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KING TAOTAI

by

CHARLES GILSON

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KING TAOTAI

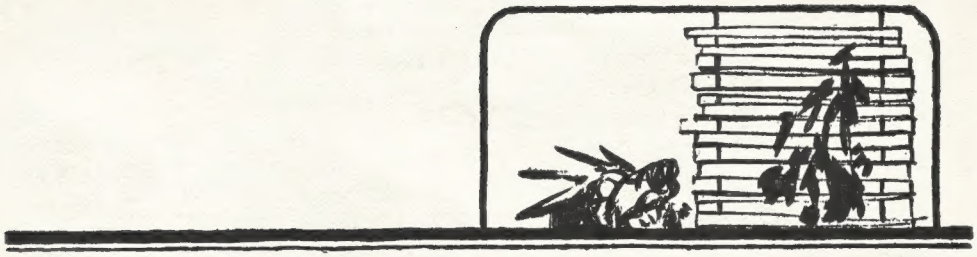
By CHARLES GILSON

CHAPTER I

THE *FU*

ON THE left bank of the Pei-ho in what is called the Russian Concession of Tientsin, there once stood an old Chinese *fu*, or mansion, under Sankolinsin's Wall. At that time, soon after the Boxer Rebellion, there were few buildings on that side of the river besides one or two broken down warehouses, the railway station and some half dozen wooden huts, the quarters of the Siberian officers in the Cossack camp.

It was a desolate region, even in summer, when the few trees were in leaf. The monotony of the mud flats was relieved only by innumerable mounds of Chinese graves, here and there a native village, and on the skyline the ruins of the Northern Arsenal. When the ice had thawed and the river was open to shipping, the square sails of junks and the funnels of sea going ships could be seen approaching from far in the distance, as if propelled overland by magic. Indeed, upon that brown stretch of wasteland they looked as out of place as the imported locomotive that grunted and snorted upon its daily



An exotic novelette of a mysterious Manchu mandarin who lived a Jekyll and Hyde life in the shadow of the Great Wall of China

journey from Tongku to Peking, where in those days was the throne of the son of heaven and the center of the universe.

An oasis in the desert was the garden of the *fu* where there were flowering shrubs shielded from the biting winter wind by the great mud wall, built centuries before to keep out the Tartar foe. The Tartar was now on the lee side of the wall all right, snugly ensconsed within the *fu!* For in that house lived King-shi-kai,* who was Taotai of Tientsin.

THOUGH a Manchu, professing to believe in the doctrines of Confucius and to reverence the memory of his ancestors, King Taotai—as he was always called—was not without Western culture and attainments. He was graduated at Oxford University; he had traveled extensively, and could talk English fluently, though unable to pronounce the letter R. Moreover, though he had violently opposed the making of the North China railroad, he himself scorned to travel in either a mandarin's chair or a

*If the reader pronounce such Chinese proper nouns as "King-shi-kai" and "Taotai" so that they both rhyme and scan with "Sing-she-high" and "Cow-eye", respectively, he will be as near as he can get to the correct Chinese pronunciation—which it takes much practise and patience to acquire. C. G.

Peking cart, but preferred a modern high wheeled gig that he delighted to drive himself.

King Taotai was a familiar figure in the Victoria Road—a tall, thin Chinese, who usually wore a robe of bright blue silk and sat round shouldered in his high wheeled gig with a Havana cigar between his lips and a liveried *mafoo**, who was a White Button mandarin, on the back seat with folded arms, and as much facial expression as a grindstone. King was wont to acknowledge his European friends in a manner not anywhere prescribed in the rules of ceremony and good behavior; for he would just waggle his whip and remove his cigar from his mouth.

AT ABOUT sunset on a July evening, when the weather was far too hot for comfort, a young man in a rickshaw crossed the pontoon bridge from the French to the Russian Concession. As far as the railway station there was a more or less respectable roadway; but beyond that the coolie took to a cart track where, as he never slackened his pace, his dilapidated vehicle threatened to break into pieces. His fare, who was a good looking young fellow in a black dinner jacket, had every reason to complain; instead, he appeared to have a truly Oriental disregard of his own personal convenience, even his safety.

If the truth be told, he found his thoughts far more unpleasant than the jolting of the rickshaw; and he who is mentally distressed takes little account of physical discomfort.

For his present embarrassment Paul Ritchie blamed only himself and the "chit" system. He had learned the folly of improvidence in a country where one has only to sign one's name to get whatever one wants; a country, moreover, where the good things of this life are somewhat in demand. A few cents for rickshaw coolies is all a man need carry in his trousers pockets—until the end of the month, when comes the reckoning.

And the reckoning for the month of June had been more than Paul Ritchie could manage, almost more than he dared think about. He knew now that he ought to have gone to Robertson in the first place and told him the truth. Old Tom Robertson had lived in China long enough to understand, and he would have squared the matter somehow.

As it was, Ritchie had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. As a kind of forlorn hope, he had played poker in such company as One Up Jackson and Ogorodnief, the Russian Consul, both men who knew the game from A to Z and could buy him out. Jackson had got his nickname on the local golf course and he had earned it. Well seasoned on the China Coast, he was generally "one up" on most people, whether the business on hand were cards, commerce or cocktails.

As for the consul—an excitable Slav whose hair stood on end and whose eyes were always bloodshot, since he seldom went to bed before five o'clock in the morning—he reckoned his official duties of secondary importance when compared to such necessities of life as caviar and vodka, champagne imported duty free as a consular privilege, a private roulette table and the ladies of the French Concession.

By nothing short of a miracle could Ritchie have won money there. And as it turned out, his signature was once again in demand. For he left his host with an I.O.U; whereas One Up expressed himself satisfied with a document that was the next thing to a promissory note. And Ritchie was in the soup.

The situation provided him with food for sober reflection as the rickshaw trundled in and out of the sun baked ruts on the track that led to the *fu*. Things wouldn't have been so bad, if he hadn't been ordered out of Tientsin in a fortnight's time. Given a breathing space, he might have been able to settle up all round; but, as matters stood, an appointment that his colleagues in the customs envied, as being likely to lead to *kudos* and promotion, looked as if it would mean a curt, official letter from Peking, signed by

*Groom.

the inspector general himself, dismissing Paul Lawrence Ritchie from the service.

He couldn't conceive why the Taotai had asked him to dinner. He had met the great man only twice in his life. It had even surprised him that King should have known his name. The Taotai could scarcely expect to transact business with any one junior to a commissioner; and as the principal Chinese official in the place, he was the social equal of generals, consuls, the leading bankers and merchants.

When the rickshaw drew up at the gate of the *fu*, painted vermillion and guarded on either hand by stone lions, the importance of King Taotai was apparent. For the walls were plastered with placards and edits, the proclamations of the Taotai, amongst which was conspicuous an announcement offering a reward of two thousand taels of silver for the apprehension, dead or alive, of the redoubtable bandit, self-styled Yen Wang, the devil god, the brigand of the Great Wall and the Yan-tsin hills.

WHEN the gate was thrown open the guest was greeted in the Chinese fashion by a salute of three pistol shots; whereupon a White Button mandarin—a hideous Chinese with a pockmarked face and no ears at all—stepped forward, bowed and proceeded Ritchie to an inner gate beyond which an army of retainers was drawn up in line.

Within a third court at the head of a flight of steps stood the Taotai himself, bedecked in a bright blue satin jacket over a silken robe of darker hue, the red button of his rank, the peacock's feather and his official beads. There was nothing in the appearance of King Taotai to suggest that he had ever in his life been out of his native country, until he extended a hand and welcomed his guest.

"Mr. Litchie," he declared, "it gives me much great pleasure to receive you in my so humble dwelling."

He had a remarkable voice, very soft, rather deep, pleasant and musical, the kind of voice one might expect from a man who was very fat. Instead, King Taotai was tall and thin, not handsome, but with well cut features and a high forehead and extraordinarily intelligent eyes. A drooping black moustache partly concealed the corners of a thin lipped mouth that might have been cruel. He was perfectly groomed, even for a high class Manchu whose yellow girdle denoted imperial descent.

Ritchie answered in English, though he was well acquainted with the Mandarin dialect. He had been long enough in the country to be conversant with the first principles of Chinese etiquette.

"The honor is mine, sir," he bowed. "Your invitation was as great a surprise to me as it was a compliment."

King smiled as he took the boy's arm and led him into a hall where there was an array of tea and sweetmeats upon carved blackwood tables, where the walls were curtained with embroideries; here and there stood bronzes and porcelains, specimens of Sung pottery and Su-chau lacquer.

"The guest cup of China tea," said King. "Maybe, you know our ancient Chinese custom. I do not place the guest cup to my lips, until, Mr. Litchie, I wish you to depart. These sweet cakes are there only for ceremony. I have ordered fare, I hope, more to your taste. Oh, yee-s, Mr. Litchie, I am tonight much honored."

Paul Ritchie was astonished and by no means at his ease. Accustomed as he was to Chinese politeness, the extreme deference with which he, a junior official in the China customs, was treated by one so distinguished as the Taotai somewhat took the wind from his sails. But, above that, he had taken it for granted that he was to be one of many guests. Apparently there was no one there except himself. That alone was mystifying. He could think of no possible reason why he should have been asked.

A servant, dressed in the Taotai's plum colored livery, produced Mahattan cocktails. And then came dinner, the cooking being half French, half Chinese; caviar

croûtes, birds' nest soup, *bècassine rôtie*, larks' tongues, and so forth, with the choicest foreign wines. And throughout that meal King Taotai was suave, ingratiating, courteous, too well bred to be condescending—and above all, inexplicable.

"Oh, yee-s, Mr. Litchie," he observed, "between the East and the West there will always be intolerwance. Maybe that is to be expected. Our cultures are so—so divergent. In all things—art, music, even food—we have so different taste that we are incomplehensible to one another. Tell me, Mr. Litchie, I am incomplehensible to you? Oh, yee-s, is that not so?"

"I fear it is," said Ritchie, who could think of no other answer.

The Taotai shrugged his rounded shoulders.

"For what leason that should be?" he asked. "I tell you why; you have learned the Chinese language, but have not made much attempt to understand the Chinese callacter. Our old time customs, Mr. Litchie, they are not without their melit."

Ritchie leaned forward with his elbows on the table, for they had dined seated upon chairs. Though he was still considerably embarrassed the wine that he had drunk had made him feel a little more at home.

"Please, tell me, Taotai," he asked, "why have you asked me to dine with you tonight?"

"Why not, Mr. Litchie? Why not?"

"Well, I don't flatter myself that I'm a person of much importance. I may be a Chinese government official, like yourself, sir, but you're at the top of the ladder and I'm at the bottom."

"And should I not desire to know the opinions of the lising generwation?" asked King. "Suppose my guest were a gentleman holding a position of authority; then our talk would be of politics, maybe of finance. We should not meet as man to man, as do you and I, my dear Mr. Litchie."

Ritchie had not the slightest idea what the Taotai was driving at. In his opinion, there had been very little of the man to man idea in the conversation, which had been stilted and formal.

AFTER dinner they repaired into a small room, magnificently furnished in the Chinese style, in which there were several books in both Chinese and English. Here Ritchie found himself with an excellent cigar, though the hard, carved blackwood chair upon which he sat was far too straight in the back for comfort.

The conversation continued as before—meaningless platitudes, irksome compliments, topics ranging from Christian missions to the native drama which King Taotai compared to the works of Shakespeare.

And then there entered the man who had ushered Ritchie across the outer courtyard, the White Button mandarin who at one time of his life had suffered torture by the loss of his ears. He was carrying a small lacquer box and without a word he set it down upon the table by the Taotai's elbow.

"The lice tribute from the plovince of Chi-li," announced the mandarin. "It is never too very much, since in this part of China the peasants grow mostly *kiao-liang**."

Still talking in his soft, silken voice, he produced a bunch of keys from the pocket in the sleeve of his robe, unlocked the box and tumbled out the contents upon the table.

Paul Ritchie caught his breath. The little box was filled with Chinese hundred dollar bills tied up into packets. King Taotai's guest found himself wondering what the rice tribute would amount to in a district where *kiao-liang* was not the prevailing crop.

"Oh, yee-s, Mr. Litchie; here in the north we can not grow lice as in Japan or Kwangsi. In Chi-li and Shantung the salt tax is more remunelative. I have of course my quota as Taotai, the honolarium, Mr. Litchie, for a classic education. But, by your leave, I put this money in a more safe place."

He leaned forward and, spreading both

*Millet.

arms across the table, swept up the paper packets, put them back into the lacquer box and was out of the room, apparently without having realized what he had done. With his elbow he had brushed one of the packets from the table to the floor.

Paul Ritchie stared at the little sheaf of paper money that lay not an inch from his foot as if it were something deadly, a venomous serpent. The thing might have been blood or fire or poison. With a hand that trembled violently he stooped and picked it up.

The bills were held together in the middle by an elastic band. Quickly he flicked some of them over with the tip of his second finger. One and all they were notes for a hundred Mexican dollars on the North China Merchants Bank. As King Taotai turned the handle of the door, Paul Ritchie thrust the bills into his pocket and looked up with a white face, to see the Taotai smiling in the doorway.

"Now, Mr. Litchie, I should have so great pleasure to show you something that in all China is unique. An unbroken specimen of the pottery of the Later Chow peliod, the only one in all the world. I have one small vase that antedates—oh, yee-s, Mr. Litchie, I assure you—the Norman Conquest of England. The people of Eulope, who have so great genius for invention, did not then know how to manufacture glass."

When Paul Ritchie followed King Taotai from the room, he felt his heart racing. He could not disguise his feelings from himself; he was both frightened and ashamed. He had done a thing that he already regretted. On the spur of the moment he had been guilty of an action that he would have thought impossible.

In another room illumined with candles he listened to a lengthy dissertation upon the lost art of the halcyon days of the Chows. He paid not the slightest attention to what King was telling him. For a moment he was permitted to hold in his hand the little vase of graceful design, not more than four inches high, a most beautiful pale blue in coloring, and highly glazed. He expressed his admiration and confessed his ignorance, when all the time his thoughts were running riot.

He, Paul Ritchie, was a thief. He was committed for the rest of his life to that. There was no going back. Already it was too late to change his mind.

He glanced furtively at the Taotai, at that thin, inscrutable countenance, and had to admit that he was afraid of the man—this cultured, cold blooded mandarin with the hard face, the soft voice and the gorgeous silk and satin robes. All the evening Ritchie had been frightened of his host, but now he was doubly afraid.

KING TAOTAI was more genial than ever. There was not a vase like his in any museum in the world, not even in the Imperial Palace itself. There were many collectors who treasured small broken pieces of the pottery of that period. He would not part with his specimen, he declared, even for the viceroyalty of Shantung.

By then Ritchie was off on another train of thought. He calculated that he could scarcely have less in his pocket than ten thousand dollars. That was far more than he needed to clear himself, to save himself from disgrace and the loss of his job. It looked so much as if Providence had played into his hands that he would be a fool if he didn't make the most of it. The packet had fallen at his very feet. Manna in the wilderness! A propitious bolt from the blue! If there were an omniscient power that controlled the destinies of mankind, he was never meant to be honest.

There could be no doubt the Taotai was ignorant of his loss. They returned to the other room where drinks were served and where Ritchie somewhat nervously suggested that it was time for him to go.

King insisted that he should stay a little longer, jokingly reminding his guest that he had not yet drunk tea from the guest cup of tradition. Upon Ritchie's own suggestion, his rickshaw coolie was dismissed; he declared that he would prefer to walk home for the sake of the exercise.

It was a distance of less than two miles, and the night was perfect.

That led to a confession from the Taotai that he had never walked more than a hundred yards in his life. And yet he had nothing to complain of in the way of health. He smoked opium, he indulged in hot baths, he often read for seven or eight hours at a stretch, and not even for the smallest Chinese characters did he require spectacles.

The Taotai even went so far as to say that he had every reason to be a very happy man, since all his life he had been befriended by the spirits of his ancestors who had been dukes of the forbidden city.

He then clapped his hands and on the appearance of a servant ordered the man to bring in the tea. As he raised the guest cup to his lips, he paid Ritchie a final compliment—a Parthian shot.

"I twust, Mr. Litchie, that we meet again," said he. "Oh, yee-s, I somehow think we shall. I have so much enjoyed the pleasure of your company."

Ritchie could not believe there was a grain of truth in that. At the back of his agitated mind he had a vague idea that he hadn't made a single remark the whole evening that the Taotai could possibly have found of the slightest interest. Then he remembered that sincerity has no place in Chinese politeness. A Chinese could say what he liked, with the exception of one thing, what he really meant and believed.

King Taotai rose to shake hands, and bowed politely.

"My servants see you to the gate," said he. "If you should prefer, I could supply you with an escort."

Ritchie declared that he would rather be alone. In fact, that was the one thing in the world he really wanted—a chance to readjust his confused and disordered mind, to attempt to realize exactly where he was.

More than anything else, Paul Ritchie wanted to get away from King-shi-kai, from the man's quiet voice, his almost nauseating flatteries.

ALONE outside the *yamen* walls, when the vermillion gate had closed behind him, the young man took in a deep breath. A full moon that hung like a lantern somewhere over the Taku Forts illumined the whole plain. The placards on the wall of the *fu* were staring white, the offer of the two thousand taels for Yen Wang, the bandit, dead or alive. Sankolinsin's great mud wall stood forth like a rampart, shutting out the skyline to the north. South, across the river, were the lights of the Concessions and the ships in the harbor, and farther to the west, the pagodas, temples and memorial archways of the native city.

Ritchie set forth at a brisk walk, conflicting emotions surging within him. He felt somehow that he had lost caste, that he would never be the same man again. He dreaded meeting his sister. That is one of the reasons he had preferred to walk. He wanted to get into the house after Constance had gone to bed, because he felt that he would never be able to look her in the face.

Then he cursed his conscience. It was only his conscience that prevented him from realizing that he was in luck's way. He believed that he had stolen the money half subconsciously; he had certainly done it without thinking. And he had got away with it. That was the main thing. Nobody need ever know. King Taotai could never accuse him.

He had come within sight of the railway station, when four men sprang at him from behind the mound of a grave. Ritchie had no time to struggle, even to cry out. He was flung to the gound and then dragged to his feet, to find himself with a strong man hanging on to each arm, another in front of him and a fourth behind.

And as Ritchie was marched back to the *fu* of King-shi-kai under Sankolinsin's Wall, he recognized that three of these four men were wearing the plum colored livery of his Excellency, the Taotai of Tientsin, while the fourth, who was in command, was none other than the man who had no ears.

CHAPTER II

KING TAOTAI SHOWS HIS HAND

"OH, YES, Mr. Litchie, did I not pledict that we should meet again? But I was not so much optimistic as to hope that it would be so soon."

Ritchie found himself again in the little room with the blackwood chairs, the lacquer screens and the embroideries on the walls. But this time King Taotai's guest was a prisoner, for the door was locked.

A moment elapsed before the young man could answer. He was breathing heavily as the truth was beginning to dawn upon him.

"You hound!" he cried. "You did that on purpose! It was a trap—to ruin me!"

"Oh, my dear Mr. Litchie, if I move my foot to twead upon a beetle, it is not the fault of the beetle it is clushed. When a mosquito settles on my face, it does not do so that I may have the felicity of waving it away. It was there by accident. So was the beetle. So were my hundred dollar bills, the twibute of the lice clop."

Ritchie stood quivering, his fists clenched. The Taotai was as imperturbable, as ingratiating as ever.

"Do you ask me to believe," he blurted out, "that you let that packet fall from the table by *accident?* Impossible! I've never heard it said that King Taotai was a fool."

"That is so very glatifying, Mr. Litchie. It is always pleasant to know that people speak well of one behind one's back."

"That's no answer to my question," roared the other.

"Question, Mr. Litchie? Have you ask me question? I forget. Please lepeat."

"Why did you bring me here to put temptation in my way? You must have known that I was stone broke, at my wits' end what to do."

The Taotai clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth, as if he were shocked.

"Tut-tut," said he. "That is so much distwessing, Mr. Litchie."

"My God," cried the other, "you'll drive me mad! You're not human! Can't you listen? Can't you understand? Are you going to accuse me of being a thief?"

"It is you, Mr. Litchie, who have accuse me, I think. You say I make twap. I invite you to my *fu,* and your company gives me great pleasure. I entertain you with such poor hospitality as I can. You eat my food, dwink my wine, dwink from the guest cup in accordance with our old time Chinese custom—and steal ten thousand dollars. Then you blame me! Oh, yee-s—but, Mr. Litchie, that is not so fair to your host. For the evening I may have made myself lesponsible for your digestion, but I can not be lesponsible for either your molal sense or your actions. Your ideas of justice, Mr. Litchie, will tell you I am light."

Paul Ritchie collapsed into a chair. Stretching his arms upon the table, he buried his face between them and remained thus for several minutes without moving.

The man's personality was overwhelming. Nothing could shake him, nothing could move him, nothing could alter him. In King's very plausibility there was the quality of persecution. His softest words were like little poisoned darts.

When at last Ritchie looked up he was a beaten man—and he looked it. Within the few seconds he seemed to have got quite old. He was beyond resistance, even indignation.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked.

"I can scarcely answer that question, Mr. Litchie, until you favor me with some paliculars about yourself. It is a so good plinciple in life to do nothing in the dark, do you not think so? In my official position I am magistrate. Therefore it is nothing new to me to dispense justice; and although our Chinese methods are sometimes summary, we invariably permit the accused to state his case."

"Then I'm accused?"

"Have you not already pleaded guilty? Still legard me as your host, I play you,

not as a plesiding judge. At the same time favor me with some little explanation. I do not blame you for picking up from the floor my dollar bills which fell by bad joss, as our simple minded people would term it. But I am so tempted to wonder why you placed those bills in the pocket of your coat, instead of returning them to me."

"I told you why," said Ritchie. "Because I was in a mess; because I owe more money than I can ever hope to pay."

"Indeed!" exclaimed King Taotai, as if surprised. "And how was that, Mr. Litchie?"

"Oh, one thing and another. It's thundering easy to spend money in Tientsin. And then I played poker. That was the last straw."

KING TAOTAI never moved a muscle of his face. He looked the boy steadfastly, straight in the eyes.

"I should not think, Mr. Litchie," he observed, "that you would be a so very good poker player. May I suggest without offense that just now you twied to bluff me? The bluff did not come off, as you would say. I hold the cards. And, Mr. Litchie, I am not ignowant of this game of poker."

Ritchie, who had been sitting staring at the floor, looked up.

"Do you mean you're going to down me?" he asked. "I'm in your power, and you know it."

"Oh, no, no, no," said the Taotai, again clicking his tongue. "I am your host, Mr. Litchie; I would never forget that. My Chinese sense of courtesy forbids it. But continue your interwesting story. The custom service is not badly paid. You have many fliends in Tientsin, I think. Your cleditors would surely give you time?"

"That's just the worst of it," said the other. "There's not a dog's chance of that. I'm ordered out of the place. I've got to leave in a fortnight's time, to take command of a custom's launch on the Lutai Canal."

"So, so!" exclaimed the Taotai. "This is news, Mr. Litchie. You go to the Lutai Canal, eh? Some special duty? So nice, Mr. Litchie—were it not for these little emballassments you have mentioned. Would you think me impertinent, if I were to ask what you are expected to do on the Lutai Canal?"

"There's no secret about it," replied the other. "It has got to do with the fur trade which is in a bad way at present. For a year the camel caravans that come down from Mongolia through the Great Wall have been waylaid by this brigand who calls himself Yen Wang. There's simply nothing coming into Tung-chow or Tientsin. One caravan after another has been attacked, the traders murdered and their skins stolen. It's believed the stuff has been deflected down the Shang-tu. All I've got to do is to go up into the other valley, keep a weather eye open, and report anything I can find out."

King Taotai was silent for more than a minute. He sat with stooping shoulders, looking straight at Ritchie with bright, dark eyes that gleamed like gems and had even less human expression. The smooth features of his face were immobile; they might have been of wax.

"Should you by chance, Mr. Litchie," he observed very slowly, "find anything in the Shang-tu Valley that seems to you surplising, you will leport nothing."

Ritchie, staring at him in amazement, repeated his words.

"Report nothing!" he exclaimed.

"Yee-s, Mr. Litchie," said the Taotai, drawing out the monosyllable even longer than was his wont. "You will leport nothing. But that will be quite easy."

"But I don't understand!" faltered the other. "I'm to go to this place for a definite purpose. You know yourself that this man, Yen Wang, is the scourge of the province. Why, there's a placard on the walls of your own *fu*, signed by yourself, offering a reward of two thousand taels for the apprehension of the bandit. If I'm lucky enough to get hold of any information—"

King Taotai interrupted by holding up a hand.

"If you are lucky enough to get any information," he continued, "you shall be so wise, Mr. Litchie, to keep that information to yourself."

"In heaven's name, why?"

"Because I say so."

Ritchie continued to stare at the man.

"Are you interested in Yen Wang?" he asked. "Surely, Taotai, that's not possible!"

"Then why suggest what is impossible, Mr. Litchie?" asked the Taotai calmly. "It will be enough for you to lealize that henceforward you take your orders from me, and not from the inspector general of customs. Have I made myself quite—clear?"

"Yes. But, by God, what if I refused?"

"Then you would compel me to fulfill a very unpleasant duty. I must be obliged to leport your—little aberlation, Mr. Litchie. And I have witnesses—oh, yee-s."

Ritchie sprang to his feet.

"I was right!" he cried. I'm in your power, and for some reason or other that's what you wanted! This amounts to blackmail!"

"Not a so very pleasant word, Mr. Litchie!" remarked the Taotai. "It is surely better that we just oblige one another? That happens every day in business. We Chinese have the leputation of being good business men and very uplight in our dealings, I think. We do not often bleak our contwacts."

"Yet that's just what you ask me to do," cried the other. "Break my contract to your own government!"

"In no country is government a business," retorted King, "least of all in China. Many honolable men do not mind defrauding the government, when they can. What I suggest is only a plivate twansaction between you and myself, Mr. Litchie."

"I can refuse," said the other.

"And take the consequence?"

"Yes. I'd face the music and resign from the customs service; I'd do it like a shot—were it not for one thing."

"And what is that one thing, Mr. Litchie?"

"Well, it's my sister," said Ritchie, in whose voice there was now a break. "We've been together since we were kids."

"So you have a sister, Mr. Litchie. Your golden lily, eh—your piece of silver? But those are Chinese metaphors. So you would not like your sister to share in your disglace. Am I corlect?"

"Yes. That's the truth of it. It'd hurt her more than me."

HE FLUNG himself into the chair from which he had risen, and again buried his face between his arms on the table. But this time he broke into sobs; and when at last he looked up his eyes were red rimmed, his cheeks tear marked. King Taotai was just the same—inscrutable, calm, unmoved.

"A week ago," said Ritchie, "I was a happy man. I had no reason to be ashamed of myself. Now everything's changed. I'm down and out, ruined!"

"Oh, no," exclaimed the Taotai, "that is quite wrong, Mr. Litchie, I am sure. Nobody need know about all this. You are quite at liberty to keep the ten thousand dollars, if they are indeed of such necessity to you. And if I give you what you would have stolen, it stands to leason you can not be disglaced! Is that not so, my dear Mr. Litchie?"

"Do you mean you'll bribe me?" Ritchie gasped. "Do you mean you'll pay my debts and hush up the whole thing, if I do some dirty job for you out on the Lutai Canal?"

"Dirty job!" exclaimed the Taotai, shocked. "Oh, Mr. Litchie, I never ask you to do anything! And I would not ask a gentleman to do anything that could be so descwibed as dirty. That is coolie work."

"Taotai," said Ritchie after a pause, "I suppose, it's asking too much to expect from you a straight answer to a plain question?"

"It would not be in my nature," the Taotai confessed with a shrug. "But do

not blame me for that. What is your question, Mr. Litchie?"

"Why do you want to protect Yen Wang—a pirate and a robber?"

"And you want a stwaight answer?" asked the Taotai.

"Exactly."

"And you think it impossible, Mr. Litchie, that a Chinese gentleman can give you a stwaight answer to what you call a plain question?"

"I'm inclined to think so," said the other. "Even now, Taotai, you prevaricate. What do you know about Yen Wang?"

"Very much," the Taotai answered. "But maybe I still plevawicate? I know all about Yen Wang—oh, yee-s, what he says, what he thinks, what he does, what he looks like. And if by chance I one time forget what he looks like—well, Mr. Litchie—I have only to look in the mirror."

Ritchie caught his breath. A moment elapsed before he could speak. He sat gripping the edge of the table in front of him, his mouth open, his eyes staring.

"You—Yen Wang!" he gasped. "You can't be serious! You, a high official, can't be the brigand for whose head you yourself have offered a reward! Taotai, you're joking!"

"You are a little unleasonable, Mr. Litchie! You ask for a stwaight answer, and then you tell me I joke."

Ritchie got to his feet, striking the table with a fist.

"Then, by God," he cried, "I'll not take orders from you. What if I go to the viceroy with this information?"

"I do not think," said King, very quietly, "that you would leach the *yamen* of the viceloy. You would never cross the river, Mr. Litchie. Your dead body would be washed up, maybe, at Tong-ku."

"So you've shown your hand at last!" cried Ritchie between his teeth.

"Do we not play poker? Did I not say I held the cards, that I could not be bluffed? And even if I let you go to the viceloy, do you think any one would belive you? I would be so sorry to hurt your feelings, Mr. Litchie, and I do not like to lemind you of a so unfortunate circumstance, but, I think, neither the viceloy nor the inspector generwal of customs would attach much cledence to an accusation made by—a thief."

"I'll take the risk of that!" retorted the other quickly.

"There will be no lisk, Mr. Litchie. If you betway my confidence as you thweaten, I do away with you."

"To be accused of my murder?" Ritchie replied. "Mr. Robertson of the Universal Fur Trading Company, one of the best known men in Tientsin, knows that I came here tonight."

"Yee-s? But Mr. Lobertson does not know that my hospitality has proved too much for you. You smoke opium, maybe, or dwink too much. The pontoon bridge is very nallow; and the cullent of the river so swift. You walk over the edge, Mr. Litchie; and when you are found, there are no marks of violence on you. None! You see, my man who is called Tung Lu, who has had his ears cut off to remind him that he is deaf; he dwown you first, in my *fu*, because you betway my confidence. Afterwards he puts you in the river. So simple! So easy, I think."

Desperate, his blood rushing in his veins, Paul Ritchie hurled himself at the mandarin. He had a momentary glance of a kind of squirt, a thing like an electric torch. His nostrils were stifled with the rank, pungent odor of ammonia. Blinded, his eyes smarting, crying out in pain, he fell to the floor, to hear again King Taotai's soft, even voice.

"I am never unplepared, Mr. Litchie, for the methods of a barbawian."

CHAPTER III

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS

WHEN Paul Ritchie awoke it was nearly midday, and the sun was streaming in through a small circular window. So unfamiliar were his surroundings that it took him several seconds to remember what had happened, to

realize where he was. He felt feverish; his throat was dry as sand; he had a splitting headache, and his eyes were bloodshot and smarted in the light.

He was lying upon a Chinese *k'ang*—a wide brick ledge built against the wall, furnished with an inner flue that could be heated in winter. This was covered with several silk cushions upon a woolen mattress. There was no air in the room, for the window was shut and the heat on that account almost unbearable. The walls were adorned with exquisite embroideries and Chinese objects of art. By the side of the *k'ang* there was a blackwood table upon which was a small bronze gong.

As Paul Ritchie recalled to mind the events of the previous night he forgot his physical discomforts in his extreme mental distress. The whole thing seemed incredible. That a powerful Manchu official, with progressive views and almost fabulous wealth, should be living a kind of Jekyll and Hyde existence, combining the duties of a government official with the exploits of a notorious and bloodthirsty outlaw, did not seem possible—even in such a country as China.

This explained much that had hitherto been a mystery. For months no one had been able to account for Yen Wang's activities. Such valuable skins as sable, mink, fox and astrakhan are not easily negotiable, apart from the fact that raw pelts require proper treatment before exportation. The bandit operated on the north side of the Great Wall, guarding every caravan route from the Yellow River to the Barrier of Stakes. At the expense of the Mongolian fur traders he had already practically emptied the godowns of the Tientsin merchants, and yet no one had ever been able to trace an outlet for the stolen merchandise.

It was now clear to Ritchie that a man like King Taotai would have far greater facilities for getting rid of such property, as well as a better idea of modern business methods, than a semi-savage brigand chieftain who, in order to conceal his identity, had to remain hidden within the fastnesses of the Yang-tsin Hills.

Ritchie groaned aloud, and almost immediately the door was opened by a tall Chinese servant dressed in a long plum colored coat. Ritchie recognized the man at once as being one of the four who had seized him the previous night and dragged him by force back to the *fu*. However, the man's smooth face was expressionless.

"No doubt master would like some tea?" he asked in the Mandarin dialect.

In a minute the servant re-entered, as noiselessly as a cat, to place upon the blackwood table a large teapot and a cup into which he poured out pale green China tea without milk or sugar.

LEFT alone, Ritchie swallowed the contents of one cup after another. And then there came a knock upon the door, and there entered King-shi-kai, who with his hands upon his knees, seated himself upon a chair by the side of the *k'ang*.

"It has been to myself so much distwessing, Mr. Litchie," he observed, "that you should have been taken ill in my unworthy *fu*. At this time of the year, when the hot wind is blowing, one is very apt to contwact fever. I have taken the liberty of sending a note to the commissioner of customs, saying you are indisposed, but are being well cared for. I twust I have done light, my dear Mr. Litchie?"

The young man sat up and gaped. What a hypocrite! What a cold blooded, calculating, plausible scoundrel! With difficulty Ritchie mastered himself and made a weak attempt at irony.

"Evidently, Taotai," he remarked, "you are interested in my personal welfare?"

"Oh, yee-s, Mr. Litchie. Of course. My Chinese sense of courtesy does not allow me to forget the obligations of a host. In fact I have telephoned to your sister who, I understand, lives with you at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Lobertson."

"My sister!" Ritchie exclaimed.

"From what you told me last night," the Taotai ran on unperturbed, "I gathered that you were so much devoted to

one another. That is just as it should be, Mr. Litchie. In China, as you know, the ties of family are so sacwed."

"And what did you tell my sister?" Ritchie demanded anxiously.

"Just that you were indisposed, Mr. Litchie, that you were suddenly taken ill after dinner. I said that it was nothing glave, but that it might be well if Miss Litchie came here herself."

"Here!" the other exclaimed. "My sister—in this house!"

"I hoped to relieve her anxiety, Mr. Litchie. I acted for the best. Oh, yee-s, I assure you."

"I wish you'd left her out of it," said the other. "She's the one person in the world I don't want to face."

"And why Mr. Litchie?"

"Well, to speak the truth, because I am ashamed of myself."

"May I lemind you of what I said last night. You have debts—maybe embal-lassing for a junior Customs official, but not so too much for a Chinese *taotai*. Ten thousand dollars is not a great deal to me, Mr. Litchie. As a token of my fliendship, might I ask you to accept this so small plesent? The privilege would be mine."

As he spoke, he threw upon the table one of the packets of hundred dollar bills. Ritchie turned away his face.

"Take it away!" he cried, almost frantically. "I can't accept it!"

"I think, you will, Mr. Litchie," came that soft, expressionless monotone. "Last night I concluded—maybe wrongly—that you did not intend to fall in with my ideas; and being interwested in your welfare—as you yourself have observed—I would be so much solly, Mr. Litchie, if you came to any serwious harm. That is one of the leasons, I must confess, why I sent for Miss Litchie herself, why your sister is alweady in the *fu*."

The young man swung his legs to the floor and sat bolt upright on the *k'ang*.

"Constance—here!" he exclaimed.

"In my house," bowed King-shi-kai.

"Then why have you not brought her to me?"

"I will do so, if you wish, Mr. Litchie, by all means. But I think in your own interwests it would be best for us to understand one another first. I have had the privilege of meeting your so much charming sister before. On the lace course, Mr. Lobertson was so kind as to introduce me."

"And last night you pretended you didn't know of her existence!" Ritchie cut in.

"I had first to see the so beautiful lady I had met at the laces to lealize she was your sister. It is a fortunate circumstance that the two ladies should have proved to be the same, since that enables me, Mr. Litchie, to encloach even further on your fliendship. I do not disguise from you the fact that Miss Litchie has made upon me a so great impression that I would ask for her hand in mallage."

"Good God!" cried Ritchie, springing sharply to his feet. "You're mad! Rather than see that, I'd kill you."

"Play sit down, my dear Mr. Litchie," said the Taotai, with a wave of the hand towards the *k'ang*. "In moments of excitement we are all apt to be unleasonable. You compel me to be so much plain spoken, in your own idiom, to call a spade a spade. Though I feel ungwacious in saying so, I have to lemind you that not only yourself, but your so charming sister, is in my power, that this *fu* is some distance both from the city and the Concessions, and also, Mr. Litchie, that I have enough imagination to be able to account for your disappeawance."

FOR SOME moments Ritchie sat with his head between his hands, gazing at the painted matting on the floor. When at last he looked up his brows were contracted, his lips tight pressed, and there was an expression of set, if somewhat forced, determination on his face.

"As you have said, Taotai," he began, "it's time we understood one another. The commissioner has selected me for this job on the Lutai Canal. Very well then, what is there to prevent me from asking him to find some one else to take my place?"

The mandarin pointed to the sheaf of banknotes upon the blackwood table.

"That money," said he. "Also, your sister. Thirdly, the circumstance that maybe you would not like the commissioner to know that one of his junior officials is a thief."

Ritchie was silenced. He was now past indignation; he was almost past resistance.

"All right," said he. "Let us admit that you're top dog, master of the situation. Suppose then, I go up the Lutai Canal. Bought and blackmailed by you, no more than your puppet, I carry out your orders and fail in my duty. Do you think I'll be kept there? Do you imagine for a moment that they won't send some one else to take my place, some one who will do his duty more thoroughly, who will in all probability run the unknown Yen Wang to earth?"

"I see I was light in my estimation of you," said the Taotai pleasantly. "You are a young gentleman of so much discrimination. But I assure you your fears are groundless. I have thought of this difficulty, Mr. Litchie; and every now and then I will send you my special messengers who will disclose to you certain facts that you will be at liberty to disclose. You may even have the good fortune to discover some of the secret places where Yen Wang hides his stolen property. It may be that some of the brigands themselves will fall into your hands. In that case, of course, they will be executed by order of the Taotai of Tientsin."

He made this villainous announcement without turning a hair, as if he referred to an everyday occurrence of not the least importance to himself or any one else. And yet, what it amounted to was this: if the Taotai himself were actually Yen Wang, he calmly proposed to betray his own hirelings, to deliver them over to the public executioner, in order to conceal his identity and to continue to enjoy the profit of his crimes.

With a half smothered oath, choked by something that was not far from a sob, Paul Ritchie recognized that to be in the power of a man like this was to have sold one's soul to the devil.

"I think now," came the voice that Ritchie had learned to dread like the hiss of a snake, "maybe, we have learned to understand one another, my dear Mr. Litchie?"

The young man looked at him in despair.

"You leave me no loophole of escape!" he moaned.

"Oh, yee-s, Mr. Litchie, I do! Instead of a little loophole I leave open the flont door, I think. I say nothing that you steal my money. That is finish. I give you more than enough to pay your debts. The bargain can not be all on one side, Mr. Litchie; I expect something in exchange. I have given you my confidence —and I would not do that to any one who was not my so great fliend. I want your word that you will consent to cally out your part of the twansaction."

Again Paul Ritchie got to his feet, this time to pace the room restlessly. When he came back to the Taotai, his face was snow white and both his fists tightly clenched.

"If I make this damnable promise," he cried, "you will forget a suggestion that was preposterous? You will renounce all claim to my sister?"

"For one who is of imperwial descent to sue humbly for the hand of a foleign lady who is neither wealthy nor of noble birth would not in China be considered plepposterous, Mr. Litchie. But I waive that. If you insist, I fall in with your wishes."

"I do insist," declared the other.

"Then we are agleed. There is nothing more to be said. I would not insult an English gentleman by demanding from him his oath. I ask you, Mr. Litchie, in the foleign fashion to give me your hand."

Ritchie held out a hand, and the Taotai grasped it. At that moment the young man was conscious of two distinct sensations which seemed in his disordered imagination to be directly connected with each other. The Taotai's hand was cold and clammy, and it was as if that coldness extended, like the slow movement of a

glacier, to the very blood in his veins.

"I think you forget this," said the Taotai, presenting the young man with the packet of paper money which Paul thrust in a pocket.

King-shi-kai appeared neither elated nor relieved. He spoke in the same easy, polite tones as he struck the little gong that stood upon the blackwood table.

"As our business is now settled to our mutual satisfaction," he observed, "would it not be well if I summoned the so glaceful and elegant Miss Litchie to the bedside of her devoted, ailing brother?"

AS HE was speaking a servant entered to whom he gave quick orders in Chinese. And a moment later Constance Ritchie walked into the room. The Taotai, for the first time rising to his feet, folded his arms in the long sleeves of his robe, bowed and shook hands with himself.

"I think there is no cause for anxiety, Miss Litchie," he remarked. "A touch of fever, maybe, or the ill effects of Chinese food to which he was not accustomed. By tomollow he should be himself again."

Ritchie sat upon the *k'ang*, dejected, pale, broken and disheveled. Quickly the girl moved toward him.

"But, Paul, you look so ill!" she exclaimed. "And your eyes! They are awful!"

The young man was unable to answer, even to look up at his sister. The mandarin went on in his smooth, emotionless voice.

"I did not send for a foleign doctor," he observed, "because Mr. Litchie himself assured me that was not necessary. He himself will tell you, I hope, that whilst under my so humble looftree, he has received every care. I have personally attended to his wants, Miss Litchie."

Constance turned to the mandarin. She was a tall, dark haired girl with a beautifully clear, though pale, complexion —a face in which there was an expression of Madonnalike serenity.

"I think, it would be best if I took him home at once," she said. "There he can see a doctor. I have brought two rickshaws to the *fu*."

The Taotai shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you wish, my dear Miss Litchie," he bowed. "I can lend you two of my chairs. Maybe they are so more comfortable."

Paul staggered to his feet and took his sister by an arm, clutched at her as if he wanted support.

"Come, Connie!" said he. "Let's get out of this!"

"There is no hurwy, surely, Mr. Litchie? Would it not be best to wait a little, until the heat of the sun is not so stwong?"

As if with an effort Paul Ritchie pulled himself together and raised his voice almost to a shout.

"No!" he cried, savagely. "I'll get out —now! I want air to breathe."

Neglecting the courtesy that was due to a Chinese of rank and position, half dragging his amazed sister with him, he went stumbling from the room.

Constance and he passed through the vermillion outer gate of the *fu*. There in the shadow of a clump of trees two rickshaws were awaiting them in which they were trundled over the jolting roadway until they reached the pontoon bridge whence the wheels ran smoothly on the level, well made streets of the European quarter.

ARRIVED at Tom Robertson's house where they both lived, almost the last house in the British Concession, Constance led her brother into the big drawing room the windows of which looked out upon the rice fields on either side of the Racecourse Road.

"Paul," she asked, the moment the door was closed, "what does all this mean? What happened to you last night in King Taotai's house?"

"Nothing," said he. "I was taken ill. I told you."

"There's something more than that," she answered. "You were well enough when you went there. Something must have happened."

"I say there was nothing," said Paul,

"nothing—that is to say, that I can tell you, Connie."

She clasped her hands together and looked anxiously out of the window.

"That means that I am right," she said. "I have met King Taotai; and I would never trust him. He always frightens me. Paul, tell me the truth. Had your visit last night to King-shi-kai's *fu* anything to do with me?"

Ritchie had made a quick movement toward the door, when his sister intervened.

"You must tell me the truth!" she cried.

Almost roughly he pushed her aside.

"I can't!" said he. "Not now, anyway. I'm too ill, too down and out. Constance, I'm a beaten man!"

He was past her and out of the room before she could stop him, and a few moments later she heard him slam the door of his bedroom which was immediately above the drawing room.

Sinking into a chair, she sat for a long time wondering about it all, trying to guess what could have passed between the Taotai and her brother.

And then her host, Tom Robertson, entered. These days, when his business was in a state of stagnation, Robertson always came home early from the office to which as often as not he never returned in the afternoon. He was a big, broad shouldered Scotch American who had never lost his native accent.

Robertson was the manager of the Tientsin branch of the Universal Fur Trading Company of New York, the president of which was a certain George Warren Vaile, who was a cousin of the Ritchies. The business—which was one of the biggest concerns of its kind in the world—had been founded by Warren Vaile, Senior, whose beautiful sister had created something of a sensation in London society in early Victorian days, when fascinating American ladies were not so well known in Park Lane as they are today. Had she liked, Margery Vaile might have married an earl or a viscount; instead of which she threw herself away upon a happy go lucky, good looking cavalry officer, a nice enough fellow in his way, but weak as water and so improvident that contemporary scandal had it that an American heiress was his only possible means of saving himself from the clutches of professional money lenders.

Whether or not that were true, there can be no doubt that it was from his father that Paul Ritchie had inherited the many weak points in his character; whereas Constance had something of the strength of personality of the Vailes.

George Warren Vaile had kept in touch with his English cousins, who had been left orphans and none too well off before Constance was of age. And when he heard that young Ritchie had gone into the China customs and that his sister was going out to the East to keep house for him, he immediately wrote to the Robertsons and asked them to accept the two young people as paying guests. The arrangement had worked splendidly—up to a certain point, when Paul had started to get hold of the wrong people.

ROBERTSON flung his white solar topee on to a chair.

"Any news of Paul?" he asked.

"Yes," said Constance. "He has come home. He's upstairs. Something's wrong. Tell me, Mr. Robertson, would you trust King Taotai?"

"As much as any Chinese," said the other, with a shrug. "King's a clever man; no one denies that. One of the few strong men in North China who keep the old rotten Manchu dynasty on its legs. Besides he has got more or less modern ideas."

"All the same," said Constance, "I wouldn't trust him. Something dreadful has happened to Paul. He's quite changed. He looks terribly worried and ill."

"There's a reason for that," said Robertson, after a pause. "He has got himself into a mess. We all know it at the Club. The young fool has been playing poker with Ogorodnief and Jackson, and has of course lost far more than he can

pay. He has got debts all over the place. I should have told you before, Constance, but I didn't want to worry you. I'm to blame as much as any one."

The girl was silent a moment.

"I knew," she said, at last, very quietly. "But it's not your fault. How can it be?"

"I ought to have pulled him up in time," said the other. "But the fact is I have been worried stiff lately. Business is at a standstill here, and likely to remain so. I've written to Vaile about it. He doesn't blame me. It's well known in New York, as well as London and Paris, that the Chinese fur market is practically closed. The last letter I had from Vaile, he said he was coming out to China himself to inquire into things. So, I guess, you're going soon to meet your American cousin, Constance. Though he's my boss, I scarcely know him myself. He has got the reputation of being one of the smartest business men in New York."

As Robertson was speaking a rickshaw drew up before the gate into the road, which happened to be closed. The passenger—a slim man with a youthful figure, wearing white flannel trousers and a very well cut gray coat—jumped out, paid the coolie, and began to walk quickly up the short drive that led to the front door.

When he caught sight of Constance and Robertson standing at the open bay window of the drawing room, he took a garden path that led down that side of the house, and when about fifteen yards away, called out to attract their attention.

"Here's Mahomet come to the mountain!" he cried. "It's a good many years since we met, Robertson. And this should be the English cousin I've known about for years."

When Constance Ritchie turned, she gave a start. Almost before she was aware of it, her brother's name had passed her lips. This man was the living image of Paul.

Robertson must have seen the resemblance, too, for he looked surprised.

"You must come right in, Mr. Vaile," said he. "I didn't expect you so soon."

He was out of the room on his way to the front door, when Constance Ritchie straightened as if she had been struck. Instantly she turned snow white in the face, and swaying, clutched the frame of the opened window to prevent herself from falling.

Vaile, too, in the garden had suddenly assumed a tense attitude. He stood mystified, alarmed, unable to do anything, and yet realizing that something terrible had happened.

For the loud report of a revolver had echoed through the house from one of the upper rooms—a sharp, sudden detonation, followed by a heavy thud upon the floor above the drawing room, in which Constance Ritchie waited.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREATER DEBT

ROBERTSON had got as far as the front steps when he was back again in the house in two seconds, with George Vaile close upon his heels. The hall was furnished as a lounge with comfortable settees, occasional tables and one or two enormous vases of Japanese cloisonné. A central flight of stairs led to the upper story; and as Constance Ritchie came from the drawing room, the stout, motherly figure of Mrs. Robertson appeared at the head of the stairs.

Holding on to the bannisters, she had descended two or three steps before she caught sight of her husband.

"Tom, come here for mercy's sake!" she cried. "That shot was in Paul's room. I heard him go in there about ten minutes ago."

Constance moved slowly forward, walking as if she were blindfolded, groping aimlessly with her hands in front of her. She was still white as a ghost; her lips quivered as she tried to speak.

"Paul!" she exclaimed—and then, discarding the thought as one too terrible to contemplate, "Oh, impossible!" she groaned.

George Vaile took the girl by an arm and led her toward Mrs. Robertson, who by then had reached the foot of the stairs. Though he knew nothing of existing circumstances, the terror stricken faces of his three companions warned him of the possibility of tragedy.

"Look after her," he whispered. "Your husband and I will go and see what has happened."

Tom Robertson followed him up the staircase, breathing heavily and leaning on the bannisters. At the top Vaile turned and waited for his companion.

"Does this mean there's a chance that Paul Ritchie has shot himself?" he asked.

Robertson came out with a kind of breathless grunt.

"It's on the cards," said he. "The boy was in trouble—money difficulties. But he can't have been driven to that!"

"Which room?" Vaile asked.

"There. The first on the right."

Vaile flung the door open, took two steps forward, and then came to a sudden standstill. He heard Robertson's voice close behind him, a kind of husky whisper.

"Oh, my God!"

Vaile closed the door and locked it.

"How terrible for his sister!" he exclaimed. "And it's a shock for me. I was looking forward to meeting my cousins. I remember their mother well. Young as I then was, I thought her the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. When you look at that, Robertson, one can't be sorry she's dead!"

With a hand he indicated the huddled, almost shapeless, form upon the floor. In his evening clothes, just as he had come from the *fu* of King-shi-kai, the young man lay face downward, while a pool of blood was slowly spreading on the carpet. A revolver lay a few feet away from him where it had fallen from his hand.

George Vaile went down upon his knees. As gently as he could, he turned the body over, while Robertson stood looking on, stiff and rigid as if he had been turned into stone. Upon a sudden Vaile looked up.

"Quick!" he cried. "Ring for a doctor! He's still alive."

For a moment Paul Ritchie had half opened glazed, vacant eyes. He looked at his cousin without interest or curiosity, and then spoke in a strained whisper, barely audible.

"Too—much," he gasped, as if each syllable all but choked him. "Yen—Wang. *Black*—"

HIS HEAD fell forward on his chest. Robertson, who had paused at the doorway, hurried back into the room. George Vaile slowly lowered the body to the floor.

"He's gone now," said he. "No need for a doctor, Robertson. Poor boy! God forgive him!"

"Did you hear what he said?"

" 'Too much'. 'Yen Wang'. Surely, that's the name of the cutthroat who has smashed the fur trade out here? And then, he said 'black'. Black what, Robertson? What did he mean by that?"

"Darned if I know," said the other. "He must have been half off his head. I never dreamed it would come to this!"

Vaile got to his feet.

"You say he was in debt," said he. "If that was all, I would have seen him through. When all's said and done, he and his sister are my first cousins. It's the girl I'm thinking about now."

"And I, too," said Robertson. "This will be a terrible blow to her. They were devoted to one another—though she's worth twenty of him, poor chap! Vaile, we've got to go down and tell them—somehow."

"I know," said the younger man, as if he were thinking about it. "We've got to face the music. And there'll have to be an inquest, I suppose. But, even if he was up to his eyes in debt, I don't see that that's any reason why he should have taken his own life. We may find something on him to give us a clue. Right or wrong, I'm going to look."

Again he went down upon his knees, and very carefully went through Paul Ritchie's pockets, though he could not do

so without staining his hands in blood. From a drenched wallet he produced King Taotai's wad of hundred dollar bills.

"Does this look like debt?" he asked. "There's the equivalent here of something like five thousand dollars gold. Robertson, that's a mighty lot for a boy in the China customs! He didn't shoot himself because he was short of cash."

Tom Robertson shook his gray head.

"I can't explain it!" he mumbled. "I don't know where Paul could have got all that money from. He has got gambling debts in the place that are a mere trifle compared to this."

There came a timid knock upon the door. The two men exchanged a startled glance.

"It has got to be done," said Vaile, "and it will be easier for me."

He unlocked the door, opened it just wide enough for him to pass out, and then stood as if he barred the way to the two frightened women in front of him.

"Constance," said he, "this is a sad meeting for us."

"The worst!" she exclaimed.

Vaile bowed his head.

"It's all up with him," said he. "There's some mystery at the back of it. We'll have to find out what it is."

The girl stood swaying a moment with her hands clasped in front of her. Mrs. Robertson threw her arms around her and guided her to a chair upon which she sank into a sitting position, as if all the strength had gone out of her. There was no sign of tears, though her face was drawn and white, as if she were suffering the most intense physical pain.

"Oh," she sobbed, "for the moment he must have been mad. And I blamed him! That was why he did it."

Robertson whispered to his wife.

"Get her into her room," said he, "and look after her until Graham comes. He'll be here in two minutes. I left him at the Club."

He went straight to the telephone and at once got hold of Graham, the leading doctor in the British Concession. He told the doctor no more than that something very serious had happened and that he must come at once without a moment's delay.

BY THE time Dr. Graham had got to the house, Constance Ritchie was in a state of complete prostration and needed his first attention. A few minutes elapsed before he returned to Paul's bedroom where he found both Robertson and George Vaile awaiting him.

"This is a bad business!" he observed.

And then he stared hard at Vaile.

"I've not introduced you," Robertson intervened. "Doctor Graham, this is Mr. Vaile, Paul Ritchie's cousin, and incidentally my boss in New York."

"There's more than a family likeness," the doctor smiled. "I got a bit of a shock before I looked twice. Extraordinary!"

As he was speaking, he knelt down and examined the body. He remained upon his knees no longer than a few seconds before he rose to his feet.

"I can do nothing here," said he, with a sigh. "Rob, this is terrible! There wasn't any real harm in the boy, though he may have been playing the fool lately. Of course, I've got to take official notice of it—inform the police and the consul general. I had better see about it at once."

He had half turned as if about to leave the room, when George Vaile interposed.

"One moment, Doctor," said he. "As my cousin, poor girl, won't be able to take any steps in this matter, I'm going to take the responsibility of acting for her. Do you think you could keep this matter hushed up? If I can possibly do so, I would like to keep it out of the local papers."

"That's natural," said Graham, with a shrug. "We might be able to work it; but Tientsin's a small place, as you know. Everybody knows everybody else. However I can quite understand your feelings, Mr. Vaile. You want to avoid a scandal."

"And I've some very special reason for wishing to do so," said Vaile, perfectly calmly. "I want to talk this matter out

with Robertson. It's not so simple as it looks. The inquest can only find one verdict—suicide while of unsound mind. I've got my doubts about it all the same. That's between you and me. I don't mean to say that he was responsible for what he did at the time; I guess there's more at the back of this than a few odd gambling debts. That's why I want to keep the whole matter quiet. I mean to find out the truth."

"I'll call on the inspector of police on my way home." said the doctor. "I'll tell him what you wish. He'll probably be up here in a few minutes."

THE MOMENT he was out of the room Vaile turned to Robertson into whose hands he thrust the sheaf of blood stained banknotes.

"Take charge of those," said he quickly. "Put them away in a safe place under lock and key. There'll be trouble if any one finds them—remember that! We'll have the devil's own job to explain matters."

"Why?" asked the other. "What on earth do you mean to do?"

"Robertson," said Vaile, "according to my ideas, there are occasions in life when it doesn't do to be honest, when a man's justified in lying. Nothing you or I can do can give Paul Ritchie back the life he has thrown away. All we can do is to make things as easy for him as we can—and easier for ourselves, as well. With you as a witness, to prove that I have no malice aforethought. I'm going to put this wallet back empty into Paul Ritchie's pocket."

"Without the bills?" gasped Robertson, astonished.

"Empty," Vaile repeated. "That'll make it simple work for the inquest. He was known to be in debt. But on no account must you breathe a word to any living soul that we found enough money on him to keep him in luxury for weeks. You'll have some mighty difficult questions to answer, if you do."

"All right," Robertson replied. "I'll do it; but I'm darned if I know what you're playing at!"

Vaile placed both hands upon the broad shoulders of his manager.

"Robertson," said he, "I'm going to see this out."

CHAPTER V

YEN WANG'S TRADING POST

TWO WEEKS afterward, George Warren Vaile found himself the representative of the inspector general of China customs, engaged upon a special mission, knowing next to nothing of the country and unable to speak a single word of the language.

In the face of considerable difficulties he had succeeded in getting his own way. Vaile had known from the beginning that something other than financial worries had been the cause of Paul Ritchie's suicide. Robertson had made sundry inquiries in the Concessions, all of which had led him to the conclusion that the young man must have received his ten thousand dollars on the night when he dined with King-shi-kai.

It was obvious therefore that the Taotai himself was the only person who could throw any real light on the matter; and he was the one man in the whole of China to whom George Vaile was determined not to go. For Constance had supplied her cousin with a clue. She had admitted that the Taotai had on more than one occasion ventured to make love to her in a subtle, roundabout manner, essentially Chinese. The girl had also described the condition of her brother when she had found him in the *fu*—a condition that at once suggested to the American that the young man must have been drugged.

A man who accepts an invitation to dinner, who is discovered the following morning a moral, mental and physical wreck, and who moreover has suddenly come into possession of a considerable sum of money, has very obviously compromised himself to some serious extent. So, at least, thought Vaile.

Although with his last breath Ritchie had mentioned the name of Yen Wang,

it never for a moment occurred either to Vaile or Robertson that the Taotai could be in any way connected with the brigand. Vaile's sole idea was to find out, if possible, the real reason why the young man had killed himself; and with this objective in view, he had seen at once that his own striking physical resemblance to his cousin might be turned to some account.

He had frankly stated his case to the commissioner of customs, to whom he had proposed that he should take Paul Ritchie's place. He pointed out that the young man could only have received so large a sum of money as a bribe or by means of blackmail. There was more than a possibility that the one word "black"—the last word that had passed the lips of the dying man—was the first syllable of the word "blackmail," though it was uncertain in this case whether the Taotai or Ritchie himself was the victim.

Thanks mainly to Vaile, Paul Ritchie's death had been hushed up. It was known in Tientsin that Ritchie was shortly leaving the place, and it was taken for granted that he had gone away earlier than he had expected. The commissioner was not slow to see that certain facts might come to light of their own accord, if George Vaile impersonated his cousin.

Vaile was determined to go up country in any case. He had come out to China expressly to inquire into the activities of Yen Wang. He wasn't the man to accept defeat lying down. His own interests were largely at stake, since his firm was the biggest buyer of Chinese furs in the world.

Vaile was a man of considerable strength of personality, who knew well how to drive home an argument. Having decided upon the course of action he intended to take, he kept well in the background during his brief stay in Tientsin, until the time came for him to go up the Lutai Canal, posing as his cousin.

ON BOARD the customs' launch he found an exceptionally capable interpreter—a Peking man of the name of Pai-chu-li—who had to be let into the secret. This was the man who in any case was to have acted under Ritchie's orders. He was a regular employee of the customs, to which he had rendered yeoman service in the past, and was known to be thoroughly reliable. The expedition was intended to be solely in the nature of a reconnaissance. The launch was to work its way from the Lutai Canal into another canal that connected with the Shang-tu, which river was to be patrolled both above and below the walled city of Yung-ping.

The interpreter was instructed to make inquiries in the numerous villages scattered throughout the valley. It was believed that Yen Wang's stolen furs were being secretly conveyed to some unknown point on the coast.

Vaile delighted in the experience. Though he had traded with China for years, both the country and the people were new to him. When he had left behind him the level mud flats of the Pei-ho basin, he found himself in a picturesque, hilly country where he walked miles with a shotgun and lived like a fighting cock on pheasants and snipe.

The interpreter struck Vaile as being an exceptional man. In the first place he was uncommonly handsome. He had a pigtail, of which he was inordinately proud, that reached almost to his knees and which he always kept beautifully oiled. He spoke the English language faultlessly, and seemed to be incapable of fear.

His courage may be explained to some extent by native avarice; for he freely confessed that he had no other object in view than to possess himself of the two thousand taels of silver offered by the Taotai for the apprehension of Yen Wang. On that account his energy was inexhaustible. He seemed able to do without sleep and was capable of almost continual physical exertion. As soon as they reached the Shang-tu valley, day after day he was absent from dawn to sunset, sometimes not returning to the launch until late at night.

Discarding his long coat that betrayed him as a member of the middle class, he

dressed himself as a coolie and coiled his pigtail around his head. Speaking the country dialect, he visited one village after another, passing himself off as a peasant. He knew that no people in the world are more suspicious and reticent than his own countrymen who, though great gossipers and talkers, will seldom give away any information to a stranger.

In an indirect and truly Oriental manner Pai-chu-li succeeded in his object. He ascertained that for many months camel caravans had been going down to the coast on the north side of the Great Wall, thus avoiding the customs' barrier to the south. He had no doubt that these camels were those that had been stolen from the Mongolian fur traders, though it took him several days to discover that the destination of the caravans lay somewhere in the neighborhood of the town of Ning-wan-tao on the Manchurian coast of the Lioatung Gulf.

A conference took place between Vaile and the interpreter at which they decided to steam down to the estuary of the river, whence they could go up the coast in some native craft in order to allay suspicion. If the caravans were actually conveying Yen Wang's stolen furs to a trading post on the seaboard, there was a fair chance that they might be able to discover the brigand's dump. The place was evidently a natural harbor where seagoing ships could be berthed and take on cargo; and if this were so, a big organization was concerned in the business, for the stolen merchandise had to be conveyed out of the country and disposed of in some foreign port where Yen Wang had an agent who was both competent and trustworthy.

AT THE mouth of the Shang-tu, Pai-chu-li interviewed the *laoban* of a river junk, or *wupan*, anchored off the town of Lohling. This man—who, like most Chinese junkmen, was master of his own craft—readily agreed to charter his boat to a foreign devil who wanted to shoot pheasants and was ready to pay a good price.

The launch was left at anchor in the estuary under the command of a Chinese quartermaster, while Vaile sailed up the coast in the *wupan* with Pai-chu-li, the *laoban* and his two monkey faced sons who comprised the crew.

The *wupan* was a long, flat bottomed boat with a single mast and carried a huge, square sail, all the colors of the rainbow. Astern was a matting awning that afforded protection from the sun's rays and harbored vermin of all descriptions.

As Vaile was supposed to be on a sporting trip, he made a point of going ashore every day with his shotgun, accompanied by Pai-chu-li, ostensibly as a game carrier, but in reality to spy out the land. On this account it took the *wupan* several days to work its way up to Ning-wan-tao. They passed Shan-hai-kwan, where the Great Wall of China crumbles into the sea, to the north of which extended the broken hilly coastline of Manchuria.

Here, the astute Pekingese was wise enough to confine his inquiries to village children whom he found playing hide and seek in the *kiao-liang*. From these, with the help of a few "copper cash", he learned that camel caravans sometimes passed to the north of Ning-wan-tao. Accordingly they returned to the *wupan* and ordered the *laoban* to put out to sea, whence they could keep a sharp lookout upon several miles of coastline.

Sure enough, on the second day, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, their efforts were rewarded; for a large seagoing junk suddenly emerged from the foot of a steep tree covered bluff, to head straight across the gulf on a southeasterly course.

At about the same time they sighted a sailing sampan that was tacking northward and hugging the coast. They hove to and made pretense that they were fishing, while they watched the junk until she stood out on the eastern horizon.

By that time they had some reason to regard the movements of the sampan as suspicious. She had come close enough for them to see that there was only one man on board; and it was as if this man had been frightened by the discovery that there was a foreigner on board the *wupan;*

for he immediately put about and made out to sea with a following wind. The last they saw of him in the dusk of evening, he had again turned and was following on the same tack as themselves.

It was nearly nightfall when they reached the place where they had first sighted the junk. Here they discovered the narrow entrance to a cove, lying immediately behind a rocky islet that from the sea appeared indistinguishable from the cliff to the west of it. The *laoban* succeeded in negotiating the narrow entrance in the semi-darkness; and a few minutes later they caught sight of the lights of a house on the south side of the inlet.

The cove was evidently an old harbor that had been used in former times by the pirates who ravaged the coast before the Grand Canal was made. Constructed along the shore was a long stone embankment that had the appearance of being very old, though it still served its purpose as well as ever. Alongside there was sufficient depth of water for seagoing ships. Moreover there were bollards and mooring posts, as well as one or two gangplanks that had been carelessly left about.

THAT they had at last discovered Yen Wang's trading post from which he exported his stolen goods there could be little doubt; and Vaile and Pai-chu-li decided to go ashore at once, though they knew they were taking their lives in their hands.

They set out, armed, having but a vague idea of the lie of the land and not knowing what kind of reception they were likely to get. They had seen a native village situated on a hilltop at the end of the cove and a little to the south. This village was surrounded by trees that extended along a crescent shaped cliff that stood forth like a kind of rampart upon the south side of the harbor.

The house lay at the end of the stone embankment. It was a massive stone building, standing upon such an extraordinary site that it could have existed in no country but China. For the greater part of it had been built upon a bridge, under which flowed a torrent that came down from the hills with such velocity that at the bottom there was white foam among the rocks. The building had the appearance of having once been the *yamen* of some provincial prefect or magistrate, for it was surrounded upon three sides by high walls, whereas at the front was a wooden balcony that spanned the mountain stream at a height of more than thirty feet.

They proposed to go openly to the *yamen* on the pretext of buying rice and millet, as only thus could they hope to allay suspicion. However, they had walked the entire length of the embankment, without being challenged or meeting a living soul, when they were brought up by finding themselves confronted by the torrent, the wooden balcony being high above them to their left.

Searching for the steps that they knew must be somewhere there, they eventually discovered a ladder which had been hauled up to the balcony. It was therefore clear to them that they could not get into the house from the front, and they must see whether there was any means of entry from one of the sides.

Returning to the embankment, they began to climb the steep face of the cliff upon the top of which the house was situated, until they came to the *yamen* outer wall on the east side of the building.

So silent was the whole place that they were inclined to believe that no one knew they were there. The people in the village—whoever they were—may not have thought it any business of theirs to report the arrival in the cove of a strange junk, and those who lived in the *yamen* had not bothered to post a lookout man. If George Vaile was surprised at this, Pai-chu-li took it for granted. He knew his own countrymen too well; he knew the capacity of the Chinese to mind his own "pidgin" and that peculiar way of looking at things that makes the burning of a joss stick a more effective precaution than the posting of an armed guard.

Near the very end of the east wall they found a narrow entrance, a kind of postern

gate that had been left wide open. Cautiously they walked in, to find themselves in a spacious yard—the courtyard of an Oriental caravansery or a large Chinese inn, where their nostrils were at once offended by the unmistakable odor of camels. And a few yards farther on, they received proof positive that they had found the destination of Yen Wang's caravans that came down to the sea from the Great Wall and the Yantsin Hills. For they were obliged to pick their way between some score of kneeling, long haired camels that with craned necks watched the intruders suspiciously, while their jaws moved slowly, like those of old toothless men.

The yard was illumined by bright shafts of light that came from three windows in the main central building. So far as they could make out, there was no entrance to the house from that side. Pai-chu-li, walking on tiptoe, moved straight toward the first window on the left. When he had reached the window sill, he crouched down, peered cautiously in and then beckoned to Vaile.

THROUGH the glass George Vaile beheld a sight that he found anything but reassuring. It was a fair sized room in which the atmosphere was thick with the smoke of opium. Several small tables were crowded with all manner of things—rice bowls and cups, chopsticks, opium lamps; and there were, also, pots filled with tea and others with *samshu*.

Around the walls of the room were couches, cushions spread upon the ordinary Chinese *k'ang;* and upon these were sprawling lazily about half a dozen naked men. In the light of an oil lamp suspended from the ceiling these men were neither pleasant nor prepossessing. They lay in various attitudes suggestive of complete physical exhaustion, half drugged by opium and half drunk with *samshu*. The eyes of some were half closed; the mouths of others wide open; their long, bony limbs glistened with perspiration.

They belonged to the most muscular and the least civilized branch of the great Chinese nation. They were rawboned, hardy mountaineers from one of the northern provinces. Their skin was not yellow, but nut brown. They had evil, apelike faces, with powerful jaws and receding foreheads, and those deep wrinkles and furrows that a man gets who must screw his eyes in the glare of the sun or the biting winter wind that sweeps down from the steppes of Siberia.

As Vaile drew away from the window he realized for the first time that he had placed himself in a position of extreme danger. He was bound to associate these villainous looking, opium drugged coolies with the camels outside in the yard. There could be no question that these men were the camel drivers, and hence they were none other than Yen Wang's bandits, some of the very men who waylaid the fur traders on their journey across the Mongolian plains.

Vaile reminded himself that he had a loaded revolver on him and knew how to use it. He found some consolation in the thought that in all probability these brigands did not carry firearms; and if he required any further reassurance, he found it in the calm, expressionless countenance of Pai-chu-li who seemed to take what they had seen for granted.

Still on tiptoe, they passed on to the second window—the central window on that side of the house. This was smaller than the others and higher from the ground. Indeed Vaile was obliged to crane his neck in order to see into the room beyond.

Here was something very different, so different, in fact, that one would have thought it impossible that the two rooms belonged to the same house, much less that they were next to one another and connected by a door which happened to be closed.

THE ROOM was comfortably, even luxuriously furnished in the Chinese fashion. There were three doors; one on the left of the window—that which connected with the room in which Yen

Wang's bandits were enjoying an opium debauch; another to the right, and one which stood ajar immediately facing the window. In the corner between these last two doors there was one of those high desks at which the Chinese clerk, or *shroff*, likes to conduct his business and balance his accounts, with his feet several inches from the floor.

Such a man was now seated upon a stool with an ink brush in his hand. He was a very different kind of man from those in the other room. There was nothing of the brigand about him. He was neatly dressed in a dust colored robe of Chifu silk. Though his back was half turned to the window, he occasionally screwed himself round to refer to some ledgers that stood upon a shelf to his right. He had the pale yellow complexion of the typical Cantonese. His face was smooth, his features, regular, though they suggested the humorist. He had a little turned up nose, a mouth that wore a perpetual grin, and small, black, almond shaped eyes that positively twinkled with delight.

Though he looked a merry soul who was out to get what amusement he could out of life, at that moment he was wonderfully busy. Referring time and again to his ledgers, he worked his ink brush held in deft fingers with extraordinary rapidity, while a long scroll of paper hung down from the desk almost to the floor.

Suddenly he turned his head, assuming the attitude of one who listens. This might have given Vaile some cause for alarm, had the man turned toward the window; instead he was looking the other way, toward the half opened door that led to the inner room.

Without getting off his high stool, the Cantonese leaned backward, flung out his left arm and pushed the door wide open. The action enabled George Vaile to see into the room beyond. And immediately he caught his breath.

For a moment he believed that somehow or other the fumes from the opium smokers had got into his brain, to confuse his powers of vision. For it seemed incredible to him that, in that old *yamen*, hidden away in a cover on the desolate coast of Manchuria, at least two hundred miles from Tientsin, he should find his cousin, Constance Ritchie.

CHAPTER VI

A NARROW ESCAPE

HE COULD not doubt the evidence of his eyes, for the girl was seated in an attitude of the utmost dejection at a table upon which stood a cheap oil lamp of Britannia metal that looked as out of place in the Chinese room as a tin of sardines in an art gallery. Constance Ritchie's costume was for those days unconventional. For she was one of the first girls on the China coast to ride a horse straddle legged and to wear riding breeches. Though she was so attired, she was now without a hat, and her long, dark hair was disheveled and half down her back. She sat at the table without moving, with her face turned toward the other room, to the Chinese clerk at the desk, to whom she was evidently speaking. And a very white face it was, with tired eyes and an expression of mingled anxiety and bewilderment.

Vaile had sufficient presence of mind not to cry out, to give vent to no exclamation of surprise. Though, had he done so, it is doubtful whether the Chinese would have heard him, since the window was closed. Seizing Pai-chu-li by an arm, he drew silently away; and not until they were some distance from the house among the motionless, ruminating camels did he venture to speak.

Pai-chu-li had seen the girl, too; but it was not in the nature of the inscrutable Pekingese to behave as if there were anything unusual in finding a white girl in a lonely Chinese *yamen* in the wilds of Manchuria. When Vaile explained who the prisoner was, he did no more than shrug his shoulders and suggest that they should look into the third window before they attempted to get into the house.

"We behave all the same as if we have not seen her," said he. "I think, the

Canton man is master here. We go to buy rice and millet."

"If that clerk were alone," said Vaile, "we'd soon settle him. But those other fellows look dangerous customers, and there are a dozen of them, at least."

"I don't agree," said Pai-chu-li. "One Cantonese snake is more dangerous than twelve Honanese wolves. And besides, I can not speak the tongue of Canton, the language of thieves and liars."

As he spoke he moved toward the third window on that side of the house—the window nearest the corner where the balcony extended over the ravine. The light in this window was dimmer than that in the others, as if the lamp within were shaded.

This proved to be the case. Peering cautiously over the sill, they found that here was a great room, much larger than the others they had seen, that extended across the whole front of the *yamen*. However, very little of this room was visible, since not far from the window was a large folding lacquer screen that partly shut out the light from a bronze temple lantern suspended from the ceiling. Between the screen and the window was a very extraordinary thing—a great idol of a Chinese god, seated in the usual cross legged position. Though the idol's back was to the window, Pai-chu-li recognized the image of the dreaded deity at once.

"That is Yen Wang," he whispered. "Devil god. King of all Taoist devils. I expect the man we want makes use of it to suit his own purposes. Those Honanese peasants are very superstitious, and they are all Taoists. They believe in *feng-shui* and joss and plenty more rubbish."

Vaile paid very little attention to him. His thoughts were still of Constance and the mystery of how the girl had got there. However great the risk, he was now determined to get into the house with as little delay as possible.

Upon his suggestion they passed on tip toe to the wooden balcony. Here it was quite dark; there appeared to be no windows in the front of the house. In the center of the balcony was a porch under a curved, projecting roof, above the front door which was immediately over the torrent that tumbled through the ravine thirty feet beneath them.

Groping in the darkness, they found a bronze knocker, the noise of which echoed loudly in the long, shallow room beyond. They had now a very good idea of the plan of that part of the *yamen*. The two rooms in which they had seen the Cantonese and Constance Ritchie were immediately behind the big front room; and they had seen from the third window that there were communicating doors with each—a blue door into the first room and a red one into the second. Once they had gained admittance into the *yamen*, they would not have far to go to rescue the captured girl.

They waited in suspense for several minutes, and then they heard the jangling of keys. Bolts were withdrawn; the lock was turned. The door was opened a matter of a few inches, and a face appeared.

THOUGH they could not see this face very clearly, they had no difficulty in recognizing the Cantonese whom they had seen in the central room on the east side of the house.

The man closely regarded firstly Pai-chu-li, then Vaile. Seeing that the latter was a foreigner, he grinned, nodded pleasantly, and then spoke in pidgin English.

"What wanchee?" he asked.

It was Pai-chu-li who answered in the same mongrel language, the *langue de commerce* of the Far East in which Chinese from remote provinces often choose to converse with one another.

"No have got rice," said he, thrusting a foot against the jamb of the door in case of accidents. "Come catch'em rice, or maybe millet. Master look by your house, him think maybe you sell. Him shoot plenty pheasants this side."

"What time you come?" asked the Cantonese suspiciously.

"When make dark," said Pai-chu-li. "Have got one small piecee junk."

"No have saw," said the other who, in

spite of his grinning countenance, seemed not a little annoyed.

But Pai-chu-li was determined to take charge of the situation.

"Suppose you can catch rice, what time we step inside," said he; and without waiting for an answer, he walked straight past the man into the room.

"All right," grumbled the Cantonese. "I make plenty look see. My name Chang. Canton man. Can catch. All same good rice belong plenty dear this year. Crop no too plenty. Maybe I catch'em, master pay five piecee dollar?" he asked.

"Sure," said Vaile, "I'll pay what you like. I'm on a shooting trip up the coast. Can't live on meat alone. Must have something to make cakes and flour. Savvy?"

The Cantonese regarded him with an amused expression. For some reason the sound of Vaile's voice appeared to give him greater confidence, doubtless because he thought it would be far easier to swindle the American than his own country man.

"Too muchee meat sick stomach," he sagely observed. "What for you come into this harbor, eh?"

"Found it by chance," said Vaile, lying whole heartedly. "We wanted somewhere to anchor for the night. No good being caught out at sea on board a river junk in a typhoon."

"Not good so much," remarked the other, meaning to suggest that he thought his visitors had certainly acted wisely. "One piecee bag rice five piecee dollar," he added, implying that he took them for a couple of fools.

However on this point he was soon to be disillusioned. Jangling his bunch of keys in his hand, he had moved toward a large cupboard that stood against the wall to the right of the door. And no sooner was his back turned than Pai-chu-li sprang at him like a tiger.

The tall Pekingese came down upon the little native of Canton like a thunderbolt. Chang was knocked flat upon his face upon the floor boards; and before he could cry out for help, one of Pai-chu-li's hands had been pressed upon his opened mouth. With his other hand the Peking man snatched the bunch of keys and hurled them across to Vaile who had remained in the middle of the room.

"Open the red door!" he cried in a loud whisper. "The girl's in there, and it's bound to be locked."

Vaile was quick as a knife. Thrusting into his pocket the revolver he had held ready to fire, he quickly tried one key after another, until at last he found the one that fitted the lock.

Still, this took him several seconds; and during that brief space of time Pai-chu-li kept the Cantonese face downward on the floor and, unseen by either Vaile or his companion, another man crept stealthily and swiftly into the room by the front door that had been left half open.

THE INTRUDER wore the long robe of an upper class Chinese, and his circular hat was crowned by the White Button of the lowest degree of mandarin. He was very ugly, for his face was all pitted with the marks of smallpox, and he had no ears. His black hair was drawn back to his well oiled queue slightly above two horrid scars upon either side of his head.

He looked first at the two men upon the floor, Pai-chu-li and the Cantonese. Then he glanced at Vaile whose face was half turned towards him and well in the light, as he opened the red door to the inner room. Immediately the newcomer was seen to start, like a man surprised. For a moment he stared at Vaile in amazement; and then he disappeared behind the lacquer screen that stood at the end of the room before the image of Yen Wang, the devil god.

Sheer astonishment, as well as a sense of unexpected and intense relief, made Constance Ritchie mute when she beheld George Vaile, whom she first believed to be her dead brother. Starring with parted lips, she got to her feet; and before her memory could come to the help of her bewildered faculties, she was seized by a

wrist and dragged forcibly across the threshold into the other room.

And there, at that very moment, she was given something else to think of. The ceiling was not more than eight feet above the floor, and in that long, shallow chamber, more or less devoid of furniture, the report of a revolver echoed like a cannon shot.

Vaile was not more than a yard in front of Constance whom he was pulling by an arm, when the bullet whistled between their two heads to splinter the woodwork on the wall.

Pai-chu-il never lost his presence of mind. Turning quickly, he caught sight of the man who had fired from behind the screen. Clenching a fist, he deliberately drove it straight into the face of the struggling Cantonese whom he had been holding down under his knees, and then rising to his feet, he rushed toward Vaile.

"Give me the keys!" he cried. "If this door's not locked, we'll have the whole of those Honan wolves on top of us!"

He caught the bunch of keys that Vaile threw him, hastened to the red door, slammed it to and with quick fingers began to try one key after another. As a second bullet smashed into the door but a few inches from his face, he spoke again, a little breathlessly, but with his voice under control.

"Get the girl away!" he exclaimed. "Across the yard, to the *wupan*, by the way we came! I'll follow as soon as I've locked up the gang. They'll have to go round to the front by another way, and that will mean time saved. Quick! They'll make short work of us if they catch us."

For the first time George Vaile realized the worth of his companion. Pai-chu-li had all the makings of a hero, though the goal of his ambition may have been nothing more sublime than two thousand taels of silver.

"Come, Constance!" he cried. "We must run for it. We've not far to go."

Together they dashed straight for the open door, and when they were still six yards from the threshold, there came a resounding crash made up of the clanging of iron bolts and huge hinges and the booming sound of heavy wooden planks, strongly clamped together, striking against stonework.

THE MAN and girl pulled up in the nick of time, as it were upon the very edge of eternity. Immediately in front of the threshold the boards had opened in much the same manner as the trap in an execution shed where a condemned man is hanged by the neck. Horizontal folding doors had been suddenly lowered by means of their own weight upon lateral hinges. The floor gaped at their very feet.

Indeed, George Vaile stood aghast, with one foot actually half over the brink. Constance had drawn back, white and breathless. Before her was a yawning blackness, a place like one of the pits of Acheron; and from the depths below came the murmuring of swiftly flowing water.

While they stood motionless as if petrified, both Vaile and the girl were a sure mark for the man behind the screen who now took careful aim, leveling his revolver again at Vaile.

As the man with no ears kneeled at the end of the screen, his pock marked face was but half hidden from Pai-chu-li who, having at last locked the red door, crossed rapidly to the center of the room, where he stood immediately under the hanging temple lantern.

The Pekingese saw Vaile's danger in time. His revolver spat like a cornered cat. And there had been an end of that White Button mandarin then and there, had the bullet not struck the edge of the screen and been deflected at a wide angle by the lacquered woodwork, from which splinters were driven deep into the man's chin and throat. With a loud cry of pain he reeled backward, his revolver falling from his hand.

Pai-chu-li flew at him, much as a terrier runs at a rat. The big screen went over backward, to strike the feet of the idol—the grinning, hideous image of Yen Wang, the Taoist devil god.

Pai-chu-li was too tall to be agile. Before he could pass round both the idol and the fallen screen, he was too late to intercept the intruder. The man had got to his feet, opened the window and dived through head foremost into the yard, where the kneeling camels were to be seen in the moonlight as motionless as the stone images of the strange beasts that stand guardians over the sacred tombs of the Mings.

In less than three seconds the Peking man was back at the side of Vaile and Constance Ritchie. He appeared to be about to speak, when suddenly he stood listening, with a warning finger held up and his head cocked a little sidewise like a dog.

"Honan wolf pack," said he quietly. "They heard the shooting. Soon they come howling on our trail."

Even as he was speaking a terrific onslaught took place almost simultaneously upon the two doors that connected with the inner rooms. The men whom they had seen smoking opium were wrenching at the handles, hurling their weight against the doors and endeavoring to beat them in.

"No time to lose," said Pai-chu-li, looking down into the black gap at his feet from which there came a draught of cold air. "Lucky escape, I think!" he went on. "Come quick! There is the window."

He led them behind the idol, where even Constance had no difficulty in climbing through the narrow window. Out in the yard in the moonlight, beyond the motionless figures of the long haired, weary camels, they could see the little postern gate by way of which they had entered; and through this the shadow of a man passed quickly—the White Button mandarin with no ears who had sprung, as it seemed, from nowhere and who had done his best to murder them in the great hall of the *yamen*.

For a moment the three watched the gateway through which their scarred, pock marked, earless adversary had fled.

"Follow me," whispered Pai-chu-li.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE DARK

WITH Pai-chu-li well in front, like some swift, silent ghost, they rushed for their lives across the yard over ground rough and uneven, all ruts and hoof marks, that in the rainy season must have been a quagmire, now baked hard by the summer sun. And when they had passed through the little gate by way of which they had entered, they had a clear view of the cove behind them; for the sunset had disclosed a half moon hanging low above the sea beyond the entrance of the harbor. The moonshine had traced a silvery pathway on the water, before which they could see their own *wupan* at the far end of the stone embankment—a silhouette in black and white of old, ancestral China. And then, much nearer to them—indeed, at the very foot of the broken cliff on the eastern side of the *yamen*—a light sampan with sail lowered lay moored alongside the bund.

They had more reasons than one for knowing this to be the sailing boat they had sighted upon the open sea late that afternoon. It was the same type of craft exactly; and moreover, it was straight toward this that the fugitive was hurrying, the unknown man who had attacked them in the *yamen*. They could see him clearly in front of them, with his long white coat, springing over rocks in desperate haste to get away from Pai-chu-li who was on his heels like a dog.

Vaile might have gone on ahead and joined in the chase, but he delayed to give Constance a helping hand. Not only was the hillside strewn with great rocks that made it difficult for the girl to run in her riding boots, but at any moment she might need a man's protection. For they were not half way down the cliff before a crowd of men, all shouting wildly, appeared from the direction of the southern wall of the *yamen*, that farthest from the cove. They must have left the house by some exit at the back, and on this account they were at least a hundred yards

behind, in Vaile's thinking, dangerously near if any carried firearms; and in any case they were strong, agile men who, wearing practically no clothes, were likely to gain ground at every yard, if they were not overdrugged with opium.

Pai-chu-li could not have seen them. His one and only objective was to overtake the man in front of him. Regardless of his own safety, running the risk of breaking his neck at any moment, he sprang from one rock to another, as sure footed with his soft felt soled shoes as any mountain goat.

And yet, for all his efforts, he just failed to come up with the fugitive before the man reached the bund, flung himself bodily into his boat, cut the painter with a knife, and shoved the sampan clear.

Pai-chu-li was on board with a bound. Had he waited an instant he could never have taken the jump. As it was, he landed on his feet with such force that he nearly stove the boat in and then pitched forward on his face, knocking the mandarin over backward.

WHEN Vaile and Constance arrived upon the embankment they saw the struggle that was taking place in the sampan which was not more than ten yards from the bank. To their intense relief it did not take Pai-chu-li long to master his opponent—his inferior in physical strength and so badly wounded in the face that the front of his white robe was stained with blood. A crack on the head with the butt end of a revolver put him out of action, and Pai-chu-li was on his feet.

Seizing the long steering oar that was tied to the stern, he swept the sampan alongside the embankment, where Vaile and his cousin scrambled on board. They had then not more than twenty yards to spare, for the brigands—among whom could be seen the figure of Chang, the Cantonese—had by then reached the bottom of the slope.

Working like a fiend, the Pekingese drove the blade of the oar backward and forward, swinging his weight from one side to another, with the result that the little boat rocked so much that she seemed in danger of being swamped.

In a few seconds they were safe, for the time being, at any rate. Pai-chu-li let go the oar, placed both hands to his mouth and shouted to the *laoban* of their *wupan* to get his craft under way without waste of time, if he set any value on his life.

As the sampan moved down the harbor, waddling like a swimming duck, they could see the running naked figures of those fierce semi-savages upon the stone embankment. They were armed with knives, swords and spears, each man carrying such arms as he had found time to seize.

Still, those in the sampan were not yet out of danger. If the brigands captured the *wupan*, they were lost; for, with four people on board so light a craft, it would be madness to take to the open sea.

The Honanese shouted as they ran, jabbering loudly like the monkey men they looked; and urging them on, dancing with fury and excitement, was the little Cantonese.

Luckily Pai-chu-li's voice was strong, and the *laoban* and his two sons were on board. To George Vaile's intense relief, he saw the *wupan* clear the embankment, though the burst of firecrackers that immediately broke out he took at first for a rapid exchange of pistol shots.

The *laoban* proved faithful to his employers. Indeed, there was little chance that he would be anything else, when more money than he had ever earned in his life was already due to him. The wind was in the right direction for them to head straight from the cove; but, before the great sail was hoisted, the *laoban* waited for the sampan to come alongside.

Constance Ritchie climbed on board by means of a rope that was lowered. Vaile followed; and then the Pekingese tied the end of the rope round the waist of the White Button mandarin who was hauled up like a sack of freight. The man lay unconscious on the deck for some moments; and when at last he opened his eyes, it was to find himself staring down

the barrel of George Vaile's revolver.

The moment Pai-chu-li got on board, even before they were out of danger, when the Honanese were hurling oaths at them across the widening strip of water, the astute *laoban* got to business. Two more passengers—double the money he had been already promised. The Pekingese was all out for a bargain; but Vaile assured him that it didn't amount to much in any case, while at the present moment they had more important things to do than haggle and argue.

PAI-CHU-LI himself may have held the same opinion, for he came to terms, whipped out his revolver and planted himself cross legged on the deck in front of their prisoner. He directed the prisoner to hold up his hands and then addressed him in the mandarin dialect.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Wounded, thinking his last hour was come, with the bright muzzle of a dangerous weapon not three inches from the bridge of his nose, the man with no ears was at first not disposed to prevaricate.

"Tung Lu," said he.

"That conveys nothing to me," replied the Peking man. "In China there are many Tungs and there are also many Lus. As all are scoundrels, Tung Lu, it seems, must be doubly so. Why did you follow us into the *yamen*?"

"Because you had no right to go there."

The prisoner was getting braver. A quick glance in the direction of George Vaile and the girl had seemed to reassure him. The *wupan* under full sail was now heading straight along the pathway of the moonlight for the entrance to the cove.

"Why not?"

The reply was typically Chinese.

"No reason at all," said the man.

"Then why did you fire at sight at my foreign friend?"

Tung Lu's answer was even more astonishing.

"Ask him," said he. "What right have I to speak of another man's business?"

Pai-chu-li clenched his teeth.

"You speak of my business," said he, "or I make you pay for it. By the look of things, I will not be the first to try a few experiments in torture on the worthy Tung Lu. And then," he concluded, "your carcass can go overboard to frighten the fishes."

Tung Lu again looked nervously toward the white man and the girl. However much in his heart he may have despised the green eyed barbarians, he knew enough of them to believe that for the time being he was safe from any deviltries this smoothed faced, handsome Pekingese might choose to practise.

He did no more than shrug his shoulders. Pai-chu-li looked hard at him and then spoke in English to Vaile.

"I want your help," said he. I want you to search this man's pockets, while I keep an eye on him."

Vaile did as he was asked. The contents of the man's pocket sleeves proved him to be no pauper. He had plenty of money in silver dollars and banknotes, to say nothing of a roll of gold leaf from Yunnan; he had a snuff bottle, an opium pipe, chopsticks, a box of cigarets and an ivory fan. And then Vaile produced a letter, unlike a Chinese letter, in an ordinary envelope—and moreover, that envelope was addressed in English writing to Mr. Paul Ritchie.

GEORGE VAILE stood staring at the thing in his hand. Though the moonlight was bright enough for him to read the writing distinctly, he could not believe what he saw, until he had struck a match and read it again. He turned to Pai-chu-li.

"Do you know that this letter is addressed to Paul Ritchie!" he exclaimed.

Pai-chu-li showed no astonishment.

"That is to yourself," he answered in English. "I am careful to say that, though I am more or less certain that this man does not understand what we say. Still, it is always best to be on the safe side."

"I agree," said Vaile. "At the same time this letter may contain something of interest."

"Maybe," said the other. "Wait a moment, and I will be with you. It is my duty first to see that our honored and respected guest is comfortably settled for the night."

His ideas of comfort were a little peculiar, for he trussed the unhappy man like a fowl. Borrowing a rope from the *laoban*, he tied up the White Button mandarin to the foot of the mast in such a complicated manner that he resembled some strange kind of human cocoon.

By the light of a lantern on a bamboo davit in the stern, they read that letter, and not one of the three of them could make head or tail of it.

> To Mr. Paul Ritchie The hills north of Yung-ping by the village of Tai-si-ku that is called by those that live there End of the Cave under the floor of the old joss house among the mulberry trees you shall find Yen Wang's stolen furs and it may be take by surprise one or two of his men.

Though this short missive was altogether without punctuation, not a word was misspelt or used in a wrong sense. There was nothing in the way of a signature, nothing to suggest who the writer could be—except that he must be some one in the confidence of the brigand chief.

The most obvious explanation was treachery, and to this view Pai-chu-li was strongly inclined. It looked as if a trap had been laid for the customs man who, after being decoyed to a certain place, could be put safely out of the way.

For all that George Vaile could not forget that his cousin had certainly mentioned Yen Wang's name just before he died. The American had reason to believe that Ritchie had been playing a double game in which, in some manner impossible to guess, the Taotai of Tientsin was taking a hand. Pai-chu-li had a suggestion to offer that had more in it that was practical than human.

He declared that it would be no very difficult matter to find out the truth from Tung Lu. What need was there, he asked, for them to rack their brains for nothing, when this man whom they held a captive could save them so much trouble. They had but to persuade him to speak. The Peking man admitted that verbal persuasion would be unlikely to lead to any satisfactory results. But there were other methods he declared. He knew of many. Without moving a muscle of his face, he informed them that he was capable of producing the most lingering and agonizing torture by means of such simple articles as a blunt knife and a chopstick.

Quite willingly he would have explained the details of this ghastly operation, had not Constance Ritchie displayed her horror and disgust. And George Vaile was no less emphatic in his refusal to allow anything of the sort to take place. He pointed out that his cousin's life was already forfeited, that their object was to run to earth a certain notorious criminal in the interests of justice. Tung Lu himself was nothing more than a paid servant who was perhaps guilty of no greater crime than being faithful to his master.

Pai-chu-li just shrugged his shoulders. He did not understand, and he did not pretend to. He intimated politely that he regarded them as imbeciles, and was thereupon content to let the matter drop.

CONSTANCE could give them no detailed account of how she had been kidnaped. The thing had happened in a few minutes. She had been riding on the north bank of the Pei-ho, some miles down the river where native villages are few and far between. Descending a steep bank, she had been under the impression that her horse had trod on a rolling stone. Anyway, she had been pitched forward on her face, and before she could recover herself, had been seized, blindfolded and gagged.

She had heard whispering voices in the guttural Northern dialect; and from the little she had been able to understand, she had gathered that her favorite horse had been killed and left dead by the river bank with his head under water. That that was a blind no one could doubt. It would look as if the horse had stumbled, broken his neck, and thrown her into the river,

where the current was both swift and deep and where she had been drowned. Circumstantial evidence would make it appear that she had lost her life by accident.

Nor could she say anything definitely of what had happened to her since, except that she had suffered neither injury nor insult; indeed, she had been well looked after in every way, though never once for four days, until she reached the *yamen* above Ning-wan-tao, had the bandage been taken from her eyes.

Of Chang, the Cantonese in charge of the *yamen*, she could also tell them little or nothing. He had informed her in his quaint pidgin English that it was his duty to look after her, that she could have everything she wanted—except liberty. There were in the *yamen* several wild men from the hills; but these the lady would not be called upon to meet, and in any case they would very soon be leaving for the interior.

UNABLE to make any definite plans for the future, Vaile and his party had no other course to take but to return to the mouth of the Shang-tu where they had left the customs' launch. A few miles south of Shan-hai-kuan, they fell in with a United States gunboat, patroling the coast. Getting into communication with her, they found that she had been sent up from Taku to keep a lookout for them. As the lieutenant-commander offered to take them the rest of the way, the *laoban* was paid off, and Constance Ritchie finished her journey in comfort.

At the mouth of the Shang-tu, Tung Lu, who still stubbornly refused to speak, was left in safe custody on board the gunboat, while Vaile and Pai-chu-li went on board the launch, where the Chinese quartermaster had somewhat startling intelligence to give them.

On the very first day when he had been left in charge, a White Button mandarin with no ears had turned up in a sampan. He had put off from the northern shore a little below the town of Lohling and had demanded at once to see the custom's officer to whom he had an important message to deliver. Hearing from the quartermaster that the officer had gone north along the coast in a *wupan*, he had at once hoisted his sail, and headed out to sea.

That explained little or nothing. Whether the message were genuine or a ruse, Vaile had no intention of finding out. The officer in command of the gunboat had no authority to land a party of American sailors on foreign soil; and the customs men could not be relied upon to hold their own against an armed party of brigands who had prepared an ambush.

VAILE and the Pekingese were convinced that the only place where they were likely to discover anything of value was not this questionable joss house in the hills, but the *yamen* above Ning-wantao, which was not only the headquarters and trading post of Yen Wang, but also the place whither the man who was responsible for the kidnaping of Constance Ritchie would sooner or later come to claim her.

If any proof were need of this, it was supplied by a certain aged seller of watermelons, an old man with a wrinkled face and skinny arms and legs, who dropped down the river from Loh-ling with a sampan loaded with fruit. He came aboard the gunboat and did a brisk trade with the sailors and then declared that he had one special watermelon in reserve, a fruit of superior quality that he was willing to dispose of to George Vaile at a slightly advanced price.

Vaile bought the thing more or less to get rid of the old fellow who went down the gangway and was never seen again. His somewhat feeble identity was just swallowed up in the immensity of China. He came and went, leaving behind him nothing but a watermelon. When cut open at dinner the melon was found to contain another message in the same handwriting as the other, and read as follows:

Mr. Paul Ritchie In so many ways have you broken your pledge that the time has come for

you to take orders from your master you must return at once to the yamen beyond the Great Wall and you must go there with both Tung Lu and your sister if you fail to do this you are threatened with full exposure obey my orders.

Again no signature, nothing whatsoever to suggest who was the writer of the message. Only one thing was clear; he thought he had the whip hand of him whom he believed to be Paul Ritchie.

They talked the thing out that evening in the little saloon on board the launch. Pai-chu-li was all in favor of his original suggestion. He was confident he could get the truth out of Tung Lu. But George Vaile was insistent, the more so because both his cousin and the lieutenant commander were dead against a proposition that looked the next thing to suicide.

For Vaile declared that, since he was passing himself off as Paul Ritchie, he would do the thing thoroughly. He proposed to pretend to comply with the instructions given him by the unknown writer of the letter. He was going back to the *yamen*, taking with him Tung Lu as a hostage, whereas Constance would return at once to Tientsin on board the gunboat.

The naval officer washed his hands of all responsibility in the matter. Constance pleaded and entreated in vain. She found her cousin the strong minded, self confident man that Tom Robertson had often described. Once George Vaile had made up his mind, wild horses could not move him.

As for Pai-chu-li, as was his custom, he merely shrugged his shoulders. He may have intended to give the impression that it was all the same to him. On the other hand, already he may have had definite plans of his own.

They found their old *laoban* with his *wupan* at Loh-ling, and hired the man again with his two sons for a short trip up the coast. And at daybreak one morning, Vaile and his inscrutable companion set forth upon their great adventure; while Constance Ritchie from the deck of the gunboat watched with sinking heart the square sail of the *wupan* vanish round the headland at the mouth of the Shang-tu River.

CHAPTER VIII

INQUISITION

VAILE had no intention of entering the cove. He knew that the *wupan* would be recognized at once; and even if he had nobody more formidable to reckon with than the industrious Chang, this time the little Cantonese would take good care the intruder did not escape. At the same time it was not George Vaile's custom to undertake so dangerous an enterprise without having a definite plan of campaign.

In the first place he had a hostage. Tung Lu was a prisoner on the *wupan*, bound hand and foot, watched day and night by Pai-chu-li with the patient vigilance of a lynx. Vaile was prepared to bluff. If he could come to terms with the unknown man whom he hoped to meet, he was ready to produce Tung Lu; but, as for the girl, that was another matter. He intended to play a waiting game. It was inconceivable that Paul Ritchie had actually contemplated the sacrifice of his sister.

The American could not believe that the risk he was taking was so very great; for he recognized that there could be nothing to be gained by putting him to death. His one danger lay in the circumstance that he could speak no Chinese dialect, and that might betray his identity.

He was ready to leave that to chance; and even if the worst came to the worst, he might declare that his murder would be soon revenged by the handing over of Tung Lu to the *yamen* officials of the viceroy, who would afterward take what steps they thought fit to apprehend Yen Wang.

Vaile had decided to make a secret landing by night at some suitable place a little south of the cove, whence he could walk overland across the high ground to the *yamen*. Pai-chu-li was to put out to sea again and keep a sharp lookout for a

signal—a Chinese rocket purchased in Shan-hai-kwan.

The *wupan* ran into shallow water, and Vaile waded ashore under cover of darkness. Five minutes later a flash from an electric torch from halfway up the hill signified that all was well. Pai-chu-li ordered the *laoban* to put out to sea again and anchor about a mile from the coast at a point where he would have the benefit of what wind there was, should he be called upon to return in haste.

There was a gentle breeze blowing shoreward from the southeast. The surface of a calm sea was broken up into countless ripples that sparkled in the moonlight like huge, brilliant gems. The night was hot, though out at sea there was air to breathe. At sunset they had seen no sail, except a fishing junk far away to the north. In the darkness the broken hilly coastline showed up against the stars like a ruined rampart.

Pai-chu-li sat alone in the bows, immobile, as if he meditated upon the unfathomable secrets of the universe, as if he communed with the spirts of his departed ancestors. The moonshine on his face disclosed an expression of almost sublime tranquility, of a serenity in keeping with the warm, kindly breeze, the dark silent hills, the glorious infinity of the stars above him.

He sat thus for an hour, while the *wupan* rode at anchor, the ripples lapping the sides of the boat timidly and yet persistently. Then, without haste, he got to his feet, and walked slowly aft, toward the matting awning where the *laoban* and his two sons squatted with their opium pipes.

Presently Pai-chu-li returned to the bows, and before him walked, or rather hobbled, a disconsolate, miserable object —Tung Lu, stripped to the waist, with his arms bound so tightly behind his back that his shoulders were like those of a hunchback, whilst his ankles were fastened one to the other by a short rope that permitted footsteps of no more than a few inches. The unhappy man bore the worried expression the Oriental assumes when the soul within him is cold, when he knows that he is lost.

UPON the deck of the *wupan*, moving ever so little to the rhythm of the sea, enveloped by the darkness of night, they sat down opposite each other, face to face, these two strange men, Tung Lu with his bound legs stretched out in front of him, Pai-chu-li with his legs curled up under him and his arms folded in the sleeves of his coat.

And they talked in quiet voices, in the mandarin tongue, using the honorific terms, the meaningless compliments, the flowery metaphors of China. They might have been old friends, or one a host who entertained a distinguished guest; they might even have been brothers, had it not been that one was as handsome as the other was disfigured and ugly, pock marked, scarred, earless.

Pai-chu-li had both the appearance and the manner of a man who discusses a proposition to himself entirely impersonal. His ornate figures of speech adorned certain practical proposals that might have been merely formal. Though he plied Tung Lu with questions, he did not seem to mind very much whether those questions were answered truthfully or untruthfully or not at all. It was as if he went through a prescribed and somewhat tedious ritual.

In what manner Tung Lu failed to satisfy his inquisitor will never be known. He may have refused to speak, or he may have lied and been detected in those lies. It matters nothing to any one—least of all, perhaps, to Tung Lu himself.

When he spoke at last, it was too late. With a deep sigh he rolled over sidewise and lay upon the deck, dead, his face so screwed and contorted that his tightened lips had framed themselves into a rectangular gap in which were displayed his clenched, yellow teeth.

Under the awning astern the *laoban* squatted with his two sons with whom he was now gambling, winning back from his own flesh and blood the "copper cash" he had paid them, and grinning like an ape.

With his foot Pai-chu-li lifted the body of Tung Lu into the sea. Then he lighted a cigaret and clapped his hands for the *laoban* to weigh anchor and hoist the sail.

CHAPTER IX

DEAD PIDGIN

IN THE meantime George Vaile had climbed the steep bluff, at the top of which he found himself out of breath and his clothes both soiled and torn. Sitting down upon a rock to rest and collect his thoughts, he could see the broken surface of the sea below him, the ripples scintillating in the moonshine, and he could see, too, the dark shadow of the *wupan*, small in the distance, still heading on a southeasterly course across the gulf.

Now that he was alone he did not feel the same confidence in himself as when he had made his plans. Everything had seemed simple enough then; but solitude and darkness, the very fact that he was a stranger in a strange land, had robbed him of much of his self-assurance.

The last man in the world to falter in his resolution, he rose to his feet, shook himself as if he threw off some heavy weight from his shoulders, and then set off walking briskly along the cliff. More than three hours elapsed before he found himself looking down upon the cove. The moon was now high enough for him to recognize the place. He could see neither the stone embankment nor the *yamen* itself, which lay in dead ground immediately beneath him, but there were still lights in the village at the end of the harbor, and he had no difficulty in recognizing the formation of the cove itself, with the little hilly island that screened the narrow entrance, guarded by steep, rocky cliffs that were like the pillars of a gateway.

He saw at a glance that the slope in front of him was so steep that he could not with safety continue to advance. He did not wish to advertise his presence in the neighbourhood. The hillside was strewn with loose stones of all sizes, many of which would be displaced by his footsteps, to go rolling down to the embankment below and thus announce his arrival.

Following the crestline of the ridge, he moved stealthily inland, in the direction of the village, until he had gained a point immediately above the *yamen* itself, whence he could look down into the yard across which Pai-chu-li and himself had gained entrance to the house.

He was surprised, and even a little disappointed, to see that the great building looked more deserted than ever. For there were no lights in any of the windows on that side, and the caravan camels were gone from the enclosure. As before, there was no sign of there being any one about, except in the native village which must have been more than a mile away.

Continuing his journey, he presently found himself confronted by the stream that flowed down the hillside passing under the *yamen*, confined to the narrow limits of a gully that was like a deep sword cut in the virgin rock. He saw at once that he had no means of crossing, as there was neither bridge nor stepping stones, and the current was to all intents and purposes a cataract.

He therefore turned to the right and climbed down the hill, following the course of the stream which finally disappeared into a kind of tunnel, a brick archway constructed but a few yards from the high *yamen* wall.

In this wall he saw an iron gate immediately in front of him—doubtless that gate through which the Honanese had passed when they followed in pursuit of the fugitives, when Pai-chu-li and Vaile himself had escaped with Constance Ritchie.

The gate, however, was now locked on the inner side, and realizing that all attempt to open it would be futile, Vaile passed round to the eastern wall where to his dismay he found that the little postern gate was also bolted.

He had a momentary fear that the place was unoccupied, a suspicion that had grown almost to a certainty by the time he had passed round to the front of

the *yamen* which, situated on the south side of the cove, faced due north.

From the foot of the wooden balcony he could see no lights above him—a circumstance that did not surprise him, as he knew there were no windows facing in that direction.

He could hear the torrent roaring beneath his feet, the tumult of waters unseen, a dark, subterranean cascade that might have been the home of sightless, supernatural monsters, such as coiled and lurked in the black waters of the Styx.

Indeed, the atmosphere of the place had an uncanny effect upon the nerves of a man who had hitherto prided himself upon his superiority to environment. And yet, had it not been that he saw immediately in front of him the bamboo ladder leading to the wooden balcony above, he might have been inclined at that moment to give up the whole mad enterprise.

But there stood the ladder, inviting and convenient, as if put there purposely like the bait in a trap. He ascended slowly and cautiously, rung by rung, until he stood upon the narrow veranda, but a few yards from the gabled porchway of the building.

He was now like a man who acts subconsciously. All his plans, the words he had intended to say, the excuses he had been prepared to make, were forgotten. He just walked up to the front door, groped in the darkness for the great bronze knocker and beat upon the door so loudly and violently that the noise echoed across the water.

HE WAS surprised, and not a little startled, when the door was opened almost at once—opened no more than a few inches, to release a broad shaft of light, then a lantern, then a round, cheerful, inquisitive countenance—the jocular yet homely face of Chang, the Cantonese, who snapped out two words in pidgin English.

"What wanchee?" he asked.

Vaile felt called upon to reply in the same fashion, though he had not been long enough in the country to learn those quaint terms and phrases. He knew neither when it was correct to infringe the laws of grammar, nor where to use the past tense of an irregular verb for the past participle, to apply the wrong word in the right place.

"I come here by appointment," said he. "Wanchee meet friend of mine."

The Cantonese nodded, though he showed no intention of opening the door wider.

"One large man here," he observed. "Him talk maybe you call bimeby. You wait here, savvy? What for you come all alone?"

"That's my pidgin," said Vaile. "I speak all that to your master."

Chang, who was wearing a long white coat, shrugged his shoulders.

"Him plenty clever inside," he observed, with a kind of a wink. "Him chop chop find out all your pidgin, yes. You member me last time you come this side?" he asked.

"Sure," said the other. "I and my friends were lucky to get away with our lives."

"Joss pidgin," exclaimed the Cantonese. "All belong miracle work. Maybe you no believe in Yen Wang?"

"That's the devil god, isn't it?" asked Vaile.

"Him belong all same king plenty devils. Him not in hope to compare with small size gods. You wait see and catch 'em! Bimeby Yen Wang ask plenty question. You no speak true talk, then Yen Wang belong bobbery and him make dead pidgin. Wanchee know why you do bad things on some date you should guess. Him sleep now. Me go wake him up."

With that he slammed the door in Vaile's face and was heard to lock it rapidly on the other side.

The American waited in some suspense, though he was as much interested and curious as apprehensive. Whatever happened, he was in for an experience. He could make neither head nor tail of what the Cantonese had told him, and he had been given little or no time to ask

questions. It appeared that he was to meet either a supernatural being who in Taoist mythology was Lucifer or Satan, or that very brigand chieftain whom George Warren Vaile had come all the way from the United States to run to earth.

He waited the better part of ten minutes before the door was again opened, this time wide enough to disclose the long, shallow room beyond, in which the hanging lantern had now been lighted, throwing into strong relief the little figure of the long coated Cantonese standing on the threshold.

"All belong proper," Chang announced. "You come inside."

Vaile did as he was told, whereupon Chang immediately closed the door behind him and locked it, leaving the key in the lock.

The room, it will be remembered, was more or less bare of furniture. The big lacquer screen to the left had been removed, and now stood folded, leaning against the wall. In the lamplight the great image beyond, immediately in front of the window, was visible. It appeared to be made of wood, painted in the most glaring colors in which there was a predominance of gold, vermilion and yellow. The face was hideous; it was that of an Oriental fury that might have been roaring with diabolical laughter or suffering the most intense physical agony. A gaping mouth with fanglike teeth, yellow eyes that squinted inward horribly, and fat, shapeless fingers that had claws like those of a tiger. A crown upon the thing's head was set with colored stones that caught the light.

VAILE had done no more than glance at the idol when his attention was attracted by the figure of a man in a beautifully embroidered robe, who sat at a small table immediately under the temple lantern, and whose face bore a remarkable resemblance to that of the idol itself.

Vaile drew back in alarm. The sight of this apparition had taken him wholly by surprise. He could not at first believe that the man before him was actually a human being, until he rose to his feet, bringing his face nearer to the light, when it became apparent that the countenance of this man—whoever he might be—was concealed behind a mask.

It might have been a mask representing some Oriental tragic muse that went strangely with the soft, almost cultured, voice that spoke. The words that issued from between those immobile, painted and contorted lips were like oil. It was as if there were soft music in the fiery breath of the legendary basilisk itself.

"Ah, my dear Mr. Litchie, it is to me so great a pleasure to extend to you once more my meager hospitality."

Vaile realized from the first the importance of not committing himself. He knew his danger. A false move, a wrong allusion, even a moment's hesitation—and he was lost. One circumstance alone encouraged him; he had not been called upon to speak in the Chinese language, of which he knew not a word.

"I have come in obedience to your orders," he bowed, and waited.

"Ah, that was indeed so good of you, Mr. Litchie. But, from what I can hear, you have ignored my instwuctions. And I thought my dilections were so very quite plain. I plesume, you lemember me?"

Vaile bowed assent.

"Naturally," said he.

"As you know," the man went on, "in Tientsin I am one man; in this place I am another. I use the weligious supahstitions of the uncultured to my own advantages. Oh, yee-s, Mr. Litchie, as the devil god, Yen Wang, I can exercise authority over so lawless men who would diswegard the edicts even of a *taotai*."

Vaile, who did not wholly grasp what the man meant, thought it best to keep the conversation to topics with which he was more or less familiar.

"You expected me to bring my sister," said he, "but that is asking too much of me. Would you yourself entrust your own sister to the safe-keeping of one whom you would call a 'foreign devil'?"

The man in the mask wave' a hand, as if the question were puerile.

"The situation, Mr. Litchie," he declared, "does not alise. You are in my debt in plenty more ways than one. As I say before, there are two sides to each twansaction. The time has come for me to speak plainly. You agleed to fall in with my suggestions; I was ready—as we Chinese would call it—to save your face. You took it upon yourself to make unpelmitted investigations. I would not pletend to disguise from you so many facts that you must already know. It is from this place where I export merchandise to Dalni, where I have an agent as capable and industwious as my so worthy fliend, Mr. Chang, whose acquaintance you have already made in circumstance so dwamatic. Without hope to appear impeltinent, may I ask, Mr. Litchie, by what light you took it upon yourself to play the spy? Oh, yee-s, that was not in our contwact, I think. And for what leason did you assault those whom I employ? The melitorious Tung Lu, from whom you should have leceived my orders, you have taken plisoner and now hold a hostage. Sir, you will lepent of this. Oh, yee-s, I say so."

ALL THIS time the masked man had been sitting at the table, with George Vaile before him, like a prisoner in the dock, and Chang behind his chair. He now rose to his feet and, as if a paroxysm of rage had suddenly seized him, violently struck the table with a fist.

"You have defied me!" he cried. "Yah, you have lied to me and played the part of a twaitor and a spy! For that you pay the penalty, unless, Mr. Litchie, you can give me so enough good leason for your actions."

Vaile, in self-defense, fired a shot in the dark.

"Was it in our contract," he asked, "that I should deliver up my sister?"

He saw at a glance that he had struck right home. That hideous waxen mask was grotesquely expressionless; but a sudden stiffening of the man's lean, stooping form was enough to show the American that his opponent was hard put to it to find an answer.

"Had you some leason," he asked, "to know that she was here?"

"I refuse to answer," Vaile replied. "If there has been treachery on my side—as you say—you, too, have failed to keep your word."

Vaile was not wholly answering at random. It was inconceivable that his cousin, Paul Ritchie, could have sunk so low as to sell the honor of his sister to a Chinese pirate who played upon the superstitions of his followers by posing as the incarnation of a heathen Taoist god. None the less he was still in complete ignorance of the main points at issue. He did not know who his interrogator really was; nor did he know to what extent exactly Ritchie had compromised himself. It was this that he was determined to find out, if he could.

"Remember this," said he, "I have come here tonight alone and of my own free will. If I had not realized that I was to some extent indebted to you, would I have come at all? The truth is I am here to strike a bargain. From the first I will be honest."

"Honest!" cried the other. "Oh, Mr. Litchie, how can you use such a word? Have you forgot that I know you to be a thief, and am in a position to prove it? Ah, no, Mr. Litchie, nowadays, I think, we understand one another more better than to speak like that."

Vaile was somewhat startled by what he heard. It took him a moment to readjust his thoughts. If Paul Ritchie had stolen anything, it must have been the money that was found upon him after he had killed himself. And that money could have come from nowhere but the *yamen* of the Taotai of Tientsin.

"I think," said he, "you will scarcely doubt my honesty when I declare to you on my oath, that my sister will never be returned to you. She is now safe on board an American man-of-war, well beyond your reach."

The masked man never moved. He sat like a graven image.

"I have worse things in store for you than death," said he. "Disglace. In my official capacity I am well acquainted with the inspector genewal of customs. What if I go to him with the evidence I have? Would you have the world know that Mr. Paul Litchie of the China customs stole ten thousand dollars from King-shi-kai, Taotai in Tientsin?"

To Vaile it was as if he suddenly beheld the glow of daylight, piercing the black obscurity of suspicion and doubt. He had already half guessed the truth.

"And you are sure you have proof of that?" he asked, sounding the man as a sailor heaves the lead.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Litchie, how could you doubt it? Did you not do me the honor of being my guest that night? And were you not applehended by my letainers, more than a mile from my *yamen*, with the stolen money in your possession, the twibute of the lice crop?"

GEORGE VAILE said nothing. He stood aghast, amazed, almost stupified by the sudden discovery of an incredible fact; the masked man in front of him was at once Yen Wang, the famous brigand, the terror of two provinces, and the official magistrate of one of the greatest cities in China, the very man who had offered a reward of two thousand ounces of silver for the arrest of the bandit chief.

Vaile had a business head; he was able to think quickly and logically at critical moments. For all that, it took him several minutes to weave together the straws of evidence that he had gleaned one by one.

He had got the whole truth; and if any further evidence were needed, it was to be found in the anonymous letters he had received. He saw that he had nothing more to do, but make his escape from the *yamen* as quickly as he could; and if he had not known that the door was locked at his back, he might have made a bolt for it there and then. As matters stood, he had to be careful, to guard his words, as well as himself.

"I have pleaded guilty," said he, "but your own guilt is greater than mine. It was your hirelings who attacked and kidnaped the lady whom you had promised not to molest. I am in no position to make you answer for your crime; but remember this—if anything happens to me, my friends have a hostage whom, sooner or later, they will compel to speak the truth!"

"That is a thweat," said the Taotai, outwardly unmoved. "I have too much plide to be afflaid. You may lemember you thweatened me before, and that led to nothing Mr. Litchie. It is still for me to make conditions. If you do not return Tung Lu to this *yamen* within three days, I take those steps that are necessary to ruin you, *after you are dead.*"

The man had dwelt with silken emphasis upon the last words. He went on in the same quiet, expressionless voice, in tones almost of kind consideration.

"You must know well," said he, "that if one time again you lefuse to obey me, you must die, no matter where you may be. Also I expose you as a thief, when you yourself, Mr. Litche, will have joined your ancestors, so shall I be revenged upon your so much charming lady sister. When you are no more, the glaceful and tender hearted Miss Litchie will imagine shame and dishonor with her glief. Oh, yee-s," he went on, "that is so kind of me, so thoughtful. For do I not lemember the words of your English sage! In Shakespeare I have found the wisdom of him you call Confucius. One pain is so much lessened by another's anguish, is it not? So true, Mr. Litchie! So harmonious! So true!"

As Paul Ritchie had done before, George Vaile now perceived this man as the very devil he was. Almost involuntarily his hand went to the pocket of his coat in which was his loaded revolver. He hesitated to shoot only because he realized that there were certain to be others in the house—*yamen* runners, servants and retainers—and he was many

miles from the place where he had come ashore from the *wupan*.

The Taotai must have seen the movement and understood its meaning; but, as if unsuspecting, he again seated himself, and underneath the table drew from the sleeve of his coat a little silver squirt, a thing but a few inches in length, with a nozzle that formed a spray.

With Paul Ritchie himself the man's threats might have had some effect upon a guilty conscience. But with George Vaile they did no more than arouse in him a reckless spirit of defiance.

"You may do your worst," he answered. "All powerful as you think yourself, I'm ready to take the risk."

The mandarin started visibly, like one surprised. Such words, no less than the confident tones in which they had been uttered, did not seem to him to be in keeping with what he knew of the character of Ritchie. Very deliberately he removed his painted mask and, turning to Chang, jerked out a few guttural words in some Chinese dialect.

The Cantonese passed into one of the inner rooms—that with the red door. In a few seconds he returned, carrying in his hand the round, stiff hat of a mandarin of the Red Button. This, as if he were performing some solemn religious rite, he placed upon the head of him who was Yen Wang no longer, but King-shi-kai, the Taotai of Tientsin.

THE MANDARIN leaned forward with folded arms across the table, and stared hard at Vaile, closely scrutinizing his features.

"You will lemember, Mr. Litchie," he observed, "a plomise I once made to you?"

Vaile nodded, though he had not the ghost of a notion what the man meant, nor why he had so suddenly discarded his disguise.

The American was carefully studying the features of the Taotai whom he had never seen before. A sallow, cadaverous face; a drooping, black moustache; very intelligent and almost magnetic eyes, and rounded shoulders upon a narrow, hollow chest.

"When you steal my money," King-shi-kai continued, "I was so genewous as to attach to you no blame. I now fleely admit I pulposely put temptation in your way. Afterwards, of my own flee will, I gave you the ten thousand dollars you steal. Yee-s, indeed, Mr. Litchie, I am benevolent by nature, of a disposition so chalitable, so kind. I am so, still. My nature does not alter. Did I not plomise you the carved ivory opium pipe that would act as your passport in the Yantsin Hills? Should you come in contact with any of my bligands, that opium pipe would not only save your life, but give you your liberty again."

He sat with his hands beneath the little table, still staring hard at Vaile.

"You see, I do not forget," said he, "the plomisse I make."

He waited, as if for an answer.

Vaile, feeling called upon to say something, replied.

"To do you justice," said he, "that is the truth."

The mandarin withdrew his left hand from underneath the table, upon which he carefully placed an object, about nine inches in length which was wrapped in thin rice paper and tied up with red silk.

"There it is," said he. "You may take it, Mr. Litchie, if you want it, for I know that he acquires melit who is honolable and just."

Vaile saw at once that this thing might be of incalculable value, if this man were apprehended and his hirelings rounded up in their haunts among the mountains.

He had taken a step forward, when he could have sworn that he heard a kind of dull thud upon the floor at the far end of the room, immediately behind the image of Yen Wang. He was conscious that the mandarin's eyes were upon him, with the fixed stare of a wild beast that watches its unsuspecting prey. He extended a hand to take the opium pipe from the table, while at the same time he turned his head in the direction whence had come the noise he could not explain.

And then, it was as if he had been struck blind by a flash of lightning. An acute

smarting sensation in the eyes was accompanied by the almost overpowering, acrid smell of ammonia. He reeled backward, like a man hopelessly drunk, with both hands pressed upon his eyes.

There rang in his ears the laughter of King-shi-kai. The mandarin had looked incapable of laughing. A sound issued from those thin, opium stained lips that might have been the cry of a hyena.

And at the end of that laughter, which was a kind of brief, chuckling scream, came the man's voice, quiet and soft no longer—at once the howl of some strange carnivorous animal and the hiss of a venomous snake.

"Fool! Fool!" he cried. "I have made never such a plomise! And now I catch you in the very net you made for me! You not leave this loom alive!"

IT WAS only the realization of his own immediate danger that made George Vaile attempt to open his eyes, since, blinded as he was, he could never hope to defend himself.

He thrust a hand in the pocket of his coat, only to find that his revolver had already gone. In those few seconds when he went reeling and staggering across the room, the slippery Chang had played the pickpocket; and Vaile had nothing with which to protect himself, but his fists.

He knew that he was at the mercy of the two men—the mandarin who had outwitted him and the little Cantonese. By sheer will power he succeeded in half opening the left eye, which had been turned away from the Taotai at the moment of assault, and which in consequence had received no more than a minute quantity of the spirit.

Dimly, with this eye only, he was able to see before him the slim, white coated figure of the Cantonese, who held in his hand Vaile's own revolver.

Unaccustomed to the use of firearms, Chang hesitated to fire; and when at last he decided to do so, he received a blow on the jaw from the clenched fist of a strong man in the throes of acute, violent pain, that sent him like a half empty sack to the floor, while the bullet buried itself deep in the ceiling almost immediately above his head, bringing down a shower of plaster.

Vaile turned to flee, groping with his hands in front of him, like a man in the dark. Almost at once, he stumbled over something, and would have pitched forward on his face, had he not grasped with both hands two round, smooth objects that he guessed at once to be the crossed knees of the wooden painted idol.

As he waited there a moment, screwing his eyes, he heard distinctly a violent and sudden hammering upon the door that was as if some one had hurled against the door a weight heavy enough to burst it inward, breaking the lock.

Vaile turned, and again opening his left eye, beheld as through a heavy mist what appeared to him to be both a tragedy and a miracle.

A second blow, and the door was seen to shiver. In all probability the lock had already shifted in its setting. Such another assault and undoubtedly the assailant on the other side would break his way into the room.

The mandarin was quick to see his danger. In one bound like a tiger, he sprang across the room. With his shoulder to the door, he thrust home three heavy bolts—one at the top, another at the bottom, and a third by the lock itself.

Then he turned, and with an automatic pistol in his right hand, he strode swiftly and savagely toward his helpless victim.

He had not taken two steps before the floor opened at his very feet. There was the clang of iron on stone, a rumble like the roll of a monstrous wooden drum. As a rush of cold air swept upward into the breathless room, the Taotai flung up his arms and dropped like a stone. As he fell, with the sinking floor beneath him, he threw his weight forward in a frantic attempt to save himself.

He succeeded in grasping with both hand the edge of the pit, where his long fingernails looked like a row of pale leaden slugs. From far below him came the dull murmuring of dark, troubled

waters, into which the pistol had fallen from his hand.

His face was terrible to see. All his Chinese dignity had left him, his soft voiced suavity, his bland insensibility. His features were contorted both by fury and by fear. The Chinese words that issued from between his clenched teeth would have been incomprehensible even to one of his own race.

From behind the idol, the image of Yen Wang, the Taoist devil god, there issued, like some soft footed, fleeting ghost, the tall figure of Pai-chu-li, the Pekingese, his face expressionless as ever, as coldly handsome. He came right up to the man whose life was hanging on a thread and snatched from his head his mandarin's hat surmounted by the Red Button of the highest rank.

And then, deliberately, in cold blood, he stamped slowly and violently upon those thin, clutching hands with the long, curved fingernails, while at the same time he cried aloud in English.

"To hell with the devil god! To the home of Yen Wang, the Taotai of Tientsin!"

He drew back, as the mandarin plunged feet foremost into the depths, and stood with the black cloth hat in his hand, regarding it as if the thing were a masterpiece of art, or some priceless jewel.

CHAPTER X

BAD JOSS

VAILE, hearing a groan from Chang behind him, turned quickly, rushed to the place at the foot of the idol where the little Cantonese sat holding his jaw as if he had toothache and snatched up his own revolver from the floor. Chang had the look of a man who is mighty sick; his complexion was a pale greenish color, and he was staring at nothing in the manner of one quite dazed.

George Vaile stood over him, covering him with the revolver, while at the same time he kept the only eye he could use, with which he could see but vaguely, fixed upon the two doors that communicated with the interior rooms of the *yamen*.

Very slowly Chang shook his head from side to side. He spoke in the mournful, plaintive tones of a man overwhelmed by a sudden grief.

"Too plenty dead pidgin!" he deplored. "No belong proper."

Vaile—in spite of the intense agony he was still suffering—had to laugh. Certainly, throughout the scene that had recently been enacted, the proprieties, what the Chinese themselves would call the immemorial usages of good behavior, had scarcely been considered.

In the meantime the inexorable Pai-chu-li had done a very strange thing. With much solemn dignity he had placed the Red Button mandarin's hat of the Taotai of Tientsin upon his own head. His attitude suggested Napoleon Bonaparte crowning himself Emperor of the French, having snatched the crown from the hands of His Holiness, the Pope.

And then he did a thing that was even stranger still. He actually smiled; and it was the smile of the poet who is conscious of having achieved in a moment of inspiration the sublime and the ideal.

However, his poetic ecstasy was but short lived. He was a man of action in a trice. With three bounds he was across the room and disappeared behind the painted image of Yen Wang. And a moment after there came the grating sound of chains beneath the floor, and the leaves of the trap door swung upward, to lock with a loud snapping sound, like that of a powerful gin.

Pai-chu-li beckoned to Vaile to follow him, unlocked and opened the front door, upon the threshold of which was to be seen the half naked figure of the *laoban* of the *wupan* leaning upon his rusty iron anchor.

Pai-chu-li passed out first and, as he grasped Vaile by a hand, he looked back and saw the blue door at the end of the room slowly open, to admit some servant of the *yamen* whom the noise had awakened from his sleep.

"Come quick!" he cried. "The boat

is not far away—by the embankment. We have not far to go."

Luckily for Vaile, this was the truth. As both his eyes were now tightly closed, and to all intents and purposes he was blind, he stumbled repeatedly upon the rough ground before they gained the level stone embankment.

The *wupan* had been brought alongside at the western extremity of the bund, little more than two hundred yards from the *yamen* wall. A gangplank had been lowered, and across this George Vaile was guided by Pai-chu-li and the *laoban*. And in less than a minute the boat was under way, heading straight for the open sea.

IN THE broad Gulf of Liao-tung, when the first signs of daybreak were visible above the far distant hills that form the peninsula that ends at Port Arthur, George Vaile sat upon the deck with a damp bandage across his eyes, plying Pai-chu-li with questions.

"How did you learn of the secret of the trapdoor in the *yamen* room?"

"I was told that," said Pai-chu-li, without emotion, "by the honorable Tung Lu."

Vaile guessed at once something of what had happened; but he dared not openly accuse the man who had proved himself so faithful a guide, philosopher and friend.

"You came in through the window, I suppose? And the trapdoor was worked in some way from behind the idol? But how did you know that I was in such danger?"

Pai-chu-li just shrugged his shoulders.

"Suppose," said he, "I suspected that Yen Wang, the robber, was the same man as King-chi-kai, the Taotai of Tientsin?"

Vaile started visibly. He felt shocked, even a little frightened.

"Is that why you took the Taotai's hat?" he asked.

"Yes," said the Peking man. "Maybe we have evidence enough already, but that hat will prove our case. And then the viceroy must admit that I am entitled to those two thousand taels of silver."

"I see."

Vaile nodded, after an interval devoted to serious reflection. Indeed, almost three minutes elapsed before he spoke again.

"And is Tung Lu still on board this ship?" he asked.

"Alas!" sighed Pai-chu-li. "Concerning that, I have a disaster to report. The fool fell overboard. Bad joss!"

Vaile said nothing in reply. He supposed that this was China. The sun was now rising upon the clustered roofs of the city of Shanhai-kwan, one of the ancient frontier fortresses of the Celestial Middle Kingdom, that nestled at the foot of the barren hills under the shadow of the Great Wall that will remain, like China itself, until men become as angels.

BUCK RIPLEY'S SLIDE

By BERTRAND

FOUR men rode abreast in the thin, hot air of a summer afternoon, behind a score of loose horses, two of which carried packs. The Canada line lay forty miles behind them, and off to the south the Big Bend of Milk River formed a great half circle, a giant curve gouged deep in the broad level of the plains. These riders had come a long way since morning, across a flat, well grassed country that would have been a Paradise save that it lacked water. As it was, one horse wrangler had remarked plaintively that a jackrabbit could hardly cross that region without a filled canteen. Yet the range had a fair sprinkling of stock, grazing in scattered bunches.

"We'll make the river in a couple of hours, by the looks," one remarked, "but, oh me, oh my, I'd give two big, round silver dollars right now for a quart of cold water."

The rider addressed smiled and pointed west.

"About a mile an' a half over there," said he, "is a creek comin' down from the north. Lots of water. Few trees in the bottom. Good place to camp, if you want to turn aside, Jack."

"Why in blazes didn't you say so before?" the first asked. "You mean to say we been parellelin' water right along?"

The other nodded.

"Here I been all set to perish of thirst," the first mourned, "when I could 'a' been livin' in hope. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask me, Jack. You said

And a grimly dramatic coincidence make for an exceptional story of the Montana range

W. SINCLAIR

we better pull straight for Milk River."

Jack Miller spoke to one of the horse wranglers. He turned the small herd off at right angles, so that they headed straight for the indicated creek. They dropped into a shallow draw, crossed a mile of prairie as flat as a billiard table, pale yellow instead of green covered, the bleached yellow of ripe buffalo grass. And suddenly they came to the brink of a deep crevasse, a huge, flat bottomed trough with straight earthen walls, coming from somewhere in that northern flatness, bearing south to a junction with Milk River. From the rim sparkled water in a channel bordered by wildrose thickets, patches of berry brush, occasional solitary cottonwood trees of vast girth and gnarly limbs that made a pleasant shade for man or beast.

They had to hunt for a place to get down, so steep was the eastern bank. Once in the bottom they made for the creek.

"Let's camp," Miller said. "Let's call it a day. I ain't seen as good a lookin' spot as this in a week's travel."

His partner nodded. They had lain on their bellies to drink out of that clear, cool stream. The loose horses stood knee deep, dipping their muzzles. They led the pack animals under a cottonwood, took off their gear, unsaddled, stretched themselves in the shade to smoke.

"YOU NEVER told me you knew this country, Buck," Miller said after a time. "But you do know it too well not to have been over it before."

His partner did not answer for a minute. He was tall, sparely built, a soft speaking man with mild blue eyes. The only striking feature about him was his nose. It stood out prominently, with a bold Roman curve, a veritable beak. He looked away up the cañon. Cañons are peculiar to mountain ranges, but this was a cañon slashed through the heart of the plains. Glacial, eroded by water, however it happened, there it was, a boxlike gorge. They had come slipping and scrambling to the bottom. Farther above it was sheer wall. As George Buchanan stared up that deep cleft the nostrils of his thin, curved beak seemed to dilate. For a second he looked almost fierce, as if memory stirred passion and resentment. Then he smiled affably.

"Yes," he said. "I know this country, Jack. Or did once. Long time ago."

Miller looked curious, but he said nothing. He had been a partner in the horse business with George Buchanan for nine years. He knew most of Buck's little peculiarities. He had learned them during a period when he and Buck built up a sizable horse outfit in Eastern Oregon, built it up together out of nothing. He knew Buchanan hailed originally from Texas. Otherwise his personal history was a blank. Buck never had talked much to his partner about what he did and where he ranged before Miller met him in the lava rock country. Miller didn't know that Buck had ever been in Montana until he admitted it now. Yet they had crossed the State diagonally to deliver three hundred horses to a buyer on the Canadian side.

They were trailing home now. Twice in the last twenty-four hours Buck had betrayed an intimate knowledge of local topography. But Miller didn't ask any more questions. Buck would talk if he chose, not otherwise.

They lay in the shade of the cottonwood for an hour. The two horse wranglers sprawled on the ground. Miller and Buchanan leaned their backs against the rough bark. Their horses grazed, content with grass and good water.

This north Montana country impressed Miller. It was more to his taste than the lava rock of Eastern Oregon. Also, it was five hundred miles nearer a potential market. Western Canada was settling up. Farmers needed teams. It seemed incredible that such a creek as this, for instance, wasn't held as a ranch location. Miller kept looking about. And one of his casual eye castings fell on something far up the creek bottom. He hadn't noticed it before.

"Might be a ranch up there," said he to Buck. "Think I see a fence. Want to ride up a ways with me?"

Buck shook his head.

Miller, a preternaturally energetic man, gave way to an impulse of restlessness and curiosity. The country interested him, with its rich carpet of grass, its tremendous unoccupied stretches. He wondered whether anyone *did* live beyond that next bend.

They had three horses on picket. He saddled one and rode up the creek.

THE STEEP walls of the gorge closed in, became if possible higher and straighter, great brown earth cliffs. The bottom was flat. The creek channel wound like a sluggish snake.

Half a mile farther the nature of the creekbed altered. Instead of the hardpan and gravel over which the water flowed by their camp, the stream here ran over soft, whitish clay. The channel proper was a narrowing trough, ten or twelve feet below the surface of the flats.

The fence Miller found to be a barrier of poplar poles from earth wall on one side to earth wall on the other. He found a set of bars and passed through. Some ranchman's home pasture, he supposed, with those steep banks for the east and west fenceline.

Yet no ranch-house greeted him around that bend, or the next; only a few loose horses bearing a curiously formed H on their left hips. The bottom lay in shadow now, though the sun still had two hours to go. It was cool in that cleft. Miller whistled "Sam Bass", and "Sandy Land".

A rich earthy smell rose from the black soil. Grass swept his stirrups.

Then he came upon something that made him draw rein and stare and ponder. For a hundred feet up and down the bed of the creek, overlaid by the sluggish current, was littered, nay solidly floored, with *bones!* A white carpet of bones. The bank on both sides was covered with them, so that the grass grew in tufts between. And on the edge of the flat like a cairn stood a mound of skulls ten feet high, twenty feet in diameter. Skulls of longhorn steers, the Texas longhorn that spanned four and five feet between tip and tip. The skulls were bleached, but in that dry air, three thousand-odd feet above sea level, the horns remained on the pith. Some even retained a bit of their ancient gloss. The pile was like an immense porcupine, curved four foot quills sticking out at every angle. It was as if a bovine massacre had occurred some time in the past. There were hundreds of bleached skulls in that pile. Miller knew the litter of bones that whitened the creek bed must be the disarticulated skeletons of all these cattle.

He sat wondering about that. He stared into the creek bed, raised his eyes to scan the bank towering above. A notch of a ravine cut the high wall. From the flat where the skull mound stood a sharp slope dipped to the water. All else was straight up and down. Miller saw that the place of skeletons was the only spot anywhere near where four footed beasts could come down from the plains above, cross the creek to the flat on which he stood—for at least two miles by the way he had come.

He rode on at last, thinking about that graveyard of longhorn cattle, wondering whether the place was perhaps a boggy trap at certain seasons, and whether some rancher had fenced it off for protection. He decided that this must be so when he had gone another mile or two. He was about to turn back when he marked another line of fence across the cañon.

He rode up to that. Above it a little way the creek bottom began to widen, the straight banks to become more sloping. And out where the gorge ceased to be a gorge and became more like the natural banks of a plains stream Miller saw buildings by the creek and smoke streaming blue above one roof.

Miller went through the fence, rode straight for the ranch. Not because he craved company, or because he desired exercise. He had already ridden three times as far as he intended. But he was tremendously curious about how all those mature cattle perished in one spot, and who piled all those skulls in a beehive mound, and why. It is the nature of all men to be curious about strange things that stir the imagination. Where smoke blew people lived. And whoever lived there would know.

The buildings comprised a typical combined cook and bunkhouse, a stable, a set of round corrals, the remnant of a stack of hay against one stable end. It was all built of popular poles, dirt roofed. And it had been built a long time, Miller could see. A sort of crude porch slanted over the house door. Before this stood a saddle horse. And as Miller rode up a man came out and mounted. He was dressed in the ordinary garments of a range man. He nodded to Miller, looked at him more or less indifferently and rode away, down across the gut of white mud, and up the steep bank on the east side.

MILLER sat his horse like a man dumbfounded. For this man's face under a worn Stetson was practically the face of his partner, George Buchanan. The same mild blue eyes, separated by that high, thin, curving, predatory beak of a nose. They might have been twins. Miller sat looking after him, his mouth open in astonishment.

Another man appeared in the doorway.

" 'Lo stranger," said he. "Better light an' tarry awhile. Put your horse in the stable."

"Got a camp down the creek a ways," Miller found voice to answer patent hospitality. "I'll tarry a spell though."

His host was elderly, if not old. Probably not less than sixty, possibly more, but with no sign of age in speech or action. Miller followed him into a room sixteen by twenty or more, bare except for bunks and a few rough chairs. A fire burned in a big kitchen stove. There was a smell of frying bacon.

"Just fixin' me a snack," the ranchman said. "Pull up a chair."

"I et not so long since," Miller replied. "I'll join you in a cup of coffee though."

He sat across the table and watched the old fellow eat. Miller decided that this was no common ranchero. There was an air about him, a note of command in his voice. He wore good clothes, of almost modish cut for the heart of the cow country. There was something indefinitely familiar about him that puzzled Miller. They faced each other across the table. The old man had a plate of fried potatoes and bacon. He lifted his coffee cup genially.

"Here's how, stranger," he said, "for lack of somethin' stronger."

"I come up through this here cañon below," Miller said after an interval. "I see a regular cows' graveyard one place. Made me kinda curious."

The old man looked up from his plate.

"Yeah," he nodded, "graveyard it is. We fenced it off years ago."

He finished his food. The sun struck through a window and laid a slanting beam on the white oilcloth of the table. Miller's horse dozed on three legs at the door. A cool breeze fluttered gently through the room. The blistering plains heat had spent itself, and relief from that brassy glare was grateful alike to man and beast. The old man leaned back in his chair and produced a cigar case, thrust it at Miller.

"Don't mind if I do."

They lighted up. Miller relished a clear Havana. They blew smoke rings in silence.

"So you wondered about that pile o' bones, eh?" The old fellow came abruptly to what was still lurking in Miller's mind. "You're a stranger in these parts, eh?"

"Horse outfit in Eastern Oregon," Miller replied, "on our way home after deliverin' a bunch we sold to a Canadian near Willow Springs. Yes, sir. That boneyard made me plumb curious. Musta heap of stock died there."

"Nigh a thousand head. An' they didn't die. They were killed. Them bones is a monument. They call that crossin' Buck Ripley's Slide."

Miller crossed his knees and waited. The old man stared out the window, as if his attention had been suddenly fixed by a pair of houseflies buzzing in a sunbeam.

"I MOVED the Ragged H from Texas to Montana eleven years ago," he said at last. "Got crowded outa the South. Had about nine thousand head in three herds. It costs money to transfer that much stock over two thousand miles, stranger. One way an' another, time I got them herds north of the Platte I owed a lot of money, an' had darned little cash to go on. We wintered in Southern Wyoming, pulled on early next spring. We crossed the Missouri at Wolf Point. I'd scouted this country a little the year before an' it looked good. So we located a headquarters on Poplar about thirty-five miles east of here. If you ever pass through this way again stop in an' you'll see a real cow ranch. But eleven years ago she was just a bunkhouse an' some corrals in a howlin' wilderness, with three thousand none too tame Sioux Injuns to the south of us on the old Fort Peck reservation. Lookin' back it seems to me some of us old-timers had more nerve than judgment.

"As I said I owed a heap of money to the banks. I needed to sell considerable beef that fall to reduce these here liabilities somewhat an' have cash to carry me over to another season. So come August, an' the Chicago market on the rise, we gather a herd of steers. All the Ragged H stuff is rangin' close, an' mostly east of Poplar, so it don't take us long to bunch about two thousand prime beef. This

Northern buffalo grass puts real meat on a longhorn's bones.

"Them days there's only one railroad crossin' the sovereign State of Montana. That's the Northern Pacific—she's just completed for transcontinental traffic. The main line's south of the Yellowstone. We have three hundred an' fifty miles to go an' two big rivers to cross. So we're trailin' this herd toward the Wolf Point crossin' of the Missouri on the first part of the drive.

"We don't know this white mud country. We'd only got into this part of the State that spring, recollect. Anyway we're grazin' south an' west an' we draw up to this here White Mud Creek."

The old man inspected critically the accumulated ash on the end of his cigar.

"We didn't know the White Mud—but we learned about her. Yes, we learned about her, all right," he said and fell silent, for so long that Miller prompted him, when it seemed that his host meant to stare at the kitchen floor indefinitely.

In that silence the buzz of the house-flies was like the muted whining of saws. The sun was almost gone now from the creek bottom. Away off on the bench a coyote, prowling early, yapped and let his yapping trail off into a howl.

"You had some sort of mixup here, I expect," Miller suggested.

"That there pile uh bones you seen," the old man continued, "cost me thirty thousand dollars."

"You don't say," Miller commented. "That's a lot of money, even if you say it quick."

The old man smiled. He reached over to drop his cigar ash in the stove.

"Yes, sir. An' I owed seventy or eighty thousand on top of that."

"Cowman an' bankers gamble with cattle an' weather," Miller observed, "just like a cowpuncher does with cards an' dice."

The old man nodded agreement. He rose to spit in the firebox. When he sat down again he looked at Miller and said:

"I had two boys in my outfit that I hand raised. You notice that feller that rode away as you come up? He's the youngest—Tom Ripley. He's range boss for the Ragged H now. Pretty good man. But he wasn't much account them days. Feather brained. Wild as a hawk. I kept him goin' mostly on account of his brother. Buck was smart an' steady. Old head on young shoulders. He had a bad temper an' a kinda mean streak too, but he never showed it. Buck was plumb reliable. I depended on him a lot. He bossed one uh these herds for me clear from the Panhandle, an' he wan't scarcely turned twenty then. I commanded this beef roundup in person, but Buck was *segundo*—his sayso as good as mine.

"TO MAKE a long story short we have this beef herd strung out to cross the White Mud below here, first place that looked like a feasible crossin'. We point the lead down a notch an' let 'em take their time, figurin' they'd find the best way to cross that boggy creek in that narrow gut themselves.

"Buck rode on ahead of the herd when we was a mile or two back. I didn't think nothin' of that at the time. There was plenty of riders to handle 'em.

"Well, them two thousand-odd fat, snuffy longhorns was strung out three-quarters of a mile. The lead was well into the creek bottom, some of 'em watered an' up on the flats. This ravine that led down was full of 'em an' the drag was still on the east bench shovin' up, for they could smell water. Me an' another feller pulled up to watch 'em string down that deep coulee. An' while we set there Buck comes scramblin' up the bank on one side uh the herd. He pulls up forty-fifty yards from us. I was lookin' at him. He set there with his head kinda droopin' for a minute or two. I see him straighten up with a kind of start an' look around. He reaches behind him an' unties the long yaller slicker every one if us carries on his saddle.

"Then he drives the spurs into his horse, waves this slicker over his head an' with a yell like a Comanche charges right into the middle of the herd.

"You know what longhorn steers are. They're wilder'n antelope. They go crazy when they're scared. They jump at their own shadow. When they run all hell can't stop 'em till they've run themselves out. That there herd parted in the middle like a snake you'd run a wagon wheel over. Them behind Buck rolled back like the wash from a steamer. Them ahead plunged down that narrow ravine. The noise of 'em, horns clackin' an' hoofs poundin' was like thunder. It shook the earth.

"I yelled to the boys to take care of that part of the herd that was stampedin' back on the bench an' I galloped over to the rim to look down. I knew there was goin' to be a hell of a mixup down there. An' it *was* hell, stranger. I never seen nothin' quite so bad before, an' hope never to again. You see this ravine they followed down led into the creek like a chute into a coal bin. They couldn't walk straight across that boggy channel an' up the other side. They had to go into the water, foller downstream about fifty yards an' then turn up the right hand bank. The channel banks was ten or twelve foot high on each side.

"Well, sir, when that stampede started from behind the leaders tried to run in that bog. Of course they couldn't. Some of 'em went down. The rest poured in on 'em in blind panic. That boggy channel was full of cattle when I got to look down, The rest piled in, piled in, like water pourin' over a mountain falls. Nothin' on earth could stop 'em. Nothin' did stop 'em. They surged into that hole, plungin', bellerin', till it was level full. Level full. A bridge of flesh an' blood an' bone. An' the remnant of nigh a thousand head of prime steers floundered an' plunged across to solid ground on the west side over that solid mass of bogged an' smothered, dead an' dyin' cattle."

The old man shook his head.

"I never seen nothin' like it," he said solemnly. "No sir!

"An' whilst I sat there dumbfounded, Buck come ridin' back to stop beside me an' look down. He looks like he's seein' a ghost or a murder or somethin', but he don't say a word. He just looks.

"I can't say anythin' myself for a minute. I feel like—well I don't know as I can describe how I feel. An' when I do get my tongue all I can say is, 'I'd ought to have the boys hang you to a cottonwood limb—you . . .

"I'M FROTHIN' at the mouth by this time. I can't think straight. I don't even wonder why he did that lunatic thing. All I can see is them dead an' crippled cattle. I can see 'em wallerin' on the edges of this mess, with broken legs, and horns cracked off an' the stumps bleedin', an' the cripples was bawlin' low an' mournful.

"An' Buck he still don't say a word. He looks down for a second or two more. Then he turns his horse away an' points straight across country for the home ranch—an' I never lay eyes on him again."

The old man chucked the butt of his cigar into the stove and frowned at the floor.

"It was a hell of a thing to see, I can tell you," he murmured. "That's how come that pile uh bones you seen. Some of the boys camped on roundup piled all them skulls together one day a couple of years after. They still call that place Buck Ripley's Slide—yeah, I told you that before."

"But what in blazes did he do that for?" Miller inquired.

"Ah," the old cattleman grunted. "That's the point. I didn't have sense enough to know that boy would sure have a reason. I just didn't give him a chance. But I found out, darned soon—yes."

He walked over to a window.

"She's cloudin' up in the east," he remarked. "Looks pretty black. Maybe one of them hell-tearin' thundershowers we get in these parts. Better put up your horse, stranger."

"Oh, I gotta amble back to my own camp," Miller replied. "A thundershower won't hurt me none. What made

this here Buck Ripley stampede the herd?"

The old cattleman sat down again, and passed another cigar to Miller.

"This here ranch," said he, with apparent irrelevance, "where we're settin' now—my outfit owns it an' uses it as a line camp in winter—had been built a year or two before we come into the country. Feller had about three hundred cattle. Was holdin' 'em all in this here gorge below. Good pasture on them flats. Well, of course, Buck didn't get no chance to explain. I damned him so hot an' heavy, I guess he just got his back up —an' I told you he had a temper an' a mean streak in him.

"But you recollect I told you he rode on ahead. Well, he went through these creek bottoms. He didn't speak with this here nester but the feller told us after he saw Buck ridin' through his cattle. An' Buck was smart enough to see what was wrong. This here little rancher's herd was rotten with hoof an' mouth disease. You *sabe* that, I suppose?"

MILLER nodded. Foot and mouth disease affects cattle, sheep, deer —anything with a cloven hoof. Wherever it breaks out in a herd that herd is doomed. It is deadly in its nature and it spreads by contagion and infection. The only successful method of fighting it is to exterminate every hoofed beast within the scope of possible infection, and isolate the territory where they have grazed till the bacillus dies out on the grazing grounds.

"In fact, the Stock Association was sendin' men down from Fort Benton to shoot every hoof he owned, to stop the darned thing spreadin'.

"An' Buck of course had seen this foot-an' mouth disease work in the South. I reckoned that he figured to turn back as much of the herd as he could, because he knew every hoof that went down into them infected bottoms was a total loss.

"He was right, too. Every Ragged H steer that crossed the White Mud alive we had to shoot. We was there three days killin' cripples, fencin' off the creek so nothin' more could graze across that infected ground. The rest of the herd we took 'way round, trailed south to Miles City an' shipped—just about half the original two thousand. But I never laid eyes on Buck from that day."

"He done you a good turn, after all," Miller commented.

"A good turn?" the old cowman echoed. "Stranger, he saved my bacon. If I had lost all that herd, it would 'a' broke me. The banks would 'a' shut down on me, sold me out. I owed a lot of money. As it was, the remnant of that herd give me some cash. I carried over to the next season, nip an' tuck. Two years squared me with the world. I've done well ever since. Yes, I owe that boy somethin'. The Ragged H is a cow outfit these days. Buck should 'a' been in on it."

"I suppose you tried to get track of him?" Miller said.

"Sure I tried. It was like the ground had swallered him. An' he was a man you didn't overlook," the old fellow said. "Tall, with a high hooked nose—face like a eagle. Yes, I'd give Buck a good start in the cow business for himself if I could locate him. Every time I see that pile of skulls on the creek I think of Buck."

Miller sat digesting this.

"But since Buck faded outa the picture," his host continued—a little sadly, Miller thought— "I took hold of his brother, young Tom. He'd never been much account. Buck used to nurse him along, but they was always havin' trouble. Tom was darned unreliable. But somehow when I put it up to him it sorta made a man of him. He's run the Ragged H roundup for me seven seasons now. But he ain't Buck Ripley an' he never will be. A feller should never light on a man roughshod, stranger—not till you know just why he done whatever he does do, no matter how crazy it may look to you."

Miller nodded agreement.

"You know," he said tentatively, "there's a feller in the Bellefleur country,

south of where I range, that resembles your description of Buck Ripley. I noticed this Tom Ripley as he rode off. He reminded me of this feller. I might come across him when I get back home."

The old man looked eager.

"You look up to that feller," he said. "Let me know. You can address me at Glasgow, Vale County, Montana. Ripley's my name, too. Ben Ripley."

Miller stared at him.

"Yes," the cattleman nodded. "Buck was my son. I thought a heap of that boy."

Miller glanced out the window. The clouds, big thunderheads, were massing darkly.

"She looks like she might burst loose," said he. "I guess I'll mosey back to camp."

He saw something besides the gathering storm. The Ragged H roundup was pulling in on the flats above the ranch, chuck and bed wagons, with a fan shaped tail of loose saddlehorses. Their beef herd would be trailing across the bench.

"I'll let you know whether this party I mentioned happens to be your missin' Buck," Miller offered, as he reached for his stirrup.

"I'll be a heap obliged," Ripley answered. "Stop in at the home ranch if you come down this way with horses another season. So long."

Miller drew rein in the gathering dusk to stare at that pile of skulls for a second, that monumemt to the Buck Ripley who had vanished into space. Then he jogged along to his own camp. Buck—it was funny, Miller reflected that the name Buck seemed to go naturally with George Buchanan.

Buck and the horse wranglers were eating supper. A fire glowed at the base of the big cottonwood tree, the blaze sheltered from the first drops of rain by a stretched tent fly. Miller staked out his horse and filled his plate. They smoked in silence afterward. The thunderstorm passed with gusty squalls of rain, a few thunder peals. Then the clouds scattered and the stars came out to speckle a clear sky with points of fire. The two wranglers made down their beds and turned in. Buchanan and Miller sat staring into the bed of coals.

"I SEEN a place they call Buck Ripley's Slide, up the creek a ways," Miller said abruptly, "an I come across the old feller that owns the Ragged H at a ranch the upper end of this cañon. We talked quite a spell."

"Yeah?" Buchanan grunted.

"I seen a feller looks like your twin, too," Miller continued. "He's range boss of the Ragged H, the old man told me—feller name uh Tom Ripley."

Buck stared into the dying coals for a minute, then looked squarely at his partner.

"What did old Ben tell you?" he demanded.

Miller rolled a fresh cigaret and repeated the story.

Buck listened to the end without comment. The fire sank to a dull ruby spot in the dark. And he said nothing for some time. It was quite dark and very still in that cañon bottom. Buck sat humming a little tune to himself. "The Forty-nine Bottles A-hangin' on the Wall", which every stockhand between Texas and Canada has chanted to wild steers bedded in the dark.

"Well," he said at last, "it never rains but it pours, seems like. Let's go to bed, Jack."

Stretched in their blankets side by side Miller became aware of his partner's shaking with suppressed laughter.

"What the dickens ails you now?" he inquired.

"Just thinkin'," Buck replied, "about this hoof an' mouth disease. You know there used to be a josh around the Ragged H about that an' my esteemed younger brother. He never was much of a rider—in fact, as the old man told you, he never was much account nohow. His horse used to buck him off an' get away from him. Then he'd hoof it into camp an' shoot off his mouth—an' one day the old man remarked that was the origin of

the disease. An' now Tom's range boss of the Ragged H, eh?"

"Which you was an' shoulda been," Miller observed. "You'd oughta go up an' see the old man. He'd be tickled to death."

"Would you like to have me quit you as a partner in the horse business?" Buck asked.

"Hell, no, of course not," Miller replied. "But—"

"That's just what the old man would want," Buck murmured. "An' Tom's nose would be outa joint. If he has made Tom man enough to boss the outfit, 'tain't for me to show up at this late day an' cut the ground from under his feet. Buck Ripley's Slide, eh?"

He lay silent for a minute. Then he began to shake again with that strange suppressed laughter.

"What's the joke, darn you?" Miller demanded.

Buck paid no attention for a time. Then he whispered—

"Say Jack."

"Yeah."

"I don't know whether the joke is on me or the old man."

"What you mean?" Miller asked.

"I didn't know nothin' about that nester's cattle bein' rotten with the foot an' mouth disease."

Miller digested this.

"Then what the devil made you stampede that herd thataway?" he inquired.

"I don't know," Buck confessed. "I never could figure it out nohow. Only this way. On that roundup, in fact all that summer, it had been up to me. Tom worried me. The old man worried me. I was everlastin'ly on the go. That day I was near wore out—just about dead for sleep. I'd nap in my saddle if I pulled up for a minute. Remember he told you about me ridin' ahead of the herd down into White Mud? Well, I did. I remember lookin' at the place they had to cross an' thinkin' that if they piled in too fast there would be merry hell in that boggy crossin'. Then I rode up on the rim an' set still to watch 'em string down. I must'a' dozed off. I recollect some crazy impulse to head that herd off from somethin' or other. Then I found myself ridin' like hell, whoopin' an' wavin' my slicker in their faces. The minute I come alive I knew that part of the herd that piled into the creek was thunderin' down to destruction. So when the old man began to squawk, I hadn't nothin' to say. I just rode off an' kept ridin'."

"Well, for Gawd's sake!" Miller breathed.

"I couldn't tell the old man that," Buck continued thoughtfully. "I'm darned glad I done him a good turn—but it ain't no credit to me. Maybe—sometime. Tom's deliverin' the goods. Buck Ripley's dead. That pile of skulls is his monument. Eh?"

"Amen," said Miller. "He was a good man, if he did go wrong once!"

The LARGE PARADE

A Tale of the Big Tops

By THOMSON BURTIS

POP GARRITY wandered mournfully through the cluttered backyard of the Great Garrity Shows. He threaded his way among six elephants, lined up for their entrance into the big top and finally reached the curtain that hid the backyard from the spectators in the main tent. He nodded to the group of clowns who were ready for their next tour of the arena and then eased past the curtain into the big top. There he found Mr. Sockless Knight, assistant manager and boss canvasman, leaning against the sideboards.

Pop surveyed the empty benches over the top of his spectacles with a jaundiced eye. As he pulled at his gray mustache the music of the band was merely a dirge to him, and his wispy figure seemed to slump.

"There ain't as many people here as we carry with the show." He peered into the far corners anxiously.

"We ain't took in enough to buy hay for the bulls," Knight admitted, shifting his huge bulk.

"And for forty years in this business I wanted to be the boss of my own show!" Pop commented acridly. "Them was the happy days, with only a sideshow to handle, the money comin' in every week, and the big bosses there to do all the worryin'!"

He relieved his mouth of its cud of tobacco. His foxy old face was thin and keen, and sly humor flashed in his bright gray eyes.

"God, I used to think I was leadin' a tough life when some temperamental fat woman had a hair pullin' match with an albino that sold more pictures than she did," he went on. "Keepin' a Hawaiian dancer away from the canvasmen and a knife thrower from gettin' drunk was my heaviest problems. Now look at me!"

The riding acts which were occupying the two rings made their exits, and twelve elephants came running into the big top through the two entrances.

"Them bulls alone cost me more'n a sideshow." Pop's eyes narrowed sadly.

"Not much hope for tomorrow, either,"

Sockless reminded him. "Belleville never was a good show town."

"I know it. But Harrisburg, day after tomorrow, might sit 'em on the grass if it don't rain, which it will. If I'd took out rain insurance this season—"

"You could buy the Big Show out of your cigaret money," Knight finished for him. "Pretty near sunk, ain't you, boss?"

"Right you are. We got to do business in Harrisburg—or the animals don't eat."

"Charley Wickersham wouldn't loan you another bundle o' kale, would he?"

"None. Ten thousand was his limit. And you kicked about me takin' that—"

"That rock faced old coot ain't to be trusted," Knight stated, his bass voice harsh. "He's worth a million if he's worth a nickel, and there ain't a penny of it come his way on the square. He'd rather be crooked than on the level—"

"He was pretty good for me," Pop reminded him. "You don't pick up ten thousand on a pay-when-you-can proposition every day."

"All right, crow. You had to have it. If you could get more now, I'd say get it. You can't be too choosey when your back's t' the wall. But if I was you I wouldn't feel too good over it until you git it paid."

"Well, time to haul the menagerie top down. See you later."

POP WANDERED into the backyard again and watched the menagerie tent come down. Then he went to the main ticket wagon and got the bad news. Twenty-eight hundred dollars formed the total receipts for the day, and his overhead was thirty-five hundred. As always, he watched the tear down of the show at the end of the after piece. Sockless Knight and his assistants drove their canvasmen hard, and in less than an hour the big top was a billowing sea of canvas, over which a hundred men swarmed like ants in the wan glare of the searchlights on the light wagon. They unlaced the top into sections and rolled them for loading on the canvas wagons.

The big boss was a mournful little figure with his battered Panama hat pulled low over his bespectacled eyes.

"Hello, Pop! Have a good day?"

Garrity whirled around as if stunned, and his jaw dropped.

"Why—hello, Charley," he stammered. A premonition of disaster swept over him. "Why so far from Chicago?"

"My show's playing Buffalo, and I jumped on to fire Tom Pringle. He's on a drunk."

Wickersham was tall and big boned and harsh faced. Twenty years as a smart and crooked connection man with old "strong" shows had turned him into a man whose light gray eyes were like two pieces of flint in his head. He carried some of the methods of the old grifting days into his present position, as the owner of two three-ring shows, if gossip were true.

"Listen, Pop," he said bluntly, "I've got to have that ten thousand."

He pushed his derby back on his head, revealing more clearly his granite-like face.

"But, Charley, I told you I didn't know when I could pay it. We been havin' terrible weather—had a blowdown in Seely Falls besides—and we're just staggerin' along waitin' for a break. I—"

"Can't help that," Wickersham told him. "I got to have it. Scratch around and get it in the next day or so."

"Where?" demanded Pop. He was like a wistful old fox. "I told you plain where I stood. I wouldn't have borried it if you hadn't told me any time would do—"

"Things have changed. Well, I got to mosey along. Catching the twelve-fifteen out. Thought I'd see you for a minute and tell you what was what. You ain't the only show been rained out. Mine are losing money. I got to have that ten grand. Send it to me in Chicago."

"I can't, Charley! No use o' sayin' I can. Maybe after a few days good business—we get into Massachusetts day after tomorrow."

"I can't wait. So long, Pop. Good luck."

He strode away, climbed into the waiting taxicab, and was driven off.

"GOT TO have it, hell!" Pop thought savagely. "He needs ready money about as bad as one o' them camels needs a looking glass. Just proddin' me, that's all. He don't expect it."

Nevertheless, there was foreboding in his heart as he climbed aboard the white circus train, had a coffee and sinker supper in the privilege car, and crawled into his bunk. Sockless Knight was right. Charley Wickersham wasn't to be trusted as far as Pop could throw that Pullman car.

He fell into troubled sleep, finally, and awakened at nine o'clock to find that the train was still in motion.

"Held up for four hours at five o'clock this mornin'," the porter told him. "We'll have t' scratch t' make parade, eh?"

"Damned if we won't," Pop agreed.

The train pulled into Belleville a half hour later, and the large gathering of spectators was treated to the fastest unloading the Garrity razorbacks had ever accomplished. The wagons rolled off the runs in a continuous stream and were driven to the lot with the drivers lashing their multiple teams into almost a gallop.

Pop rode the steam wagon and was on the lot before Sockless had decided on the layout of the show.

Studebaker Slim, twenty-four hour man, was waiting for him.

"Pretty late, eh?" he commented. "Wouldn't of made much difference if you'd never got here. Half the factories are workin' just part time. But Harrisburg, Chief—you sure git a break there tomorrow."

"Yeah?"

"Biggest advance sale we ever had; trolley lines runnin' excursions, and a half holiday in the cement works."

"Great! Guess I'll tell Sockless and see whether that'll lift his grouch."

Knight was just driving the kingpole stake. With the location of this little steel rod the entire layout of the lot was accomplished. By specified measurements, all centering on this particular stake, the location of every section of the show, from ballet top to sideshow, was automatically fixed.

"Hear about Harrisburg, Sockless?" queried Pop, a spry little showman once more. "We sit 'em on the grass there—"

"ARE YOU Mr. Garrity?"

Pop turned around as Sockless grunted—

"The law, b'God!"

"Yep, I'm the sheriff," the lanky stranger admitted. He pushed his battered soft hat back on his head. "I got an attachment against your show for ten thousand dollars. Man name o' Wickersham—"

"I knew it!" bellowed Sockless, and waxed blasphemous.

He ascended to rarified heights, and the sheriff gaped with amused awe. The vocabulary of a veteran showman is a weird and wonderful thing, embracing etymological wonders undreamed of by the layman.

It gave Pop time to think. Emergencies were no new thing to him. The brain that had figured out a bath of vinegar and dye, and created the original "blue man", that had seen in a Mexican with a large wen on his head the germ of the two headed man, and had taken a six toed negro and burst upon show business with the first wild man—that mind was working like lightning now. He was pretty sure of the law.

"That skunk laid you a trap, boss!" Sockless was raving. "He was plannin' all the time t' git your show for ten thousand dollars! Who knew better'n him that tyin' you up with an attachment when you was in hard luck would make your show worth less'n nothin'?"

It was true. The show could not move until the money was paid, and the overhead would be thirty-five hundred dollars a day. It was worth much less than nothing.

Pop's wiry figure straightened, and his keen old eyes were snapping.

"Let's git together, Sheriff," he said rapidly.

His eyes swept the lot. The wagons were trundling on it in a continuous stream.

"The only way we can pay that money is to have a good turnout at both shows. We got to parade to help along the attendance, see? We can't even parade if you attach us now. You'll wait till after that, won't you?"

The sheriff scratched his head. He was a trifle in awe of those strange, almost mythical beings—showfolks.

"Sure," he said finally. "That seems O.K."

"Good! And we'll make it a real one—use all the wagons! Sockless! Listen."

He talked rapidly into the boss canvasman's ear. Knight stared wordlessly at his chief and then galloped away, firing orders right and left. His rough hewn Irish face was a study in mixed rage and delight.

THE PERFORMERS were arriving from the train. Sockless, his assistants, and Fred Myers, the equestrian director, were rushing from wagon to wagon. In half an hour the parade was forming. The canvasmen, talking excitedly, merely stood around and wondered.

Myers, astride a white horse, gave the signal. The band, on its ornate wagon, started to play. The long line of cages, wagons, riders and animals left the lot.

From time to time the gaudily painted wagons which transported canvas and poles swung into the line under Pop's direction. He himself climbed up on the lofty seat of a pole wagon, last in the parade except for the steam wagon. It was the first time in history that a whole show had paraded, and an impressive sight it was.

The long line marched slowly through the wide main street. As Pop, at the end, looked back he could see most of the sidewalk spectators rush down side-streets to get positions on another thoroughfare through which the procession would return to the lot.

But their haste was wasted, for the parade marched on, straight ahead. It passed the outskirts of town, and paced majestically through the open country. Cows fled in panic, and farmhouses erupted astounded rustics. Little villages were thrown into hysteria—but ever the column flowed on. Bewildered elephants and puzzled camels were prodded into greater speed. The cats roared their wonderment, and the ballet girls switched with the bandmen, from time to time, as horseback riding became irksome. Word sped ahead, until fence rails sagged with the weight of spectators from back in the fields. Up hill and down dale, through open country and crowded towns, the Garrity Shows marched on.

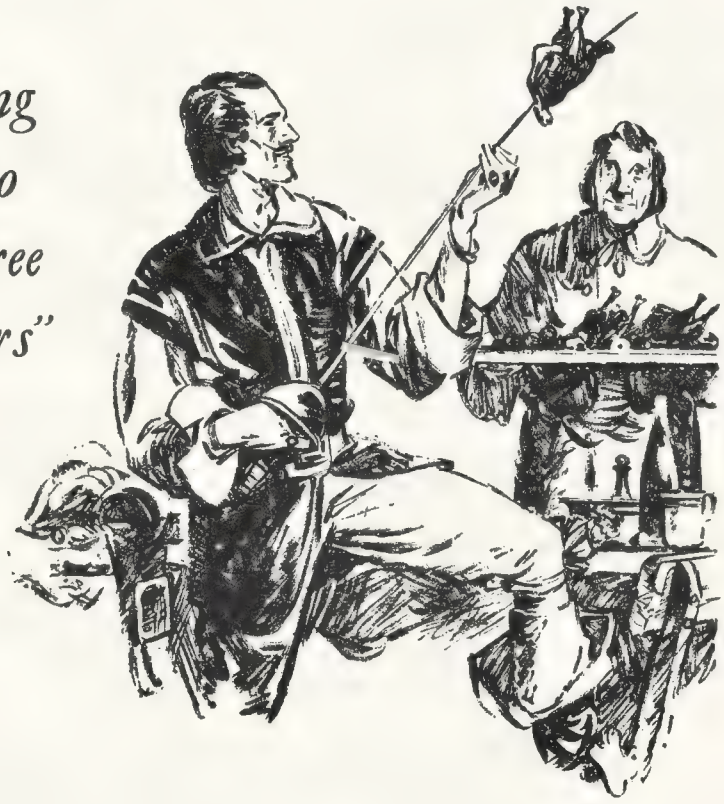
And Pop rode the pole wagon, behind six spanking grays. Harrisburg was twenty-five miles away, in a different State, and property could not be attached when in motion. A sellout was assured. The train belonged to the railroad, and even the sheriff couldn't attach a canvasman.

So Pop sat on the pole wagon and beamed benignly on the world.

Last and most exciting instalment

D'ARTAGNAN

A Stirring Sequel to "The Three Musketeers"



IN THE summer of 1630 all France was bubbling with war, treason and civil strife. Cardinal Richelieu was directing the army, but his position was insecure. The queen mother, Marie de Médici, loathed him; Louis XIII feared him; du Plessis openly fought him; but the queen, Anne of Austria, had perhaps the most important following of all Richelieu's enemies. Accordingly, he sought to crush her first.

A lady, Anne of Austria lacked not of cavaliers; a queen, she enjoyed the loyalty of the Musketeers; a diplomat, she cultivated the greatest of all the Musketeers—d'Artagnan. Her association with d'Artagnan, drew not only d'Artagnan into the realm of the cardinal-minister's activities, but it reunited in jeopardy the famous Three—Porthos, Athos and Aramis.

It seems that two years before in the village of Aubain there died one Curé François Thounenin who had added to his will a codicil providing for a certain child born while the curé was at Dompt. The child was christened Raoul d'Aram but, singularly enough, it had been born in the

From a Fragmentary and Unpublished Manuscript

By ALEXANDRE DUMAS

Translated and Augmented by

H. BEDFORD-JONES

abbey while the queen and her friend, the Duchesse de Chevreuse, were retreated there for a religious holiday. Richelieu, hearing of the child and the Thounenin will, grew suspicious of the queen's virtue; he began to try to gather his proofs—the will and the child.

A network of mystery surrounded the affair. The will was in England, perhaps connected with the ex-ambassador's—Bassompierre's—sojourn there; the child was concealed; the Duchesse de Chevreuse refused to speak of it. In her desperation the queen employed d'Artagnan to ride from Lyon to Dampierre with a message for Chevreuse. It was this journey which revealed to d'Artagnan the magnitude of the Thounenin will case. No sooner had he ridden a league than he discovered a dying man, wearing the ring of Aramis and carrying the papers of Porthos. When he reached the inn at Grenoble, at once Montforge, Cardinalist and plotter, insulted him. At that moment Porthos appeared to act as second; and Cardinal Richelieu appeared to stop the duel.

The cardinal summoned d'Artagnan to

his chamber, gave him a horse and a purse, and a message for the selfsame provincial duchess—de Chevreuse. Thus from the queen and the cardinal, sworn enemies, he bore similar messages.

D'Artagnan took Porthos with him to visit Athos, where they prevailed upon that scholarly Musketeer to accompany them to Dampierre, with Grimaud, his servant. The three halted to sup at a provincial inn, and Athos and Porthos went into the courtyard. A coach rumbled by, the horses galloping madly, and in the window d'Artagnan espied Aramis, pale and bleeding, and the Duchesse de Chevreuse, disguised as a cavalier, riding with him. Without notifying his two comrades, d'Artagnan set out to catch the coach. He was intercepted by two bandits, in the pay of Montforge, and had to dispatch them both before riding on.

The artful d'Artagnan pretended to be a surgeon when he came to the inn where Aramis lay ill, and thus he reached his old comrade. De Chevreuse posed as a cavalier to whom de Chevreuse's messages might be delivered; so d'Artagnan uttered the words of the cardinal. The disguised duchess fainted, and when she recovered she rode away.

In the meantime, while d'Artagnan was separated from them, Athos and Porthos decided that inasmuch as the three of them—and also Aramis—had an appointment with a mysterious Lord de Winter July 30 in Paris, they would ride directly to Paris. Nearing the city, they separated for safety. Athos met his old steward upon the highway and asked him to call for him daily at the Hotel of the Musketeers in Paris. Being a kindly man, Athos' suspicions were not aroused by the sight of a fair young lady in a broken down coach farther on, and he assisted in getting the coach to the nearby château. The lady proved to be Hélène de Sirle, an ally of the cardinal, who expected the rider to be d'Artagnan, doomed, since he escaped Montforge, to a subtler death. Athos was compelled to run his sword through two men as he escaped from the château.

He rode swiftly for the city; he did not wish to be late at the Place Royale for the meeting with de Winter and the Musketeers.

CHAPTER XI

THE STILL MORE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE OF M. DU VALLON

SINCE every one knew that M. de St. Luc was with the king, and his hotel in the Place Royale was closed for the summer, there was some astonishment in the quarter when, on the thirtieth day of July, servants appeared, the gates were opened, and the shutters flung back. However, in this vicinity of hotels and residences of the nobility, nearly all of which were shut up, there were few to ask questions.

On the morning of this day a traveling coach entered the courtyard of the hotel. A gentleman of stern features, sober but rich attire, wearing pistols beneath his cloak, alighted. This gentleman was Lord de Winter, Baron Sheffield. The steward of M. de St. Luc approached and bowed deferentially.

"Milord will find everything ready," he said. "The larder is stocked, the beds are aired; the orders from our master are to obey you as himself. We are at your service, monsieur, and we trust you will have no reason to be dissatisfied with us."

Lord de Winter nodded.

"Very well. In the course of today I expect four gentlemen who will ask for me here. They may come together or singly. They may come at noon or midnight. I desire to have ready for them the most sumptuous banquet possible with the finest wines."

"At what hour, Milord?"

"At whatever hour they come," said Lord de Winter.

"And if they delay until evening, monsieur will dine—"

"On bread and milk only, in my own chamber."

So saying, he retired to the chamber prepared for him and rested most of the day.

The afternoon drew on; evening came. Lights were put out, the banquet was ready, no guests arrived. At nine o'clock Lord de Winter supped lightly in his own room on bread and milk. He was served by his lackey, who spoke a sort of French, but who only shrugged when the anxious steward questioned him about the expected guests.

"My master has invited them," he said. "They will arrive."

At ten o'clock Lord de Winter, who had been seated by an open window, appeared upon the grand staircase and encountered the steward.

"I hear a horse at the gallop," he said. "Let us descend."

The steward thought him mad. They descended to the courtyard, where cressets had been lighted, and were just in time to see an exhausted horse come through the gates and halt, trembling. The rider alighted; he was bare headed, but so covered with dust from head to foot as to be unrecognizable. He took two steps and staggered.

"M. de Winter!" he exclaimed in a croaking voice.

"By the love of the saints!" exclaimed de Winter. "It is M. d'Artagnan!"

And he caught d'Artagnan in his arms, embraced him warmly, then assisted him to enter and ordered a bath prepared and garments laid out from his own wardrobe. D'Artagnan, who had ridden all day at breakneck speed, had killed his horse; but he had arrived.

HE BATHED hurriedly, dressed, and was being conducted to the salon where Lord de Winter awaited him, when the steward entered.

"Monsieur, there is a gentleman below. He came on foot, and he appears to be covered with blood. He asked for you."

D'Artagnan turned, gained the courtyard at a bound, and clasped Athos in his arms. Athos was, it is true, covered with blood, and he had arrived on foot, for excellent reasons. Upon entering Paris he had suddenly fainted, had fallen from his horse, and for two hours lay in the house of a surgeon whither he was carried. Upon regaining consciousness, he had forced his way from the house and had come to the Place Royale afoot, like a man blind and deaf, answering none who spoke to him.

Athos in turn bathed, and with the wound across his scalp dressed anew, presently joined d'Artagnan and Lord de Winter. The latter was filled with curiosity, but said nothing. Athos paused in the doorway and regarded his friend.

"D'Artagnan, you did not fulfill your errand at Dampierre?"

"I did," said d'Artagnan, "but I did not go to Dampierre. Two men attempted to kill me; I killed them. Unfortunately, one of them hit me a blow between the eyes. I think it is quite discolored. Peasants, in passing, took me for dead, and stripped us all. However—"

"You did not find Aramis?"

"Yes. All is well. But you, my friend—you, Athos! I have never seen you in such a state!"

Athos shrugged.

"Bah! I fell from my horse and struck my head, that is all. I separated from Porthos and left Grimaud with him. They have not arrived?"

At that instant Grimaud arrived, alone. He was brought into the salon.

"Speak," said Athos. "Where is M. Porthos?"

The unhappy Grimaud spread out his hands.

"God knows, monsieur! We halted at a tavern just inside the gates. Two other gentlemen were there; both were masked. M. Porthos joined them, and I think he is drunk by this time. Half a dozen more gentlemen arrived just before dark, and were ordering supper when their servants forced me to leave."

"How?" exclaimed Athos. "Masked, you say? Were the other arrivals masked also?"

"Two of them were masked, monsieur, beside the first two."

"This is singular!" murmured d'Artagnan.

Lord de Winter smiled.

"Good! We will not await Porthos, then. And Aramis?"

"Is wounded, but in the care of friends. He does not join us."

"Then let us proceed to supper, my friends, to supper, and to what we have to say. For, to judge from what I have seen and heard," he added, "each of us has a good deal to recount."

"That is true," said Athos in a grave voice. "But not before servants."

THE THREE passed into the stately dining hall, built by that Gérard de St. Luc who was said to have slain the Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, at the siege of Nancy in 1477. Here they were served with a supper, or rather a banquet, composed of the most marvelous dishes that could be concocted by the finest chefs in Paris—that is to say, in the entire world.

Athos accepted all this as a matter of course. He drank the superb wines as though they were common *vin rouge;* he left half the delicate foods almost untasted. He was preoccupied, weighed down by one of his dark moods. D'Artagnan, on the contrary, was astonished at each new course, relished each fresh wine with gusto, and could not contain his admiration.

"This is no dinner, my dear baron, but a feast!" he exclaimed. "You are the soul of generosity!"

"That, my dear d'Artagnan," said Lord de Winter, "is because I have come here to appeal to generosity."

Porthos did not arrive. Presently the table was cleared, save for wine, fruit and nuts, and the baron's English lackey closed the doors and took up his station outside. Lord de Winter passed Athos a carafe of old Xeres wine, and spoke.

"With your permission, my friends, I shall first tell you my story; then, if you will, tell me of your adventures. You received one at least of the letters I sent, and you discovered what was written with secret ink. Therefore, you know that I referred to her Majesty the queen."

Athos pushed away the carafe of Xeres, which he had been in the act of lifting.

"It is a brief thing to tell, but not one to write in words," resumed the Englishman. "You gentlemen were friends of the late Duke of Buckingham; you were in his confidence; therefore it was to you I turned. As you may or may not know, I have friends in Nancy. I am, in fact, distantly related to Duke Charles of Lorraine. One of these friends, who is also a friend of Madame de Chevreuse, recently wrote me of a very serious matter. I at once wrote you."

"Ah! Ah!" exclaimed d'Artagnan, his eyes widening. "You can not mean—no, it is impossible! Not the Thounenin will?"

As though by a thunderbolt, the calm of the phlegmatic Englishman was shattered.

"What!" he cried. "You can not know of it already."

"Be silent, my son," said Athos suddenly to d'Artagnan, "until our host first tells us everything. Then we, in turn, will complement his tale with what we know. Rather, with what we have heard; for we know little."

"Very well," said de Winter, recovering. "A village curé near Versailles, a relative of Madame de Chevreuse, received from her an infant, some four years since, a newborn child. He was given money and precise directions for the care of the child. Being in Lorraine about a year ago, knowing himself facing death from an incurable malady, he added a codicil to a will which he had made in 1624. This codicil, of two pages, written on vellum, told of the child and its origin; I may say that this curé firmly believed that the infant had been born of her Majesty, who had been seriously ill at this time, at Versailles, under the care of Madame de Chevreuse."

At these words Athos, to whom any slur upon the honor of the queen was a blasphemy, became livid.

"This curé," went on the Englishman, "made incautious statements in his will. They are statements which, if this

document came into the wrong hands, might work incalculable harm to her Majesty. As an Englishman, it was no affair of mine; as a gentleman, it became my affair. Further—"

"Ah-ah!" cried out d'Artagnan, unable to control himself. "This is the child which is under Bassompierre's care! This is the document which is on the way to Richelieu!"

"On the contrary," said Athos, whose aspect was frightful, "this child is now being taken from St. Saforin by agents of the cardinal! But stop. Continue, monsieur. It appears that each of us has important contributions to make to this *dossier*."

INEXPRESSIBLY astonished by this knowledge on the part of his guests, Lord de Winter inclined his head and pursued his story.

"Further, gentlemen, I know absolutely that this is not the child of her Majesty. You will remember that I was in the confidence of the late Buckingham. Also, when M. de Bassompierre was ambassador to England, I knew him intimately. There is a secret regarding this child, and I impart this secret to you upon your honor as gentlemen. This child was not born of the queen, but of Madame de Chevreuse. The fact was so strictly concealed that the curé in question leaped to the wrong conclusion. However, if his will is obtained by enemies of her Majesty, there will undoubtedly be a terrible injury done an innocent lady. That is why I wrote you. I can not act in this matter; you can act freely. I know your devotion to Anne of Austria as queen and woman; I know your chivalrous natures; and above all I know of what you are capable."

"Good," said Athos, "but remember, we know very little. Can you tell us where that paper or document is now?"

"I can tell you everything," said Lord de Winter, with a trace of agitation. "That is why I asked you to meet me here. I can tell you who the man is that carries the document, where he is, whither he is going. The agents of Richelieu who extracted the document from the archives were caught, almost in the act. While they escaped, they could not send the paper to France. They sent it to England for security, and to cover their own traces. The man bearing it to Paris left London for Calais the same day I left. At Dover he was arrested on a false charge and search was made for the document. It was not discovered, but he missed his passage to Calais, and I got ahead of him. I have remained ahead of him. Sometime tonight a messenger will arrive to tell us exactly where he now is, what road he is taking to Paris and how many are with him."

"Excellent!" cried d'Artagnan. "We ask no more. Depend upon it, monsieur, that document is as good as destroyed this moment!"

Athos looked at the Englishman with a species of admiration.

"And it was to tell us this, monsieur," he said, "that you sent for us, that you came to Paris, that—"

"No, no!" broke in de Winter. "It was not for that. It was because I, like you, I can not see the honor of a woman whom I revere made a pawn for politics by an unscrupulous prelate!"

There was a moment of silence. Then the Englishman looked at d'Artagnan.

"I have finished, monsieur. It is your turn."

D'ARTAGNAN began to tell with eagerness and vivacity of all that had happened to him since leaving Athos and Porthos at Lonjumeau. At last he himself understood everything, or nearly everything, and he kept back only one item, Richelieu's verbal message to Chevreuse.

"I may say this much," he concluded. "The message spoke of the child, and upon receiving it my masked cavalier first fainted, then fled like a startled rabbit. And here is her diamond, to prove my tale. But you, Athos—come, tell us about this fall from a horse!"

"With pleasure," said Athos. "More

especially as it has a direct bearing upon our entire errand—and, I fear, a very terrible bearing!"

He told of his encounter with Hélène de Sirle, of what he had heard and done at her house; but he said nothing of meeting his uncle's steward, Gervais. D'Artagnan heard the tale with anxiety; Lord de Winter only nodded from time to time, as though he were no longer to be amazed by anything these extraordinary men might say.

"So, my friends," said Athos in conclusion, "we may be certain of two things in regard to the Comte de Montforge. He has been ordered to destroy us, or at least d'Artagnan; and he has been ordered to carry off this child from the abbey of St. Saforin."

"Very good," observed Lord de Winter calmly. "I believe we may now sum up? The document, then, is on its way to Paris, where it will be handed over—"

"To Mlle de Sirle," said Athos, as the other paused. "The child is at St. Saforin. How came he there? Why did Marshal de Bassompierre assume his guardianship?"

"For several reasons," replied Lord de Winter. "Bassompierre is a Lorrainer and friendly with Chevreuse. I myself know this lady well, and she, who might be expected to take most interest in the child, takes none. After its birth she desired never to look upon its face. True, she makes provision for the child, but she is a selfish woman who cares not who loves her so long as she is not known as the mother of illegitimate children. In such a case, you comprehend, the Duc de Chevreuse might very well abandon her, and Richelieu would certainly hold her in his power."

The brow of Athos was dark and gloomy.

"Her attitude toward this child is a crime," he said.

D'Artagnan stared, for he had seldom heard Athos so speak of a woman.

"She denies herself a son. She denies the child a parent. She places others in danger. What a woman! Bah!"

Lord de Winter shrugged.

"Well, whoever may have been the father of the child, which is a somewhat vexed question, there are the facts. He was placed in St. Saforin under the name of Raoul d'Aram—"

Athos started so violently that his arm knocked over the carafe of Xeres wine, which d'Artagnan recovered.

"What is that? What is that?" cried Athos in a low but piercing voice. "Raoul d'Aram! Do you comprehend, d'Artagnan? This explains everything! Aramis is a friend of Bassompierre; he has been a lover of Chevreuse for years; the boy, named Raoul d'Aram—"

He fell silent, staring at the others. Lord de Winter nodded again. D'Artagnan swore.

"*Diantre!* And he is helpless, unable to leave his bed, caring nothing for the child—ah, Aramis, what a pretty mess your gallantry has entangled us in! And this scoundrel Montforge is now on his way to St. Saforin, Athos?"

"Yes, my son; but rest assured. He can not proceed there until he has a ring made like the one on your finger. That requires time. He can not get the ring before tomorrow night at the earliest. We shall be ahead of him."

"Ahead of him?" D'Artagnan looked at Athos inquiringly.

"Certainly," said Athos with his calm air. "Our errand is twofold. We have, first, to meet this messenger from London, kill him, secure the document and destroy it. Second, we have to carry off this boy from St. Saforin."

D'Artagnan looked at him with incredulity, Lord de Winter with stupefied surprise. Athos met their gaze with his rare smile, whose high nobility was touched with sadness.

"My friends," he said, "I confess to you, I am tempted to perceive the finger of God in all this affair. Our endeavor is first to defeat the schemes of Richelieu, that man whom ambition has blinded to honor; by defeating him we save her Majesty. Good! Aramis has abandoned this child to the care of a friend. The boy

faces a terrible destiny; he is without a father, he is without a mother, yet his father and his mother are of the noblest blood in France!"

"Bah!" said d'Artagnan uneasily. "It is no hindrance to be a bastard, my friend. Look at Orleans, who drove the English out of France! Look at the Duc de Vendôme—"

"I am looking, at this instant, at the son of Aramis, who is my friend," said Athos, with so noble an air, so lofty and severe a tone, that d'Artagnan fell silent. "In order to accomplish our task, I propose that we first carry off this boy, cause him to vanish utterly from the sight of Richelieu or any other. I will then provide him with a father, with a mother, with a name. In brief, I will myself adopt him."

"You!" cried d'Artagnan in amazement.

"You?" echoed the Englishman, as though not crediting his ears.

"I," said Athos calmly. "My friend"—and he turned to d'Artagnan— "I have determined to leave the service and retire to a small estate. Heretofore I have had nothing to live for; now, it would seem, I have found a son. He will bear the name of my estate of Bragelonne."

THERE was a knock at the door. The English lackey opened.

"My lord," he said to his master, "Franklin has arrived."

"Bring him," said Lord de Winter, and turned to his guests. "My messenger, gentlemen."

A dust covered cavalier appeared, saluted, and at a command from Lord de Winter spoke in French.

"Milord, our man stopped at Compiegne for the night. I rode on. He arrives in Paris at noon tomorrow, at the earliest—probably not until later, for he is exhausted."

"Good," said de Winter. "You learned nothing about the document we failed to discover?"

"I learned nothing," said Franklin. "But when he came to Compiegne, he removed the pistol from the right hand side of his saddle and carried it to his room with him."

"Eureka!" exclaimed d'Artagnan. "The paper is in the barrel of that pistol."

The messenger was dismissed, and the doors closed.

"Well, my friends," said Lord de Winter, "I must depart in two days for Venice. I have an errand there for the King of England. While I remain here, this house and all I have or can borrow, are at your service."

"Thank you, monsieur," said Athos. "We have need of nothing, except the name of the man who bears that document."

"His name is the Comte de Riberac."

"Ah!" exclaimed d'Artagnan, half in consternation. "Riberac, whose brother was killed at La Rochelle, whose relative is Madame de Combalet, niece of Richelieu, whose—"

Athos burst into a laugh, a thing almost unknown for him.

"Whose pistol carries the honor of her Majesty!" he intervened. "That is enough for us. You know him by sight, I think?"

"Yes," said d'Artagnan, who perceived that Athos had formulated everything clearly in his own mind. "Proceed, I beg of you, Athos! Your judgment is unsurpassed. Give the orders and I will obey."

"You honor me, my friend. I propose that you deal with this gentleman, secure the document, deliver your letter to Mademoiselle de Sirle. I, on my part, shall take Porthos and Grimaud, and go to St. Saforin. It is a short half-day's ride from Paris. We shall need your ring."

"Here it is," and d'Artagnan handed the circlet of gold to Athos. "And since I, for one, have some need of repose, when does this program go into effect?"

Athos reflected.

"Your share is to you; mine to me. I will ride to St. Saforin tomorrow evening, remove the boy early next morning, and return to the Hotel de Treville to await word from you."

"Very well," said d'Artagnan. "I will sleep until noon tomorrow, then ride out on the Compiegne road and meet M. de Riberac."

"And if you miss him?"

"Then I will find the document at the château of the lady."

"Be careful, my son!" Athos bent a terrible look upon his friend. "You do not know of what that woman and those around her are capable! She serves the cardinal; Bassompierre is certainly her friend; she would deceive an angel from heaven with her airs of innocence! Be careful!"

"I promise it, Athos," said d'Artagnan, alarmed by these words.

Again there was a knock, and the lackey opened the doors.

"My lord," he said, "a gentleman is here by the name of Monsieur Porthos."

There was a cry of acclaim from all three. A moment later Porthos appeared.

MDU VALLON had this peculiarity; when he was extremely drunk, he was apparently in perfect control of his faculties, but in reality had not the least consciousness of anything except what passed through his brain on the instant. He entered the room, bowed ceremoniously to Lord de Winter, and gazed blankly at Athos and d'Artagnan. He was, if possible, more magnificent than ever in his bearing.

"This is most extraordinary, gentlemen," he declaimed in a loud voice, without noticing the greetings of any one. "Here I left you on your way to the Hotel de Chevreuse, and I find you awaiting me here! However, I do not try to understand anything. Ah, messieurs, so you have unmasked? Monsieur—" and he bowed profoundly to Lord de Winter—"you will, I promise you, have no reason to regret attaching me to the service of your Highness."

"Heavens!" D'Artagnan broke into a laugh, and pulled at the Englishman's sleeve. "He is drunk; he takes you for the Duc d'Orleans!"

Porthos turned to Athos, and bowed again.

"Monsieur le Comte," he declared, "it is an honor to have shared your enjoyment of that exquisite Chablis, and your views upon the subject of his Eminence the cardinal."

"Ah!" said Athos, amused. "It seems that I have become the Comte de Soissons!"

Porthos twirled his mustache magnificently, and bowed to d'Artagnan.

"I did not need a whisper from M. de Bassompierre to penetrate your identity, but be assured, monsieur, it is entirely safe with me!" he said loftily. "None shall know that you are in Paris. If any inquire of me, I shall say, 'Certainly! M. le Duc de Guise is spending a few days at my country house'. But I do not see our honest Bassompierre, that dear friend of my comrade d'Herblay—well, well, let us see if this wine can match the Chablis—"

And coming to the table, he seated himself amid the laughter of the three men, and with a perfectly steady hand poured himself wine, and sipped it.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Excellent! Gentlemen, damnation to the cardinal, happiness to our new king—and may it prove true that the king is dead!"

And Porthos gravely drank the toast he had proposed.

The laughter of the three listeners froze into a frightful silence, which d'Artagnan was the first to break.

"Porthos!" he said severely, leaning forward. "Awake! For the love of heaven guard your tongue; think of what you say! Do you not know me?"

Porthos set down his glass.

"That is admirable wine. The bouquet is magnificent," he observed, and regarded d'Artagnan with a blank stare. "Gentlemen, you did well to meet me. You do well, M. le Duc, to appreciate my qualities and ask my advice. Yes, I heard rumors at Grenoble that the king had not been well, but devil take me if I expected such news as this. I presume, monsieur—" he turned in a stately

fashion to Lord de Winter— "I presume your first move will be to arrest Richelieu? Ah, yes, I believe you mentioned something of the sort. I desired to carry the order of arrest. You had promised it to my friend M. de Bassompierre, was that it? Yes, yes."

LORD DE WINTER sat stupefied. Athos, bending his penetrating gaze upon Porthos, had turned pale. D'Artagnan, who sat there staring with his mouth open, suddenly moved as though a fly had stung him.

"Ah!" he said. "Those masked gentlemen—no, no, it is impossible! He is the victim of some hoax! He is drunk and—"

"He is nothing of the sort," said Athos. "You think this news about the king is quite reliable, M. du Vallon?"

"Eh?" said Porthos, transferring his stare to Athos. "You ask me that, M. le Comte? You yourself showed me the dispatch, brought from Lyon by your own cousin. Upon my word, monsieur, if you were not the Comte de Soissons I should imagine you to be drunk!"

And he poured himself more wine, very gravely.

"Monsieur," he said to Lord de Winter, applying to that gentleman the title usually accorded the king's brother, the Duc d'Orleans, "it has pleased your Highness to consult me about your plans. I will even carry my advice a step farther. I advise you to marry her Majesty the queen immediately, and thus secure the throne by making peace with Austria. You could not do better than create M. d'Artagan a marshal of France, and my friend the Comte de la Fère would make an admirable minister. For myself, I desire nothing; I believe, however, that a mere barony would quite delight Madame du Vallon. I beg, monsieur, that you will think over this advice very seriously."

Cold sweat started upon the brow of d'Artagnan, and he saw in the face of Athos something like terror.

There was now no doubt that by some chance Porthos had encountered the greatest enemies of Richelieu, who were supposed to be far from Paris. By what magic of wine or talk he had insinuated himself into their company and penetrated their identities, was impossible to say; ordinarily the most simple fellow in the world, Porthos when in liquor had a certain subtlety.

D'Artagnan could picture that scene at the tavern; unfortunately it was far from being incredible. Gaston of Orleans was a dissolute fool, always turning to some new prank or eccentricity, careless what he did or said. Soissons was a popinjay who blew in any wind and was headstrong in the wrong direction. Guise, learning that the king was dying, was capable of anything. That they had amused themselves with Porthos was evident. The very improbability of their discussing such matters with him was the surest proof of its having occurred, particularly where Orleans was concerned.

"If this has happened," murmured d'Artagnan, "it means the Bastille!"

"On the contrary," said Athos, who had recovered himself, "if it has happened, it may mean power and honor! Reflect; it is clear that the Comte de Soissons has news that the king is dying or dead. Therefore, the Duc d'Orleans ascends the throne—"

"We must sober M. Porthos and drag the truth out of him," said Lord de Winter.

"Impossible!" said d'Artagnan, with a gesture of despair. "I know him, monsieur. One more drink, and he will be asleep. When he wakens, all memory of what has happened will be utterly gone from his mind."

"That is true," said Athos.

In another five minutes, indeed, Porthos dropped his chin on his breast and fell sound asleep.

Porthos, however, had not been deceived, nor had he deceived.

At the exact moment he was creating d'Artagnan a marshal of France, terrible things were happening in Lyon, where the king had some time since joined the court. Attacked by dysentery and fever,

Louis XIII was informed that medical skill could do no more for him, and he could not live another day.

He confessed, and receiving the viaticum from the hands of Père Suffren, bade farewell to his mother, his wife and Richelieu. The court ordered mourning. Anne of Austria meditated upon the future and at her bidding Countess de Fargis wrote Gaston d'Orleans and mentioned a marriage between them. Marie de Médici sent couriers in every direction and prepared for her triumph over the cardinal, a triumph which would know neither scruple nor mercy.

As for Richelieu, he saw the abyss opening under his very feet, and was utterly powerless to save himself.

"I do not know," he wrote that night to Schomberg, who was in command of the army, "whether I am alive or dead."

Thus did history, in those heroic days, hang upon the life or death of a king.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH D'ARTAGNAN ACCOMPLISHES TWO THINGS FOR OTHERS, ONE FOR HIMSELF

WHEN d'Artagnan wakened at noon the next day he found at his bedside a magnificent suit of blue and silver cloth; lying upon it was this note:

My Friends:

I have gone to Chaillot with M. de Bassompierre, and I shall make peace for M. Porthos, provided he forgets everything that happened to him last night. Memory would be excessively dangerous for him. The king is believed to be dying. I shall await word from you; go with God! —WINTER.

D'Artagnan asked after his friends. Grimaud appeared with word that Porthos was snoring, Athos still asleep.

"I have orders to waken them at two o'clock, monsieur."

"Obey, then. I shall be gone. One moment—where is the convent of St. Saforin?"

"Half way between Paris and Soissons, monsieur."

Obviously, Athos had ordered Grimaud to inform himself on this point.

D'Artagnan bathed and then dressed in the superb habiliments provided, finding they fitted him to a marvel; and in the courtyard he discovered a horse being saddled for him. This horse, presented to him with the compliments of Lord de Winter, was even finer than the one given him by Richelieu, now lost somewhere in Paris.

When he had eaten d'Artagnan examined his sword, inspected the letter for Mlle. de Sirle, and rode for Passy and the Compiegne highway.

He was unhurried, and appreciated to the full the glances of admiration which his magnificent costume and his royal steed drew from every side. He did not fail to note, however, an undercurrent of excitement in the streets, and he knew the reason full well.

"*Pardieu!* Rumors have spread," he muttered. "And what is this? Bassompierre's liveries!"

He encountered six of the finest horses imaginable, each one caparisoned with real splendor, in charge of two grooms wearing the marshal's livery. He halted them, curious.

"Will you have the goodness to tell me the reason of this?" he inquired. "I understood your master was at Chaillot today."

The grooms, seeing that this young man, so regally mounted and attired, had recognized their liveries and must be some great noble and friend of Bassompierre, did not hesitate to answer him.

"We are taking them as relays, monsieur. Our master leaves at dawn tomorrow for Lyon, and has wagered a thousand pistoles that he will reach Lyon before midnight tomorrow."

Thanking them, d'Artagnan rode on, stupefied with astonishment at such prodigality. Bassompierre had better reasons than a wager for reaching Lyon, he perceived, but why, then, was not the marshal leaving today instead of tomorrow?

"If I were M. de Bassompierre,"

thought d'Artagnan shrewdly. "I would be finishing my journey tomorrow morning instead of beginning it! However, I suppose he has the best of reasons for remaining here; and it is lucky for Porthos that he is! Our friend must have learned some pretty secrets last night, and if he ever breathes one of them, he is a lost man."

He need not have worried, however. When Porthos wakened, he had not the slightest recollection of his last night's adventure.

IT WAS not yet two o'clock when d'Artagnan, past the barrier, was upon the Compiegne road. A word with the guards showed that the Comte de Riberac had not yet entered Paris, but this did not mean that he had not reached Passy, which at that time was well outside Paris. So, at a slightly quicker gait, d'Artagnan rode on. He knew Riberac, and could not miss his man, who would be unsuspecting any danger so close to his journey's end.

With his characteristic curiosity, d'Artagnan sought out the château of Mlle. de Sirle, and slowly rode past, admiring the situation of the little park. Then he had reason to curse his imprudence, for as he came opposite the gates they opened and a cavalier rode forth and drew rein in surprise.

"M. d'Artagnan!" he exclaimed. "It is you, indeed?"

D'Artagnan recognized Sieur de Roquemont, lieutenant of the cardinal's guards and a close relative of Châteauneuf, at this period the most able of all Richelieu's supporters. He noted that Roquemont seemed quite disconcerted at the encounter, and wondered what on earth this gentleman could be doing in Paris.

"Good morning, my dear Roquemont," he rejoined with entire aplomb. "A happy meeting, indeed! I fancied you were in Savoy, becoming another Bayard!"

"And I," said Roquemont, opening his eyes at D'Artagnan's horse and equipment, "fancied you were in Lyon with the court!"

"So I was," said d'Artagnan, twirling his mustache, "but at the present moment I am on my way to Calais, and in two days I shall be in London. What news from the army?"

"Faith, I know not!" Roquemont shrugged. "I have been in Paris for ten days, and am even now starting for Lyon. *Au revoir* and *bon voyage*, monsieur!"

"And to you," rejoined d'Artagnan, and rode on his way. "Ah, liar!" he said to himself. "You lied to me, even as I lied to you! Now there's something in the wind. You were astonished to see me, therefore you knew nothing about me or my errand. That, it seems, lies in the hand of the Comte de Montforge. But what the devil are you doing at this house?"

He was uneasy. Roquemont, he knew, was a man of savage character; it was Roquemont who had dragged from his bed and killed the unfortunate Villeroy; it was Roquemont who, according to report, had coolly held a pistol to the dying body of Concini and finished the assassination. With such a man anything was possible.

However, Roquemont lay behind, Riberac ahead; d'Artagnan rode on. The day, which had begun brightly, had now become overcast; rain threatened, and d'Artagnan, who had no cloak to cover his magnificent suit, scowled at the unkind heavens.

AT THREE-THIRTY d'Artagnan was in the open, flat country just beyond Bourg-Royale. The fields were empty and no one was in sight along the road; but, ahead, a growing spurt of dust indicated a rider spurring to reach Paris before the storm arrived. D'Artagnan drew rein, inspected his pistols, loosened his sword in the sheath and waited. A single rider was coming toward him. Presently, recognizing his man, d'Artagnan moved his horse into the road.

Riberac, at sight of this impassive figure blocking his way, slowed his pace, and then drew rein a few feet distant, staring at d'Artagnan.

"This is a strange meeting, M. d'Artagnan!" he exclaimed.

He was a pleasant young man, rich and handsome, destined for high fortune.

"I regret, monsieur", and d'Artagnan bowed slightly in the saddle, "that the meeting was inevitable."

"Your words are also strange, monsieur," said Riberac, "and so is your tone. You can not have come on purpose to meet me?"

His hand dropped to the pistol on the left side of his saddle.

"Be careful, monsieur!" said d'Artagnan. "I have two pistols here; you have only one."

"Ah!" Riberac checked himself, regarded d'Artagnan fixedly. "So that is it!"

"That is it, monsieur. It is with the greatest regret in the world, I assure you, that I must ask you for that pistol."

"Your regret is only equalled by mine, monsieur, in refusing it," said Riberac, and then dismounted and drew his sword.

D'Artagnan did likewise, for he was dealing with a very polite gentleman. Riberac, who had great confidence in himself, smiled with assurance.

"I must warn you, monsieur," he stated, "that I have been taking lessons from the Italian fencing master of the Prince of Wales, in London."

"And I," said d'Artagnan, "have been killing those who give lessons. *En garde, monsieur!*"

The blades crossed. At the second pass d'Artagnan's rapier drove through the heart of Riberac, who fell backward and was dead before he struck the ground.

This victory gave d'Artagnan no satisfaction; rather, it filled him with sadness. He went to Riberac's horse, drew the right hand pistol from its holster and inspected the weapon. A wooden plug was in the muzzle. Removing this, he presently extracted a tightly-rolled length of vellum.

"In this matter," he reflected, "I can not afford to make any mistakes."

He unrolled the vellum and found it to consist of three sheets, folded in the center and sewed together. A glance at the outer page showed him that this was the will of François Thounenin of Dompt. He examined the remainder of the pages. The center sheet proved to be a codicil to the will, undoubtedly the document of which he was in search. He removed the outer sheet and placed it in his pocket. The other two sheets he rolled again and held in his hand.

"These," he reflected, "must be destroyed. The first sheet, which holds nothing of peril to any one, must be sent to Madame de Chevreuse as evidence that the work is done. Good."

HE MOUNTED and retraced his way along the road toward Paris. In half a mile he came to an inn at a crossroads. Dismounting, he entered. A fire was burning below the spit in the hearth, and going to it, he placed the rolled sheets of vellum on the flames, watched them writhe and fall into ashes, and then turned to the host of the inn.

"Monsieur," he said, "half a mile from here a gentleman lies in the road, dead. He is a noble, a man of family, and a favorite of Cardinal de Richelieu. I advise you to send for this body, communicate with the authorities and forget having seen me."

And with this he returned to his horse and mounted.

He had been successful in his mission. The document was destroyed, the queen was saved; but d'Artagnan felt no exultation. On the contrary, he vowed that upon returning to Paris he would have ten masses said at St. Sulpice for the repose of the soul of Comte de Riberac, who had been a gallant gentleman. Upon reflection, however, he changed this vow to one mass only; for one would undoubtedly be as efficient as ten, and at one tenth the cost.

AT FIVE o'clock that afternoon, with rain still threatening and black clouds massing, d'Artagnan rode into the little park occupied by the château of Hélène de Sirle. He found the gates standing wide open, as though he were expected. As he entered, the first spattering raindrops began to fall. A groom came to take his horse, and a lackey appeared as he mounted the steps to the entrance.

"Mlle. de Sirle?" he inquired. "I am M. d'Artagnan, lieutenant of Musketeers."

"Will you have the goodness to enter, monsieur?" said the lackey.

D'Artagnan followed him. Here was the identical house Athos had described, the curving staircase, the corridor, the dark library of which d'Artagnan had a glimpse in passing. He was ushered into a charming little salon, hung with yellow satin, and filled with the most beautiful furniture and *bibelots*.

Our Musketeer was distinctly on his guard; he was alert, wary, suspicious. The tale of Athos was vividly in his mind, in each terrible detail. The beauty and peace of this charming place only served to enhance his caution. Yet, when his hostess appeared, he was staggered; susceptible young man that he was, there arose within him a cry of protest against such things being possible of this creature.

She was younger than the tale of Athos had led him to suppose, very young, indeed, pale and beautiful, in her delicate features an air of vivacity which was tempered by a frank and open innocence —the most charming thing in the world to the eye of d'Artagnan.

"You desired to see me, monsieur?" she asked in a low and musical voice.

"Yes, mademoiselle, I have the honor to be the bearer of a letter from his Eminence, Cardinal Richelieu—"

"Ah!" She started, and broke into a smile that dazzled the young man. "Then it is my sister Hélène you desired! I am Eugenie de Sirle, monsieur. I regret that my sister went to Paris this morning and has not yet returned. Give me the letter; I will place it on her escritoire."

Having no instructions restricting the delivery of the letter, d'Artagnan produced it.

"One moment, monsieur, if you please," said she, and departed with a lithe step and so radiant a smile that d'Artagnan remained spellbound where he stood. That smile—did it promise anything? Instinctively he twirled his mustache, brushed a speck of dust from the silver facing of his coat, and his heart leaped.

Danger was suddenly banished. The perilous woman was away, his name had created no impression and was evidently not known to this girl. He was, therefore, running no immediate risk.

"Decidedly," he reflected, "I am not a fool! When a woman looks at me, I can read the message in her eyes—if there is one there. If I leave this house instantly and ride away, what good? I am in the enemy's country, and it is the first rule of war to profit by the enemy wherever possible! And what delicious—"

He checked his thoughts, and decided that he must be a fool after all. Yet he could not gainsay the hammering of his pulses, the flame of his imagination, caused by the eyes of this girl. That she was not the lady of Athos' tale caused him inexpressible happiness.

It must be confessed that Monsieur d'Artagnan had not wasted his time since coming to Paris. It was a period when a young and gallant man was appreciated to the full, and was indeed more sought after than seeking; a period when the privilege of the aristocracy was unlimited, and when impulse was better comprehended than discretion. It is true that the unperfumed feet of Bassompierre cost him the love of a queen; but to atone for this the gallant Lorrainer made more than one conquest at first sight.

EUGENIE returned and came up to d'Artagnan.

"Will you not sit down, monsieur?" she said sweetly. "I believe my sister will return soon, and she will not forgive me if I let you depart. Or

perhaps you would prefer a turn in the gardens. The rain ceased almost as it began, and the house is oppressive."

A turn in the gardens was exactly to the mind of d'Artagnan. What could be more attractive than those secluded paths among the lilacs, with this charming creature on his arm! He hoped, his hope became conviction; his conviction became daring. In a word, ambition seized upon him.

At the rear of the gardens, built against a corner of the walls, was an exquisite little pavilion, furnished in the most superb manner imaginable. A patter of rain was heard on the leaves; conducting his companion to the shelter of this pavilion, d'Artagnan was soon left in no doubt whatever as to her feelings for him or her capability of affection. He was transported to the seventh heaven; his heart was bursting with happiness.

Suddenly, an expression of fright crossing her face, she escaped from his arms.

"Oh!" she murmured. "My sister—I hear the gates opening! If we are discovered here then you are lost, I am lost! You do not know of what she is capable!"

D'Artagnan flung himself at her feet.

"Only tell me where and how our happiness may be completed!" he implored fervently and, seizing her hand, he covered it with kisses.

"Come, then—there is not a moment to lose!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "I hear the coach entering. You must remain here hidden. Wait!"

"With all my heart," cried d'Artagnan, bursting with joy at this prospect of happiness.

He followed her to a small room, adjoining the bedroom of the pavilion; this little chamber was built against the corner of the garden walls, had no window, and was furnished as an oratory or tiny chapel, but was apparently little used for this purpose.

"I will come for you later. This pavilion is my own abode," whispered the girl in some agitation.

For one brief moment she yielded as d'Artagnan clasped her in his arms; then she was gone, and the door closed.

Next instant the young man was transfixed. He heard, outside, a short peal of merry laughter, as the lock of the door clicked.

"A pleasant wait to you, Monsieur d'Artagnan!" came a faintly mocking voice. "You shall have the pleasure of Tantalus in hearing how another enjoys what you desire. Turn the crucifix on its pedestal. A pleasant evening, monsieur! We were expecting you—"

And with another peal of laughter, the lady departed.

D'Artagnan was absolutely frozen with horror for a moment; he was incapable of movement; he could feel her kisses burning his lips while her words sent ice into his very soul.

Too late, he recalled the warning of Athos, and a groan burst from him. This was no sister, then, but Hélène de Sirle herself; she had caught him in a network, had trapped him like a sturgeon in the fisher's weir! He thought of her beauty, of her innocence, of her half timid, half yielding embrace—and with an oath, he flung himself at the door.

It was massive, locked, unyielding.

CHAPTER XIII

ONE MEANS OF ADMISSION OF THE ORDER OF THE HOLY GHOST

WHEN the first emotion of d'Artagnan had passed he sat down upon a *prie-dieu* in the darkness and, faced by a situation of extreme peril, almost at once regained all his coolness and aplomb.

At this moment d'Artagnan was extremely dangerous.

It is the prerogative of youth that it may overlook insults, forget hatred, forgive injury; but when its self-esteem is wounded, vengeance is invariably exacted. D'Artagnan had seen himself in possession of the fruits of a superb conquest, only to find it delusion. He had arrived fully warned, exercising extreme

caution; without the least effort, he had been tricked and duped by the very person he had supposed vanquished. His person was unharmed, but his vanity had received a blow that penetrated to every fiber of his spirit.

"Good!" he said calmly. "At all events, I now know with whom I am dealing. There is a score to settle on behalf of Athos, and a score to settle on my own behalf. Certainly she has not poisoned me; if I am in prison, at least I have my sword."

He set about thinking how he could use this sword.

When he first entered this room there had been a little light; an opening six inches square, high in one wall, supplied air. Now darkness had completely fallen, and from the little opening he could hear the steady thrum of the beating rain. At this instant a flash of lightning lighted up the oratory. Except for the *prie-dieu* on which he had been sitting and a small altar against one wall, the place was bare. Above the altar hung an ivory crucifix.

Catching sight of this crucifix by light of the bolt, d'Artagnan remembered the last words his jailer had flung at him. Plunged once more into intense darkness, he made his way toward the spot. What she had meant by turning the crucifix, by her mocking words, he could not tell.

His groping fingers encountered the ivory image, seemingly fixed in the wall. He found that it turned about, apparently upon a hinge or pivot. Exploring, he discovered that the crucifix opened from the wall like a door, leaving a slot in the stones, an inch wide and three inches high. The meaning of this remained inscrutable, for it was quite dark, contained nothing, and his fingers could not reach through the hole.

"*Cadédis!* I'm a rat in a trap," he reflected.

He found his way back to the *prie-dieu* and sat down, gloomy. There was only one exit from this chamber, and that was blocked solidly by the massive locked door.

The prisoner was, as has been said, entirely calm. He was even cheerful; for the chief portion of his mission had been accomplished. The essential part of the Thounenin will was destroyed; the plans of Richelieu were checkmated; the queen was saved. Having leisure to consider private affairs, d'Artagnan considered them.

"If I could get out of this place," he murmured, "I would find myself without a horse; for it would be impossible to get my own animal from the stables. On the other hand, I would find no difficulty in getting away, since this storm drowns out everything. But I do not desire to escape, since I have my sword. I can not kill that woman, since she is a woman; besides, she deserves a very different sort of fate . . ."

HIS REFLECTIONS were interrupted by a ray of light falling across his prison cell. This ray came from the slot in the wall, which he had left open.

Starting to his feet, he approached the opening, and a sudden trembling seized upon him. He heard the voice of Hélène de Sirle, and her voice wakened in him all the emotion he had felt in her presence, at her kisses, at the pressure of her fingers. True, he burned to avenge himself, but when it is a question of a woman, a gentleman has other means of vengeance than a sword.

Putting his eye to the hole in the wall, d'Artagnan repressed an exclamation. This opening pierced through to another chamber in which a tapestry had just been drawn aside, giving him a view of the room, bright with candelabra. This room was a *salle-à-manger;* directly before d'Artagnan was set a table, with places for two, glittering with gold and silver dishes. At this table, but with her back to him, sat Hélène de Sirle; and, facing d'Artagnan, Marshal de Bassompierre.

D'Artagnan stared in utter amazement. He knew Bassompierre too well to be mistaken; he knew that somewhat stout figure, that powerful, gay countenance with its carefully brushed mustaches, far

too well. Bassompierre had laid aside a cloak and wore a magnificent suit thickly sewn with seed pearls, similar to the famous suit for which he had paid fourteen thousand crowns, but certainly not the same, since Bossompierre never wore the same suit more than once.

A moment later the tapestry was drawn on the other side of the hole, and d'Artagnan was again in darkness.

Through the aperture d'Artagnan could now hear everything, but he could see nothing.

Biting his nails in fury, he made his way back to his seat. He comprehended now the full extent of the lady's cruelty—and he comprehended a good deal besides. This, for example, fully explained why Bassompierre had remained for the night in Paris.

"And I—I must sit here like a snail!" thought d'Artagnan in despair and rage.

His chagrin was complete. From the adjoining room he could hear the voices plainly, now low, now high; he could hear the suave, merry tones of Bassompierre; he could hear the soft laughter of Hélène de Sirle. He could even catch the savor of the exquisite viands that were served, viands which Bassompierre, one of the first epicures of his day, applauded with vehemence.

Further, d'Artagnan could comprehend even more than this. From what he had seen of this pavilion, knowing that his prison cell lay in a corner of the wall against which the pavilion was built, he understood that its bedroom lay on the opposite side. His cell, in effect, lay between dining room and bedroom.

As the moments passed, d'Artagnan felt his own hunger more acutely, for he had not eaten since leaving the hotel of St. Luc. Evidently Bassompierre was not sparing the wine, for its effects sharpened the tones of both hostess and guest, and gay sallies were interspersed with bursts of laughter. D'Artagnan pricked up his ears, as he heard a well known name uttered.

"Richelieu? Bah! You have dismissed the servants, I think?"

"We are alone, my love," returned the voice of Hélène.

"Listen, then! You have heard rumors today?" said Bassompierre.

"That the king is ill."

"Ill? *Ventre de St. Gris!*" cried Bassompierre, who affected the favorite oath of Henri IV. "He is better than ill, upon my honor! He is dying—at this moment he is doubtless dead. That is why I spur to Lyon tomorrow. That is why I must leave you, my sweet charmer! Death of my life! Who is king, think you, but Gaston of Orleans? Well, I bear his order to arrest Richelieu. There's a secret for you! A kiss for it—a kiss!"

D'Artagnan sat transfixed. So the Duc d'Orleans, who would be king the moment Louis XIII was dead, had given Bassompierre an order for Richelieu's arrest! This explained everything; the gathering of the princes, the mad haste in which Bassompierre was riding at dawn.

"Orleans has signed the order?" came the voice of Hélène sharply.

"Doubtless. It will be awaiting me at the Hotel de St. Luc, with my horses and gentlemen," said Bassompierre, whose tongue was thickening. "But come! One more glass of this marvelous vintage—and then, my charmer—"

D'ARTAGNAN almost lost sight of his own chagrin in view of what he had just heard. Chaillot lay outside Paris. Bassompierre had come here to Passy, and at dawn would go to the Hotel de St. Luc. This meant that the Englishman was concerned in the matter somewhere! Well, so much the worse for Richelieu, at whose door lay the assassination of Buckingham.

Suddenly d'Artagnan started to his feet. He remembered something. He remembered meeting with Sieur de Roquemont outside these gates. And Hélène de Sirle was certainly the agent of Richelieu. A dreadful suspicion seized upon the young man; he stood, trembling, indecisive, hesitant.

At this moment a cry sounded from the other room, a cry, the sound of a

laughing struggle, the sound of a glass smashing on the floor. A peal of thunder, a vivid lightning stroke drowned all else. In the ensuing silence, he heard the laughing voice of the lady.

"No, no, impatient man!"

Another laugh, and d'Artagnan judged shrewdly that not Bassompierre alone had misused the wine.

"The door will lie before you, monsieur," came the voice of Hélène, and then an interval of silence.

D'Artagnan comprehended. Hélène de Sirle had preceded Bassompierre. With a muttered oath, d'Artagnan came back to his own situation and cursed his own blind folly.

"Charming creature!" soliloquized Bassompierre's voice. "A charming repast, charming food, a charming end to the evening. Let the tempest howl, and devil take all poor souls who lack the luck of Bassompierre! One more glass—"

D'Artagnan considered speaking through the aperture, giving the marshal warning—but of what? Bassompierre was, to put it bluntly, drunk; and when in liquor, he was famed for his blind rages. Undoubtedly he would be unable to think or act coherently. Before d'Artagnan could decide, the moment of opportunity had flown. He heard Bassompierre stumbling from the next room into the corridor.

"Fool that I am!" exclaimed d'Artagnan in despair.

What mattered the marshal to him, after all? His own fate was the thing at issue. He ground his teeth at thought of the chagrin Hélène de Sirle was heaping upon him.

The key was turned in the lock of his door.

D'Artagnan started to his feet, his rapier bared. Had they come to assassinate him then? Undoubtedly. He had witnessed the prelude to the comedy; now, in refinement of cruelty, her men were about to put an end to him.

The door opened, showing the corridor dimly lighted. Against this background was a single figure, that of Bassompierre.

"My love, you are devilish modest!" said the marshal, taking a step forward.

Then he recoiled, as the rapier of d'Artagnan touched his breast; the cloak fell from his hand, and he stood motionless.

"Not a sound!" said d'Artagnan, confident that he was safe against recognition in the darkness of the oratory. "One word, one call, and you are a dead man. Fool that you were, to prate of your errand at Lyon! Do you not know that milady is the chief agent of Richelieu in Paris—that Richelieu is her friend?"

A choked exclamation broke from Bassompierre.

"So you bear an order to arrest Richelieu!" pursued d'Artagnan. As he spoke he moved around the intruder. "In with you! Come forward! You are too late, M. de Bassompierre. Milady holds an order from Richelieu to arrest you."

"Who are you?" murmured the unhappy Bassompierre, overwhelmed by these words, and realizing that he had fallen into a trap.

Without response, d'Artagnan slipped through the doorway, closed the door, and turned the key in the lock. Bassompierre was imprisoned.

D'ARTAGNAN looked about. There had been no alarm; everything was peaceful. A hanging lamp burned dimly in the corridor. The door to the little dining room stood open. The door at the end of the corridor was closed, half shadowed by a turn. The mistake of Bassompierre, to one who did not know the situation of the rooms, was entirely natural.

On the floor lay the cloak of Bassompierre, still wet with rain. D'Artagnan picked it up, shook it out, wrapped it around him. Upon it was fastened the cross of the *Ordre du St. Esprit*, an order to which only princes of the blood and very great nobles belonged.

"Good!" murmured d'Artagnan, and his pulses leaped swiftly. "Cruelty for cruelty; humiliation for humiliation; mockery for mockery! That is justice."

He passed to the door at the end of the corridor, tried it softly, found it unlocked. It opened upon modest darkness, indeed, but not upon complete darkness. Beside the bed there burned a candle.

Wrapped in his cloak with its splendid insignia, d'Artagnan advanced and extinguished the light.

Hélène de Sirle was sleeping with the quiet and regular breathing of a child.

A board in the floor creaked lightly. Some one else was in the room.

Startled, d'Artagnan was aware of a dim light showing through the curtains. He did not hesitate; as the curtains were abruptly jerked away, he quickly skirted the bed of Hélène de Sirle. A sword plunged at him, and another. Two men stood there, a third holding aside the curtains.

There was a cry, a choked scream. D'Artagnan, throwing himself over the far side of the bed, had a frightful vision of Hélène de Sirle, sitting half upright, pierced by the two blades intended for him. Then he was on the floor, scrambling catlike to his feet, darting to the foot of the bed.

Oaths resounded, shrill curses. One of the three men rushed to the doorway, blocked it; the two others hurled themselves on d'Artagnan. He bared his rapier as they came upon him, and recognized one of the two as Roquemont.

"Ha, assassin!" he cried, and engaged both blades at once.

FROM ROQUEMONT burst a cry of dismay, of rage, of consternation.

"It is not he! It is not our man! In upon him! Finish him quickly!"

For reply, d'Artagnan's rapier pierced the throat of Roquemont's companion. The third bravo, darting forward from the doorway, attacked the young man in the rear. Only a miracle of agility saved him.

D'Artagnan now comprehended everything perfectly. It was Bassompierre these three assassins had sought; they had arranged with Hélène de Sirle, had planned to murder him. The species of horror which had enveloped d'Artagnan, upon seeing those bloody swords torn from her body, passed into a furious rage.

"So you sought Bassompierre, eh?" he exclaimed. "*Cadédis!* Murderers of women, you have found retribution instead!"

As he spoke, his point touched the third assassin in the groin, and the man sank to the floor, groaning. D'Artagnan faced Roquemont, laughed wildly, and pressed in a furious attack that drove his opponent backward until he stood against the bed and could retreat no farther.

"Good!" cried d'Artagnan. "You shall die with her whom your base blade murdered, you dog!"

Roquemont rallied, cursing heartily, but the superb attack of d'Artagnan dazzled him, held him mercilessly rooted to the spot. Sweat streamed down his face, his lips drew back from his teeth; d'Artagnan's point touched his breast and blood gushed out. He fought on. At his back the torn bedclothes revealed the figure of Hélène de Sirle, lying dead in a terrible crimson tide.

Suddenly d'Artagnan lunged, lunged again, uttered a sharp cry of triumph. Roquemont dropped his blade. Pierced through the heart, he flung out his arms, fell backward and lay half across the bed.

A terrible sound caught the ear of d'Artagnan. He turned, saw the wounded man half rising from the floor, coughing horribly. Without hesitation, as he would have pierced a snake, he drove his rapier through the throat of the assassin.

"Justice!" he exclaimed, and stood leaning on his rapier, until a sudden trembling seized upon him.

With a choked cry, he turned hurriedly. Cold horror of this place of death spurred him, froze his very marrow.

He caught up Bassompierre's cloak, seized his bloody rapier and strode down the corridor to the oratory door. This he unlocked.

"ARE YOU there, M. de Bassompierre?" he exclaimed. "Quickly!"

Bassompierre, dagger in hand, stumbled into the doorway. At sight of

d'Artagnan standing with dripping blade, he stopped short, blinked, then recoiled a step.

"Ha! It is M. d'Artagnan!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"Is this your cloak, monsieur?" D'Artagnan extended the garment, which the other took. "I was in time to save you, then. They came to kill you, monsieur! Go and look in the room yonder."

Bassompierre was bewildered, yet comprehended that he was in no immediate danger. He did not comprehend everything; d'Artagnan did not desire that he should comprehend everything, in fact. He went to the door of the bedroom and took a step inside. A low cry burst from him. He turned, came back to d'Artagnan, and his eyes were starting from his head.

"She—dead— Who killed her?"

"How do I know?" D'Artagnan laughed harshly. "Come, let us get out of here and talk later! Have the goodness to follow me, monsieur."

Still holding his sword, he led the way out into the rain wet gardens, and directed his steps toward the stables, with Bassompierre at his side. Under the lantern in the doorway of the stables was a sleepy groom, three saddled horses waiting at hand. D'Artagnan pointed to them with his crimsoned sword.

"The horses of your assassins, monsieur!" Then, advancing upon the groom, he put his point at the man's throat. "Up! Walk in front of me; see that the gates are open! Assassins have murdered your mistress, but I have avenged her. Forward!"

He drove the groom before him. Bassompierre, mounting into the saddle, followed with the horses. Reaching the gates, they found them unlocked and unguarded; the terrified groom opened them.

A moment later the two were away from the château, in the darkness of the road. Here Bassompierre drew rein.

"I do not understand this, monsieur, except that you have saved my life," he exclaimed warmly. "If I can in any way repay you—"

D'Artagnan brought the horses stirrup to stirrup.

"You can, monsieur," he said simply. "Madame de Chevreuse desires to send a message of four words to the queen. These four words will inform her Majesty that she has for the moment no more to fear from her enemies."

"Ah-ah! Chevreuse, noble creature! Then she sent you?" exclaimed Bassompierre. "Yes, yes, by all means give me the message! I comprehend perfectly. The four words?"

"God loves the brave."

"They shall be delivered."

"Thank you, monsieur. And allow me to say that my friends, one of whom is Lord de Winter, are about to place the child in better security than St. Saforin affords at the moment. He will be taken care of."

"Ah! Death of my life!" cried Bassompierre, who could no longer contain his amazement. "M. d'Artagnan, you overcome me."

"We must part, if you are to gain Lyon tonight." And d'Artagnan turned his horse before any further explanations could be made. "Farewell, monsieur!"

"Farewell, and accept my thanks," came the voice of Bassompierre. Already half swallowed up in the dawn darkness. "I am in your debt. Believe me, I shall not forget it!"

D'Artagnan, who now heard cries of alarm rising within the park of the little château, put spurs to his horse.

"And I," he said to himself, "owe you a good deal for the loan of your cloak! Our accounts are balanced, my dear Bassompierre."

He rode—but not toward Paris.

CHAPTER XIV

HE WHO HAS NO FATHER FINDS TWO

THERE were at this period two Saints Saforin—the village of the name, lying close to the highway, and the royal abbey which owned the village and many other fiefs. The abbey,

however, lay a league distant, and was gained by an indirect road.

On May 3, 1542, François I rode out of Paris with a single companion, on one of those pleasant excursions so beloved of that amorous monarch. He had a rendezvous at the village of St. Saforin with a lady of the vicinity who had promised to entertain him fittingly in the absence of her lord. Unluckily, the king was misdirected, took the road to the abbey, was recognized, and was that night entertained by the worthy prior instead of by the charitable lady.

Athos and Porthos, on the contrary, asked directions from a country lout who knew much of village wenches and little of monasteries or abbeys. Toward midnight they found themselves in the village of St. Saforin, with rain pouring down and thunder rolling across the hills. To gain the abbey that night was an impossibility.

"Very well," said Athos calmly, and looked at Grimaud. "Sunrise!"

At sunrise, they were breaking their fast and the horses were ready. An hour later they were dismounting before the entrance of the abbey.

Some years previously the abbacy had been conferred upon a gentleman of Picardy, who drew his revenues and did not trouble his head about the place whence they came. The direct rule of the abbey was in the hands of the prior, Dom Lawrence, a distant connection of the Luynes family and in earlier years a boon companion of Bassompierre in the campaign of Hungary against the Turks.

Athos and Porthos were conducted into a reception room by a black clad lay brother upon whom the rule of silence had not yet been imposed.

"Dom Lawrence will be with you in a few moments," he said, and left them.

Porthos was vastly impressed by the well ordered place, with its massive walls and its air of indomitable strength. Wine was brought them, and he tasted it with appreciation.

"This is excellent!" he observed. "I perceive that these monks know how to live. Athos, my friend, drink! You are pale. Does the fact that you are about to become a father so weigh upon your spirit?"

"I was thinking of d'Artagnan," said Athos. "Ah! Here is Dom Lawrence."

DOM LAWRENCE was a very spare and vigorous man of sixty. He gravely inclined his head to the bow of his visitors, dismissed Porthos with a glance, and then gazed fixedly at Athos.

"I am at your service, gentlemen," he said, "but, if I am not mistaken, I have met one of you at least—a long time ago."

The pallor of Athos became accentuated.

"This, Dom Lawrence, is M. du Vallon," he replied. "As for me, I am named Athos, formerly of the company of M. de Tréville, now of the company of M. Ramburés."

"Eh? Eh?" Dom Lawrence frowned slightly. The lofty countenance of Athos seemed to bring other memories before him. "Of the Musketeers? But, my dear monsieur, I am quite certain that I have had the honor of meeting you, not recently, but in the past."

"It is entirely possible," said Athos. "Louis XIII married Anne of Austria at Bordeaux on Nov. 28, 1615—that is to say, fifteen years ago. Upon that occasion I was a page of the Duc d'Orleans; and you, if I mistake not, were the father confessor of—"

He paused. Across the face of Dom Lawrence flashed a look, almost of terror, as though some frightful scene had suddenly recurred to his mind. His eyes widened upon Athos.

"I remember now, M. le Comte," he said in a low voice, and he bowed as though he were silently saluting a person whom he reverenced. "You desired to see me, you and your friend?"

Athos took from his finger the gold ring with the arms of Bassompierre.

"You recognize this ring, undoubtedly? I have come to take away the boy."

The prior started.

"Ah! Monsieur, as to his departure I have no orders. I can allow you to see him, certainly."

"Pardon me," intervened Athos. "Dom Lawrence, I come to take the boy as my own son; he is the son of one of my oldest friends."

"Unfortunately, monsieur, the gentleman who placed him here gave strict orders."

Again Athos intervened.

"Within a short time, perhaps within a few minutes, other men will arrive on this errand. They will bear a forged ring; but they will bear the orders of Cardinal de Richelieu as well. As for M. de Bassompierre, you need not worry. We act on his behalf and would bear a letter from him, had he been given time to write one."

At the name of Richelieu, a look of alarm flashed into the eyes of Dom Lawrence.

"The cardinal—knows the boy is here?" he ejaculated.

"Worse, he has sent to get him," said Athos calmly.

There was a moment of silence; struggle was depicted in the face of Dom Lawrence, who knew that he would not dare refuse the child to an order of the cardinal. As for Porthos, to whom the veiled past of Athos was ever revealing new surprises, he stood, staring, yet wise enough not to open his mouth.

"Monsieur," said the prior suddenly, "I remember certain events in the past; I can read your face as you stand before me. Do you swear upon your honor that all you say is true?"

"Upon my honor, it is the truth," said Athos firmly, and so lofty and serene was his clear gaze that it would have removed doubt from St. Thomas himself.

"It is your purpose to adopt this child, then?"

"No; it is my purpose to make him my own son," said Athos.

Dom Lawrence summoned a lay brother, gave him certain instructions, and motioned to chairs.

"We shall not keep you long, gentlemen. As to the boy, I can only say, M. le Comte, that I have studied his character well, and I believe him worthy to become your son."

"Then keep the confidence as sacred," said Athos solemnly. "No one must know this, no one must suspect where the child has gone! M. de Bassompierre alone will know. As to the child, I know already what his character is, since I know his parents."

"Ah!" said the prior, and regarded him searchingly.

THE NEXT moment, a lay brother led in a child of four years. Porthos could not repress an exclamation of surprise and admiration; Athos rose to his feet ceremoniously. The boy, young as he was, betrayed in his features a singular beauty and loftiness of character. He wore a miniature cavalier's suit, and bore at his side a tiny sword. He bowed to the prior, a bow of such grace and dignity that the eyes of Athos lighted.

"M. d'Aram," said the prior, "I wish to present M. Porthos, and the Comte—"

He checked himself, with a glance at Athos, who concluded the sentence.

"The Comte de la Fère."

The boy bowed to Porthos, then to Athos; his gaze remained fastened upon the latter.

"Ah!" he exclaimed curiously. "Now I know something I have long desired—"

He checked himself, and flushed.

"Yes, my son?" said the prior with a smile.

"Your pardon, *mon père*. It was an impolite thought, perhaps."

"Speak it, if you please. We desire to hear an impolite thought from your lips, my son!"

"I was about to say," said the boy, still looking at Athos, "that I now know what a gentleman looks like."

"Eh? Eh?" exclaimed Porthos, puffing out his cheeks in mock anger. "And I, then—am I not a gentleman, eh? And honest Dom Lawrence, here?"

The boy turned and regarded him with perfect composure.

"Monsieur, you may be a gentleman, but I think you are first a soldier," he answered. "And Dom Lawrence is a monk. That is not the same thing."

"The thought is to the mark, if not the words!" cried Athos in delight and, kneeling, he held out his arms. "My son, my son, embrace me!"

The boy looked at him, turned very pale, and his eyes widened.

"What, monsieur!" he stammered. "You—you are not the father I have prayed for—"

"My son," said Athos, in a grave and solemn voice, "I am the father you have prayed for; you are the son I thought never to hold in my arms! Dom Lawrence, I ask you to give this union the blessing of God; and I swear before Him that from this day forward I will be such a father to this boy that he may all his life remember me with love, respect and reverence."

And as he spoke tears came from his eyes and bedewed his cheeks. With a short, sharp cry the boy was in his arms, and they embraced warmly. Dom Lawrence, himself visibly moved at this singular emotion, lifted his arm above the two, and his fingers made the gesture of benediction. As for honest Porthos, he was dabbing at his eyes also, but of a sudden he fell upon his knees and held out his arms to the boy.

"Name of the devil, I say the same thing!" he thundered terribly. "Embrace me! If ever you stand in need of a father, if ever you need love, money, strength, help, devil fly away with me, if I don't supply all this and more! My son, I am your second father!"

And he, too, folded the boy in his arms. Dom Lawrence, who had looked stern at these resounding oaths, perceived that they went, as it were, by contraries; and a smile came to his lips.

Athos rose.

"We must be off," he said.

"May I saddle a horse or mule for—"

"No." Athos shook his head, and took the hand of the boy. A smile came to his lips, a smile of ineffable sweetness and serenity. "My son, you will ride in my arms, for we may have to ride fast. If I can not carry you, my faithful Grimaud will."

"Ha!" cried Porthos. "He is a flea, this little one! I could carry him on my hand. Here, my son, step to my hand!"

And in a moment Porthos held Raoul, who stood upright, on the palm of his hand; and then he extended the hand and held the boy at arm's length, with scarcely an effort. Laughing, Athos caught up the boy and set him on the floor.

"Come, Raoul!" he said. "Say adieu to Dom Lawrence. You have clothes, perhaps, toys, things you would fetch?"

Raoul looked up at him, smiled, pressed his hand.

"There is nothing in the world I lack, my father, now that I have found you!" he said, with an expression of such heartfelt affection that Athos turned pale from very emotion.

THE FAREWELLS said, Dom Lawrence went with them to the courtyard. Athos signed to Grimaud to bring up the horses. As he did so, there was a sudden commotion at the gate, a shout, and into the courtyard came a horse covered with mud and lather, staggering with exhaustion; from the saddle slipped d'Artagnan, his blue and silver garments splashed with mud from neck to boots.

"Ah! I rode hard to find you here!" he exclaimed. "All is well."

"Good." Athos presented him to Dom Lawrence, then looked at the foundered horse. "You can not ride that poor beast a rod farther—"

"Let that be my care," broke in the prior. "A moment, gentlemen. I will myself select a fitting horse from the stable."

He hurried away. Athos turned, pointed to d'Artagnan.

"My son, let me present a man whom I am proud to call my friend, and whom you may ever call your friend with the same pride. M. d'Artagnan, this is my son Raoul, Vicomte de Bragelonne."

D'Artagnan dropped to one knee, his face beaming, and embraced the boy.

As he rose, Athos gave him a swift look of interrogation.

"And your errand?"

"Accomplished," said d'Artagnan.

Then his face changed, as he looked from man to boy. He suddenly realized that never again would Athos address him with the title which had so charmed and warmed him with its affection, the title of "my son".

"You met no one on the way here—Montforge, for example?"

"No," said d'Artagnan.

He put hand to pocket, and drew forth the outer sheet of the Thounenin will. Silently he held it before the eyes of Athos, who changed countenance.

"What? You have not preserved that document—"

"The outer sheet alone; the remainder I destroyed."

"And the bearer—Riberac?"

D'Artagnan made the sign of the cross. Dom Lawrence was approaching; behind him came a lay brother, leading a beautiful horse, saddled and bridled.

"With my compliments, M. d'Artagnan," said the prior. Then, as the four mounted, he handed up Raoul to the arms of Athos; he lifted his hand, and they bared their heads to his benediction.

Another moment and, with Grimaud following, they were out of the courtyard of St. Saforin and riding Parisward.

"Athos, my friend, you appear like a new man," said d'Artagnan.

"I am a new man," said Athos gravely. "Did I not predict that from this meeting with Lord de Winter would come either a great happiness or a great sorrow? Well, it has come, as you can see for yourself. But tell us all, d'Artagnan, what happened at that house last night. Why did you ride to join us here, instead of keeping the rendezvous in the Vieux Colombier?"

"Merely to join you, I think. Terrible things have happened, Athos."

And, while Porthos crowded close to hear the better, d'Artagnan began to recount his adventures since leaving the Hotel de St. Luc. As the tale proceeded, Porthos uttered admiring ejaculations; Athos listened in silence. D'Artagnan concealed nothing, but poured forth his story as it had happened.

"Ah, my friend," said Athos, when it was finished, "I fear you did wrong, very wrong—"

Raoul twisted about in his arms and looked up at him with an expression of surprise.

"*Mon père*, you told me you were proud to call this gentleman your friend. Now, then, can you say that he did wrong? I think he was another Bayard!"

Athos, usually pale, flushed deeply; d'Artagnan was frankly embarrassed; then both of them broke into a laugh as their eyes met.

"And," said d'Artagnan, "since I saved the life of a marshal of France—"

"My dear d'Artagnan," cried Porthos in admiration, "I always said you yourself deserved a marshal's baton! This proves it. We have succeeded to perfection! The document burned, everything is as we would have it! But there is one thing we have forgotten."

"And what is that?" demanded d'Artagnan.

"We ride to Paris. Montforge rides from Paris. Ergo, we are fairly certain to meet."

This was true, and the fact had been entirely overlooked. While thus conversing, they had drawn into the highway, from the road leading to the abbey, and now Athos turned and beckoned Grimaud. He made a gesture to ride in advance, touched his pistols, and Grimaud comprehended. The faithful fellow, who was staring with all his eyes at Raoul, put in his spurs and rode on as a vanguard.

"LET US suppose," said d'Artagnan, a trifle uncomfortably, "that the king is not dead. My dear Athos, do you imagine that our activity in this matter will be remembered by his Eminence? Or, more specifically, my activity?"

Athos shrugged.

"Remembered, yes; by Montforge,

with whom you must some day settle accounts, also. Punished, no. Should the king live, Richelieu will be engulfed in a terrific struggle with the queen mother and the princes. He knows you are not his enemy, but a servant of the queen. Since his agents failed to destroy you, he is apt to leave you alone. If he loses the fight, you have nothing to fear. If he wins, he will be so busy sending the Bassompierres and Marillacs to the scaffold or the Bastille, that he will not think of lesser folk."

D'Artagnan nodded, and felt some assurance that Athos spoke the truth.

Grimaud remained half a mile in advance, far enough to give them plenty of warning in case he encountered trouble. No danger appeared. Noon was drawing on when before them appeared the inn of Le Moine Qui Keude—The Plucking Monk—an ancient wayside tavern, occupying the triangle between forks of the road.

"Faith!" exclaimed d'Artagnan, staring at the swinging sign. "Is this French or English?"

Athos smiled.

"In Champagne, my friend, they say *keude* for *cueille*. This is the famous *auberge* where Henry V of England halted on his way to Paris; it was here that Henri III of France first met the charming Lais; and it is here that we shall stop for a bite if you will ride on and bring Grimaud back."

D'Artagnan touched up his horse and rode past the curious old tavern, which stood apparently to itself between the two roads, the adjacent buildings being at some distance.

He caught up with Grimaud, recalled him, and turned back. This required some little time, for Grimaud had been well in the lead. When they rode into the courtyard of The Plucking Monk, the others had entered the *auberge*, and a groom was feeding the horses; also, a cavalier was in the act of mounting and riding. He saluted d'Artagnan as he passed, and rode forth, but not for Paris; instead, he headed north, and spurred as though in haste to reach Soissons before night.

"Who was that man?" d'Artagnan asked the groom who took his horse.

"I do not know, monsieur. He stayed the night here."

D'Artagnan turned to the inn entrance. He heard the voice of Porthos inside, and was on the point of entering when Grimaud halted him. To his surprise, he saw that Grimaud was in some agitation.

"Well? Name of the devil, you need not be dumb with me! What is it?"

"That—that man, monsieur!" said Grimaud, in a sort of croak, and pointed after the departed rider.

"What about him?"

"Nevers, Arceuil, Paris!" said Grimaud, with an expression of alarm.

Athos had appeared at the doorway and was listening.

"Eh?" said d'Artagnan, perceiving him. "You heard, Athos? Grimaud says that he saw this same man, who had just departed after spending the night here, at Nevers, Arceuil and Paris! And I remember now, he rode away at a gallop."

Athos motioned him inside. To Grimaud he made a gesture which the lackey perfectly understood; Grimaud went to eat and drink hurriedly.

D'Artagnan, following his friend, was astonished by the perfect composure of Athos, who betrayed not the least alarm or haste.

CHAPTER XV

TWO DEPART; THREE REMAIN

THE INTERIOR of The Plucking Monk was astonishing. The structure had originally been built during the English wars; the doors were of iron bound oak, at least a span thick, and the interior had at some time been nearly gutted by fire.

It was one large room reaching to the roof, and lighted only by two small, high placed windows. To the right of the

hearth was a narrow doorway, the only means of egress to the kitchens and upper buildings; for here was a sharp slant of the ground, so that the front of the *auberge* was lower than the rear, and there were two steps in the floor.

This hearth was of enormous size. Across its front ran a spit of iron, seven feet in length, which fitted into sockets at each end; these sockets were supplied with chains and weights, and when the weights were raised the spit would turn for an hour at a time of itself. At one side, leaning against the chimney, stood the spare spit, a sharpened bar of iron which would have served Goliath for a bodkin.

In this dark, gloomy, ancient room, whose stones were blackened by the smoke of centuries, Porthos sat at a massive oaken table before the fireplace, a table eight feet in length and carven magnificently. At the head of the table Raoul was placed, avidly watching while the fat host inspected the fowls browning on the spit and basted them.

"Fetch bread and wine instantly," said Athos to the host.

Porthos looked at him, surprised, and glanced at d'Artagnan. The latter, comprehending that Athos did not wish to speak before the boy, made a gesture which Porthos comprehended.

"My son—" Athos held out his hand to that of Raoul— "I am about to make a request of you. Some important business detains me and these gentlemen here. Therefore, I am going to ask that you go on to Paris with Grimaud. I will follow you soon, rejoin you, and together we will go to our future home."

"A little thing to ask, *mon père*," replied the boy, smiling. "But I do not like to leave you so soon after finding you!"

"It will not be for long, I promise you," said Athos.

Porthos gaped in astonishment at all this. Grimaud stumbled in, wiping his lips, and came to the table. Athos regarded him sternly, and for once did not spare words.

"Grimaud, you have served me faithfully; upon your service today depends your entire future. Succeed, and you shall never lack. Fail, and I myself will kill you. Do you comprehend?"

"Perfectly, monsieur," said Grimaud, with a bow.

"Very well. You will take my son, here, to Paris. Proceed to the Hotel of the Musketeers. At noon tomorrow, or at noon of whatever day you reach there, Gervais will arrive."

This was altogether too much for the taciturnity of Grimaud.

"Monsieur!" he exclaimed. "Not—not Gervais—your father's steward."

"The same," said Athos. "If I do not arrive within three days, you and Gervais will take the Vicomte de Bragelonne home to my uncle, and he will become the Comte de la Fère. However, I will arrive. That is all."

He turned to the boy.

"My son, you have heard. Eat quickly; you must depart at once."

Raoul began to eat the bread which had been placed on the table. Grimaud departed; in five minutes he reappeared at the entrance with a sign signifying that the horse was ready. Athos took Raoul by the hand and conducted him to the doorway. There the boy looked back and bowed.

"*Au revoir, messieurs!*" came his sweet boyish voice.

The others bowed. Then they looked at one another as they resumed their seats.

"WHAT the devil does this mean?" demanded Porthos.

"The devil," said d'Artagnan.

Athos came back into the room.

"There is no one coming as yet," he observed and, advancing to the table, sat down calmly as if nothing remained to be said.

"Well, well!" said d'Artagnan testily. "I confess that I do not comprehend all this, my dear Athos. We see a gentleman departing; we find that he stopped here for the night; Grimaud had seen this man at Nevers, at Arceuil and at Paris. So—"

Athos smiled at him gently.

"So, my son, I take warning! Why was that man here? We do not know. Not to watch us, certainly. Since Grimaud has thrice encountered him, he was obviously watching us upon those occasions, however. Therefore, he is a Cardinalist. Where Montforge is, we do not know. You did not meet him on your way from Paris; but his errand is certainly to get hold of Raoul. Good! Where the danger is unseen, it is omnipresent."

"Eh? Eh?" Porthos opened his eyes wide. "So that is it—that man! I thought I had seen him somewhere myself. But, Athos, regard! Why do we not all of us ride with the child?"

"They want him, not us," explained Athos. "That man was stationed here for some purpose; I think to take the child and ride on, in case Montforge and his companions were pursued after getting the boy. You comprehend? He recognized us, he knew we had got ahead of them. Therefore Montforge must have been ahead of us after all, perhaps was delayed or caught by the storm. At all events, that man must have ridden to bring him up."

"And," added d'Artagnan, "we would have to do some hard riding to reach Paris ahead, eh?"

"Exactly," affirmed Athos. "I chose to place Raoul in safety. In case Montforge comes, he will think Raoul is here. I do not care to be pursued all my life, my friends; I must meet this man and kill him. It is no longer your affair. Mount, I counsel you, and ride."

"Bah!" said d'Artagnan. "You forget I have my own account with him. Porthos, leave us! Ride after Grimaud."

"Will you have the goodness to go to the devil?" roared Porthos angrily. "One for all; all for one! Am I a fool, a coward, a poltroon? Devil fly away with me, if I leave you! Besides," he added thoughtfully, "there is nothing to show your fine theories are right, Athos."

Athos shrugged.

"Granted. We shall wait an hour; if no one arrives, we go on our way."

"And if they do come, then?"

Athos only shrugged again and said nothing.

D'Artagnan could very well imagine that the man who had spent the night there knew exactly whither he was riding. He eyed the huge room, and laughed shortly.

"Athos," he said, "we could hold this fortress against an army! Here are the capons; the wine is good; what more do we lack?"

"Pistols," said Athos laconically. "All our powder was wet in that accursed rain last night."

So saying, he applied himself to the meal set before them. He was entirely composed; but in his composure was something terrible.

D'Artagnan was by no means composed. He knew that in Montforge they had an adversary as crafty as he was determined; a man no doubt armed with powers from the cardinal, who would stop at nothing to accomplish his end. As he ate and drank, d'Artagnan thought; and the result was a sudden exclamation which made the others look up.

"*Vivadiou!* I forgot something. Host!"

At his call, the fat host came hurriedly. D'Artagnan laid a gold piece on the table.

"Come, my friend, another like this if your memory is good. The gentleman who was here last night did not give his name?"

"No, monsieur. He arrived just before the storm and went to his room and remained there."

"Then you have rooms? Where?"

"There, monsieur." The host pointed to the rear door. "Two good ones."

"Ah! And this man said nothing about any companions?"

"Nothing, monsieur. True, he expected a company of gentlemen this afternoon and inquired if I had plenty of fowl ready. As you can see, monsieur, we were making the extra spit—"

"Gentlemen? How many?"

"A score or more, monsieur."

"*Ma foi!* From Paris?"

"No, monsieur. I think he said they would be riding for Paris."

D'Artagnan, in consternation, looked at Athos. The latter, however, calmly took out his purse and put it in the hand of the host.

"There is payment in advance, my good man."

"In advance, monsieur!"

"Exactly. For the damage that will be done here. You may leave us."

The host was so astonished that he quite forgot to ask after the other half piece promised by d'Artagnan.

"You see?" said Athos. "A score of men at least, perhaps more. Montforge could not get the ring made, or would not wait for it. He went to seize the boy, took plenty of men, and depended on his authority from Richelieu. We may yet have to hold your army in check, d'Artagnan."

"Good. We are at your orders, my dear Athos."

"Then I propose that as soon as we appease our hunger, we inspect our defenses."

Porthos was already raising an entrenchment of bones and empty bottles.

IN TWENTY minutes the three friends quitted the table and began their examination. As Athos pointed out, they could hope to hold only this main room of the inn; therefore they looked first at the small doorway by the fireplace. This was regrettably weak, being a makeshift door without bar or bolt. Porthos remedied the lack by overturning the oak table and placing it against the door, whereupon the host appeared with loud wails.

"Be off," d'Artagnan said to him. "Be off, or you will be lucky to escape with your hide!"

"But send us more wine first," added Porthos.

"Alas, monsieur, I can not reach the cellar. You have blocked the door!"

"Then go around; dolt!" cried d'Artagnan angrily. "You have been well paid in advance; get the wine and set it in the courtyard."

They examined the main entrance, and here they found that the double doors, iron mounted, were almost fitted to withstand grenades. The courtyard was small. Along one side were stables, a high pile of manure before them. On the other flank were the pump and troughs. At the apex of the triangle were the gates, solid barriers on well oiled hinges. The inn entrance occupied the base of this triangle.

"The walls can be climbed," said Athos, sweeping a glance around. "D'Artagnan, you will open the *pourparlers*, while we stand ready to shut the gates. We will defend the courtyard first, since our aim is to gain time. When we can no longer hold this position, we will retreat to the inn."

"That is," added Porthos, "if the enemy appears!"

"They have appeared," said d'Artagnan, and pointed to a large body of men just sweeping around a bend in the road, a quarter mile distant.

APPLYING themselves to the gates, the three friends closed one, leaving the other slightly ajar; beside this, Porthos stood in readiness with the beam of wood which served to hold both closed.

Seeing these preparations and sighting the horsemen approaching at a gallop, the host and hostlers were no longer in doubt as to what portended; they vanished hastily. Athos eyed the enemy.

"Twenty-three or four," he said. "Good! When the attack opens, gentlemen, I will retire and hold the rear entrenchment; for they will certainly surround the place and attempt entrance from the rear."

"And I," said Porthos, indicating the pile of manure which lay close to the wall, "will hold this side. The other to you, d'Artagnan."

D'Artagnan advanced to the half open gate.

The enemy were now at close quarters; sighting d'Artagnan, they drew rein,

perhaps expecting to be greeted by pistol shots. At their head d'Artagnan recognized the Comte de Montforge, with the cavalier who had lately departed from the tavern. The others, he perceived, were neither gentlemen nor soldiers, but hastily gathered riffraff of Paris—lackeys, *bretteurs*, who could ride and use sword.

While his men dismounted, Montforge rode on alone and halted a few paces from the gateway.

"Good morning, M. d'Artagnan," he said.

"And to you, monsieur," responded d'Artagnan politely. "You have come, no doubt, to finish our interrupted conversation?"

"Unfortunately, monsieur, that is not the case. I am engaged in an errand for his Eminence, and until it is finished, am not my own master."

"In that case, monsieur," said d'Artagnan, "pray do not let me detain you."

Montforge became very angry.

"Monsieur," he exclaimed sharply, "let me warn you that I am acting by the express orders of his Eminence."

"Who is not the ruler of France," said d'Artagnan calmly. "As you may know, monsieur, I am an officer of Musketeers, whose officers take rank over those of other corps. However, I must confess that your words cause me extreme astonishment. One would imagine that I am obstructing or hindering you, when I am doing nothing of the sort. In fact, monsieur, I shall be only too glad to further you in every way possible, since I have only the liveliest good feeling toward his Eminence."

Montforge listened to this speech with suppressed rage, but managed to control himself. He was about to speak when the bellow of Porthos broke forth from the wall to their right.

"Far enough, gentlemen! Halt, or I fire!"

In effect, several of Montforge's companions had come close. D'Artagnan was astonished to see the figure of Porthos looming up above the wall, in his hands a huge old fashioned harquebus. This weapon had been hanging above the fireplace in the tavern, and besides being at present empty, had certainly not been used since the time of the League; the enemy, however, were not aware of this, and promptly halted.

"You were about to say, monsieur—" prompted d'Artagnan.

"That you have misunderstood me," returned Montforge. "Or rather, you know very well what I want. I have an order from his Eminence to arrest the person of a boy named Raoul d'Aram."

"Monsieur," said d'Artagnan, "that is interesting information; but do you expect me to believe the word of an assassin?"

A tide of red suffused the face of Montforge. Then, taking a paper from his pocket, he came close to the gate and handed it to d'Artagnan.

"LET US cease this byplay, monsieur," Montforge said acidly. "You took this child from St. Saforin; he was seen to arrive here with you; he is inside this place. There is my authority, and I demand in the name of the cardinal that you deliver him to me."

D'Artagnan opened the document and found that Montforge spoke the truth.

"Very well, monsieur," he said, with a bow, as he returned the paper. "I have every respect for the orders of his Eminence, I assure you."

"Good. You will deliver the child at once?"

"Eh?" D'Artagnan assumed an expression of surprise. "I? But, my dear M. de Montforge, this order has nothing to do with me! The boy is not here, I assure you! He is now on the way to Paris; if you hurry after him, you have every chance in the world of catching him!"

"Bah!" said the other, with a gesture of contempt. "I am astonished, monsieur, that a gentleman of your reputation would stoop to lies!"

"No less astonished, monsieur," returned d'Artagnan, "than I am that a gentleman of your name would acquire the reputation which you possess."

The angry features of Montforge went livid at this thrust.

"Then you refuse to obey the orders of the cardinal?" he cried.

"No, monsieur," said d'Artagnan. "I refuse to obey the dictates of a dishonored assassin."

With the rapidity of light, Montforge drew a pistol from its saddle holster and fired.

D'Artagnan, however, had glided into the opening behind him; the bullet struck the planks and was deflected. At the same instant the gate swung shut and Porthos hurried from his perch to help with the beam. It fell into place.

Athos departed to the interior, Porthos to his pile of manure. From outside, sounded shouts and orders. The assailants crowded close about the gates, found them solid and, being unable to force an entrance, sought to create one.

The first man to reach the top of the wall did so, unluckily for himself, opposite Porthos. The giant, whirling the heavy harquebus about his head like a feather, loosed it suddenly; the missile struck the unfortunate man, knocked him from the wall, and when his comrades ran to him, they found his body a crushed and lifeless mass.

The battle was opened.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ASTONISHING EFFECT OF A KICK UPON A DEAD MAN

THE WALL of the courtyard was ten feet in height. Within two minutes the head and shoulders of a man appeared on the side of Porthos; another appeared opposite d'Artagnan. They then remained stationary, without attempting to scale the wall.

"Come, descend!" roared Porthos, who had drawn his sword. "Over with you, rascals!"

"We are too polite, monsieur," said the man on his side, and he turned to look back at his comrades who supported him. "They have no pistols," he said. "Quickly!"

The man opposite d'Artagnan said nothing, but took a pistol handed up to him, leveled it at d'Artagnan and fired.

The bullet pierced the Musketeer's hat.

"Another!" exclaimed the man.

D'Artagnan ground his teeth with rage. He perceived instantly that without powder they could not defend the courtyard. The enemy had no intention of risking a hand to hand combat when these two men on the wall could shoot down the defenders without peril to themselves.

"Back, Porthos!" he exclaimed sharply. "Take shelter!"

"Am I a crab to run backward? Name of the devil!" cried Porthos furiously. "We held the Bastion St. Gervais against an army. Can not we hold this fortress against a rabble?"

His adversary on the wall grinned at him and raised a pistol upon the parapet.

"Here is a flea too large to miss!" he observed. "*Vive le cardinal!*"

The explosion of the weapon drowned his words. Porthos, as though buffeted by an invisible hand, was knocked backward and rolled to the bottom of the manure pile. D'Artagnan ran to him, but Porthos rose, holding the hilt of his sword. The bullet had struck the blade and shattered it.

"*Vive le roi!*" bellowed Porthos. "Cowards! Traitors! Murderers—"

At this instant the man on the right flank fired again.

Porthos spun around, took two or three steps, and then fell headlong at the inn entrance. Dropping his weapon, d'Artagnan caught him by the shoulders and dragged him inside. The face of Porthos was covered with blood.

"Athos! To the doors!"

"Impossible," came the calm response of Athos. "I am—"

There was a crash. The massive table, blocking the small door beside the hearth, flew backward and fell to one side. The door behind it was carried off its hinges. D'Artagnan saw the end of a beam forced into the room, carried by several men, who stumbled along with it.

Athos, standing beside the opening. lunged as coolly as though he were in a *salle d'armes*. The first man fell forward on his face. The second plunged across him, clutching at his throat. Above and across them fell the beam.

"Hail Mary!" screamed the third man, as Athos' sword transfixed him.

Fascinated by this spectacle, d'Artagnan suddenly turned to his own flank. In the courtyard, two men had dropped over the walls and were unfastening the gates. Pulling Porthos farther inside, d'Artagnan closed the massive doors of the inn, dropped the bar in place, and caught at his sword as the voice of Athos reached him.

"D'Artagnan! They are preparing to fire—"

Two or three pistols were discharged together, the balls whistling through the chamber and flattening on the stone walls. After them, a man came rushing through the opening, sword in hand; he hesitated before the obscurity of the place, and Athos ran him through the heart. This made the fourth body upon the heap.

"Good!" said Athos coolly. "They burst down our door, and replace it with their own bodies. That is fair. Porthos, is he dead?"

"I do not know," confessed d'Artagnan. "I think he is."

A tremendous clang resounded through the room. The enemy were battering at the closed doors.

"Inside, there!" As the summons came to them through the half closed passage, d'Artagnan trembled with fury; he recognized the voice of Montforge. "Surrender at once, or I will give no quarter!"

"It is we who make offers; we do not receive them," returned Athos imperturbably.

"Fire!" shouted Montforge.

A number of pistols were discharged. Athos staggered, turned half around, then took two steps and dropped into a chair by a table against the side wall.

"Athos!" With a terrible cry of grief, d'Artagnan ran to his friend. Athos, lifting his head, pushed him away.

"Quick, to your post!" he cried. "I am not yet dead."

Laying his sword upon the table, Athos tore open his shirt and calmly began to bandage two wounds, one in his thigh, the other in his left shoulder. A thunderous sound re-echoed through the room; the massive doors were beginning to bend beneath the battering of the men outside.

D'ARTAGNAN darted to the rear entrance. He was barely in time; two men were scrambling over the pile of bodies, and with a cry of joy d'Artagnan recognized one of them as Montforge.

"This time you will not escape me, assassin!" he cried.

For response, Montforge lifted a pistol and fired; but the powder flashed in the pan. His comrade flung himself upon d'Artagnan, slipped in a pool of blood, and spitted himself upon the rapier of the Musketeer as he fell. He lay upon the floor, coughing terribly in the fumes of powder, and presently coughed no more.

No others came through the rear entrance.

Dropping his pistol, Montforge attacked d'Artagnan, sword in hand.

"Now for your comb, my cockerel!" he exclaimed mockingly. Then he staggered. The rapier of d'Artagnan struck him exactly over the heart, but it did not pierce.

"So!" cried d'Artagnan furiously. "I forgot that you were a coward and wore mail beneath your shirt."

"In the throat, my son!" came the voice of Athos, who was watching them. "In the throat!"

Montforge turned his head for an instant, and saw Athos sitting at the table.

"Your turn next, my friend," he cried.

For an instant, d'Artagnan despaired of his life, so deadly was the attack of Montforge that now overwhelmed him. For all his skill, he could scarce parry those incredible lunges, those ripostes which rippled from a wrist of steel. He was driven back, was forced to remain upon the defensive; and all the while there thundered a louder and louder clamor as

the doors began to yield, their ancient iron hinges bending and breaking.

Suddenly the foot of d'Artagnan slipped. He fell heavily upon hands and knees. The rapier was dashed from his hand by the force of his fall. Montforge drew back a pace. Then, as d'Artagnan was in the act of rising, he leaned forward and plunged his sword into the young man's breast.

A terrible cry burst from Athos, as he saw d'Artagnan fall prostrate.

Next instant, Montforge found himself confronted by a frightful spectacle—a man, half naked, blood upon shoulder and leg, whose eyes blazed from a livid countenance. So awful was the aspect of Athos in this instant that Montforge recoiled a step.

"Assassin!" cried Athos, and engaged that sword, wet with the blood of d'Artagnan.

In this moment Athos, ever a magnificent swordsman, was swept to superhuman heights by his grief and fury. Thrice his blade swept about the blade of Montforge, thrust it aside, lunged for the throat; thrice Montforge evaded those inimitable attacks. Suddenly the arm of Athos moved. His blade seemed to curl about that of Montforge, then tore it from the latter's hand and sent it flying across the room.

"Life for life!" said Athos in a hollow voice, and drove his point into the throat of Montforge.

He drew the blade clear of the falling man. For an instant he looked down at Montforge, then he threw the weapon aside.

"I have dishonored my sword for the first time," he murmured, "but I have avenged my friend!"

And quietly, with a smile upon his lips, he came to his knees, drooped and fell forward.

AT THIS instant the doors at the entrance sagged down. The cross bar held, but the hinges of one door burst, and those of the other cracked. This enormous mass of wood and iron swung inward one side; it checked, caught, hung there by the cracked hinges of the other door, giving access to those without by the one open side. They attempted to shove it down, but it resisted. They gave up the effort and flooded into the room.

"Ah! Ah!" cried the first man in, as he stumbled across the figure of Porthos. "Here is the big rascal I purged with a leaden pill!"

And he kicked the body of Porthos heavily. At this kick, Porthos opened his eyes, but no one perceived him, for the scene before them had now drawn the attention of all those men, and with confused oaths and cries they hastened across the room.

The scene was frightful; it appeared that no living person remained here to greet them.

D'Artagnan lay upon his face, a trickle of blood coming from beneath his arm. Athos lay across the legs of Montforge. Behind them, the dead men and the fallen beam were piled in the rear entrance.

"The captain is dead!" cried one of the throng in consternation.

"They are all dead!" cried another.

"Name of the devil, then who pays us?" shouted a third. "Get the captain's purse, take what we find!"

And all of them with one accord clustered about the body of Montforge, to plunder the dead.

Near the entrance, Porthos came to one knee, then gained his feet. He was almost unhurt; the ball that stunned him had barely cut the scalp, letting blood but doing no worse damage. As now, among those struggling, plundering figures, he saw the half naked form of Athos and the fallen body of d'Artagnan, his eyes distended, a flood of color rushed into his face, and from his lips burst a wild and horrible cry.

"Murderers, you shall pay for this!"

Unarmed as he was, he rushed forward.

Next instant, even through the madness of his despair and rage he could perceive his folly, for they heard his cry and swung about, snarling like wolves. Swords

glittered; a pistol crashed out, but the ball went wild. Porthos, evading the lunge of a rapier, caught sight of the huge spit leaning against the fireplace. He hurled himself toward it, reached it, and grasped it in both hands.

This pointed bar of steel, which one man could scarce lift, whirled about his head like a sliver of wood. The nearest bravo, rushing upon Porthos with sword extended, was struck full across the face by this terrific weapon.

A fearful scream burst from the others. Instead of crowding forward, they crowded back, away from this giant who flung himself upon them, face empurpled, foam slavering his lips. Porthos was in the grip of one of those convulsive rages in which he was no longer a man but a destroying angel.

He leaped among them, striking.

Now in the obscurity of this room, through the fumes of powder, ascended fearful and hideous sounds; the revolting reek of fresh blood stank in the nostrils of men. Amid the rising cloud of dust might be discerned frantic shapes rushing to and fro. The piercing sharpness of cries and screams followed swift upon thudding crunches as that grisly weapon fell, now here, now there, crushing out life and human shape.

Panic fell upon the men; they crowded about the entrance, and there Porthos fell upon them and scattered them, and slew two as they fought madly together at the narrow opening. At this, their blind panic was changed into the instinct of the wild beast to destroy that which is destroying him. Their weapons had been flung away or dropped. None the less, they came crowding upon the dim and terrible figure of Porthos, gripping at him before and behind. He thrust the pointed bar and transfixed one man so that he screamed and writhed like some helpless beetle dying upon a pin, but there the steel spit was torn out of his hand and lost.

In this chamber of dust and blood and death, Porthos uprose among the dozen that tore at him, a giant among pigmies. Suddenly something was seen to move in the air above their heads, and there sounded a rushing as it were of wings, and the pitiful wail of a man sharply rising. Then they fell back from around him in mad horror, for Porthos, stooping, had plucked up a man by the ankles and was swinging him about his head, and beating with this flail of flesh and bone upon those before him, and crushing them down. Upon this, they fled.

ABRUPTLY, the madness went out of Porthos. He dropped the broken body from his hands, wiped the blood and sweat out of his eyes and stood, peering around him in a sort of half comprehending abhorrence. A trembling seized upon him. A dying man was shrieking at his feet, and he turned away, crossing himself with shaking hand.

"*Mon Dieu*, what have I done!" he groaned.

He went to the doors, wrenched at them. In a spasmodic effort he put forth his strength and tore them from the remaining hinges; the mass of iron and wood swung at him, he checked and turned it, and with a heave of his shoulders sent it over with a resounding crash. He stumbled out into the sunlight, wiping his streaming face.

Upon his benumbed brain broke sharply the remembrance of Athos and d'Artagnan. He turned, went back into that place of death, and presently bore forth the body of Athos in his arms; the body breathed, and with a sob of relief Porthos laid it down and went back inside. He paid no heed to the remaining assailants, nor cared that these were escaping by the rear entrance. He searched until he found d'Artagnan, picked him up, and carried him outside, where he set him down beside Athos.

Panting, he stood and gazed around with bloodshot eyes. From the interior of the inn came a low groaning of stricken men. From outside the wall of the courtyard lifted the sound of men running; five figures came into sight through the shattered gates, making for the clump of

grazing horses. There were five survivors of Montforge's party.

Porthos paid no heed to these things. He went to the pump, plunged his head into the trough, and, dripping, brought back water which he dashed over Athos and d'Artagnan. The latter stirred, moved, and suddenly sat up, blinking around.

"*Ma foi!* Where am I?" he exclaimed. "Is that you, Porthos?"

Porthos, seeing that d'Artagnan was not greatly hurt, was kneeling over Athos and bandaging the two wounds of the latter.

"Yes, it is I," said Porthos gloomily. "I thought you were dead, my friend."

"Evidently I am not," said d'Artagnan, and surveyed himself. "Ah! There's a scrape along my ribs at least."

He opened his clothes, to disclose a wound, alarming in appearance but not at all dangerous, where the sword of Montforge had glided along his ribs.

"My new suit is certainly ruined," he observed. "Well, I must obey the example of M. de Bassompierre, who never wears a suit more than once or twice!"

He drew from his pocket the folded vellum sheet of the Thounenin will. It was disfigured by a cut where the sword had passed through, and was stained with blood, but was none the less readable.

"Good!" said d'Artagnan. "And Montforge, where is he? What has happened?"

"He is dead," said Porthos.

He suddenly desisted from his work, and began a frantic search of his person. He explored pockets, looked everywhere; at length he stared at d'Artagnan with an expression of such terror that d'Artagnan despite his wound, struggled to his feet.

"What is the matter, Porthos?" he exclaimed in alarm. "What has happened?"

"Ah!" Porthos uttered a groan. "I am lost!"

"Why, in heaven's name? You are hurt?"

"I am lost," repeated Porthos in a sepulchral voice, and showed a broken silver chain which he had taken from beneath his shirt. "The portrait of Madame du Vallon, which I swore never to remove from about my neck—well, it is gone!"

D'Artagnan gaped at him, then suddenly broke into a laugh.

"It is no laughing matter, I assure you," said Porthos. "You do not understand these things."

D'Artagnan laughed the harder. At this instant he perceived that Athos had opened his eyes and, kneeling, he clasped the bandaged figure in his arms.

Porthos departed to search for his lost portrait, but he did not find it.

EPILOG

THE THREE friends reached the Hotel de Treville late the following afternoon, for it was necessary to obtain a coach before Athos could be transported. Thanks to the miraculous balsam of d'Artagnan, his wounds promised to be in no way serious, but they effectually prevented him from keeping the saddle for some days.

At the Hotel of the Musketeers they learned that Grimaud and Raoul had arrived, had met Gervais at noon and had departed with him. Since Athos did not know the whereabouts of his uncle's steward, it was necessary to await his return on the following day.

They discovered, further, that Mousqueton had thrice arrived in search of Porthos, and on the third occasion the former Madame Coquenard had come also, promising to return very shortly. At this news Porthos was in some consternation.

D'Artagnan had his wound dressed anew; and immediately after dinner that night he prepared two missives. The first contained no writing; it held only the outer sheet of the Thounenin will, and was addressed to Mme. la Duchesse de Chevreuse. at her château of Dampierre. As Athos rightly said, the sword thrust and the blood staining the document told their own story.

The second epistle was a letter addressed to his Eminence Cardinal de Richelieu. In it d'Artagnan wrote:

Monseigneur:

I have the honor to report that the two errands which you had the goodness to confide to me have been performed.

The verbal message was delivered. There was apparently no response, since the person to whom it was addressed was subject to fainting spells. The letter to a person in Paris was also delivered. As your Eminence said nothing of any answer, I did not await one but departed immediately.

I regret that I have not the honor to deliver this report in person, owing to a wound received at the hands of certain *bretteurs* who attacked me. I await your orders, Monseigneur being your very humble and very obedient servant, —ARTAGNAN.

D'Artagnan showed this letter to Athos, who read it attentively.

"You must rewrite it."

"How?" said d'Artagnan. "What have I misspelled?"

"Nothing. You must change the wording to read 'a severe wound . . . which confines me to my bed.' It will make an excellent impression upon his Eminence. No one knows exactly what happened among you, Bassompierre and Mlle. de Sirle—except Bassompierre, who does not know all. Richelieu will probably deem you sufficiently punished. If he discovers that Raoul was not the son of her Majesty, but of Chevreuse—well, you may be entirely safe!"

"But I am not confined to my bed—"

"Confine yourself for the night. Our complaisant surgeon will gladly add a notation to this effect."

"But you, Athos—"

"I leave the service, my son. As soon as I am able to write, my resignation goes in. There is nothing to fear, believe me! If the king dies, Richelieu is lost. If the king lives—then greater men than you and I are lost, and in the stench of their blood we are forgotten, I promise you!"

D'Artagnan did not entirely agree with this reasoning, but he perceived the force of the advice, and promptly followed it.

Neither he nor Athos saw Porthos again at this time, for when they arose next morning, it was to learn that a coach had arrived very early, a lady had alighted and asked for Porthos, and that Porthos, summoned from his bed, had mounted into the coach with the lady and departed. He did not leave so much as a note for his friends, but Grimaud, who witnessed the scene, said that Porthos had flung both arms toward heaven as though in supplication, and had then meekly obeyed the orders of the lady.

A week later Athos departed for his estates, d'Artagnan for his duty.

UPON the day Louis XIII was expected to die at Lyon, at almost the very hour predicted for his death by the physicians, he unexpectedly recovered; but he made his mother a secret promise that as soon as peace was concluded with the Empire, he would dismiss Richelieu.

The court returned to Paris, the king going to Versailles, the queen mother to her palace of the Luxembourg. She dissembled, and pretended great friendship for the cardinal. Alarmed by this, Richelieu investigated, heard of the promise made by Louis XIII, and dispatched a courier to Ratisbon ordering Père Joseph not to sign the treaty.

It had already been signed. Marie de Médici sent imperatively for her son.

On the morning of November 10 the king arrived quietly at the Luxembourg, accompanied only by Bassompierre. Richelieu, already warned, made haste to be present at this interview, but when he reached the Luxembourg, it was too late. The doors of the ante-chamber were locked. The king and Marie de Médici were alone in the latter's cabinet; orders were given that no one was to be allowed entrance.

Here in the heart of this vast palace, secure from the disturbing influence of Richelieu or others, Marie de Médici indicated the desk beside the window, and commanded her son to sit down and write the dismissal of the minister. Louis, who feared the tongue of his

mother above all things, yielded and took his seat.

At this instant a small door opened in the wall. The door led by a private passage into the chapel of the Luxembourg, and had not been locked. In the opening was framed the scarlet clad figure of Richelieu.

"He is here; all is lost!" exclaimed the king.

Pretending not to hear these words, Richelieu smiled and came forward.

"Your Majesties, I believe, were speaking of me?" he observed.

Marie de Médici was infuriated by the audacity of this man whom she had raised to power. The intrusion upon her privacy outraged her pride; the upsetting of her plans kindled her virulence; she flew into a paroxysm of rage and unloosed upon Richelieu all the floodgates of her hatred and wrath.

She berated him, reproached him, accused him, in a storm of the most violent passion imaginable. Her storm of fury could not be checked or averted. Richelieu fell upon his knees before her; his excuses, even his tears, only added fire to her rage. Perceiving himself lost, he rose and demanded permission to retire.

The king dared not reply. The queen mother loosed a fresh storm of passion. His features livid, Richelieu bowed and quitted the room.

Upon the following day the king signed an order placing Louis de Marillac in command of the army, as Marie de Médici had demanded; this order recalled Schomberg and La Force, who were Richelieu's adherents. Louis XIII then departed for Versailles; he was followed by Michael de Marillac, named by Marie de Médici as minister in the place of Richelieu. The great cardinal had fallen.

THAT day the hotel of Richelieu was deserted. The entire court thronged to the Luxembourg, paying their addresses to Marie de Médici, complimenting her, surrounding her with adulation. The Spanish ambassador was overjoyed. Anne of Austria smiled for the first time in months. Couriers were sent forth to carry the news to Madrid, Vienna, London. All Paris rejoiced at the ruin of the hated cardinal.

Richelieu knew that he was lost. He prepared to take refuge at Le Havre; his mules, laden with his most valuable effects, set forth upon the Pontoise road. He gave orders to prepare his coach. He was on the point of departure, when St. Simon arrived from Versailles ordering him to the presence of the king.

When Richelieu arrived, Louis XIII ordered that they be left alone together.

Marie de Médici was holding triumphant court at the Luxembourg, surrounded by the nobles of the realm and throngs of sycophant courtiers; she was intoxicated by victory and paused at nothing in venting her hatred of the fallen minister. And at the same moment, the king was signing orders at Versailles which were being dictated by Richelieu; unknown to any, not only was the cardinal reinstated in power, but this power was made absolute. Marshal de Marillac was arrested and sent to Paris a prisoner. Michael de Marillac was deprived of the seals and banished. This 11th of November, 1630, was named by Bassompierre "The Day of Dupes"; unfortunately for himself, he was one of the dupes.

Richelieu had turned disaster into triumph; and those who had caused his disaster now paid.

The Duc de Guise fled into exile. Marie de Médici was arrested, to die in exile. Those about her were struck down right and left. Bassompierre, warned, might have fled; he preferred to go home and destroy the six thousand love letters he had received from ladies. He spent the next twelve years in writing his memoirs in a room of the Bastille, of which he had at one time been the governor.

ON THE morning after the arrest of Bassompierre, d'Artagnan was summoned to the cabinet of the cardinal. He destroyed all his letters and papers, then obeyed the summons.

"Good morning, M. d'Artagnan," said Richelieu affably. "I understand that you escorted M. de Bassompierre to the Bastille yesterday?"

The young man bowed.

"I had that honor, your Eminence, though it was Sieur de Launay who executed the order of arrest."

"I sent for you, monsieur, hoping you might enlighten me upon a certain subject. You have, I perceive, quite recovered from your recent wound?"

"Your Eminence does me too much honor in remembering such trifles," returned d'Artagnan, feeling a cold chill.

"Not at all, not at all," said Richelieu, smoothly. "It has been brought to my attention, monsieur, that a Musketeer of your company has left the service and assumed the title of the Comte de la Fère. Is not this the gentleman known as Athos?"

"Yes, Monseigneur," replied d'Artagnan, whose brow was now beaded with perspiration.

"Ah!" said Richelieu musingly. "He has, it appears, adopted a son."

In these words d'Artagnan perceived that the cardinal knew everything.

"Your Eminence," he said, in a sort of desperation, "only those who are truly great can know the meaning of generosity. My friend Athos is the noblest man alive; he is incapable of the least deceit, pettiness or dishonor; he is even incapable of ambition, which is the most petty of all things in his eyes. If your Eminence would have the graciousness to grant Athos a recompense for his years of service, I believe he would appreciate it above all things."

"How?" asked Richelieu, with a slight frown. "A recompense? A pension, you mean?"

"Not at all, Monseigneur," said d'Artagnan. "Your Eminence is a statesman, a minister, a great man; but before these things, a cardinal. If your Eminence would but send to the son of Athos, the Vicomte de Bragelonne, your benediction, I am certain that Athos would esteem it above all other things!"

Richelieu looked truly astonished. His gaze rested upon the features of d'Artagnan, and then, with one of his rare impulses, he smiled and held out his hand to the young man.

"Monsieur," he said, "there are less charming things in the world than the frank audacity of youth. I shall accept your advice in this matter. Have you nothing to ask for yourself?"

"Faith, Monseigneur," said the astonished d'Artagnan, "there is nothing I need, since you do me the honor of commending me!"

This interview cost d'Artagnan above three hundred crowns. Among the papers he had destroyed was a receipt from his tailor; two weeks later the tailor claimed his bill for the second time and, having burned the receipt, d'Artagnan was forced to pay again. However, he did not regret the loss.

THE END

R. V. GERY

gives us another story of that ruthless but curiously fascinating Cockney, Griggs, and his lonely isle in the Java Seas

The PLAY ACTRESS

"LIFE'S a damn' queer deal!"

Griggs leaned back in a crazy canvas chair as he delivered this profound sentiment. It was three years since I had seen him, and he had told me with such ingenuousness the story of his double murder of Four-Times-He and the Portuguese; and a whim to discover whether he still inhabited the ramshackle bungalow on that beach in Java had led me to anchor the *Kittiwake* offshore and have myself rowed in.

Sure enough, he met me at the water edge. Paunchier than of yore and, if possible, grimier; with the heavy pouches under the eye that tell their tale to the least skilled observer of the white man in the tropics; but still with the air of hot eyed and insolent cunning that had attracted me to him in the first place.

I had taken the precaution to bring three or four bottles of Scotch ashore with me; and we now sat amid the litter before his unkempt mansion, looking at the sun falling like a crimson orange into a steel gray sea, while Griggs entertained me royally with—I must believe—the unvarnished history of his three years *fantee*. Under our feet, in the company of various mongrel curs, squirmed and wriggled a couple of children, their pale gold skin showing through layers of unmitigated uncleanliness; and the yellow

girl Om-dong, more matronly but as graceful as ever, grinned at me as she padded in and out of the house.

Griggs drank and breathed deeply.

"Yus," he said. "Seen some funny things 'appen, I 'ave." He laughed in idle reminiscence, his disproportionate stomach shaking under the thin singlet. "Lot of 'em 'twouldn't do to tell. Even you," he added prettily.

Om-dong dragged a stool out and sat on it, her expressionless brown eyes on the whisky bottle. Griggs winked at me and handed it to her, to see her set the neck to her mouth and take off as satisfactory a four fingers as any practised toper could have compassed. Griggs grinned appreciatively, as one that displays the engaging tricks of a favored pet.

"Little devil, ain't she?" he remarked admiringly. "You'd be surprised now."

I looked at the girl. Slightly flat faced from some forgotten Mongolian ancestor, she had the level set eyes of the Aryan; and the neck and shoulders, exposed by her ill fitting *sari*, were molded like those of a European. Something caught my eye, and I turned to Griggs.

"Good Lord!" I said. "Where under the sun did she get that necklace?"

Griggs favored me with the impenetrable stare he reserves for his more magnificent lies.

"Nice bit of glass, ain't it?" he inquired.

Now my knowledge of precious stones may not qualify me for an appraiser's post with Tiffany's, but I am not altogether unfamiliar with diamonds. Therefore, knowing by now the technique of extracting pay dirt from Griggs, I maintained an adamantine silence. Griggs puffed at his cheroot and gulped whisky and water, and the sun's rim cut the shadowy line of the horizon.

At last the cockney chuckled.

"Might's well tell you," he said affably. "You didn't split on me over Four-Times-He, and I reckon you won't over this." He drank again gaspingly, fell silent once more, and then asked, "D'j'ever hear tell of a woman called Julie Laplante?"

CONSIDERING that the lady in question had devastated the world's front pages six months before, I rather fancied I had. She was a theatrical artiste of the more flamboyant order, much given to globe trotting, and still more to exotic amours with odd affinities round about the world; her affair with the Europeanized heir to one of the smaller Rajput states had even stirred the Indian Government to take a friendly hand, and she had left Karachi for Karachi's good and her own. When next heard of, she and her manager—apparently a gentleman of no inconsiderable astuteness—were at Singapore, and they sailed thence for Perth in West Australia, upon what trail was never revealed.

Two days out of Batavia their boat, the *Murray River*, ran into the Sunda Sea at its almighty worst, and may or may not have turned turtle. In any event, no one of her complement returned with an account of the ship's fate. The papers, remembering their series of scoops over the Rajputana business, gave Julie space for a day or so; and I recollected seeing somewhere an inventory of the jewelry fabled to be possessed by her, and then forgot all about her. I told Griggs I believed I had heard the name.

"That there—bit o' glass—was 'ers," he announced. "It ain't now. An' damme if I knows 'ow to realize on it. It oughter be worth no end," he went on, "judgin' by the fuss they made over it."

I leaned over and took the thing in my hand. There were eighteen big stones, with the diamond's undeniable soapy feel, and unless I was very much mistaken their water and cutting were something out of the way.

"Yes," I said, "I don't think you'll find that so very easy to dispose of. It must be a marked piece."

"So I b'lieve."

He looked away, and I waited anxiously for the recital of how he had come by it. Om-dong rose and slipped into the house like a yellow shadow.

"I met 'im comin' along the shore."

Griggs seemed to hunt for his opening. "It was two days after the big blow last year—daresay you'll 'ave 'eard of it; pretty well wiped us out 'ereabouts—and I was takin' a stroll on the beach to see what I could see."

He leered sidewise, and I remembered another walk of his along that same beach.

" 'E was a big buck of a feller, fat an' smooth shaven when 'e was in trim; but now 'e was wet an' draggly, an' there was a cut over one eye. 'E was carryin' the woman slung over 'is shoulder like a sack of potatoes, an' 'e 'alts when I tells 'im to."

" 'What's this?' says 'e.

" 'Me!' says I. 'Will you 'ave the extreme goodness to lay down your int'restin' burden,' I says, polite but business-like, 'an' elevate your 'ands skyward with despatch?' I says, takin' a bead on 'im with the Winchester. 'E lays the woman down, an' I goes over 'im.

" 'This is a very 'igh 'anded proceedin', my friend,' 'e remarks, pretty cool, while I was friskin' 'im.

" 'It is,' I says. 'Keep 'em up!' 'E'd a gun in 'is pocket, an' I takes it from 'im, though 'e cursed a lot when I did; besides that 'e'd pretty much nothin', except a little money an' some papers. I reads 'is name on an envelop.

" 'Now,' says I, 'Mister James Francis Maxon, 'ooever you may be, if you care to resoom a normal position an' continue freightin' your lady friend, we'll talk more comfortable at my 'ouse.' I goes over an' looks at 'er. 'Oo is she?' I asks 'im.

" 'She was a black 'aired, medium sized woman, with quite a figure; been a good looker once, seemed to me, but now she was past it some time—forty, if she was a day, I reckoned. She was about 'alf drowned, by the blueness of 'er. Maxon stoops an' picks 'er up mighty careful.

" 'This,' 'e says, walkin' beside me, 'is a lady you'll no doubt 'ave 'eard of, Mr.—pardon me, I've not the honor of your name.'

" 'We'll let that slide,' I says.

" 'As you please, of course,' 'e says, thoughtful like. 'This lady,' 'e goes on after a minute, 'is none other than Julie Laplante.'

"The way 'e talks, you'd think 'e was carryin' the queen an' 'alf the royal fambly.

" 'Never 'eard tell of 'er,' I says.

"He looks astonished. 'Never 'eard tell of Julie Laplante!' 'e says. 'The world's greatest vaudeville star! Why,' 'e says, 'wherever was you brought up, Mister Slide?'

"E'd a nasty, sneery way with 'im I didn' like."

" 'Ho—a play actress?' I says. 'An' no better than she should be, I s'pose, Mister Maxon. An' you'll oblige me by adoptin' a more respeckful tone towards me,' I says, for I'd me own ideas about this feller, 'or else,' I says, 'there's liable to be proceedin's.'

" 'You don't say,' he says, quite cool. 'An' may I arsk,' 'e goes on, 'just what you're threatenin', Mister Slide?'

" 'Get on in front there!' I says to 'im, sharp. 'An' not so much of that lip of yours, neither!' And I swings the Winchester from under me arm. 'Now—march!' I says, for I'd enough of 'is back talk.

" 'E looks me up an' down, Winchester an' all.

" 'You damned little rat!' 'e says, quiet, an' then 'e walks ahead with the woman over 'is shoulder.

" 'E WAS carryin' 'er with the fireman's lift, and 'er 'ead hung between 'is shoulders, floppin' a little as 'e walked. I kept a pretty peeled eye on 'im, for 'e was one of them fellers it don't do to play with; an' I was just wonderin' what to do with 'im, and 'ow to do it, when I see the glitter of this thing in among 'er 'air.

" 'Hi—'alt there!' I says. 'Let's 'ave a look at this lady friend of yours again! Put 'er down!'

" 'E swings round, an' I pushes the muzzle of the Winchester straight into 'is face. 'Put 'er down!' I says again. 'I believe there's somethin' 'ere I'll 'ave to 'ave a *dekko* at before we go on.'

" 'E'd been grinnin' to 'imself, amused like, so far, but now 'is face shuts up like a trap.

" 'Very well,' 'e says after a minute, an' lays 'er down by the side of the path careful, and I bends over 'er in an 'urry."

Griggs paused and grinned ruefully.

"Only shows," he said, " 'ow a man'll make a fool of himself. 'E was on the back of my neck in a second, strong as an 'orse an' fightin' like a wildcat, an' I'd no more'n time to pitch the rifle into the bushes an' go 'ard for 'is groin when 'e 'ad me pinned, an' was fumblin' in me pockets for 'is own gun."

" 'Now,' 'e says, most 'orrid nasty, 'we'll talk this out! You extremely unpleasant little biter,' 'e says, 'I've 'arf a mind to plug you out of 'and for your bad manners. Besides,' 'e says, 'you know a damn' sight too much!'

" 'E sits up, panting and laughing to 'imself an' fingerin' the pistol. 'On second thoughts,' 'e says, 'I'm inclined to let you up—for a while. I don't quite see me way—!'

" 'On second thoughts,' I says to 'im, 'this is where you pass out, Mister bloomin' Maxon!' And with that Om-dong 'its 'im from be'ind with the back of a choppin' ax, an' 'e falls in an 'eap on top of me.

" 'Good girl!' I says to 'er, gettin' up. 'Now you take the *mem*,' I says, for the woman 'ad come to 'erself by now, an' was lookin' at us with eyes like saucers, 'up to the 'ouse *jeldi-ko-jao*, an' you'd better put 'er to bed. But first,' I says, 'I b'lieve I'll do meself the pleasure of relievin' you of this little toy, madame.' And I takes the thing off of her neck, and a wonderful fine 'owl she lets out of 'er to see it go.

"Well, Om-dong walks 'er up the path, screamin' an' jabberin' to beat all hell, and I gives Maxon a lookover—Om-dong 'its like a woman, and 'adn't cracked 'is skull—an' then takes 'im in my 'arms an' drags 'im up 'ere. Then I pulls out the necklace, and Om-dong comes out an' paws me all over just like a cat, askin' for it.

" 'Yus,' I says, 'I know what you want, you little penn'orth o' pop! But there's a deal to do before that.'

"MAXON, 'e'd got a pretty good clip, an' it took 'im a day or two to pick up again. An' by then Om-dong tells me the woman's nigh well again, too, although she's shook up, an' mighty mad over losing' the necklace. I didn't go to see 'er, for I can't abide 'owlin' women; Om-dong she gets a lambastin' now an' then, but you'd be 'ard put to it to get a peep out of 'er. Knife more likely, only she's fond of me, kind of.

"So I talks civil to Maxon, an' one day 'e says to me, sittin' on the side of the cot, ' 'Ow's the fair Julie, Mister Slide?' 'E'd taken to callin' me that, an' nothin' I could do would make 'im stop it, for 'e was pig 'eaded as a mule, an' tough. I ain't seen many tougher than 'im.

" 'Recoverin' fast,' I tells 'im. 'An' no doubt, Mr. Maxon,' I says, 'you'll be wishful to go a-visitin' this here lady love of yours you've rescooed so romantic.' For I 'ad it from Om-dong that the woman was 'arf crazy about 'im, when she wasn't in high strikes about the necklace.

" 'E runs is 'and over 'is jaw an' looks at me partic'lar 'ard. Then 'e laughs fit to split.

" 'You poor, 'arf witted, low minded, interferin' little coot!' 'e says, with the tears streamin' down 'is blue chin. 'So you think,' 'e says, 'I'm sufferin' from the tender passion on account o' that old trout in yonder? My Gawd!' 'E speaks under 'is breath. 'I may 'ave been ass enough to let a yellow wench knock me silly from be'ind, but I ain't entirely *non compass* yet. No,' 'e says, 'if I were that ways inclined, this here yellow girl of yours'd suit me a fat sight better than old Julie.' And 'e winks at Om-dong that was standin' in the doorway, an' Om-dong she grins back at 'im so's I give 'er a good beltin' afterwards.

" 'My good sir,' 'e goes on, 'I 'ave other reasons for inquirin' as to 'ealth of your fair guest. An' that reminds me,' 'e says, 'you 'aven't yet informed me of what

steps are to be taken to procure my release from these singularly unsuitable surroundings.'

"I looks at 'im. 'Well,' I says, 'it's like this: What's it worth to you? There's times we don't get any one 'ere for six months an' more. And I b'lieve you'd be glad to be away from us before then,' I says, tryin' 'im out.

" 'E rubs 'is nose with 'is finger, thoughtful like. 'Mister Slide,' 'e says slow, 'I agree. You 'ave me at a disadvantage, an' I'll 'ave to pay to get away from 'ere. Now,' 'e says, 'what's the damage? In other words, 'ow much?'

" 'It'll 'ave to be cash on the nail, of course,' I says, more to see what 'e'd say than anything else, for of course me own mind was made up long enough ago.

" 'I can't well pay you cash,' 'e says. 'But seein' what conditions are, no doubt you'd consider acceptin' somethin' just as good.' And he looks at me 'ard again.

" 'What in 'ell,' I thinks to myself, for I knew well enough he'd nothing on him. 'What's your offer?' I asks him.

" 'E sends Om-dong out of the room an' shuts the door careful. Then 'e comes an' sits by me.

" 'Griggs,' 'e says, calling me by my name, 'that old creature in there 'as a necklace—'

"NOW, I'd to do some mighty smart thinking, as you'll agree. The stones were in my pocket, an' yet 'ere was this merchant talkin' as if the woman 'ad 'em still. 'E'd seen me take 'em, too, just before Om-dong crowned 'im with the ax. An' then it come to me like a flash.

" ' 'As she?' I asked, interested. 'Well, I'm not sayin' as a stone or two out of it won't suit me as well as the cash, seein' as you 'aven't any o' that. But,' I says, 'supposin' the lady won't part?'

"Mind you, I wasn't doin' anything but foolin' with 'im. Only I 'adn't made me mind up yet what to do with the two of 'em. One'd 'ave been easy enough, but I'd the woman to think of.

" 'E looks down an' drums 'is fingers on the bed. 'I don't think we need exactly consider her,' 'e says very quiet. 'She's—' and then 'e stops for a full minute.

" 'Griggs,' 'e says sudden, 'don't let's beat about the bush this damn' silly fashion. That old woman's got a ruddy bit of stuff there's worth—oh, say fifty thou, an' you won't be far out. An' there's you—an' me,' 'e goes on. 'An' who's to know she aint drowned?'

" 'E stops again an' looks at me with an eye like the devil's. 'She won't give it up,' 'e says. 'Course she won't. But suppose we takes it off of 'er? 'Oo's to know?'

"I put me 'and in me pocket to feel if the stones was there still, 'e spoke so natural. I see it all now; Om-dong 'adn't 'urt 'im much, but that crack on the 'ead 'ad made 'im forget about me takin' the necklace; an' now 'e was beginnin' to talk murder. I see it in 'is eye.

" 'Why, you idjit!' I says. 'Let 'er get out of 'ere—an' she will sooner or later—an' she'll 'ave the police all over the East after us. An' let me tell you, they're people I'm not mighty anxious to meet!'

" 'E looks out of the window, 'ands in 'is pockets. Then 'e swings round on me.

" 'Come!' 'e says. 'This is shilly-shally. 'Oo's goin' to kill 'er, you or me? I will, if you like.' 'E was growlin' now like a dog. 'But 'ooever does, it's 'arf shares for the other—an' nothin' said. No one'll ever know.'

" 'Coo!' I says. 'You're an 'ot one. I ain't goin' to 'ave anything to do with killin' women.'

" 'No?' 'e says. 'But under the circumstances, Griggs, you'd not stand in the way of any one who wasn't so squeamish?'

" 'I'm not sayin', one way or another,' I says. An' with that I walks out to think.

"NOW, I'VE killed men—four or five of 'em—an' took my chance of gettin' killed meself, same as lots of people. But this 'ere woman business 'ad me cold. Of course, Maxon 'ad to go. There wasn't any gettin' away from that, and 'adn't been since I saw 'im.

I didn't mind that. But what to do with this Julie Laplante beat me. Tell Om-dong to kill 'er? She would, soon as look at you, and I'd only pretend to be a bit sweet on 'er. Some'ow I didn't like that, for Om-dong ain't a bad kid at all. Kill 'er meself? Never done it, an' not likely to—too much like killin' chickens. Let Maxon do it? Then 'e's got to be armed, an' 'e'll kill me or Om-dong if we ain't mighty spry. I tell you, that man was a real devil.

"I walks up an' down an hour outside, an' then goes into the woman's room. She was settin' at a table, an' jumps up when she sees me.

" 'Madame, 'I says, for she'd turned as white as a sheet. 'There ain't no occasion for alarm. I 'ave a bit of property 'ere I believe belongs to you.' An' with that I 'ands 'er the necklace, an' she does a weep all over it. Why'd I give it 'er? Bait, my boy—bait for our Mr. Maxon.

"I goes back to him, and 'e's readin' a book.

" 'Well,' I says, 'I've been thinkin' over your proposition, Mister Maxon, and I'm inclined to agree. 'Arf shares; you to do it, an' me to find necessary weapons an' see you safe away from 'ere. There's me 'and on it.'

" 'E looks up. 'I thought you'd see the reason in it, Griggs,' 'e says. 'You're an unpleasant party but then so am I. What's the next move?'

" 'Go in and see 'er,' I says. 'Mebbe she's inclined to see reason without all this persuadin',' I says.

" 'E grins at me, savage. 'Twon't 'elp 'er any!' 'e says. 'E goes out and along the veranda into the woman's room.

"By an' by I 'ears 'im call me, an' I goes in. The woman's sittin' on 'er bed, close in against the wall, an' shiverin' with fear; an' Maxon's lookin' at 'er kind o' puzzled.

" 'I don't understand this,' 'e says. ' 'Oo's been scarin 'er this way?'

"The woman's too almighty trembly to do anything but shiver, an' we got no sense out of 'er. The necklace is still round 'er throat, an' I notice Maxon lookin' at it mighty 'ungry. 'Oh, no you don't!' I says to meself. 'Not by no means!' For you'll see easy enough 'twasn't any part of my idea to let 'im get 'is 'ooks on to it at all. I goes to the door an' calls Om-dong.

"She slips in, lookin' ashamed of 'erself, like a cat in the cream.

" 'What've you been doin', you little *budmash?*' I says. The woman looks at 'er an' puts 'er fingers in front of 'er face.

"Om-dong don't say nothin', an' the old chink that's 'er father slides in. The woman lets off a scream like she's seen a ghost. Maxon looks round at me.

" 'Dirty work 'ere, Griggs,' 'e says. 'Find out what it's all about.'

" 'Clear out, then,' I tells 'im, for I wasn't goin' to 'ave no family washin' done before 'im. 'E looks black, an' goes. 'Yes,' I says to meself, 'you'd do me in soon as kiss me 'and, wouldn't you? But you'll not get the chance!' I says. An' then I grills Om-dong an' the chink pretty 'ard, an' finally they come across.

"WELL, that give me another new idea, an' I went a-walkin' outside for to consider it. You see, it was like this: Maxon 'ad to go, anyways; but it's funny 'ow I 'ated the notion of *puckarowin'* that frowsy woman. Mebbe because of Om-dong an' these brats 'ere. I dunno.

"Anyways, I walks up an' down another 'arf hour considerin' of it, an' choosin' a place for Maxon alongside of old Four-Times-He an' the Goose, an' then I goes in an' sends for Om-dong again.

" 'Listen 'ere, me girl,' I says. 'You want them stones, don't you?' She dances on 'er toes like she does when she's pleased. 'Well,' I says to 'er, 'you just call up the old man,' I says, 'an' give that *mem* in there every bit you know of what you give 'er just now, an' then some more. No,' I says, 'I'll not 'it you, neither. You *imshi* off *Shaitan ke marfik*, an' get to work—an' don't you stop till I tells you, or I'll *marrow* you good,' I says.

"D'j'ever see a chink magic show?

They're scary, I'll tell you. Almost give me the creeps, they can. An' the old man was good at it . . .

"SO I TOOK Maxon a walk again, to talk things over, I told him.

"'Now,' I says, 'it's like this: Tonight's the night, for there's no time like the present. I'll give you a pistol, an' you'll go in an' finish 'er an' get the necklace; then we'll split, an' you can clear out of 'ere, an' I'll give you grub enough to take you down the coast. You never knew nothin' about me, of course, an' the woman was drowned when the boat sunk with you. You get across to Saigon or some place an' put them stones in soak. An' I'm sure,' I says, 'I wish you every kind of fortune in the new life about to commence for you, Mister Maxon.' I couldn't 'elp but be funny, 'e was that simple.

"'E stops by the graves. 'What's these?' 'e asks.

"'Couple o' fellers died 'ere one time,' I says. 'E looks at them an' shivers. 'Ain't gettin' cold feet, are yer?' I asks 'im.

"'E glares at me poisonous. 'You ain't the one to talk about cold feet, Mister Slide,' 'e says. 'If 'twasn't that I've better things to think about, I'd learn you not to make suggestions of that sort!' 'e says, very stiff.

"'Oh, you would, would you?' I says to myself. 'Well, we'll see.' And with that we goes back to the 'ouse, just as it was fallin' dark.

"There's a tremenjous row comin' from the woman's room—'owlin' an' weepin' an' sobbin'—and I was 'ard put to keep Maxon from goin' in to find out what was on. 'Just 'igh strikes,' I tells 'im. 'She's been all shook up, an' you know what they are when they're like that. Leave 'er alone an' she'll quiet down.'

"'E takes a big shot of rum—'e'd started fillin' up for the job on 'and—an' grunts.

"'I'll quiet 'er!' 'e says.

"Well, I went round tiptoe an' peeped in the window. Certainly these chinks can do the 'orribles well when they like, an' the woman was fair jibberin' at 'em. Still, I thinks, watchin' old Hi Fat at 'is tricks, better 'ave 'er scared wild than let this Maxon do what 'e likes with 'er; an' she'd be off of our 'ands, anyway.

"So I goes back again, an' fills 'im up good with rum, an' a fine lot o' stuff 'e talks, too. By an' by 'e starts in to tell me about this woman Julie Laplante, an' some of the things she was in the 'abit of doin', seemin'ly, in private life, as you might say. Pretty coarse 'e was about it. I reckon 'e was tryin' to find fault with 'er as some excuse for what 'e 'ad in 'is wicked 'ead.

"Maybe around ten o'clock the woman stops 'er 'owlin', an' I 'ears Om-dong an' the old man leave 'er an' go out of the 'ouse. Maxon was full as an egg by this time, an' sat slumped on the bed, mutterin' to 'imself; so I took the bottle away from 'im an' sat there for another hour, listenin'.

"By an by—I'd 'eard all I wanted—I shook 'im by the shoulder.

"'Come on, me lord,' I says to 'im. 'Time's up. Let's 'ave a little action.' And I gives 'im 'is gun, with one shell in it; no more, of course.

"'E gets to 'is feet—cold sober right away. Funny 'ow that always 'appens—don't tell me any man kills when 'e's anyways lushed; 'e can't. 'E stands there a moment with the gun in 'is 'and, and I've a notion 'e wasn't very far off expendin' 'is one round on me. Leastways 'e looks like it, an' for a moment I got ready for 'im. But no, 'e swings round without a word to me, and out 'e goes through the door on to the veranda, slips off 'is shoes—I'm wearin' 'em now—and pad-pads along to the other door. I picks up the Winchester an' follows along the wall.

"There wasn't much to it. Maxon pushes open the door, quiet and easy, and there's the woman—or so 'e thinks—lyin' in the bed. It was just about the last thing 'e did think, too; for just as 'e pulls trigger, lightin' the room up with the spurt of flame, I plugs 'im good from be'ind, and that's *maffish* with 'im . . .

"WHAT? Oh, easy. See 'ere! Of course *'e'd* to go, naturally; 'e knew too much, anyway, and 'e was just the kind of dangerous bird I didn't want round 'ere. But some'ow I didn't see 'avin' the woman killed on the premises, so to speak. So when I found Om-dong and 'er father tryin' to scare the stones out of 'er, I made them scare 'er out altogether; an' she run clear away into the woods. An' Om-dong crawls in afterwards an' fixes it so's Maxon would think she was in bed.

"The necklace? No, she didn't take that— she'd the life pretty well frightened out of 'er, an' the old man magicked it right away from 'er in the evenin'."

Griggs looked at me and laughed.

"What'd you 'ave done?" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Why ask me?" I said. "Like you—I suppose—dealt with the situation as it arose. But what about the woman?"

" 'Er?" he answered carelessly. "I dunno. Never did 'ear, except that a feller comes in in a couple of days with a tale 'e'd seen a white away off in the woods twenty miles out, carryin' on scandalous. Guess she's dead, all right; but anyways, I didn't kill 'er—that's a comfort. And now, 'ow about another bottle? This one's through."

SIGNALS

A Story of a Feud in a Mountain Mine

By EARL BENHAM CRANE

IT WAS fitting that Timmons should have the most responsible job at the Round Mountain Mine. It was imperative that the man at the hoist controls should have steady nerve and the habit of keeping his attention fixed on the indicator dial when hoisting men or ore. And Timmons had these qualities. There was no danger of his thoughts cruising about in pleasanter climes, causing him to overwind and dump a skipload of men into the ore bin, or to do a hundred other things which might allow the skip to crush and kill.

"Yes, sir, I've been right here on this job fifteen years tomorrow," he announced to Knuteson, the skip tender, one night when the latter was in the hoist room. There was a hint of justifiable pride in his voice. "I'm thinking of asking for a day off and taking the wife and kids on a little celebration."

"Fif-teen ye-ars!" exclaimed Knuteson, dragging the words along and making it sound like a long time indeed. "Wow! I been here less than fifteen weeks and thinkin' of making a change already. I should think it would be awful monotonous standing in front of that hoist for fifteen years."

"Maybe," admitted the hoistman, busily wiping the motor with a handful of waste, "maybe; but there's lots of interesting things about this job. Take the signal bell for instance. I can pretty near always tell who's sending in the hoisting signal. That is, unless it's a right short signal."

The skip tender looked at him suspiciously, evidently not ready to concede him any supernatural powers.

"It's fact," continued Timmons, as he passed his palm fondly over the controller handle. "It's something like fingerprints, I guess. No two men's fingerprints are alike, and no two men ring in signals alike. Take Broadrick for instance. He rings 'em in crisp and quick. Just pause enough between 'em so I get 'em good, and just as though he expected action right away. And then take Graham. He rings 'em in kind of tired and timid like, as though he was thinking, 'Oh, what's the use. The skip won't move, anyway.' "

The skip tender's interest was aroused.

"Say," he exclaimed, "that sounds like what I heard about telegraph operators. They say that some of those fellas get so they can tell who's operating the sending key at the other end of the line."

"Yep. There's a difference in the way every one of the miners sends in signals," continued Timmons, nodding his head as if he were still impressed by the discovery he had made. "It's hard to distinguish some of 'em, but most of 'em are as plain as if they had wrote their names, and—"

He was interrupted by the ringing of the hoist signal.

One . . . two . . . three . . . one . . . one, it clanged.

"That will be Gorme," announced the hoistman as he grasped the controller handle and glanced at the indicator dial. "I always know his ring. Something mean about it."

"Mean! Mean! The whinin', bullyin' gorilla. You pay him nice, pretty compliments, Tim," grumbled Knuteson as he went out of the hoist room to receive the skip at the collar of the shaft.

The indicator showed the skip to be at the bottom level, twelve hundred feet down in the earth. Timmons threw the controller lever over a notch at a time. The motor hummed and the big drum of the hoist began to wind upon itself wrap after wrap of the inch and a quarter steel cable, slowly at first and then gaining in speed as the hoistman threw the lever farther over. And as it wound, the black, oily cable came in to it through a slot in the wall of the hoist room.

TIMMONS could not see the collar of the shaft from his position at the hoist. The indicator, placed a few feet in front of him, was his guide. The long hand moved about the dial of the indicator like the hand of a clock, pointing out the numbers of the levels in the mine, which were marked like the hours of the day. It showed the exact location of the skip at every moment.

His gaze followed the moving hand as he stood with his left hand on the controller and his right on the brake handle. He was a tired looking little man somewhat past middle age, neat in his freshly scrubbed, blue bib overalls and black sateen shirt, with an air of having pride in his job and a satisfaction in doing it well.

When the indicator showed that the skip was nearly up to the collar of the shaft Timmons worked the controller lever back toward starting position until the big hoist drum stopped winding, and at that instant he applied the brake.

Ten seconds later the hoist room door flew open and Gorme lurched in. From his jumper pockets down he was wet, thoroughly wet. His overalls clung skin tight to his great, thick legs, and his boots squirted water on the floor as he stalked across the room toward Timmons. Without a word he struck the hoistman between the eyes. It was a cruel, venomous chop, and it flattened the little man. It flattened him far more effectively than most bullies would have considered necessary.

As the big miner stood over the crumpled form, with his bony fists clenched and small head drawn down turtlelike between his enormous shoulders, Knuteson entered. The skip tender took one look at the vicious scene and rushed at the bully, with arms flailing the air. Gorme brushed aside the attack, grabbed the valiant Swede by the shoulder of his jumper and threw him against the wall

with such violence that he slid to the floor, dazed.

Gorme had always been unpopular among the men. He had a way of meting out vengeance on animate or inanimate objects with primordial directness, and the fact that most of his grievances were fancied did not help his case. He was so powerful, so relentless and so unfair that it had been pretty thoroughly demonstrated around the mine that it was pure folly to stand up to Gorme with any weapon less effective than a gun.

If Gorme's mentality were capable of making any distinction in the matter of justice he must have thought that he had an unusually good reason for beating the hoistman. He had received a ducking, and he had been in the skip when he got it. That called for some pretty direct action, of course.

It was the custom, when loading the skip at the bottom level, to lower it into the sump far enough to bring its open end level with the car tracks. Thus the ore cars could be dumped directly into it. Generally the water was kept low in the sump. But at this particular time when Gorme had climbed into the skip the water was high and the skip did not lack many inches of dipping under.

That would have been all right were it not for the fact that due to some mechanical reason, peculiar to the installation, the skip always lowered a few inches just before starting up. This was usually unnoticed and unimportant. But when the skip lowered its customary few inches before starting up with Gorme, the water in the sump was sufficiently high to pour over the rim and give him a chilly bath.

THE NEXT night when Timmons went on shift and took his place at the hoist, Broadrick, the superintendent, happened to be in the hoist room. He looked at Timmons' swollen and blackened face in surprise and exclaimed:

"Why, Timmons, what happened to your face? How did you get your eyes blackened that way?"

The hoistman hesitated a moment, smiled rather painfully and replied—

"Well, you see, I was chopping some wood, and a stick flew up and hit me."

Knuteson, who was near at hand, interrupted indignantly:

"He's not giving it to you straight, Mr. Broadrick. That—that damned—" he hesitated and looked at Timmons; evidently he got no encouragement from the hoistman's expression, for he changed his tone and said in an offhand manner, "A mule kicked him."

Timmons knew that if he told the superintendent the truth about it Gorme would be fired in jig time. But he did not consider that getting a man fired was any proper manly way of wiping out a personal score.

Broadrick seemed to sense this and after giving the usual advice about what is best to put on black eyes he went about his business.

Timmons had some trouble seeing the hand on the indicator dial that shift, but he laid it to the swollen condition of his eyes and thought that when the inflammation had subsided they would be all right. But the next shift they were no better, nor the next shift, nor the next. And when the swelling did finally go down and the color of the skin around his eyes became normal, his vision was still clouded.

He could see the dial of the indicator all right, but in order to see the hand as it swept through its wide circle, pointing out the location of the skip, he had to lean far forward from his normal position at the controller and brake.

KNUTESON shared none of Timmons' scruples about making public the business of Gorme's attack on him. He told a number of the men about it in a manner quite dramatic, and the sheer brutality of it maddened the crew.

"The boys are certainly riding Gorme since he socked you," the skip tender told Timmons, "but he won't fight fair. There's a dozen of the boys that would

like to take him on in a fair fight, but Gorme wants a pick handle or a drill steel in his hand when he fights, and him as big as a mountain."

The hoistman did not seem to be elated over being the indirect cause of so much strife.

"But they certainly have got his goat and he's in the wickedest and ugliest mood you can think of," continued Knuteson. "He swears he will kill the whole crew, and he looks the part."

It was not long after that when some one took the straight of the story to Broadrick, and Gorme was fired.

The big miner went down the trail in a lather of hate, with his small head drawn down between his shoulders, shaking his bony fists at every man in sight and promising revenge on the whole outfit.

IT WAS not to be expected that Timmons' difficulty in seeing the indicator hand would escape the attention of Broadrick. The superintendent soon observed the hoistman in the awkward, strained position which he found necessary to enable him to follow the movements of the skip.

"Are you having trouble seeing the indicator?" he asked when the skip had come to rest.

"It does seem kind of blurred at times, Mr. Broadrick," admitted Timmons, "but I don't have any trouble spotting the skip," he added hurriedly.

The superintendent looked worried.

"When you go off shift tonight, go to town and have your eyes examined," he instructed. "You know, Timmons, you have a great responsibility in this job. All of the men's lives depend upon your senses being keen."

Timmons detected a tone of sympathy and doubt in Broadrick's voice. There was something about it which gave him a premonition of trouble, and through the remaining hours of the shift this feeling grew upon him. It would mean a deep uprooting if he had to leave this job, for in fifteen years it had become a definite part of his being. He loved the whir of the hoist gears and the whine of the electric motor which drove them. The polished wood of the controller handle was soothing to his palm, and the smell of the hoist room, a blend from heated motor, lubricating oils and laboring steel was pleasant to his nostrils.

He had been right there since the mine was little more than a prospect and had raised to the surface most of the ore that had made the mine famous. At first he had played out a scant hundred feet of cable when lowering the skip to the bottom, and now it was full twelve hundred feet to the lowest level. But Timmons knew the feel of every foot of the distance. He had become, as far as humanly possible, a part of the mechanism.

It was as he feared. An examination found his eyesight to be permanently impaired. Broadrick was sympathetic and greatly concerned, but none the less firm in his determination to protect the lives of the crew.

"Surely we will find some work which you can do without your feeling that you are being pensioned for your faithfulness," he told Timmons, after informing him that he would have to give up his job as hoistman. "But right now there isn't a job about the place which does not require good eyesight."

THAT night at quitting time Timmons cleaned up the hoist and motor as usual. He passed his handful of waste over the black metal with even more than usual care, and there was a trace of a wistful smile about his straining eyes as he did so. He stood for a moment in the shallow depression that his feet had worn in the concrete floor and let his hands feel the familiar coolness of the brake handle and the smoothness of the wooden handle on the controller lever. His last shift. He could hardly believe it.

His heels scuffed the floor in a tired manner as he walked over to the locker in the corner of the room. There he rolled a few personal odds and ends into a bundle, placed it under his arm and scuffed to the door. As he paused in the

doorway and looked back, the sight of the objects that had once been so familiar to him now gave him a strange, detached feeling. It was as if they had been part of another existence, an existence which was now denied him.

Knuteson came up and broke into what was proving to be a painful moment to Timmons.

"Well, Tim—" the skip tender hesitated, dug out tobacco and filled in an awkward moment by rolling a clumsy cigaret—"I suppose you know that the boys are sorry to have you go."

"That so?" replied Timmons, pleased but rather at a loss to know how to acknowledge it. "Well, I'll see you once in a while. Mr. Broadrick says for me to keep on living in the company cottage. I couldn't be moving my family all around with me when I'm looking for work. It may be hard for me to find something I can do, with my eyesight foggy this way."

He walked wearily down the trail.

Broadrick had promised him some kind of work there, but Timmons felt that it would probably be a "made" job, something to reward him for his long service at the Round Mountain. He did not like the feel of that, so he made several trips to the outside and to other mining camps, looking for work. But he found that fifteen years at one job had unfitted him, to a great degree, for other work. He had become a specialist, and on account of his eyes he was now unable to follow his particular line.

During these empty days Timmons was extremely restless, for he was not accustomed to inactivity. When night descended upon the company cottage which housed him and his family he welcomed the oblivion of sleep.

BUT THIS relief was interrupted one night in a startling manner. Timmons was wakened by a pounding on the door of his cottage.

"Tim! Tim! Wake up! Quick!" an excited voice called.

The pounding was renewed until the windows of the cottage rattled. Timmons rolled out of bed, turned on the light and ran to the door. It was Knuteson. The skip tender was breathless as he choked out the words:

"Underground magazine's afire! Mine filling with powder gas! Hoist indicator won't work! Come on!"

Timmons shuddered. That meant that all of the men in the mine would perish unless they were hoisted to the surface before the heavy powder gas had sought them out. There would be no chance for them to climb up the manway, for it took mighty little gas to knock a man off a ladder.

As Timmons was yanking on his overalls a clock in the house struck twelve. Just the end of the night shift's supper hour.

"Hoist indicator busted. Can't fix it. Carey can't tell where to land the skip," explained Knuteson as they stumbled through the dark toward the shaft. "Signals for the skip comin' in from every level. Poor devils! Awful mess!"

"What's matter with indicator?" panted Timmons as they ran.

He was holding to the sleeve of Knuteson's jumper, that he might take advantage of the other's better eyesight.

"Don't know. Looks like it was smashed with a hammer. Carey and I was eatin' supper and makin' coffee in the shop when the danger signal was rung in from the mine. Hadn't been in the hoist room for nearly an hour."

"Wonder how long it will take the fumes to get through the mine," gasped Timmons.

The combination of burning magazine and disabled hoist indicator appalled him.

"That's it, Tim. They ain't got much time. That hoist'll have to run like hell."

The underground magazine was located on the sixth level, some distance back from the shaft. There would be no men in the levels above there as that part of the mine had been worked out some years before.

As they entered the hoist room the

bright lights made Timmons blink his weakened eyes. But he could see Carey, his successor, standing before the hoist controls in a helpless attitude. Carey had brought up one load of men from the level at which the skip rested when the alarm came in, but now he was unable to spot the skip again. Evidently they had abandoned the attempt to repair the broken indicator.

Broadrick, clad in pajamas with a pair of riding breeches pulled over them, stood beside Carey. He was trying to spot the skip by watching the cable wraps on the hoist drum, and sweat was streaming down his cheeks:

"Up now, Carey! Up! Up! Easy—slow!" he panted. "There—stop—God, I wish those men would stop ringing that bell for a minute! No, that's not the place. Down, Carey—down! Faster—whoa!"

Several of the men who had come up on the first trip of the skip entered the hoist room. The pungent, stinging smell of powder gas filled the room as it arose from their clothing. Their excited voices added to the confusion around the hoist.

"Gar, it's thick down there!" exclaimed a miner named Hatch, as he passed his hand across his forehead. "The gas is going down the shaft and down through the stopes. There's none above the sixth level yet."

"There, hold it Carey! Hold it there a moment. That must be the tenth level," commanded Broadrick as he counted the wraps of cable on the hoist drum. "No—the ninth. Hold it there long enough for them to get on. There, now hoist. Raise it to the surface."

Carey brought the skip up with speed. But after it had arrived at the surface Knuteson came running in and announced that there was not a soul aboard it.

"We must have had it stopped between the levels," moaned Broadrick. "Lower, Carey. Lower it."

"I can't do it. I can't do it," whined Carey. "I'm lost. I can't do it without the indicator. He was white and his hand was trembling on the brake handle.

THE SUPERINTENDENT looked around in despair, and his glance fell on Timmons.

"Here, Timmons, for God's sake take this hoist," he begged.

The ex-hoistman stepped to the familiar spot. There were more than seventy men down in that gas filled hole, seventy odd men whose lives depended upon his getting them out of there in a very few minutes. It was impossible for them to climb the manway, with the stream of deadly gas pouring down the shaft. They would drop off the ladders like flies in a smudge.

As Timmons' eager hands closed on the brake and controller handle there was an expression of wistfulness in his eyes, but this immediately changed to one of concentration.

He released the brake and, as the hoist drum spun, he tried to follow in his mind the progress of the skip, tried to calculate the speed at which it was traveling and how long it would take it to go from one level to another. Obviously that was the only thing to do in the absence of the indicator. But he was shocked to find that it did not feel right. No. That wouldn't work. It was as if he were running another hoist.

He stopped the descent of the skip and then raised it a short distance, baffled. He shut off the current and applied the brake and the hoist drum stood motionless. He was doing no better than Carey had done. Meanwhile the men in the mine would be wilting as they breathed the powder gas.

"Hurry, Timmons, hurry!" gasped the frantic superintendent. "Only a few minutes of life left to those men down there."

Then Timmons recalled a thought which had often recurred to him in the past; that his faultless control of the hoist had been in his hands rather than his head. Years of raising and lowering the skip from every one of the twelve hundred feet of the shaft had trained his hands to act at the proper time, without conscious prompting. It was a mere

theory and he had never experimented with it. But now, with the indicator out of commission, everything depended upon his hands knowing their job. He closed his eyes, concentrated on the seventh level for a moment and then let his thought be with the men down in the mine while he threw on the current.

He kept his eyes closed and his thoughts away from the skip and presently he turned off the power and applied the brake mechanically. The hoist signal bell had been ringing incessantly but he knew that it would be folly to try to obey it. He let the skip stand ten seconds in order to give the men time to get aboard and then started to raise it at a speed which it had never equalled before. Several men hurried from the hoist room to meet it.

When the skip stopped at the collar of the shaft Timmons could tell by the sound of shouting, excited voices that he had brought up a load of men.

"Good!" yelled Broadrick as he started toward the door. "Hold it till I get aboard. I'm going down."

"What in hell's been the matter with that skip?" asked a miner angrily as he staggered into the hoist room. "We been ringin' and ringin' and the gas—" he slumped down on the floor, unconscious.

TIMMONS stood at the controls in his customary easy attitude. His hands were exceedingly busy but his face was expressionless and he looked at nothing in particular.

Knuteson dragged the half asphyxiated miner into a corner and propped him up in a sitting position.

"Swenson and Cline jumped off at the two hundred foot level when the skip was hesitating up and down the shaft," announced a pumpman. "They must have gone out through the raise at the end of the level."

At that moment Cline entered. He and Swenson had come to the surface through an old raise that went up from the second level and emerged in a gulch some distance away.

"I closed the draft door on the fourth level soon as the fire was discovered," said Cline with an air of having done something to help the situation.

"You did wrong," snapped Knuteson. "Suppose some one was in there."

"No chance. Nobody in those old workings," replied Cline.

The great hoist drum revolved swiftly and the wraps of cable crawled back and forth along its length as the weight of the skip unreeled it. Presently the brake was applied firmly, confidently, and the drum came to a gradual stop. Another pause of ten seconds as Timmons visualized men climbing into the skip with desperate haste. Some, perhaps unconscious or nearly so, would have to be helped into the skip. Others, rather than wait another trip of the skip, would stand on its edge and cling to the cable. The hoistman prayed that none would succumb to the fumes on their trip up the shaft, and fall from their precarious positions. Throwing the controller lever clear over he brought the skip up on this trip with more speed than before. Presently a shout announced the deliverance from death of another load of men.

Two unconscious men were carried into the hoist room.

"Here. Put 'em here," said Knuteson as he swung a bench against the wall. "Upright position. Better for 'em." The men were propped up in a sitting position.

A grizzled miner named Conway stepped up close to the hoistman.

"Tenth level next, Tim! For God's sake, tenth level next!" he begged with trembling voice. "Jim's down there."

Then he started, looked ashamed and backed off. Jim was his son.

The unconscious man whom Knuteson had placed in the corner moved his feet jerkily. His sprawling hands began to flap back and forth on the floor.

"It's a wonder the magazine don't explode," said Graham.

"It would be better if it did," asserted Gilhan, the shift boss. "Powder burning that way makes lots worse fumes than when it explodes."

TIMMONS landed another load in safety. He was operating the hoist at tremendous speed.

The man in the corner stopped flapping his hands, climbed to his feet suddenly, brushed the hair back from his forehead and joined the tense group about the hoist.

"This load is from the tenth level, Conway," Timmons called to the grizzled miner, as he threw on the power again. Conway stumbled toward the door.

Black smoke belched from the shaft and floated in through the hoist room doorway, and tongues of it licked in through the cable slot.

"How long kin they last?" asked Graham of no one in particular as he rolled his wide-lidded eyes.

Conway staggered in with his son, Jim, in his arms. He placed him tenderly on the floor with his back against the bench, brushed back his hair and opened his shirt front. And his big calloused hands trembled as he did so.

Another load was landed. And another. Timmons was oblivious of his surroundings, for his thoughts were with the men in the mine and their dependence upon him to get them out. Then an exhilaration possessed him as he realized that this was now almost accomplished.

One more load of men. A forlorn load. Some of them were unconscious and those who could walk staggered, with wabbling knees.

Broadrick came up on the last trip. He weaved a little as he walked into the hoist room and announced to Timmons:

"That's all, Tim. I think they're all up."

"All accounted for. I've checked them all as they came up," said the timekeeper as he came in with time book and pencil in hand.

There was a murmur of relaxation among the men and they began to crowd around the hoistman.

"Good work, Tim, old boy!"

They patted him on the back. They clung to the guard rail to support their wobbling knees, and grinned at him with bloodshot eyes. A score of voices, each subtly conveying its owner's gratitude, offered him congratulations. Either through force of habit or to cover up his embarrassment, Timmons grabbed a handful of waste and began to go through the familiar motions of tidying up a bit before going off shift.

The superintendent took him by the arm, gently straightened him up, and addressed him:

"You come to work on your old job in the morning, Tim. I never saw such perfect control of a hoist in my life. Damn it, you don't need eyes!"

"All right, Mr. Broadrick," the hoistman replied simply, but a warm glow began to steal over him. He looked around the room at the familiar equipment and began to feel at home again.

"NOW, BOYS," called Broadrick, "does any one know how the powder got afire?"

There was no answer. Several shook their heads.

"No one would be getting powder this time of the night," suggested Gilhan, the shift boss.

"No, sir. No one's been to the sixth level this shift. I haven't stopped the skip above the eighth level once this shift," announced Carey positively.

"I thought I heard some one pounding on the draft door as the skip went past the fourth level," said Graham.

"Everybody is up now, all right. I checked you all carefully," explained the timekeeper.

"Some one has been to the magazine just the same," said the superintendent angrily. "Otherwise it wouldn't have caught fire."

His bloodshot eyes turned to the wrecked indicator. "Any one know anything about this? How this got broken?" he growled. "How about it Carey?"

"Well, Knuteson and I were eating supper in the blacksmith shop so we could make coffee on the forge. We were about ready to come back here when the danger signal rung," replied Carey ner-

vously. "Then we ran in here and found the indicator smashed. Don't know how long it had been broke. We were in the shop nearly an—"

His explanation was cut short by the clanging of the hoist signal bell. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . one . . . two.

Exclamations of surprise almost drowned the signal.

"We left some one down there on the fourth level!" yelled Broadrick, throwing up his hands in dismay. "Get him, Timmons! Get him!"

The eyes of the men were wide with surprise. Some looked around uneasily as if to assure themselves that some particular friend or partner was not missing.

Timmons leaped to his place at the hoist and began to play out the cable.

"What did I tell you, Cline? You had some one cooped up behind that draft door on the fourth level," accused Knuteson. "He's just got through. Probably had to break the door down."

"He must have gone down the manway then. Carey says he didn't land any one there," Cline replied.

Timmons stopped the skip at the fourth level and waited for the man to get aboard. Then came the hoisting signal; one . . . two . . . three . . . one . . . two . . . one. Meaning: "man aboard, hoist to two hundred foot level."

"Listen to that! He wants you to stop at the two hundred foot level! What's the idea?" exclaimed Broadrick.

"Maybe he figures on coming out through the old raise like Cline and Swenson did," suggested Gilhan.

"What would he want to do that for when he knows he could come on right up to the surface in the skip?" grumbled the superintendent.

EVERY one looked expectantly at Timmons, for the hoistman had not responded to the signal. His arms were rigid as he held the levers, and his face was grim. Then his expression changed to one of keen amusement and he actually chuckled.

"This *is* rich," he said as he released the brake.

The hoist drum began to unwind and the cable played out through the slot in the end of the room at a rapid rate. Exclamations of warning arose from the crowd.

"Stop!" yelled Broadrick. "You're lowering! Bring it up, man! What's the matter with you? Up! Up!"

But Timmons paid no attention to the clamor, and his bearing encouraged no interference. The superintendent stepped toward him and then hesitated, as if undecided whether to commit the unheard of act of grabbing the controls away from a hoistman when the hoist was in motion.

Meanwhile Timmons was letting the skip down the shaft at a thunderous pace, and before he could be restrained the skip had reached the sump, in the bottom of the mine. He held it there for a moment, while the clamor around him grew to fury, and then he threw the power on and the hoist drum began to wind.

As the speed of the winding increased and the skip approached the surface most of those who were able ran out toward the shaft collar. Broadrick followed them rather unsteadily.

One minute later four men staggered in. They were half carrying Gorme. The big miner was wet, thoroughly wet. His overalls clung skin tight to his great, thick legs, and his boots squirted water on the floor as he was dragged across the room. Then the men set about to revive him, for he was half drowned and pretty well gassed, but it was with none of the tender care with which they had revived their fellow workmen. Their faces were grim and their voices cold. They seemed to be terribly anxious to get him able to stand on his feet as quickly as possible.

Timmons paid no attention to the stern group. He was busy with a piece of waste, carefully wiping the motor and hoist mechanism, tidying up a bit before going off shift.

The SONG *of the* SOONER

By LLOYD M. GRAVES

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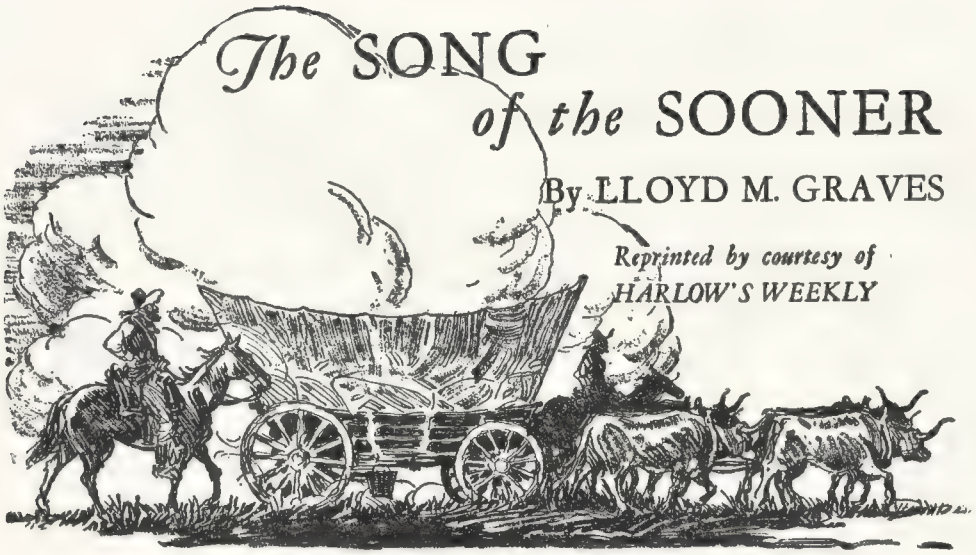


IN MY youth I went a soonerin'
Boom, boom, soonerin',
I spent my youth a-soonerin' upon the tall grass plains.
With Eighty-niners soonerin'
And outlaws prairie schoonerin'
Where Davy Payne went boomerin' acrost the sandy plains.

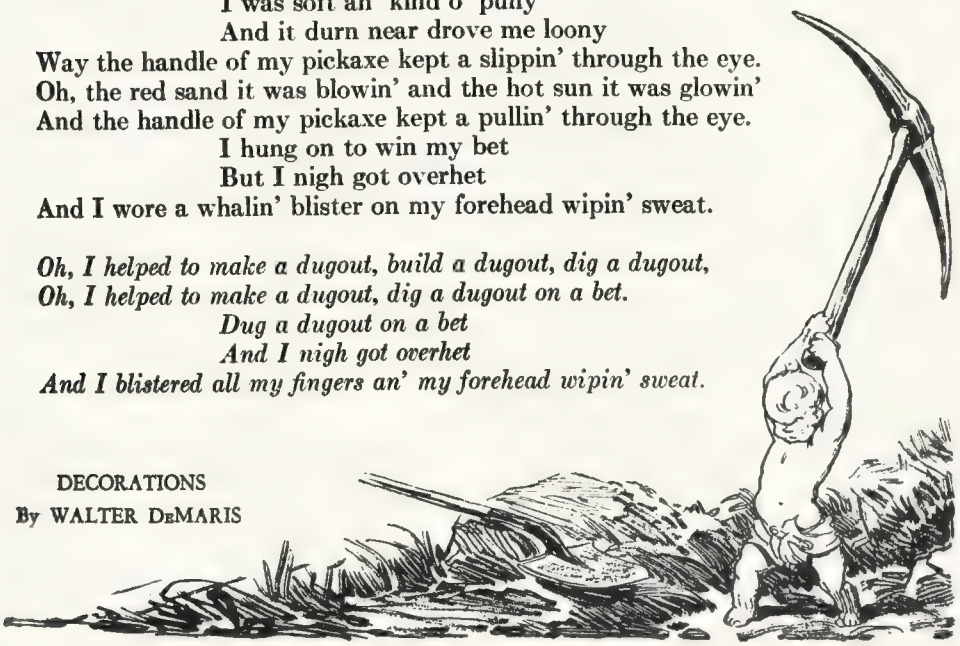
Oh, my daddy was a sooner
And my uncle was a sooner
And my granddad would 'a' been one if he'd ever had the chance—
Yea, gran'pappy should 'a' been one but he never had the chance.
All my folks come in from Kansas down the old bonanza trail
Where the cowmen rode to market an' the boomers rode to jail.
Drove a schooner outer Kansas to the openin' of the Strip
An' it's said they got here sooner than was lawful for the trip.
Oh, they got the date all twisted
From the way that it was listed
Else it must 'a' come September 'long about the first of March.
Yes, it must 'a' been September when they planted corn in March.
For the race was in September
Strip wan't open till September
And I guess it was September when they planted corn in March.

Oh, my folks was worthy honest folk
Thrifty early risin' folk
Bar none among 'em.
'Course they may 'a' made mistakes
'Bout the dates o' settin' stakes
May 'a' done some little things about which conscience stung 'em;
May 'a' had some triflin' faults or some occasional shortcomin'—
But I'll tell the cockeyed world procrastination wan't among 'em.

I'm a sooner, I'm a boomer,
I'm a bloomin' boomin' sooner
And I never wore no socks till I was wed.
I'm a woolly roughneck sooner, I admit that it's no rumor
I was raised on cold sowbelly and cornbread.

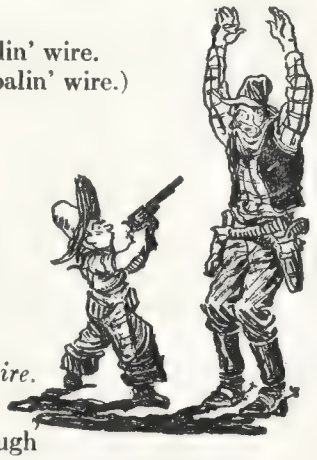
I WAS born 'longside a claimstake
Had no doctor, nurse nor namesake
And I spent my first night campin' on the naked windswept plains.
'Twas a rough an' chilly evenin' in the fall o' ninety-three
In the brush along the Salt Fork 'mongst the howlin' Cherokee.
Folks they parked the prairie schooner by a gnarly ole mesquit'
An' pappy fixed me up a cradle underneath the driver's seat.
Oh, they bathed me in the Salt Fork,
In the chilly briny Salt Fork,
An' then laid me on a blanket underneath the wagon seat.
Left me there to shake an' shiver, scream an' beller for more kivver
An' malign the salty river, wrapped up in a wagon sheet.
Follerin' day we made a dugout for to house the womenfolk,
Pap an' me we made a dugout to commode our womenfolk.
I was soft an' kind o' puny
And it durn near drove me loony
Way the handle of my pickaxe kept a slippin' through the eye.
Oh, the red sand it was blowin' and the hot sun it was glowin'
And the handle of my pickaxe kept a pullin' through the eye.
I hung on to win my bet
But I nigh got overhet
And I wore a whalin' blister on my forehead wipin' sweat.

Oh, I helped to make a dugout, build a dugout, dig a dugout,
Oh, I helped to make a dugout, dig a dugout on a bet.
Dug a dugout on a bet
And I nigh got overhet
And I blistered all my fingers an' my forehead wipin' sweat.



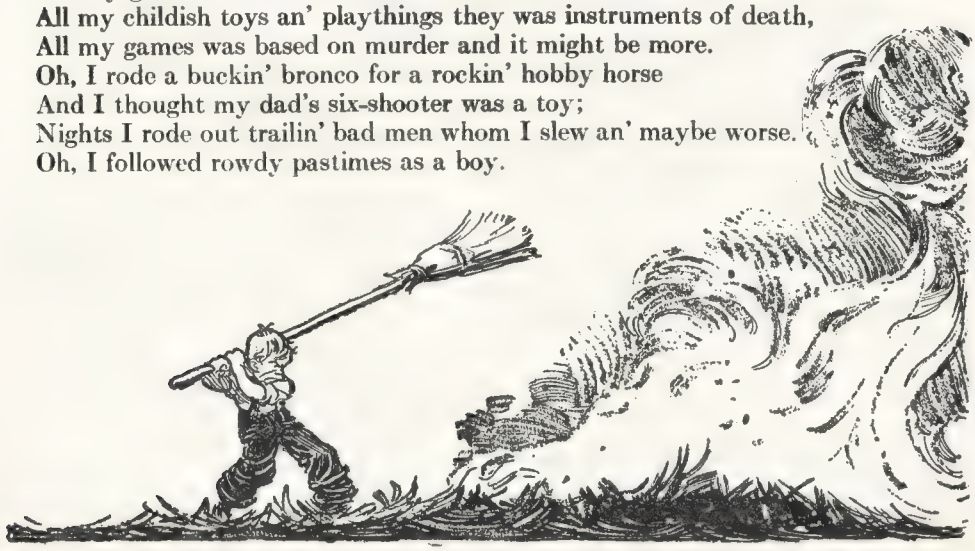
DECORATIONS
By WALTER DEMARIS

Oh, I grew up on the prairie
And I helped to run a dairy
With a bunch of Texas longhorns 'fore the day that I was weaned.
And I learned to drive a sod plow with a pair of hellish mustangs
And to ride the pitchin' devils till their wet sides heaved an' streamed.
I could scotch a prairie rattler 'fore he ever showed his spitfangs,
Rope a runnin' steer an' tie him while his hot hide steamed.
Oh, I knew a thousand tricks
That they played out in the sticks
And I done nine hundred things a day like all them country hicks.
Nay, there wan't no rest nor surcease, chasin' hither yon an' thence
Doin' things that God Almighty never thought of 'fore nor sence:
Go an' build a mile o' stock fence,
Run beat out a prairie fire
Then come make a four horse lister with a piece o' balin' wire.
(And we spent our hours o' leisure huntin' round for balin' wire.)
Farmin' days out on the prairie,
Horses wild an' mules contrary,
Crab grass growin' in the cotton,
Soil blowed out an' seasons rotten.



Oh, I made a ridin' lister out o' scraps o' balin' wire
And I made a set o' harness out of rope an' balin' wire.
And I started out to farmin'
And I set myself up farmin'
And I went in business farmin' on my guts an' balin' wire.

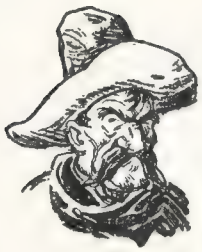
MY TENDER years were very tough
My infancy was rough
Yea, my childish play an' trainin' was at times real rough.
Them wild days I always wore
A gun strapped round my pinafore
For my games was based on killin'—and at times much more.
All my childish toys an' playthings they was instruments of death,
All my games was based on murder and it might be more.
Oh, I rode a buckin' bronco for a rockin' hobby horse
And I thought my dad's six-shooter was a toy;
Nights I rode out trailin' bad men whom I slew an' maybe worse.
Oh, I followed rowdy pastimes as a boy.



Outlaw bands an' cattle rustlers come forayin' crost the plains
An' the Indians every autumn painted up an' made a raid,
Come a-shootin' and a-scalpin', lootin' towns an' robbin' trains
Till we chased 'em to the rockhills where their damn' gangs stayed.
Oh, we mixed in with the Daltons an' the Doolins an' the rest
And we went and licked the redskins every two-three months or so;
Went a-chasin' cattle thieves an' fierce Apaches in the West
And we chased the wild Comanches and we chased Geronimo.
Oh, my youth was wild and woolly,
I regret the fact quite fully—
So did horsethieves and Apaches for my marksmanship was bully.

Oh, I cut my teeth on an old six gun
And I joined the Guards at the age of one.
I found a hog thief prowlin' round
And I burnt him straightway to the ground.
I caught a redskin under my cradle
And I stretched his scalp on an old soup ladle.

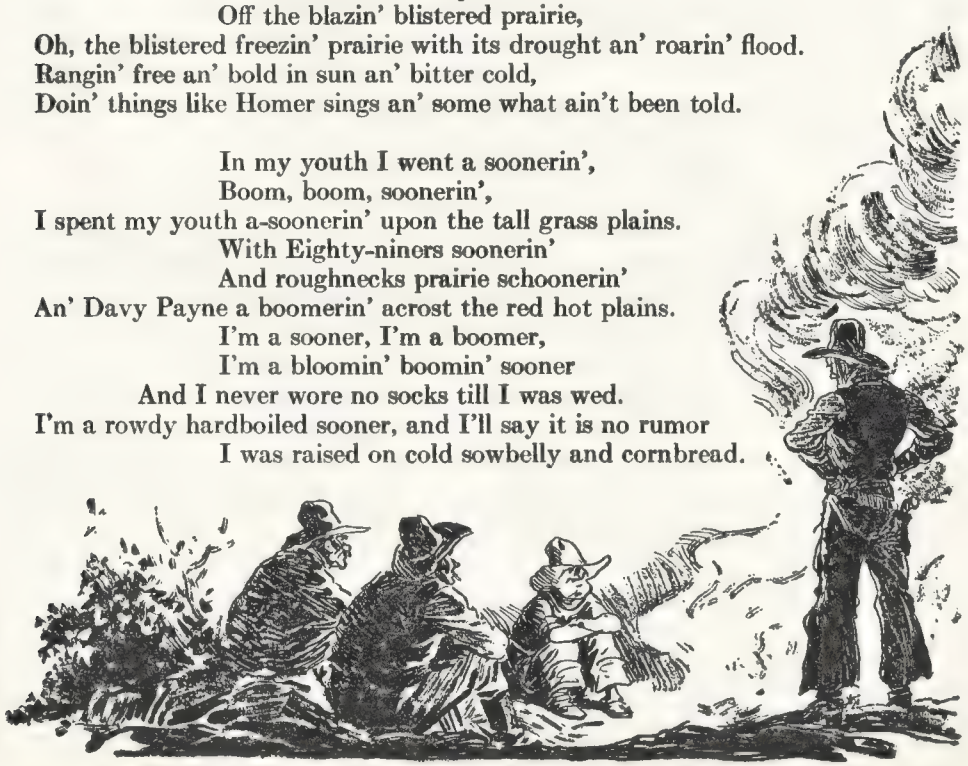
I'm deformed and I am stunted
And my intellect is blunted
By the hardships and privations of my cast iron youth.
For we worked ten days a week
And we didn't never sleep
And we had no grub but turnips—now I'm tellin' you the truth.
Oh, we raised no grub to speak of and our lot was shorely hard
Purt'nigh all we et was turnips—that was all was on the card.
Purt'nigh all we et was turnips,
Kafir bread an' scads o' turnips
With sometimes a slab o' sidemeat which was mostly brine an' lard.
Oh, them lean lank years—awful years,
Hot winds blowin', nothin' growin'
Never no precipitation savin' settler's salty tears—
So we practised irrigation with our hot salt tears.
We got up just after midnight, worked all day an' then by moonlight
Et our supper in the lamplight 'fore we went to feed the hogs.
Then we'd go to bed an' listen to the skulkin' c'yotes yippin'
And a howlin' and a yowlin' an' kiyi-in' at the dogs.
And along the dusty highroad we could hear the cowboys passin'
Raisin' plain an' fancy hell an' kickin' red sand on the moon:
Grizzled cattlemen an' cowboys on their pinto ponies passin'
With the flyin' hoofs a-poundin' underneath the rusty moon.

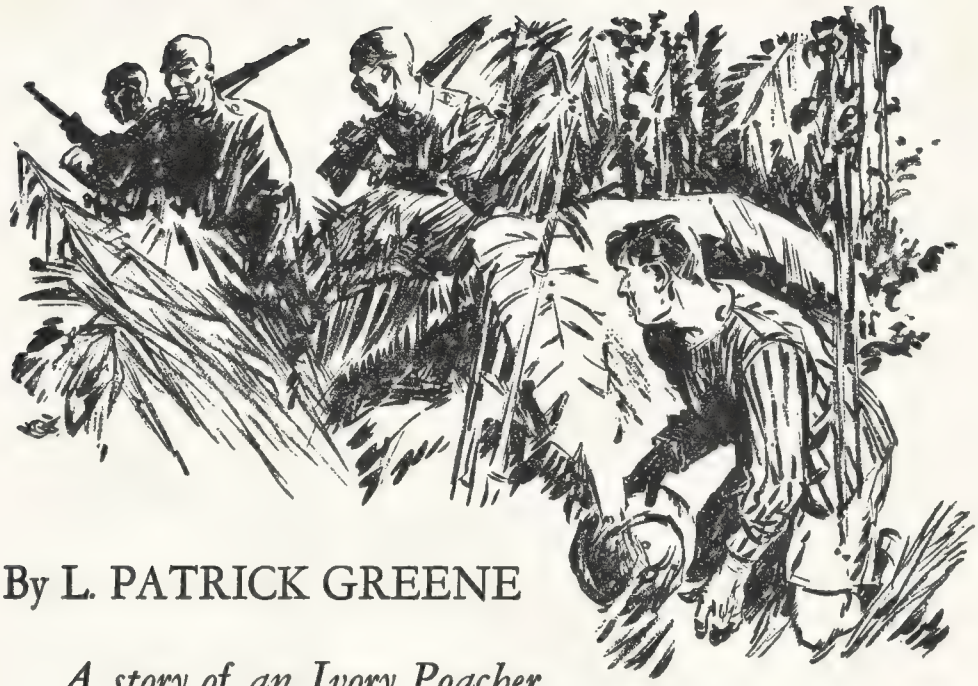


Cowboys an' cattlemen ridin' at night,
Ridin' wild broncs in the dusty moonlight;
Ridin' like hell an' the devil possest
Tow'rds the wide short grass ranges that
laid to the west.

IN MY youth I went a soonerin',
Boom, boom, soonerin',
I spent my youth a-soonerin' upon the tall grass plains.
Rangin' loose with Eighty-niners
An' with all them rough ol' timers
With them outlaw chiefs and U. S. scouts an' redskins off the plains.
Oh, we ranged the bitter prairie with its hot winds and its twisters
And its sandstorms and its hailstorms and its drought and roarin' flood;
Faced the naked scorchin' sunblaze an' the howlin' wild northwesters
An' the icy wind o' winter drivin' sleet that cut the blood.
Oh, we ranged the bitter prairie carin' nought for what befell,
Draggin' Fate upon our cow-ropes if the hag opposed our will.
When we went out on the loose they nailed up all the doors of hell
An' the folks there got religion an' the devil had a chill.
I was born and bred a sooner,
Yea, by heck, I'm still a sooner,
I can't help but be a sooner for I've got it in my blood.
I'm a sooner off the prairie,
Off the blazin' blistered prairie,
Oh, the blistered freezin' prairie with its drought an' roarin' flood.
Rangin' free an' bold in sun an' bitter cold,
Doin' things like Homer sings an' some what ain't been told.

In my youth I went a soonerin',
Boom, boom, soonerin',
I spent my youth a-soonerin' upon the tall grass plains.
With Eighty-niners soonerin'
And roughnecks prairie schoonerin'
An' Davy Payne a boomerin' acrost the red hot plains.
I'm a sooner, I'm a boomer,
I'm a bloomin' boomin' sooner
And I never wore no socks till I was wed.
I'm a rowdy hardboiled sooner, and I'll say it is no rumor
I was raised on cold sowbelly and cornbread.





By L. PATRICK GREENE

A story of an Ivory Poacher in the East African Jungle

BIG GAME

"OH BLOOMIN' fools!"

Colvin grumbled and endeavored to contract his bulky frame into a smaller compass. He was lying full length on the ground, almost motionless, despite the swarm of insects which tormented him.

"They ain't playing the game," he continued. "Anybody 'ud think I was all the bloomin' poachers there ever was rolled into one. Listen to them! It's a fact there won't be any elephants, or any other game, in the district for a month of Sundays after this. It's a shame, it is. An' I'll tell 'em so after they've cooled down a bit. Listen to the fools!"

The normal silence of the bush was profaned by the chatter of a machine gun, the crisp isolated reports of rifles and the guttural shouts of men.

Leaves fluttered down from the bush behind which Colvin was lying, stripped from the twigs by leaden hail. The air was filled with the vicious whine of bullets.

"Sounds like a swarm of oversized bees," Colvin continued. "An' I don't like it. Pretty soon there'll come along a bullet I won't hear. An' then—" he shrugged his shoulders.

A sapling close by toppled over with a crash, cut in two by bullets about six feet from the ground.

"An' I thought of standing behind that," Colvin muttered. "Blimey! They'd have got me between the eyes. But, hell, it's no good thinking things like that!

"Only—" the note of grievance again came into his voice—"it ain't fair. Sounds as if they've got their whole bloomin' army out after me. Maybe I ought to feel honored, but I don't. An' if this is a sample of their efficiency, I don't appreciate it. That's a nasty fact."

There was a sudden cessation of firing. Save for the denuded bushes and the felled tree, everything was as it had been when the rising sun dispelled the darkness of African night. Once again Colvin felt as utterly alone as when, that morning, he had awakened to find that his porters had deserted, taking with them all his equipment—ammunition, foodstuffs, trade good—everything save the pile of elephant tusks which lay condemningly in the center of the clearing.

"If they'd only taken them, too," Colvin groused, "the situation wouldn't be so bloomin' bad. Blast the niggers! Wonder what put the wind up them? Wonder why, supposing they got word a German patrol was out after me, they didn't warn me? Ain't like them to go off like this. They've been with me a long time, most of them. An' we've been chased before an' got away. They enjoyed being chivvied; thought it was bloomin' fine fun. So what ailed 'em this time?"

He scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Maybe they got scared at the numbers. It's a fact we ain't had an army corps after us before. Well, what to do? It's a fact I don't like this bloomin' silence. Maybe they're surroundin' me. In that case I'd better hop along whilst the hopping's good."

He crawled backward, moving very cautiously. As he did so shrill whistles sounded and the hell of firing broke out again.

Colvin "froze", thinking they had detected his movements.

"It ain't bloomin' well fair," he complained again, "making all this fuss just because I shot a few elephants. An' they ain't even givin' me a chance to surrender, let alone getting a shot back at them. My God! If they act like this just because I've been doing a little ivory poaching, what 'ud they do if I committed a murder!"

He cautiously parted a tuft of grass and scrutinized the little of the clearing that was visible through the bush before him.

He saw nothing moving save branches that swayed before the hail of bullets.

IN THE center of the clearing where he had encamped overnight a thin coil of smoke floated lazily upward from the embers of a fire.

Near to the orderly pile of elephant tusks were his blankets, their disarray giving evidence of his hasty rising and flight to the cover of the bush.

His discovery of his porters' desertion and the sight of the advancing German patrol had followed in swift sequence.

He cursed now the curiosity that had kept him from getting away from the place with all possible speed. He had wanted to know why the Germans were out in such large numbers after a lone ivory poacher. There were, he estimated, at least two hundred native soldiers, commanded by several whites, and a horde of porters.

"Maybe," Colvin conjectured as he resumed his backward crawl, "maybe they're out on a training march an' just happened to stumble across my tracks. Or maybe the niggers are out; that 'ud partly explain why my lot deserted." He shook his head, realizing that neither explanation satisfactorily fitted the situation. "Because," he continued, "if the niggers were out in rebellion the Dutchies wouldn't attack a white man's camp like this, not even if he *was* an ivory poacher who'd been thumbing his nose at them for years. An' if they're on maneuvers an' just happened on me, what's the idea of all the shooting without giving me a chance to do or say anything? Ah! I thought so! I got to hurry."

Firing now sounded from the right and left of the clearing. Evidently the Germans were completing a circular movement.

"Hope the blighters'll wing each other, that's all," Colvin said grimly.

"An' that's what happened," he exclaimed, as shrill, pain filled shouts and angry imprecations sounded above the din of firing. "Hell! That makes it worse for me. If I surrender now, they'll swear I shot at 'em an'll furnish me with a hemp necktie that'll put a finishing touch to this bloomin' swagger outfit of mine."

His swagger outfit consisted of a pair of khaki shorts, *veldt schoens*, gaudy patterned pajama jacket—green, yellow and purple stripes—and a large sun helmet. In the holster attached to his belt was a small automatic containing four shots. That and a hunting knife represented all his arms.

Whistles sounded shrilly. The firing ceased; again the bush was a place of silent mystery.

Colvin mistrusted it and fancied he heard whisperings and stealthly rustlings all about him.

A TWIG cracked not far to his right; and a giant uniformed negro appeared suddenly, moving toward the clearing. He carried a rifle at the trail; his eyes glittered with the anticipatory light of a hunter. Others appeared, to the right and left of him, at uniform distances. They beat the bush as they advanced.

Colvin crouched low. He was not an imaginative man, yet he could not repress a shudder. He, the big game hunter, was being hunted.

"An' I don't bloomin' well like it," he muttered.

He was hiding beneath a thick thorn bush. The native he had first seen was heading straight for him.

Colvin drew his automatic. Discovery seemed certain. The native's eyes were riveted appraisingly upon the thorn bush.

The native was very near now. Colvin trained his weapon on the third gleaming button of the man's tunic.

But he still withheld his fire. Despite a lifetime spent in killing, Colvin was not a senseless killer.

The native came on. Colvin sighed softly. There seemed no alternative. His trigger finger started to contract . . .

And then a native to the left of the giant shouted a coarse joke, and the giant changed his direction, moving toward the speaker. Colvin heard him make some ribald reply. The line of soldiers passed on; Colvin's hiding place was undiscovered.

He waited a few minutes, then went swiftly, noislessly forward. Although the shouts of the German soldiers—they had reached the clearing—effectively drowned all noise he might have made, Colvin took no chances. And despite his speed he left very slight indications of his line of retreat. His sixth sense, the experienced big game hunter's sense, took care of that.

He passed through the thick bush and scarcely disturbed a leaf; he ran through tall grasses, and barely bruised them. He crossed marshy ground and left no footprints, his keen eyes detecting the half submerged rocks and tree trunks which afforded him a series of stepping stones. His progress across that boggy place was a series of magnificent leaps and wonderful feats of balancing. Colvin was fully master of his powerfully muscled body.

The look of indignant amazement still ludicrously distorted his good natured, homely features; he was still endeavoring to find a reason for the stupendous efforts made to catch him, a lonely ivory poacher.

THE SWIFTLY mounting sun had dispelled the white cold mist and was beating down with full force. Colvin sweated profusely, but did not slacken his speed. Actually he traveled faster, for the bush growth had thinned and the ground was iron hard, making caution unnecessary. The cleverest native hunter could not, he reasoned, follow him across this ground. A day's hard trekking would, he hoped, put him beyond the German's reach. They would give up the quest for him and return to their post, believing, perhaps, that he had been wounded by one of their bursts of

gunfire and had crawled away somewhere into the bush to die.

He came at length to a large pond, several acres in extent, fed by hidden springs, its shores fringed with reeds and coarse, needle sharp grasses.

It was a haunt of brilliantly colored birds and a rendezvous of all the game of the district, despite the small native village which was built on the opposite shore, hidden by a clump of thick bush.

That kraal was Colvin's present destination. The inhabitants were well disposed toward him, and with good cause. He had fed them during a period of famine. They would give him food for his journey. He might, perhaps, hide among them.

He commenced to encircle the pond, keeping to the high ground so that he would leave no spoor in the soft mud at the pond's edge.

Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks.

Black clouds of smoke rose above the bush which hid the native village. Shouts and shrill whistle blasts profaned the silence.

"More of the bloomin' devils," Colvin muttered.

There was a sound of marching men, and Colvin saw, with the startling suddenness of a picture thrown upon the screen, a party of native soldiers, led by a white officer, defile from thick bush, heading directly toward him. He dropped to the ground.

For a moment Colvin thought his presence had been detected. He considered surrendering to them, hoping that the officer would be a man he knew or who could, at least, speak English.

He decided against that course almost immediately. The officer, his keen eyes quickly showed him, was a stranger to him; a stranger, also, to the country. That was evident from the way in which he led his men. He kept to a straight line, forcing his way through tangle of bush-clambering over piles of rock. A bush wise man would have made detours around such obstacles knowing, that, in Africa, a straight line is rarely the shortest distance between two points.

Colvin's next thought was a precipitous retreat.

Voices in his rear, the snapping of twigs, the booted tread of feet showed him the futility of that course.

"My God!" Colvin muttered in tones of dismay, but there was humor in his voice too. "The bush is lousy with the bloomin' devils! Well, they'll know what hide and seek is before they catch me."

He snaked his way down to the pond, in and out of the reeds, through stinking mud. Some of that mud he daubed on his helmet—and vanished!

A native of the village might have remarked upon the appearance of a rounded boulder above the surface of the water among a clump of reeds about twenty feet from the shore, and might—if he could have overcome his fear of the supernatural—have been tempted to investigate.

He would have discovered the boulder to be the crown of Colvin's helmet. It covered Colvin's face and automatic. That was all of Colvin that was above the water. He was sitting down on the pond's muddy bed.

Through holes pierced in the crown he obtained a restricted view of the shore, and through those holes he watched constantly.

PRESENTLY two parties of soldiers came into his field of vision, both led by white men, and met almost directly opposite him.

There they halted. The two officers sat down together on a rock and lighted cigarets. The native soldiers intermingled and talked in high pitched, shrill voices. Snatches of their conversation reached Colvin's ears. What he heard made him curse softly, and increased his bewilderment.

The village to which he was heading had been destroyed, the natives, such as had not escaped into the bush, either killed or taken prisoners. These two parties of soldiers had encircled the pond,

hoping to pick up more fugitives. The main body of soldiers were still at the kraal.

But nothing the soldiers said gave Colvin a clue as to the reason for it all, and he could only conjecture that the villagers had been thus punished because they were known to be friendly to him.

"An' if that's it," he muttered, "I'm a bloomin' good mind to give myself up. Else they'll be wiping out a lot more kraals. At least," he added thoughtfully, "it means I can't go to any bloomin' kraal for food. That's a sure thing. An' all this is because I shot a few tuskers!"

There was a sudden ripple of excitement among the natives. One of them had stumbled upon Colvin's spoor and, with several companions, was following it down to its disappearance in the pond.

They looked across the water; their eyes rested for a moment unsuspectingly on Colvin's helmet. Their faces, he saw and chuckled softly, reflected their awed amazement. A spoor which vanished so unaccountably must be something supernatural!

He heard their guttural exclamations of fear.

They returned in a body to where their white officers sat and reported the matter.

Colvin sighed with relief at the white men's loud, jeering laughter. Evidently both were greenhorns. A white man who knows Africa does not scoff at or ignore the apparently supernatural. Generally he investigates, in the expectation of finding a commonplace explanation, and is not often disappointed.

Presently, their cigarets finished, the two white men stood up. In response to their guttural commands the soldiers fell in. A moment later they marched away.

Colvin did not move. His limbs were numb; he felt nauseated and strangely weak, but he was too cunning a hunter to leave anything to chance.

The soldiers might return. Perhaps the officers were wiser than they appeared and had left men, hidden somewhere in the bush, to watch for the return of the creature that had made the spoor which disappeared.

And when, after a long time, he realized that he must move, or surrender to the feeling of faintness which possessed him, it was very gradually, inch by inch.

Nothing happened. The shots he half expected were not fired. No fear filled shouts greeted a boulder which moved! He moved into shallower water, crawling now on hands and knees, heading for a place some distance to the right of where he entered. His pajama jacket, appearing just above the surface of the water, looked like a patch of scum, driven shoreward by some chance eddy.

Reaching the comparative shelter of the reeds that lined the shore of the pond, Colvin cautiously straightened himself.

There was no one in sight.

Then he heard a confused sound somewhere to his right. Looking toward it, he saw the head of a native appearing above the reeds.

The man's eyes were bulging with fear; his teeth were chattering. It was, Colvin recognized, the headman of the destroyed village.

With an exclamation of glad relief, Colvin walked toward him, hands outstretched.

There was a yell of fear. The native, springing to his feet, dashed madly away.

Colvin endeavored to give chase, but his limbs, weakened by their long immersion, failed him; with a philosophical acceptance of defeat he made his way slowly to the high ground and crawled under the shelter of a bush.

There, having removed his muddy, saturated clothing, he was occupied for a time in removing from his body the leeches and ticks which had fastened themselves to him and were draining his blood.

"NO WONDER that nigger ran from me," he mused. "He must have thought I was a bloomin' ghost, coming on him like that, plastered with mud an' water dripping from me. I

ought to have been more careful. Ought to have spoken to him first. Hell! We could have joined forces. Been a bloomin' chance then of us both getting away. Bet he don't let me get within shouting distance of him after this."

He was silent for awhile as he wrung the water from his clothes and spread them to dry.

"Only thing for me to do," he decided eventually, "is to head for Tikky Scott's store. I don't like the little cur. But he's a white man—at least his skin's white—an' he'll give me some grub. He'll have to do that."

HE CAME within sight of the *kopje*, at the base of which Tikky's store was built, in the early afternoon of the eighth day of his trek. The sight heartened him, spurred his flagging energies with the thought of the warm, substantial food, more clothing and, for one night at least, the luxury of a bed free from the necessity of being on guard even while he slept.

Tattered rags were all that remained of his once gaudy pajama jacket; his shorts were torn, and the soles of his *veldt schoen* were worn painfully thin, so thin that he avoided hard rocky ground.

He was very hungry and thirsty; his body, ill protected by his clothes from the sun, smarted; its flesh was red and puffed. When a chance bough touched it he with difficulty repressed a yelp of pain. Even so, Colvin could still smile.

Several times during the past week he had come into visual range of the parties of German native soldiery, but they had not seen him, and it tickled his vanity to think that they were all searching for him.

"But they won't find me," he vowed grimly. "The fools! I'd 'a' surrendered to the first lot if they'd approached me decent like."

Several times, caught in open, coverless country, he had heard bullets whine over his head as he crouched down low, and he had been forced to travel for interminable distances, crawling on his belly.

That so many should be searching for him filled him at times with something approaching awe and invested him with a sense of great self-importance. Yet it annoyed him, offended his sense of fairness.

Despite their numbers, splendid equipment and Teutonic thoroughness, he had outwitted them again and again, had played with them as cleverly as a veteran fox plays with a young and inexperienced pack of hounds.

One phase of the game, however, they had won. They had stopped his earths!

One attempt to seek food and shelter in a native village, a village where in other days he had been more than welcome, had proved almost disastrous.

His appearance had been the signal for a fusilade of shots from muzzle loading guns. The air about him had been filled with pot bellied slugs. A flight of arrows, infinitely more deadly than the wild gun shots, followed, and he had been forced to run for his life, chased by a mob of yelling men.

After that he had avoided native kraals and had lived off the country, snared birds and small buck, gathered wild fruits and green herbs. And he laughed less often. He felt that every man's hand was against him. Every rock was the possible hiding place of an enemy; when he approached a waterhole he exhibited all the craft of a nervous buck. His sleep was broken; a cracking twig, a rustle in the undergrowth would send him into a panic stricken flight. He felt a strange sympathy with all beasts that are preyed upon. Hunted himself, he had a feeling of fellowship with those others. And they seemed to understand it and sensed that there was an unarmed truce between them and man, the most ruthless killer of them all.

He was very tired. Desire for sleep hurried his footsteps toward the store of Tikky Scott.

THE WESTERN sky glowed crimson with the glory of a setting sun; the purple shadow of the *kopje* stretched across the gray greenness of the veld. It was, Colvin thought, a shadow of

ill omen, suggesting the barren harshness of the *kopje* itself. He was walking in that shadow. Missing the warmth of the sun's rays, he shivered.

In a little while, half an hour at the most, the veld would be plunged into darkness. He wanted to be at Tikky's place before then; unaccountably, he experienced a childish fear of being alone in the dark.

He broke into a labored, footsore run.

It was still light when he rounded a spur of the *kopje* and came in sight of Tikky Scott's place—of what had been Tikky Scott's place!

Of the cluster of tin roofed huts that had formed the little Londoner's store and living quarters nothing remained but a heap of blackened ruins.

"The niggers must be 'out'," Colvin panted as he ran forward. "The Germans ain't after me at all!"

He slowed to a walk, and his keen, bush-wise eyes took note of his surroundings. There was no one in sight. A mile or more beyond the ruined store he could see wisps of smoke, floating above the tree tops, from the cook fires of the large kraal that had been Tikky's chief source of revenue.

Coming still nearer, he examined the ground, looking for spoor, for footprints which would enable him to get a mental picture of what had happened.

About twelve feet from the biggest heap of ruins he picked up a number of spent rifle cartridges.

"It wasn't the bloomin' niggers after all," he muttered, and his eyes were drawn irresistibly to a white object which sprawled at the base of the ruins.

He ran over to it, cursing softly.

It was the naked body of Tikky Scott. Bullet wounds pitted his body; a handkerchief—portraits of the English king and queen were depicted on it in garish colors—was bound over his eyes.

"Oh bloomin' hell!" Colvin muttered.

He wasted no sympathy on the dead man—Tikky's life had been devoted to evil—who had died, Colvin thought as he noted the composure of the dead man's face, better than he had lived.

"I suppose," he continued, "they caught him selling booze an' guns to the niggers. Well, I warned him. Just the same they hadn't ought to have left him like this. They ought to have buried him."

He supposed some of the native soldiers or men from the kraal had stripped the clothing from the dead man.

With feverish haste he covered the body with rubble from the ruins and then, realizing suddenly what all this meant, searched among the ashes, hoping to find something which would be of use to him. Clothing, food, ammunition.

Darkness put an end to his quest; he had discovered nothing.

HE HEADED through the darkness for the kraal, determined to demand food and shelter even if it meant death.

He had counted on finding a safe haven at Tikky's place, had counted on leaving there so well equipped that the ten day's trek which was still between him and English territory could be made in comparative ease and safety.

And, like a fox which finds its last earth stopped, he was now ready for desperate courses, ready to take risks, to face overwhelming odds.

Yet, when he came to the clearing which encircled the kraal, his natural hunter's caution reasserted itself and he repented his noisy progress through the bush and the sentimental impulse which had induced him to cover Tikky's body.

He stopped short at the very edge of the clearing and gasped in amazed dismay.

Several fires blazed and by their flickering light he saw a number of small two men tents. Beyond them, sleeping beside stacked rifles were hundreds—he could only guess at their numbers—of native soldiers. Others, bayonets fixed, kept guard, pacing up and down in good military style.

A twig cracked under Colvin's foot.

One of the sentries swung toward him,

rifle at the ready, and shouted a hoarse challenge.

Instantly the camp was in an uproar, and Colvin fled swiftly through the bush, heading north for the river that flowed nearby. A hunted animal's terror again possessed him. He no longer desired sleep; he desired nothing save to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the human hornet's nest.

One thought kept pounding through his brain as he ran. He gave utterance to it over and over again in a voice tinged with hysterical laughter:

"But they can't all be after me. It ain't right. They can't be."

Then, as he heard wild shouts and whistles blowing behind him, he gasped desperately—

"But they are, by God!"

Gaining his second breath, he ran more easily. His eyes, accustomed now to the darkness, enabled him to avoid obstacles which otherwise might have impeded him.

Gradually the darkness lessened as a cloud veiled moon rose above the horizon.

Coming to the river, he dived noiselessly into it, for the ford was out of his line of flight, and swam swiftly down stream, aided by the current.

Something nosed him and he splashed violently, thinking it was a crocodile. When he discovered that it was a tree trunk, uprooted by recent floods, he clambered upon it and floated down on his primitive boat until the sun's first upshooting rays paled the white splendor of the moon and warned him that it was time to seek cover in the bush.

All through the night he had heard voices of men who sought him, growing fainter and fainter as the night aged; and now, as he steered his ungainly craft to the southern bank it seemed that he was alone in a silent world.

He had outwitted his pursuers. Only chance could put them on his trail again. He chuckled contentedly as he reached up and caught hold of a bough which hung down low over the river and climbed up into the tree.

Mounting to its topmost branches, he settled himself comfortably in a fork, where the sun's rays beat full upon him, and slept.

COLVIN whistled softly as he limped over the veld.

Behind him were seven painful, hunger filled days since he had left Tikky Scott's place; seven days of headlong flight.

They had got on his trail sooner than he had thought possible. For five days he had fled with fear at his heels; for all his bush lore, his cunning tricks of laying false spoor, he could not shake them off his trail. The bush swarmed with them. No matter in what direction he turned, they barred his way.

At last, too tired to lay any more false trails, too tired even to attempt to destroy his spoor, he had kept to the easiest road—following the native paths which, in their tortuous wanderings, were indicative of the black man and gave evidence of the superstitious fears which governed the pathmaker's mind.

Three times during the past two days Colvin had entered small native villages and helped himself to beer, eggs and meal in defiance of the few aged women and graybeards who seemed the sole inhabitants.

Desperation, hunger, bewilderment had at last defeated caution, and Colvin's trail was now plain enough for a veritable greenhorn to read.

And yet when he had that morning climbed a steep *kopje* to view the country behind he had seen the Germans encamped a full day's trek distant. He was awed by their numbers. But:

"They've decided to give up the chase," he had concluded. "An' about bloomin' well time. Damn 'em! Just the same there's no call for me to hang about here. They might change their minds, an' it's a bloomin' fact I'll never enter their territory again, not for ivory or any other bloomin' reason. They're too fussy."

He whistled as he descended the *kopje*. At intervals through the long day's trek

he had whistled, just as he whistled now. The hardships were behind him. Directly ahead, blued by the distance, was a group of hills which he well knew were just beyond the boundary river.

"I'll be there by noon tomorrow," he told himself. "Maybe before."

And "there" for him meant the small British post which was supposed to guard the railroad bridge.

"Though what they've got to guard it against beats me," he mused. "Less it's from elephants. They ought to give me that job. They'd save money. I'd take my pay in tusks!"

He laughed happily. Today, for the first time since his camp had been raided, he felt that he was no longer a hunted beast. Stealthy rustlings in the grass, a snapping twig, the *toc-toc* noises of beetles no longer filled him with dread of discovery.

Here was the clean, open veld. Despite the pain of his sun burnt body, of his bleeding feet, despite his haggard appearance, he felt strangely carefree and, for a time, speculated on the probabilities of a trading trip, with ivory poaching as a side line, up in the Belgian Congo.

And then he wondered what sort of meal they'd give him at the police post. Curried goat, he supposed. And a goat which had died of old age, at that. Good enough . . .

He left the winding path and headed for the hills which marked his goal. He had eyes for nothing else.

IT WAS his nose that gave him warning. A fragrant whiff of burning wood and presently, mingled with it, the aroma of coffee.

He stopped abruptly, sniffed hungrily. For a moment he was ready to believe that it was all an illusion. He moved impatiently forward a few steps, then again came to a halt. The smell of wood fire, of coffee, of cooking food, persisted.

He concentrated, tracing the aromas to their source. He saw, not a hundred yards to his left, a coil of blue smoke, almost invisible against the electric blue of the sky, drifting lazily toward him from behind a thick clump of *mapani* bush.

His mouth watered with anticipation, but his habit of caution reasserted itself and, dropping noiselessly to the ground, he wriggled slowly toward the clump of bush, determined to investigate before exposing himself.

Several times he paused, listening intently. That he heard no voices raised in conversation heartened him. He had, he decided, only one man with whom to deal with—and undoubtedly a white man. The coffee told him that.

But Colvin never relaxed his caution. Having endured so much, he could wait a little longer.

"But, oh bloomin' hell!" he muttered. "That coffee smells damned tantalizing."

He reached the bush and, parting them softly, peered through.

He saw a man seated before a small fire. A man as unkempt and hunted looking as himself; a man dressed in ragged clothes, whose face was covered with an unkempt beard and whose over long hair was caked with dirt.

A billy can was warming on the fire; a slice of meat was grilling on a cleverly improvised spit. Close by was a blanket roll and the few tools a prospector might carry.

Colvin nodded at the sight of them. They confirmed his deduction. A rifle was on the ground within easy reach of the prospector. It was a German service rifle. But that meant nothing. His eyes returned to the man.

His face was haggard with pain and fear—fear of being followed. Colvin gasped at the thought.

As the man moved sluggishly to move the coffee from the fire, Colvin saw that his left thigh was swathed in blood stained bandages.

"My God!" Colvin thought. "They've been after him too. Wonder what he's done! Well, nothing to fear here."

He rose to his feet and crashed through the bush.

"Looks like you and me are in the same boat," he began heartily.

Then he ducked hastily and leaped to one side, as the other drew his revolver and fired.

BEFORE the prospector could fire again Colvin had closed with him, cursing him for an impetuous fool, shouting explanations.

The other made no intelligible reply. For awhile the two wrestled violently, rolling over and over. Four other shots the prospector fired, the last one passing clean through Colvin's helmet, and then suddenly relaxed.

"The damned fool!" Colvin panted, releasing his grip on the prospector's throat. "What did he want to act like a madman for?" He felt the man's heart. "Only fainted," he continued relievedly. "Must have been damned weak; lost a lot of blood from that wound in his leg. Have to have a look at that.

"Maybe he's struck a rich reef nearby an' me coming on him sudden like made him think I was going to jump his claim. Hell! Gold doesn't interest me, not until it's made into pretty coins at any rate. But he didn't know that."

There was a water bag hanging from a bough of the bush. Colvin took it down and splashed water in the man's face.

"That's better, old-timer," he said cheerfully as the prospector slowly opened his eyes and gulped painfully. "Now we will have some skoff, if you don't mind me butting in—"

He stopped short, amazed at the look in the other's eyes.

"Oh, bloomin' hell!" he exploded. "You don't want to act like that. I'm sorry I used you rough, you crippled like you are, but you came damn' near to killing me. Shooting like a madman! What got into you, anyway? Think I was after gold? Hell! Grub an' somebody to talk to's all I want."

The other only glared. Colvin shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if you're going to be like a sulky kid an' not talk, at least there's some grub."

He turned his back contemptuously on the prospector and, squatting on his haunches, native fashion, poured out some coffee into an enamel mug and drank it with a luxurious sigh of satisfaction.

Warned by a premonition of danger, he turned swiftly and saw the prospector crawling painfully toward the rifle.

Colvin drew his automatic.

"Stop it, you fool!" he shouted.

But the prospector only moved the faster; his hands had almost closed on the rifle when Colvin acted, rushing forward and kicking the weapon out of the prospector's reach.

Then two desperate hands closed about his ankles, jerking him off his balance so that he fell headlong to the ground.

And again the two men wrestled, almost upsetting the coffee, scattering the red ashes of the fire.

The prospector was determined to kill him. Colvin had no doubt of that and he exerted all his strength to avoid such an unpleasant finish to his wanderings.

Even had the prospector not been wounded he would have stood no chance against Colvin. Colvin fought solely on the defensive and good humoredly, until the prospector bit him.

Quite coolly then and without malice he knocked the prospector out with a cleverly calculated blow, tied his hands and feet, then philosophically resumed his interrupted meal.

HUNGER and thirst satisfied, Colvin turned again to the prospector to find that man's pain wracked eyes fixed balefully upon him.

Colvin looked at him thoughtfully.

"You're mad," he said slowly. "Mad as a bloomin' hatter."

Then another thought came to him.

"Say, you're a German, ain't you? You ain't English, anyway. Do you speak English?"

No answer.

"Well, do you speak Swahili?"

He repeated the question in the vernacular. Still no answer.

"You're a sulky devil," Colvin grunted, "and mad—course you're mad." There

could not, he reasoned, be any other explanation.

He undid the rags about the man's thigh and whistled sympathetically. As far as he could judge, a bullet had smashed against the thigh bone, shattering it. He marveled at the man's endurance.

He covered the wound with *mapani* leaves which he first steeped in water, then he searched the prospector's kit, finding in it a small vial containing crystals of permanganate.

He made a strong solution with these and carefully swabbed out the wound. Then, having boiled the rags, he again bandaged the man's thigh, making a workmanlike job of it.

Still the man was silent; not even a groan escaped his lips, though he sweated profusely with agony of pain. Colvin nodded acknowledgment of the look of gratitude which appeared for a moment in the other's eyes.

"That's all right, old-timer. But I've got to get you somewhere quick so's that wound can be properly attended to. First thing you know, gangrene'll set in an' you'll be finished. God! Wish you were a bit more chatty like."

After a moment's thought he searched the man's pockets, discovering nothing of interest save a notebook and a map of the district.

The map was one of the official ones made by the British topographical department.

"God help you if you're been following that," Colvin said contemptuously.

The notebook proved the wounded man a German. Colvin recognized the script and regretted his ignorance of the language.

"An' that explains a lot," Colvin muttered. "No it don't though. He ain't a soldier an' surely they ain't mobilized all their civilians to get after me too!"

He returned the map and notebook to the man's pockets, wondering at the expression of relief which came into the man's eyes as he did so.

He offered the German food and coffee and, when he refused, sat down, his back against a rock and endeavored to puzzle the reason for the German's attack on him.

"I could understand it if he'd have warned me first," he mused, "but maybe he didn't take that chance seeing how crippled he is with that wounded leg. It must be that he's found gold and suspects I'm after it. Well, why in hell won't he talk? Maybe because he knows he's feverish an' once he talks he won't be able to stop an'll tell too much. Maybe that's it. Sort of hypnotized himself to be dumb. That's what I'd do if I was in his position, damn' me if I wouldn't!"

Colvin stared moodily before him until a raucous snore made him start apprehensively. The German, worn out by his wound and the struggle with Colvin, was fast asleep.

"Bloomin' hell!" Colvin grumbled. "Now what to do? It wouldn't be right to leave this chap alone on the veld. He'd peg out, sure. An' I don't see staying here with him. Only one thing to do as I see it, an' that's take him along with me."

He rose to his feet and made a careful note of his position so that the German could find the place again when he had recovered from the wound.

Then, fastening the water bottle to his belt, he picked up the sleeping German, slung him across his shoulders, and briskly resumed the trek.

He halted at sunset, but his rest was disturbed by delirious ravings and the German's maddened attempts to kill his rescuer. In self-defense, Colvin was obliged to bind him again.

ALL THROUGH the heat of the following day Colvin plodded doggedly, bent almost double under his burden, a burden which now sung, now cursed, now endeavored to strangle the man who carried him.

Colvin's halts were frequent; and after each halt the will to continue lessened.

At times he toyed with the idea of leaving the German on the veld.

"It 'ud be the best for both of us," he

reasoned. "I could send somebody out after him. I'll never be able to make it with him to carry."

Once he acted on the suggestion of his tired brain and left the German in the shade of a thickly leafed bush. He went on alone, his stride brisker now that he was freed from the weight of the man.

But, at the end of a hundred yards, his footsteps faltered. He came to a halt, hesitated a moment, then ran back to the bush.

At that it was several minutes before he found the German who had crawled some distance away from the bush. The man spat at him like a wild beast and pelted him with stones as he approached.

Colvin picked him up and continued his trek, his conscience easy once again.

He discarded everything which meant unnecessary weight, his knife and automatic, the German's revolver, the German's heavy nailed boots.

He reeled in his gait; the veld, seen through his sweat blinded eyes, seemed to revolve madly about him.

His laughter joined the German's, sounded just as mad. He too sang ribald, gutter bred songs; he too cursed. He had to fight desperately against the inner voice which urged him to drop his burden to the ground, to jump on it, to bash in its head with a rock. He was conscious of an insensate, unreasoning hate for it.

Victory over the homicidal mood left him weak and trembling. But it completely restored sanity and his sense of proportion.

He could laugh again naturally, especially when he saw how near he was to his goal. So near that he could see the flag which floated at the top of a tall staff before the post.

The German was quiet at last; his eyes were closed.

With gentle solicitude Colvin shifted his burden to a more comfortable position, carried him now in his arms.

He heard the notes of a bugle and saw the flag slowly descend. It was sunset.

IT SEEMED to him that the square about the flagpole was black with men.

But that, of course, was an illusion created by distance and fatigue.

There were only five white men at the post, a sergeant and four troopers, and a dozen, at the most, native soldiers.

Lord, he was tired. But he must not think of that.

He came to the river's ford and began the crossing, stepping very carefully for fear he should slip and drop his sleeping burden.

And then a volley of rifle fire broke out; the surface of the placidly flowing river was pitted with fountains of spray.

The unexpectedness, the unjustness of this attack completely broke through Colvin's armor of self-control.

His face was distorted with anger and he yelled hoarsely:

"Damn' you! Stop that row! You'll wake poor old Dutchy. Stop it, damn' you!"

The water was almost to his waist, impeding his progress, and it was with difficulty that he kept the unconscious man above the surface; but not once did he think of turning to seek shelter. He only cursed at a pain which suddenly stung his ribs.

The firing grew spasmodic, finally ceased. Colvin was not aware of that.

Men shouted curt orders. He heard nothing but his own laughter.

It was so very funny! So bewilderingly funny. Chased for days, months, years, by Germans and now attacked by his own people! He was like a dog lost in a crowd, running helplessly back and forth, seeking a friend and finding only kicks!

All right! He would go back to the veld. By bloomin' hell, he would!

"Me and Dutchy! he muttered. "To hell with everybody else. We're both in the same boat. Nobody wants us. We got to stick together.

"But what's it all about? What's it all about? I don't know, that's what makes it so bloomin' funny!"

He laughed again.

The laugh ended in a gurgle as he slipped gently forward. The water which closed over his head was faintly tinged with red.

COLVIN opened his eyes and sighed luxuriously. He was between sheets in a well built hut.

Some one had shaved him; he felt gloriously clean.

Then he remembered and frowned thoughtfully.

"Hi, you!" he said, addressing a man who stood in the doorway of the hut. "What's this all about?"

The man turned; Colvin recognized him. It was Burke, the sergeant in charge of the post.

"What's it all about, Burke?" he demanded. "What the hell do you mean shootin' at me for?"

"Some damn' fool sentry thought you were a German—"

"And what the bloomin' hell did it matter if I was?" Colvin interrupted angrily.

"Didn't you know, Colvin? We're at war with Germany."

"War! Oh, bloomin' hell! That explains everything. An' me thinking all the time they was after me. Say—"

"You'd better keep quiet, Colvin," the sergeant interrupted. "You stopped a bullet with your ribs. The doc had a hell of a time getting it out."

Colvin snorted.

"That's nothing, nothing to what I've been through these last two weeks. Let me tell you. I've got to get it off my mind. But wait a minute." He frowned thoughtfully. "That Dutchy I brought in, where's he?"

"He's being taken care of," the sergeant said evasively.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's a spy. He kept a store over here. We caught him trying to blow up the bridge, but he got away. Got away, too, with a lot of information we were trying to keep dark."

"What sort of information?"

"Well, we're hoping the German's 'll come to attack us."

"My God, you're hoping for trouble then," Colvin exclaimed. "There's hundreds of 'em a couple of day's trek away. Do you think you and your four troopers can hold 'em back?"

"No." The sergeant chuckled. "We're only the bait. We've got a bleedin' army corps to back us up. Keeping under cover, you see. Well, if this Dutchy you brought in had managed to get word to his crowd, all our planning and scheming would have been no good. As it is, when they come they'll get a warm reception. See!"

"Hell yes! I see! No wonder Dutchy acted sort o' wild when I butted on to him; no wonder he didn't want me to bring him along. But why didn't he say something?"

"He thought you were one of our intelligence officers; he was afraid to talk," the sergeant explained. "And, believe me, the O. C. is ready to give you anything you want for bringing him in. Though why you didn't just knock him on the head is more than I can understand."

"Don't be a fool, Burke. Why should I kill him? I thought he was in the same fix as me. Thought he was being chased, too. I didn't know there was a war on. An' if I had it wouldn't have made any difference. After all I'd been through I was ready to kiss me worst bloomin' enemy. Say, what are they goin' to do with Dutchy?"

"What do they generally do with spies in wartime?" the sergeant asked roughly.

"You mean they'll shoot him?"

"Naturally. What else?"

"My God, they won't," Colvin shouted wrathfully. "Think I went through all I went through to get the poor devil where he could be attended to, just to have him shot. By bloomin' hell, no! I wouldn't play such a dirty trick on the poor devil. Do you think I carried him from sunrise to sunset just so's you fools could show what good shots you are at a stationary target? Well, I didn't. I thought I was saving life, an' I'm damned if anybody is

goin' to make a bloomin' murderer of me."

"Quiet, Colvin," the sergeant said soothingly. "Quiet, man. You'll burst the stitches—"

"Bust 'em an' be damned!" Colvin snorted and struggled to a sitting position. "Me! I'm going to get old Dutchy an' carry him back to the bush where I found him. I'm—"

He fell back on the pillows utterly exhausted.

"WHAT'S all this about, Sergeant?"

Burke jumped to attention and tersely reported Colvin's conversation to a man who appeared in the doorway and whose black pointed beard, comfortable paunch and kindly brown eyes gave the lie to the stern military note in his voice.

He nodded as Burke finished his report and moved nearer the bed.

"I think I understand your position, Colvin," he said gravely, "and the sentence of death will not be carried out."

Colvin's eyes thanked him.

"I'll have him moved in here with you," the other went on. "Go and see to it now, sergeant. He's been asking to see you and say thank you."

"He'll be good company—to look at," Colvin muttered. "He's a bloomin' dummy!"

The O.C. laughed.

"You'll find he speaks English very fluently. And he's a good sport. Asked immediately after you when he came to himself and saw that escape was impossible.

"Now, is there anything you'd like?"

"A beefsteak, a bottle of champagne and a good cigar," Colvin said with a grin, thinking he had asked the impossible.

The O.C. laughed.

"You shall have all three." He walked to the door, pausing to add, "You must hurry up and get well. We need big game hunters like you—for special duty. We're hunting very big, big game, you know."

"Yah, I know," Colvin grumbled to himself, as the O.C. departed. "I've had some. I've been hunted an' I don't bloomin' well like it." He frowned. "An' I still don't know what it's all about. War. War's bloomin' hell, an' damn' foolish. It made Dutchy try to murder me, only it wouldn't have been murder. That's what's so funny. An' I suppose they shot Tikky Scott 'cause they thought he was a spy. An' shot up my camp because they thought I was one."

Then he grinned.

"Maybe I'll be able to go back to that ivory when this affair's over. They'll have forgot all about me by then. Only, somehow, I ain't so bloomin' keen on hunting as I was."

Presently he fell asleep.

At first his sleep was disturbed by phantasies of nightmare. He lived over again the sensations of a hunted animal; ogrelike men waited behind bushes, ready to pounce upon him. He wandered for a time in a dark, noisome wood where hideous death awaited an unwary step.

But gradually the distorted visions faded.

And when orderlies carried the German into the hut on a stretcher, Colvin was sleeping peacefully.

He seemed to smile acknowledgment, when the German whispered—

"Thanks for everything, old chap."

ESKIMO STYLE

A Story of the Royal Northwest Mounted and the Premier Bad Man of the Arctic

By A. DEHERRIES SMITH

THE OLD whaler *Dolphin* lay three miles off the low, brown coast at the top of the map, her ice scraped sides heaving gently to the Arctic's roll. Her decks rang to the clatter of puffing steam winches. Now and then sounded a sharp shout of command.

Haste marked the movements of those aboard the ship. There were yet a dozen scattered outposts of the Mounted Police and the Ungava Company to visit, and Captain Hendricksen's eyes went again and again to the bobbing icebergs and to the August snows which were already mantling the higher ridges. Under his baleful gaze the first mate roared urging threats at the sailors who were filling the hoisting slings down in the hold.

Tied fore and aft to the *Dolphin's* side, the trim Mounted Police schooner *Resolution* rolled alongside. Clucking Eskimos, garbed in skin parkas, darted for the cargo slings as they descended, tumbling the contents helter skelter over the Mounted Police schooner's hatchways. The natives babbled good naturedly as they worked, glancing out of slanting Mongolian eyes at the two Mounties who were engaged in checking the freight as it came aboard the *Resolution*.

"Happy jiggers, ain't they?" Constable Tim Noonan queried of his youthful superior. "Give 'em the sight of a deep sea ship once a year, plenty of blubber to chew, an igloo dance once in a while, an'

they'll jump over a haystack—only there ain't no such thing less than a thousand miles south. Well, I—"

"There's the last sling, Tim," Sergeant Cleaver cut in on Noonan's chatter, as there came a hail from the whaler's bridge, high overhead. "Darn it, I hate to see the cargo loaded. Hendricksen will be heading out right away and we won't see another new face for eight months. I believe this Arctic winter is beginning to get on my nerves. Anyhow we have all kinds of stores. Good Lord, they haven't shot us the mail yet!"

The sergeant broke off his remarks to throw his long body across the patrol boat's deck, cup hands to mouth and yell at the row of faces peering down from the whaler's gunwale:

"Hey, Hendricksen, don't cast off yet! Hey! Hey! You haven't given us our mail. Slide it down, Cap. Great Saint Peter! If you put to sea with our mail on board there'll be two lunatics to greet you when you come in next fall."

"About all I'll get is a picture post card of the jail in Los Angeles, but, by gosh, I want it bad," Noonan said to himself in support of his chief. "There'll be magazines, anyhow, an' likely some cookery hints in 'em how to fry blubber and disguise beans. That should help. Go on, you bozos," he added in command to the staring Eskimos, "get the hatches on."

THE CONSTABLE wheeled around again as another blurred yell reached the patrol boat from the whaler. Sergeant Cleaver's wide shoulders seemed to sag; his face went white under its coating of tan.

"Haven't got the mail!" he bellowed back. "Why the devil didn't you wait for it, eh? You're the contractor. Who has it? What?"

"*Himmel*, but are you already mad?" Captain Hendricksen boomed back, as he stamped over to the end of the bridge and leaned down, an untidy figure in sea boots, canvas wind jacket and fur cap.

"Who has de mail? How de devil should I know? It do not come in time by the Mackenzie boat. I can not vait mit de ice forming; no. I leave word at de post dat Needrich or one of dem traders should bring it. Needrich he come soon. Ten thousand tunders! Tink you I hold de *Dolphin* all day to make talk of such foolishness? Cast off there, Mister Mate, cast off!"

"Holy pink toed Eliza!" Noonan whistled through his nose when the lines were slackened on the larger vessel and thudded to the schooner's deck. "In the soup up to our delicate ears! Fat chance of Needrich bringing the mail. That big walrus has it in for us since Dick pinched him for robbing Piook's traps. Bet a month's pay he'll throw it overboard. Knows darned well we can't stand a winter on the coast without reading matter. Then when we head out with the dogs, he hops over into Hartog's Land an' makes a cleanup in the white fox reserve. I hereby sentences myself to eat my own cooking for ten years if that hunch ain't O. K."

The sergeant's gray eyes were pin points of cold light, his lips a slit, when he turned away from the *Dolphin's* scraped sides.

USUALLY it was the two Mounties' custom to sit silently on the patrol boat's deck and watch the supply ship out of sight; a mournful scene that recurred every fall. But now Noonan disappeared down the hatchway without words, and Cleaver did not glance once at the whaler as he whirled the spokes when the schooner's engine commenced sputtering.

To both men the same thoughts came again and again. Needrich in charge of the mail for which they had waited those eight long months. Needrich, the Arctic's premier bad actor, the man who had openly boasted that he was becoming wealthy on pirated furs despite the police patrols. Needrich!

Cleaver held the boat steadily for the coast, berthed her against a flat rock that did duty for a dock; and after he had instructed the Eskimos as to the landing of the supply cases, he strode up over the

wind swept ridges to where the little white walled detachment building stood.

"Remember that racket at Admiralty Bay?" Noonan's panting voice came from behind. "When the relief ship got in they found the shack rifled by the polar bears and never got any trace of Beecroft, or Chegwin either. Nothin' to read, Dickie; nothin' to read!"

"You sure get hold of some quaintly comforting notions, Mister Noonan," the sergeant grunted, turning to stare down at his companion's red, freckled face. "Needrich is a tough egg, but he wouldn't dare to interfere with our mail."

"Mebbe he'll leave it behind so that we'll have to go after it," the constable suggested.

There was no answer.

CLEAVER stood staring about him as the cabin door clanged on his heels. Everything was spick and span. The black bulks of the cook stove and the Quebec heater shone with polish; the rifles, revolvers and snowshoes on the walls gleamed with oil. Both the built in bunks were as neat as hospital beds; even the table top had been scrubbed snow white by the unwilling Timothy Noonan.

Cleaver's gaze strayed to the neat piles of old newspapers and magazines stacked in one corner of the cabin. Heavens! Suppose they had to read them all over again. Why he knew every article and story almost by heart; even the advertisements had been read, reread and discussed a thousand times. No, he couldn't stand wading through all that old stuff again. But, by James, they'd have to stick it! He wasn't going to pull out for Herschel Island and let Needrich run wild in his absence. But then likely it would be all right. The trader knew what the mail meant to them; he wouldn't dare to monkey with it.

At the detachment all necessary work had been done. Now, with the winter drawing in, no fresh tasks would be available until the snow made land patrols possible. Cleaver well knew that they must find something to occupy their time or the Arctic would claim them as it had claimed so many others. But with plenty of reading material it would be a different matter. If that mail—

"*Whoo—oo-o! Whoo—oo-o!*

A gasboat's compressed air whistle filled the rock walled bay with sudden sound, sundering the sergeant's train of thought. He bent down and, peering through the window, glimpsed a trading schooner chugging along the coast.

"That's Needrich's boat. He's nearly in," Cleaver rumbled, brown chin outthrust. Climb into your parka and we'll mosey out."

He strove to keep the eager note out of his voice, for Noonan knew all about that girl in Seattle. He'd have to put on the soft pedal or Noonan would be making fat headed remarks all through the winter. A good scout, but darn it all, he got on a man's nerves sometimes.

A clanging of the stove and a sudden waft of hot, oily air announced that Noonan was examining the tin of beans simmering in the oven.

Then the constable's voice boomed:

"When I get hitched, it's goin' to be in Reno, Nevada. Yes, sir. And if my light of love pipes out, 'Oh, Timothy dear! Boston baked beans for supper', I'll kick her in the slats and phone for the nearest divorce lawyer. Three years of beans! Say, Dickie, how'd you like to be roped for life to a jane what pulled down seventeen medals for cookin' weinies and sauerkraut? That's the kind I'm going to lay for when we get out of this blubber and bean country."

Noonan's cynical speech was cut off by the door's clanging. He laughed, kicked the smoking tin back into the stove, threw on his parka and followed the other man.

Cleaver was already halfway to the cluster of Eskimo *tupiks* that huddled down in the shelter of the red rocks, away from the Arctic winds. He passed the two low buildings that comprised the trading post, waving a casual hand to the halfbreed Eskimos who lounged in the doorway.

The natives' dogs—tethered to rocks after the Northern mode—bayed greetings to the sergeant as his long, yellow striped legs carried him down in swinging strides toward the gleaming waters of Tusayok bay. Copper faces, framed by unruly mops of long black hair, peered at the Mountie from the rude shelters made of skins and driftwood; now and then a child paused in its game of building stone igloos to grin up at him out of friendly brown eyes.

But Cleaver was heedless of these things. His gaze was on the shape of the little schooner, each moment becoming more distinct. His mind was on the precious mail sacks in her cabin. Unwittingly he broke into a run, to halt suddenly on the rocky rim below which the mush ice crinkled and waved with the Arctic's swell.

TEN MINUTES later the two Mounties were looking down on the *White Wind's* untidy decks, as the yelling Eskimos hauled on the shorelines and made the little vessel fast to the rock dock.

Cleaver made a leap into the schooner's shrouds and, followed by the constable, scrambled to the deck. He picked his way aft over the disorderly cordage, the tail ends of flapping canvas and the jumble of Eskimo camp gear, to where Needrich's great figure loomed at the wheel.

"Made a quick trip," Cleaver told the trader, ignoring the thick fingered hand extended to him. "How's things at Aklavik? The Hudson's Bay Company ship got in through the Bering straits all right, eh?"

"Yaw, she get in," Needrich grinned back, tobacco stained teeth gleaming through the stubble on his broad face. "De Mackenzie river steamer bring in a bunch of missionaries an' two more of your gang for Herschel Island; one of dem is a inspector, I tink—"

"Go on below," the sergeant ordered, breaking in on the trader.

The news of the coast could wait until those precious letters were read—the first for over a year.

"Yaw, come on," Needrich invited.

He swung his legs over the hatchway and disappeared with the two Mounties close behind him.

Mixed odors of lamp oil, fish, stale food and the musty tang of unwashed clothing assailed Cleaver's nostrils as he came upright in the little cabin. Needrich turned up the lamp fixed to the low ceiling, rummaged for a moment in a locker and produced a black bottle and two glasses. Cleaver shook his head emphatically.

"No thanks, Needrich; don't drink. The mail please," he said, staring across the table at the other man's untidy bulk.

"De mail?" Needrich tilted a muskrat cap back on his head, scratching a tousled mop with stained fingers.

Flickering, close set eyes peered over at the young Mountie from a wind wrinkled face seared by an old knife scar.

"Oh, yaw," the trader grunted at length, a wolfish smile upon his features when neither of the waiting men replied to his previous query.

They waited in a silence broken only by the slapping of ice burdened wavelets against the schooner's sides, the thudding of muckluks on the deck overhead, and faint shouting from the Eskimos ashore.

"What mail you mean?" Needrich asked innocently, groping in one pocket for his pipe.

The thudding of Cleaver's sealskin boots replied to the query. The sergeant flung himself about the table. The fingers of one hand closed about Needrich's thick wrist, sending the poised pipe to the floor with a clatter.

"That'll be all from you," Cleaver hissed. "Hendricksen told us you were bringing the mail. Come clean, Needrich, or I'll flatten your head against that bulkhead, service regulations or not."

"*Mein Gott*, are you crazy?" the trader choked out, features wreathed in a puzzled frown. "Get your mail? Get hell! Tink I am a servant for youse fellers, eh? That Hendricksen he lie. Why, I never see him going down; I never see him coming back. Mail, you say? Mail nothin'. Ask Jake Suyer here."

The sergeant's hand dropped away from Needrich's wrist and fastened on the constable's, halting Tim's furious rush across the cabin. A low laugh welled out from Suyer's vague bulk in the shadows.

Cleaver rasped his service revolver out of its holster and thrust the butt into his comrade's ready hand. A significant wave to the two traders and they lost no time in standing together under the lamp's yellow beams. Cleaver's strained face told them that the limit of his patience had been reached.

"I'm going to search the ship, Needrich," Sergeant Cleaver threw out over his shoulder, "and if either of you make a move Noonan will attend to you."

"All right, Sergeant!" The trader's gruff voice filled the cabin. "Look all you likes. But, by Thor, I makes a report of dis ting to your boss at Herschel. You have no search warrant, nothings. Dere is law here an' I vill get it too."

"Shut up!" came from between Cleaver's tightly drawn lips as he commenced a systematic examination of the cabin.

The filthy blankets were tumbled out of the bunks, sea chests were up-ended, cupboards explored with no result. With a final ransacking of the cabin, Cleaver came erect again, eyes dangerous, the muscles along his neck thrown up into tensed ridges.

Needrich's face registered a thin smile, but this quickly faded when he glimpsed the other man's eyes. Without speaking, the sergeant motioned Noonan toward the companionway and stamped up the steps with leaden feet. Before he disappeared the constable turned back to stare down at the trader.

Needrich was still standing under the lamp, one great hand shoved down into a greasy trousers pocket, the other pulling at his thick lips. He returned Tim's glare.

The shuffling of sealskin boots on the deck above became more distant, then died away. With it the trader's heavy features broke into a wide grin. He gestured feebly with one great paw and threw himself down on a bunk, shoulders shaking.

"That's puttin' it over," Jake Suyer's thin voice sounded above the other man's choking gasps.

"Ho-ho-ho!" Needrich laughed, chuckles shaking his great body. "That'll fix dem bozos, eh? Too damn' smart, dem police fellers, Jake. Spoilin' our trade since dey come in here. Yes. Can we pinch a load of white fox skins now? By yimminy, we will, Jake! Dem police don't get nothin' to read an', by golly, dey gotta get out, see? I know dat fella Cleaver. He tinks nothin' can stop him. You'll see, once de snow come he hitch de dogs an' beat it from Aklavik to look for dat mail. Den what, Jake?"

Suyer echoed his chief's roar of merriment at the success of the simple scheme, slamming an admiring hand on the trader's great shoulders.

THE QUICK coming Arctic night was drawing down when Noonan trudged to the Mounted Police dog corral, a bag of fish on one shoulder. Strangely enough, he was neither humming nor whistling. The dying sun's saffron fingers touching the red lichened hillsides across the bay made no appeal to him. His eyes were on the gabbling flocks of geese gathering together on the graying water. Tim knew what that heralded. The eight months dark would soon be there—and there was nothing to read.

"If I get in there I'll do the Tunney act on you pooches," he said sullenly to the milling dogs, when the wolfish, triangular faces reared up at the pickets. "Lie down, you damn' wolves! Sayak, another blat outa you an'—"

A chorus of high noted, yelping laughs from the Eskimo *tupiks* brought the constable's head about.

"Sweet suffering Susie!" Tim ejaculated, staring at a figure promenading through the skin huts. "Have I got the D. T's from eatin' beans? I must be crazy, or that guy is."

Instead of singling out the dogs and tossing each animal its fish, Noonan upended the bag over the pickets and, heed-

less of the raging, tearing inferno behind him, turned from the corral to trot toward the Eskimo dwellings.

"It's Uluk; he of the many wives," Tim said to himself as he neared the excited throng, "and by the powers of evil he must have wangled a contract from Hollywood. Wow, he's got 'It' sure enough!"

The constable's round face was filled with amazement and his blue eyes popped, when he finally reached the mob of capering Eskimos and closely investigated the cause of their merriment.

"No, by golly, I'm not crazy or blind," Noonan told himself. "It's Uluk emergin' from his boudoir and, by James, he's the sensation of the hour. Now wouldn't that jar you, eh?"

As the constable approached the Eskimos drew back, at the same time yelling in a wild chorus—

"*Nalunaxyayivan nunayum ma anoteyulu!*" They gestured to the strangely clothed Uluk, yellow faces gleaming with excitement.

"I'll say he doesn't know what they are either," Tim replied to himself. "A sleepin' suit, by all the gods of war!"

Uluk was garbed in astonishing raiment. Over his hooded parka he wore a loose fitting cotton jacket decorated with purple daisies on a field of sickly green, the coat fastened about his thick waist by a rawhide thong. The Eskimo's bow legs were encased in baggy trousers of the same terribly patterned material, from under the ends of which the man's sealskin boots protruded. He strutted to and fro before the admiring women, in time to protesting squeals from the children and a wild baying from the tethered huskies.

The laugh died away on Noonan's rounded face all at once. He wheeled about and raced up to the police barracks on the hill, kicking in the door and pouring out a torrent of words at the sergeant.

"There's something behind this foolery, Dickie," the constable panted as he completed his story. "You know that Uluk took Cukayok's wife away from him last week; got three now. Uluk bought one of those hand power sewing machines and a whole raft of cloth from Needrich, and on top of that here he's sashayin' round in a darned good imitation of pajamas. A nifty sleepin' suit, get that? What do you make of it?"

Cleaver's long fingers were drumming on the table; his gray eyes looked clear through Noonan's blue ones.

"Well, these Eskimos are almost as clever and imitative as the Japanese when it comes to that," the sergeant said at length. "Remember last year how Quacivina dressed her man up in a pretty good imitation of old Captain Birnie of the *Buchan Head* whaler; gold lace on his sleeves, deep sea cap and all the rest of it. It's interesting, though. I'll take a ramble round as soon as we have something to eat. Beans again, I guess. Well, it'll freeze up in a few weeks now and then we should be able to get some fresh caribou meat."

The sergeant's voice was toneless. Noonan nodded and commenced clattering the eating utensils on the table. They were both thinking of the same thing—the eight months' winter and nothing to read.

SUPPER over, Sergeant Cleaver's sealskin muckluks padded silently over the rocks as he made his way cautiously down toward the Eskimo *tupiks*. Bright starlight glimmered on the white shapes of the icebergs slowly moving down the coast on the ebb tide. The sound of gramaphone clatter came from several of the native dwellings; through the thin walls the blurred shapes of the natives were silhouetted on the skins as they passed the low hung lamps. Needrich's post was dark and apparently deserted.

Dogs whined as the Mountie slowly felt his way along. Cleaver had been careful to wear his peaked Stetson hat. This hat the huskies knew from long association; hence they contented themselves with low whimperings and did not fill the night with their warning yowls.

Stenches flowed out on the clean night air from the *tupiks*—the mixed smells of

fish and cached deer meat, smoke tanned clothing, and the acrid odors of human bodies. Low talk hummed; now and then a child's laugh pierced the drone of thicker voices.

Cleaver padded steadily forward until he finally reached Uluk's teepee. This was larger than the others, partly because of the additional wife he had taken, and partly because the Eskimo was a progressive soul. When he felt in need of those things which smoothen the raw life at the top of the map the native simply took them.

Uluk's gramaphone was steadily grinding "It's a Long Way to Tipperary!" and would continue to do so until the record was worn out, the listening man realized. He well knew that music meant nothing to the Eskimos; as long as there was plenty of noise every one was satisfied.

Above the gramaphone's whining there came the steady rattle of Uluk's new sewing machine. Now and then a voice sounded, but Cleaver could not catch the words because of the machine's clatter.

All at once the sergeant stiffened, and automatically his fingers reached back to the revolver holster. Needrich's thick voice had sounded above the clucking Eskimo tongues. Cleaver nodded and half got to his feet, only to throw himself flat again, as a figure brushed against him through the skin walls. Then the rustling of the doorflap and Needrich came upright in the outer air.

From where he lay the Mountie could have touched the man. He heard the wheezing lungs when the trader filled them with the clear air after the *tupik's* foul interior, then the shuffling of his muckluks on the rocks. The sergeant gently elevated himself to his feet and stared after the disappearing figure.

In a few minutes the man was back at the *tupik* again. Cleaver crouched motionless in the shadows cast by the skin tent. He heard Needrich's voice sound from within, answered by clucking grunts from the Eskimos. The gramaphone was still blaring.

The Mountie elevated himself to his feet with caution and carefully circled the *tupik* until he reached where two of the caribou skins forming the walls had been loosely sewn together. A careful prying of the stiff hides and he was looking into the dwelling.

A SMOKY oil lamp illuminated the scene. After the indoor custom of the Eskimos, Uluk and two of the women were stripped to the waist for coolness. When Cleaver's eyes roved to the third *klootch* a chuckle arose to his lips.

The woman's oily body glimmered in the lamplight where she stood with broad face wreathed in grins while a second woman pinned a scarlet kiltlike skirt about her fat waist. Below it two sturdy legs appeared, hard muscled from much overland packing.

"Christopher! An Arctic flapper!" the Mountie said to himself.

His eyes roved farther. Another woman was squatted on the littered floor, holding down the sewing machine with her legs, one hand feeding it cloth, the other whirling the little drive wheel. Uluk stood gazing down on the work, still clad in his pajama trousers.

Needrich was leaning over the woman at the machine, a bunch of white fox skins tucked under one arm, the other holding out a vague shape at which the seamstress glanced again and again.

"What the devil is going on?" the Mountie asked himself, his brown face wreathed in a puzzled frown. He carefully widened the slit between the caribou hides, staring intently.

"*Numdixyayami takoyaneyloqa!*" Uluk laughed, shuffling his feet.

"When I dance I will look very fine," the sergeant translated the phrase. "Like hell you will!" he added grimly.

The Eskimo wound up the gramaphone again, set the needle for another rendition of "Tipperary" and squatted down on his heels to watch the woman at the sewing machine. The other two *klootches* were slapping the "model's" fat back with resounding thuds; their grins exposed rows of teeth stubs, worn down to the

gums with much chewing of boot sealskins.

The Mountie got to his feet. He tugged the service Webley out of its holster, and softly stepped to the skin hanging at the *tupik's* entrance. Yelps of dismay came from the Eskimo women as the skin was jerked back and Cleaver leaped through the doorway to stand facing the dressmakers, his head almost touching the roof.

"*Gott!*"

A single word from Needrich. He stood staring at the sergeant, thick lipped mouth wide, great head thrust forward. The white fox skins dropped from his arm as one hand whipped behind him.

"Quit!" Cleaver's voice was icy.

With the revolver held before him he took several steps forward, kicked over the whirring gramaphone and motioned the women aside with the revolver. There was a hurried shuffling as they obeyed the order.

"You see if that man has a knife or a shooting stick!" the sergeant ordered the Eskimo.

Uluk glanced from Cleaver's set face to Needrich's jowls showing sickly green underneath their stubble. He hesitated for a moment, then padded across to run his hands over the trader's frame. A long bladed hunting knife was tossed to the Mountie's feet.

"All right, Uluk, get out of the way," Cleaver ordered in the Innuit tongue.

"Now, Needrich, you're going to get a hammering you won't forget!" the Mountie added as he wheeled on the gaping trader. "You know why! Save your wind; you'll need it. No, I'm not going to use the gun. Put up your paws."

With his eyes still on the other man Cleaver held the revolver between his knees while he slid out of his tunic. Then he tossed the Webley behind him and leaped forward.

NEEDRICH knew nothing of boxing, but on the waterfronts of Seattle and Vancouver and along the Arctic coast he had many times crashed a bloody passage to victory. His was the rough and tumble savagery of the whaler and the beachcomber.

The shaggy head went down, driving at the pit of the Mountie's stomach; the attack brought wild yells of approval from the Eskimos. There was another chorus of delighted howls when Needrich's hairy arms gripped Cleaver's shirt and they thudded to the hard packed earth in a welter of flying fists.

This was no fight according to the Queensberry rules; it was a battle to maim or kill. The Mountie knew it and when he felt himself pulled down on top of the other man he groped blindly for the trader's throat, crashing his fist down time and again.

Needrich's beard ground into the sergeant's face as the men thrashed about on the floor. The Eskimos had stopped yelling. This was a real fight and they were thoroughly enjoying it.

A shower of snowshoes, sealing spears and stone cooking pots descended on the two struggling men when they rolled across the *tupik* and caromed off the skin walls.

Cleaver was vaguely conscious of muckluked feet striking his body when the Eskimo women leaped out of the way and darted for the open air.

The tethered dogs outside had sensed a killing and were filling the raw air with mournful howls.

Now Needrich's red eyes and tobacco stained teeth, distorted to gigantic dimensions, hovered over the sergeant. The brute was trying to tear his throat!

Whug! Whug!

All Cleaver's waning strength, nerve and will power went into those two vicious jabs.

Then surprisingly the black mist rolled away and the sergeant was conscious of Noonan's voice yelling:

"Time! Time! A sweet knockout in the first round."

Cleaver leaned back against Constable Noonan. He wiped the salty sweat out of his eyes and at length made out Needrich's great frame. The trader lay prone on the littered *tupik* floor, arms stretched,

making no motion to rise. The Eskimos had recommenced leaping about, were again laughing uproariously.

"How about it?" Tim asked. "Want me to sock those yabbering fools?"

"No," Cleaver wheezed. "Leave them alone. Gather the magazine covers. We'll gum them on—"

"The magazine covers!" Noonan yelped.

"Huh-huh," the other man grunted. "The rest of our mail is up in the meat cache. Saw Needrich going there." He swung one arm in the direction of the little house built on stilts, whose contents were beyond the huskies' reach.

"Needrich was too greedy; that's where he spoiled himself," the sergeant went on, sitting upright. "He stole our mail but couldn't resist the temptation of making something out of it as well. That accounts for Uluk's pajamas and the women's frills."

"Go on; shoot it," the constable urged.

"Told you the Eskimos were about as imitative as their Japanese ancestors, didn't I?" Cleaver queried, waving one hand to where four brilliantly colored magazine plates were pinned to the *tupik* walls by bone skewers.

"Well," the sergeant went on, filling his lungs gratefully, "Needrich was trading those magazine plates to the Esks for foxskins, and the women were using the pictures for clothing patterns. That accounts for all the glad rags. Remember how they copied Captain Birnie's uniform?"

Noonan's howl of laughter filled the *tupik* when he strode across to the wall where there hung a picture of an immaculate youth, clad in brilliant pajamas and examining a tennis racquet. He could see that Uluk's garments were a very good imitation of the lithographed design.

"I'm going down to the meat cache to get the rest of the mail," the sergeant said. "Bring Needrich along."

He picked up the rumpled tunic, found his revolver, and stumbled out of the *tupik*.

"All right, my old college chum," the constable addressed Uluk. "Flap your pijammers and hand over those pretty pictures. Yes, that one the bandy legged movie queen is grabbing too. Fine. Up you get Needrich, old-timer. You may be sick now but you'll be a damn' sight sicker. I finds you guilty of vagrancy and sentences you to chop firewood an' wash pots for the next six months while I lies at ease an' cultivates my mind. That's the door. Out you go. S'long, girls!"

The

William P. Barron

returns to our pages with a refreshingly new kind of treasure island tale

CAPTAIN DAUGHERTY of the coastwise steamer *Maggie May* looked cautiously up and down the oleander shaded street. There was no one in sight except three small children, one black, who were democratically making mud pies, drawing their raw material from the puddle caused by last night's rain.

Seeing that he was not observed, the captain stepped up and knocked softly on No. 316. There was no answer. He knocked again, this time with a heavier hand.

"Come in!" called a voice, husky from irritation. "Come on in, can't yer? An' put them groceries on the hall floor."

"Lucy!" called the voice in a louder and more irritated key. "Come here an' git these here groceries an' let a man git a little sleep. I never got no sleep the last three nights on board ship an' it looks like I ain't goin' ter git none at home."

The captain opened the door, stepped in quickly and shut it softly behind him.

"It ain't the grocery boy," he called. "It's me, Captain Daugherty. Can I come in?"

Perhaps if the captain had seen the look of irascible malignancy that came over his mate's face, he would have hesitated. Fortunately, he only heard the voice which the mate strove to make pleasant, as he said, "Sure, come right in, Cap'n." And he acted on the invitation with alacrity.

"Sit down over there in the chair by the window," continued the mate, rising from the couch where he had been lying half undressed, trying to sleep.

"Don't get up, Jim," said the captain, raising an admonishing hand. "Stay where you are. We can talk just as well."

TREASURE *of* LAFITTE

"Are we alone?" continued the captain, looking about him cautiously, as he shut the door, while over his weather beaten face there stole a look of mystery. "Are we alone?"

"Well, Lucy an' the kid is somewheres on the place; most likely hangin' over the back fence tellin' Mis' O'Leary what a brute she has got for a husband. But she can't hear what we say. What is it?"

"Jim, can you be trusted to keep a secret, a real secret?" asked the captain anxiously.

"Ain't I kept it a secret about you shippin' that crazy woman that time you got full in Tampico?" asked the mate pointedly. "More than one," continued the mate in an aggrieved tone, apparently addressing a portrait of his wife's brother hanging on the wall. "I have covered up things like that an' yet he comes askin' if I can keep a secret!" The mate lay back on the couch and waved a protesting hand at the ceiling. "Well, I like that!"

"Jim," the captain protested, "it ain't that sort of secret. Them sort of secrets

is secrets between man an' man, secrets that any man will keep for another man. Them kind of secrets protect the whole man race. Otherwise, none of us would have any women folks at home; that is, any that we could live with in peace. I'd do as much fer you any day—an' more. But this is a different sort of secret."

The captain again looked carefully about him. Then he tiptoed over to the couch, cupped his hand close to the mate's ear and whispered hoarsely:

"It's a secret that's got lots of money in it, fer you an' me. Will you jine me?"

"What is it?" asked the mate suspiciously. "I'd do most anything fer money, a big stake; that is if you rule out murder an' it ain't jail. Anything else in reason an' I'm with you."

"This ain't murder an' it ain't jail. But it's money, big money! Will you swear to keep it all under your hat—not a word to a soul?"

"Spit it out!" said the mate, sitting up on the couch. "I won't tell."

"But are you with me? That's the main thing! Will you go in an' help out? Otherwise, there ain't no use tellin' you."

"Ain't I just told you?" snarled the mate irritably, his temper already upset by loss of sleep and now strained to the breaking point by the captain's air of mystery. "I'll go into anything short of murder if there's money in it. But I won't go into no oil well scheme, nor send no money to bail a Spanish prisoner out of jail so he can go home an' send me half the family silver that's buried in an old cistern. Them things is too old to ketch me. Besides I've done bit at 'em years ago. They are about as foolish as huntin' fer Cap'n Kidd's buried treasure."

The captain started guiltily.

"I helped look fer that buried treasure when I was a kid an'—"

His flow of language was stopped by the captain's hand which was pressed firmly over his mouth.

"Hush!" he said sternly. "Not so loud! Them stevedores down on the wharf kin hear you! An' that's funny!" he said, laughing silently to himself while the mate struggled to release himself. "This here is a lost treasure, but it ain't Cap'n Kidd's. It's—"

"Whose?" asked the mate, finally releasing his mouth. "Have you gone plumb nutty in your old age? Nobody but kids who read about them old pirates in dime novels ever believes in that buried treasure bunk nowadays. You'll be buyin' gold bricks next."

"All right, then, Mr. Shannon," said the captain, drawing himself up with an air of offended dignity. "But I wouldn't go off on the wrong tack if I was you, afore I knowed which way the wind blowed. An' I ain't old yet, not exactly totterin' an' toothless. An' my head is usually fairly hard to turn. Now you just lissen ter me an' don't snatch a man up afore you know what you are talkin' about. "I—"

"Here, have a cigar?" interrupted the mate, abruptly picking up a box from the table and thrusting it at the captain.

This ruse having stopped the long winded tirade which the mate had anticipated by former experiences, the captain lit a cigar and between puffs explained the mission upon which he had come.

"Jim," he said looking at the other impressively, "do you know where Yucatan is?"

"In latitude north 20 degrees 18 minutes, longitude west 86 degrees, 42 minutes, Greenwich Standard Meridian," answered the mate promptly, who was always proud of his nautical knowledge. "About five or six days run from here in the *Maggie May*, if her engines hold out. Why?"

"Well," said the captain in a husky whisper, "there's a little island just off the coast of Yucatan where old Lafitte used to go in hidin' when he was the grand pirate down in them waters, if the pirate chasers got too close in behind him. An' —an'—well, I've got a old map here in my pocket, made out on a piece of old sail cloth with red ink, showin' right where the old sea hound buried some gold."

WITH these words uttered at low breath in a voice hoarse with earnestness, the captain leaned back in his chair, folded his arms on his chest and beamed at his first officer through the cigar smoke. If the captain had expected an exclamatory outburst of surprise he was disappointed. The mate regarded him fixedly with a speculative eye, somewhat bloodshot from loss of sleep.

"Well, what do you think of it?" inquired the captain, after the two men had mutually stared each other out of countenance. "What do you think of it?" he repeated lamely, somewhat taken aback by the mate's rigidly uncommunicative attitude.

"All I can say," retorted the mate, rising abruptly from the bed, tightening his belt and reaching for his pipe, "all I can say is I ain't had no sleep fer three nights, but I ain't no ways light headed or nutty yet. I had a spell of pirate gold fever when I was a kid an' dug up all the lower end of Pelican Island lookin' fer Lafitte's treasure. All I got then was blistered hands an' a lickin' from the old man fer playin' hookey from school. That there lickin' from the old man plum cured me of pirate gold fever. I ain't had it since, an' I'm too old to have it agin at this late day.

"Won't you try some of this Cuban tobaccy? I got it off that Portygee A. B. you hired on in Puerto Cortez last trip down."

The captain waved away the proffered tobacco pouch and watched the mate with a belligerent eye as he stuffed the pungent aromatic tobacco in his pipe. His pipe lit, the mate hitched up his trousers nervously, sat down and began to put on his shoes. Finally, embarrassed by the older man's silence, he felt compelled to resume the conversation.

"I'm willin' to do anything in reason, but I ain't goin' on no such wild goose chase at my time of life."

The captain sniffed scornfully.

"Any one to hear you talk, Jim, would think you was a great granddaddy with one foot in the grave an' a widderower. I'm older than you be an' I'm willin' to take a chance. Besides that, it ain't no wild goose chase. All we have got to do is to lose a couple of days off of our regular time, call at that there island on our way down to Puerto Cortez, locate the place where the map says the treasure is and dig fer it. If it ain't there, we ain't lost much. If it is—" The captain paused and licked his lips. "If it is, why me an' the Portygee an'—an' that red headed cabin boy Joe— You see they are in on this, too," he added hastily as he saw the look of inquiry in the mate's eyes. "I'll tell you all about it in a minute.

"If the treasure is there—gold, money an' jewels an' such like—why all of us is fixed for life an' no mistake. I ain't askin' you to do much. You talk like I'm askin' you to make a run fer the South Pole or double Cape Horn in a rowboat. Your eyes is bigger than your stummick. I mean," he added hastily, realizing he had used the wrong comparison, "I mean you make a mountain out of a mole hill. It ain't such a big job after all."

"How did you get this here map?" asked the mate, relenting and curious in spite of his declared skepticism.

"Well, you see it all come through that Portygee. He bought it off an old Indian turtle catcher in Puerto Cortez. The old turtle chaser was drunk an' his money run out afore his thirst did, an' he sold this here map to the Portygee. He swore his father had it off a old pirate what died of yeller fever and give this map to the old greaser fer takin' care of him whilst he was sick. An' Slim the Portygee, he showed it to Joe an' Joe brought it to me."

"Do you reckon that Portygee is straight?" asked the mate. "An' if Joe knows erbout it you might just as well put it in the newspaper. He'll tell all the crew an' everybody in Galveston besides."

"No, he won't!" exclaimed the captain triumphantly. "I've got him locked up in my cabin an' left the cook to guard him. As fer the crew, we'll have ter tell them, but there ain't so many of them but what we can share what we find.

"As fer the map. I ain't no map maker, but I've looked at it close with a readin' glass an' it don't look like no fake. It's old an' faded an' been made a long time. You can see that. But here, you look at it and see what you think."

And the captain took an oilcloth covered package from his pocket and unwrapped it with fingers that shook with excitement.

THE NEXT DAY the *Maggie May* slipped past the lighthouse on the turn of the tide and with her nose pointed south stood out to sea.

Acting on the mate's advice, the captain called the crew forward and spoke to them frankly concerning the map furnished by Slim the Portygee, the cabin boy's share in it and his determination to spend two days of the eighteen the Fruit Company allowed him in which to make the round trip from Puerto Cortez to Galveston.

"An' men," he concluded, "I ain't sayin' that we'll find anything down there on Mugueres Island. Don't fergit that! I ain't sayin' we will. But what I do say is this: If you stand by me, we'll land there an' we'll take two days to look eround an' dig. An' then if we ain't found nothin' we'll be on our way an' no harm done. We will all have to hustle a little at Puerto Cortez to git loaded an' git back home on time. If we do find anything valuable such as gold, money an' diamonds an' jewels, such like what pirates used to bury on islands an' such places, why we'll share an' share alike—all but one third, what goes to Slim who furnished the map in the first place. Is that agreeable?"

The crew agreed that it was. And Joe, the cabin boy, who had been reading all the piratical literature procurable since Slim had produced the map, suggested that they should all sign an agreement to stick together until death, with a pen dipped in blood. This proposition being overruled by the cook with a cuff on the ear and a command to set the captain's table for dinner, the meeting broke up.

THE VOYAGE down was made without accident. The whole crew caught the contagion of adventure which lies dormant in the hearts of those who go down to the sea in ships. Joe read himself hoarse, being required by the men to spend every idle hour in the forecastle reading aloud from his variegated collection of pirate yarns, which comprised everything from "Treasure Island" to "Chop Stick Charlie, the Terror of the Yellow Sea".

Therefore, on the evening of the fifth day, when the *Maggie May* made her unaccustomed way into the Bay of Dolores and came to anchor close into the shore of Mugueres Island, expectancy was at a white heat.

The bay was an unruffled sheet of emerald and the small fishing village of Dolores made a charming picture with its crowded rows of thatched cottages, the white beach with its fisherman's boats hauled up out of reach of the tide and the tall palms waving great fronds in the freshening gulf breeze.

As Captain Daugherty viewed the snug little harbor with a practical seaman's eyes and glanced also at the quiet, peaceful scene, he did not wonder that the old sea wolf Lafitte had chosen this island as his headquarters from which to prey on the rich shipping that in his day navigated the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea.

The night was spent by the crew in sleepless conjecture as to what procedure the captain would adopt in landing and beginning his quest. Joe, as a literary authority, was first appealed to.

"There ain't nothin' in them books about huntin' fer no treasure what is buried except that in 'Treasure Island' an' I read you that last night—what they done about that. An' that's all I know."

"I'll tell you, folks, how it 'tis," said Big Un, the giant colored stoker who had been with the *Maggie May* since her maiden voyage. "I ain't never seen the skipper so worked up over anything since me an' him has been on this here boat.

Don't you worry none. When the cap'n sets his head ter do somethin', it's sot an' nothin' ain't goin' ter stop him. He'll find a way all right. 'Course he's got ter go ashore an' fix de alcalde an' dat takes money. But so long as he don't ask us ter help pay de freight an' offers ter devide de gold up wid us what we digs up, we should worry. What gits my goat is de hants."

"Hants? What's them?" asked Slim the Portygee.

"Hants is—well, hants is ghosts—spirits," Big Un hastened to explain. "Folks what is done dead an' who comes back from de grave ter—ter—well, ter hant dem what ain't dead. My Lawd, man! Is you old as you is an' don't know what hants is?"

"I have heard of many such, of dead people who return," said Slim in his choice, deliberate English. "Such as men who have been drowned at sea, swept overboard, who follow ships. And the Flying Dutchman that appears to ships about to be foundered in these southern waters. And the ghost of the beautiful young woman that old Captain Kidd made to walk the plank, but the word 'hant' is new to me."

"Well, it ain't new ter me," Big Un replied, shaking his big head and looking behind him fearfully in the dim light of the forecastle's one light bulb. "An' dey tells me dat where whomsoever dere is money, stole money or pirate's money what is buried, two or three hants is shore ter be hangin' eround just ter see dat nobody but dem what is got a right to hit gits dat money; dat if it ain't intended dat you shall have dat money, you can't no ways git it, dat you can't even find where hits buried in de ground. An' dat efen you does find it, dem hants is right dere ter butt in an' see dat you don't tote none of it off, efen dey has ter do away wid you somehow, ter keep you from gittin' it.

"Dat's de way I has got de word 'bout dis here pirate's gold an' buried treasure dat's got dead men's bones piled up on top of de treasure chests ter guard hit. An' I'se just wonderin' how de cap'n aims ter git by dem hants."

The supernatural is natural to those who follow the sea. Under the surface, a very thin veneer even in the most practical of the forecastle brotherhood, is found a rich, inexhaustible vein of superstition. Therefore, from each in turn of the interested audience Big Un had gathered about him, came some ghost story or supernatural yarn. And none of them lost force or horror in the telling. These were bandied about from mouth to mouth until the watch was changed and continued on with those who came below with fresh yarns to exchange for old. There was no sleep in the forecastle of the *Maggie May* that night.

AT SUNRISE the next morning the captain, accompanied by the mate as interpreter, set out in the *Maggie May's* longboat for the village of Dolores and the alcalde.

It would seem a comparatively simple matter to negotiate with the alcalde of a small village for a permit to dig for buried treasure, a third of what is found to go into the treasury of the national government and a permit fee of twenty pesos to be paid in any case into the alcalde's private coffers. So Captain Daugherty thought, but he found out differently.

The *Maggie May's* boat grounded on the white sandy beach and was at once the center of an admiring group consisting of two old women, twelve half naked and six wholly naked children, three dozen dogs, four goats and two men who were of the ancient and honorable profession of turtle catchers.

Welcomed to the city by this assemblage, the captain and his first officer made their way to the house of the alcalde; the citizen's committee parting to the right and left to allow them to pass. The alcalde's official residence was distinguished from the adjacent thatched cottages by a flag pole in front of the door. Arriving there, followed at a respectable distance by the committee of welcome, the captain knocked, using the huge

wooden knocker that hung on the door. The door was instantly opened by a small, dark eyed brown maiden who dropped an old-fashioned curtsey and asked the good señor's pleasure.

"We want to see the alcalde at once," answered the mate in his best official Spanish, "on a matter of business."

The small maiden opened her mouth, rolled up her eyes and put a fluttering brown hand over her heart.

"Oh, señor, I am desolated. But the alcalde has not yet risen from his rest of the night. Will not the good señors enter and await with patience until the alcalde shall terminate his slumbers? Or would it suit their pleasure to return later in the day, say at four in the afternoon, after the siesta hour? Or to return tomorrow, perhaps, would be better yet."

Not to be thus daunted, they entered, and the small brown maiden, murmuring something about chocolate, disappeared. They were alone; the sound of lusty, deep chested snores came with a maddening regularity of rhythm from the adjoining room.

The mate, his feet making no sound on the dirt floor, stepped softly across to the door over which was hung a reed portière and looked in. The alcalde lay on a low rattan wrought bed which sagged beneath his weight. He was deep in the profound slumber vouchsafed only to babies and the obese, with his feet protruding from the light blanket. He was fat, fat with the fatness of good living, fat with the fatness of no exercise and a chronic hatred of exertion.

"He won't wake up afore noon," observed the mate in a hoarse whisper, turning to the captain. "What had we better do?"

"Wake him up!" advised the captain promptly, anxious to begin his digging. "We ain't got no lifetime to spend here."

The mate shook his head thoughtfully.

"It won't do! If we wake the old bird, he'll git mad most likely an' not let us dig at all. Let's ask the girl.

The small brown maiden had returned with two cups of chocolate, fragrant with nutmeg.

As she served them, the mate dropped a bright American silver dollar in her hand and said—

"Say, señorita, do you think the alcalde is liable to wake up any time soon?"

"The saints alone know, señor," she replied staring at the dollar she held in her hand. "It is his custom to sleep until noon, if the flies do not annoy. Then he eats and, as it is then siesta time, he returns to his bed and sleeps again until four in the afternoon. Yes, it is thus he is accustomed," she went on, nodding brightly and smiling. "Afterward, he goes out for a stroll on the beach or to visit the ladies. Yes, señors, that is what is usual with him."

"And if the flies annoy?" asked the mate, looking at her with eyes that held a hidden meaning and holding another silver dollar temptingly in his hand.

"Why, señor," she said, with her eyes fixed in an avaricious stare on the dollar, "he wakes up at once, demanding his chocolate. And oh, señor, he uses words at such times that curdle the blood, words that swear! He calls down upon one the maledictions of the Evil One! It is horrible!"

"Perhaps then, señorita," said the mate, glancing down at the dollar carelessly and turning it in his palm, "perhaps the flies will annoy the alcalde this morning. Who can say?"

And he dropped the dollar in the small hand held out to receive it.

THE LITTLE brown maiden turned and disappeared without noise through the portieres. She stooped and picked up a long handled fan of parrot feathers from the floor. Concealing herself among the draperies at the head of the alcalde's couch, she extended the fan and delicately tickled his nose.

In a few minutes the rhythmical snores terminated in an abrupt snort. They began again. The feathered fan was again applied. There was another snort, a creaking of the bed and a round Spanish

oath that would have caused the bones of old Pizarro to rattle in the tomb.

"Malediction!" shouted the alcalde. "These accursed flies! Pelona, where art thou? Without doubt the young she devil is flirting with young Pedro at the next house, leaving me to be devoured alive by flies!"

The small brown maiden softly disentangled herself from the draperies and stepped forth into the august presence.

"I am here, honored señor," she said in demure Spanish. "What is it that you wish?"

"My chocolate, sister of a pig!" thundered the alcalde. "And be quick!"

Pelona precipitated herself through the portieres and was back instantly with a big cup of spiced chocolate.

"There are two noble señor gringos without, honored señor, who would speak with you," she ventured as the alcalde drank the fragrant liquid.

The alcalde sat the cup down and licked his lips in anticipation.

"Without doubt the gringos desire a fishing concession. Quick, girl, my silk sash . . . Now my best sandals . . . Now my embroidered jacket that came as a present of the birthday from my sister in Aguas Calientes . . . So! Now, allow the señor gringos to enter.

"Ah, señors!" the alcalde exclaimed, rising from his rattan couch as from a throne, when the captain and the mate were ushered in. "You honor my poor house! Be seated, I beg. All that I have is yours." And he flung his arm outward with an expansive gesture.

"What does the old fool say?" asked the captain.

"Oh, nothin' but a lot of bull! Listen now when I ask him for a permit to dig.

"What we want, Alcalde," said the mate, opening negotiations at once in American fashion, "is a permit to dig for buried treasure, old pirate treasure, you understand. What will the damage be for two days?"

"Damage?" queried the alcalde, putting up a fat hand to scratch his head. "I do not get the meaning of the honored señor's words. What does the señor mean?"

"I mean how much will it cost us to dig for two days? How many pesos for two days, just two days?"

"Why, for two days, señor, if there be no public buildings destroyed or defaced, no roads torn up or no holy ground about the church defiled—why, señor, I should say—" The alcalde scratched his head thoughtfully. "I should say—well, to be generous, señor, I should say two hundred pesos and a third of the treasure, if any be found, to revert to the state. Where would the honored señors desire to dig?"

The mate, used to years of bargaining along the Spanish-American coasts, staggered a few paces backward, dramatically, with his hand on his heart. Then he inquired in a husky voice whether he was dreaming or did he hear aright.

"The good señor heard quite correctly," said the alcalde, smiling blandly as he sat regarding the two sailors with much the same expression that a hungry cat regards a plump careless sparrow. "Two hundred pesos and not too many questions asked. Entire liberty in digging within the restrictions I have named. And all the turtles your crew may care to catch and carry away. And of course, as I stated, one third to go to the national government."

"Why, man!" exclaimed the mate. "We don't want to buy your island. We just want to dig around on it for two days. We are not bankers, neither. We are just plain sailor men trying to find old Lafitte's treasure. No doubt we'd make more money and fare better digging for clams or chasing turtles. How about fifty pesos?"

The alcalde rose with majestic dignity, gasping for breath. He regarded the audacious mate with a ghastly smile. With a dramatic gesture, he waved aside the fifty pesos.

"Would the señor rob — the — the dead?" he whispered hoarsely. "I could not again face my countrymen if I allowed the last resting place of even a pirate's ill gotten gains to be disturbed for so

trifling a sum! Don Lafitte was a pirate, no doubt. But he was very dear to the hearts of these simple people who yet revere his memory after all these years. It is said he did much good in his bold bad way, killing off only the old and ugly, the aged and infirm, leaving the young to enjoy life; that he clothed the naked and fed the hungry; that he—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted the mate. "But we ain't got all day. Lafitte was a good man and all that. We admit it. And we ain't going to hurt his reputation none looking for the treasure he was supposed to bury on this island. But I see now we can't trade. I said to the captain here the other day when we left Galveston, 'Captain,' I says, 'If you have got twenty-five good U. S. A. dollars that you do not need, let's stop at Mugueres Island on our way down to Puerto Cortez and have a try at digging for old Lafitte's treasure chest he is supposed to have planted there. Let's have a try at it,' I says, 'with twenty-five pesos for the digging permit from the alcalde and twenty-five pesos more to the alcalde if we find anything.'

"And so we came. But I see the digging permit had gone up since I was a boy. *Adios*, Alcalde. We will be going and get on our way to Puerto Cortez."

And the mate, followed by the bewildered captain, made his way out in perfect silence.

"What does all this here foolishness mean?" asked the captain indignantly as they walked toward the beach where the boat was waiting. "What did you say to the old bird? What is he goin' ter do erbout the permit?"

"Hush! Don't talk none," cautioned the mate. "An' don't look back. Keep on walkin'. We ain't half through with the old crook yet."

They continued on their way. Half way to the beach they heard a shrill voice behind them.

"Oh, señors!" shrilled the voice. "Be good enough to pause, señors!"

And Pelona ran up to them, all out of breath. She held out a paper to the mate.

"The honored alcalde says here is the permission to dig. Be so gracious as to transmit to him the twenty-five pesos of the United States and he would be pleased to receive other twenty-five pesos if the treasure chest of Don Lafitte be found."

And, with the sonorously phrased permit to dig in their pockets, the captain and mate made their way to the boat.

IT WAS late in the very hot afternoon before the entire crew of the *Maggie May* except the engineer and an aged A. B. left behind to make up the watch required by law, had landed on the beach.

In the meantime the alcalde and Pelona had been vocally busy. They had talked until their tongues were sore. As a result, all of the able bodied inhabitants of the island were assembled on the beach to welcome the treasure hunters. Even the alcalde, waiving the dignity of his office, was there.

The map owned by Slim directed that the treasure chest was buried at the south end of the island among the old observation towers built by Lafitte, one hundred and twenty paces from the water's edge, where three stones placed in a triangle would be found; thence one hundred and twenty paces to the south corner of the largest observation tower, here would be found buried a leaden box, beneath another rocky triangle.

The journey to the place for exploration was accomplished in perfect silence, except for the heavy breathing of the obese alcalde and a few skeptical and sarcastic remarks furnished by the two oldest inhabitants of the island who, from their youth up, had attended many such fruitless functions.

Reaching the selected spot, the one hundred and twenty paces were stepped off by Captain Daugherty, after a heated discussion with the mate as to which one possessed the proper length of leg for a regulation pace. The mate yielded only after he had been forcibly reminded that it was the captain's private treasure hunt and that he had only been permitted to share it by grace of long friendship.

"Well, here's the one hundred and twenty paces, but I don't see no triangle of rocks. There ain't nothin' here but just sand."

"It's just barely possible that after all this time since that there treasure was buried them rocks might have got covered up or lost or somethin'," suggested the mate sarcastically.

"Let's dig down a little anyhow an' see. Here, men! Clear away a little of this here sand."

With the population of Dolores closely surrounding them and effectively shutting off the cool Gulf breeze, Big Un and the three white A. B.'s from the *Maggie May* cleared away a wide circle of sand. To the mate's complete surprise, the rocky triangle was found after half an hour's strenuous shoveling.

"Here's them rocks, sir!" reported Joe, the cabin boy, to Captain Daugherty, who had withdrawn by invitation into the shade of the alcalde's huge umbrella.

The captain did not show any surprise, but his heart leaped and his pulse bounded. He excused himself to the alcade by a dignified bow and, with his pocket compass and the treasure map as guides, stepped off the second requirement of one hundred and twenty paces.

Again the crew of the *Maggie May* cleared away the sand and dug down a few feet and again the stones were found.

EXCITEMENT was now intense. The captain and the alcalde pressed forward and gravely shook hands over the stones. Neither could speak the other's language, but both made up in dignity what they lacked in linguistic ability, and they were getting along famously together.

Of course, Lafitte's observation towers had long since gone the way of Nineveh and Tyre, but a careful search resulted in the unearthing of some of the old stone foundations. Further work of about an hour brought out the outlines of the old wall and the corner stipulated in the map, while the women in the crowd Oh'd and Ah'd and the men nervously hitched at trousers and tightened belts and sashes.

At this stage of the proceedings Captain Daugherty stepped forward and called a halt. And after the mate had dragged Joe from the excavation and threatened to brain him with his own spade, if he didn't cease work, the captain said:

"Jim, don't you think we'd better knock off now until moonrise? It's nearly dark, and maybe some of these here yaller birds will go home or to what they call home if we quit work, an' we won't have such a big crowd around."

The mate had passed rapidly from complete skepticism to absolute faith as the old map's reputation for truth and veracity had become more firmly established with each new find. He shook his head.

"No, sir, I don't," he said firmly. "Let's work right on, now that we've got this far—till we find it or don't find it. These here greasers will hang around till Gabriel blows his horn if we stay here ourselves. We ain't goin' ter git rid of them."

"All right, then, go ahead," ordered the captain briskly.

Joe, rushing past Big Un with a whoop of joy, jumped into the shallow pit and began work again. The crew shoveled in silence until Joe stooped, as his spade hit against something, and picked it up He removed the damp earth clinging to it and revealed a human jaw bone with several teeth in perfect preservation. Big Un regarded this find with starting eyeballs as Joe with a grin on his face extended it toward him.

"What's the matter, boys?" asked the mate coming forward as Big Un climbed promptly out of the pit. "Let's hurry and get the job over with."

"Mr. Shannon, suh, not me!" replied Big Un with the decision of great fear. "Does you see what dat boy has got? Hit's a human jawbone wid toofs in hit. Dat's what hit is! An' I ain't diggin' up no human what is already dead. No, suh, not me!"

Every one crowded about the hole, and

the two oldest inhabitants looked at each other fearsomely and wagged their heads.

"It is the jawbone of the sailor whose ghost wanders about the beach on Christmas Eve," remarked one to the other sagely.

"Yes, it is indeed he," replied the other with an air of finality, gazing at the gruesome relic as if he were looking at the well remembered photograph of a departed friend. "Yes, it is the remains of him who walks at Christmas Eve. And those to whom he speaks die within the year."

Big Un who understood Spanish turned wildly about.

"Does you mean it's him we just dug up dat walks?" he inquired tremulously.

"*Quien sabe?*" replied one of the old relics shrugging his withered shoulders. "Perhaps now he will walk all the more, now that his last resting place has been disturbed," he added darkly.

"Gawd knows I never teched dat jawbone!" exclaimed Big Un loudly as if the ghost of the dead man himself could hear. "It was dat boy Joe! He done it! An' 'sides dat it ain't nothin' but er piece of jawbone wid some toofs in hit. No ghost had orter git mad at dat."

"Oh, come on, Big Un!" urged Joe, "an' let's dig. I ain't 'fraid of no old pirate's ghost nor no live one either," he added suddenly, thinking of the youthful hero of "Treasure Island."

"Naw, not me!" reiterated Big Un, girding up his loins preparatory to returning to the village and the boat. "I ain't lost no money in no hole full of dead men's bones an' I ain't huntin' none. I'se—"

"Glory ter Gawd, Cap'n!" shouted Joe as his shovel unearthed something that gave out a dull hollow sound and that a hurried clawing away of dirt showed to be lead. "Here it is! Come an' see! Jus' like it is in them pirate books! Jeminey Christmas, ain't we the hot dogs! Here it is!"

And with a concerted heave by Joe the Portygee and the bald headed A. B. who rejoiced in the name of Archie, a small leaden casket was lifted from the hole and set out for all to see.

Captain Daugherty, breathing as hard as a strong man who has run a race, pushed his way through the jostling, excited crowd to where the leaden box could be dimly discerned in the fast gathering twilight.

"Mr. Shannon, sir," he said to the mate who was regarding the leaden box with the rapt rigidity of a prize pointer who has spotted a covey of quail. "Mr. Shannon, sir, we will take this box at once on board the *Maggie May!*"

"Señor," whispered the little brown maid who had been yanked forward to follow in the wake of the captain by the alcalde's strong hand, "The gringo señor says he will take away the treasure to his lady, perhaps to his wife, whom he calls by name."

"No! By the blessed saints he will not!" retorted the alcalde hoarsely, stepping on the brown maiden's bare toes in his excitement.

THE ALCALDE trembled with greed as he saw the substantial size of the leaden casket. No one could have been more surprised than was the alcalde at the finding of the treasure. Since he was a small boy he had eagerly followed the treasure hunters who came to Mugueres Island from time to time, only to be disappointed. And now, here in his middle age, was the treasure chest of Lafitte at last! The mate was almost jostled into the excavation by the alcalde in his eagerness to reach the captain's side.

"Now," he said rapidly in Spanish to the small brown maid, whose hand he still held firmly in his own, "speak quickly to the gringo señor and say that it is my wish for the treasure chest to be opened in my presence at my official residence and a suitable division made. Speak quickly!"

Pelona pulled timidly at the captain's sleeve without effect. And then, after a swift glance at the alcalde's lowering face, she seized the captain's little finger and twisted it.

"Good señor," she said hurriedly as the captain looked down, "it is the alcalde's

wish that you go for supper to his home and—and—that you also bring with you the treasure chest.

"What?" asked Captain Daugherty, somewhat puzzled by the quaint English that Pelona had learned in a mission school in Mexico.

"She says we are to bring the treasure chest along to the alcalde's," interpreted the mate, who had recovered his balance and was standing on the opposite side of the excavation, "an' open it up there."

"Oh, does she!" exclaimed the captain. "Perhaps they would like fer us ter leave the chest there and come back here an' dig fer more," he added with ferocious sarcasm. "Well, you tell 'em both fer me that I ain't goin' nowheres but back on board the *Maggie May* an' that tomorrer mornin' he can come aboard an' see the chest opened up I ain't goin' ter open it nowheres ternight.

"Here, Joe!" ordered the captain. "Quit arguin' an' disputin' with that superstitious nigger an' come on here an' lend a hand with this here chest! We'll git away from here afore some land pirate tries ter steal it from us," he concluded, glaring at the perturbed alcalde. "We come by it honest, free an' above board, accordin' ter contract an' we'll keep it the same way."

The mate and the rest of the crew, emboldened by the captain's words, picked up the chest and set out for the beach, paying no attention to the glowering glances of the alcalde and the muttering of the crowd.

It was almost night now, as they nonchalantly shoved their way through the alcalde's fellow citizens whose venomous looks were partly concealed by the dark. Big Un, who had refused to touch the chest or to have anything whatever to do with the treasure hunt since the jawbone had been found, led the way, and the crowd, overawed by his size, readily parted to let them pass.

The full moon was just rising out of the sea and filling the world with glory, when they reached the beach and prepared to embark. The treasure chest was placed in the boat, the mate had stepped aboard and the captain was preparing to follow, while Slim, Big Un, Archie and Joe stood by to shove off, when the alcalde and a determined following pantingly arrived.

"Señors, pause! I command it! Do not depart—I forbid it!" the alcalde exclaimed as dramatically as a very fat man, short of breath, could deliver it.

"What does he want now?" inquired the captain testily.

"He says we musn't go away from here," explained the mate.

"Shove off, boys!" was the captain's reply.

Vigorously propelled, the boat glided out into the moonlit waters of the bay, while the crew, with the exception of Joe, raced after it to climb aboard.

"Señors, if you halt not, I fire!" shrieked the alcalde and, drawing a revolver of ancient vintage from the ample folds of his sash, he leveled it at the captain who was standing in the bow of the boat.

"Oh, Lawd!" yelled Big Un in terror, pushing frenziedly at the boat. "He's goin' ter shoot, Cap'n! Lay down flat in de boat, quick! Dat's what comes of diggin' up money what belongs ter hants an' ghosts!"

"Halt or I shoot! In the name of my government I fire!" yelled the alcalde, dancing about in a frenzy of greed as he saw the boat getting out of range. He again leveled his gun to shoot, this time in earnest.

BUT THERE was no sound of a revolver shot, but rather an agonized yell of terror from the alcalde himself. There had come a short, fierce growl behind him and the calf of his leg had been seized in the vicious grip of a savage dog. Or, to be more exact, this was the interpretation of the real facts made by the alcalde's vivid imagination.

Joe, who had stopped behind when the boat was shoved off, a favorite trick by which he avoided this extra exertion, had seen the gleam of the alcalde's revolver in the moonlight. A school boy's trick,

not so far away in his memory as to be forgotten, came into his mind.

He darted behind him, grabbed his fat calf in a pinching grip and at the same time gave a short, savage growl. The success of Joe's ruse was complete. Next to the alcalde's fear of work was his fear of dogs. He had seen one man die of hydrophobia, and the fear of dogs was seared into his brain.

With a shriek of "Holy Saints! I am bitten!" the alcalde leaped in the air and fell moaning on the sands, his revolver falling several feet away.

And a skinny, wiry, red headed boy with a derisive, hysterical cackle, leaped into the shallow water, raced after the boat and clambered on board, well content with his first day as a hunter of pirates' treasure.

The alcalde, reassured by Pelona and at least twenty-five of his people, as to the non-existence of a canine wound, sat up and tremblingly mopped the cold sweat from his fat face.

Out in the bay in front of him bobbed the longboat of the gringos, plainly to be seen in the moonlight. In the boat was a three foot leaden casket, filled to the brim, no doubt, with the fabled pirate's loot, consisting of diamonds, rubies, pearls and good old Spanish gold, which had been the object of fruitless search for half a century.

And now, almost without effort, and on the payment of merely a paltry fee such as was paid for a permit to hunt turtles, these gringos had borne away the coveted prize which the years had taught him did not really exist! It was maddening! What was he to do? Must he sit here helpless? The alcalde searched his soul for the answer.

Then his brooding face lighted up with an evil joy and his obese heart throbbed with rejuvenated hope.

"Sister of a pig!" he shouted to Pelona as if she were a mile away instead of standing meekly by his side. "Go thou at once to the house of Doña Serephina Lopez, present my compliments and say to her that I will be honored if she will allow me to call upon her within the half hour. Hasten! Fly! Bring back word to me at the Presidio! Avaunt!"

Pelona melted into the moonlit landscape as fast as her thin legs would carry her. The alcalde, assisted to his feet by willing hands, cleared a space in front of him with a sweeping gesture.

"Return home, my children, and refresh yourselves with your evening's repast of tortillas and beans. I, Don Pedro Podenero, will protect you! It is I who will find a way for our treasure to be returned to us. It is I who will see that each man is suitably recompensed. Go in peace!"

IN THE MEANTIME Pelona, scurrying over the wet sands, gathering speed as she passed through the village's one street, had reached a low built, modern villa with broad shady porches which sat somewhat apart from the village of Dolores. Racing up the steps, Pelona knocked and then pantingly sought admission of the supercilious, rather pretty maid in high heeled French shoes and Spanish lace silk stockings who answered the door.

"You would see my mistress?" asked the supercilious one, a veritable daughter of the Aztecs. But the scornful dark eyes said much more eloquently, "What, you, a peon, to see my mistress, the great Doña Serephina de Lopez!"

"It is my master who would see your mistress. Not I, but the alcalde of the Island of Mugueres, the Señor Don Pedro Podenero. It is I that would deliver his message. Quick, thou, for time presses," answered Pelona who also had her pride.

With a stride, the facsimile of her mistress when she strode into the presence of some rich hacienda owner, waiting to consult the stars, have his palm read or to gaze into the future vouchsafed by the crystal ball, the maid led the way into the cool dark hall and bade Pelona wait.

"There is here present a—a—peon person to see madame," she announced to some one in the sandalwood scented room beyond.

"Who? Imbecile! Have I not told you!" came a low, furious voice through the crystal ornamented portieres.

"Yes, madame, and I have not forgotten. This person, a female servant, bears a message from the alcalde."

"Show her in then!"

And Pelona entered The Presence.

"Señorita," she said, after she had dropped a profound curtsey before the great fortune teller, "my master, the alcalde of Mugueres, the Señor Don Pedro de Podenero, presents his compliments and begs the favor of visiting you within the half hour in order to consult with you on a matter of importance."

Doña Serephina languidly fanned herself for a few moments, yawned and then pensively regarded her well manicured big toe that shone resplendent in a jewel studded Chinese sandal.

"Tell your master I will see him," she said at last. "But, stay!" she said, as Pelona turned to flee. "Tell him to hasten hither, as at the hour of ten I ascend to the roof to consult the stars."

Properly impressed, as was desired, Pelona sprinted an amateur marathon back to her master.

The alcalde, aided by the sustaining influence of several *aguardiente* cocktails, had managed to recover his equanimity, and he received Pelona's breathless message with great complacency.

Within the half hour, faultlessly attired and on his well oiled head, a silver mounted filigreed sombrero costing as much as a Ford car, he knocked at the door of Doña Serephina's villa.

"Madame, I am ravished," exclaimed the alcalde, as he was ushered into the softly lighted room.

"Do you come, honored señor, to consult the stars?" was the demure reply of Doña Serephina over a lazily waving fan of parrot feathers.

"Not the stars, my dear doña, nor yet the wisdom of the crystal ball, the two things in the reading of which thou dost so much excel; but rather of the wisdom garnered up in that beautiful head of thine. It is of that I would avail myself."

Doña Serephina languidly raised a protesting hand, heavy with rings of topaz and jade.

"My dear Alcalde! One would think thee a courtier and me, perhaps, the Spanish Infanta. What is it that you really wish? Tell me."

"My dear lady," protested the alcalde, renewing his gallantries by kissing the protesting hand, after a shrewd glance from under fatty eyelids at the not displeased doña, "I am sure no one could adorn the court of Spain with half so worthy grace as your beautiful self! But now to state the object of my visit.

"Señorita, today, this morning, at an ungodly hour, before I had arisen for the duties of the day, there comes to me at the Presidio a Yankee captain of a ship. This captain and an obscene pig of a mate he had with him bargained and bartered with me, the alcalde, for a permit to dig for treasures. You have heard, no doubt, of the pirate's gold, the treasure chest of old Lafitte that tradition says is buried here?"

Doña Serephina nodded.

"Go on. Proceed. Continue," she urged, her brown eyes glowing.

"Señorita," the alcalde proceeded, mopping his perspiring face nervously, "many, oh many, have dug here for the treasure chest. From a little child I have seen it. None have been successful, but all have paid a digging fee to the alcalde of—of—well, from one peso, if the digger was poor, to five hundred pesos, if the digger was rich and—foolish. But all have paid according to their means.

"And, señorita, this digging permit was a source of income for the alcalde for many years. Many came to dig twenty-five years ago with many strange maps, divining rods and witches' staffs. They dug and delved the whole of the island. Not one foot escaped. But all to no purpose. Not one jewel was found, not one gold piece. Only the alcalde profited.

"Gradually the digging delirium died out and ceased altogether. Since I have been alcalde there has been perhaps ten such permits given. And then today, after all these years of fruitless digging,

comes this Yankee pig and—and—for a mere trifle paid to me for a permit, after all this mighty digging, this—this—vulture of the sea comes—and—and—"

"You don't mean he found the treasure?" Doña Serephina gasped.

"I mean just that, madame!" snapped the alcalde, resenting that the dramatic climax of his tale should be anticipated. "I mean just that. And furthermore he has the treasure chest safely on board his ship and, as far as I know, may sail with the dawn. And—Holy Saints! What am I to do to get this treasure chest back?" wailed the alcalde, appealing piteously to Doña Serephina.

"It is true that there is an agreement between us," he concluded with a nervous gulp, "that one third of what is found shall go to the state. But he has the chest in his possession. And—and—all the island knows of the chest and will demand their share of it even if it be returned. What am I to do, dear lady? Speak and your reward is certain!"

A BRAIN trained by years of quick thinking for those who appealed to her in her capacity of fortune teller and crystal gazer did not fail the lady now. Doña Serephina had found men usually to be merely little children when the mask was removed, and the alcalde was running true to form. She had a snug little fortune tucked away in the National Bank of Mexico, acquired by quick thinking and shrewd advice, utilized for those in need of them, and the alcalde apparently was in need. Quickly the look of surprise the alcalde's announcement had brought forth faded from her face to be succeeded by one of inscrutability that would have done honor to the ancient sphinx. She sat up and drew a long breath.

"Ah! it is as I thought," she spoke in a far away musing voice. "It is as—"

"What?" spluttered the alcalde. "In God's name! Dost thou tell me—"

"I tell thee nothing now. What would be the use? 'Tis too late. Let me see thy hand."

The alcalde extended a moist, pudgy hand, which trembled slightly from nervousness. Doña Serephina took the hand in her slim, cool, rose scented one, and in order to see more clearly in the dimly lighted room she bent her head until her perfumed tresses were directly under the alcalde's nose.

The alcalde's nostrils sensed the faint, intoxicating odor of jasmine. He shut his eyes and for the moment leaden treasure chests, stars, gold—all was forgotten. A mocking bird woke in the honeysuckle vine outside and flooded the night with melody. What was sordid gold anyway, or diamonds or pearls, save to give to a dearly beloved woman! What was—

"Ah ha!" exclaimed Doña Serephina, straightening up so suddenly that the top of her head hit the alcalde's chin and made him bite his tongue. "Here it all is in thy hand, as I thought! As plainly written as a young girl's writing lesson."

"What is there?" he faltered. "What is written?"

Doña Serephina laughed a low melodious laugh. It was just such a laugh that put Cleopatra over the top in the race for the throne of Egypt.

"I read there, my dear Alcalde, that you find a great treasure in your middle—er—latter young manhood; that trouble comes. The line of riches breaks; you lose this treasure. The line of riches is crossed at this break by— Well, it means that a woman comes into your life when the line of riches is broken. Here it is that the line of riches and the line of Venus—of the heart—merge and thus in this way is the treasure regained."

"How?" he whispered hoarsely, leaning forward. "How?"

"By me!" replied Doña Serephina promptly, pointing a pink forefinger inwards towards herself. "Through me shalt thou regain the treasure!"

"But, my dear Doña, how?" persisted the alcalde. "Even now, as I have told you, this Yankee shark has the treasure chest safely on board his ship. He may sail for Puerto Cortez at dawn. He says tomorrow he will give to me one third of

what is in the chest, but I believe him not. How can you, a woman—beautiful one—" the alcalde added hastily—"how can you secure this treasure chest?"

The inscrutable look again came over the Doña's face.

"Leave all to me, great boy! Only go thou to thy strong box at the Presidio and return here swiftly with at least five hundred pesos, all in gold if that be possible, and I will do the rest. Trust all to me."

The alcalde's heart sank and a profuse perspiration exuded from his pores. Surely this beautiful woman was indeed a witch, for in his strong box was just that sum in good American gold! With all his gallantry, the alcalde was practical, not to say close, in money matters. Should he send good money on such an adventure? Would it be wise to trade a certainty for an uncertainty? What did Doña Serephina want with so large a sum? Why did she require it? Could she be trusted with so much gold?

Doña Serephina waited until all these thoughts had found their slow way through his torpid brain, as she had anticipated they would. Then, in a musing voice, as if to herself, she said:

"It is said that Lafitte took only gold and precious stones—diamonds, rubies, pearls. The lesser loot he left for the rabble of his ships."

"What would you do with this gold, doña? What—"

"I?" She turned on him suddenly, as suddenly as a cat lands on a mouse. "Why, I would go on this Yankee's ship at once, tonight. I would say to him that I had come to go as a passenger to Puerto Cortez, I, a rich widow. I would show my gold. I would turn his head. I would say to him, 'Go on to Puerto Cortez with the treasure chest without division.' Voyaging, en route, I would win his heart. He would trust me. And when we landed, in some way I would have the chest and then return hither—and—and to thee!"

It was the psychological moment. Doubt was struggling with cupidity on the alcalde's fat face. He did not know how she would do all this; he could not think it out; and yet, what she said sounded reasonable.

Doña Serephina swiftly read the wavering in his face, and as swiftly seized the right moment. She leaped from her couch, her face aflame with resolve. The alcalde arose also, hesitatingly. She put both hands on his shoulders, turned him about and gave him a great push through the crystal portières.

"Go! Go, dull one! Go, great boy! Bring to me the gold, and in two weeks I return with the treasure chest of Lafitte! I, Doña Serephina, who never lies, who is never mistaken, who reads the stars as an open book and knows the inner secrets of the heart, I promise it! Go!"

And he went. The alcalde's name was on the dotted line.

AT THE first pink streak of dawn the early morning watch on the *Maggie May*, consisting of Big Un and Slim, the Portygee, were aroused from their somnolence by the sound of oars and a lusty Spanish voice speaking the ship.

"Urhuh!" exclaimed Big Un. "What did I tell yer! Here dey is, just like I said! Dese here Mexicans ain't gwine ter let us alone just as long as we keeps dat lead box full of dead men's money on dis here boat. Dere ain't no good comin' outen dat hant money.

"Ahoy! Yes! Here we is! What you want?" yelled Big Un, hanging over the side.

"Fer Gawd's sake, Slim! Come here an' look! Look good!"

What Slim saw was a small fishing boat manned by two Mexican fishermen. But in the stern of the boat sat a vision of beauty and a joy forever—two visions to be accurate. It was the Doña Serephina and her high caste Mexican maid. At their feet was a small steamer trunk.

"What you fellows want?" asked Slim in Spanish. Big Un was beyond the power of speech.

Doña Serephina looked up at Slim and smiled.

"I would converse with the captain," she said, also in Spanish. Fearing he would not understand, she repeated in English this time. "I, the captain would be spoken with."

"The captain, he ain't up yet, lady," Slim replied, "and won't be fer more than an hour."

"Then I must come on board and await his pleasure," said the lady with a shrug. "Be pleased to attend at the ladder to assist me on board."

Big Un nudged Slim's elbow.

"Say, Slim, don't you reckon we had better see the mate about this here? You know how cranky de cap'n is 'bout women folks bein' on de *Maggie May* since dat crazy woman cut up sich a ruckus. He cussed me from Genesis to Revelations 'cause my wife which I is lawfully married to, brought me some clean clothes on board. De Ole Man will just 'bout bust his b'iler efen he wakes up an' finds dese here womens settin' here on de deck."

But the smile that had won better men than Slim prevailed. And the lady, maid, trunk and a yellow silk parasol were assisted up the ladder and made comfortable on deck.

"Huh! Looks like she has done come ter spend de week," Big Un muttered as he watched Slim place the trunk so the maid could sit on it, there being but one steamer chair available.

"Thank you," said Doña Serephina sweetly. "Come here, please!" And as Slim held out a tarred and calloused palm for the generous tip, Doña Serephina with a start gazed fixedly at his palm.

"Pardon!" she begged and caught his hand with her beautifully groomed fingers. She turned the hand about this way and that, gazing at it with the same rapt attention a diamond expert would bestow upon a rare stone. "Ah! I see here many things!" she explained finally as Slim began to grow warm with embarrassment.

"Ma'am?" stuttered the confused and self-conscious Slim, gazing at his hand as if he had just seen it for the first time.

Big Un, with all his ideas of the conventions shattered, edged uneasily towards the cook's galley, ready for a quick get away if the captain or mate should suddenly come up the companionway. But he was not too far away to hear.

"I said," the sweet voice repeated, "that I see here many things. You see, I have the gift of reading palms, the stars. I see the future. It is my profession."

Out of the tail of her eye she noted the effect of her words on Big Un.

"Come hither!" she beckoned, releasing Slim's limp and nerveless hand.

Big Un came forward, dragging his big bare feet reluctantly, with a fearsome eye on the companionway. He dreaded the captain's sudden appearance, but his superstitious curiosity drove him.

"Dost thou speak Spanish?" she asked in that tongue.

Big Un nodded.

"I shore does!" he added fervently in English.

"It is well! Hold out thy hand also that I may view it."

Big Un hesitatingly extended a manual extremity rivaling in size one of Mr. Armour's largest hams. Doña Serephina studied the hand for a few moments. Then she looked away, across the blue waters of the little bay dimpling in the morning sun. Then, with a fleeting glance at Big Un's broad face, she fumbled in her handbag of Mexican bird feathers.

"Here is a tip for thee, also," she said in Spanish. "Thank you."

With just such mannerisms and tricks of expression and movement Doña Serephina had fanned into a consuming flame the curiosity of richer and wiser men than these two simple A. B.'s, steeped to the neck in the superstition of the sea.

Big Un took the tip with a trembling hand.

"Lady, what did you say you found in mah hand?"

She shrugged her expressive shoulders.

"I did not say," she replied with a light laugh. "There is to be read there many things: some that you know already, as they are of the past; some which are yet

to come, as these are of the future and I alone know them. I know all things, if I but choose to gaze into the crystal ball. I spy out hidden things. I find buried treasures. Or I see into the future which perhaps holds a new wife—"

She paused as a gruff voice, swearing at the cabin boy's delay with coffee, floated up the stairs.

"I know'd hit!" exclaimed Big Un, diving into the galley and colliding with the cook on his way to the captain's cabin with the coffee percolator; "Just as shore as I is born, dat woman is a witch an' knows all 'bout dat lead chest full of dead men's money! An' Gawd knows what she'll do 'bout it!"

Snatching the percolator from the hands of the astonished cook, he rushed down the companionway to the captain's cabin and knocked on the door.

"Cap'n, sir, here is your coffee. Dat boy Joe he ain't woke up yit. An'—an'—dere's a woman, two ob 'em, settin' up dere on deck waitin' ter see you, sir."

"What!" exclaimed Captain Daugherty, taking the coffee and motioning for Big Un to step inside the cabin. "Two women! Where did two women come from this time er day?"

"Gawd knows!" said Big Un, comprehensively answering all the questions. "Me an' Slim, we had de fust mornin' watch an' a boat come off frum de town and dese here womens, dey come on board. An' dere dey sets. Dat's all I knows, 'ceptin' dat one of 'em is a witch er a fortune teller er bofe. An' dey says dey wants ter go on wid us to Puerto Cortez."

"What kind of lookin' women are they?" asked the captain.

"Dey is de bestest lookin' Mexican womens I ever seen," replied Big Un, glad to gossip, especially so when he saw the captain was not displeased. "One of 'em is dressed up fitten ter kill an' de other one she ain't so bad rigged up her own self."

"Well, that'll do, Big Un," said the captain hastily. "I'll dress right away. Tell the ladies I'll be right up."

WHEN the captain came on deck he found the sun well up and the crew clustered about the cook's galley engaged in frankly admiring the two women who sat under the small awning in the center of the deck. Big Un and Slim had lost no time in acquainting their shipmates with Doña Serephina's professional qualifications. In addition, Big Un expressed his firm conviction that in some uncanny way Doña Serephina had become aware of the finding of the pirate's treasure, knew of its presence on the *Maggie May* and had come on board to possess herself of it by supernatural means. This had doubly added to the attraction that two finely groomed, good looking women would have on a crew accustomed to the dull routine of a small fruit steamer.

The captain's gray head in the companionway was a signal for futile efforts on the part of the crew to get busy with deck mops and morning routine. The captain hailed this relaxation of discipline with secret delight. It was a chance to show off.

"What do you men think is goin' on?" he yelled. "A Sunday school picnic? This here deck ain't been touched this mornin'. An' my breakfas' ain't ready yet an' here it is eight bells! But I see the cook has got plenty time ter stand eround gapin' at—at what he sees, instead of doin' what he's paid for! Git to hell away from here!" he ordered in a lower tone. "An' git ter work, all of you! Them women don't want ter look at sich freaks as you. If they did, they'd go ter a zoo somewhere."

Having displayed his authority and disposed of his crew, the captain joined his visitors.

"Good mornin'," he said with as an elaborate a bow as a rheumatic back would admit of. "What can I do fer you ladies?"

"Are you Spanish spoken?" asked Doña Serephina with a heart warming smile. "No? Well, English must speak I. El Capitán, I am a—what you call?—a wife that is desert!" A handkerchief redolent

with jasmine was flutteringly applied to her eyes. "I live in Puerto Cortez, a young girl. Comes there a hacienda *caballero* from Mexico. Oh, so rich! Lands! Sheep! Goats! Cows! He make much love to my mother for me. I say no to my mother. My mother beg, she implore. She pray, she weep, that I marry this man. At last I so do, to please my mother!

"And then I come away from my home. I live in Mexico City in the summer. I live here at Dolores in the winter, the rainy time. In time, my mother, she is old. She write that I visit her. I so do. She fall sick and beg that I not leave her one, two, three months. She is ill and I write my husband each week that it is so. At last my mother she die. And I cable to my husband that I return to this place. What do I discover?"

The handkerchief was called upon for yeoman service. The maid was now also sobbing, at the recital of Doña Serephina's woes.

"I find all my summer villa locked against me—against me and my little sister here—" indicating Nina, the maid, with a wave of the handkerchief. "I rush to the alcalde. I appeal to him. He laugh and say that my husband, reading wrong the cable I send to say my mother is dead, say that I, his dear wife is dead! That he rejoice at the news and make merry and at once he marry again, a young girl of Dolores, and departs for a honeymoon to Brazil and business also, for he has there a coffee plantation that he would visit.

"And now, señor, I learn you sail soon for Puerto Cortez. I would go with you. I would inform my brother, my uncle who live there, of the cruelty of my husband—that I am desert! And they will take suitable revenge. Without doubt the de Costellos will be revenge!"

"But, madame," stuttered the captain, who had listened spellbound by the words that were poured out upon him, "we don't take passengers. We ain't got no place for 'em."

"But we, my sister and myself, can sleep here upon the deck," Doña Serephina interrupted him ecstatically. "I am sure with so gallant a gentleman present to protect us, no one would dare to harm us."

"And besides," began the captain again, after pausing for breath, "I have promised the alcalde that I would go on shore today an'—an'—well, settle up a business matter we have between us."

"Ah but, señor, can not the business wait?" asked the doña, making a quick grab for the captain's hand and placing it against her cheek as she looked up into his eyes imploringly. "What is business when a woman's heart is bleeding? Surely the alcalde, who is my friend, surely he will consent to wait. See! I will write to him and request it. I will send it by your so big colored man—he who stands yonder looking!"

The captain turned and bent a ferocious look on Big Un, whom the cook, from a safe distance inside the galley, was trying to persuade to go aft and tell the captain his breakfast was ready. Stimulated by the look which Big Un misunderstood and judged to be caused from the uneasy gnawings of an empty stomach, he came forward and said—

"De cook says your breakfus is gittin' cold, sir."

"Oh, is it?" snapped the captain. "Well, you tell the cook to serve it up at once and also to lay plates fer these here two ladies. An' you go tell that bunch of grinnin' apes," he added, lowering his voice, "to git ter work an' lay off watchin' me all the time. I ain't goin' ter fall overboard. And," raising his voice, "I want you an' Slim to take the small boat an' go over to the village an' take a note to the alcalde for these here ladies."

"Oh, so dear a man!" exclaimed Doña Serephina, softly clapping her hands. "Something told me—my heart, perhaps—that I would not appeal in vain to a gallant son of the sea! I will at once write the note. Nina, give to me my writing portfolio."

"And I'll go below, ma'am," said the captain, flushing with pleasure at her

words, "an' arrange breakfast for you an' your sister, whilst you write the note to the alcalde. An' tell him, ma'am, that if he'll come on board at once, we will settle our business afore I sail. Otherwise I'll—I'll—"

"Why not say otherwise you will with pleasure his reply await?" added Doña Serephina readily.

"That's it!" said the delighted captain. "An' now if you'll excuse me, I'll go below."

As he walked toward the companionway the two women exchanged significant glances.

"And will you not also order, dear captain," Doña Serephina called after him, "what you call—that steam be constructed so that we may be ready soon to sail for Puerto Cortez and my revenge?

"Who knows," said the doña as the captain disappeared and Nina handed her the portfolio, "who knows but that the alcalde, fat imbecile that he is, might get impatient and come aboard to claim his share, if we do not hasten out to sea?"

My dear friend [wrote the doña in Spanish] all goes well. The Yankee pig has played into our hands, as I, the reader of the stars, predicted. Send back by the great African, the bearer hereof, your permission that I be allowed to act as your agent in this matter and to deposit in the bank of the government at Puerto Cortez your share, as we arranged. You see, as I have told you, that I, Doña Serephina, have the wisdom! Soon now, a few days, and the treasure chest of Lafitte is ours, without division! Hasten to answer. This honest thickhead will not sail without your agreement.

I allow you to kiss my hands. Adios!

—SEREPHINA

BY THE TIME this had been written, Big Un, who had bolted his breakfast, was ready to go ashore.

"Come hither, thou," said the doña, beckoning with her sweet smile to Big Un, who stood at a respectful distance. "This," sealing the envelop, "is the letter to the alcalde who lives in the Presidio, the house where the flag is. Give it only into his hands and thou shalt have as a reward— Stay! I will show you. Nina, my beaded bag!"

She fumbled in the bag and produced two ordinary looking dice.

"Thou shalt have as a reward these magic dice of San Fernandez. Didst thou never hear of them?"

"No'm," said Big Un, his eyes naturally glistening at the sight of the two small cubes whose twin brothers reposed at that moment in his trousers' pocket. Due to their fumbling perversity Big Un's monthly wages were regularly appropriated by his more lucky shipmates as a well worn place on the forecastle floor could testify.

"The tale runs," said Doña Serephina, shaking the two small cubes softly in her hand, "that San Fernandez, a good saint of the early days, dwelt near a large cemetery where the devil came nightly to steal the souls of those who lay dead therein. Horrified, the good saint meditated how he might outwit the devil, and after much fasting and prayer he hit upon a plan.

"Boldly he went forth to meet the devil, dressed as a rogue of the streets, so that the Evil One might not know him. And soon they met. No sooner had this occurred than the saint bantered the devil to throw at dice for the souls of those who slept in the cemetery.

" 'Agreed!' said the devil, 'but I have no dice!'

" 'I will provide the dice,' said the saint, who was a master workman in ivory and gold and had made these dice for the occasion. And he produced them from a little leather bag he carried.

"So they diced, there by the roadside. And when the saint threw the dice thus, softly and cunningly—" and she threw them—"why seven or eleven always appeared. But when he threw them roughly—thus—the seven or the eleven did not appear, as they do not now.

" 'Malediction!' exclaimed the devil. 'Thy dice are loaded! You win all the good souls, leaving me only the bad!'

" 'Examine them closely and see for thyself!' quoth the saint, which the devil did without avail. The dice were not loaded but only made very cunningly so

that he who threw them roughly, as is the habit with most dicers, almost never threw the lucky seven or eleven; while he who threw them softly almost always won.

"So it came to pass that the good saint won nearly all the souls in the cemetery and would have won all the souls in purgatory had the devil not flown away in disgust, declaring that the saint had cheated, but it could not be proven.

"Since that day the little dice so made are called the dice of San Fernandez, and fortune waits on him who learns to throw them wisely. Throwing softly—so!—when the stakes are high."

And the all powerful seven and then the eleven stared up at Big Un from the deck.

"Lady, does you say I kin have dese here dice?" asked Big Un, in a voice husky with longing.

"Surely, they are already yours if you but hasten to Dolores with my letter to the alcalde, get his answer and return so that we may sail before noon."

"Lady, I'se done gone!" exclaimed Big Un, hurrying to the ship's side. "Done gone!" he repeated, falling nimbly down the ladder and into the boat where Slim already awaited him.

AS THE tale of the magic dice of San Fernandez was being recounted to Big Un, the captain was telling the story of his two passengers to an unresponsive mate, who was impatiently waiting for breakfast.

"An' you see," concluded the captain lamely, "we can pick up about eighty dollars passage money an' that ain't done every day. Me and you will split forty dollars an' we'll give forty dollars to the crew an' everybody will be happy."

"It's agin the law," the mate retorted shortly, "to charge passenger fares if you ain't chartered to carry 'em. An' we ain't got no room fer 'em. Suppose the owners got on to us? We've lost nearly two days already and we've got to wait now until we divide up that there treasure chest with that old pop eyed porpoise over in the village afore we sail. If we don't, he can have us arrested when we git to Puerto Cortez, if he can get a cable through."

"No, we ain't, Jim! I forgot that. That there lady has sent a letter to him by Big Un and Slim, askin' him to come on board at once to divide or leave us divide some other time—somethin' like that she wrote him. An' she is good friends with him. So you can just give orders to turn on the boiler burners an' by the time Big Un and Slim gits back we'll have steam up an' be ready to sail. Now, let's eat breakfus' an' after that we kin decide erbout them women."

"You won't exactly find no high toned grub, ma'am," said the captain apologetically, as he ushered Doña Serephina and Nina into the small mess room, "but what we have I am sure you are welcome to.

"This is Mr. Shannon, ma'am, my first officer."

"And this, Meester Shannon, is my little sister Nina," said the doña.

"Pleased to meet you," the mate murmured, his hands suddenly becoming useless impedimenta, as the two tropical visions of beauty burst on him.

"Did you say I was to order the engineer to get up steam, sir?" he asked, after the ladies were seated.

"Yes, Jim, but eat your breakfast first."

"No, I'll do it now. It won't take but a minute."

He hurried to the chart room and yelled down the speaking tube to the engineer:

"Turn on them burners, Bob! We'll sail as soon as you get up steam:" And then in a lower tone, "Jam your ear up close, Bob, an' lissen! Say, just keep your eye on the deck in about half an hour an' see whut the Old Man's took on as passengers to Puerto Cortez!"

"DO YOU speak Spanish?" asked Nina softly of the mate half an hour later, detaching herself from the captain and the doña, who sat talking under the awning, and coming over to where he was leaning over the side watching the shore.

"Yes, I do," answered the mate fervently.

"How nice! Do you think you can teach me to speak English?"

He nodded.

"In three days!" she laughed. "But do you see anything of the boat? We are so anxious to sail, my sister and I."

The mate put up his glass again.

"It's them, but I don't see the alcalde with them. I will go tell the captain," he said.

"The alcalde ain't in the boat, sir," the mate reported and returned to the side where Nina was watching its approach.

"Perhaps he is coming off later," the captain said to Doña Serephina.

"I do not believe it," she exclaimed. "I believe that he will say in reply to my letter that all of—of your business is to be left to your honest heart and that we may sail at once for Puerto Cortez. You see," she continued, looking up at him from under her lashes, "I am—what you call it in English?—one who tells of fortunes, one who reads the hand. I have a gift of telling what is to be. Let me have now a little glance at your hand. So!

"Ah!" She gave a little suppressed shriek. "I see here," laboriously tracing out a line in the captain's calloused palm with a pointed pink finger nail, "I see here a strange thing! A thing that can hardly seem possible in this modern time!" She knitted her brows and bent over the hand, studying it. "In the days of romance and adventure, perhaps—when—when—"

"What did you see in my hand, ma'am?" he asked in a voice that was slightly tremulous.

"Do not ask me!" she exclaimed with a slight shrug. "You would not believe. You would doubt. You are as are all Yankees—what you call?—hard of the head. You would doubt, and I desire that you trust me. You that have been so kind to me, a stranger!"

And the tears of strategy welled up in her dark eyes.

"Ma'am," said Captain Daugherty, who sat looking at his hand as if some one had just suddenly presented it to him, "if you seen any bad luck in my hand, I'd like to know erbout it, so as to be prepared. You know we sea folks like to be ready for storms ahead of time. I kin read barometers an' all sorts of weather signs, but I don't know nothin' erbout hands. Won't you please tell me what it is?"

With a slow, inscrutable smile, she again bent over the weather beaten paw of the ranking captain of the Fruit Company's fleet.

"I see," she began in a droning, dreamy voice, too low for the two who were leaning over the rail watching the approach of the boat to hear, "I see here a great good fortune about midway of your line of life. Perhaps it is a lucky legacy, an oil well, a mine—I would say hidden treasure—" the captain started—"if it were in the old days of pirates and buccaneers, but such times have passed! But certainly your hand says great good fortune is soon to come to you. And from this sudden change, the line of life runs on, broad and smooth, indicating a long and happy life—after the finding of the treasure—er—the good luck," she added hastily. "And so—"

She hesitated; looked at his hand again, then up at his face that was moist with the perspiration of eagerness; bit her lip, looked away over the bay, then back again with a languishing glance.

"What?" he asked eagerly. "What?"

"I—why—the line of the heart merges into the line of life about the time of the finding of the treas—when the good luck has come to you."

"What does that mean?" he asked eagerly.

Doña Serephina had had many customers in her young and adventurous life. By experience she knew that cowboys were willing victims, hacienda owners credulous and susceptible gamblers superstitious and generous; sailors she had found possessed the combined proclivities of all three, and this middle aged son of Neptune apparently was the bellwether of them all.

"Perhaps it is not best, el Capitán, to

speak of the line of the heart." She sighed deeply. "But this I will say: She—that is, when the heart line merges with the line of life, no ill fortune comes to you. All is peace and joy and plenty for a long life thereafter. Maybe she who comes, I mean, maybe the merging of the line of the heart and the line of life will bring to you the realization of your dreams."

Looking up into his face, she gave him the shy, sweet, fleeting smile that is classically attributed to sweet sixteen, but which is usually seen in its perfection only after the teens are a memory, following long and sophisticated practise.

BIG UN clambered up the side and put into Doña Serephina's hand a fat, crested envelop, sealed with the seal of Mexico. "Here 'tis, lady. I done just like you said. I put dat letter in his own hand."

"And here is thy reward," she said in Spanish, handing him a Mexican silver dollar.

Big Un had opened his mouth to remind her of the magic dice of San Fernandez when he felt them in his hand underneath the dollar. The transfer had been accomplished so adroitly no one had seen. Murmuring a "*Gracias, señorita,*" he pocketed the dice and the dollar and went below.

Doña Serephina opened the letter. It read:

> Gracious Lady:
>
> Let the captain sail at his pleasure. He has my permission to depart, if in departing he is of service to thee, my esteemed and honored friend!
>
> As to the division of the treasure chest of Lafitte, disinterred by him on yesterday of this week, I hereby appoint thee as my agent and my witness to a fair and equal division of one third for my share of the same in gold or its equal value in jewels or precious stones, to be deposited in my name in the bank of the nation at Puerto Cortez, when said port be reached by you. Given under my hand this day as alcalde and guardian of the peace of the Ciudad de Dolores.
>
> —DON PEDRO PODENERO, ALCALDE.

"See!" exclaimed Doña Serephina, looking up from the letter. "It is as I said it would be. I will translate as much as is needful."

Which she did.

"I am sure now that you, my friend, will sail at once."

The *Maggie May*, being an oil burner, had not taken long to get up a working head of steam. And an "Already, sir!" came up the tube when the captain stepped in the pilot house and clanged the bell. He ordered the anchor hoisted, and half an hour after the alcalde's letter had been received, the *Maggie May* was slipping out of the little sapphire bay of Dolores.

"Call all hands for'ard!" he said shortly to the mate who was busy explaining to Nina in Spanish the mystery of getting a ship under way.

When the crew had assembled and the captain had given Joe the cabin boy, who was audibly chewing gum, a look of venomous hatred, he cleared his throat and said:

"Boys, as you see, we've got two lady passengers aboard bound for Puerto Cortez. They was anxious to make that port, so they begged to come along with us fer—fer—a consideration, a cash fare of forty dollars gold each, which is eighty dollars in all.

"Me an' Mr. Shannon is agreed that you men should have forty dollars of this money, which is four dollars apiece. An' the other forty dollars we will share and share alike twixt ourselves an' the engineers.

"Cook, if that durn boy don't quit smackin' his mouth over that gum, hit him on the head an' chuck him overboard. His mother won't miss him!"

"No, sir, she won't," answered the cook readily. "But it wouldn't be treatin' them poor trustin' sharks just right."

"Now about this here treasure chest we dug up," resumed the captain. "We don't open that till we get to Puerto Cortez; then we share it as agreed on afore we left Galveston. I told you we'd have to give a third to the alcalde an' he wants us to divide it after we make Puerto

Cortez an' these here ladies will take care of his share. Now is all that fair and square?"

"Yes, sir! It is, sir," said the cook who was the most voluble of the crew and their usual mouthpiece. "An' we are glad to have the ladies with us, money or no money. An'—"

"That will do, cook!" interrupted the captain hastily. "Now, I want you to show these here ladies that you can cook when you try.

"That's all, men!"

BY HIGH NOON the *Maggie May* was breasting the rolling waters of the open sea. The presence of the two dark eyed demoiselles of Mexico seemed to increase the general efficiency. Joe voluntarily washed his face and McComb, the old Scots engineer, was getting better speed out of the engines than was usual with him. The cook, stimulated by the captain's admonishing praise, prepared a noon meal which he described as a repast "that would make a preacher lay his Bible down." He accomplished this without Big Un's usual good natured assistance.

Big Un was otherwise employed. He had practised in solitude with the magic dice of San Fernandez until he could throw a seven or an eleven with ease, or not, as he desired. He was now kneeling on the floor of the forecastle, beseeching the assembled crew to "jest risk one mo' throw!" Beside him was a fair sized collection of bills and silver, which was unusual in the crap games in which he heretofore participated.

"Big Un," said Slim, "your luck sure has changed! I ain't been on this here old tub long, but since I have been here I ain't seen you win no money before."

"Luck shore has changed!" replied Big Un, shaking the dice of San Fernandez in his hand. "Here hit is, folks, jest like I said! I said I had twenty dollars to say I passes. Here hit is, fair and square. Read 'em as they lays on de floor!"

"Let me see them dice, Big Un," said one of the A. B.'s. "They might be Dan's."

"Dey might an' den agin dey moughtn't. Take'm up, gents! Take dem dice an' shake 'em an' roll 'em! Look at 'em an' feel 'em! Dey is de same dice I has allus toted. 'Tain't nothin' but jest my luck has done changed like dat fortune teller lady said hit would. She says to me, 'Big Un,' she says, 'you take dis here note to de alcalde an' bring me de answer an' efen you don't have good luck for thirty days, I don't know my business, dat's all!' An' shore 'nough, I'se had a change. You all knows dat!

"An' lissen!" He made a gesture full of mystery and secrecy, gathering the little group about him. "Does you all know what dem women come on board for?"

The group shook their heads simultaneously, all but Joe who was too absorbingly interested to move.

"Well, people, I'll tell you. I knows!" Big Un's voice sank to a husky whisper. "Dey says dat dey come on board to go to Puerto Cortez, dat's what dey says. But dat ain't it. Lissen!" Having spellbound his audience, Big Un drew on the histrionic ability that is possessed by all the negro race. "Lissen, folks! Dey has come on board dis here boat on purpose to git dat treasure chest dat de cap'n an' you all dug up. Dat's what! Dat woman what totes de yaller parasol, she is a fortune teller an' a mind reader an' a clabberyant, an' a honest to Gawd witch! Dat's what she is!"

"Oh, hell! You don't mean it!" came a protesting chorus.

"Sartin I does! Didn't she say so outen her own mouf! An' dat ain't all! She just kinder glanced at my hand, plumb keerless like, an' den she tole me more 'bout myself den my own mammy knows!"

"That's so!" corroborated Slim, anxious to shine in the reflected glory from Big Un. "I heard what she said. An' she read my hand, too," he added proudly.

"She shore did!" exclaimed Big Un, emboldened by Slim's confirmation. "She told Slim a Gawd's plenty about hisself, too!"

Having given Slim a share of the spotlight, Big Un resumed.

"Don't tell me dat woman don't know 'bout dat treasure box! I bet that she was lookin' into dat crystal ball she has got an' seen you all an' de cap'n when you dug dat box up! Maybe she put it in Slim's mind to find dat old map. You can't never tell! Anyhow she come mighty nigh to beat dat treasure box to de *Maggie May* at dat. She wasn't far behind it in gittin' on board!"

"Well, why didn't she dig it up her ownself if she know'd where it was at?" asked Joe with the skepticism of youth.

Big Un snorted contemptuously.

"You has got lots ter learn yit, boy! Dey is spells put on dem treasure chests, Gawd knows how! And ghosts an' hants watch 'em at nite. All sorts of bad luck happens to folks what digs up dead men's money. 'Tain't everybody dat kin dig up gold what dem old pirates done buried. An' maybe dat woman know'd dat. Dat's why I wouldn't noways touch dat box myself."

"That's right!" said the chorus. Big Un had his audience with him and was going strong.

"So now you see how it 'tis," he concluded triumphantly. "I kept out of dat gold diggin' all I could an' you see how my luck has done changed. Ain't it so, men?"

They agreed that it was true, and the loss of three or four dollars each also verified his statement.

"But how is she goin' to do all this?" asked the persistent Joe. "Git the treasure chest, I mean."

"Gawd knows, boy. Don't ask me!" exclaimed Big Un impatiently. "But I bet yer she'll git dat treasure box jest de same!"

"Why? What makes you say that?" persisted Joe. "Can't we all watch it an' keep anybody from stealin' it?"

"You can efen you wants to," said Big Un with finality, preparing to resume his successful crap game. "But when you say 'we all' you don't mean me! I signed up to work on a fruit steamer, not to chase hants and witches an' dig up dead men's money an' git all de bad luck in the world headin' my way. An' dat ain't all. I ain't lost nothin' like dat an' I ain't huntin' fer it. Dat's me!"

"CAP'N," panted Joe in the shortest possible time necessary to get up on deck from the forecastle and into the chart room, "Big Un says—"

"Take off your cap when you come in this room!" thundered the captain.

"Yes, sir. Big Un says—"

"An' knock on the door before you come in an' take your cap off."

"Yes, sir. Big Un says that them there women come on board special to—to—"

"To what?" asked the captain as Joe stopped to take breath.

"To rob us of that there pirate gold, sir! An'—an' to cast some sort of witches' spell on us," he added mysteriously.

"To do what?" asked the captain in an ominous voice. "What did you say, boy?"

"Why, to—to—maybe to tell our fortunes, sir," concluded Joe lamely, realizing by the gathering storm on the captain's face that his news was not well received.

"Jim," said the captain fiercely, turning to the mate, "why don't you put this boy to work? Why, when I was a ship's boy I was thankful if I got a chanst to snatch a few winks of sleep layin' on the galley floor. But here's this boy all fixed up like a admiral, with a sea chest an' a special bunk. An' with nothin' to do but stand around suckin' his thumb an' listenin' to sailors' lies. Why—"

"Don't you worry none!" said the mate, grimly rising from his seat. "When I get through with him he'll be too tired to go around tattlin' tales from the focsle to the officers."

"I didn't mean no harm," whimpered Joe. "I just thought I had orter tell you. You—you was glad fer me to tell you about that there map that Slim had an'—an'—you said I was to have a share of what we found, an' I didn't want ter lose it."

"Take him out, Jim!" commanded the captain sternly. "Take him out afore I kill him. Take him out an' set him to peelin' taters er washin' the ship's cat. An' listen, boy, if you open your mouth erbout that lead chest or them women again afore we make port, I'll shut you up down in the hold with them big rats, I swear I will!"

"Cap'n," asked the mate after he had returned from a triumphant and ceremonious installation of Joe as galley mate to the cook, "do you reckon that little runt has got on to somethin' or do you think it's just focsle dope?"

"Foscle dope, Jim," said the skipper airily. "Why them women look too innercent to do anything like that! An' you know how superstitious that nigger Big Un is. Why Big Un is just reekin' with ideas about hants an' ghosts an' witches! All sailors is! We know that. But Big Un is the biggest hant hunter I ever seen."

"Well, I don't know," answered the mate dubiously. "I took to them wimmen at first same as you did—leastways to the one who can't talk United States," he added hastily, as he remembered the captain's preference. "But I ain't never got mixed up with women yet that I didn't get in some sort of trouble, big or little, as the case might be.

"It seems to me that the one with the yaller parasol doped out mighty quick what to do about the alcalde an' she got a answer back too, right away an' all nice an' favorable. It don't look right! Why, that old shark would have took a shot at you las' night if it hadn't been for that boy Joe. He was plumb wild an' so mad he couldn't get his breath when we put off fer the *Maggie May* with that treasure chest. An' now he cools down all of a sudden an' kisses us goodby in a nice letter. It all looks fishy to me."

"Tut! Tut!" said the skipper, still seeing the world through roseate glasses. "You are too suspicious, Jim! You can't hardly blame the old feller fer bein' sore. All them folks there on the island an' lots of others that come there a-purpose to dig have just about tore that there island up from center to circumference in the last fifty years, lookin' fer buried treasures of some kind or another. An' as far as I know, nobody never did find none. An' then fer us to come erlong an' in two hours an' with very little work at that, dig up a chest full of it, why that would make anybody sore.

"An' you know yourself how them Mexicans are when they git sore. They take a crack at you with a gun or stick a knife in you without thinkin' it over none. An' then, maybe, afterwards they git sorry. The way I think it is: The alcalde got sorry about the way he treated us or maybe got skeered we would complain to the U. S. consul or somethin'."

"Maybe so," the mate agreed gloomily, "but if you will take my advice, you'll watch your soundin's till you git rid of them wimmen an' git that treasure all divided up."

"All right! All right!" said the skipper testily. "Now let's go see if that durn cook has got supper ready."

THE COOK had. In fact he had begun to serve up the meal himself, a task usually delegated to the persecuted Joe, in order that he might obtain a more intimate view of the lady passengers.

The two ladies were gazing interestedly at a passing steamer on the horizon. The cook was puttering nervously about the small mess room, setting the table and trying to reconcile his present wife's excellent health with the prediction that Doña Serephina had just made when she read his palm: namely, that he would soon marry for the third time and leave the precarious profession of the sea to become the husband of a rich widow and the proprietor of a thriving fish store.

The ladies turned away from the porthole on the entrance of the two officers and the four sat down to supper.

Tears of gratitude filled Doña Serephina's large soft dark eyes when the captain told her that the mate and himself would sleep on deck, leaving the two state rooms for the ladies.

"Oh, señor, we could not think of it!" she exclaimed. "We would be distressed! It is just as good that we spend the mild cool night in the steamer chairs. My sister and I, we would ourselves reproach to take your beds!"

Nina, too, having the matter explained to her in Spanish, burst into a voluble volcano of protest that overwhelmed the mate's power of comprehensive translation.

"Never mind!" said the captain gruffly as became a rough old sea dog, the part he had assumed. "It's all settled! You two ladies take the cabins. Me an' Jim sometimes don't even go below in bad weather. Surely we can stand one night of it in good weather. We couldn't stand fer no women sleepin' on deck as long as we could find a cabin fer 'em, could we, Jim?"

The mate shook his head and, in spite of his suspicions, a warm glow suffused him when Nina softly thanked him in Spanish and gave his hand a little affectionate squeeze under the table.

The captain, who liked to sleep late, took the first watch with Big Un and Slim. The sea was quiet. The *Maggie May* forged ahead with scarcely a sound, except for the swish of the water along her sides and the subdued drone and clack of her engines. To the south of them, in the direction in which she was headed, the Southern Cross had just appeared above the horizon, and the seven stars shone high in the east.

Under the awning the mate was snoring rhythmically. Forward in the galley, Big Un and Joe were brewing a pot of coffee. Big Un was listening with rapturous horror to Joe's version of the finding of Captain Kidd's treasure, a version that he enlivened by his imitation of the hollow groans that came from the chest as it was lifted out of the ground.

THE CAPTAIN rose, stretched himself and walked slowly to the stern. He consulted his radiolite Ingersoll, confirming his suspicions that he had a good hour before him yet before he would be justified in rousing the mate. Leaning over the rail, he watched the brilliant phosphorescent trail in the ship's wake.

He was startled by a light touch on his arm and a soft voice behind him.

"Ah! El Capitán, what a beautiful night! Much too beautiful to sleep, with the so lovely moon and the stars! And of what is thinking my friend? Of the lady of his heart, perhaps? Or is it of the acquirement of riches which I am told is the main thought of all merchants of the sea who come to us from the north?"

"No, seenyreeta," replied the skipper, trying to fit honest English to the few Spanish words he was sure of, "I was thinking'—"

"I know!" interrupted the doña, clapping her hands gleefully. "The dear man is thinking of that treasure chest which he and my friend the alcalde are to share. Is it not so?"

"But—how—did you know?" he stammered.

She shrugged a perfect pair of shoulders that gleamed like old ivory beneath the filmy black Spanish lace of her negligee.

"But, my friend"—and she took his arm as the *Maggie May*, neglected somewhat by Slim, who was trying to steer and watch the captain at the same time, took a long swell broadside on—"why should I not know? Did not all Dolores know of your good fortune in finding the buried treasure chest of Lafitte, after all these years? All of the town was yet upon the beach making much foolish talk about it when I came away in a fisher's boat for your good ship," she concluded truthfully.

"All of my life, from but a little girl, I have dreamed of the treasure chests of Lafitte," she continued softly, clinging to the skipper's arm with both hands as she gazed out over the moonlit sea. "I have longed too that I might go forth to great adventures with a great strong brave man such as you that—that—one might be proud to love—on—on occasion, dreamed of accompanying him to seek in the waste places of the world for long lost treasures. I have longed to sail the Spanish Main, to see deep sea divers come up from the bottom of the sea, holding in their arms

rusted money chests from some long lost galleon, filled to the brim with golden guldens, green with the mold of the sea. Or that I might, with my very strong man that I could so dearly belove, go seek the treasure that Lafitte, brave old pirate and sea robber that he was, has hidden so cunningly about among these little islands of the southern sea.

"But, heigh ho!" Her lovely bosom heaved with a deep sigh. "Here I am! Poor me! On board a modern steamship, a deserted wife—" here there was a catchy little sob—"on the arm of a great rough man of the north who loves only the sea and the money that comes therefrom!

"Yet—"and she laughed a pathetic little laugh—"at least, in my life I have known the finding of the treasure, one chest of it, even if I did not myself assist with the hero of my dreams. Many times, in those dreams of mine I have seen those treasure chests. But now—" looking up brightly in his face—"I am to see the real chest, am I not? The real chest that old Lafitte himself placed in the ground! You will show it to me, that I may see with my own eyes a real pirate's treasure chest?"

And she rubbed her cheek lovingly against the skipper's arm as another sort of cat rubs lovingly against your legs when it wants a saucer of milk. This time it was not the *Maggie May*, but her captain that staggered. Yet Doña Serephina covertly observed that the hard lines of decision in his face did not relax. So, with a deeply indrawn breath and a click of her large white teeth, she tried again.

"Is it not strange, my Captain—" and the little catchy sob came back in her voice—"that all desired things in this life come too late! But yesterday before I—I—had seen you, it seemed—it seemed as if all I desired was to have my husband back again. But now—when I have seen—when I have—seen—what—great—kindly—handsome men—come out of the north! I— Are you married by any chance, Captain?" And there was just the right inflection to a well simulated affrighted gasp, a belated alarm for the proprieties.

THE CAPTAIN had totally forgotten the latitude and longitude of home. He could not have charted Galveston on a bet. Now, however, there trooped through his conscience stricken mind a visualization of a suspicious, sour faced middle aged woman and two buxom daughters who always came to his rescue with, "Aw, maw, leave off of daddy! He ain't no worse than any other sea captain is!" Could it be possible that hardly three days ago he had sat at table with these three?

He put a shaking hand to the back of his bewildered head, tilting his cap forward, unconsciously seeking for the usual place he scratched when sorely puzzled. He had opened his mouth to declare his marital status when the soft voice began again.

"Not married, then? You have never loved? Nought but the sea then has claimed your strong brave heart! If—" The voice fluted down almost to a whisper. She made a little nestling motion against his arm—"I could love! I could—"

Was the skipper dreaming? Or was there the soft fleeting pressure of lips on his starboard cheek? Or was it only the suspicion of a kiss? Anyway, there surely was a plump arm about his neck, a little fluttery hug, a sense of jasmine scented hair, a fragrant sigh.

"And now, great boy, I know thou wilt show to me this treasure chest of Lafitte," the doña said with a gurgling little laugh. "It is the only dream of all my life that seems to have come true! Love, why, love is far away! Men of—of the north are so cold!"

The doña was right. The captain would show her the treasure chest. Just then he would have shown her his immortal soul if she had asked to see it and he could have got at it. The skipper turned and, with Doña Serephina still clinging to his arm, which had gone to sleep from the pressure, made his way to the chart room.

He went over to the great built-in sea chest that held the ship's log, freight money and other valuables. Unlocking it,

he put up the heavy lid and with evident effort lifted out the leaden box with moldy earth still adhering to it.

He set it on the chart table and snapped on the desk light.

"Here it is, seenyreeta," he said tremulously, mopping his perspiring face. "I'm glad to show it to you."

Doña Serephina viewed it with greedy eyes. She reached forward and brushed the still damp earth away from the lid. And stooping closer, she read the old quaint Spanish inscription:

LAFITTE—BUCCANEER—HIS CHEST.

Again she seized the captain's arm, this time unconsciously.

"What—what," she stammered, wetting her dry lips with her tongue, "What, my friend, do you think is inside? Jewels! Gold! Old Spanish doubloons! Rubies! Oh, blessed saints, what might not be inside! Let us look! Let us—"

"Cap'n," interrupted a voice behind her, a voice that trembled with fear, yet had a note of the courage of despair in it, "Cap'n, our watch is done up half a hour ago. Can we go below an' wake up the others, sir?"

"Yes, you can—can go to hell as fur as I keer!" snapped the skipper. "Why is it you are always snoopin' around?"

"I ain't snoopin' around! But Big Un an' Slim, they sent me. They want to turn in an'—an' they say it ain't fair for us to stay up all night."

"All right. Go below an' wake the next watch, but don't call the mate. I'll stay up yet awhile."

"And now," resumed the Doña Serephina, after consigning the unconscious Joe to the lowest depths of purgatory, "the box! May we not open it for just a little peep?"

"We can't do that, seenyreeta," said the captain firmly, having, thanks to Joe's timely arrival, almost recovered consciousness. "The agreement was not to open it unless all were present and you can see it's locked and all sealed solid. We'll have to pry it open with a hand spike when we do open it."

And he returned it to the ship's chest and locked the lid.

"We will open it when we reach Puerto Cortez and not before," he said firmly.

"Good! Good!" exclaimed the doña, clapping her hands. She had fumbled her chance, thanks to Joe. But she would not waste energy in regrets.

"And at Puerto Cortez I have a friend, oh, such a friend! He is a jeweler of the best renown. My uncle, he is, in fact. We will go to his home, if that so please you, and there we will open the chest. If jewels be found therein, or gold, my uncle he will tell to us the uttermost value of all that we find. And now, *querido*, the dawn is almost here. I must to bed go! Good night to you!"

And before the captain realized it, he had received a warm kiss on the mouth, a pat on the cheek and she had gone.

"SAY, FELLERS," whispered Joe a few seconds later, tumbling down into the forecastle from his vantage point on deck, "I seen her kiss the Old Man plumb on the mouth! An' he showed her that there pirate's chest! She know'd it was here just like Big Un said she did!"

"What did the Old Man do when she kissed him?" asked Slim, who had a romantic strain.

"He—" began Joe.

"Shucks!" interrupted Big Un, "I know whut he done. What's any man goin' ter do when one of dem witchified womens blows her bref on him? He didn't do nothin'. He just set an' took it, dat's what he done! Now let's go to sleep 'cause Gawd knows what'll happen tomorrow when we gits in. I shorely is glad dat none of dat pirate money is comin' to me. No, Lawd! I ain't lost none of it my own self!"

"Didst thou succeed?" asked Nina softly when her mistress shook her gently to consciousness.

"Did I ever fail?" questioned the doña triumphantly. "I saw the chest. I know its whereabouts. With my own eyes I read the name of Lafitte upon the top of it. But, saints above, it is tiresome work!

I had even to kiss the old pig before he would show the chest to me! Tomorrow we must plan how to possess it for ourselves. I have already a plan, half formed, in my mind. In the morning go thou early to the cook for a cup of coffee for me. I go now to sleep awhile."

IN THE early evening of the next day the *Maggie May*, assisted by the fruit company's tug, made her berth at the fruit wharves of Puerto Cortez, Doña Serephina and Nina, with their luggage, were on the deck ready to go ashore. The captain stood beside them, while the mate, farther forward, superintended making the vessel fast to her wharf and attended to the other details of making port. All was made fast at last and the gangplank in place. The ladies rose to depart.

"Do not forget, my friend! Tomorrow evening at the hour of nine I shall expect you and those who are to share in the division of the treasure, together with the chest of Lafitte, at the house of my uncle, Don Pedro Requiz. And now *adios!*

"But stay! Let him—what you call?—the Large One? He who is black, let him come with me to take my luggage. There will be reward. And then tomorrow at the appointed time he can show the way to the house of my uncle and bring the treasure chest also. He is strong and will not notice the burden."

Doña Serephina, once clear of the wharves, led Big Un through a series of crooked narrow streets, made doubly dark by oleanders and tall palms and only dimly lighted by street lights of ancient make. She came at last to a dark imposing residence, set back from the street and inclosed by a tall old fashioned stone wall. There was a postern gate of nail studded cypress from which hung a small bell rope.

Nina pulled at this vigorously, and far within a bell jangled twice. In a few moments there was a shuffling of feet on flagstones, a sliding window was pulled aside in the gate and an old yellow face, wrinkled as a dried walnut, peered out of rheumy eyes.

"What is it for thee at this hour?" he inquired impersonally, his toothless, shrunken old jaws chewing tremulously. In the dim light of the small porter's lantern that hung over the gate, he looked as grizzly as a goblin. A gargoyle was handsome by comparison.

It was a weird, ghostly looking place in the broad light of day, but in the moonlight doubly so. A giant tropical cypress bent over the wall of the house, casting a dense, dank shade. At each side of the gate, great palms stood like sentinels. The house itself, set far back from the front wall, showed dimly in the moonlight among other great trees, ghastly gray, as if it were some giant's skull grinning in the midst of moldy weeds.

Big Un, standing there staring at the old man who stared at him in turn, felt the goose flesh pimpling his skin and the honest sweat of labor from carrying the luggage turned into the cold sweat of fear. For a few seconds they stood and stared. Then Big Un jumped and almost dropped the luggage when the old man gave a delighted squeal.

"Why, it is none other but my little Nina! Whence cometh thou at this hour?" he gibbered in Spanish. "And thy mistress also, the great—"

"Cease!" the doña commanded fiercely. "Cease, imbecile! Obscene pig! Always dost thou talk too much! Open the gate that I may enter my uncle's house and rest from a sea voyage!"

"Pardon, señorita! Even now I open it," said the old man humbly, his manner changing from idiotic joy to docile servility. And he stood aside for them to pass.

Doña Serephina led the way across an ancient flagstone court where a fountain sparkled, lighted only by the moon and the feeble lantern above the gateway, to a stone portico. Here there was another feeble lamp that illumined the way up a stairway. Then she entered a large room and waited in silence until the old man returned from an inner room with a candle and touched other candles.

The room was ghostly also, with a high

ceiling that was alive with the flickering shadows thrown by the candles. There was a large built-in bed of cypress from which hung heavy yellow silk curtains. And in an alcove was a little shrine before which burned a tiny ruby altar lamp. And against the wall opposite the bed a great library table sprawled on legs hideously carved as grinning dragons. To the right of this was a small room into which Nina followed the old *mozo.*

"NOW THEN!" said Doña Serephina in Spanish, turning with a bright smile to the mystified and fearful Big Un and holding out two Mexican silver dollars. "Dost thou think thou couldst find this place another time?"

"Yes, ma'am, I could find it with my eyes shut," he replied in the same language, or rather the Texas version of it.

"Good!" she exclaimed. "Tomorrow then in the evening you will bring here El Capitán and thy friends and the treasure chest so that it may be divided equally as was agreed. And there will be at that time other *lagnappe*—a tip—for thee. Five pesos it shall be at that time, for I shall look to thee and thee only to fetch the treasure chest."

Big Un swallowed hard with a nervous gulp. He turned his sea cap about in his hands. He shuffled his big feet nervously.

"Yes'm, I'd like to oblige you," he said, unconsciously reverting to English in his nervous embarrassment, "but, lady, I ain't noways took up wid dat old pirate's chest. No, ma'am, I ain't! I has done heard enough 'bout dead men's money an' sich things. Dem chests an' money boxes is all hanted an' has all sorts of spells put on 'em. Dey is conjured, if you gits what I means. An' while I likes to oblige a lady," he went on pleadingly, "more specially one what's done give me a set of dice dat does everything but talk; I is just nach'ally too skeered to put my hands on dat chest, an' dat's de truf!"

Doña Serephina had listened carefully to what Big Un had said. She did not understand all of it, but she got the general drift. And to what she understood, she added her knowledge of the negro race. She knew quite well that an artillery barrage, going over the top or cleaning out a machine gun nest would be child's play in Big Un's opinion when compared with his superstitious awe of the pirate's treasure chest. And she rejoiced in the instrument she had intuitively selected as the best of the *Maggie May's* crew for her purpose.

Big Un had turned to go, but with his feet tangling up in the soft rugs on the tiled floor he was making slow progress toward the stairs.

"Stay but one moment!" the doña called. She went to her luggage, unlocked the small leather trunk and took from it a small chamois bag. She thrust her hand in the bag and drew out what appeared to be a small bill fold. She walked over to Big Un, unfolded the little case and held it up before his eyes.

"Look!" she commanded.

Big Un looked, and if his hair had not been kinky it would have stood on end. Before his eyes was the supreme fetish, the champion hoodoo of the Southern negro—always denied and laughed at in the presence of an alien race, but feared and coveted by all. On a background of red flannel was a dried, mummified bat with outstretched wings. Under each wing was a silver dime. At the very foot a tiny horseshoe magnet.

"Thou knowest," she said, "the bat, he is killed at night in a graveyard. The dimes must be from a dead man's eyes; the magnet it must be stolen, never bought. And all must be sewed on and made fast by a woman who is thrice a widow. And it must be a gift to bring real power and good luck. This, together with the magic dice of San Fernandez, will make thee all conquering, invincible! The dice with men; the lodestone in the magnet with women! And all of the whole will keep thee from harm! And this is thine, a gift, if thou wilt but bring the treasure chest. Will you promise?"

"Yes'm," said Big Un, viewing the

fetish with greedy eyes and putting out a trembling finger to touch it longingly. "Yes'm, I'll shorely bring it efen I lives!"

And he fled stumblingly down the stairs through the courtyard and out the gate, with which he fumbled in a panic for a moment before it would open. He increased his speed into a run until he was free of the tree shadowed streets and on the wharf, with the friendly outline of the *Maggie May* to revive his courage.

LATE the next afternoon Captain Daugherty came out on deck and went aft to where the mate was superintending the storing of the last of the return cargo and having the stern hatches fastened down. The captain was dressed in his shore clothes and was evidently surprised that the mate had not made a like preparation.

"Ain't you goin' with us, Jim, to see the treasure box opened? And that reminds me—where is Big Un? He promised to carry the chest."

"Big Un's down below now sprucin' up to go ashore with you," answered the mate. "I ain't comin' myself. Thought I'd better stay and git everything ready to slip out of here with the mornin' tide. If there is anything left after them women git through with you, you can bring me my share."

"I am sorry you won't come along," said the captain in a relieved tone, "but, after all, it ain't right fer both of us to be away from the ship at once."

"That's what I thought," the mate answered gloomily, eyeing a *tamale* peddler on the wharf. "An' you mustn't get all het up if I warn you agin them women. Watch 'em! That's all I've got to say. Watch 'em!"

The captain had just drawn a long breath and opened his mouth to make a suitable, scathing reply, when the appearance of the treasure seekers, headed by the cook, put an end to hostilities. The countenances of all of them, except Big Un, wore a holiday look. On Big Un's broad expressive face was the anxious yet resigned cast of one being led to the stake.

Joe had washed his face well. He had shined his shoes and his red hair was combed and neatly plastered down with neat's-foot oil, borrowed from the cook.

Slim the Portygee had accentuated his long, lank shape by draping it in a coat of clerical cut and length, topping it off with a cap borrowed from McComb, the engineer.

The cook had added an extra effect to his usual shore clothes by wearing a flowing tie of variegated colors and a brown derby hat belonging to an A.B. of questionable reputation, who had deserted the last trip down.

The captain looked them over with a belligerent eye, and opened his mouth to express his opinion of their toilets, but realizing the uselessness of words, held his peace. He merely gave thanks inwardly that Puerto Cortez was not his home port and that he was not known in the town.

"Come on, Big Un, and I will show you where the chest is," said the captain, leading the way to the chart room.

Big Un followed reluctantly, and when the chest was placed on the table evinced almost as much enthusiastic desire to take hold of it as a hound dog shows for tackling a bobcat.

"Well, are you ready?" asked the captain after an awkward pause.

"Yes, suh, I'se ready," answered Big Un desperately. "Ain't we gwine to wrap this here thing up?"

"Why, yes. Wrap it up in that piece of sailcloth over there in the corner. And come on, let's go. It's dark already."

"Can't go too soon to suit me," grunted Big Un as he lifted the box up on his shoulder.

Followed closely by the captain and the rest of the treasure party, Big Un threaded his way through the narrow streets in silence. To the passersby they presented all the earmarks of a lower class funeral, and many removed their hats reverently as they passed, or crossed themselves.

FINALLY the house at the head of the street of oleanders was reached and Big Un, placing the chest on the stone bench outside, jangled the bell twice as he had seen Nina do. The peephole in the door slid open and the same yellow, wrinkled, vulture-like face peered out.

"Open!" said Big Un, with the most menacing tone he could throw into his Texas Spanish. "Open, son of a hog!"

Instead of the flow of invective that usually promptly follows such salutation, the shriveled blue lips curled in a grin that was toothless except for one loathsome fang.

"I open, kind Black One, for my mistress awaits thee." The gate grated on its rusty hinges and was locked behind them.

No sooner were they inside than Nina, with a shriek of delight, rushed with extended arms from the stone portico, enveloped the unresisting captain in a hearty hug and kissed him on both cheeks. The cook, being directly behind the captain, showed signs of uneasiness, but was relieved when Nina, not pursuing the subject further, took the captain's hand and led him to the table on the portico where chocolate, cake and sweetmeats were served.

"My mistress, I—I mean my sister will be down presently," said Nina in Spanish which Slim translated for the captain. "Be pleased to seat yourselves and partake of the chocolate and cake.

"The chest—" and she glanced at Big Un, who brought up the rear—"is to be taken upstairs in the room that is set apart for the division. We have only to wait for our uncle the jeweler to come from the town and all will be prepared."

"Don't you let that there chest out of your sight, Big Un! You can eat after I get up stairs," warned the captain.

"Yes, suh, I hears!" grunted Big Un. "But don't make it too long 'fore you comes. As fer eatin' I don't want none. All I wants is to git out of here safe an' sound. Dis here house gives me de creeps," he muttered as he climbed the stairs in the wake of the old gatekeeper.

"Oh, but let him return back down to eat!" urged Nina hospitably after Slim had translated what had been said. "The treasure box can not come to harm."

But the captain was firm that Big Un should remain, and there was an awkward pause in the conversation. Then there was a clicking of high heeled shoes on the stairs and Doña Serephina descended upon them, arrayed like a yellow bird of paradise. And again the captain was kissed, while Joe, Slim and the cook looked on, astounded.

"And here are all my dear friends!" exclaimed the doña after the skipper had disentangled himself from the yellow arm laces of his hostess. "And the treasure chest and the big black man, where are they?"

"They went upstairs, ma'am, with your *mozo*," said the captain, beaming on the doña. "Big Un said you wanted him to take it up there."

"To be sure! Please to excuse while I see to it! And with a flash of yellow silk stockings she fled up the stairs.

IN THE meantime Big Un had sat grimly down in the dimly lighted room with the treasure chest on the table across the room. He hoped the captain would not be long; this place got on his nerves, and only the hope of gaining the lodestone fetish as a reward would have induced him to remain.

There was but one candle—a huge, awkwardly home made one—in the room and its flickering light served only to intensify the dark, shadowy corners of the great room. The little ruby altar lamp gave out a faint reddish glow and the voluminous bed curtains might conceal almost a regiment of departed spirits. And there opposite on the table was a dead pirate's treasure chest, admitted by all authorities to be the greatest ghost gatherer and goblin generator in the world!

Big Un shifted his feet uneasily and looked fearfully about him.

Doña Serephina reached the head of

the stairs, peeped in the big room and saw Big Un guarding the treasure chest. Then she tiptoed quickly by the open door, along the passageway into the anteroom beyond.

Here were seated three Spaniards, while another, who was peering through a small slit in the heavy curtain at Big Un, turned an evil, crafty face to meet Doña Serephina as she entered.

"Is all prepared?" she whispered breathlessly. "Juan—" motioning to him of the evil face—"have you the phosphorus salve to rub on your hands? And your voice, can you throw it as of old?"

Juan Felipe Solis, sometime champion ventriloquist of the Marionette Shows Inc. of Mexico, nodded and held up his diamond shaped piece of tin with which he produced his vocal marvels.

"Good!" she whispered.

"And you, Silas? Is the scaling ladder placed without?"

One of the three at the table looked up and nodded.

"Good!" she said again. "And now work fast, my friends! I can not hold these gringos for long. Rub the phosphorus salve on your hands and arms quick, Juan, and get behind the curtains of the bed. Swift now! Swift! All that is needed is to frighten this black one with ghosts, and when he flees, seize the chest and make your way through the window here and away to the place appointed. The window—is the bar loosened, Silas?"

"It is not loosened," replied the one addressed as Silas. "But it is just the work of a moment. I—"

"Malediction!" she hissed. "Imbeciles! Must all the work be left to two women? Loosen it at once! Hasten now each of you to work as arranged. I go below. Work swiftly!"

THE MERRY voices from below, the captain's hearty laugh and Doña Serephina's silvery rejoinder had almost lulled Big Un into a fancied security. He was looking about him for the twentieth time, peering at every flickering shadow, when a hollow bubbling groan from the vicinity of the treasure chest froze the blood in his veins and clutched his heart in an icy terror.

Had he really heard anything? He was not long left in doubt. In thin weak, gibbering Spanish, seemingly issuing from the chest, came the words:

"Master, Master! They took me from my resting place in the ground! And the dead man thou didst leave to guard me, where is he? Master! Master! I can not rest!"

Big Un afterward asserted that only an exceptionally strong and vigorous constitution saved him from instant dissolution. The muscles of his neck jerked his head back spasmodically; the sweat poured off a face that would have been livid if it had not been black. His tongue refused to function. His teeth chattered. His eyes rolled. And his whole huge frame slumped in his chair as if a dead man sat there. This, for a moment, was Big Un.

Then two phosphorescent hands came, apparently from out of the nowhere, waved about in the air, and a voice said in Spanish as before:

"Cease! Do not moan! I will carry thee out to sea! I will cast thee in the midst thereof, so that the blood money inside thee can no more be used! And he that watches—lo! in three days shall he die and the sharks shall eat him!" And the glowing, luminous hands seized the chest.

That broke the spell. Big Un, filling his great lungs, let out a yell that would have put to shame a Zulu warrior of the first class.

"Cap'n! Please, suh, Cap'n! Come quick! De hants has done got me an' de money chest, too!"

Big Un did not wait for the results of his SOS. With a mighty, fear frenzied leap he cleared the door and was on the stairs. Down the stairs he stumbled, tangled his feet in his haste and completed the descent in a nose dive, striking Slim's chair, colliding with the table and up-

setting all on the floor with a clash of broken china.

"What in the hell do you mean?" stuttered the captain, as Big Un and Slim gathered themselves together and scrambled up, while Joe and the cook picked up the table and tried to repair the damage by collecting the broken pieces of the wrecked chocolate set.

The sweat was pouring down Big Un's face. He swallowed spasmodically, striving in vain for speech.

"Well, spit it out!" thundered the captain. "What is wrong with you? What do you mean by yellin' here in a private house like—like—a fog horn that has lost his mother? An' fallin' down stairs an' upsettin' furniture an' breakin' dishes!" The captain looked ruefully at the wreck that Doña Serephina was helping Joe and the cook to pick up.

"I will above go, El Capitán, and see what is wrong," said the doña, smiling sweetly. "Perhaps the poor man was frightened when left alone."

"Frightened!" exclaimed the mystified captain testily. "Why, the durned idjit is skeered plumb speechless! What's the matter with you, Big Un? Why in the hell don't you talk?"

"Cap'n, suh," Big Un finally managed to stutter, "you better go see 'bout dat treasure chest— I'se tellin' you plain! I misdoubts dat treasure box bein' dere! You better go see! I'se done wid dat box for always my ownself! But you better go see!

"Lissen, Cap'n!" The words were tumbling over themselves now. "It's de dyin' truf! I set dere in dat cheer, I did, an' den first thing I knows I hears groans! Yes, suh! I hears groans just like a man dyin'! An' den somethin' inside dat chest, he say, 'What is dey gwine to do wid me?' An', Cap'n, dat hant talked in Spanish just like you said dat ole pirate used to talk!

"An' den, Cap'n, I set right dere an' seen what I is tellin' you—I seen two shiny hands dat was lit up just like lightnin' bugs when dey shines! An' dem hands come right plumb smack out of de air! Floatin'! Yes, suh, dey did! An' dey waved theirselves around! An' den another voice what come from close up to the ceilin', it says, 'Don't you worry none, honey, 'cause dis time I'se gwine to throw you in de deep sea—where—where—de wicked cease frum troublin' an' de weary is at rest!' Yes, suh, dem very words!

"An' den de voice say, 'Nigger, you is a brave man! I kin see dat 'cause you done stayed here longer den most folks could, but efen you tries to follow me an' dis here chest, you had better repair to meet thy God!'

"An'—an'—I jumped up an' tried to grab dat box anyhow out of his hand. Yes, suh, I done dat! I was skeered, of course, but I wasn't plumb skeered! An'—an'—den de whole thing busted up in a big blue light an' somethin' dat felt cold an' hot, bofe at once, shoved me away, turned me eround an' pushed me plumb down de stairs. An' dat's all!

"You go look, Cap'n! But it 'tain't no use! Dem hants has done took dat treasure chest an' lit out wid it! I tole you plain when you dug it up outen de ground dat it belonged to de hants. An' now dey is got it an' gone!"

"Bosh! Are you gone plumb nutty, Big Un? I'd say you was drunk if I didn't know you hadn't had a chance to git a drink! Do you expect me to swallow all that talk? You was just settin' up there an' got lonesome an' skeered! That's all! Of course I'll go see an' I'll bet you I find that there chest right where you first put it, not moved an inch. Come on, cook, you an' Joe an' Slim; we'll go an' see."

"Pardon me, El Capitán," said Doña Serephina who had stood at the foot of the stairs during Big Un's dramatic recital, "you shall come up and find the treasure chest, no doubt, where your *mozo* placed it on the table in my boudoir. But first you should compel him to explain why he has performed in such a wild, uncouth manner, yelling as if the Seven Devils of Seville have seized him, falling also down the stairs, upsetting the furniture and breaking the dishes.

For why does he do this? There should be excellent apology!"

Doña Serephina was playing for time and she did it well. Noticing swiftly the look of indecision on the skipper's face, she stamped her foot in well simulated rage.

"Why should this big baby of a man, this great black pig, be allowed my furniture to break, servants to alarm by his great shouts? Because the evening wind from the sea blows a curtain and frightens him! Poof! Just a baby is this great black man of yours, El Capitán!"

"Cap'n," said Big Un earnestly, "don't you pay that lady no mind, please, suh! You go on up dem stairs an' see efen dat box ain't done gone! I hates fer you an' dese here boys to lose dat money even if hit is dead men's money dat don't bring no luck wid it!

"Yes, suh, I 'poligizes! I 'poligizes fer knockin' de table over an' breakin' de dishes an' bustin' inter Slim. Hit ain't no disgrace ter run when you is skeered an' dat's what I done, but I didn't mean to break no dishes! So now you just go right on up an' see 'bout dat treasure chest!"

THE CAPTAIN moved toward the stairs with the cook, Slim and Joe in the rear. And Doña Serephina tried a new tack. She stepped off the bottom stair and, tucking her arm into that of the captain's, she turned him gently about.

"Pardon, dear friend," she cooed with a ravishing smile, "but for a little moment I was angry at the havoc wrought by the great black man in the house of my uncle. My uncle he is so easy to anger and so very terrible! I am devastated that I should so much rudeness display! Sit down and I will order yet more refreshment and especially there will be sweetmeats for this Big One to whom I would make amends." And she clapped her hands to summon the *mozo*.

So anxious was she to please and divert the captain's mind she didn't notice that Joe, unperceived by any one, turned and crept softly and quickly up the stairs.

Reaching the landing, he tiptoed into the room facing the stairway, as the door was open. He looked cautiously about in the dim light furnished by the one candle. He clutched at his hip pocket when he heard voices in the anteroom beyond concealed by the curtains and brought out a small revolver of the type known as Bull Dog. With this more or less deadly weapon held in a trembling hand, Joe advanced. He was aided by the heavy rugs strewn on the stone floor. He reached the curtains without making any appreciable noise.

Joe peered through the midway slit in the heavy curtains, and the only reason his fiery red hair did not stand on end was due to the superior qualities of the neat's-foot oil that held it down. Gathered at the window and working furiously at the heavy iron bars were three Spaniards. One picked and hacked at the woodwork of the window with a villainous looking dagger, while the other two pulled and strained and jerked at the bars. While they worked feverishly and vainly at the bars, Nina held a candle aloft that they might see, and at the same time upbraided them in Spanish.

"Hasten, obscene carrion! Otherwise the American pig will be at our heels and all will be in vain! This bar should have been removed this morning at your leisure while you waited. But, no, lazy devils that you are! One said, 'The treasure chest can be lifted through without removing the bars!' Another, 'There is plenty of time!' And a third, 'Let us wait until the evening!' And now! Oh, that I might scar your backs with whips until the blood ran!"

Joe looked closely. Beside them on the floor was the treasure chest. Outside, against the window, a ladder leaned, its outline clearly seen in the moonlight. These men were preparing a get-away with the treasure chest! It would be too late to go back for the captain; the window bar had already become loosened at the bottom, and before he could make the captain understand, they would be gone.

And Joe shuddered to think what would happen if he called for help.

With a final wrench, one of the iron bars gave way, one of the men squirmed through the opening and felt about with his feet for the ladder. Another turned about to seize the chest.

Joe drew a deep breath and, raising the wobbling Bull Dog, took hurried aim and fired at the group in the window. There was a sound of splintering glass, a shriek from Nina, a yell from the men. But Joe continued to fire. He fired three times.

Then, with his trusty Bull Dog in his trembling hand, he leaped into the smoke filled room. Nina had fallen in a faint, taking the candle with her, so he had only the moonlight from the window to guide him. Joe reached the treasure chest, seized it and turned to run. He noticed briefly that the man on the ladder outside had disappeared and that Nina had fallen across another; the third he did not see. The belief that he had killed or wounded at least two fellow creatures lent terror to his feet and he was instantly on the stairs.

Plunging down, treasure chest in hand, like a red headed comet on its last lap towards the sun, Joe met the captain and the crew coming up. For the second time that evening the stairway was treated to a human avalanche. Down they rolled, a cursing, tangled heap and once more the chocolate table and its contents went down.

BEFORE Doña Serephina could speak to the gaping *mozos* who viewed the proceedings from the kitchen doorway, a yellow form catapulted down the stairs, sprang over the wriggling forms on the floor, seized the chest and sprang away toward the open court and the gate beyond.

Joe had not spent all of his young life on the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to his nautical attainments he was one of the juvenile football champions of the Galveston waterfront. Seeing the fleeing Spaniard, he quickly disentangled himself, rose swiftly and tackled from the rear. The Spaniard came heavily down and the treasure chest rolled with a splash in the shallow water of the fountain.

There was a flash of yellow silken clad legs, a dainty swear word in Spanish and Doña Serephina had rushed forward, stooped, fished out the heavy lead box and was away toward the gate, calling for the fallen Juan to follow. And climbing nimbly down from the balcony above and leaping lightly to the ground, came the third Spaniard and ran after the doña.

The man Juan, whom Joe had tackled and thrown, leaped to his feet, drew a small dirk from his belt and lurched viciously at Joe, who had also regained his feet. But Big Un, whose only fear was of the supernatural, anticipated him. He seized the Spaniard about the middle and with a quick grunting heave threw him into the fountain.

The captain got up from the stone floor of the portico just in time to see Doña Serephina, the old gate keeper and the third Spaniard, together with the treasure chest, make their get-away through the gate to be followed a second later by the dripping fugitive from the fountain who slammed the gate after him.

"They are gone!" said Slim ruefully. rubbing his bruised shins.

"Yep, I seen 'em!" snuffled the cook tenderly feeling his bleeding and swollen nose.

"An' I done everything I could to stop 'em!" blubbered Joe hysterically. "I shot at 'em an' thought I had killed 'em, all but seems like I never hit none of 'em but that woman. An'—an' I tried to git that there chest back down here an'—an'—I be durned if they didn't git it after all!"

"Never mind, Joe," soothed Big Un, "you done better'n I did 'cause them hants or whatever it was, they skeered me stiff."

There was an awkward pause and they all looked furtively at the captain. He walked out in the moonlight and looked

toward the gate. Should he follow the fleeing thieves? A dangerous business in a strange town in the middle of the night. The captain scratched his head and looked blankly about him. He noted the expectant look on the faces of his crew and searched his soul in vain for something to say. The English language or that part of it ordinarily used by the coastwise trade had failed him.

"Let's go through the house," he said finally, "an' see if Joe did hurt anybody."

This was done but no one, injured or otherwise, was to be found. All had fled by ways unknown.

SO THEY came once more into the courtyard which the moon, now risen high above the palms and oleanders, made almost as light as day. All was still. From far off somewhere in the town a dog barked. There was nothing left for them to do but to return to the *Maggie May*, rich in experience but minus the treasure. But still the captain hesitated. He dreaded to return to the ship to face the ribald sarcasm of the mate. This experience would be cabin and forecastle talk for many a long day! If a hurried but unbiased inventory of his spiritual condition had not bade him pause, death would have been preferable.

As the skipper hesitated, struggling with his thoughts, there came a fumbling at the gate, followed by a rasping sound as some one from without strove to open it. Due to the fact that the gate had been violently slammed by the last man who fled and had become jammed, the skipper and his crew were enabled to dodge in among the thick oleanders and hide before the gate opened to the returning doña and her three allies.

"Go thou in advance, Jose," directed the doña, "and see if the gringos be really departed."

"Do I not know?" grumbled the hero of the fountain. "Did not I pursue the black one with a knife until I tired of the sport and returned to seek you and the others?"

Here Big Un stirred uneasily and muttered to himself in wrath, until the skipper swore at him softly under his breath. They peeped out cautiously from the oleander leaves and saw the old gate keeper bringing up the rear with the treasure chest on his shoulder, after Jose had motioned to them that all was safe. He set the chest on the table, directly under the lantern that hung from the roof of the portico and, directed by the doña, went in search of tools with which to open it.

"Nina!" called Doña Serephina. "Pedro! Alvarez!"

There was no answer.

"Those imbeciles! Where are they?" she exclaimed petulantly.

"Perhaps Nina has fled with the *mozos* to the house of her cousin near the mission of San Felipe," suggested Jose.

"Let us hasten then to open the chest and see what is within. Didst thou not say my uncle returns from the mountains at dawn? If he returns and sees this, the greedy pig will also demand his share! Hasten! The tools, where are they?"

"Here, mistress," replied the old gate keeper, and they set to work.

"Boys," whispered the captain under the oleanders, "when they git it open, we'll rush 'em, see? An' take it all fer ourselves. They shan't have a durn bit of it, the dirty thieves! When I say the word, follow me!" And they nodded to each other, crouched expectant among the thick leaves.

THE THREE MEN worked with a feverish energy foreign to their racial habits, until at last with a grunt of satisfaction Jose loosened the hasps and pried open the lid. Six eager yellow hands reached within and lifted out a smaller box of cedar wood.

Impatiently Doña Serephina snatched it from them and wrenched at the lid. It came open in her eager hands and there fell out on the table a small bundle of rotten cloth. She tore it apart to find within a collection of small bones and a little skull that seemed to grin up at

her derisively with its tiny fleshless jaws.

She drew a deep, sighing breath and turned the box over wonderingly, while Jose and the others looked on with open mouths. So absorbed were they, they did not see the crew of the *Maggie May* who, absorbed also, had unconsciously crept forth from the shelter of the oleanders.

Turning the cedar box in her hand, Doña Serephina noted an inscription on the lid. Holding it nearer to the lantern, she read aloud the Spanish inscription, rudely burned on the lid with a heated wire or a dagger point:

"El Capitán—Beloved Monkey of Lafitte, Buccaneer.
Rest in Peace. He ate the poisoned cake Wong Loo had intended for me.
For El Capitán, honorable burial.
For Wong Loo, a shark's maw.

—LAFITTE

"What!" she gasped when she had finished reading. "Holy Mother! What is this? Have we only bones, a monkey's bones?"

She sank into a chair and looked at the others blankly. Then she snatched at the larger leaden casket, turned it upside down, shook it, knocked on the bottom, looked inside. She did the same to the smaller, and then searched carefully among the bones and the sail cloth that had held them.

There was nothing!

And then, holding her hands to her sides and throwing back her head, she laughed, laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks, laughed until the laughter became a hysterical orgy of mirth.

The three men looked on in helpless wonder, and out near the oleanders Slim, in a hoarse whisper, explained to the captain what had occurred.

"Ha-ha! The alcalde!" Doña Serephina gasped. "That pompous fat pig! What a misfortune to him! And the five hundred pesos in gold that he has spent! Ha-ha-ha! And all for the bones of a little monkey!

"And—and I!" she shrieked. "How I labored! I even kissed the impossible gringo who has the little ship! Ha-ha-ha! He was easy! My part was easy; for all men are fools! And this hairy ape the greatest of all!

"But the alcalde! For years he has patiently gathered this gold! By befooling foolish gringos who are hunting, always hunting for souvenirs and treasures. And then—ha-ha-ha! To lose it through a gringo at last! Ha-ha-ha! The alcalde will die of an apoplexy! He—"

"Haw-haw-haw!" roared the captain, breaking from the restraining arms of Slim and the cook. "Haw-haw-haw! Stung, ain't ye? Sold out! Double crossed! Beat at your own game! I hope an' trust," he added, "that you understand some of them words. Haw-haw-haw!"

And in single file the crew of the *Maggie May*, headed by the captain, walked past the astounded doña and her friends, unmolested out of the gate.

"All the same, señorita," Big Un called out, sticking his head in the peep hole after he had closed the gate, "all the same, I thanks yer fer them magic dice of San Fernandez. They sure is the hot dogs!"

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

The Not-So-Terrible Horn

EXPERIENCES with "the world's worst corner" certainly differed. Some were tragic enough; but here speaks a comrade who rounded it six times—and thought it somewhat over-rated.

I am writing you a few lines *in re* Cape Horn which may interest you personally, even if you do not find room for them in Camp-Fire, and which may start an argument with Comrade Bill Adams if you do print them.

My father was a Swede who went to sea for fifty-seven years mostly in American wooden sailing ships and was for thirty-five years master of a vessel.

He was mainly in the China and Honolulu trades and went around the Horn probably some fifty times, the first time cabin boy in a Danish brig bound from Montevideo to Valparaiso in 1848.

While a boy I went around the Horn six times with him, the last three times I remember very well; the last time especially as I was then sixteen and used to take observations every day and work up the day's work to see how near he and I could check.

I personally always thought the Horn was no worse than Cape Good Hope, as we never had any serious trouble in getting around.

The last time around the Horn going to the westward in 1888 in a 900 ton wooden bark Boston to Honolulu with general cargo we were forced down to 60 degrees South before we made enough westing but we had no men sick, lost no sails and had no damage.

I asked my father a few months before he died last year why he thought so many people had trouble off the Horn when he never had had, and he said most of them, especially the English, were afraid to carry sail, and that they paid too much attention to the barometer; as a low barometer off the Horn did not mean much.

The winds off the Horn are usually a series of cyclones coming up from the Antarctic, starting from a flat calm with an oily swell from the south or southwest; the wind will begin with light airs from the east, hauling to the north and breezing up and gradually working to the westward. Carry all the sail she will stand and keep her full and by until it blows a gale until you can make no headway, and you are down to fore and main lower topsails fore top mast staysail and main spencer; then when the

wind hauls to west, wear her around, and as soon as it hauls to southwest and moderates a little, put the sail to her as fast as she will stand it and drive her until the wind dies out and it falls calm again; then roll around a day or two and the same thing over again.

Sometimes you would be hove to a couple of days on the starboard tack before the wind hauled far enough south to make it safe to wear her around.

The English ships were iron, generally longer than the American ships of the same tonnage, not so well kept up, or conveniently rigged, and unless they had a Nova Scotia captain not driven as hard.

The whole secret of getting to the westward was to drive the ship as hard and as long as possible while the wind was east of NNW or south of WSW.

The worst weather I was ever in was off Valparaiso while bound from San Francisco to Liverpool in 1881. We were hove down for twenty-four hours. cargo shifted, spars, etc., adrift on deck and a rough time was had by all.

—Charles H. Johnson, Sarasota, Florida

"Song Of The Sooner"

THOUGH this amusing and riotous poem was published previously in "Harlow's Weekly"—a magazine of almost purely local circulation—the Literary Editor, Zoe A. Tilghman, asked *Adventure* to give the verses a broader audience. Though as a rule I do not care to reprint anything, I just could not resist this. And isn't the "rough, tough and wanton wild" infant portrayed in the drawings by De Maris worth a smile?

Heroism

COMRADE TRUE adds an important incident to Captain H. M. Hartman's saga of the Great Samoan Hurricane.

One touch of heroism Captain Hartman failed to include in his vivid account of the giant storm at Apia. Naturally he could not then have heard it, for reasons good.

But I believe it is now a classic of the sea that when the British *Calliope* came plunging past the American man-of-war in its final desperate strive to bore its way to safety in the open ocean right through the mountainous seas as they came thundering in, the men on that doomed, disabled Yankee warship matched the roar of that hurricane with a hurricane of hearty cheers!

That is a note that always should be clanged like a clarion whenever the story of that storm is told.

—John Preston True, Waban, Mass.

BUT THEN Captain Hartman tells a little more. Possibly it may be construed as patriotic propaganda—yet a little of this never did a man's soul any harm.

Editor Rud of *Adventure* forwarded your letter of the 8th inst., in which you draw his attention to an important episode that occurred during the Great Samoan Hurricane and which I failed to mention in my "Island of Terror" which was published in this month's issue.

It is quite true that the crew of the U. S. Flagship *Trenton* led by the admiral, cheered the *H. M. S. Calliope* as she reared and plunged past on her way seaward to safety. It may interest you to know that the ship's band also played "God Save The Queen", and the *Calliope's* band returned the cheers, and their band played the "Star Spangled Banner" until the British vessel was almost through the fissure of the barrier reef; but none of this could be heard from shore.

It may be of further interest to you to know that Captain Nean of the British warship, when she returned after the hurricane, made a speech to the assembled shipwrecked crews of the American vessels, and paid one of the finest tributes that I have ever heard to their valor and discipline.

"By God, it was splendid to see you lads standing at your posts on the deck of a vessel that was doomed without a chance of escape! Your cheers shall live forever in the memory of those who were privileged to hear them, and it was a proud day for us when we witnessed the heroism of our blood brothers of the sea."

I failed to add the above because I felt that it would savor too much of patriotic propaganda.

—Capt. H. M. Hartman.

What A Trip!

I MAY say gladly that a number of James Stevens' tales are carded for issues soon to appear. And he and Dick Wetjen ought to have enough colorful material now to last them a couple of lifetimes.

Volstead, we are home, gin-soaked and tanned, salty of eye and with a new speech hectic with Argentine and Brazilian oaths. Today I go down to the city hall, register as a Democrat, and prepare to vote for Al. I'm also having some new rings put in the old Buick, I open a letter from Hardy in which he says that you have bought "The Grip of Life" and that Collier's hooked a father-and-son story called "The Hellion." I prefer the former yarn myself, but what does a writer know? Anyhow I'm crashing back into the old rut. Thanks mainly to Dick Wetjen, I'm now able to boss my stories along in fair style. I've a dozen plots ahead, and

you'll probably get your pick. I'm going to do shorts until the first of October. Then I'll have a three-months' book job, as Knopf's want me to make a kid's book out of "Paul Bunyan". That old boy keeps plugging along at twelve hundred copies a year, the sixth edition being printed in March. Not so bad for a three-year-old.

I judge by the magazine that you have *Adventure* solidly established again. I surely hope so. I'm glad to see you running some of Frank Pierce's best. He has a good style and a rich background of material. And he is a hell of a good scout.

The voyage was a great success in every respect. Wetjen and I were the only passengers on the outward voyage of thirty-four days from San Francisco to Buenos Aires. Sweet weather all the way, except for the always-present heavy seas and thick weather off the western entrance to Magellan's Straits. The Trades blew for us all through the Pacific tropics. We loafed along through the drowsy days, doing just enough work to keep from stagnating. In the evenings we had grand yarning sprees with the captain and the mate The former proved to be a superb character. Olaus Bellesen was the name of this ruddy-faced, white-haired, profane, roaring giant. His age I never learned. But he always started his old-timer stories in this style: "Seventy-five years ago, when I was a boy—"

He was born on an Easter Sunday, he said, and on Easter Sunday he celebrates his birthday, whatever the date. He went to sea out of a Norwegian port when he was fourteen. When he was nineteen he shipped on a square-rigger that was bound around the Horn for California and at the end of the outward voyage in San Francisco, he ran away. He got on a coasting schooner then. Having been starved all through his experiences on British and Scandinavian sailing ships, this coaster was paradise. "Grub! The pantry table was always loaded with all kinds. I would stand and look at it by the hour when I was off watch, and I'd remember the days of Liverpool pancakes and three quarts of water a day, and I'd laugh. How I'd laugh!" Captain Bellesen sailed for four years with Ralph Peasley, the original of the "Matt" in Kyne's Cappy Ricks stories, and taught that hero all the sailing he knew.

The captain himself is good for a complete book, and how I'll get the entire voyage into just one I can't imagine. What experiences! The grandeur of the Straits, in both their scenic and historical aspects. The voyage up the Plate, the entry to the harbor of Buenos Aires, the spires and domes of the beautiful capital, glowing in a soft morning haze, the passage, under the guidance of a tug, up the South channel, past the Boca, once as notorious as the Barbary Coast, the sight of a wide waterfront street jammed with horses and drays, the sidewalks alive with sailors and longshoremen, life teeming on up such avenues as Almirante Brown toward the renowned Avenida del Mayo. So much could be told of just all that, and so much more of our eight days in B. A. and the towns around.

Then there were our ten days in a river town three hundred miles up the Paraña, and out two weeks in Rosario, twenty miles on. Adventure, romance, color all the way. Our ship had not yet got out of the Plate on heading upriver from B. A. when a gale from the sea drove five feet of water from under our bottom, and we were stuck in the mud for eighteen hours; then a Pampero roared down from the Andes, rolled the five back in half an hour—it blew spray over the top of a deckhouse thirty feet from the surface—and we floated and steamed on. In the river town of Villa Constitucion we saw the life of the Argentine as the *peones* of the land lived it, and we picked up a thousand stories from the Englishmen who manage the deposits of the Central Argentine Railway there. At Rosario we found a city of four hundred thousand growing and striving as Chicago once grew and strove. A packing center, a railway head and a grain port, Rosario is the Chicago of the Argentine.

The remoter provinces called us, the lands where the *gauchos* survive—Chaco, Tucuman—but we were not sightseeing and we hadn't the time for exploration. So we stuck to the ship as she plowed back down the muddy waters of the great Paraña to Montevideo. There we loaded corned beef and hides, and steamed out into the Atlantic again, headed for Santos, Brazil, famous now as a coffee port, and notorious in other years as the rottenest fever hole in the world. But the yellow jack and malaria have been completely subjugated there, as they have in Bahia and Para. A Brazilian scientist led the way to this beneficent victory. And the name of Cruz is venerated by even the humblest Brazilian, as the name of Pasteur is venerated in France.

We were five sweaty days at Santos, just about long enough to begin to appreciate the beauty of Brazilian gals and the glory of the drink called gin tonica. With thirty thousand bags of coffee in the holds of the *West Mahwah*, we headed out for Bahia. That port had been suffering from an outbreak of the bubonic plague, and we didn't wonder at that after getting a few overpowering whiffs from the waterfront streets. But the port was bursting with stories, so we forgot our noses in the use of our eyes and ears. Cocoa beans made up most of the cargo loaded at Bahia.

Para is two hundred miles inland, on the southern route up the Amazon. The jungles surround it; but the weather was cool during our three days there, the streets were clean, and the people appeared to be generally prosperous. Many tall stories were being circulated about Ford's rubber-growing enterprise there. We were told that he had acquired twenty million acres of jungle. Perhaps he has. In the vastness of Brazil that's not such a great spot. The wild rubber business down there has succumbed to the British plantations in Java and other parts. But it's a natural rubber country and great fortunes will some day flow out of it.

In Para our ship acquired an original character, something of a Trader Horn, one Victor Vincent, forty-five, and for twenty-five years a diamond

prospector. He'd sailed a voyage on the *West Mahwah* the year before and deserted in Montevideo when he had a grubstake. He hoboed through the Argentine to Bolivia, ran rum across the border for awhile, then struck out into the jungles, looking for a river of diamonds which he had found, so he said, a dozen years ago. The savages had driven him off, had nearly finished him with the poisoned darts they squirt from blowpipes, and he had never again been able to locate the river. He didn't on this try. So finally he started down the Amazon alone in a dugout. The yarns he had to tell! But he had made that journey at any rate, and he had jaguar skins, crocodile oil, snake skins, and hide an inch thick on his feet to show for it. He's still with the *West Mahwah*, making another grubstake. He wants to be employed in photographing the coasts of North and South America, his plan being to go alone in a small sailer from Alaska to the Straits, and on up to New York. That's his idea of an enjoyable vacation, after twenty-five years in the Amazonian jungles!

Adventure ended when we left Para, as we got out the old typewriters and began to bang away on stories again. I did four and you'll probably get a crack at all of them. I hope you like one or two. There was the Canal of course, and Panama City, but here we were on a tourist line of travel again. Work on up the Mexican coast until we reached the home port. Now I'm at the old desk again, and when some 99 letters are written I'll tackle the stories once more.

Wishing you the best of luck and with thanks for your regard for my work. Adios—JAMES STEVENS.
P. S. If you can get some decent dry gin you might also be able to locate some English quinine tonic water in N. Y. A tall glass, two lumps of ice, a whisky glass of gin, then fill with tonica, and you have the superbest hot weather drink yet concocted. There's not enough quinine to taste, but just enough to neutralize the heating effect of the alcohol. In Santos I'd be in a slather from whisky and soda; but gin tonica left me as cool as an old maid's kiss. . . .
—J. S.

Earl Benham Crane

TO ACCOMPANY his mining story, "Signals", appearing in this issue, Mr. Crane has a comprehensive word to tell of his life and fictional background.

I am a native of the Northwest. The most impressionable period of my boyhood was spent in Wardner, Idaho, during the most colorful of its boom days. My memories of that camp are fragmentary but vivid. Such as street fights in which one of the combatants was invariably knocked through a saloon window, said windows being so numerous that if he were knocked at all he couldn't miss 'em. The jingle of the bells on the ore teams hauling concentrates out of the railroad. An avalanche ripping its way through the town. The long narrow street, steaming with the smell of the beer halls which lined it; and the Bunker Hill aerial tramway dropping an occasional bucket through the roof of a house. Big, swaggering miners, dark tunnels, deep shafts, dynamite, and the result—inoculation with the mining virus.

Then to Rossland, British Columbia, and my first mining job. Then copper mining at Greenwood, B. C., silver at Cobalt, Ontario, gold in eastern Oregon, lead in Idaho, copper in Washington and quicksilver in western Oregon, with a whirl at all of the jobs from mucker to manager, and somewhere in between, four years at mining school.

During several years of scouting for mining properties I have enjoyed the hospitality of many a prospector at his mountain cabin. There is a charm about the life. But who can name it? To the inoculated there is a saga of the prospector, the mine and the miner.—EARL BENHAM CRANE, The Quicksilver Syndicate, Blackbutte, Oregon.

Waves By Square Root!

CAPTAIN OLE BULL of the *S.S. Bergensfjord* (Norwegian-American Line), noticed the discussion in a late issue concerning the possible height of waves on Lake Michigan. Captain Bull writes:

There is a formula of a sort by which it is possible to determine how high waves at a given point may become, provided deep water, no current and—of course—unlimited wind:

Take the square root of the distance to land to windward in nautical miles, and you have the limit—in feet—to which waves may grow.

If for example the distance to land is 400 miles it should not be improbable to see waves 20 feet high; higher if current or shallows interfere with their sweep. Yours very truly.—CAPT. OLE BULL

AND ANOTHER comrade, eight years in the Navy, speaks of waterspouts and waves:

I have been an interested reader of *Adventure* for the past fifteen years and have never entered into any of your discussions or arguments heretofore.

In your Sept. 1st issue of *Adventure* I ran across the discussion between Jos. A. Krieg and Karl W. Detzer relative to the size of waves on Lake Michigan.

Having lived on the shore of Lake Michigan all of my life with the exception of the time I put in the Navy, which was eight years, I feel somewhat qualified—or if not qualified, at least determined to express an opinion.

I personally have seen waves on Lake Michigan that I am sure very nearly approached thirty feet in height. Ten and fifteen foot waves are not uncommon during very hard blows.

In nineteen hundred twelve I saw what I believe to be a phenomenon on fresh water, as I never have heard anyone except those present at the time say they had ever witnessed the same thing.

In the late afternoon one September day after a flat calm a wind came up from the southeast, which lashed the lake into a fury in a very short space of time. A ship was leaving Chicago, northbound. Seeing the storm approaching shortened sail and soon took in everything and went flying past us under bare poles. Just at this time three separate and distinct waterspouts appeared in the lake several miles apart! These traveled along very swiftly, but soon subsided again.

One of these broke fairly near the shore, say two miles out, and was plainly visible to us on shore.

I lived by the lake for over thirty years and that is the only time I ever saw such a sight on fresh water.

I haven't sailed the seven seas, but have sailed six of them, and really know what thirty foot waves are, so must take a stand by Comrade Detzer.

Have been in several storms and was present in 1917 when the superdreadnaught *Michigan* was blown eighty miles off her course, lost her topmast and boats. The sea-going tugs *Cherokee* and *Mariner* both took a dive for Davy Jones and I helped pick up their crews.

Four years might or might not qualify me to speak about storms on Lake Michigan. I have seen four years go by without any particularly heavy storm and then have seen many heavy storms in comparatively short space of time.

I may often be deceived but I have learned from experience never to doubt a tale because I have never seen it myself; you can't be everywhere at once.—H. R. VERNON, 1222 W. 41 St., La Grange, Ill.

September Strawberries

BROTHER SMITH did not believe they grew in Montana, and wrote us to that effect. Mr. Sinclair's reply, having to do with a situation in his novel, "Room For The Rolling M";

Dear Hank Smith:

Adventure has forwarded me your letter. To be sure it wasn't necessary to have Ches Williams come across ripe wild strawberries in Montana in September. But it is not wholly impossible, either, old scout. I'll admit that it may be stretching the seasons a trifle, and if anyone asked me offhand what the wild strawberry season in northern Montana is, I should probably stop and think and say, "Oh, late June and the first half of July."

But when I was a kid I have eaten the wild strawberry in canyon bottoms in both the Bear Paws and the Little Rockies late in August. Once, many moons ago, another cowpuncher and myself were crossing the Belknap Reservation to join the Circle C roundup, and the Square. We made a noon camp on a little, spring-fed branch of Big Warm, and in a shady hollow we found the odd ripe strawberry in one little patch. Why shouldn't wild strawberries show a second crop like their domestic cousins, if soil and sunshine happened to hit 'em just right? If you ever lived in Montana you should know that seasons are erratic. The worst snowstorm I ever saw in the Bear Paw Mountains began on the sixteenth of June! The snow lay three feet deep in the level. It froze so that two or three saddle-horses that had been hard-ridden chilled to death in the *remuda* of the outfit I rode with. We lay a week on Eagle Creek south of the Bear Paws without turning a wheel. And ten days later it was ninety in the shade—only there wasn't any shade!

Of course, I suppose I shouldn't have dated the time Ches found that berry patch. But I was thinking more of the man and his feelings, and his impressions of the range he had come back to. The berry patch was a casual detail. Casual details should always be correct, even if unnecessary. But even on thinking it over, while willing to admit that ripe strawberries in the first part of September may be stretching it a bit, the thing is not impossible. And don't let this strawberry business bust your confidence either in me or *Adventure*, Hank, because the best shot in the world will occasionally miss the mark, the most sure-footed horse may stumble, and the writer who knows his country and his people inside out, top and bottom, may slip on a detail. He shouldn't—but he may. Stewart Edward White once had a man ride off into the desert on a horse that a few paragraphs before had laid down and died under his rider. Have patience with us, Hank, if you otherwise like our stuff. Sincerely,

—BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR.

When The Full Moon Rose At Midnight—

CHARLES GILSON admitted his astronomical error. Replying to his letter, Comrade Johnston writes interestingly:

Dear Mr. Gilson,

Your nice letter at hand. Yes, we all make mistakes; my clients pay for mine, the doctors bury theirs—and the lits get it in the neck from chaps who sit on the sidelines and watch the game! My people were intimate with Mrs. Burnett (Little Lord Fauntleroy, etc.) and she was crazy when she upset a boat on the sand at Arles on a character she had to drown when the tide came in; I pointed out that a set of fishermen would have dug the sand from under him. Fanny wept, but no critic saw it.

Conan Doyle (bless him for the pleasure he has given me!) in the "White Company" makes Hordle John lie down and put a foot *on each end* of a longbow in order to shoot. Some stunt! How he could bend the stave does not appear. There are others, you see.

A wise parson, with many fine men in his church, once said to me, "Johnston, I never address my

congregation without knowing that on whatever subject I speak, from systematic theology to current news, there will be at least two men who know more about it than I, present and listening." And your congregation is many times his in numbers, and perhaps more various in accomplishments. *Adventure* has a wide field. I send it to an army man in the Punjab, who says his wife, now at home in old England, reads every word of it. So does my grown daughter and my son, a corporation officer and ex-Marine in the War.

The fun of it is that the moon's last quarter, rising there at about midnight, would have given you light a-plenty. I venture to say we will both be the better lunatics for this bit of correspondence; anyhow it gives me a chance to tell you I *did* enjoy your story, and hope to see more of them. Cordially yours.—T. J. Johnston.

Steve's Pardner

EVEN A SLIGHT miscalculation on the part of the professional knife thrower would have meant death or maiming for this correspondent.

Have just read an article by Ethan Snow regarding Steve Clemento, who uses a knife for other purposes than eating, to earn a livelihood in pictures.

I am in a position to vouch for Mr. Clemento's ability, as I have witnessed his performances from a very close distance.

Being a professional daredevil or what is better known in the vernacular of the movies as a "stuntman" I have frequent calls for things much different than figuring out how many turns my body will have to make before "spanking" my net. On this particular occasion I received a call one day to double for a well known western star (meaning wearing his clothes and substituting for him in the "long shot"). The gag was to let a professional knife thrower pin my clothes to a wall of a saloon and then place them all around my throat and body while pinned there. As all professional doubles carefully time and routine each stunt to keep the yearly "on-the-cot-time" at a minimum, I made the fellow (this same Mr. Clemento) display his ability.

The first test I put him to was to pencil mark a bull's-eye on a piece of paper and make him throw at it from a distance about half way across the room. He struck dead center with his knife. Thinking this might be a percentage fluke I suggested that he try it again. Instead of doing so, however, he amazed me by placing two more (one on each side) alongside of the one already sticking there. The distance from one point to the other was not more than a quarter of an inch in a dead straight line; how he could have done it is a mystery to me as the handles were bulky and had to land tilted to fit around each other. He then performed with axes with the same amazing skill and apparent ease.

I can still hear the twang of his knives wedging in the wood a fraction of an inch from my Adam's-apple. Yes—there can be no doubt as to his ability; and I for one would nominate him for your expert's chair on knife throwing.—BUDDY MASON.

Cruel And Unusual

TWO GIFTED AUTHORS, confined in the San Quentin Federal Prison for life, during past months have been contributing striking and poignant articles to a contemporary publication, "The American Mercury." These articles have dealt with criminal psychology, with life behind the bars, with gangs and crookdom in general.

At once I hasten to say that *Adventure* or this whole publishing company has no interest whatsoever in the fortunes of the magazine mentioned; as a matter of fact I find myself in what I conceive to be healthy disagreement with many of the pronunciamentos and critiques of its editor, Mr. H. L. Mencken. He is a real force in the formation of world opinion however—in the smallest sense, a mental mustard plaster and counter-irritant; in the greatest, a leader of the thought of men. He cannot be ignored.

Mr. Edwin Booth and Mr. Robert Tasker, authors of the stirring articles mentioned, now are banned *forever!* They may not write again for publication! So says the warden of San Quentin.

Unfortunately, at this time full facts in the case are almost impossible to secure; but on the face of things, no matter *what* their crimes, it seems to me that some other means could have been used—granting, for sake of argument, that these articles had proved detrimental to prison discipline. Could not the abilities of these men have been diverted, if necessary? Could not a prison censorship have done as much as an absolute ban? I am no fanatic on the subject of free speech, yet so it seems to me. What prison warden is able to say with surety that he is not strangling in embryo another "Ballad of Reading Gaol", or another "Pilgrim's Progress"?—ANTHONY M. RUD.

ASK *Adventure*

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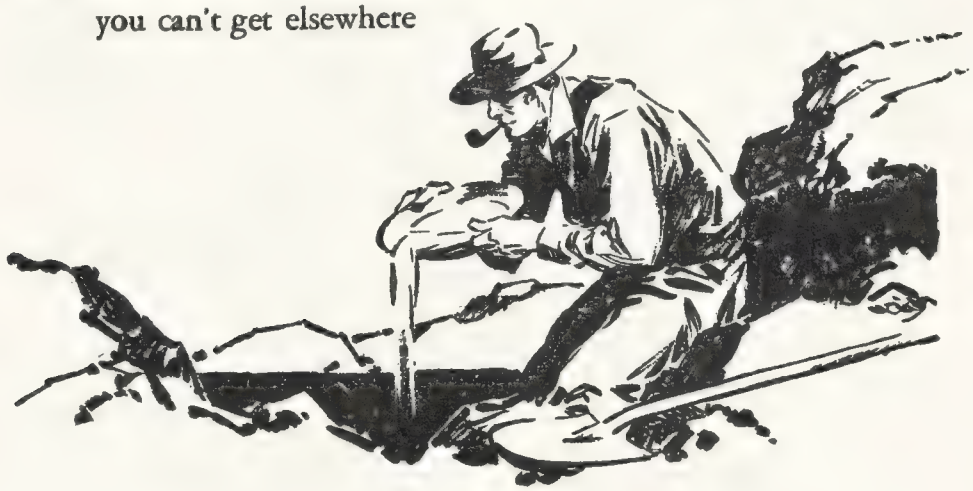

New Guinea

HERE is a vast unexploited region that the venturesome gold hunter might find it worth his while to explore, but the first requisite seems to be that he come well heeled.

Request:—"I have prospected and mined in Western Australia, South Africa and in Alaska, where I am now located.

For some time I have felt the urge to try for gold in New Guinea.

1. In what part of the Guineas are conditions most favorable as regards laws, prospects of finding placer gold and regulations covering the operations by non-residents?

2. What are the laws pertaining to mining operations by non-citizens?

3. Are the natives of the gold bearing districts friendly?

4. Are there any restrictions regarding the carrying of firearms?

5. How should one outfit for this venture and where?

6. What papers are required for entrance to and remaining in the country?

7. Where is the best point to strike the coast or what is the best port to embark to?

8. What point should one embark from in Australia and what are the means of transportation to New Guinea?

9. Should like to have any other information that will prove valuable in attempting this venture."

—WM. FROMHOLZ.

Reply, by Mr. L. P. B. Armit:—1 and 2. At present a good deal of interest is being taken in the Bulolo-Edie Creek area, which is in the mountains behind Salamoa, in the Territory of New Guinea. Good gold has been got in this region, and several men made rather large rises fron their alluvial claims. Port for the field is Salamoa, which is reached via Rabaul, the capital of the Territory of New Guinea, which is in direct steamer communication with Sydney, Australia, seven days steam away. For information relative to operations by non-residents, write to the Government Secretary, Rabaul, and also ask him if there is any restriction on the holding of mining claims, etc., by foreigners. I do not know that there is any law that prevents any European (white) man from mining up there.

3. So far as I can ascertain the natives on the goldfield are not troublesome.

4. I know of no restriction regarding the carrying of firearms.

5. Rabaul, the capital of Territory of New Guinea, is well supplied by trading stores; there are stores at Salamoa, the port for the Bulolo-Edie Creek Field,

and most supplies are available there. Outfit would include medicines (quinine, etc.,) tentage, tools, and the usual items for prospecting in new country. Most of the food is canned; even flour and sugar is carried in soldered tins to keep out damp.

6. The usual passport would be necessary to travel on. Your local authority could advise you re this. There is no restriction on entering the Territory other than a monetary one, i.e. every man going there to settle must have at least $100 on his arrival. Men going there to mine must produce $2,500 on arrival. The latter law is necessary to keep out the moneyless adventurers who in the event of their becoming destitute, would become a charge on the local government to repatriate them.

7 and 8. Steamers from San Francisco and Vancouver ply direct to Sydney, Australia, from which place the Burns Philip Line runs a three-weekly steam service to Rabaul and Salamoa. Salamoa is the port for the country around the Bulolo, etc.

9. The field is some three years old. Some of the original prospectors did very well from their alluvial claims. Most of the available ground is pegged, so newcomers must expect to go and find a place to set in themselves. Lots of country quite untouched; in fact there is a vast region absolutely unknown, which might be worth a properly found party's attention. But expense is very heavy. About $3,000 is estimated cost for one man and fifteen native porters for a six month trip into the mountains.

Oil Fields

WORK that offers fine opportunities to willing young men.

Request:—"I intend to go to the States of Colorado and Wyoming in the near future to look for work in the oil fields. I would like to know where the best work is to be found, in the fields or in the refineries, and what jobs a new person would have to take, and what positions would be open to work into. Also, about what are the wages paid a new man at the wells and refineries, and what are living conditions like? Are refiners and still men, also chemists taking tests of the oil after it is refined to see if it is of proper quality and comes up to standard, college educated men?

Is there any other industry over there where there is more opportunity for a young man? I am a pipe fitter in the mines, and at present am pipe fitting in a tunnel job here. I am twenty-one years old, and intend to take a course in chemistry at the Carnegie Institute in Washington. I would like to work in an oil refinery first to see if it would be worth while to specialize in oil, such as quality tests, etc."—VERNON COOLING, Westportal, New Jersey.

Reply, by Mr. Frank Earnest:—Of course, I can not tell you whether the best work for you is in the refineries or in the field, except of course if you should go in for chemistry, and then the refineries of course. As I understand it, a new person is given a job on the bull gang, and if he survives two weeks of that and is fitted for something better, they give him a boost. In other words, they put you on a couple of weeks probation; then if you make good they give you an opportunity to develop.

Most of the men who do the chemical work in the refineries are college graduates. Wages run from $5 to $20 per day. A pipe fitter gets from $10 to $14, according to the work he does, either in the refineries or in the field. Living conditions are good in general. Casper, Wyoming, or Salt Creek, Wyoming, would be the best places for you to go.

There are other industries in both Wyoming and Colorado, but I do not think any other industry offers a better chance for a young man than the oil industry.

Your idea of working for a while in a refinery, and then taking a course at Carnegie is O.K.

Archery

COMPARING the long and short bow; the virtues of wood and of horn.

Request:—"1. How would the dry climate of our Southwest affect the condition of archery tackle?

2. What are the virtues of the buffalo-hunting Indian short bow compared with the modern long bow?

3. Do you supply price lists of archery tackle?"

—H. BRUEGMAN, Belleville, Ill.

Reply, by Mr. Earl B. Powell:—1. If kept in cool dark place (out of sun) it will not affect it much. Of course there is a tendency to dry out and become a little brittle, sometimes. The climate of Southern California for example with its alterating periods of damp and extremely dry weather is hard on tackle, but if properly varnished and kept oiled (moisten cloth with good furniture oil) it will be O. K. Desert country is not so hard on tackle if kept out of the sun.

2. The short bow is handier and shoots farther in proportion to its length, but the long bow having as a rule a heavier missile and greater accuracy at long distances is most used. This rule applies to wooden bows. A short horn bow may be made that will carry the longer missile with its truer aiming capacity. For hunting I use a bow about 5 ft. 3 in. to 5 ft. 7 in. instead of the standard 6 ft. bow.

3. You might write L. E. Stemmler, Queens Village, New York; F. W. Mosher Co., 257 Montgomery St., Grand Rapids, Mich.; California By Products Co., 2067 San Bruno Ave., San Francisco; Wolverine Archery Tackle Co., Coldwater, Michigan or to National Archery Tackle Co., 3142 W. 10th St., Los Angeles, Calif. For fine yew bows write to Cassius H. Styles, Los Gatos, Calif. For Osage Orange bows write to E. F. Pope, Woodville, Texas. In my opinion Osage Orange wood makes the best bow on earth for lasting qualities and general utility.

Jumping Snakes

THE ANSWER seems to be: They don't.

Request:—"There has been much discussion in our neighborhood as to how far a certain snake known as the king cobra can jump. As I understand, this snake is a native of Siam. If you can possibly give me the approximate number of feet such a jump can be made on level ground I would very much appreciate it."—JAMES HUTCHINSON, Akron, Ohio.

Reply, by Dr. G. K. Noble:—It is physically impossible for any snake actually to *jump* any distance whatever. Such reports have probably arisen from exaggerated versions of a reptile's rearing up the forward end of his body and striking at his victim. In this manner, a snake can support itself for a short time on the hinder third or quarter of its body. Unless highly excited, he will not strike more than one-half his own length.

The king cobra (*Hamadryas bungarus*) sometimes attains a length of 12 feet or more. It is also known as the Hamadryad and occasionally—because of its exclusively cannibalistic diet—as the "snake eating cobra." It ranges through India and southern China (including Siam) to the Philippines.

U. S. Merchant Marine

RATE of pay in this service.

Request:—"What is the present rate of pay in the merchant service for second mate, third mate, able seaman and electrician?—G. P. WOOLLEY, Badin, N. C.

Reply, by Mr. Harry E. Rieseberg:—Relative to the rate of pay in the merchant marine service on board American vessels, I wish to advise you as follows:

Deck department	*Private*	*U. S. S. Board*
First mate	$174.00	$184.00
Second mate	153.00	164.00
Third mate	137.00	149.00
Fourth mate	116.00	150.00
Boatswain	72.00	74.00
Carpenter	77.00	79.00
Seaman, able	67.00	62.00
Seaman, ordinary	44.00	47.00
Engineer department		
Chief engineer	268.00	263.00
Second engineer	258.00	184.00
Third engineer	154.00	164.00
Fourth engineer	138.00	149.00
Junior engineer	—— —	130.00
Fireman	62.00	65.00
Greaser	68.00	72.00
Water tender	68.00	72.00
Coal passer or wiper	58.00	58.00
Chief steward	125.00	122.00
Second steward	93.00	100.00
Cook	110.00	97.00
Second cook	81.00	81.00
Mess steward	47.00	48.00
Mess boy	41.00	42.00

Trogon

A BIRD of resplendent plumage, once sacred to the Mayas, and now used on the emblem of Guatemala as a symbol of liberty.

Request:—"Do you know where the tail feathers of the quetzal trogon bird of South America may be procured? I have been told this bird was held sacred by the Incas, and is at present rated in commerce as are the aigrette and paradise—forbidden."—R. LUCILLE, Phila, Pa.

Reply, by Mr. Edgar Young:—The trogon is a Central American and not a South American bird. It was the sacred bird of the Mayas, of Guatemala and Honduras, and also, possibly, of the Toltecs and early Aztecs of Mexico. It is used as a portion of the national emblem of the republic of Guatemala today as a symbol of liberty, due to the fact that it is said not to be able to live in captivity. I have never seen one in captivity anywhere, although it might be some have been confined and lived.

At the present time it is not widely distributed, very few being found in the northern provinces of Guatemala and also in the highlands of Honduras, and only a rare one being seen in these natural habitats.

The bird is curiously colored. If I remember rightly it is of a vivid, iridescent green on the back, vivid scarlet underneath, and the tail fringed with black, white and yellow. The tail feathers of the male bird are about two feet long and these are, I imagine, the valuable feathers.

The Incas did not have this bird, nor is it found anywhere on the western Andes or Amazon. These people lived too high up in the mountains for anything except the condor and a couple of small birds to attain the altitude.

"Hard Times Token"

A RELIC of the times when it was not unlawful to mint coins of small denominations privately.

Request:—"Can you kindly give me any information as to this coin, made of copper? On one side it reads Merchants' Exchange, on the other, New York Joint Stock Exchange Company, 6 Pontine Building. Any information you can give I will be very thankful for. I have carried this coin for a number of years, but so many persons have wanted to know what it really is and I have always been unable to explain."

—JOHN V. HYLAND, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Howland Wood:—The coin you write about is known as a "Hard Times Token." A number of varieties of these were issued in the 30's and 40's of the last century by private sources, some with patriotic inscriptions, others with satirical legends (chiefly aimed against Jackson and Van Buren); others still were simply the names of the issuing merchants. At that time it was not unlawful for coins of small denominations to be made privately.

Your coin was evidently issued jointly by the Merchant's Exchange (which, by the way, also issued some paper money) and the New York Stock Exchange, which at that time was located at 6 Pontine Building, Wall Street. The piece has slight value; say, from 10 to 25 cents.

Fencing

THE relative merits of the French and Italian schools.

Request:—"Being an ardent follower of the art of fencing, and knowing that there are two accepted schools of fencing, I would like to know your opinion regarding the advantages and disadvantages of both as would be exemplified in a duel between students of the two schools."

—DONALD LOWENSTEIN, N. Y. C.

Reply, by Mr. John V. Grombach—At the present time many people believe the art of foil and épée fencing to be divided between two schools: i.e., the French and the Italian.

In the Italian school the guard is high, the arm is straight, the sword strapped to the wrist with a leather strap, the point always in line, the body more erect, the stance perhaps a little more rigid, the legs a bit farther apart, the wrist more resistant, the position more adaptable to defense rather than to offense.

The French school, on the other hand, shows the sword lightly held in the hand, the arm bent, the point free, the body slightly more collected, stance more relaxed, legs slightly closer together, wrist more supple, the whole more suitable to feints, to attacks—to offense. To weigh the two schools against each other would bring on endless and useless arguments. Suffice it to say that the Italian school is comparable to the old stand-up English fighter with his straight left in front of him while the French school is more like the weaving and ducking offense of the present day American pugilist.

Assuming two fencers of equal skill but of different schools, the winner could only be determined by the flip of a coin, the slip of a foot, a beam of sunlight in the eyes or the mistake of the judges.

The champion of the World recently crowned at the last Olympics both in foil and épée is a Frenchman, but that does not prove the French school superior. In the U. S. National championships this year, Leo Nuñez opposed Lieut. George Calnan, U. S. N. in the final bout for the épée title. Nuñez fences according to the Italian school, while Calnan follows the French. The bout was thrilling, as Calnan twice rushed his opponent down the strip. Finally, making his bid, he almost scored on the leg of Nuñez only to lose by being stopped on the chest by the outstretched point of his antagonist. Lieutenant Calnan later was the first American ever to place in an Olympic fencing event, scoring third in épée at Amsterdam.

Firearms

A SHORT, incisive treatise on the care of them.

Request:—"Will you please be so kind and let me know how to take care of rifles and revolvers?"

—BERT H. BUDDE, San Francisco, Cal.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—As soon as I return home after shooting, I first scrub out the bore of the firearm with a brass brush on a revolving rod, and use either hot water, in the case of the rifle of large bore, or else a solvent, of which I find Chloroil and Rem Solvent the best two.

I brush them out well, and then allow them to stand until next day; in case anything shows dirty in the bore, I repeat the process, but once generally does it. Then I coat the bore with a good heavy grease like B S A Saftipaste or Winchester Gun Grease, and rest content.

To preserve the finish, I merely wipe it over with an oily cloth after shooting or any other handling. Use a woolen cloth with any good light oil like Remoil or 3-in-1 for this. Rub down the stock occasionally with some boiled linseed oil, and work it into the wood well.

The above is my way of caring for firearms, and proves effective here.

Balloon Silk

THE difference between rainproof and waterproof material.

Request:—"By any chance do you know where I can obtain balloon silk or aberlite waterproofed cloth for tent and sleeping bag material?"

—R. E. BOLAND, Mullin, Texas.

Reply, by Mr. Horace Kephart:—Balloon silk is the trade name for a very closely woven, light weight stuff made, not from silk, but from long fibered Sea Island or Egyptian cotton. It runs about 3½ ounces to the square yard and 5 to 5½ ounces after being waterproofed. It is excellent material for small and very light tents, but is quite expensive. It is sold by only a few firms and each of them use its own waterproofing process and then calls the stuff by some fancy name, such as Tanalite, Egyptian, etc. They charge $1.20 to $1.30 a yard for it. It is very strong and durable for its weight, rainproof but not

waterproof under friction (as in a sleeping-bag cover or a poncho), and worth the price for such as can afford it.

Aberlite is a trade name for cotton sheeting waterproofed by the green copper process. In 40-inch width it weighs 5½ ounces to the running yard and retails at 65 cents a yard. You can get it from the maker, D. T. Abercrombie, 311 Broadway, New York. Its rainproof quality is about the same as that of the material described above, but it does not wear quite so well.

There is a tent material called Vivatex that is permanently waterproof and mildew-proof and contains no wax or grease. You can get it from the manufacturers (Metacloth Co., Lodi, N. J.) in either 8-ounce army duck, 28½ inches wide, at 44 cents a yard in khaki color or 47 cents in olive drab, or in the lighter weight army shelter tent drill, 32¾ inches wide, 47 cents khaki or 50 cents olive drab.

Tents waterproofed by metal processes are preferable to those treated with paraffine or other wax process.

Moose

A BIG game paradise for the sportsman.

Request:—"I am figuring on a moose hunt in the central or northern part of New Brunswick and would appreciate any information you could give me as to the best territory and whom I could get in touch with for outfit and guides."

—F G. DANA, Richmond, Va.

Reply, by Mr. Fred L. Bowden:—You will undoubtedly have a great time if you carry out your present plan to hunt moose in New Brunswick. No where else in the world are there more moose and larger than in this province, with the exception of Alaska, and Alaska is out of the question for the average sportsman.

You can write to Charles Allen, Stanley, New Brunswick, Edward Menzies, Newcastle, N. B., or to Richard Scott, Whitneyville, N. B. These are all registered guides, with several camps each, so that if the hunting is not good in one locality for some reason, a change is at once made to another. Charlie Allen is probably the best known guide in New Brunswick—this of course does not mean necessarily that he is the best, but he probably has been in the game about the longest of any of the men who are registered guides.

You understand of course that you have to have a guide to go into the woods hunting in New Brunswick. The cost will depend on the size of your party. The price is about $10.00 per day per man. The guides furnish everything, boats, canoes, sleeping quarters and dishes; some of the guides ask you to furnish your own blankets. It is better to bring your own blankets; then you are sure of getting bedding that suits you.

I have just returned from that part of the world, and while there talked with a number of guides and woodsmen, who report that game is very plentiful this year; last winter was a rather mild one for that part of the world, and moose and deer wintered well. It is exceptionally hard winters that make game scarce in that part of the continent some years. I remember one year a short while back, when a crust formed over the snow, caused by a rain in the winter which froze as fast as it fell. That spring the whole interior of the province was dotted with moose and deer which had starved. They were unable to move around, even as little as they have to in the winter.

A license will cost you fifty dollars.

Our Experts—They have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

They will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assume any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible.

1. **Service**—It is free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached,* are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union. Be sure that the issuing office stamps the coupon in the left-hand circle.
2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.
3. **Extent of Service**—No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.
4. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

A complete list of the "Ask Adventure" experts appears in the first issue of each month.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

Cassidy Rolls One

By FREDERICK J. JACKSON

A novel of mystery and humor, marking the long awaited return of that clever and irrepressible cowboy, Slivers Cassidy.

The Wheel of Destiny

By TALBOT MUNDY

The essence of India is inscrutability, and India's heart is the tiny state of Narada; and into Narada blind Fate plunged unsuspecting Ben Quorn, erstwhile Philadelphia taxi driver.

The Dance of the Scarlet Leopards

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

Part One of a serial of the teeming territory that has been called "the World's next great battlefield". Major Davies, U.S. Cavalry, on a perilous mission beyond the last outposts of Siberia.

And — *Other Good Stories*

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