again there was a following second shock, coupled with a burst of flame inside the caldron of the cone and a few rocketing streaks of molten stuff that shot up and fell back within the cone.

The music stopped abruptly, and all was silence except for the weird noises of the blowhole spouters. He kept on to where the cone itself reared up and the trees ended. Now he heard voices. They seemed to come from his right, and worked along the base of a sheer cliff, smooth with a flow of old lava that glittered in the moon. Then he saw a light and crept on.

There was a deep fissure that he entered with his automatic ready. It opened into a cavern where an oil lamp swung from a wooden pole thrust into a crevice. More light came from a side chamber. The men were there, their conversation distinct. They seemed to be having an argument. Dean stepped cautiously toward this inner cave.

"I vote we clear out," said one rough voice. "Take the stuff an' scam. I ain't stuck on havin' the place close in on me. We'll leave these two guys here an' take their boat. We can sail off an' on until the Big Shot shows up in his plane."

Dean's pulses leaped. They had Sam and Tom inside these caverns—prisoners! They would not have bothered with dead men.

"What about the other gink?" another asked.

"He's croaked. I tell you I hit him."

A third voice broke in.

"You bozo'll do what the boss says. We got that message. I'll get the set workin' again soon. Mebbe the aerial's busted. I'll take a look in a minute. But he don't like his orders crossed. We told him about the boat and he said to hold the guys and stand tight till he

shows and decides what to do with 'em. He wants to find out what they know—why they come here. He'll get it out of 'em. These shakes ain't done any harm before, they won't now. The volcano is as good as dead."

"Yeah? Them things have a habit of bustin' out when they're least expected. Pass me that jug, will ya?"

There was a plane coming. It would be a seaplane or amphibian. And it would bring the man who was their Big Shot. He would probably give Sam and Tom a short shrift. They would take the sloop. It explained why they had seen no other boat. These men had been brought by air. Their cargo, whatever precious freight they might have on hand, could not be very bulky or heavy.

It seemed there were three of them. An even fight if Sam and Tom could get into action. One was coming out, saying he would look at the aerial.

Dean crouched. The man had an electric torch, swinging its white beam idly. Dean let him go by, and then he leaped and slugged the man with his automatic. The flashlight dropped, unbroken.

The man fell from the blow at the back of his head. Dean was upon him, listening. But the other two were drinking, pledging each other.

The man he had knocked down was in singlet and pants and he wore sneakers. Dean got his belt, and bound his arms securely. He used his socks for a gag and secured it with his shoe laces. For his feet he used a bandanna he found in the pocket of the pants and hauled the man aside behind a projection of the rock.

Another would come presently to see what delayed him. One of them asked the other to pass him a dipper of water and the suggestion was maddening to Dean's dry throat.

What was the secret of their living here in these caves? Perhaps the Caribs

who had tended the goats, and made the salt had been scared off by the recent volcanic activities; perhaps these men had driven them away, or killed them. The skulls on the beach might be relics of old head-hunting days when the Caribs were wild savages.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRET.

ONCE again the tremor came with a twisting, wrenching shock. Dean heard an exclamation from the inner cave. The wording was as sulphurous as the gas that seemed to escape from opening seams in the rock. One man, still cursing, was stumbling out.

"It's gettin' too hot for me," he said. "Boss or no boss, I'm beatin' it outside! Come on, Limpy, we'll go down to the boat."

"Who'sh goin' to handle her? You can't, Jake can't—an' I can't. There'sh nothin' to be 'fraid of."

They were both pretty drunk, Dean figured. He had switched off the flashlight. Now he could get the second man.

It was not as easy as he had hoped. He kicked a fallen fragment as he moved, and the other whirled as Dean sprang. They clinched and the man grunted. Dean stifled a louder cry by clutching his throat, tripping him, bearing him to the floor where they rolled in a desperate tussle. He was a big fellow and Dean was in poor shape to handle him. His hand caught Dean's wrist and Dean could not use his gun. If the other one came out, it was all over. Dean was weak from lack of blood and food, and he had been badly jarred by his fall. Desperation gave him false strength and he made the most of it.

He was smashed in the face, but he kept his throat hold and he managed to throw a scissers with his legs about

the other's middle, clamping on a flabby belly. He felt his fingers on his cheeks, clawing for his eyes. A thumb entered the inner corner of one of them, and the agony of it gave him power to wrench his wrist free. He clubbed with his pistol, and the other went limp, just as Dean heard a scuffling in the passage and knew the third was coming out, aroused and alarmed.

His rifle was leaning against the cave wall. He had lost the flashlight, but the lamp gave fair illumination, and he saw the reeling figure of the third of them, bearded and bow-legged.

"Can't you stand up, you dope?" he asked and then tried to draw the gun holstered at his belt. Dean got the drop on him.

"Stick them up!" Dean panted. "Or I'll plug you."

The bearded man ripped out an oath and fired from his hip through the open holster. The bullet struck the rocky floor, and the report roared in the enclosed space, doubled by Dean's shot, that got him in the shoulder and sent him sprawling back, astounded. His gun fell, his jaw dropped; he stared blearily.

Dean's hand shook, and he tottered as he jammed his own pistol in the other's belly. The struggle had almost done him in, but he made the man turn face to the wall, ripped off his belt and pinioned his arms behind him, disregarding the yelp of pain as he wrenched the wounded shoulder.

Dean was ruthless, at the tag end of his resources. He made his prisoner lie down and tied his shoe laces together to fetter his ankles. Gags did not count now. He had the three of them. Sam and Tom were somewhere in the cave pits of the volcano's crest.

Wearily, he secured the one he had just slugged and then, hardly able to keep his feet, he retrieved the flashlight and went through the passage to the inner cavern.

It was roughly furnished with empty boxes for seats, three cots, a crude table and a Primus stove. There was a bucket half full of water and Dean drank the needed liquid eagerly. He saw a demi-john and swallowed a slug of fiery rum that gave him new vigor. On the table were tin cups, cards, food shoved aside with used paper plates. He crammed scraps of cold ham ravenously into his mouth. He needed them.

Another lamp was suspended from a hook, screwed into a plug of wood that was driven into a ceiling crevice. Two openings suggested other caves. These were dark.

Dean chose one at random and entered a chamber where he felt cool air descending. It had some rift that led to the out of doors. His beam roved round, in search of Sam and Tom, and revealed some machinery that looked like a press and a proof-taking table.

There was an open trunk of leather, and it was piled with paper money neatly stacked, bound with slips of paper. It seemed United States currency, yellow-backed, of high denominations, though he saw some packages of twenties.

THE secret was out now. This was a counterfeiters' layout and hideout. They had made their run. Hundreds of thousands of spurious bills were ready for distribution. There might be no important minerals or gems on Drowned Island, but here was a fake fortune that doubtless could be converted into the equivalent of honest cash.

Miami Matthews did not like to pay out real money in exchange for his contraband unless he could help it. Here he turned out his phony currency.

Dean did not examine it closely. He was not an expert, and he was more concerned about Sam and Tom. In the last cave, where canned goods were stacked in the crooks' larder, he found Sam and Tom and released them.

They were trussed so tightly from head to foot with rope that they could hardly move after Dean cast them loose. They lay and rolled their eyes at him until he flung the beam on his own face and they knew him.

Tom's hair was matted with blood. He had fallen in his blinded flight and struck against a rock, stunned and an easy captive. Sam, calling Tom's name, reckless in his search, had walked into an ambush. He was unhurt, supremely indignant at the fact of his undignified surrender. When Dean told how he had come there, how the three men were tied up, Sam shook his head.

"You done it, all crippled like you was. I'm shuah ashamed."

"Never mind that," said Dean. "Are you hungry? And thirsty?"

"Am I? Is Tom? Is theah food and water handy? I could eat a whale and drink water enough to float him."

Tom was not so very badly off. He claimed he had a thick skull. They went into the dining cave and finished what was left of the abandoned meal and the bucket of water. They did not neglect the rum while they listened to Dean's story.

"What you aim to do?" asked Sam.

"Get away," said Dean. "The island may not blow up or sink, but there's nothing on it we want, to my mind. There may be mineral, but we are not miners. As for the counterfeit money, we can tip off the authorities. These men have their boss arriving, sooner or later, in a seaplane. I suggest we take them down to the sloop. We'll take the fake bills at the same time and head for Florida. The sooner the better. If we get well away, they'll not know us from any other craft. Anyway, this Big Shot will have to land to know what happened. We may not get him, but these birds will talk, and if we haven't struck a gold or diamond mine, we've had plenty of excitement."

"I've had all I want," said Tom.

"I wouldn't wonder," said Sam, "if there might not be a reward for bring-in' in these men, since they had all them fake bills."

"We ought to look for the plates," said Dean, "but we can leave that for the Federal men."

They did not know that Miami Matthews, already on the wing, had an accurate description of their sloop.

And they were not yet free of Drowned Island—of Conjure Cay.

CHAPTER VII.

"GOOD CONJURE."

IT was dawn as they slid through the passage of the reef with their three unwilling passengers and the leather trunk of counterfeit money. They were eager to get away and, although the breeze blew from the land, they started the engine.

They were almost clear when they saw a great cloud spout from the top of the island, shaped like an enormous cauliflower amid which there showed masses of smoking rock.

The forest swayed, and then the island seemed to split in half. The cone divided and looked like a bishop's miter for a second before it lost all shape as a flood of lava belched from it and came racing down the shuddering slopes.

In the lagoon, the water suddenly lifted in confusion as if a great wind had smitten it. Fragments of rock fell hissing into it. The bottom rose under their keel and, for a moment, they hung there in the reef gate. The next tremor released them and they shot forward for the open sea.

Still they were not away. A great wave reared itself. The wind had vanished, and only the push of their sturdy engine sent them up the curling comber. To starboard the sea sent up a water-spout of steam and spray. Another showed to port. All about them the waves ran in wild confusion, and the

water that came aboard was scalding hot.

They forged through. Dean, at the wheel, glanced back. There were no trees now, only the big mound of the island's base covered with rolling vapors out of which there flashed burst of flame. There was a noise like the grinding gears of a thousand trucks, lava hissed into the sea. The place was sinking. The Big Shot would find nothing when he arrived.

Sam shouted and pointed. There was a speck in the sky—distant, but swiftly approaching. It was the plane. They would certainly be hailed. Close as they were to the erupting island they were bound to be suspected, identified with the message that had brought the Big Shot so swiftly, although he had undoubtedly been about to collect the counterfeit bills they had run off.

It would be a plane capable of carrying several passengers. It might be carrying guns, bombs.

"Break out that quick firer," Dean ordered. "Get it seated, but keep it covered with the tarpaulin. We can't get away from this bird. He may take a notion to spray us from the air. He won't bother about his three men, although he might worry about the fake bills if he knew they were aboard. He's lost the plates, anyway."

The big plane was flying at about five thousand feet. It came down in a long swoop and then zoomed up again, seeming to ignore them, circling the island. They could no more escape from it than a crippled gull could get away from a sea eagle. They kept the engine running at its best speed. The eruption had destroyed all wind. The rolling vapors rose through the air as if in a vacuum.

The plane came swooping back. It lowered to a few hundred feet. Some one shouted at them from a cabin window through a megaphone.

"We're coming aboard. Stand by. Heave to right away, or we'll sink you."

To back the threat, a trap opened in the bottom of the big hull between the pontoons. Something dropped from it and hit the sea with a splash and an explosion.

THE Big Shot clearly meant to find out just what they knew about everything. He would not be in a kindly mood, and when he discovered they had his men aboard, with the counterfeit money, it was as certain as the sun was shining that this would be an end of all their adventures.

Dean called to Tom to shut off the engine and to Sam to take over the wheel. He went forward himself and stood by the quick-firer. He knew how to handle it. It was set up, and there were shells in a bucket that the tarpaulin also covered.

The only thing to do was to let the plane settle on the sea, to parley with them, but not to let an armed boarding party over the rail. Then it would be close, fast work. The engine stopped and the sloop floated idly, three miles out from the smoking island on the heaving sea.

The plane lit, perfectly handled. It taxied toward them and then its propeller slowed down its revolutions, came to rest.

Again a man shouted at them from an open window.

"We'll use your dinghy. Send one man over in it, unarmed."

Now they could see there were several men on board the plane. It looked as if the Big Shot had not expected to take his men from the island but merely to take the bills and leave them there to run off some more. A section of the hull opened, sliding upward and revealing the nose of a machine gun.

"No monkey business—and look lively," came the command.

The dinghy swung in davits at the taffrail.

"Pretend you're going to launch,"

said Dean. "Let the falls jam. We're getting closer."

Plane and sloop were slowly drifting toward each other. There was no present danger of collision. Sam and Tom jiggled the falls, seemingly working strenuously. The voice from the plane cursed them for dolts, threatened to fire.

Dean swung the quick-firer still masked. Suddenly he flung off the tarpaulin and the gun showed its spiteful shape. For the first time he shouted back. He hardly knew what he said. He realised he had to put the plane out of commission or they were doomed.

"Who are you" he demanded.

A bulky figure showed by the machine gun.

"I'm Miami Matthews, you young sap, and——"

He had caught sight of the quick-firer and instantly the machine gun began to chatter. Its range was imperfect, the distance too great for accurate shooting and the bullets sprayed the water, a few of them touching the hull of the sloop, beginning to creep up the rail as Dean shoved in a shell and sighted. Sam and Tom had left the dinghy, and their rifles cracked. The machine gunner was shielded, but not against a shell.

Dean fired. He saw the shell strike the plane amidships, low down, not a foot from the opening. He had missed his mark but he did not need another shot. The shell exploded. It might have struck a magazine of bombs. The plane was ripped apart.

In another second it was a mass of flames. Men flung themselves from it. Some struck out and others disappeared. Two kept swimming, making for the sloop. There was a terrific roar, and the plane blew up, scattering fiery fragments.

One of the swimmers was Miami Matthews. His face was twisted with either rage or pain, or both. He yelled for the dinghy, but he was making good progress and so was the other man.

Dean preferred to have them come over the rail. They were comparatively helpless, but Dean was not taking any chances.

"We'll give you a rope," he said.

The two got alongside, Matthews ahead. He hauled himself up, covered by Dean with his automatic. Sam and Tom had put down their rifles and also stood by with pistols ready. The hair of Matthews was scorched and so was his face. He looked like a balked devil. The other man came over the rail.

"Frisk them, Sam," said Dean.

The giant did so with a grin, while the two men scowled. Sam got a knife from one and a gun from Matthews.

"I've heard of you, Matthews," said Dean. "We are going back to the place you're named for—Miami. Better tie them up, Sam, they might get into mischief. You'll find your three counterfeiters down below," he added. "And the phony bills."

"You scut!" said Matthews. "There's five hundred thousand dollars in that lot. I don't have to count it. I'll give you a hundred thousand in real money to set me ashore on a place I'll show you and forget the rest."

Dean laughed at him, and Matthews snatched out a small pistol from beneath a watertight waistband and fired it

pointblank at Dean's heart. Dean felt the impact of the bullet and staggered back, catching at a stay. He heard Sam snarl and saw him leap and slog Matthews on the side of the head while Tom jumped for his companion. Matthews went down like a log and Sam picked up the little pistol and threw it into the sea. He raised his own automatic.

"Don't shoot him, Sam," Dean cried. "I'm not hurt."

He did not understand why for the moment. Then he opened his shirt. There was a bruise on his chest. A small bullet fell to the deck. It had struck the charm given to him by Pete's wife, reflected by the pebbles inside the little bag.

"Didn't I tell you that was good conjuah?" cried Sam in delight. "Didn't I tell you?"

Matthews was taken below, not too tenderly. He and his man from the plane were roped hand and foot.

Sam came on deck again after Tom had started the engine. Dean was at the wheel.

Sam gave a shout and pointed astern.

Dean looked. There was no more island, only a cloud of shredding vapor, fast disappearing.

"That suah a drowned island now," said Sam.

IN THE NEXT TOP-NOTCH!

GOLD OF GAMBIRI

By J. ALLAN DUNN

UNUSUAL!

THRILLING!

WATCH FOR IT!



Ozar and the Jade Altar

By Valentine Wood

Author of the "Kroom" stories, etc.

Once more the son of American parents—hailed as an Aztec god—is challenged with one of the Five Sacred Commands of the Lost City of Karnux

CHAPTER I.

THE THRUST OF A SPEAR.

OZAR THE AZTEC imagined that the stone lips of the giant image of Mexlitl the Sun God were bent in a mysterious smile. Perhaps it was only the play of the guttering shadows of the giant lamps against the carved stone. Who could say?

Certainly the jade-incrusted idol had cause to smile; for the sight of a white man was strangely out of place with the gorgeous appointments of a pagan temple.

A superb figure was Ozar, standing on the thick mats which carpeted the checkered floor of the Holy Room of the Aztec Temple of Gold. His body was circled by the fur of an ocelot, while his feet were bound in leathern sandals by

straps which crisscrossed to his knees. Wrapped about his brow, holding back the crisp locks of hair, was his only weapon—a pliable leathern sling, for which a pouch of stones hung at his golden fur girdle.

Beside Ozar, a priest clad in the red feathers of a humming-bird mantle was reading the mystic symbols which were

cano filled with water, and the temple on which the Jade Altar was placed became submerged.

"Now the great god Mexlitl was standing before the Jade Altar, and when the floods came and winds blew, he fled, leaving thereon his Sacred Knife.

"When the waters subsided, it was

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE IN THE ADVENTURES OF OZAR THE AZTEC

LARRY STARLING was captured as an infant by a lost tribe of Aztecs. The barbarians killed his parents, who had wandered into an inaccessible part of mountainous Mexico with an American scientific expedition. They had been slaughtered to appease the wrath of Yaxob the Rain God, who had withheld his favors until the fertile fields that were once so green and lush were now withered and brown.

Just as the child was placed on the sacrificial block, thunder pealed and lightning flashed. Rain—merciful, life-saving rain—poured from the skies in torrents.

And Montezirka, aged king of the Aztecs, shouted to the high priest in charge of the sacrifice: "Spare him, O Tarx! It is written in the walls of the Golden Temple that a ruler shall come to Karnux—a fair god with skin like furbished silver, named Ozar the Aztec. Who knows but this babe is Ozar?"

As the bloodthirsty Tarx scowled, the monarch continued: "He shall not be killed until twenty summers have passed—for then, if he be indeed Ozar the Aztec, he can prove his divinity by meeting the mightiest warrior in Karnux in the fabled Doom Duel. If victorious in that, strippling though he be, this ivory-skinned babe is indeed Ozar, sky king of the Aztecs!"

And Ozar, after twenty summers had passed, proved victorious in the fabled Doom Duel. But he had yet to fulfill the Five Sacred Commands of Mexlitl the Sun God and redeem an afflicted people from the sinister influence of Tarx, the pagan high priest who ruled supreme now that the aged monarch was dead. He was victorious in fulfilling the first of these feats, and now in "Ozar and the Jade Altar"—the third of the Ozar adventures—he is beset with new and more thrilling perils.

hewn in the limestone walls of the room. Perhaps that was why the great god Mexlitl smiled; for the words had not been repeated for many years, nay, many centuries. And they were as sinister as a death sentence in the ears of the young white man who heard them.

"Long years ago, when the Aztecs first built the mighty city of Karnux in the crater of the Navajada Mountains," read the high priest, "they worshiped at an altar made of a huge block of flawless jade. And then, according to the legends of our forefathers, floods came and winds blew, so that the vol-

found that the Temple of the Jade Altar had sunk deep into the earth; and a Crystal Lake occupied the cavity left by its sinking.

"On the banks of the Crystal Lake, the new city of Karnux arose and flourished; and on clear days, when the sun god shone from the heavens upon the waters of the lake, the sharp-sighted Aztecs could still see the Jade Altar on the bottom, shimmering like a dazzling green box, far beneath the ripples.

"Now the god Mexlitl is the sun god of the Aztecs; he fears to dive beneath the surface of the Crystal Lake to re-

cover his Sacred Knife from the submerged altar of jade, for in so doing he would lose his radiance, and become as a dead thing. Yet the hand of Mexlitl yearns for the touch of his Sacred Knife, which he himself had fashioned from a sunbeam.

"There shall some day come to the city of Karnux a fair god, clad in skin like the lily petal; and as proof of his divinity, this fair god, who is named Ozar the Aztec, shall retrieve the knife and restore it to the palm of Mexlitl the Sun God."

THE reader paused to wrap the folds of his rich mantle of scarlet humming birds' skins more closely about his thin frame. He was Tarx, high priest to the sun god of whom he spoke; and he was magician and mightiest man in all Karnux.

Tarx paused, waiting for a reply; and if he thought the fearsome decree of almost inevitable death should falter the tongue of Ozar, he was mistaken.

"I have heard, O Tarx," responded the white man, returning to the high priest's fiendish stare. "The legend of the Jade Altar was told to me often during the years of my boyhood, spent in the mountain cave of Claxitl the Arrow-maker. I have heard, and I am ready."

The high priest stirred uncomfortably. His single eye gleamed like a serpent's; the other was sightless and opaque, and rested in its socket like a frosted marble. The priest's thin lips were parted, to expose filed, jade-inlaid teeth, on which rested the red forks of his cloven tongue—split like an adder's, as evidence of his priestly authority.

"The Lake is infested with dangerous fish and snakes, who prey on human flesh," continued the priest, his voice sibilant as a viper's hiss. "Bodies which sink to the bottom are crushed by the pressure, even as fruit is crushed by a woman's palms. Dost thou understand, Lord Ozar?"

The white man nodded, his blue eyes never leaving Tarx's hideous face.

"Ozar is aware of the dangers which exist beneath the sparkling wavelets of the lake, and the treasure which lies so far below," he replied calmly. "Ere the sun god hath risen to-morrow in his basket of gold, the Sacred Knife shall rest again in the palm of Mexlitl."

Tarx's body went stiffly in a bow.

"Mexlitl hath spoken," he said ominously. "Dost thou fail to restore the Sacred Knife to his palm as thou hast vowed before him, thou shalt die on his altar—to-morrow!"

Having delivered his ultimatum, Tarx about-faced, and slithered away to vanish between parted curtains. The huge idol seemed to smile mystically.

The presence of a man with the bronzed skin and ice-blue eyes of an American were, indeed, oddly out of place in the barbaric splendor of a pagan temple, wrapped in the atmosphere of a thousand forgotten years.

Perhaps the great god Mexlitl, peering down upon Ozar behind his gigantic mask of turquoise mosaic, realized the queer tricks of fate which had placed this clean-cut young white man before him. Mayhap that was why his stony mouth curled in a smile.

And a queer, fantastic story it was; a chain of events to stagger the most vivid imagination.

IN the first place, fate itself had conspired to hide the Aztec city of Karnux from the eyes of the world. For four hundred years since Cortes had crushed Montezuma and the Aztec empire in his far-famed conquest of Mexico, a remnant of that ancient tribe had lived and thrived through countless generations in the crater of an extinct volcano in the Navajada Mountains—an uncharted range in the vast, unmapped areas of northern Mexico.

The fates, too, had directed the footsteps of Doctor William Starling and his

geological expedition into the Navajadas, twenty years before. Could it have been the fates who decreed at the same time, that a drought should threaten the Aztecs of the Valley of the Navajadas with extinction, and sent the high priest Tarx and his blue-feathered warriors forth, to produce a sacrifice with which to appease the wrath of the rain god?

At any rate, Tarx had gone out into the sun-blistered expanse of desert-mountain malpais beyond the crater which had shielded the Aztec civilization from the world; and he and his warriors had captured that party of Americans whose footsteps led so close to a hidden world of towering, milk-white temples and royal palace rich in gold and precious jewels.

Larry Starling had been a babe when Tarx's warriors had captured him, after that horrible massacre in some forgotten, unnamed canyon beyond the Navajada's rim; and he had been brought, with his parents, to the sacrificial altars atop the highest pyramid in Karnux—the Temple of Gold.

His father and mother had been sacrificed in the name of Yaxob the Rain God; and even now, Tarx could remember with distinct clearness how the rains had opened and gushed down at the very instant he had picked up the white babe for sacrifice.

King Montezirka, ruler of the Aztecs of Karnux, had decreed that the babe's life be spared; and with the decree made a prophecy that chilled Tarx's heart: Perhaps this American child might be Ozar the Aztec—the fair god whose coming had been heralded throughout centuries of Aztec mythology as the white deity who should some day come to rule as mightiest man in Karnux.

Small wonder that Tarx, who held that enviable position, should fear the king's words; but ere Tarx could protest, the great Montezirka's soul had fled to the sky temple of the Aztecs;

for the monarch was very old and infirm.

Even a high priest could not countermand the order of a king who is dead. But he resolved to banish the babe to a remote fastness in the Navajadas, with only Claxitl the Arrow-maker, to care for him. Surely the winter cold would kill the babe!

But for twenty summers, the babe Ozar had developed in Claxitl's mountain cave, molding himself into a sturdy youth of the wilds, in whose veins beat the spirit of his American ancestors, and whose body was made mighty and supple by his primitive upbringing.

Thus had Ozar the Aztec come to Karnux to fulfill his destiny; and Tarx, high priest of the sun god, had seen him start about the fulfillment of the Five Sacred Commands, which were to test his divinity, with a heart full of courage. Then, too, Ozar had won the heart of beautiful Queen Esta, ruler of Karnux; and Tarx was consumed with jealous rage.

And now Ozar was reading for the tenth time the final words in this command of Mexlitl the Sun God: "To him who would wear the title of Ozar the Aztec be this order given: the palm of Mexlitl yearns for the Sacred Knife which lies on the Jade Altar of Karnux at the bottom of the Crystal Lake. Let Ozar bring the Sacred Knife to the throne of Mexlitl; and thereby shall his divinity be proven."

TARX, hidden behind the rich curtains of the room, grinned evilly to himself as he saw Ozar's features tighten, as he reread the Sacred Command. Therein he found a task which he, as Ozar the Aztec, must fulfill. And what human being, even though he be clad in the mystic white skin of the long-fabled fair god—what mere mortal could hope to recover the Sacred Knife which lay on a forgotten altar at the bottom of the deep lake

which lay like a platinum scimitar about the city?

Less than the space of a moon had Ozar been in Karnux; but already he had fulfilled similar orders of Mexlitl. Already he was looked upon, in truth, as Ozar by the fair Queen of Karnux, the lovely Esta.

But now, thought the wicked high priest, the supreme test had come. Was Ozar a fish, that he might survive the terrific pressures at the bottom of the lake? Or was he a god, that he might discover the location of the mystic Jade Altar?

For long minutes, Ozar stood before the huge idol, his ice-blue eyes fixed on the carved message which had stood for a thousand years awaiting his reading. His gaze flickered over the scene, taking in the jadeite censers, from which curled wisps of smoke laden with the rare odor of white acacia; the feather-work tapestries of the walls; the huge beaten disk of solid gold, thirty feet in diameter, which covered the breasts of Mexlitl: a gorgeous symbol of the sun.

As if his keen-sighted gaze had the power of penetrating the thick fabric curtains, the heavy tapestries parted, and an Aztec slave padded forth to stand before Ozar.

The American's gaze swept the underling's towering figure, majestic even in the detested raiment of bondage. The piercing black eyes, the hawkish nose, and hatchet features, surmounted by long black hair—they might have belonged to a war lord, instead of a slave in the Temple of Gold.

"When thou hast read the Sacred Commands of the sun god, thy humble servant will escort thee outside the Temple, O Lord Ozar," said the slave, bending on one knee before the white man.

"Rise, then, and lead the way through the hidden passages of the Temple," commanded Ozar, his glance making a final survey of the splendors of the Holy Room. "The Commands have been read,

and their import rests even now upon my soul."

The Indian bowed, and Ozar's brow knotted as he sought to fathom the snakelike gleam which showed in the depths of the slave's eyes. A sense of peril deepened as he followed the measured pace of the Indian across the room.

THE stone image of Mexlitl curved its stone lips in a sardonic smile as the slave held aside the heavy curtains, and Ozar stepped outside the holy presence of the god. He found himself in a gloomy corridor, with countless curtained doors leading to the various passages which honeycombed the interior of the towering pyramid. Only Tarx, or members of his priestly order, knew the secret of which one of those curtained doors led outside.

Tarx had conducted him into the Holy Room; and Ozar had been blindfolded with a paper mask of maguey fiber, in keeping with the religious customs of the Aztecs, who felt one's eyes would be blinded by too sudden contact with a deity.

Ozar kept close behind the slave. Every second he expected the twang of a bowstring and the agonizing stab of a poisoned arrow through his back. He knew enough of Tarx and his murderous ways to realize his life meant little inside the holiest temple of the Aztecs.

The slave stopped. He indicated a curtained doorway, with a brown arm.

"There lies the corridor leading to the outside, O Master," mumbled the Indian, bowing low.

Ozar shot a lightning glance at the indicated door. Did he imagine he saw the hangings stir ever so slightly? It might be the movement of shadows under the fanning flames of the lamps.

"Yes?" answered Ozar, in a steely whisper. "Well, slave—lead me through it! *Hura!* I shall follow!"

The color drained from the slave's

coppery face. "But—but master—I am not permitted outside!" babbled the Aztec, his features suddenly glistening with sweat.

"Wouldst thou disobey the fair god?" snarled Ozar, his hand moving threateningly. "*Otske!* Go—and speak not!"

Trembling as if his very bones would shake apart, the slave moved to the curtained exit. His long, gaunt fingers moved forward to touch the curtains.

Even as he did so, a choked gasp escaped the Indian's throat. His body was shocked by a heavy impact, and with a moan of agony on his lips, the Indian fell back into Ozar's arms. His chest was pierced by a ragged hole through the breast bone, from which crimson gushed in a thick flood down his body.

Projecting through the rich curtains was the obsidian-tipped head of a huge spear!

CHAPTER II.

THE QUEEN OF KARNUX.

THE spear was instantly withdrawn, leaving only a ragged, red-smeared hole in the gaudy coloring of the tapestry. Hastily lowering the body of the dying slave, Ozar sprang forward, and with fingers tough as the claws of a wild beast, he ripped down the heavy curtain. A jet-black passage met his gaze, which the feeble glow of the oil flames could not penetrate.

But the hidden murderer had fled.

Ozar's mouth twisted in a bitter smile as he dragged the body of the slave to one side, away from a possible arrow from that darkened hallway of death.

The white man regretted the fatal thrust in this Indian's chest, even though he realized the spear had been meant for his own heart. Yet his American senses could not condone the fierce cruelty of the Aztecs, who valued human life as nothing, and whose cruelty is unparalleled in the history of mankind.

He stooped over the wounded slave, peering into the agony-filled eyes which stared up at him through piteous windows of tears.

"The green—door—O Master—the gr——" The slave's words choked, and the ghastly mask of death covered the Indian's features as Ozar stood up, his face hard and bitter in the gloom.

He shuddered involuntarily as he glanced at the gaping wound which had been meant for him. It showed him the power of Tarx, the death threat which hung over him night and day, even as the air surrounded his body.

What was it the slave had gasped with his expiring breath? The green door? Glancing about, Ozar noted for the first time, that a regular system governed the hangings of the various exits leading from the corridor: they were dyed in the hues of the rainbow, and in the order of the spectrum.

The door he had been about to enter was colored red, the hue of death, of danger, and of the wounds of battle. The next in line was orange; then followed yellow, green, blue, and finally a rich purple.

Surely the slave had meant that safety lay beyond the door which was hung in green; so, without delay, Ozar headed for it. He could but take a chance on the truth of the slave's dying words; at any rate, it was better than mere guesswork.

Even as he parted the green curtains, he realized the dead man had rewarded him with the truth. Through a long, dark passage he could see a dazzling rectangle of light—the exit from the Temple!

AS he hurried down the stone-floored corridor, he saw the city of Karnux spread out with its red-paved streets radiating from this central temple, like spikes from a wheel hub.

It was a city which surpassed in

splendor, by four hundred years of seniority, the elegance of ancient Tenochtitlán, the City of Mexico discovered by Hernando Cortes in his Spanish conquest.

Towering, snow-white pyramids, topped by altars from which flamed the Unquenchable Fires; broad market places, where leather-lunged venders squatted under their awnings, selling maize and chili and arrow heads and the thousand and one other products of the field and loom and quarry; the stucco-walled, flat-roofed *azoteas*, or dwelling houses; and now, as he stepped out into the glittering sunshine, the royal palaces of the ruler of Karnux, surrounded by well-tended gardens and spacious lawns, dappled with green shrubbery.

Ozar's chest heaved in a sigh of relief as he strode out of the sinister Temple of Gold. Within its secret passages and terrifying recesses, he was faced with the mysticism of the pagan gods; outside, he was afraid of no man.

Straight to the long arcade leading through the royal apartments of Esta, Queen of Karnux, strode the white man. He felt his heart beat swiftly, as thoughts of the beautiful queen who had won his heart flooded his mind.

Even as he entered the royal palace, gorgeous with its burnished gold work and richly hued frescoes, he saw Queen Esta standing upon her silver throne, hands stretched forth in greeting.

It was a sight to thrill the heart of a wooden man; for Esta was the most beautiful woman in the Valley of the Navajadas. Her heart-shaped face was framed in a cluster of raven hair, under a gem-sprinkled corona of shimmering gold, from which streamed a plume of green feathers.

Something of the regal bearing she had inherited from her ancestors, the illustrious Montezirkas, was reflected in the shapely nose, the long-lashed ebony eyes, the carmine lips above shapely

chin. Her skin glowed like burnished copper, and was replete with ornaments of gold and jade.

Her royal costume blinded the eye: a glittering bodice of beaten gold scales, fitting her gracefully curving body like the skin of a goldfish; a skirt of costly material, dyed the royal color, a brilliant green; and gem-incrusted sandals, with soles of pure yellow gold.

"Greetings, gracious Queen!" said Ozar, dropping on one knee before the dazzling vision who was the ruler of Karnux. "Thy servant awaits thy wishes."

QUEEN ESTA smiled, her glistening white teeth beautiful in comparison to the notched teeth of the common Aztec woman.

"The high priest Tarx informs me that thou hast come for a royal canoe that thou mayest locate the Jade Altar beneath the surface of the Crystal Lake, Lord Ozar," said the queen, as Ozar arose.

For the first time, Ozar noted the presence of Tarx, standing beside the royal throne; and his hackles seemed to rise, as with a dog when it meets a hostile cat.

Tarx looked even more hideous now, for his face was stamped with surprise—surprise which betrayed instantly the knowledge that it had been his long, bony hands which had wielded the death spear back there in the tapestried cloisters of the mystic Temple of Gold.

The priest wore his blue-plumed helmet, fashioned like the head of a wild animal, with his face framed in the open, fang-studded jaws. About his shoulders was the scarlet mantle of humming birds' skins; a girdle surrounded his waist, from which swung a heavy *macquauitl*, or wooden sword edged with thin obsidian blades set in resin.

Tarx was leering, his forked tongue slaverling behind the notched teeth; his single eye gleamed like a serpent's, while

the opaque, sightless orb reflected the ruddy glare of his robes.

"Aye, gracious Queen; I must hasten my task, ere the sun god has completed his daily journey over the heavens. While his face shines upon the surface of the Crystal Lake, my eyes can find the Jade Altar in the depths beneath."

Tarx's evil face was a picture of hate as he met Ozar's meaningful glare. His fingers twisted a yellow-stained whistle which dangled from his neck on a cord; and as the white man finished speaking, he put the whistle to his lips and blew a series of mystic notes.

Almost instantly, somber-clad slaves appeared before the throne, awaiting the royal commands.

"Carry to the shores of the Crystal Lake a royal canoe," commanded Esta. "Thou mayest have thy pick of slaves to paddle the canoe, while thou searchest for the buried altar, Lord Ozar," she granted, her eyes smiling into Ozar's.

The white man bowed. "With thy permission, O Queen," he suggested, "I shall use Larxatun—the slave whom thou gavest me, after the rites of the Plumed Serpent."

Esta's eyes misted with the memory of the ordeal by which Ozar, condemned to die at the altar of the Plumed Serpent, had rescued the Indian slave Larxatun from the depths of the dungeons under the sacred Temple of Gold, and won the pardon of the gods.

Even yet, Ozar's body was seamed with half-healed scars from that struggle; and the slave Larxatun remained to remind him of his adventures in the threat of the Plumed Serpent idol.

"Thy wish is granted, Lord Ozar," said the queen. "May the great god Mexlilt guide thine eyes in thy search for the submerged altar."

A look of deep understanding passed between the youthful man and the girl; a look as strong as visible bonds, so that it was difficult for them to break its tie.

As Ozar turned away, he noticed that

Tarx had disappeared; and he wondered, for he knew that his search for the Jade Altar would be fraught with countless dangers at every turn if it were in the power of the great high priest to make it so.

Crowding thoughts of the gorgeous queen from his mind, Ozar strode from the palace, his mind occupied with the grave problem which seemed to predestine his doom.

Out on the street Ozar went, head bowed in thought. Common citizens, clad in their mantles and cheap sandals, regarded him curiously as he strode toward the slave quarter. Was this in truth Ozar the Aztec, come to deliver them from the bondage and torture inflicted upon them by the cruel Tarx?

As he neared the mud-and-straw hovels where lived the bondsmen, one of the men squatting in the shade of the wall of unburned brick leaped to his feet with a glad cry, and came running to Larry Starling's side.

It was Larxatun, he whom Ozar had saved from death at the hands of the Aztec priests; and even though the white man considered him a partner in his adventures, Larxatun worshiped Ozar with the dumb love of a dog for its master.

"A royal canoe awaits us on the lake bank, Larxatun," explained Ozar, as the two fell in step, headed for the Crystal Lake. "We shall launch it, and search for the sunken altar which has lain so long beneath the waves."

THEY found the canoe, dyed with gaudy colors and lined with rare cloths and feathered cushions, resting on the grassy bank of the Lake, where the slaves of Queen Esta had placed it. Near by, a dirty child, the offspring of some squalid slave, was playing in the shadow of the royal boat.

"Yon whelp would like to help us find the Jade Altar, O Master!" laughed the slave Larxatun, as he and Ozar slid

the boat over the grass, with the ragged little Indian boy pushing against the gunwales with chubby fingers.

The urchin regarded them with black, sober eyes. "Aye, masters—I knowest where the green block lies," returned he innocently. "Many times have I seen it, as I paddle a log over yon Lake."

Ozar stopped, regarding the slave child with narrowed eyes. Could it be that the fates had thrust this golden opportunity upon them—the chance to locate the Jade Altar at the very beginning of their search?

"Where, my child, is the green block thou hast seen beneath the waves?" inquired Ozar gently, stooping to place his bronzed hands on the boy's shoulders.

The child regarded Ozar bashfully. Then he turned, and pointed shyly toward a long bar of sand which shoved its yellow spit out from the lake bank.

"Launch thy boat off yon sand bar," he instructed. "Paddle but a short distance, and the green block will shine beneath you like an emerald."

Breathing a prayer of thanks to the gods, Ozar rummaged in his girdle pouch, and dropped a handful of T-shaped tin slabs in the boy's palm. Tin was a rare metal to the Aztecs of Karnux, and served for money, along with transparent quills of gold dust and tiny bags of *cacao*.

With a squeal of delight, the slave child wriggled from Ozar's arms and scampered away, bound for the market place where he could buy a cup of vanilla-flavored *chocolatl* with his money.

Quivering with haste, Ozar and his slave Larxatun carried the royal canoe to the very edge of the sandy shelf extending into the lapping ripples. Shoving the boat out into an inch or so of water, the two men jumped after it.

Out into the lake they paddled, their eyes feasting on the mirrored reflection of the city of Karnux. Milk-white pyramids rose in terraced heights toward the

heavens; sacred fires burned near the altars atop the lofty alabaster temples; red stone palaces of the nobles, and rich dyed the glasslike water with roseate hues.

But it was on the bottom of the lake that Ozar riveted his attention, while Larxatun paddled the canoe slowly about. As if he were looking at the bottom of a wash basin through inches of crystal water, Ozar could see the bottom of the lake; could see the magnified forms of multicolored fish, swimming to and fro; water plants waving their green spears; white sands shimmering many fathoms below.

Suddenly the white man's eyes narrowed. He held his hands over the water, to cut off the sun's glare.

"Larxatun! Larxatun!" he exclaimed, his voice vibrant with joy. "Look! Dost thou see? The child was right!"

The canoe bobbed on its keel as the Aztec rushed to Ozar's side and followed the direction of the white man's finger.

Down through the crystal depths of the lake, far beneath the shimmering wavelets of the surface, gleamed a spot of dazzling green, like a blazing emerald on a white pillow.

It was the Jade Altar!

CHAPTER III.

AN UNDERWATER ATTACK.

AFTER paddling around in a circle over that spot of green flame which sparkled up through the water, Ozar made certain that he had really found the Jade Altar of mythology.

He could even see, when the sun was right, the dim outlines of the ancient temple, which had sunk into the earth when the flood had threatened the Aztecs with extinction.

Ozar lost no time in preparing for his dive in quest of the sun god's Sacred Knife. Reaching inside his girdle of

ocelot's fur, the white man drew forth a small package of transparent, papery material which crackled as he smoothed it.

"The bladder of the ocelot whose fur I wear," explained Ozar, shaking out the crackling folds of the membranous substance. "With its use, I can remain under water many minutes. It is a trick I learned from Claxitl the Arrow-maker."

The balloonlike sack had been stretched until it assumed the proportions of a pumpkin, when unfolded. The opening of the sack was fitted with a wisp of maguey fiber, fashioned in such a way that it was like the draw string of a pouch.

While Larxatun looked on in wonderment, Ozar fitted the balloon over his head. The bladder had been scraped thin and rubbed with many applications of animal grease, so that it was nearly transparent; and it was filled with the sweet air which blew over the lake.

Ozar drew the puckering string about his neck. Then, reaching to the bottom of the canoe, he picked up the heavy rock in its meshed bag, which served as an anchor.

Defly untying the anchor rope, Ozar lifted the heavy stone against his chest, and hugged it tightly in his arms. The buoyancy of the air-filled helmet would prevent his diving; and, as he explained to Larxatun, he must keep his head upright, so as not to lose any of the air in his balloon sack.

With Larxatun balancing the opposite side of the canoe, Ozar poised on the gunwale, his lithe body as beautiful as a marble statue in the sunlight. Then, still clasping the anchor rock to his heart, he leaped into the crystal waters.

DOWN like a plummet Ozar shot. His eyes were open, peering through the transparent membrane of the air sack which surrounded his head like a globe. He could feel

the water pressure increasing as the fathoms piled up over his head.

His heart was slamming his eardrums. The water pressed against his skin like an invisible vise as he sank.

The world seemed a pea-green void about him, with sunlight glinting off the silvery sides of queer fish. Floating pads of water grass, suspended twenty feet beneath the surface, clutched at his legs as the rock carried him rapidly downward.

Suddenly a stab of pain assailed Ozar's thigh, like the stamp of a red-hot iron. He twisted about, releasing one arm from the rock. He was in time to see a long, pink-striped fish dart into the greenish gloom of the water. A streak of crimson hung in the fish's wake.

With exploring fingers, Ozar felt the slice which had been razored from his flesh by the snapping fish. He felt a slimy body against him, and whirled about to find his body encircled by a great serpent of a species unknown to him.

The rock dropped to the bottom as Ozar's fingers released the fiber-webbed bag which supported it. His body, supported by the bladder-bag air supply, started to move upward. Then his chest was pulled back by scaled coils, and he lashed out fingers that were tough as spikes, striking at the snake's head.

Evil eyes and a darting black tongue wavered like the face of a nightmare outside his air-bag window. Another spiral of tightening coils slid about Ozar's waist, wrapped thrice about one leg. They were sinking lower.

The white man caught his breath in short gasps. The trick of wearing the air bag Claxitl had made for him lay in taking the precious air supply slowly—in sips, so to speak.

Ozar's fingers closed on the snake's jaws. Needlelike fangs sank into his knuckles. Thread of crimson spiraled upward like the teeth of a wavy comb

from the tiny wounds. Luminous fishes, shaped like arrow heads, and colored blue and gold, darted in to nip bits of flesh from his body. Their bites stung like chips of hot metal in his skin, but he did not feel them above the tightening grip of the snake monster.

His other hand clawed at the slippery scales which were crushing his waist.

The serpent's tail wriggled upward, wrapped that wrist in a wiry loop, and pulled it away.

Then they touched bottom. Ozar fought to keep his head erect, to conserve that precious air supply. The bladder seemed to be cutting his neck in two, strangling him as the buoyancy of the air sought to pull it upward. His feet wallowed ankle-deep in the sludge of the lake bottom.

The water blazed green. The grip of the snake's jaws on Ozar's hand tightened. They struggled in the water, Ozar seeking to choke the reptile, the snake closing its killing squeeze with each passing second.

They foundered into a bed of speary water grass. The weight of fathoms of water was crushing Ozar down. His ankle sank into slimy muck. The razor-edged grass sliced at his skin. The monster loosened its coils somewhat then, but only to make room for another spiral about his legs, pinioning his knees together. He felt his grip weakening on the reptile's jaws. Bubbles broke loose and filtered upward.

Suddenly that green light flashed out again, making his face shine like a melon rind inside the tough skin of the balloon about his neck and head. Through eyes that were red-shot and popping from their sockets from the pressure of the snake's coils, Ozar glimpsed the vision of a box-shaped splash of apple green, close by his left hand.

The snake had pulled him to the very edge of the Jade Altar!

ACRY escaped Ozar's lips, sounding ghostly and unreal inside his air balloon. He felt his sandaled feet gouge through the muck of the lake bottom, and come to rest on the close-laid bricks of the ancient temple.

His veins were hammering his ears now like the rumble of thunder. His strength was fast being crushed from his bones, like water flowing from a punctured jar.

What was it the ancient myth had said? What were the mystic words he had read in the Holy Room of the sun god?

Ozar felt his senses fading. Frantically, desperately, he sought to summon his reeling thoughts. The crushing coils of the snake were constricting, now. But one thought persisted. What was it the myth had said?

The Sacred Knife! That was it! The legends said the great god Mexlitl had dropped it on the Jade Altar when the floods came and the winds blew and he had to flee, centuries before——

It seemed to take his last ounce of strength to drag his eyelids open. What if that Sacred Knife had been but the figment of some stone carver's imagination. How could a stone knife lie at the bottom of a Crystal Lake for untold centuries? It was silly, unbelievable, preposterous. How——

Then Ozar saw it. Through the transparent membrane of his air sack, he saw it. The Sacred Knife! Sun rays, filtered through unknown depths of icy water, glinted off a blade of polished flint. The handle was incrustated with green and blue and gold mosaic. It was lying on the Jade Altar, just as the mystic words of the Aztec legends had said.

In a convulsion of agony as he felt his vitals being pressed asunder, Ozar drew the writhing snake closer to the altar. His hand left its throttling grip on the reptile's head, groped forward toward the altar.

He felt the sharp edge of the block of

jade against his side. Then his fingers closed on the Sacred Knife.

Sunlight flashed on the obsidian blade. Spurts of red blossomed in the water, as tough scales of the serpent were ruptured by his driving thrusts.

Clinging to water grass, bracing his body against the Jade Altar, Ozar hewed and sliced. The serpent's head hung by a string as the blade severed gristle and bone of its vertebrae. The coils loosened, slipped.

In the midst of a crimson fountain, Ozar was hacking and chopping at the bleeding coils of the monster. He stepped out of the quivering, scaly body, and the Sacred Knife trailed strings of purplish color as he waded out of the water, which was colored as if a barrel of red ink had been dumped there.

He clung a moment to the grass, gasping, while the cool tug of the current washed the crimson stains from the *transparent sides of the bladder* about his head. The air in the sack was beginning to sting his nostrils. It had been about used up. He must push out for the surface, now—bearing with him the Sacred Knife, dyed with snake's blood.

But things were not to be as easy as that. A sharp *crack* of stone against stone, smiting his eardrums through the water, stunned Ozar as he was in the act of letting go his hold on the water-grass.

He turned, and his heart seemed to stop pumping in his chest.

There, standing beside the Jade Altar, which weaved and vibrated like a block of green jelly through the undulating movement of the water, stood the form of a towering Aztec warrior, spear poised and lunging!

There was no time to jerk up the Sacred Knife to parry the thrust. Ozar just managed to gulp in the last suck of air in the bladder, when he felt the warrior's javelin puncture the air bag and graze his temple.

CHAPTER IV.

BEHIND THE PANEL.

LARXATUN, leaning over the gunwale of the royal canoe, felt his body freeze. There, not six inches under his nose, a chain of crimson-stained bubbles had broken the surface of the water!

The Aztec slave had watched Ozar's body drop like a chunk of rock through the depths of the lake. He had even fancied he had seen the fish dart in to nip morsels from the white man's ribs.

Then Ozar's form had become wavering and indistinct, as the water was disturbed by submarine currents, and he had lost sight of his master altogether.

Ozar had been down in the water twice as long as the most expert swimmer in Karnux could have stayed. Larxatun half expected to see the water-crushed body of his master bob to the surface at any moment.

And now the water was beginning to swim with pads of foam which were streaked with red! That settled it!

In the stern of the canoe was another mesh bag containing a stone anchor. Heaving off his mantle of coarse cloth, the former slave untied the anchor rope and hugged the rock to his chest, as he had seen Ozar do.

Then, plunging head first from the canoe, he shot downward through the water, his long black hair billowing out behind.

Twenty feet down, and he caught sight of Ozar, standing in the midst of wavering coils of the dead water monster. And Larxatun saw, even before Ozar the Aztec became aware of his new danger, the form of the warrior creeping up behind him.

The warrior, as near as Larxatun could make out, had emerged from a panel in the Jade Altar itself. The underling recognized the huge Aztec fighter as Pukstatl, one of Tarx's blue-feathered warriors.

Larxatun felt cold fear grip his muscles at the sight. Was Tarx aware of a secret entrance to the Jade Altar? What lay behind that panel?

The water pressure was squeezing the Aztec slave almost to a pulp as he sank toward the lake bottom, but he kept his eyes open as he saw Pukstatl thrust his spear.

He saw a burst of white bubbles rocket forth from the punctured air sack on Ozar's shoulders, and start toiling upward. And he saw the white man seize the javelin with a brawny arm, and jerk the warriors toward him.

As Larxatun's knees settled in the soft ooze at the lake's floor, he saw Ozar and the Aztec warrior locked in a death struggle. Mud and silt plunged upward from their threshing feet, hiding the fighters in a brown smudge.

OZAR and Pukstatl weaved about, fingers clawing at each other's throats. It looked like a slow-motion film, the white man and the copper-skinned savage, weaving in and out of the tall grass which grew about the Jade Altar.

The mud-clouded water swirled as Ozar thrust his arm forward like a piston drive, and sank the Sacred Knife hilt-deep in the warrior's breast. Crimson spurted into the brown and mixed with the dazzling green sparks which reflected from the Jade Altar at their side.

And then the body of the dead Pukstatl slumped to one side, to settle slowly into the dreg of the lake bottom. At the same moment Larxatun's senses faded, and his body bobbed about the lake floor like a ship tugging at its anchor. Even in unconsciousness, the Indian's fingers clung like steel wires to the meshed fibers of the anchor rock.

Ozar's head ached. The bladder, its remains lying like a collar of torn paper about his shoulders, had exploded under the thrust of Pukstatl's spear like

a bomb in his eardrums. His face smarted from the slap of water which had crushed the air out of the ruptured balloon.

Thrusting the Sacred Knife between his teeth, Ozar started for the surface. Then he caught sight of Larxatun, clinging like a leech to his anchoring rock.

Kicking through the water with feeble strokes, Ozar clasped iron arms about Larxatun's body and pried the Indian's fingers loose from the death grip on the rock.

The two bodies rolled about, as Ozar struggled to summon strength enough from his bursting lungs to pull them to the surface. The crushing weight of tons of water held them down, helpless against the lake's bottom.

Consciousness fading under the pressure, Ozar slumped over against the Jade Altar, his Aztec comrade clasped in his arms. Sparks of light burst into orange flame before his eyes. Shooting stars hammered his brain. Then all went black, for a moment.

He was dimly conscious of the side of the Jade Altar moving, the polished stone as slick as glass against his bare shoulder. Then a panel moved aside, and Ozar tumbled through the opening in the altar, to land in a water-filled room.

Damp, musty air surged into his lungs in choking gasps. His senses cleared enough to see a huge savage dressed in the quilted armor and blue-plumed helmet of Tarx's warriors, engaged in sliding shut the panel of the Jade Altar, through which gushed a drenching flow of water from the lake.

Human strength alone could not have stemmed that rush of green water, but a system of weights and slides performed the task. The heavy panel in the altar's side slid shut, and the warrior turned to face Ozar, standing waist-deep in the foamy water of the room.

A gasp of fear escaped the warrior's lips as Ozar's hand shot forward, and

the Sacred Knife flashed through the air to strike the Indian's breastbone with a wooden thud. Red gushed from the Aztec's mouth as he clutched at the buried hilt of the knife, then toppled forward in the water.

Ozar, clinging to Larxatun's limp body, glanced about him. He was quick to realize that this was a room in the ancient temple which had sunk into the earth, centuries ago. One look at the massive stone which formed its construction made the white man realize how the temple had withstood the pressure of the lake above.

He also realized that the warrior whom he had stabbed had heard him fall against the panel above, and let him into the room only because he thought Ozar was the warrior Pukstatl returning victorious with the corpse of the white man. Even now, the body of Pukstatl was being devoured by the underwater creatures who infested the depths of the Crystal Lake.

Laxatun was choking himself back to life, in Ozar's arms. He coughed up great quantities of lake water as the white man bent him double at the middle, shaking him like a sack.

FOR the space of ten minutes the two men leaned against the moldy walls of the temple chamber, waist-deep in the water which had gushed through from the altar panel above. Then their ears registered the sound of voices, coming from a passage behind them!

"'Tis the voice of Tarx, O Master!" breather Larxatun, his lungs still wet, his voice wheezy. "We will be trapped!"

Ozar nodded. His eyes gleamed in the gloom. There was but one exit from this chamber—that was a flight of stairs which led up out of the water.

Ozar the Aztec paused long enough to pluck the Sacred Knife from the chest of the dead warrior. Then the two

splashed their way to the steps, and pulled their dripping bodies up the staircase. The sound of voices was getting louder; Tarx and his warriors were approaching.

Ozar knew he was inside the ancient temple of the Aztecs, far beneath the surface of the city of Karnux. He also knew that voices and sounds would travel distinctly a long way, in stone passages. Perhaps, then, the high priest was at the far end of the corridor, which tunneled off through the darkness. But they must find a hiding place, and quickly.

The two dripping men came to a doorway in the gloom. Ozar put his ear to the wooden panels, listened sharply.

"Hold the Sacred Knife, Larxatun," ordered the white man, handing the underling the mosaic-hilted weapon. "I will push open this door. We need rest. We can hide in here until Tarx and his warriors have left the temple."

He put his shoulders to the door, and felt the panels move under his weight.

The door opened with a dull squeak into a pitch-black room which smelled with the must of forgotten ages. It would be an ideal place to hide until their strength was restored.

"Come, Larxatun," said Ozar, turning. "We will——"

The white man's whisper broke off with a gasp. The spot where his slave had stood an instant before was now *blank space*! Larxatun had vanished!

CHAPTER V.

THE MASKED PRIEST.

FOR a full minute, Ozar the Aztec stood gazing at empty space, as if stunned. Then he reached forward through the murk, to make sure that Larxatun's ebon bulk had not melted against the gray tones of the opposite walls.

But his eyes had not deceived him.

The Aztec slave was gone—completely vanished! It was like turning the leaves in a maguery-paper book, from one hieroglyph to the next—here one second, gone the next. It was uncanny.

And Larxatun had carried the Sacred Knife with him, wherever his body had been whisked!

Sweat dripped from the white man's brow as he drew back into the shadow of the doorway. It was worse than uncanny. No sound of a struggle, no footsteps, nothing to betray how or where or why the slave had gone. Was Tarx behind this?

Then Ozar suddenly realized that the voices had ceased. No longer did he hear the sibilant tones of the cloven-tongued Tarx, nor the gruff voices of his henchmen. The corridor was silent as the vaults of death.

"I must find my friend," breathed Ozar to himself. "*Huva!* If the ghosts in this forgotten temple under the lake carried him away, let them seize me also!"

He crept out into the corridor, his wet-soled leathern sandals making no noise on the stone floor, which was covered with a moist coating of dust, ages old. Sliding his finger tips along the smooth-hewn walls, he made his way for a great distance down the dimly lighted corridor.

ROUNDING a square bend in the hallway, Ozar discovered the source of the pale light which filtered through the gloom of the temple. Lamps, their dust-clouded flames as weak as the life spark in a dying warrior, were set in niches along the wall.

Cautiously, Ozar made his way along the ill-lighted hall. Every few feet he paused, straining his ears for some sound to tell him of Larxatun's location; but he heard nothing, save the pulsing of the arteries behind his ear drums.

He thumbed a pebble from the pouch of his girdle, and loaded his sling, wrap-

ping the thongs about his wrist. Ozar was an expert in the use of the sling shot; in a land where men went heavily armed with spear and sword and bow and arrows, Ozar was conspicuous for the fact that he went unencumbered by weapons of any kind save his sling, wrapped like a bandeau about his head.

Suddenly, his keen blue eyes detected a movement in the flickering shadows ahead. He paused, holding his breath. Then the faint shuffle of sandals on the dusty floor reached his straining ears. Was it Larxatun?

Flattening himself against the stones like a whip-tailed lizard, Ozar waited. The sling hung from one tense hand; he was crouched like a coiled snake about to strike. What was that moving shadow there in the darkness?

And then Ozar saw. It was a priest—a crippled man whose back was hunched nearly double. He was clad in a mantle of black feathers, upon which had been worked out in embroidery and silver the "good-luck" signs and tokens of the Aztecs: the lizard, signifying fertility; the dog, meaning rank and riches; the *xopilote* hawk, indicating courage in war.

Clutched in the priest's bony hands were a pair of stone mirrors, made from nodules of pyrites, convex, and highly polished on both sides. The priests used them in Karnux as in the Aztec empire of old to determine whether children were sick or well. If they saw their reflections in the mirrors when they were placed under water, it mean death. A horrid custom, usually ending in sacrifice at the altar!

The priest was now shuffling along within a few feet of the tensed figure of the white man. Ozar noticed for the first time that he wore a mask—a shell of green mosaic, from which projected a snout. Golden spirals indicated smoke and lightning; it was the mask worn by the priests of Huitzil the War God.

The masked figure slithered past Ozar, his halting gait resembling the movement of a crippled spider. The white man's head turned, ice-blue eyes following the black figure as it went on by, apparently without noticing him.

OZAR thought rapidly. He was hopelessly lost, inside this forgotten temple under the Crystal Lake. Where Larxatun was, he had no slightest idea. Best that he ask this hobbling priest how to escape such a living tomb, rather than trust to blundering his own way out, and probably be shot down like a rat in a trap by a squad of Tarx's warriors.

He stepped forward, following the skulking figure of the masked priest for a few paces. Then he reached forth, and plucked the holy man's sable robe.

The masked priest turned, startled. Ozar heard him suck in a gasp of breath beneath the ugly mask. His hands, ridged with blue veins and dry as old paper, clutched spasmodically at the mirrors.

"I am Ozar, fair god of the Aztecs!" hissed the white youth impressively. "Canst thou tell me how to escape this passage? I wish to communicate with Mexliltl the Sun God."

The masked apparition looked Ozar over from head to feet. The white man could feel the cold breath of the hunchback against his bare chest. He shuddered. It was like the breath of a viper.

"Thy will shall be my will, Lord Ozar," rasped the priest, his voice cracked as if from disuse. "Come!"

The masked man in the black robes turned and hobbled back the way he had come. Ozar fell in step beside him, his eyes darting at each inky doorway as they proceeded, his glance sweeping behind him at frequent intervals.

"Hast thou seen one Larxatun, once an underling in the court of Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs?" inquired Ozar,

hoping that the little cripple might have some knowledge as to the whereabouts of the vanished slave.

He imagined the priest started. Then the masked head shook negatively. The priest reached a curtained doorway, and held the heavy tapestries aside, motioning Ozar over the threshold with his snout-shaped mask.

"These stairs lead you to a tunnel connected with the streets of Karnux, Lord Ozar," said the black-robed holy man, in his voice as creaky as an old hinge.

Ozar hesitated, remembering the last time he had been ushered toward a door. Did a spear lurk in those pitch-black recesses? If this crippled priest was betraying him—Ozar's fists clenched. He had a notion to break the masked monster in two, and stuff those diabolical mirrors down his parchment throat.

"I thank thee, priest of the war god," responded Ozar. "But wouldst thou lead me through the dark for a space?"

The priest shrugged, and without hesitation stepped across the threshold. Flushing at his own timidity, Ozar the Aztec followed him into the darkness, keeping his finger tips on the priest's black robes.

Crash! Something hard smashed against the back of Ozar's skull. The darkness split into ten thousand pieces, and came down in a rain of sparkling lights. He whirled in a flaming void, and then darkness tumbled down over everything and engulfed him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HALL OF BONES.

LARXATUN had seen so many appalling sights since beginning his quest with Ozar for the Sacred Knife, and had experienced the feeling of having his life balanced, as it were, on the tip of an eggshell, that he was not particularly surprised when the floor dropped from beneath him a sec-

ond or two after he had taken the Sacred Knife from Ozar's fingers.

He did not know that the corridors of the ancient temple were equipped with floors that were literally sprinkled with trapdoors, known only to the priests.

He landed with a spine-cracking jolt on a mat-covered floor some twelve feet below; and even before he struck, the trapdoor swung shut without a sound.

For a moment the slave lay gasping on the floor, the Sacred Knife clutched tightly in one fist. His vision reeled from the impact of his fall, and he felt his senses slipping off the edge into oblivion.

Then he heard a mutter of surprised voices, and the clatter of many footsteps surrounding him. As he struggled to regain his scattered wits, he felt the Sacred Knife being jerked from his grasp.

Instinctively, Larxatun's fingers had closed over the green and blue and gold mosaic haft of the weapon. But he was too late. Powerful arms clamped his elbows to his sides; hands as strong as traps pried loose his fingers; and the knife was gone.

Larxatun shook his head to rid himself of the cobwebs which clogged his senses, and blinked his eyes open.—The sight which met his reeling gaze brought a burst of cold moisture from every pore of his body.

He was completely surrounded by stern-faced warriors! Well he knew their rank and cruelty—they were the pick of the Karnux soldiery, banded together under the flag of Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs. Warriors of the Blue Feathers!

Their stalwart bodies were covered with a close vest of quilted armor, with a cuirass of thin plates of gold. Over this was worn a surcoat of gorgeous material, made from the feathers of the sacred *quetzal*.

Their helmets were made of wood and

silver, fashioned like Tarx's from the heads of wild animals, with the hawkish faces of their wearers framed between the fang-notched jaws. On top of the helmet floated a plume of sky-blue feathers.

Thick, black hair was combed back to reveal ears hung with polisheed copper rings. They wore collars and bracelets and anklets of beaten gold, sprinkled with turquoises and rare gems.

Larxatun struggled to his feet, noting dimly that no bones had been broken by his fall. He attempted to cry out for Ozar, but a moist palm was clamped over his mouth, and his head was snapped back.

"Our master, Tarx, will be pleased to find the Sacred Knife so easily," chuckled a sinister voice.

Larxatun's lips peeled back, and his sharp teeth cut through the tough skin of his captor's palms. The warrior jerked his hand away with a squall of rage, and Larxatun spun on his heels, zipping out a terrific uppercut with his free arm.

The hard-flung knuckles caught a warrior full on his beak-shaped Aztec nose, and he flopped backward to dash his head against the wall. Bawling low in his throat like a wild animal, Larxatun shook off the clinging warriors, and his fists lashed right and left, left and right, smashing ribs and crushing skin.

Cr-rash! A sword smashed against Larxatun's head, laying open a ghastly bruise. Dazed, the Indian slumped to the floor, struggled to pick himself up.

WHEN he recovered from the effects of the blow, he found himself bound hand and foot with heavy maguey fiber rope.

"Throw his body with the other slaves who have rebelled," commanded a huge warrior wearing a helmet of burnished gold—evidently a lieutenant in Tarx's band of fighting men.

Seizing Larxatun by his long, coarse

hair, a sturdy warrior, whom the slave recognized as one Avistixl, dragged the luckless captive through a pitch-black corridor. He heard the sound of a door grating open, and then Avistixl pulled him roughly up a long flight of stairs, his body jouncing cruelly over each riser and tread.

After what seemed an age, he felt himself flung into a room which blazed with light, coming in through circular windows high overhead; and before he opened his eyes, Avistixl had left him prostrate on the cold floor.

Larxatun blinked. He was lying on his face. Summoning his jaded strength, he rolled over. Then he gave vent to a startled yelp of terror.

He was looking into the leering face of a human skull, not an inch from his nose!

Dried flesh clung to the yellowed skull like leather. The lips had fallen into dust, exposing crooked, greenish teeth. Black hair sprouted from the skull, except for patches where mice had gnawed through the scalp, exposing white bone.

Sweat dripped from Larxatun's chin as he writhed away from the repulsive object. And then his senses received a fresh shock, which snapped him back to full consciousness as effectively as would a dash of ice water on his face.

That skull was connected to a skeleton, and the skeleton was bound hand and foot—*like himself!*

A grunt of terror wrenched from Larxatun's mouth as this fact soaked in. And then his eyes focused beyond the skeleton.

His heart caught in his throat from a new sight.

The floor of this long, low-ceiled room was filled with human skeletons of every shape and size, some twisted in inconceivable positions, others stretched out on the floor! Skeletons lay propped against the limestone walls; ribs broken off or hanging awry, backbones

fallen to decay. Skulls lay about the floor, like whitish-gray pots.

Without exception, the more recent of the skeletons were clad in moldering bits of *nequen* cloth—the badge of slavery. Like a flash, it occurred to Larxatun where he was.

This was the famous Hall of Bones—where disobedient slaves were left to die, surrounded by the bones of generations of past rebels! He had heard of the awful place, since childhood; but he often wondered if it were not another figment of the Aztec priests' imaginations, conceived to terrify them into subjection.

But this was real. Vividly real! Ten times more horrifying than the Wells of Sacrifice outside the city, where young maidens were hurled into a hole of bottomless depth; or to be tortured on the convex altar blocks atop some smoking pyramid.

The panic that racked Larxatun's body was excusable. Any one would have felt their sanity tottering, to be left in a place where grinning skulls held ghostly communion with each other, and piles of bones were tied together with bonds of maguey rope.

Larxatun's reason left him momentarily, and he writhed and twisted in his bonds, screaming like a madman. But it was useless. He felt the ropes cutting into his skin. He rolled into an ancient skeleton, which promptly fell into dust from the impact.

NOT until sheer exhaustion paralyzed his muscles did Larxatun cease his struggle. Foam was drying on his lips. His eyes were red-shot and staring with panic. His struggles had kicked up a dust, which eddied upward in the stale air, and was turned into golden cones by the light filtering in through the round windows above.

He blinked at those windows, which dotted the thick walls like suns. That showed him that Avistixl had dragged

him up into daylight again, anyway. Those windows had been placed there with a devilish purpose: so that a slave might see his fate, during the days or weeks he might remain alive, until he became a raving maniac and dashed his head against the walls. More than one skull had a pate that was battered in like the crust of an old melon rind.

The windows were equipped with round panes of clear quartz. The Aztecs of Karnux had developed this natural glass to a far greater degree than found by Cortes in his conquest of the Montezuman empire, four hundred years before.

Larxatun sank back in his bonds, panting. He could feel sticky fluid oozing from the welts caused by the tight ropes. No chance to loosen them, that was positive. As his senses began to clear from his first hysteria, he became conscious of the stench in the room. It made him sick at the stomach.

He was lying on his back now, in the middle of a tangle of bones. He lifted his legs from the hips, to roll over into a cleaner area. As he did so, his ankles crossed a bar of sunlight lancing down like a golden pencil from one of the quartz-paned windows.

Only for an instant were his feet in the shaft of sunlight; but in that time, he felt a sharp stab of pain, as if a red-hot iron had been drawn across the flesh. Looking at his ankles, he saw a red blister beginning to swell, on the inflamed area caused by his tight bonds.

An idea began to form in Larxatun's untrained mind. He knew nothing of lenses, or how glass can bend rays of light; he had never heard of a burning-glass, for they had not been invented by the primitive artisans of Karnux.

But he did know that the light coming through the quartz window converged like a point of a cone, at a spot just above his legs; and he had the blister to testify to the heat concentrated by that accidental burning-lens.

Gritting his teeth, Larxatun raised his legs, squirming his body until the fiber bonds which clamped his ankles were full in that brilliant, dazzling spot of light.

He felt his skin roasting, heard the sticky crimson fluid sizzling under the intense heat. The agony of the burn made him sick, but he was finally rewarded by seeing a wisp of smoke burst upward from the rows of fiber rope. Flesh charred and curled aside; but so did rope fibers.

Two minutes later, he had stepped over his bound wrists and was burning the bonds which manacled his hands. His scorched flesh still smoked from the burns incurred from the hot sun rays bent by the quartz lens in the window above; but he was free!

In Larxatun's mind, there was but one thing now to do: and that was to get out of this room of horror and locate his master, Ozar the Aztec.

Muttering Indian curses, Larxatun kicked a grinning skeleton into a scattered flurry of rattling bones. Rum-maging through the pile, he selected a heavy, knob-ended thigh bone.

This particular slave must have been of mighty build, for the bone just fit the palm of Larxatun's hand, as a war club suits the fingers of a warrior. Hefting the improvised bludgeon, Larxatun headed for the door, his face grim as a thundercloud.

The door opened without difficulty. Why should they lock a room that was full of skeletons, like the Hall of Bones?

CHAPTER VII.

THE WATER TORTURE.

OZAR'S first glimmery view of consciousness was accompanied by a pain as if a stone hatchet were pounding his skull with each beat of his heart. Pink blossoms burst in a sky as black as soot, to shed a flood of crimson sparks down upon his face. He

gasped for breath, struggled to a sitting position, and opened his eyes.

The shock which met his gaze snapped him back to full consciousness. He was sitting upright on a stone floor, surrounded by Aztec warriors! He did not know that he had been dragged here by Avistixl, the very savage who had taken Larxatun to the Hall of Bones but a minute previous.

His head ached from a great welt behind his ear. He had difficulty in recalling the events which had led up to this strange turn of events. Oh, yes! The darkened halls, and the masked priest! Where was that spawn of a devil?

Ozar attempted to rise, but fell back with a gasp of despair as he realized, for the first time, that his arms and knees and ankles were tightly trussed. And to make matters worse, his manacled arms were tied behind his back with his own sling shot!

The white man's lips peeled back in a bitter sneer. The warriors about him were leering, like a flock of cats eying a doomed mouse.

And then Ozar saw the masked priest. There he was, standing just inside the range of his blurring vision—thin, stooped, with blue-veined hands as dry as twigs, and covered with skin like brown parchment.

He was still wearing that hateful, snouted mask of green and gold mosaic, and the folds of the black-and-silver robes still hung over his warped shoulders, like rags to a scarecrow.

Suddenly, as Ozar watched, the hobbling old priest stood erect. His shoulders squared, throwing off the deformed hunch as if by magic. The withered hands tossed aside the mirrors of pyrites rock, and fumbled at the copper clasp of his robes.

Tossing aside the feathered robe as a serpent sheds its skin, with the same motion the priest lifted off the mask of Huitzil the War God.

And there, before Ozar's astounded eyes, stood the form of Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs!

IT took a full minute for the shock of this knowledge to penetrate Ozar's reeling brain. Duped! Tricked by his archenemy, Tarx, disguised behind the grotesque mask and filthy mantle of a hunch-backed priest of the war god!

A scream of rage wrenched from Ozar's lips as he struggled to rise. His eyes photographed every sinister detail of Tarx's figure—the eye like a frosted marble in its socket, the red dart of a cloven tongue behind the jade-set teeth which had been filed like the edge of a saw; the scarlet mantle of humming-birds' skins, the girdle with its stone-edged wooden sword, the whistle about his neck.

"Again we meet, Lord Ozar!" sneered the high priest, in a voice like the breath of a viper. "By sheer chance, thou and thy toad of a slave escape the water serpent.

"So I sent Pukstatl to finish thy vile life, but Pukstatl was afraid of the water, and his spear-thrust faltered. But water monsters and warriors are as nothing—to the might of Tarx!"

Ozar's face purpled with wrath. To think that he had followed the disguised priest blindly into a trap!

Tarx was leering hideously. He waved his arm to indicate the room in which Ozar was imprisoned. "Seest thou this chamber?" he taunted. "It is the sacred room of the great temple which has been beneath the waves of the Crystal Lake since time eternal.

"Yet the great Tarx uses it for his lair! The present belongs to Tarx! The past belongs to Tarx! The future belongs to Tarx!" the high priest announced as his one good eye glittered.

Ozar shuddered in spite of himself. Indeed, for a man lying in the center of a ring of murder-thirsty warriors, he

could do little else but recognize the power of his enemy.

"For long years, Tarx has yearned for a certain object," the high priest went on. "He owes his thanks to thee, lily-skinned one—for *this*!"

Ozar felt his heart leap as he saw Tarx whip a glittering object from the folds of his mantle. It was the Sacred Knife of Mexlitl the Sun God!

The white man's eyes blazed, but despair lurked in their depths. The knife he had risked his life to obtain, fallen into the hands of Tarx!

"Where is Larxatun, from whom thou obtained the knife, vile son of a viper?" rasped Ozar, wrenching at his bonds.

The high priest leered, his single eye shining with his savage pleasure at Ozar's plight.

"Thy toad of a slave is suffering ten thousand horrors," chuckled Tarx, laying the Sacred Knife on a huge block of jasper which occupied the floor beside him. "He is tasting of the terrors of the Hall of Bones!"

The high priest laughed outright now. He was confident, sinister.

The color drained from Ozar's face. Well he knew the fiendish story of the Hall of Bones—where slaves were hurled, too tightly bound to hope for escape, and left to become raging madmen amidst the bones of former victims.

"But does the white one who calls himself Ozar the Aztec share his slave's fate?" questioned Tarx, leaning over his white prisoner and panting his hot, foul breath upon Ozar's sweat-moistened face. "Indeed not! Tarx has reserved a far more fitting torture for Ozar! *Otske!*"

The warriors began to stir, as the priest bent over the fur-clad man who lay helpless before them. They, themselves, did not know what style of torture awaited the white man; but they knew Tarx respected the strength of his

white foe too much to risk delaying his death an unnecessary moment.

"Thou shalt die the water-torture death!" screeched Tarx, shaking a gnarled fist in Ozar's eyes. "Drag him to the upper chamber, O Warriors?"

STRONG hands clutched Ozar's body. Spikelike fingers entwined his soft brown hair, jerking him rudely to his feet.

Ozar struggled, but he had been bound so thoroughly that he felt like a stick. His body jounced as he was dragged up a steep flight of stairs. A moment later, and he was hurled cruelly against the cold floor of a dimly lighted chamber.

Tarx lifted the yellow-stained whistle to his lips, and played a series of notes. Interpreting the signal with great speed, the warriors lifted Ozar's body by the arm pits.

While strong-armed warriors held Ozar close to the ceiling, other Aztecs climbed on the shoulders of their fellows, and squatting thus, attached stout ropes to holes which had been bored through the stones.

In a moment, it occurred to Ozar the nature of his fate. He was to be left suspended in this room! To starve? He could only guess as to what gruesome torture Tarx had prepared for him.

His face was a drawn mask of hate as the warriors knotted the ropes from the ceiling above, in a noose about his arm pits. Then the warriors released him and hopped lightly to the floor, leaving the body swinging in mid-air.

Chuckling like a wild animal, Tarx stepped forward, and struck the white man a stinging blow across the side with the flat edge of his wooden sword.

No sound escaped Ozar's lips. A white man among savages, he betrayed no sign of pain, but his side went red where the sword had slapped the skin, and great cords stood out on his neck.

He was Larry Starling, son of cul-

tured American parents, who had died before him at the slaughter blocks of Tarx; but he was facing his death with the stoicism of the bravest Aztec chief.

"Thy soul shall toss in torment in the ovens of the gods!" snarled Ozar, his voice tense. "Flay my body, if thou wilt, but my spirit shall escape to the sun god of the Aztecs, and thine to the kitchens of the evil gods!"

Tarx's reply to Ozar's outburst was a taunting sneer, as he sheathed his sword. Again the high priest pressed the whistle to his lips, and again the thin notes sliced the air.

At this signal, a brawny slave bent a huge wooden lever near the wall. There was a sound of stone sliding against stone, and then a surging plunge of water. They had opened the sliding panel in the Jade Altar!

Turning slowly in space, held tightly by ropes which encircled his body, Ozar the Aztec saw a greenish-white fount of water gush down a staircase on the opposite side of the bare stone chamber.

"Thus does Tarx deal with worms who call themselves Ozar the Aztec!" screamed Tarx, as the warriors fled for the stairs, before the flood. "The fair god! Bah!"

For a moment, the high priest stood on the steps, his hideous face lingering for a last look upon his doomed prisoner; and then he was gone with a flutter of red robes as the level of the water began rising. The room roared as if a waterfall had been imprisoned within its limestone walls.

BENEATH him, Ozar could see the green water swirling and foaming, lashing against the walls, and falling back in a rush of spume. As his body revolved, he could see the water plunging down from the room where the sliding panel of the Jade Altar was tapping the water of the Crystal Lake

The water, gushing through the Jade Altar into the chamber, was under terrific pressure. Ozar could feel the ancient temple trembling under the impact. The staircase from which the water was plunging into his prison was a foamy cascade.

His doom was not far off, he knew. He could feel the wet spray against his feet, as the churning rush leaped higher. Now it was curling in a glowing vortex about his ankles.

Almost in the space of a dozen heartbeats, the level had crept up his knees and thighs, and was lapping over his girdle of ocelot fur. Yet no sound of fear escaped Ozar's lips.

Roaring like thunder, the water choked the stairway entrance and eddied in a terrifying whirlpool about the room. Foam dashed against the helpless prisoner's body, hanging from the ceiling which would soon feel the touch of raging waters.

The roar was subsiding into a gurgling murmur, now, a ghostly whisper portending his doom. The water was laving his chest, like greedy tongues. Soon it would be to his armpits, over his shoulders, then to his mouth and nostrils. He could feel the bonds tightening as the flesh swelled.

Ozar's body was moving with the swirl, now, each revolution costing him intense agony. His skin winced as the icy water heaved over his ribs, crawled upward about his shoulders in a frothy surge.

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER MASKED PRIEST.

LARXATUN crept stealthily down a winding staircase, his polished eyes lancing the gloom. Reaching a floor level within the sunken temple, he flattened himself against the wall and slipped on, gripping the thigh-bone club firmly.

A sullen roar, like the thunder of pent-up waters sluicing over a floodgate,

smote Larxatun's eardrums. He seemed to feel the stuffy, long-dead air of the corridor beginning to freshen and grow cooler.

He heard padding footsteps running down the darkened hallway. He glimpsed a blue-feathered warrior running toward the sound of rushing water—it was Avistixl, he who had dragged Larxatun to the Hall of Bones!

Larxatun stepped forth, his face a livid caricature of hate. The warrior slid to a stop, terror and astonishment stamped on his features. He reached for his sword, though his vitals crawled with the feeling that he could not hope to cleave the life from a ghost!

Bam! Ere his own weapon was half drawn from its girdle, Avistixl collapsed as the white bone club in Larxatun's hands rose and fell.

Discarding the brittle weapon, Larxatun snatched a flint knife from the dead warrior's belt, and hurried on. He reached a stairway, up which came a rush of cool, wet air. Looking down, he saw water surging about the steps, climbing tread on tread.

And then the slave heard a voice which made his heart leap joyfully against his ribs—the voice of Ozar the Aztec:

"I love thee, my queen! With my dying breath, I love thee!"

Straightening his body out in a running dive, Larxatun leaped unafraid into the whirlpool of the rapidly filling room. He came to the surface, panting like a landed fish. And then his bulbous eyes caught sight of the white figure of Ozar, in the middle of that maelstrom of death.

"Master! Lord Ozar!" cried the Aztec slave, battling his way through the wash toward the man whose neck and head alone were now visible.

A glad light leaped in the white man's eyes as he saw his faithful slave battling the heavy current to reach his side. Each time the Indian's right hand dipped out

of the water, Ozar saw the light flash from the obsidian tip of a dagger.

A tidal wave of water blotted out light and form, but as the waves smashed against the stone ceiling of the chamber, Ozar felt Larxatun sever the ropes which held him to the beam, with one vicious swipe of the blade.

Then Larxatun was struggling through the water which was pressing them both against the stone ceiling, holding Ozar's bound figure under one powerful elbow.

Fish and flotsam choked the muddy water which foamed about them, swashing the stone beams. The pair were caught on the outer edge of the swirl. And then both landed with stunning force against the stairs which led upward to safety.

They had not a second to lose. Already the water was pulling at their legs, seeking to sweep them back in the fatal vortex, as if jealous of being cheated of their victims.

With desperate haste, Larxatun untied Ozar's bonds, handing the white man his sling shot. He had lost the knife back in that dizzy twist of water.

Panting, the two men pulled their gleaming bodies up the steps, and sank exhausted on the floor of the corridor.

Ozar turned to his slave with speechless gratitude shining from his eyes. But before he could speak, he caught sight of a dark figure running down the corridor toward them.

Both men flattened instinctively. And as the figure rushed past them in a clatter of sandaled feet and the rush of dark robes, Ozar recognized it as the bent and hobbling form of a masked priest in a black robe!

Speechless fury rose in Ozar's throat. Would Tarx seek to pad about the halls of this dead, forgotten temple, clad in the raiment of a war priest, again? He would show him!

Summoning the strength to his jaded muscles, Ozar arose. He saw the priest

struggling with another wooden lever; and shortly there sounded the screech of a sliding panel, and the rush of water stopped. The intense silence smote their ears almost as the thunder had blasted their hearing a moment before.

The masked priest was hobbling back. Ozar could almost see the white, opaque eye, and the forked tongue, behind the ugly snout of that green-and-gold mosaic mask.

The priest was limping by; and Ozar, bunching his muscles like a panther about to spring, sailed out of the stairway as if shot from a catapult. A whistle of fear sucked between the priest's teeth as he saw the white form pounce upon him; then he was down on the floor in a hattering cloud of ebon robes.

Jerking the masked priest to his feet, Ozar's throttling fingers seized the Aztec's throat and battered his head once, twice against the wall. The priest slumped to the floor, limp as a wisp of mist.

"Huva! Tarx felt that, my brother!" panted Ozar, as Larxatun vaulted up the steps to stand beside him, over the huddled form of the unconscious priest.

STOOPING, Ozar whipped off the mask of the fallen man. And then a gasp of surprise burst from his lips.

This priest was not Tarx in disguise! They were looking into a pain-distorted face, smeared with ocher and charcoal—but it was the face of an ordinary holy man!

Ozar grunted. He had no pangs of regret for knocking out this priest, however; for the priests of the war god were fiends of incarnate cruelty. But he had hoped it was Tarx who had felt the strength of his wrath.

"Well—what is done is done," muttered Ozar. "Come, Larxatun, we must search out the real Tarx in this hall of doors. Do not worry about the carrion I have just dropped."

With Larxatun at his heels, Ozar set forth down the corridor. A hum of voices attracted him to a door which was curtained with a heavy tapestry; and peering inside, Ozar saw the high priest Tarx standing before the block of green jasper on which the Sacred Knife glowed like a thing of sunshine.

All about the room were the blue-feathered warriors; they were listening to the song of triumph of the red-robed priest, as he chanted the story of Ozar, the Aztec, who had come to Karnux as a white babe, twenty summers before.

Ozar's eyes narrowed, out there in the gloom. It would be suicide to wreak his vengeance against Tarx in the presence of those heavily armed warriors. He would scarcely set foot inside the doorway before he would bristle like a pin cushion with spears and knives.

"Thou must not enter this den of death!" came the tense whisper of Larxatun, as if probing his master's thoughts. "They would but kill thee, Lord Ozar!"

The white man nodded. His brows knitted in thought. The sight of the forked-tongue priest, bragging of his victory, was inflaming Ozar's heart to the boiling point. And he must get that Sacred Knife very soon, or he would be sacrificed upon an altar block with the dawn of a new day.

Suddenly he turned, seizing Larxatun by the shoulders.

"The black-robed priest has not been seized in vain!" he breathed into the slave's ear. "Hasten, Larxatun—bring me the mask and headdress of the sleeping one, and his robe!"

Mystified, Larxatun hastened to do the white man's bidding, and returned with the unconscious priest's holy vestments.

Hesitating not an instant, Ozar the Aztec adjusted the headdress of *quetzal* feathers and jadeite ornaments about his forehead. Then, with a shudder of distaste, he fastened the mosaic mask

upon his own face, and took the black robe from Larxatun's fingers.

As he did so, Larxatun realized for the first time his master's purpose. He grasped the robe, as if to prevent Ozar from taking it.

"Master! Thou canst not go into that den of panthers thus! Thy life would be surely forfeit! Thy——"

Ozar jerked the robe from the trembling slave and draped it about his shoulders. His body bent over in imitation of the crippled priest's, and he was ready.

"Silence, Larxatun! Did not Tarx fool me with this same disguise? Dost think Ozar is not as wise as the serpent Tarx?"

Larxatun shrank back, his teeth clattering with fear. Much as he hated to see Ozar go to almost certain death, he could not let his white lord think he doubted his bravery.

"Hide thee behind these curtains!" ordered Ozar. "Farewell!"

"May the great god Mexlitl keep thee, Lord Ozar!" breathed the slave reverently, as Ozar stepped out of the shadows and hobbled into the room which was filled with warriors thirsty for his own life.

CHAPTER IX.

WHY THE SUN GOD SMILED.

THE figure of the bent priest, trailing his black robes behind him, created no attention from the stern-faced warriors. They squatted about, ears fastened upon the words Tarx was uttering. The high priest's voice was shrill and piercing, as he sang of his exploits against the white Ozar.

Then Tarx paused, as he saw the hunch-backed form of the masked priest advancing toward him. He stiffened.

"Thou hast shut off the water which even now has drunk the life of Ozar the Aztec!" shouted the high priest fiercely. "Why, then, comest thou into the presence of the warriors?"

Ozar felt his spine turn into an ice pole. Then masked priests were not allowed in this room?

"O mighty Tarx, great magician and holy man of Karnux," chanted Ozar, his voice muffled and harsh behind the mask, "it grieves my aged heart to report—but Ozar the Axtec has flown from his watery tomb! He has—*escaped!*"

For an instant, Ozar felt, as he squinted through the peep holes of his snouted mask, that his deception had been discovered.

Then Tarx sprang forward, blasting his signal whistle.

"Ozar—escaped? Come, Warriors of the Blue Feathers! Go! Search the halls and chambers of the temple until the white dog has been found! Comb every stone and crevice! Slay him! A captaincy for him who finds Ozar the Aztec! Go!"

The high priest seemed on the verge of apoplexy as he strode about, flinging his wooden sword in the faces of his stunned men.

Then, with savage cries making the narrow confines of the room ring, the warriors leaped into action with a clattering of bucklers and swords and javelins.

The door was blocked in a rush of blue-plumed bodies, as the warriors sprang on the hunt like dogs unfastened from their leashes. The heavy curtains protected Larxatun from discovery.

Ozar, forgotten in the rush, started to hobble after Tarx. Then his eye was caught by the dazzling glitter of the green-and-blue-and-gold hilt of the Sacred Knife. He moved back, and with a deft motion, slipped the holy weapon into the folds of his disguise.

He did not see a tall warrior standing in the shadows behind, engaged in strap-ping on his mosaic incrustated shield.

As Ozar slipped the knife into his garment, a fold of the black robe lifted, to expose a flash of bronzed skin.

A screech like the voice of doom rang out, as the warrior sprang forward, sword flashing.

"Tarx! Master! Ozar is h——"

Bam! The hunch-backed "priest" went into action with a blur of motion. A fist as hard as a lump of stone smashed teeth from the warrior's mouth, cutting off his betraying shout in the middle of a word.

But the downward slash of the warrior's sword tore a great slice from the black mantle, and the disguise fell from Ozar's body to expose a muscled form clad only in the skin of an ocelot.

Ozar whirled away from the unconscious warriors at his feet, and ducked a hard-flung javelin that splintered on the wall behind him. He charged the spear-thrower, who had whirled in his rush to the door to fling his javeline at the white man. A second later, the Aztec lance-man was weltering in a crimson gore, his throat sliced by the Sacred Knife in Ozar's fingers.

A blast of sound from Tarx's whistle, summoning back his warriors who were spreading to the four corners of the sacred temple, rang out in the narrow room.

Ozar's arms were flashing like white darts from his body. Warriors crumpled under his flailing knuckles, fell choking out their lives under the slashing blade of his weapon.

Over the bodies of the prostrate fighters, Ozar hewed his way to the spot where Tarx was drawing his sword and plunging into the fray.

Ozar's arm flung out to ward off the blow of Tarx's chopping sword, and the stone blades set in resin razored a deep gash down his forearm. As Ozar clinched with the high priest, he felt Tarx's iron fingers close about the wrist of the hand which held the Sacred Knife.

The two went down like a pair of crazed panthers, rolling on the floor in a death struggle.

WRAPPING tight arms about Tarx's body, Ozar squeezed with rib-crushing force. He felt the high priest slither from his grawny grasp like a scaly reptile. Fists pounded Ozar's face, brought a spurt of crimson from his nose. Then the white man tore himself free, and lifted the Sacred Knife for the stroke that would have severed Tarx's head from his body.

Even as the glittering blade poised at the top of its stroke, Ozar looked up to see a blue flood of warriors sweep into the room, air whistling under leveled javelin heads.

It looked as if he were doomed.

Immediately behind the high priest was a heavy door of polished wood. Toward the opening Ozar plunged, his rush knocking the high priest before him.

The door swung open, to admit the white man into a cubicle not more than ten feet square. Whirling, Ozar pulled the raging priest into the room and closed the door, before the dazed Tarx could recover his breath.

A quick motion of one arm, and Ozar the Aztec had slid the locking bolt into its slot of stone. An instant later, the foremost of the warriors outside crashed against the door in a thunder of sound.

Face to face in the gloom of the tiny room, the white man and the high priest stared at each other. And in the one good eye of the evil Tarx burned the light of a doomed man, who knows that death is near. How could he expect mercy from the powerful Ozar, when that frail door would be crashed inward at any second under the terrific impact of plunging bodies?

For the space of a minute, the two enemies stood panting, speechless, motionless. Then a shower of splinters burst into the room, as a warrior's heavy shoulder shattered a panel of the door. A matter of seconds now, and the door would collapse.

"Thy men are at hand!" grated Ozar

swiftly through thin, tight lips. "I bargain a life for a life! Spare mine, and I will not slay thee ere this door breaks. Spare it not, and thou diest ere the spears of thy warriors pierce me."

With sweat bursting from his leathery skin, Tarx pressed the whistle between his purplish lips, and blew a signal. The thundering crashes against the splintering door stopped. Tarx had accepted the bargain.

As Ozar slid the bar and opened the broken door, he found the warriors standing obediently passive, spears ready in their hands. The orders of Tarx's whistle were law.

A commotion appeared from behind the block of warriors, and the form of Larxatun emerged from its hiding place.

"Let the slave's life be spared, also!" commanded Tarx, as he and Ozar stepped forth from the room. Larxatun leaped forward to his master's side.

"Conduct us out of this vile temple, and the bargain shall be closed," hissed Ozar in the priest's ear.

"So be it," fumed the scarlet-robed Tarx, quivering with helpless rage as he saw how completely Ozar dominated the situation.

QUEEN ESTA of Karnux stood in the curtained entrance of the Holy Room of Mexlitl the Sun God and watched a crimson-smeared white and his exhausted slave stand in mute reverence before the towering idol.

In the outstretched palm of the great deity, Ozar placed a glittering knife of

polished *itzli*, with a handle of green and blue and gold mosaic. As he did so, Ozar noticed that the light reflecting from the extended palm shone back against the idol's stone lips, making them appear to smile. But to the primitive eyes of Larxatun, at his side, the addition of the polished knife made the god's smile all the deeper.

For the first time in many centuries, the great god Mexlitl was happy in the possession of his Sacred Knife, thought Larxatun; happy for the first time since he had lost the possession of the knife when the floods came and the winds blew in the Valley of the Navajadas, forcing him to flee from the Jade Altar, lest he become as a dead thing.

"Thou hast fulfilled the second of the Five Sacred Commands of the Sun God," breathed the beautiful queen, as she gazed from the curtains upon the stalwart figure of the man she loved. "Surely Mexlitl will spare thee for the three remaining tasks which lie before thee ere thou canst call thyself, in truth, Ozar, fair god of the Aztecs."

The lips of the great stone idol moved in a benign smile of gratitude as the silent god peered down upon the ocelot-clad figure of Ozar the Aztec. Some might think it was but the flicker of the yellow lamp flames upon the carved image. Who could say?

Watch for "The Death Drums of Ozar," another thrilling episode of "Ozar the Aztec," in the next issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch—the April number, on the news stands March 17th.





How short can a story be—and still be a story? This is the question which the Editor of Top-Notch is trying to answer in this section of the magazine.

The highest art of story-telling is to be brief, and yet to present in that brief compass, a whole act of drama, comedy, tragedy, or melodrama.

It is the purpose of this Corner of Top-Notch to present a group of short short stories of outstanding merit—one-act tales that will grip, thrill, or amuse.

The Key

By Alfred I. Tooke

THE two men seemed part of the pitch blackness of the hall, so slowly and silently did they move. "Benny the Lark" felt his way with outstretched hands. "Gabby" Briggs, his hand on Benny's shoulder, matched step with step as they advanced.

Within a dozen yards of them were jewels worth a cool half million—and a sawed-off shotgun loaded with garlic-soaked slugs, for Zachary Marks, the fence, took great trouble to protect the jewels he had accumulated.

Recently, when pneumonia put Marks to bed, armed detectives from a private agency had guarded the house, but he had been powerless to guard his tongue when his delirium was at its height.

Garry Peters, the night nurse, pieced together the broken sentences until his eyes glittered avariciously. He learned about the jewels, where they were kept, and how to avoid the traps that guarded

them—information his dealings with the underworld made it possible for him to profit by, once the guards had gone.

Before he left the house, he had a wax impression of the key that was necessary. But he had no intention of risking his own hide, so he sought out Benny the Lark and Gabby Briggs, and the key was now in Gabby's vest pocket.

Benny carried a flashlight, but one glimmer from that would set sensitive selenium cells ringing the burglar alarm. From slots in the ornamented ceiling, Zachary Marks, awakened, would pump slugs from his sawed-off shotgun long before they could unbar the door behind them.

They had eluded the burglar alarm after weeks of watching, by slipping into the house in the daytime, and hiding there successfully. When they left they wanted to take the jewels, not the garlic-soaked slugs, so slowly and silently they felt their way.

At last Benny's snaillike motion

ceased with a quiver of anticipation. He stooped and drew his fingers up the paneling, counting the round-headed screws until he reached the sixth one. He fitted a screw driver into it and turned gently.

Instantly the panel swung away from him. Quickly now, he stepped through the opening it made and pulled Gabby after him. Swiftly he closed the silent-moving panel behind him. Only for ten seconds might that panel remain open. After that, the time mechanism would release the poison gas to kill whoever unwittingly solved the secret of the panel.

"Whew!" Benny snapped the flashlight on and mopped his brow. "We made it, Gabby! Gosh, look at the sparklers."

For several seconds they stared hypnotized at the trays of jewels on the shelves running down one side of the narrow vault Marks had built between the walls of his house.

"Baby! What a haul!"

Gabby's voice boomed loudly, for there was no need for caution now. The steel-walled vault was lightproof and soundproof—even airproof. The panel by which they had entered, opened only from the outside.

The only exit was by a panel at the other end, and it could be opened only from the inside by one possessing the key, and that key was in Gabby's vest pocket. Then a quick exit, and they would be clear away long before Marks could do anything.

"All right! I'll hold the sack!" Benny snapped. "You scoop 'em in."

INTO the sack Gabby emptied trays of diamonds, pearls, rubies, emeralds—the unrecovered loot from scores of big robberies, and Benny's hands trembled, not from the weight, but from excitement. Gabby tensed at the look in Benny's eyes as the last tray was emptied.

"What's bitin' you, Benny?" he snapped.

Benny laughed nervously and twisted the top of the sack.

"Tie it!" he grunted.

Gabby did so, and Benny hefted it with one hand. "Enough to make a guy independent for life!" he muttered. "Where's that key?"

Again Gabby caught the treacherous gleam in Benny's eyes, and a flash of greedy cunning shone in his own.

"It's in my vest pocket!"

Gabby's hand shot up under his armpit, but Benny's move was quicker. His gun flashed as Gabby's came into sight, and Gabby spun around and pitched headlong as the roar of the gun echoes in the vault. But to Benny's amazement, the close range shot seemed to have done little damage. Gabby twisted to a sitting position, and the gun in his hand jerked upward. But again Benny fired first.

And this time Gabby slumped against the wall, the red spurting from a wound in his chest.

His empty hand crept up over his heart and he groaned. Then he eyed the sack Benny still held, and laughed. The hand over his heart jerked convulsively several times.

"That first shot—that first shot——"

A spasm of coughing shook him. Then a weird, uncanny laugh sprayed the red foam from his lips. "You're ho—holding the sack, Benny!" he gasped, and as he died a fiendish grin of delight contorted his features.

Benny darted forward. His eager fingers dived into the vest pocket beneath Gabby's hand. As he withdrew them, panic flashed in his eyes. The short, thin piece of metal he held was only half of the key. Gabby's stiffening fingers grasped the other half through a bullet hole in the pocket. Frantically Benny snatched at it, and from the hole in the pocket fell a flattened bullet.

Dazedly he gazed around the steel-walled vault that imprisoned him. The air was already becoming exhausted, and the key to the only exit, that bullet-proof lock in the panel at the other end, was useless now. His own first bullet had struck it and bent it double.

Now he understood that spasmodic

jerking of Gabby's hand just before he died. Gabby had been finishing the job, snapping the key in two.

As Benny eyed the sack of jewels he still held, the full meaning of Gabby's words flashed upon him.

"You're ho-holding the sack, Benny!" the solid steel walls seemed to echo.

The Freedom Of Red Dawn

By Harry R. Keller

I NEVER knew whether "Humpy" le Moynes's twisted body was the result of birth, accident, or some malignant disease. His hunched back accounted for the name the waddies had given him, but his legs were just as badly deformed.

They were grotesquely shortened, and permanently bent at the knees, so that Humpy shuffled along at a peculiar rocking gait when he essayed to walk, the knuckles of his hands occasionally touching the ground to give him balance, as those of the great apes do.

Oddly enough, gnarled dwarf that he was, his head was as large and as finely shaped as that of any normal individual. And no blemish of body could tame the wild blood that made his cheeks glow ruddy beneath the tan.

None of the other waddies of the Pitchfork outfit knew any more about him than I. Humpy had been there before any of them, and Humpy never talked.

Some said that he had got busted up forking a mean cayuse, and that after that the Old Man had kept him on for sentiment and charity; but I rather doubt this. I do know that Humpy wasn't afraid of horses. He could ride as well as any of us. He'd get a good grip on the stirrup straps, and hoist himself to the saddle by means of his extraordinarily powerful arms, and once astride, he stuck like a bur. He could

ride herd with the best. So the charity stuff was out; Humpy paid his way.

Aside from horses, which served the purpose of legs for him, Humpy had only one weakness, and that was his .30-30 rifle. Twisted legs and a hunched back have nothing to do with marksmanship, and there wasn't a man on the place that could touch him when it came to shooting. He never rode out without the .30-30 in a saddle scabbard under his right leg.

But if horses were a weakness with him, there was one horse in particular that was so. That was Red Dawn, the wild stallion that led his band down into the foothills every winter when pickings got too lean on the high bench lands usually frequented by the wild bunch.

The stallion was well named, for he was as red as a dawn or a sunset, and just about as easy to get a rope on.

Humpy, who had watched him for years, and knew more about the stallion than any one in that region, fairly worshiped him. I think it was because he realized that Red Dawn was all that he, Humpy, could never hope to be—a wild, unconfined spirit, free as the wind that bent down the gramma grasses on which he grazed, and a marvel of speed and physical perfection.

More than once I heard Humpy swear that here was a horse that would never know any man's rope or brand. To

him, it was unthinkable that such a splendid wild beast should ever know the ignomy of a saddle gall, the bite of steel bit and roweled heel.

FOR two or three years after I joined up with the Pitchfork outfit, it looked as if Humpy had the right of it. There were plenty of attempts to catch the stallion, but he combined the cunning of coyote with his incredible speed and endurance, so that the dust of his heels settled upon the most artful of the plans laid against him. And then one summer, Bob McLean took a hand.

McLean's ranch joined the Pitchfork on the north. He, too, had long had an eye on the wild stallion, and now he set out in earnest to get him.

For several days, news of the chase filtered in, as our punchers rode in at night from the north range.

At first, Red Dawn had showed his heels to his pursuers quite as effectively as he had to all others before them. But one night "Dunk" Bradford slouched into the bunk house with the word that Dawn had been separated from his bunch.

That in itself was an achievement. The game now was to keep him from water, and for the next two days McLean's riders succeeded in doing just that. It being midsummer, there were very few water holes to be watched in the section to which they had now driven the frantic beast. They were gradually working him south, toward the Pitchfork range.

All this while I watched Humpy le Moyne narrowly. Knowing how wildly he loved the stallion, how jealously he treasured the great brute's freedom, I wondered how he would react to the almost certainty of his imminent capture.

But neither by word nor deed did Humpy betray the least emotion; in fact, he did not seem intrested in the affair. I think now that, in spite of the

odds against him, Humpy still clung to the conviction that no man would ever lay twine on Red Dawn.

Then one morning, at work on the fence around the alfalfa on the south sixty, I glanced up to the north, and got my first glimpse of the chase.

The horse hunters had driven the stallion clean down to our northern line, and it looked as if they were closing in for the finish. Dawn was out in front, but not so far out, at that. McLean and his riders were pushing him hard, and even from where I was I could see that the stallion was in a bad way.

I had no business leaving my job, but something prompted me to fork old Dan and mosey up to the ranch house. Hailing the chink cook, Sing Lee, who was the only one about, my first question was, "Where's le Moyne?"

Sing shrugged. "Him lide likee hell, no'th, mebbe fi'-ten minute ago. Why for alla hurry?"

I knew what that meant, and my heart met my boot tops. Old Dan felt the spurs jabbed into his flanks deeper than he had been cut in ten years, and his rheumatic legs responded with a burst of speed that soon carried me beyond the fringe of cottonwoods.

I saw it all then—the thirst-faunted red stallion, breathing hard, straining every muscle to keep ahead of the grim riders spread fanwise behind him; and between me and the chase, another rider that I knew to be Humpy le Moyne. McLean's bunch were heading Red Dawn into Turkey Canyon—a box canyon from which, I knew, there could be no hope of his escape. And Humpy was too late to intercept them!

As I urged old Dan toward the bunch, however, I saw that Humpy was not trying to head them off. Instead, he swung off to the left, and in a moment I saw him hurtle his horse up the boulder-strewn rise that flanked the canyon, forming its high southwestern rim.

The cow pony clung to the precarious footholds like a mountain goat, Humpy hanging on like grim death; and just as Red Dawn flashed into the mouth of the fatal canyon, Humpy reached the top. I saw the grotesque little man fling himself from the pony's back and hobble like some nightmarish creature to the canyon's rim; but it was not until I saw that one misshapen hand clutched his .30-30 rifle that I divined, or thought I divined, his real purpose.

I yelled then, a scream that felt as if it would burst my throat; but the riders were too far away, or too wildly exultant in the moment of victory, to hear me. McLean himself was out in the lead on his fleet roan gelding, Baldy, and he was the first to sweep from sight, pounding on Red Dawn's track into the canyon. I groaned. Bob McLean was a friend of mine.

It seemed to me that old Dan labored on for hours, although it could not have been more than ten seconds, before I heard the shot—a thin, whiplike crack, just one, that stabbed sharply down from the rim of the canyon.

The other riders had swept from sight by now, and Humpy was invisible, too—crouched, as I knew, behind a boulder high above them. From such a vantage point he could easily pick them off, one by one, before they could ever escape from that death trap.

But strangely enough, no further shots came. I prodded old Dan up the slope, thinking to stop the maniacal dwarf before he could wreak further havoc. The old pony's cautious picking of his way to the top seemed to consume eternities, and with each step I felt a frantic dread that a second shot might come before I could prevent.

I need not have hurried. I found Le Moyne crouched, as I had expected, behind the boulder; but he was looking toward me, and not down into the canyon.

The rifle was lying at his side. His face was taut and tortured, drawn into lines as hideous as those of his monstrous body. And when he spoke, his voice sounded like a stranger's.

"Red Dawn is still free," was what he said.

I didn't get his drift until I came a step nearer to the edge of the canyon, and peered over the rim. Then I understood.

Halfway up those steeply slanting walls, where he had struggled in his mad, hopeless frenzy to escape the circling ropes behind, the body of the wild stallion lay sprawled horribly. Even as I looked, one hind hoof kicked convulsively, sending a little shower of gravel to the bottom; then he lay still.

There was a bullet hole torn through his head.

Trail's End

By Victor Blaine Wright

I NOTICED it first on the bus that was carrying about twenty of us up the Presidio Valley to Bradford. The big man with the bland blue eyes sat across from the little fellow all the way. The little fellow was dressed in a manner that spelled lots of dough and no taste, and he had a rat's eyes and chin.

Every once in a while the big fellow would turn his casual stare upon the smaller man, and I could see the smaller man fidget and grow uncomfortable. He'd try to stare back, but couldn't, and he'd look out of the window at the cattle country and shift uneasily in his seat. Once or twice I saw him go tense and act as though he were going to speak to

the big fellow, but each time he seemed to lose his nerve.

It interested me because I thought there might be a story back of it, and I was trying to figure out what it could be. I was on my way to Hollywood with a writing contract after spending five years on the Manhattan papers, and since it was my first vacation in a long time, I was taking it easy and seeing a little of the country. These Bradford Caverns of New Mexico were a lot out of my way, but I'd heard that they were worth visiting.

So for the rest of the ninety-mile trip I kept my imagination working on the two men. There was a funny itching away back in my brain, as though I ought to remember something, but it didn't develop. But every time I'd look at the big man the itching would start.

We reached Bradford late in the afternoon, and when I went into the hotel I saw the rat-faced man already on the stairs, headed for his room. The big fellow was leaning against the desk, puffing at his cigar and staring mildly after the little chap. It was hard to tell what the big fellow was thinking of. But whatever it was it concerned the little man.

I had something to eat, and then went out to look the town over. It's a grand little place, sitting there on the edge of the mountains, with stars up above as big as bright silver dollars, and occasionally a coyote yelping out on the range. I ended up at the picture house, sandwiched between a pair of Mexican shepherders.

It was nine o'clock the next morning when the bus came to take the crowd out to the Caverns. The big fellow leaned against a wheel until the rat-eyed one came out and sidled past into the bus. Then he got aboard and sat down opposite him. The little man was more nervous than before, and he seemed a bit sore, too. But the big chap was just the same, eyes mild above the fat cigar.

WHEN we reached the Caverns I realized that they were worth coming a long way to see. We dropped down a sixth of a mile below the surface, and found ourselves in a place that made you feel that you were halfway between heaven and hell. I kept looking around for the goblins that must live here.

Impossible colors splashed the walls. There were stalagmites growing up and stalactites growing down and helactites growing every which way. There were big rooms and little rooms and weird rooms. There were strange passages blocked by pools of water so clear that you had to look twice to see them.

After a long time we reached the biggest room of all. It was too big to describe. You could lose the Polo Grounds in it, and stand the Empire State Building in one of the low corners.

I noticed that the big man always kept behind the little fellow, and every once in a while the little fellow would turn around and look at him with those reddish rat eyes.

At one end of the room stood a stalagmite the size of an upended trolley car. Thirty feet from its base was a railed-in hole about ten feet across, and as black as a politician's heart. The guide told us that this was the Bottomless Pit. He said that they'd dropped lines into it for five miles without touching anything but space and walls.

The guide herded us to the base of the big stalagmite. Here the lights were to be turned out, and the crowd was to sing "Rock of Ages" in the darkness. We all sat down. The big fellow sat next to me, the little one on the other side of the group.

The last thing I saw before the lights went out was the big chap staring at the other, and I caught an expression on the little fellow's face that was half fear and half hatred, like a cornered weasel's.

The guide started the tune, and the crowd joined in. It rolled and rumbled and resounded. The blackness was so thick and velvety that you could have cut chunks out of it for souvenirs. The chorus grew stronger and got tangled up in its own echoes. I noticed that the big fellow wasn't singing.

When I moved my arm I felt it brush his shoulder, but a minute later, when I moved again, it didn't touch.

A moment after that I heard somebody on the other side of the group cut loose with a terribly sour note. Just one, that was all, and I reckoned that whoever had done it, had had sense enough to stop singing.

A minute or so later I heard the big fellow's shoe scrape on the stone as he shifted position, and his shoulder touched mine. The singing died out, and the lights were turned on again.

The big fellow lighted a cigar and stared around. I happened to be looking at the guide, and saw that his eyes were roving over the group as though he were counting. A startled look came over his face, and he counted again. He went sort of pale after that, and walked over toward the bottomless pit. I got up and strolled that way myself. He didn't hear me coming; he was looking at a damp mark and a fresh scratch on the railing. I looked back at the crowd to make sure. The little man with the rat eyes was gone.

I stuck my press card in front of the guide and asked the question with my eyebrows.

He hesitated for a minute, and then he shrugged his shoulders in a hopeless way. "It's suicide," he said. His voice was very low. "This is the second one. The pit is going to be covered over next week." He looked about. No one had noticed the missing man. The big chap was puffing away at his cigar.

"Don't say anything till we're outside," begged the guide. "This ain't a good place for hysterical women."

I nodded and walked back to the group. It gave me sort of a queer feeling. I don't like bottomless pits. I looked at the big man, and got that funny itching in my memory again. He certainly was a big lad. He could have picked up a yearling calf and heaved it thirty feet.

We got outside without anybody noticing. The Cavern authorities questioned the whole bunch, but nobody had known the little man. His bus ticket gave the name of Joseph Randolph, of New York. The Cavern people didn't hold any one; had no reason to, and didn't want to. They dropped some strong hints that they'd appreciate it if we'd keep our mouths shut.

THAT night I was sitting at the hotel's lunch counter when the big man came in and sat beside me. He nodded, but neither of us spoke. The itching away down inside my mind got worse. I tried to remember, and couldn't.

Then I got it. It came suddenly, like a ship out of fog. It was a spring day of a year ago. I was in the city room of the *Record*. I could hear the city editor's phone buzz, hear him snarl an answer. A boy dropped an evening edition, fresh from the presses, onto my desk. There was a good story in it, by a friend of mine.

Yes, it was a good story. One detective killed and his brother badly shot up. Gang stuff. Everybody knew who had done it, but the cops couldn't make an arrest for the usual reason—no evidence.

There was a picture there, too. A picture of two big men with their arms about each other's shoulders. Brothers. One of them had a cigar in his mouth.

It was all clear then. I knew the whole story.

A boy tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a wire. It was from Jennison, editor of the *Record*.

TONY MANUELA ON LAM TRAVELING AS TOURIST STOP SCARED OUT OF NEW RACKET STOP REPORTED IN SWEETWATER TEXAS STOP GET US A STORY

I made the boy wait. I wrote an answer on the back of the envelope. I said:

Tony Manuela committed suicide this afternoon in Bradford Caverns.

I shoved both messages in front of the big man. I kept them there for a minute, then handed the answer to the boy.

The big fellow looked at me and grinned. At first I thought he wasn't going to speak. But then:

"Thanks, buddy," he said.

His Brother's Keeper

By Hal Field Leslie

ALBERT GILROY'S eyes were studying his neatly manicured nails. His weakly handsome young face was sullen. "I need a hundred bucks, Eddie," he said.

Eddie Gilroy put down his knife and fork, and looked across the supper table.

"What do you need a hundred bucks for?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Eddie!" Mrs. Gilroy's voice was sharp. "You've got nerve, asking him that! If he needs a hundred dollars, it's for something honest enough. I'm his mother, and I wouldn't think of insinuating——"

"I wasn't insinuating anything," said Eddie. "I just wanted to know. I've let him have plenty, already."

"If I had a hundred dollars, I'd let him have it," asserted Mrs. Gilroy. She was a plump woman, and her face, already warmed by cooking over the stove, was flushed the more in her defense of her last born. "I wouldn't be asking him questions."

That was the way it always had been, reflected Eddie bitterly. No questions asked, and Albert getting the best of everything.

It would have been a difficult matter to find two brothers less alike. There were three years between them. It had been the stalwart Eddie who had always to fight his brother's battles. It was Eddie who was supporting the house-

hold of three. He had to leave school to do it, when eight years ago his father died. He was making now twenty-five dollars a week—night man at the Triangle Service Station.

Albert had left school, too, shortly after there was no Eddie to lean on in his studies.

Eddie got up from the table, half his supper unfinished. His jaw was set.

"I've got no hundred dollars," he said. "And even if I did have, you wouldn't get it. From now on you're going to earn your money, like I have to."

"But where can he get a job these days?" demanded Mrs. Gilroy.

"There are no jobs to be had hanging around corners and pool rooms," said Eddie bluntly. "I suppose that hundred bucks is a gambling debt——"

"Eddie!" Mrs. Gilroy was half in tears. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. After all I've done——"

"Sure, ma, you've been good to me," said Eddie softly. "And I'm going to keep on being good to you. I know you're easy on Al because he's always been your baby, and you love him better than anything in the world. But"—and his voice hardened—"he's no baby any longer. He's over twenty, and he's just as able to find *something* to do as I am. He could have had that helper's job on a delivery truck last week."

"He's sore," put in Al sullenly, "because I took his girl away from him."

He's burned up, ma, because Dora likes me."

"You leave Dora out of this," said Eddie steadily. "I'm telling you I'm through holding you up. If I come home again to-morrow morning and find you still in bed—well, you'll be lucky if I don't break every bone in your lazy body!"

And with that Eddie took up his lunch box from the set tubs, jammed his cap on his head, and slammed the door behind him.

IT was a rainy night. Business at the Triangle Service Station wasn't very brisk. Eddie had a lot of time to think. He supposed he'd been a little harsh at supper time. It must have hurt his mother. But, confound it! Al ought to wake up, snap into it, and be somebody. There was Dora—

Dora lived just across the hall. Her father, Jim Rafferty, was a detective. Dora was slender and black-eyed and big-hearted. Eddie was crazy about her. He'd taken her out a few times—to the movies, to the beach, up the Hudson—and he'd built an unvoiced dream of his own. But lately she'd seemed mighty interested in Al.

At midnight Eddie ate his lunch and drank the coffee in his thermos bottle. The sandwiches had been wrapped in waxed paper. He was putting the crumpled refuse in the cold heater, with his back to the doorway, when he heard a footfall. The switch beside the door clicked sharp, and the lights went out.

He wheeled quickly. Outside, light gleamed on wet windows, dimly illumining the place. It gleamed dully on a pistol in the hands of a man in a slouch hat and raincoat. There was a handkerchief over the lower part of the intruder's face.

"Get the money up!"

The voice was harsh, guttural. And in the immediate silence that followed, Eddie could hear the running motor of

the car at the curb, where a second coated figure waited at the wheel.

"Get a move on you!"

Eddie moved, all right. But not toward the cash register, where the station gun lay on a shelf beneath; he bunched his muscles and dived headlong at the intruder.

The two went down together. There was a wild scuffle for possession of the gun. It went off with a loud explosion. The figure underneath Eddie relaxed queerly and lay still.

EDDIE got up. The gun was, somehow, in his hand. He was blazing mad. He jumped out of the doorway, out into the wet night, and started toward the parked sedan.

The headlights of another car were sweeping down the street, spotting Eddie's objective in brightness. But Eddie didn't make it. The sedan jumped and roared away, with clash of gears and accelerated speed.

The second car rocketed past as Eddie turned back to the station. And as he reached inside the door for the light switch, he heard a shot—and another—far up the street.

Eddie switched on the light and looked at the figure on the floor. The fellow's hat had been knocked off, the handkerchief displaced from his face. Eddie went cold and sick all over. For the body on the floor was Al. Al—dead!

How long he stood there, holding the gun as if it were something venomous that he couldn't put down, Eddie didn't know. He was jerked back to clear thinking by the arrival of a big touring car pulling in on the concrete before the door.

Eddie's thoughts raced. If Al should be branded a thief, it would break his mother's heart. And Dora!

Men were getting out of the big car. Eddie swiftly removed the telltale masking handkerchief, and spread it lightly

over Al's face. The men barged in. One of them was Rafferty. He glanced at the body on the floor.

"Good work, Eddie. We got the other one up the street—what was left of him after he crashed a pole."

"The other what?" asked Eddie steadily.

"Hold-up, of course. Stop kidding."

"You're on the wrong track, Rafferty," said Eddie quietly. "This boy here is—my brother."

Rafferty flicked the handkerchief away. He whistled softly.

"I killed him, Rafferty—without any real provocation. He asked me for a loan to-night at supper. I refused him. He came here to ask me again. We had an argument about it. I got sore—lost my head, I guess. I shot him."

Rafferty looked hard at Eddie. Then he turned to one of his companions. "That the one?" he asked.

The fellow looked at Al, nodded vigorously.

"That's the one, all right. That's the same guy that stuck up my gas station an hour ago. No doubt about it."

Eddie felt sick again. Jim Rafferty put a big hand on his shoulder.

"It's no good, Eddie—you see? If Al had had half your guts, he wouldn't be lying there now. Dora's been telling me about him, telling me how it worried her to have a brother of *yours* going wild. She's been trying to make him see things, trying to straighten him out."

Tears began to roll down Eddie Gilroy's cheeks.

A Letter From Fanchette

By Alan Grey Mayne

LARS SWENSON—six lanky feet of mud-smeared, khaki-clad stolidity—lay sprawled in shooting position behind a barricade of sandbags at the brow of the trench. His mild blue eyes were sweeping along the sector of German duckboards, two hundred yards distant, that was visible through the aperture of his sniper's gun shield. But his thoughts were some six or seven kilometers to the rear, in the little town of L'oiseau.

More specifically, his thoughts were upon the petite slenderness of Fanchette—Fanchette dark flame of a daughter to old Pierre Milon, whose cognac and *vin blanc* were the finest to be had at any café in the town.

Ping! A Mauser bullet flicked off the metal gun shield into the windy blue of the morning. *Ping!*

Lars searched without success for that German sniper who was annoying him so consistently.

Fanchette—just three nights ago she had looked at him over a glass of wine and told him what a wonderful fellow he was.

Ping! Ping! Where the devil was that German sniper, anyway?

Fanchette—he could see her now, supple as a little panther, slipping around the table to evade the reach of his clumsy hands.

Old Milon's cognac. Fanchette pouring, laughingly teasing him to have another with his so good friends. The pleasant memory of the fiery cognac was tingling in his veins now—even as Fanchette's bubbling laughter was singing in his ears. Her voice was sweeter than the notes of that joyous meadow lark somewhere high up against the blue.

Ping!

Lars grinned and rubbed the back of a hairy hand across his lips—as if he would quicken the lingering flavor of Fanchette's kisses there. Oh, sure,

she'd kissed him good night. Even with an uncounted number of shots of cognac and a quart of *vin blanc* under his belt he couldn't have been mistaken about *that!* And if he needed proof, hadn't Flack and Morton and Riley been there to see it—drinking cognac on *him*—and spreading the word of Fanchette's partiality to *him* through the whole company?

HE snuggled his leathery cheek down upon the comb of his rifle stock—lovingly, as if it had been Fanchette's cheek—and neatly picked off a German infantryman who had been unwise enough to expose his visage for a moment above the duckboards.

Fanchette! Her hair was like——

"Hullo, Swede." It was Riley, grinning up at him. "How you knockin' 'em?"

"Ay got one."

"Good huntin'. But you'd better close down that aperture or you'll be getting your block taken off. An' Fanchette'll be heartbroken!"

Lars grinned and reddened.

Riley was just back from the town. He pulled a wrinkled envelope from beneath his belt and held it to his nose.

"Oo-la-la! Fanchette!" he exclaimed soulfully. "A letter for you, Swede. Fanchette told me to be sure and deliver it to that so handsome *Monsoor* Swenson."

A crowd was beginning to gather; the captain was somewhere out of sight beyond an angle of the trench.

Riley passed the note up to Lars. Grinning sheepishly—yet with heart pounding exultation through his veins—Lars took the missive in his great hairy hand. It lay upon his palm—so little, like Fanchette! So faintly sweet with perfume.

"Go on, Swede—open it."

Lars grinned fatuously—and at that instant a sudden vagary of the morn-

ing wind whisked the letter out of his great hand and gently deposited it a score of feet beyond the sandbags.

There it lay, visible through the aperture of his gun shield, tantalizing him with its nearness, denying him knowledge of Fanchette's message.

With sudden desperation Lars rose to his feet and plunged out toward that missive. Perhaps the sheer audacity of his appearance delayed the German's shot. At any rate, Lars was plunging back over the barricade before the Mauser's bullet caught him—fair between the shoulders. He pitched headlong down into the trench, Fanchette's letter safe in his tightly clenched fist.

Lars lay upon his broad back in the boot-churned mud of the trench. Riley knelt beside him. Lars weakly thrust the letter into Riley's hand. Lars couldn't speak through the crimsoned froth that was choking him, but Riley knew what he wanted. Riley tore open the letter. And, with a queer look upon his face and in a voice that was a little hesitant, he did his best.

He read:

"DEAR LARS: My big boy—so brave one—
—Heaven keep you safe to come soon back to me—I love you—your FANCHETTE."

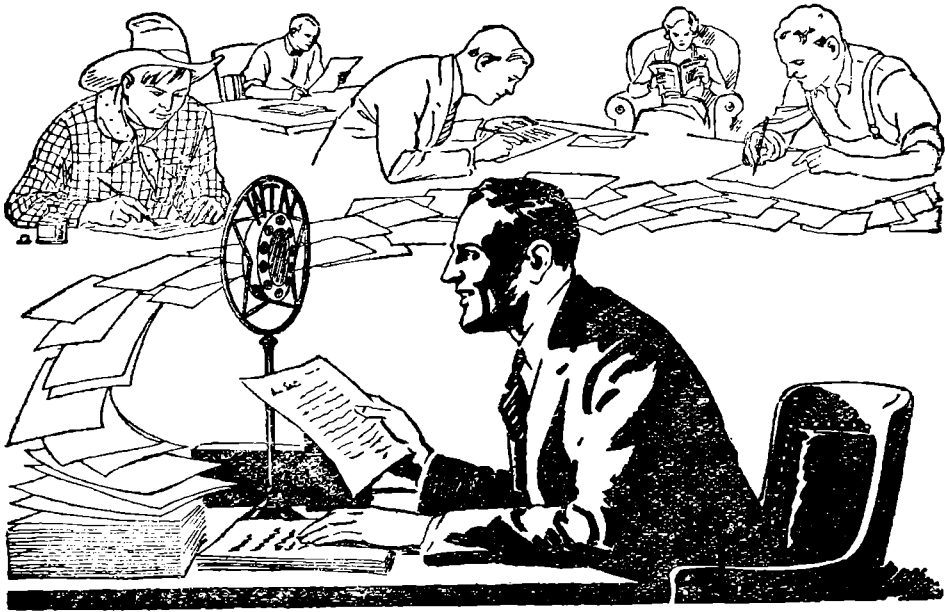
Lars must have heard it all. For his mild blue eyes, dimming swiftly now, were the eyes of a man who goes West with a singing heart.

Riley crumpled the letter with sudden viciousness and thrust it into the breast of his tunic. And when he was alone he took it out and read it again. Fanchette's English wasn't so good, but her meaning was clear enough.

What it actually said was this:

MONSIEUR THE BIG PIG SWENSON: Will you to please come at once as soon as possible to keep the promise to pay the bill to my papa for refreshments served to self and friends of Tuesday night. Not to do so means the quick report of you to your commandant.

FANCHETTE MILON.



At The Top-Notch Mike

STATION WTN, located on the fifth floor of Street & Smith's building, the home of good fiction, at 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Hello, folks!

Fans, have you ever become completely bored with everyday events and wanted to get away from it all for a time—to see new and different scenes, new people, have new adventures and enjoy a new climate? If you have, then you will understand the position of Tom Sloan, the hero of the full-length novel to be featured in the next—the April—issue of Top-Notch. The story is called "Gold of Gambiri," and it was written by that Top-Notch favorite, J. Allan Dunn.

Tom was about fed up. He had pretty strong suspicions that his girl was two-timing him also. He was out of a job, almost out of funds and very much out of luck. Who could be in a better position to take a big chance on

hitting it off in another part of the world? But how could he go about doing a thing like that?

His chance came—as chances do, generally. He really made the break for himself by shipping on the *Laughing Lass*.

If you like tense, breathless action in your adventure stories, just listen to this passage from Mr. Dunn's novel:

The vessel was broadside, jib over, sea anchor ready, when Tom saw the huge wave lifting above his head. It was streaked with sea fire. The wind smote them broadside to. The wave came crashing down. There was a swift and awful breaking and tearing of wood and canvas. The preventer stays snapped like twine and the mainboom thrashed, splintering, from side to side in a raffle of wreckage, snaking stays and lines.

Sloan was knocked down, pounded; he was breathless, helpless. He whirled over and over until he smashed into the rail. He clung desperately to something. Brine was being driven into his lungs. The vessel was on her beam ends; she was turning turtle

A flying block hit Tom on the head, and the next thing he knew he was swimming wildly amid waves that bore him onward, submerged him, sucked him down, and flung him free.

The spray blinded him, plugged his nostrils, choked him when he tried to take a breath. He could see **nothing**. He was alone in the wild welter of water.

You'll find plenty of action like this all through "Gold of Gambiri." It is the best story to come from the pen of J. Allan Dunn in a very long time.

I am glad to announce that Valentine Wood's new stories about the adventures of "Ozar the Aztec" are going like wildfire with our Top-Notch readers. Howard Clark, of Framingham, Massachusetts, writes: "Attaboy, Mr. Ed! Why didn't you do it long ago? I mean why didn't you give us these new stories by Mr. Wood who kept us entertained for months with his Kroom yarns?"

"You may recall that I wrote you some time ago and said you'd never have any more stories as good as Kroom. Well, I change my statement here and now! The Ozar stories are great! Now, don't make the same mistake with these that you did with Kroom. Keep them coming. I am en-

thusiastic about these stories; maybe I ought to add that while I am a booster for Valentine Wood, this isn't any friendly brother act. I never met or saw Mr. Wood—but I'll say his stories have the kick."

Many other letters in much the same vein have been received recently, and I do not believe Top-Notch is making any mistake in running an Ozar novelette in every issue—for a certain period—so that readers may get acquainted with Ozar and vote on whether they want his adventures continued or not. "The Death Drums of Ozar" is the title of the novelette to be run in the next issue, which will also contain a number of other stories, including, of course, the increasingly-popular Short Short Story Corner. The Corner, by the way, has proved successful—and seems destined to remain a feature of Top-Notch.

Here are a few of the shorter letters in which mention is made of the new "Ozar" series:

S. A. WEATHERBY.—Your new Valentine Wood story about the American Aztec was very good, but not the best story in the book by any means. My first choice was "The Stampede," by George C. Henderson.

HELP EDIT YOUR TOP-NOTCH! READERS' BALLOT

Best story in this issue.....

Next best.....

Best "short short" story.....

Who are your favorite Top-Notch authors?.....

Remarks and suggestions.....

Name and address.....

The Aztec story comes about next, and all the short short stories were fine.—*Brooklyn, New York.*

C. J. ROBERTS.—The best story in the January Top-Notch is "Ozar the Aztec." Next best is "Fandango Island." Best short story, "The Last Man on Guard."—*St. Albans, West Virginia.*

HARRY LIBBY.—Just a line of appreciation for the story, "Ozar the Aztec," which appears in the number of Top-Notch I just finished reading. You will find that most readers like yarns like this, something to take us away from the same old bunk. You say another episode of Ozar's adventures will appear in the next issue, and I'm waiting for it. Why not give us three or four of these stories and then alternate them—first an Ozar story, then a Kroom story, and so on? Keep up the Short Short Story Corner and give us more Western tales. You now have a great magazine for a thin dime.—*South Pasadena, California.*

Here are some more letters on general subjects:

MRS. ALICE P. BALDWIN.—I have been a reader of the Top-Notch Magazine since it

was the Tip-Top Weekly. So you can judge how much I like it.

I have always enjoyed the Merriwell stories. I think they would be an inspiration to any boy. Other favorites are stories of the Mounties and the Northwest, Seward of Sacaton, Lucky Halett (What became of him?), Kroom, the Hawk, O. K. Polter, Lazy Lucas, Kid Buckaroo, Jimmy Dean, Zip Sawyer. And please give us some more Pinto Martin. Have him establish his innocence and come back to his mother. Thank you.—*Litchfield, Connecticut.*

DAVID H. GOLDFARB.—I have been reading Top-Notch for some time and find it entertaining. I think the Short Short Story Corner is pretty good.—*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

JUNIOR CARSLON.—Best story in the latest Top-Notch was "Fandango Island." Next best, "The Taming of Smiling Smith." The best "short short" story was "Rotten Money." My favorite authors are Allan R. Bosworth and Fred MacIsaac. Why not stop the serials and have all short stories?—*State Sanitarium, Arkansas.*

Time's up, folks. Listen in again on March 17th. Your announcer wishes you all a very pleasant good night!

NEXT ISSUE!

(April Number—Published March 17th)

A Long, Complete, Adventure Novel

GOLD OF GAMBIRI

By J. ALLAN DUNN

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