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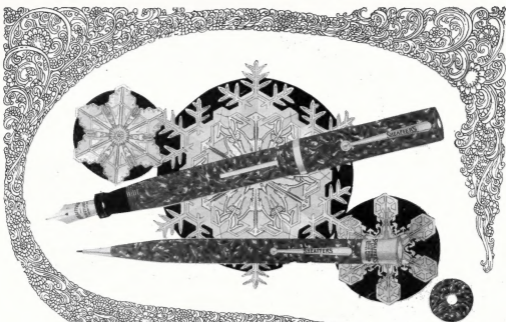
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CHALLENGE

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SHORT STORIES. Published semi-monthly on the 10th and 25th. November 25, 1926, issue. Vol. CXXVII, No. 4. Published at Garden City, N. Y. Subscription price \$5.00 a year. Entered at the Post Office at Garden City, N. Y., as second class mail matter. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office Department, Canada. Doubleday, Page & Co., Garden City, N. Y.



Short Stories

Vol. CXVII No. 4

Whole No. 503

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITORD. McILWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

THE COURAGE OF IDEALISM

JUST as long as human nature endures, humanity will worship the man who displays courage in an emergency; and ironically, nine times out of ten it is physical courage which wins the plaudits of the crowds, whereas mental courage—often the more difficult of achievement—goes unnoted. In describing the true road to manhood Kipling once said that one of the tests was being able to “meet with triumph or disaster and treat those two impostors just the same.”

Perhaps physical courage comes naturally to some men; the greater heroes cultivate it—force themselves to act with bravery when, perhaps, their spirits are secretly in retreat. But is is moral courage we all need every day, and so often have to force ourselves to foster; courage to back our own convictions in the face of ridicule or opposition; courage to cling to old traditions in the face of the modern cry of “whatever’s new

is right”; courage to branch out into new fields with faith only in old methods all around us; courage to make our minds master each situation as we meet it in the daily round.

In “The Laurelled Lie” in this issue of **SHORT STORIES** Holman Day has drawn an appealing picture of a man of the woods whose head was swollen from the adulation for a supposed act of bravery, but who, in the end, showed a really great moral courage and emerged triumphant in the vindication of what he believed to be right. The picture of bluff Murty O’Meagher standing up in that crowded theatre and throwing away what he believed to be a maimed man’s only chance of livelihood rather than allow insult to a sacred memory is one which cannot help but be an inspiration. Such heroism of ideals applied in every day life will bring us nearer true manhood.

THE EDITOR.



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YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE, PAYABLE IN ADVANCE

Postpaid in United States, and to all Possessions of the United States, and Mexico	\$5.00
Postpaid to all Foreign Countries	6.50
Postpaid throughout Canada	5.80

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Part I

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GARDEN CITY, N. Y.
NEW YORK: 255 MADISON AVENUE
BOSTON: PARK SQUARE BUILDING
CHICAGO: PROPLES GAS BUILDING
SANTA BARBARA, CAL.
LONDON: WM. HEINEMANN, LTD.
TORONTO: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



CHALLENGE

By CHARLES GOFF THOMSON

A GONG OF DOOM CLANGED ITS DEEP RESONANCE IN THOSE DEPTHS OF THE MALAY JUNGLE. THERE LAY A WEIRD SHRINE, BEFORE WHICH THE WHITE INTERLOPER WAS TO FACE A CURVED KRIS IN THE HAND OF AN AVENGER—AND WHERE HE WAS TO MAKE A FRIEND, A BLOOD BROTHER WHO WOULD STAND WITH HIM THROUGH ALL THE PERIL WHICH HE WOULD FIND UPON THE ISLAND OF MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE ISLE OF DARKNESS

TO MCKENZIE DUELL, precariously balanced in the tossing Malay canoe, the night was like a black pall, an impenetrable shroud which the outriggered craft continuously pushed before it. Far overhead a strong wind tore westward, but the proa sailed due east under the impulse of an eerie breeze eddied down by some lofty but invisible range of mountains. Driven storm clouds low ceilinged the bay, so close overhead that Duell insensibly stooped lower, as if from an impending pressure. The world seemed restricted to the very space his body occupied; the surrounding blackness was so tangible that Duell was startled when with a gentle grating upon sand the light craft lost momentum, came to rest. The white

man stood alert, uncertain, until a low Malay guttural informed him.

"*Aquí, Señor.*"

"Here." At last, after interminable delays, he had come to his island. His home! He had expected to set eyes upon it at noontide; but now it was long after sundown. Duell's arm, resting about the shoulder of the sturdy brown skinned mariner who bore him through the shallow surf, clasped more tightly. The sailor set him down. Duell's shoes touched island soil for the first time—and instantly, as if in prophecy, distant thunder sounded, ominous harbinger of the coming storm.

The sailor stirred nervously, seemed to make a peculiar sign with one hand, his figure a blur against the darker night. "There is a town," he muttered uneasily. "A small village, but you will find shelter—of a kind. *Adios.*"

"*Adios.*" "Go with God!" Duell felt

a momentary desire to question, but restrained it. He sensed a somber significance in the mariner's farewell—one given only to a man never to be seen again. Following the direction of the sailor's arm he set out for the invisible village, leaving the settlement of their passage to T'ai Fu, his already invaluable Chinaman.

For a short distance he felt the upward slope of the beach under his feet; then his groping hands made contact with a palm trunk. Pausing, he turned backward just as a vivid zigzag of lightning seared the edges of the black clouds; for an instant three breech-clouted Malays grouped about the larger Chinaman stood etched against a background of gaseous blue, their attitude stony yet immeasurably alert as if against immediate crisis. Then a following thunderclap crashed out the light, and with the utter darkness came deluge.

For long minutes, while a rent cloud emptied, it seemed to Duell that he stood under a warm waterfall. Drenched, bewildered, he stood in the buffeting darkness, vaguely hoping that T'ai Fu would finish with the sailors and join him. The rain stopped suddenly, and again oriented by the sound of the sea at its back, he went on through the odor of drenched foliage. Progress was slow, directed mainly by a sense of feeling. From afar there sounded a low murmuring which, as it approached, he identified as the sweep of another squall across dense treetops. The cloud burst just after passing over him, the rain beating the sea like a scurrying army of colossal centipedes. The storm swirled away over the sea, was dissolved into the night.

Collision with a tree trunk stopped him. He reeled back with an involuntary curse, wondering if he had broken his nose. Stumbling ahead, his feet sloshed into a pool of water which, he discovered later, was a worn depression, a trail. Wading along this path he made better time, soon coming into a dim street formed by straggling bamboo huts which, deserted and set awry upon skeletal frames, did not cheer him. The absolute silence of the village was more desolate than the forest. Once his ears caught a stealthy footstep behind him, but when he stood rooted, listening, there was nothing but the drip from high foliage. The warm earth, drenched, flung off an odor rank to his unfamiliar nostrils. Uncomfortable, vaguely disturbed, he hurried down the abandoned village street, almost running when he caught the glimmer of a light ahead.

Making a turn, he discovered a rectan-

gle of mud street illumined by a brilliant but unsteady light shining through an open door. The village might have been dead; the utter lack of movement and sound heightened the singular forebodings that had gripped him since darkness had overtaken them on the straits. Within a few yards of the door, he came to a dead stop, combatting this unusual sense of depression.

"What's the matter with this place, anyway?" he demanded.

AN APPARITION loomed before him. Squarely in the center of the lighted doorway, the squat figure of a half clad Malay appeared from within as if his limbs were jerked by strings. Silhouetted and featureless against the brilliant interior, he crouched with an intensity of pose that suggested a hunting tiger. His posture was wry, his figure unpleasantly distorted by some physical defect—a defect that did not limit his activity, for with a single bound he disappeared from the lighted area as instantaneously as he had appeared. Appearance and disappearance had been so magically swift, the figure so grotesque and ominous, that Duell blinked. It might have been a delusion of eyes strained by long days at sea in an open canoe. But from within the house came the sound of a Malay tongue; a slower unintelligible response from a second invisible but apparently harried man, then a silence charged with menace.

Duell stood tense, awaiting denouement of the unseen drama. But swiftly there mounted a conviction that he was needed—*desperately* needed—within that silent house! Without weapons, forgetful of his own safety, he sprang forward and upon the threshold.

In the glare of an acetylene lamp, he saw the interior of a nondescript store. A few feet to his left, almost within Duell's reach, a tall and darkly handsome Malay was rifling the contents of a case filled with cheap jewelry. Absorbed in his task, the native took no heed of the newcomer but continued to examine and reject as if in search of perfection. The deformed Malay, holding a waved kris, was circling a tall white man backed into the angle formed by two counters—a man emaciated beyond all possibility of effective resistance. Despair dulled his sunken eyes as he retreated the last step left to him.

Duell's perception of the scene was instantaneous. The squat native, long arms reaching almost to the floor, was trembling

on the verge of his spring, his knife gripped for the upward abdominal thrust of the Malay killer!

The white man leaped. With no time for finesse or thought of rule save to divert that deadly thrust, he launched a kick which landed crunchingly upon the assassin's right elbow. The knife flew from numbed fingers, and a hoarse cry of astonishment burst from the Malay's throat.

Duell, forced to disregard the taller native, wasted not a motion. Two stiff blows to the neck and the spongy lobe of one ear, sent the native spinning.

But the killer was not knocked unconscious as a white man must have been. He bounced upward to a crouch, stared from eyes that seemed all whites, at the sinister figure that challenged him. For Duell, with his bedraggled clothing and a red mask of blood from his injured nose smearing the entire lower half of his face, unconsciously had been transformed into an avenging apparition that appalled his adversary. The Malay's broad, flat face seemed to loosen, the lust of the killer faded from his deepset eyes to be replaced by superstitious fear. Licking his lips, he jerked unstanding to full height, the compact muscularity of his torso emphasized by its lopsided droop toward a withered left leg. His fear swiftly became sheer panic and his eyes twitched about for an avenue of escape. A low window stood open ten feet to his right; through this he sprang with an amazing bound, no whit handicapped by his deformity.

There occurred then one of the incomprehensible things which Mack Duell was to face during the whole of his stay upon the island. As he turned, expecting attack from the second Malay, a yellow arm extended from the window. He felt something thrust into his right hand, and his fingers closed upon the grip of a heavy revolver!

But the second Malay was of different fiber from the knife wielder. Facing the revolver, a slight shrug of sleek brown shoulders was his only symptom of concern as he replaced the miscellany of jewelry. Obviously, Duell's interference was of little moment to him; he desisted only because none of the jewels satisfied his exacting taste. Calmly and without hurry, he replaced the trays, rearranging their contents until contented with the display.

He wore only white cotton pantaloons, like a sprinter, but his half nudity was conventionalized by a body superb in its perfection of outline and proud carriage.

From a thick cord about his strong neck hung a mesh bag made of hundreds of small sterling rings looped together. Possibly once a handbag belonging to some European woman and abandoned because of its weight, it had somehow found its way to this remote isle—to this absurd use! Heavy, it clung close to his stalwart chest, its silver bright against the fine texture of his brown skin.

Erect and graceful as a schooled dancer, he strode within a pace of Duell before halting and the tips of two rows of glistening teeth were exposed as his classic oval face lighted with a half smile. In an abstracted way he seemed to be studying the white man, but with confused mental processes.

Then, inexplicably, the Malay made the sign of the cross!

No other possible gesture could have been so unexpected, so grotesque. He was a thwarted spoiler invoking a tremendous symbol; yet



the movement was so natural and practiced that it became a part of the man. His hand moved in graceful rhythm, marking the sacred symbol so accurately that it seemed to remain, outlined, against his muscular breast. Then, without a word or other gesture, he strode directly in front of Duell and out of the

door, his beautifully modeled brown back blending into the night.

"WELL," came a shaky voice from the man Duell had saved, "you might have used a couple of shots to good advantage. Say! But you must have had another fight tonight! Your nose—man! Broken?"

Obviously fighting for control of overwrought nerves, he shambled on poorly articulated limbs into an adjoining room, returning with a basin of water and towels.

While Duell bent to remove the unlvely evidences of his collision with a tree, the other strode nervously about the room, cracking the joints of his long hands, moving about with jerks that threatened the

unity of his cadaverous frame. He had the long bony face of a horse and a tropical jaundice had stained it indelibly sorrel. His voice remained the sole authentic vestige of masculinity, fairly booming from a prominent larynx after each aspiration but swiftly weakening as his lungs exhausted their meager store of air.

"I never thought they'd have the nerve," he said. "But lately things have——"

He broke off as the young American's face came up from the basin into the full light, started, then nodded a profound satisfaction. His hand went out. "It is easy to thank a Duell," he said simply.

"You know me?" Duell questioned. "I'm sure I've never seen you before. This is my first——"

"Yes, I know. But I knew your father. And with five more years on you—and a military mustache—and uniform—well, we old-timers would all be saluting you."

"You served with my father?"

"Right here. On this island. Twenty-three years ago. Twenty-three miserable years! God! Twenty-three years!"

The black mood held but a moment, however, to be replaced by a thin whimsicality. "But I fail in the courtesies—here in a land of nothing but courtesies—my house is your house, and all that! You are welcomed, sir, by one Billy Geer, myself! Owner of——" he swept the huddled interior with an ironic gesture—"all that you see here. This second-hand store, and a cinematograph next door. My domicile is overhead. Shared——" he confessed with a bravado somehow pitiful—"by one native woman, once pretty but now old at thirty, the mother of my two kids. My two kids—halfbreeds—God save them—God bless them! So you meet Billy Geer, squawman!"

CHAPTER II

THE WHITE PROA

GEER'S efforts toward hospitality were almost frantic, more so as each proffer was quietly declined. Drenched as he was, Duell would take no stimulant; preferred his pipe to Geer's strong native cigars; declined a supper offered out of the canned stuff that filled two shelves of the littered store.

Geer continued to pace nervously, his bony countenance gaunted by the sickly glare of the naked gas jet, his long flat feet miraculously retaining their slippers even when he jumped some obstructing pile of second hand junk scattered about

the room. Even when silent, his lips formed soundless words as if he impatiently cleared the track for the next hurtling idea. A prolonged and uninterrupted life in the tropics had undermined him, yellowed his taut skin to parchment. Failure, complete and acknowledged, had written a haunting fret into his face.

Duell was in exact contrast to the squawman. Seated in an old chair, he smoked quietly at his pipe, a youthful strong figure with all the red checked vigor of a healthy man fresh from the States. His gaze was steady, fixing attentively upon Geer whenever the squawman spoke; but he had nothing at all to tell of himself except in reply to Geer's direct questions.

"Yes," the storekeeper said suddenly, "we knew you were coming. How did we know? Oh, the grapevine telegraph. News passes around—the natives know everything. But what brought you? Going to sell the estate? You won't get much."

"No, not sell it. I'm going to operate it. So we are to be neighbors. The plantation is close by, is it not?"

"Less than a kilometer. Half a mile, as you'd put it. But, man, it's going to take a pot of money; it's jungle now. Guess you don't realize—twenty years in the tropics—unplowed!"

"I expect that, of course. It won't be easy, but I'll manage somehow. I have a lifetime, you know."

"Whew!" Geer ejaculated, studying him. Finding Duell's determination stronger because of its very diffidence, he at last nodded conviction. "Well, you mean business, anyway," he admitted.

He rambled on. Some trait, probably timidity, caused him to avoid the one most appropriate subject—the identity of the two marauders and the reason for their attack. It was only upon Duell's second direct question that he answered, and then reluctantly. "Oh, they live around here. The lame one is Malabar. He's a—well, something of a roughneck—he's all that you saw, and more."

"Why don't they imprison him?" Duell wanted to know.

Geer regarded him curiously, with something akin to pity for such ignorance of conditions. "Yes, why don't they do it?" he returned. "For one thing there isn't any official 'they' around these parts. Such 'they' as are here don't want him put away; he's too useful to them. You'll learn. But I never saw him so bold before—must be something special in the wind."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. And I'm not guessing—not out loud, for I want to keep what's left of my health. The other one? Handsome, isn't he? That was Lundu. A queer nut. Religious. Did you notice that bag around his neck? That's his *ant-ing-anting*, a charm that protects him from evil. A Malay custom. Will turn aside a bullet or dull the edge of a bolo, he thinks. Never knew anybody like this Lundu. First, his good looks; then his frenzied worship at a shrine up the mountain. He steals anything, at any risk—and not for himself, but to lay upon this altar. That's why he was here tonight; but my stuff was too poor for him. He wants only rare things. Sometimes I think he's crazy—and yet—I don't know. I could talk all night and you wouldn't be any wiser about him. You've got to learn him, and then——"

He shrugged his thin shoulders in eloquent dismissal of a fruitless subject. The whole subject was manifestly disagreeable to him, and his responses to Duell's direct questions were as evasive as possible and spoken as if he feared being overheard.

He turned to fresh topics, his short breathed sentences clipped as soon as each thought was germinated. Duell listened with keen interest, for the patchwork of description and comment vividly portrayed the spirit and something of the substance of the island that was to be his home. A word picture, however, somewhat different from the tropical pastoral for which he had been preparing these several years.

Geer's description of the plantation residence was equally doleful. "You can't live there yet," he asserted. "It's ready to tumble down. What the white ants

haven't done to it, the humidity has. Better stay here with me; I can put you up. You're alone, aren't you?"

"N-no. I have a cook, a Chinaman, s o m e w h e r e. He should be——"

"Thought I heard voices some time ago," Geer said, moving toward the door to peer into the

street. He spoke in native dialect and was answered in turn by two low voices. A Chinaman and a smaller Malay stepped in to the light.

THE large Chinaman was T'ai Fu, Duell's cook. He was in the early prime of life, his hair cut in European style and uniformly sprinkled with gray. His lusterless russet complexion was faintly ruddy, a marking usually associated with the high caste northern Chinese. His upper lip bore a short but deep scar that set the left corner of his mouth in a perpetual half smile, curiously freshening an otherwise austere countenance.

Different was the Malay, a stranger to Duell. Small boned, his brown face further darkened by the deep pittings of smallpox, he stood tousel headed and frankly sleepy, just sufficiently awake to retain interest in his quest of a job. His feet fascinated Duell, for his toes were as prehensile as fingers, the big toe on his right foot curling and uncurling as he nervously picked up a burned match with it, dropping it only to lift it again with the splay toe.

It was Geer who explained the young Malay's quest. "He wants to be your boy," he interpreted. "He wants to work for you as house servant. I don't know him—but if you ask me, I like his looks—and you've got to have somebody. He speaks several island dialects. I've sounded him out. Might come in handy, you being new here. What'll I tell him?"

Duell studied the candidate. "I'm not sure that I need him. But tell him it's all right," he said. "I'll take him. He can help T'ai Fu carry the stuff."

To the surprise of both white men the Malay thanked him in passably good English. His name, it proved, was Mercado, and he forthwith demonstrated his willing efficiency by preceding the Chinaman outside to prepare the master's hand baggage for the half mile journey to the plantation. For Duell, despite Geer's hospitable urgings had determined to go on.

"I want to get home," he said quietly, but with the decision that characterized him. "For years I've thought of it as home, and I want to be there."

Geer, realizing the futility of opposing him, conducted the three down the dark street to a point where a trail led northward.

"You can't miss the way," he directed. "The house is at the end of the trail, right on the beach. Come over tomorrow, or whenever I can help. But say; you forgot your gun! Left it on the counter. Just a minute and I'll——"

"But wait!" Duell bade him. "That isn't my revolver."



Geer cocked his head sidewise, puzzling. "But I don't get you—you came romping in with it—"

The boy Mercado moved forward a step toward the starlit pair. "The pistol, sar," he announced in his matter of fact way. "I take it, sar. I have it. It all right," the Malay declared. "Those two had piple gone. You mek them scared sufficient. No worry. We go. I tek you the way."

The three set off without further words, the stout little Malay gnomelike under his distorting bundle of baggage, the big Chinaman following with effortless stride, last the somewhat puzzled American—a curious procession through the tangle of wet underbrush silvered by starlight. Now trudging behind, uncomfortable in soaked shoes and clothing, he turned over in his mind the discrepancy between the midnight arrival at the end of his long pilgrimage and his glad expectations of the event. He had dreamed of setting foot upon his estate among happy natives grinning him welcome to their sunny tropical arbor; not this arrival in the middle of a night storm, of adventure, of knives and guns. Not in his wildest dreams had he pictured such apparitions as Malabar and Lundu; no such derelict as the squawman; and as for himself, precipitating himself headlong into an island quarrel—

Mercado had stopped. "Master, your land," said he.

His land! Moody misgivings went into discard as Duell dug the toe of his shoe into the rich humus. His land! To harness to his bidding, to make fruitful, to serve mankind's needs. Here, on this portion of earth now his, he felt closer to his father than if that parent—long stilled in a grave men called dreadful—stood beside him on this soil, this heritage.

High in the east a crescent of white moon rose above the mountainous backbone of the isle. Vague shadows took form beside every standing object. In the distance a dog howled thinly; the air chilled. Roused from his reverie Duell turned to find that the two servants had gone on. Following the trail he soon emerged into a neglected lane that led to three short stone steps, and he mounted these to stand upon the porch of his house.

T'AI FU and Mercado, already united in a smooth dual mechanism of service, came with candles to conduct the young master upon a brief and silent appraisal of the bungalow. The years

had had their way. Ceilings and floors sagged, doors hung wry upon rusted hinges, every footstep brought a squeak from aged joints. Cobwebs patterned the walls like draftings of a crazed engineer, and the rank odor of mildew saturated the place. Decay hung heavily upon the House of Duell.

Leaving the interior to the tenancy of mice, Duell followed the servants to the west porch, where they had set up a collapsible cot to be swept by breezes off the sea. The surf murmured less than a stone's throw from the railing. Pushing back the mosquito net, Duell sat heavily down upon the edge of his bed and slowly discarded his wet clothes.

Sleep came tardily. The sounds from the back of the house, where T'ai Fu and Mercado busied themselves with the baggage, finally ceased, but for a while the strangeness of his situation kept the white man awake. Periodically a dog howled in the village, inspiring an unvarying canine chorus that was infinitely mournful. The exotic dewladen breeze, the effulgence of the climbing moon, at last proved sedative, however, and his breathing slowed in the brief lucidity just preceding slumber.

He lay beneath softly weaving palms, lulled by a tropical sea breeze. On the border of slumberland he was pleasantly aware of this last minute acceptance of conditions, this feeling of being—at last—at home. A feeling of security, of peace, flooded his last conscious moment, as softly enveloping as a song.

And presently it was a song. As out of a dream it carried faintly off the sea, a melody so lilting, so elfin, that he accepted it as a fantasy of sleep.

Just offshore a white proa, its single canvas luminous under the moon, was sailing southward, steered by a lean brown man immobile in the stern. Erect, steadied by an arm against the frail mast, a white girl was singing a blythe little song whose every fourth line minored into a provocative plaint. She sang in English,



and Duell raised upon one arm to catch the soft cadences.

*"—If I only knew—
He says his love will never dim;
That I may safely trust in him.
Do triflers smile like cherubim?
—If I only knew—"*

The clear contralto personified her to him, adding detail to the ethereal harmony of her moonlit figure. He sensed rather than saw the clean vigor of her young form, the glossy mass of her hair, the gaiety of her mood. A fitting climax to this night of surprises—a serenade by the very embodiment of a tropical dream! Entranced, he strained to hear the song from the departing proa.

*"—If I only knew—
He swears that if I will say 'Yes,'
That from my side he'll ne'er digress.
Should I resist his dear caress?
—If I only knew—"*

A cloud obscured the moon, hanging a dark curtain across the sea into which the proa faded as if erased. The enfolding shadow seemed to chill the singer's mood, so that the sea swallowed the song as effectually as the singer. Scarcely breathing, Duell listened intently; there was a last low creak of rigging, then no sound.

But no phantom this. For, proving that song and singer were not illusions, there lingered the expiring tracing of the proa's wake, a phosphorescent trail of deep drowned stars.

CHAPTER III

"OUT O' CHINA, 'CROSS THE BAY"

MACK DUELL'S coming into the life on this warm Pacific isle was really entirely logical. Almost from infancy this small island had been the center of his consciousness. As the years passed and guardians permitted him to know the full story of his inheritance, he had formed a fixed resolve to pick up a burden dropped by his father, a father who, though dead before he had seen his son, nevertheless dominated the boy's life all through adolescence. His mother was not even a memory, having died in giving him birth. Orphaned at the age of two, the boy had been reared under the guardianship of the board of directors of a Philadelphia trust company, a singular foster parent, but the result had been better than might have been hoped, for the lad

had developed normally, except possibly, for a certain disposition to go alone. In some ways he was too old for his years, made his own decisions and clung to them inflexibly. Such important decisions, for example, as this matter of the sugar plantation.

The announcement of his intention to go to the island had dropped like a bomb into the circle of guardians who had met on his twenty-first birthday to transfer his property to his own keeping. There had been a few surprised attempts to dissuade him, but experience had taught them the futility of opposing him, and his exposition of his plans demonstrated that this was no sudden flight of fancy. In the end they heartily entered into the spirit of his enterprise.

The inheritance had come into his legal possession at twenty-one, but Duell had left it in the care of his old friends while he completed preparation for his life work. After a liberal education at Princeton—in which athletics played a prominent part—he had spent another four years in agriculture, specializing in cane sugar, milling, refining, and all the minutiae of the science, together with accountancy and general business training. Another year had gone into studies in the field, in the actual practice of sugar husbandry, in Cuba, Louisiana and Hawaii. Five years of earnest training doggedly pursued, though every impulse cried out against the drudgery. The isle called, romance beckoned, but he held to his self-imposed training. Thus, when at twenty-six he finally found himself westward bound upon the Pacific, he was as fully prepared as might be.

AT THE outset, in Hong Kong, it seemed that his first plan was to be frustrated. His quest was for one T'ai Fu, a Chinese cook who had served briefly but conspicuously with Duell's father on the island. Evidently a paragon, a cook among cooks, this Chinaman; for none of the elder Duell's letters—now in the son's possession—had failed to mention him. Not alone as a domestic, but as a sustaining influence, an invaluable aid in a score of difficulties. The accounts of the Mongolian's deeds had woven magic across the sea and the years—a magic heightened by the son's receipt every year of a letter from T'ai Fu himself, written on the first day of the Chinese New Year, when all Chinese debts must stand cancelled.

Each missive had expressed with brief

sincerity a gratitude undying, a desire to "discharge to the son a debt to the sire who saved this life; a life insignificant, but a life."

T'ai Fu's annual messages out of China had become, with the years, milestones on Duell's route into the East. "Whenever I may serve you, wherever I may serve you, call and I come." Thus had invariably rung the messages as translated by secretaries of Chinese legations who annually brought them to Duell—official condensations out of all proportion to humble messages from a cook.

So thought the American consul at Hong Kong to whom Duell appealed for help. The quest seemed hopeless, even the most competent guides having failed to sequester an individual coolie amid the seaport's swarms. Confronted with checkmate, Duell—almost obsessed with the importance of taking the old servant with him—missed the steamer rather than abandonment search, and settled down in a grim determination to locate this being who furnished the sole link with his father, with the past.

At last a happy thought led him to show the consul one of T'ai Fu's letters.

"Your father's *cook*, you said?" he exclaimed with peculiar emphasis as he studied the parchment. "Why—why——"

Whatever he surmised remained unsaid, for the consul knew his Orient. Four hours later he telephoned Duell at the hotel, that the cook was found, would sail with him; that another boat sailed south that night. His interest in Duell seemed suddenly stimulated; he saw him off at the jetty, offered every courtesy. Several times he seemed on the point of putting some question that perplexed him but always forbore. At the end, just as he was saying good-by, he asked Duell to write; they all would be interested in hearing how he liked the island, how he liked—*his cook!*

The boat was to sail at ten. At nine, awaiting T'ai Fu, he stood alone in the dark at the rail, drinking in the essence of the Asian crossroads city, the home of T'ai Fu.

Hong Kong!

The world seemed all stars; in the heavens; along the bund and up the slope to the Peak which shone with incandescents; across the entire harbor where tiny lanterns glowed from sampan and junk. An air odorless with salty mud, spent incense, exotic odors from godowns filled with copra, sugar, tobacco, spices; all these, plus the acrid aftermath of devil chasing fire-crackers exploding vividly along the dark

shoreline. Across the foreshortened masonry of the bund, humanity streamed like



up-reared ants groping with feelers in semi-darkness. Moving smoothly, unhurried, a dark figure emerged out of the human tide and took definite form under the gaslight on the jetty where he seemed to bargain with a sampan coolie. Duell, watching in-

tently, instinctively knew that he was gazing at last upon T'ai Fu.

Before the sampan reached the vessel's side, Duell left the promenade and hurried to the ladder that led to the littered and noisy steerage deck, thrilled at the prospect of meeting this loyal servitor of his father.

A wooden box first appeared, borne awkwardly as if upon unaccustomed shoulders, then the full figure of a very tall and strongly built Mongolian. Depositing his burden he came slowly erect.

He was clad in the bluish brown denims of the coolie class, garments manifestly new as if in honor of an occasion. The cheap red luggage box was new, as were the felt soled slippers. But the wisdom and patience in the slant black eyes were as old as his race.

The yammerings of the steam winch quieted but neither of the two seemed to find words, or to need them. This was not the impact of West upon East, master upon menial, youth upon maturity; but the gropings of two unusual spirits for a common footing. The Mongolian's countenance broke first, his scarred lip breaking into a smile that was a recognition of a friendship at once old and new. With that smile alone he joined his destiny with Duell's shadowed future; not as a camp-follower but as an abiding comrade. Both his hands lifted slightly in an indefinable gesture.

"T'ai Fu," Duell said huskily, "I'm so glad I found you! I'll take good care of you."

At Duell's promise the Chinaman's wry lip twisted into another smile. But now its tenderness was tinged with whimsy.

CHAPTER IV

TERROR IN THE NIGHT

DAWN on the isle!

A glory of cool pink skies, dew drenched forests and silvery sea.

Following a month established habit,

Duell—tousel headed and glowing after a shower bath—watched from the east porch as day lifted over the mountainous rampart of the island. The plantation lay like a great brown carpet, stretching from the palm fringed bay to the first steepening of the long slope to the volcano, Canlaon. As Duell watched, the mist about the lofty crest melted in the warm embrace of the mounting sun, leaving the sullen, jagged peak sharply defined against a crystal sky. The slumbering volcanic giant puffed a single ball of yellow smoke, a feathery symbol of titanic energies held in restraint; it was minutes before the sooty ball dissolved into still air above the crater. Then, as the sun won above the summits, the cool morning monsoon came out of the southwest, marshalled the straggling mists into orderly ranges of clouds and set them on the day long march across the heavens. Day had come.

Already groups of little brown men were plodding behind powerful, dawdling carabaos; the men and women of machete gangs vivified the brown fields with splotches of gaudy calico. A small group gathered at the site of the mill, near the mouth of the little river that formed the northern boundary of the estate. Washerwomen beat clothes against rocks along the stream. Duell's pony, saddled and eager, stamped impatiently beneath a palm. Three fishing proas already were two miles offshore, just approaching the deep waters frequented by big game fish.

A little Eden, it seemed, organized to serve man's simpler needs. Organized perfectly within the house, for when Duell issued from his bedroom in khaki breeches, leather puttees and light flannel shirt, Mercado pulled back his master's chair to a breakfast served upon a beautiful mahogany table carved from a single slab out of the neighboring forest. It was a pleasant, spacious room with colorful grass mats laid upon polished hardwood planks, comfortable reed chairs and great pearl-shell windows flung wide to the morning sea breeze.

Thus, in an idyllic setting, Duell had lived a few weeks of that peaceful life he had dreamed. Already it seemed that he had never known a life other than on this secluded equatorial isle. Twice daily the tides ebbed from the halfmoon bay to disclose a reef like a bowline strung from headland to headland. Twice daily the monsoon shifted, so that the palms along the ellipse of white beach pointed slender green fingers northward all day, southward

all night. And each day saw more acreage reclaimed with the plough, further progress in the general scheme designed to harness the tremendous energies of the jungle.

Mercado, attentive and formal in starched white jacket, was silent until the master had concluded breakfast, then unloaded the relatable bits of news garnered during nocturnal activities that covered the whole eastern slope of the isle.

"Two fish'men drowned yest'day," he announced. "Swordfish hit their proa. Old Maria gave twins last night, now got fourteen childs, all girl. Three hunters kill a python yest'day, twent'-two feet long. Four families left the island last night, in proas; no come beck, too scered."

"Scared of what?"

Mercado was noncommittal. "Bimeby you see. Wild pigs eat anoth' garden lest night; you ought to shoot 'em." He went on detailing all the happenings in and around the village, as usual reserving the important bits of news for the climax. "The boat still anchored in bay. No sail yet."

"The steamer? Why, I thought she left last night."

"No. Still stay, mebbe something wrong. And," the boy concluded with something of a flourish, "somebody steal your clock last night."

"What!"

"Yes, sar."

Duell leaped to his feet and into the living-room to find that the timepiece indeed was gone. It had been a birthday gift, a small but exquisite mechanism inclosed under a glass dome. He had noted that its pendulum—revolving instead of swinging—had fascinated the several natives who had seen it, but he had not considered the possibility of theft.

"Lundu steal it," Mercado asserted.

"How do you know? It's just gone, and anybody could—"

"Lundu," the boy repeated doggedly. "You bet. For his *anting-anting* mebbe, or mebbe for his shrine on the hill. You go up there, you find it mebbe. You go now, mebbe you find him, too."

Duell debated the matter, finally nodded assent. Lundu's guilt was probable, for the half mad thief was capable of any exploit in behalf of his absurd shrine.

Duell made prompt decision. "I'll go!" he said, and his jaw set in a line that tickled the combative little Malay. "Fetch a pony—no, the motoreycle, for I'm in a hurry."

With a wave of his hand to T'ai Fu he turned to the door—only to collide breast to breast with a huge white man who came charging in like a blind bull.

The shock that sent Duell reeling barely stopped the big man's stride. His great hairy paw bit into Duell's shoulder, wrenched him about to face directly into a tangle of white whiskers and flaming gray eyes.

"So you're the handsome white scoundrel they tell me of!" the bass voice roared. "But ye've to deal with Tim Mulvane! Where's me gur-r-l? Where's me Feliza?"

CHAPTER V

FELIZA RINCON-MULVANE

DUELL was as powerless as a child in his grasp. His wind was cut off by the other's right hand. He choked as he strove futilely to free himself from the paralyzing fingers; he was as in a vise.

But there was T'ai Fu. And Mercado. An efficient and devoted team!

The Mongolian had not moved as much as a muscle at the amazing assault, but now he came forward, a revolver in his hand.



Stepping in front of the assailant he thrust the muzzle hard against the soiled white uniform and deliberately cocked the weapon. Whether the warning click would have stayed the giant, whether T'ai Fu would have shot, was not to be dis-

closed, for simultaneously with the click, Mercado entered the drama.

A looped cord settled swiftly about the big man's neck and a terrific yank tore him backward. As he tottered, out of balance, another fierce pull toppled him over and he was half pulled, half fell, across the porch. The crash of his great bulk tore out a section of the railing, and he lay inert upon the checkered tiling. Mercado, eyes ablaze with the delight of battle, pounced upon him with the cord and with a few deft turns bound his hands and feet, then bestrode him.

But here Duell recovered and took command. "No, Mercado, turn him loose.

T'ai Fu, some whisky and ice water. He's just stunned."

Mercado cursed softly but he reluctantly loosed the bonds from the unconscious white man, who opened his eyes before T'ai Fu returned. He sat erect, shaking his heavy white mane, and as his head cleared he spied the whisky in the cook's hand. He reached out for it, emptying the glass with one gulp, then glared in turn at the three. T'ai Fu still held the gun, but it proved superfluous. The big fellow's enmity seemed spent.

"Well," he rumbled from his seat on the porch floor, "ye've got good team work, b'God!"

A surprisingly big mouth opened beneath the beard to disclose tobacco stained teeth in a quizzical grin. "If the typhoon's over, ye might help me to port. That chair, there."

Made comfortable, and after another Gargantuan drink, he sighed once like a bellows compressed, and explained his purpose. "They call me a hasty man," he confessed, "and I am, though don't ye say it! That girl will be the death of me!"

"What girl?" Duell prompted.

The sailor eyed him shrewdly, and seemed satisfied. "I see ye know nothing of it," he admitted, "nor of me. I'm Tim Mulvane, skipper of the *Soopa*, at yer service. I've been a-carryin' yer stuff here, but ye've never come aboard. And it's my girl I'm after. She's gone again."

Another sigh and another drink, then he went on, "I've laid over all night, because of her. Damn her! Though don't ye be a-damnin' her! And now, b'God, that dirty Jap tramp will beat me into Surigao, and I'll be late into Surabaya. Just because she's got one of her spells!"

"Spells?"

"Spells! She's been all right for weeks, but I've seen it a-comin'. Yesterday mornin' it started—highy-tighty, and up goes her hair in a saucy coil and she's off with the old Lascar in her white proa. B'God, and I'll dump her boat off the davits some fine night! And here I am, a-sweatin' blood over her, and she a-sailin' along this coast somewhere, a-singin' or a-fishin' or somethin'—somethin' else that a-worryin' over her old dad's worries."

A white proa—a girl—singing! Little strings tightened about Duell's throat. Shyness prevented his asking point-blank questions, but he drank in every word of the captain's monologue, which, pieced together and the gaps liberally imagined, pictured his as a typical life of the owner and

skipper of a small steamer running haphazard among the myriad islands, picking up more or less profitable leftovers of cargo, and making occasional bonanzas at remoter stations. Despite his white hair and beard, Mulvane was little beyond the prime of life, with the strength of two men and the finesse and polish of half a man.

Thirty-two years spent among little Malays cowed by his brute strength—thirty-two years of utter sovereignty on his own deck—had made him into an absolute autocrat, but not offensively so, he had merely contracted the habit of expecting others to do his will. Thanks to his Irish blood, there was no hint of insolence, and there was that about him that led one to think he was ever on the verge of a sly wink.

"But what made you think a girl might come here?" Duell asked during a pause in the rumbling narrative.

"Well, ye see I was told that ye might have somethin' to do with it."

"You were told! By whom?" Duell's anger was apparent in the added precision of his speech.

"I dunno if I ought to say—but why not? It was Sotto who told me."

"Sotto? Why, I don't know the man! I have not even seen him."

"Well, ye needn't worry about it. I know men, I'm a-thinkin' after all these years, and ye're clean, me boy. Ye'll surely be a-pardonin' my—er—informal introduction of meself? Next time I'll come with me hat in me hand like a Christian. And now I'm off, for I've got to be a-findin' Feliza."

He rose, stretched his great frame, gingerly explored his outraged neck, patted Mercado forgivingly on the back, and departed as unceremoniously as he had come. Ten yards from the steps he faced back in one swirling motion and raised an angered fist. "I'll find her!" he roared, "and this time I'm a-goin' to make good my warnin' to her! Ye can tell her—if ye see her first—that this time her old dad is a-goin' to spank her hinder, b'God!"

He hurried toward the village with great awkward strides, his shaggy head shaking. He seemed to be a-sputter, like a slow fuse.

THINKING of the girl, it was with reluctance that Duell mounted his motorcycle. At the river he called across to the ferryman, peevishly observing that, as always, the clumsy bamboo raft was on the wrong shore. While the rheumatic old Malay struggled with the rope contraption that utilized the river current

to operate the raft, Duell listlessly sat down to wait.

A carabao, distrusting the white man's taint upon the hot breeze, sullenly abandoned its mud bath and dawdled away, a ton of elastic gun metal. Two fighting parakeets zigzagged screeching into a mango tree, flew away; two brilliant green



feathers floated down into the riverside ooze. A four-foot iguana skittered out of ambush, just missing its prey; the wild chicken squawked as it took off in a low parabola of flight into the brush. A fish leaped, silvery against water that was clear and gray-blue like a crystalline lens. There was an interval of peace, utter silence; then—and Duell literally rubbed his eyes in unbelief—then there slowly emerged from the river, a hundred yards downstream, a pair of slim white legs!

The snowy legs were disembodied, knee length; and, for what seemed a long time, the toes pointed skyward. They melted slowly into the water and a small head appeared briefly, to be followed by the gleaming legs again. It was like trick camera work in slow motion, repeated time and again. Then the swimmer turned vigorously shoreward, porpoising zestfully.

The ferryman summoned Duell, but the white man neither heard nor heeded. Before the girl came dancing up out of the water he knew who it was. But he did not realize that he was hurrying to her, he did not know that he took off his cap, he came.

She seemed everything that Tim Mulvane was not—dainty, slender, lovely—and even in her scant blue jerseys, she gave an impression of being exquisitely groomed. After her vigorous swim, she lay relaxed completely, not a flicker of movement disturbing her utter repose. Even her wide gray eyes were languorous, lids half lowered and unfluttering. She lay outstretched with chin on small intertwined hands, facing him; but he did not exist, although he was so close that he

could see the pink flush the sun was bringing to all the exposed areas of her white skin. She seemed to be restoring energy by conscious effort; she did not appear to have heard his coming over the sand.

The silence brought him self-consciousness—and realization that he had surprised a lady after her bath; that he had been admiring her frankly revealed charms with an unwarranted freeness, an unwitting affrontery that brought a painful red stain to suffuse his countenance from neck to brow. His apparent misery brought her eyes wide.

"I like you for that," she stated.

"For—for what?" he stammered.

"Oh—never mind. You're Duell, I think?"

"Yes, McKenzie Duell."

"McKenzie. McKenzie. Too long; that. Mack Duell. And I'm Feliza."

"Miss—Miss Mulvane?"

"N-no. Feliza Rincon-Mulvane. You call me Feliza."

"Yes."

"Please?"

"Yes, Fe-Feliza."

She came up suddenly, crosslegged and with sparks in her eyes. "I said I liked you. Are you finding me for Mulvane? Are you a spy for him?"

"No. I saw him, and he's looking everywhere for you. But I don't know that I'm obligated to—I'm not sure that I ought to—"

Uncertain of his own position in the matter, he floundered beneath her gaze. He just could not recall whether he had actually promised to aid Mulvane or not. Anyway, there had been a tacit understanding, perhaps, that he should report.

"Please?" she queried, still uncertain.

"No," he asserted squarely. "I'm not going to tell anybody anything."

"Attaboy!"

The American slang surprised him, for her English was reminiscent of both Spanish and French, and naturally so as he was shortly to learn.

"And now that we're friends, let's not be too formal. I have a last thing to do—before letting Mulvane find me," she announced cryptically.

Running to the ferryman's bamboo shelter, she returned with soap and towels and began to loosen her hair. Standing before him, she was taller than he had thought, and her body, though gloriously feminine, was competent, well balanced, firmly muscular. Self-confidence gave

her complete poise, and every movement of her hands with her hair was swift and purposeful.

"I'm going to wash my hair," she declared. "The river is fresh and clean at low tide. You may sit by me and talk to me, for I've heard much of you."

She had commanded! And, as he strove for something to say, he noted that in her industrious shampooing she kept one small ear free of lather and bent toward him.

"You've heard of me?" he began a little desperately, his thoughts on the soapy froth that bubbled in the masses of her reddish brown hair.

"Of course," came the answer from out of the mass. "You don't think an American—can come way out here—and bet his money—against the East—without being talked about?"

He didn't know much about it, so couldn't keep on that topic. No other occurring to him, he sat silently enjoying the play of her white arms. Presently she straightened up abruptly and groped a soap blinded way to a ledge from which she dove into the river. She stayed in the water for some time, not playing now but giving the most serious attention to the rinsing of her hair—hair thick and long and bronze—hair the great beauty of which she certainly did not underrate. Absorbed in the important matter of ridding it of the last atom of soap she had forgotten him. He was to learn well this genius of hers, this faculty for dismissal of everything and everybody foreign to the problem in hand.

She finally emerged upstream and entered the little hut, to issue clad in cool Hanoi pongee, her hair flung loosely over her shoulders. She came straight to him and sank into the sand in a comradeship as cool and unaffected as a boy's.

"Now talk," she commanded again, "and faster, for when my hair is dried I must go."

"You talk," he hazarded. "For one thing, where have you hidden?"



She laughed, a throaty little contralto that reminded him of her song. "Don't you tell Mulvane, ever," she cautioned,

"for it's too easy.. I slept right here on

the shore in that hut, where I could see the steamer. We sank my proa in four feet of water—you can see its outline just under the surface now that the tide is at ebb. My old Lascar slept in the brush; he loves it after being cooped up on the smelly boat. Poor Mulvane!"

"He's your father?"

"Mulvane? No! My uncle. My mother was his sister and she died right after my father died. I was a baby, and Mulvane took me. My father was a Spaniard, a player."

"A what?"

"An actor, you would call him, a singer. A gay sort of fellow, they say. He made enemies easily, and finally the wrong ones." Her eyes grew far focussed but otherwise she gave no indication of the tremendous story to be told in fifty words.

"Just before I was born, my mother—the troupe was singing in Saigon then—my mother worried all night because he did not come home, worried because of his enemies, at whom he laughed! And he was home all the time. When she opened the door in the morning she found a basket on the threshold. His head was in the basket."

"Oh!" His ejaculation was one of horror, of sympathy, but the girl's life in the East had schooled her to stoicism. "Since then," she went on, "Mulvane has looked after me. I love Mulvane—so I hurt him. I'm Irish and Spanish, you know."

"But you were to do the talking. Tell me all about yourself, and quickly, for soon I go."

"But there isn't anything much," he objected. "I'm just here, trying to grow sugar, and that's about all there is to it."

"Sounds romantic," she mocked, shaking the mass of hair so that it glistened with fugitive copper. "Your people—where are they?"

"I'm an orphan, too," he explained.

"But I understood you were developing your father's place. That's the way the story is told around the ports."

She looked full at him, her eyes wide, sympathetic, understanding; and suddenly he felt the necessity of telling this girl the story that had never passed his lips. Her own frankness compelled him, it seemed; and her interest in him, though imparted indefinitely, was irresistible. He began clumsily, but as the story unfolded it became easier to tell, gave him relief from a secret shame that had been too much of a

burden. His narrative began with things back home, his inheritance and his plans. Near the end he swallowed hard and began again; "About my father. I want you to know—Feliza—"

"He came over here in the army, was a captain of infantry during the Philippine insurrection. It seems that after things quieted, some of the officers were detailed to put the country back on its feet, get things going again. My father, somehow, was sent way down here to this island, with enough soldiers to make a showing. There was no organized force against him, just a bit of banditry, things unsettled generally. He got to know the whole island, and after a year or so, decided it had a great future. So he invested all his savings in this plantation and tried to get it going. He built the house I live in now; had the same Chinese cook I have now. I never saw my father, so these things of his make me feel—queer—and close to him—"

"Yes," she assented softly.

"Well, that's the way things were. He, busy with his soldiers, giving odd times to the plantation, full of enthusiasm, and everybody liking him. Nearly everybody, at least. Then—it's sort of hard to tell, but I want to tell you about it—something happened. He got drunk. He babbled about a pack train that he had sent out very secretly with gold to pay troops. Acting on this information, bandits waylaid the packtrain and robbed it. When my father sobered and learned what he had done, he shot himself. The eight men were killed, you see, trying to protect it. Among my papers I have the findings of the court martial that investigated the case. You ought to see how large the words 'traitorous' and 'betrayal' look in print!"

"You poor boy! But you know the story's wrong! Of course you knew *your* father couldn't have done it."

"Thanks. I do know. It's wrong somewhere, for I know my father even though I never saw him. His picture—and what people who knew him, say."

"And that's really why you came here? To be on the scene, hoping to clear it up?"

"Yes. That and to justify his faith in all this. I have never thought of doing anything else. This is to be my life. If I can succeed, it will sort of redeem everything."

His smile was so deprecating, so brave, that the girl's voice broke a little as she put her final question, "And now that you're here, you feel that you will succeed? There

are no grave difficulties, no dangerous enemies?"

"Oh, no," he hastened to assure her. "It may sound boastful, but I think the people like me and want to see this plantation succeed."

"You're sure?" she repeated, and it seemed that she was trying to tell him something rather than ask. "No enemies?"

"No. You see, I like folks, and that's half of it. And why should anyone be an enemy? I've hurt no one here." He stood smiling at her—but with a wistfulness that strangely brought tears to her eyes.

"Mack!" she cried, "don't look like that!"

"Like—like what?"

"Like—oh, never mind! Do you remember what I said when I first spoke?"

"Yes. I won't forget. *Ever!*"

"So that you won't forget: 'I like you for that, Mack!'" Then—amazingly—she reached on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips!

He could not move while she went from him. At the ocean's edge she clapped her hands sharply thrice, and a swarthy Lascar, old and stringy, came from under the palms as from a magi's box. Wading into the surf, he reached down to bring up the submerged white proa, emptied the light craft unaided, and deftly attached the outrigger. Coming ashore, he lifted the girl and bore her to the canoe, took the rudder and handed the sail cord to her. But she let the cloth flutter empty and turned her face to the shore.

"Mack!" she called out. "Shall I see you a month from today? We will be back then."

"Yes. Oh—yes!"

"The swordfish will be running strong then; we'll have a day of it! And I'll show you Centipede Island. You've never been there?"

"No. But I have heard of it."

"But don't believe? You will when you see it."

She tautened the sail. "We don't say 'goodby' among our people," she called back as the proa gathered speed. "It's just *Hasta luego!* Mack—"

She was going. Only a last turn around the north headland. How wide the horizon, how cheerless the sea that bore her away! The last turn!

She was gone.

"*Hasta luego.*" A whole month!

Two days later, he recalled his pledge to recover the clock.

CHAPTER VI

WHITE MAGIC

MERCADO forcefully reminded Duell of the Lundu matter two days later at luncheon. "I guess maybe you stop Lundu now," he predicted.

"Why?"

"I clean the silver this morning. One set—knife, fork, spoon—stolen."

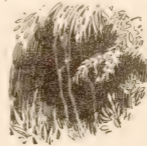
"But why Lundu?"

"*Lintik!* That simple. He set his shrine table for one. For his god."

Mercado was surly, keenly disappointed in his master for not taking the situation in hand. The thievery bothered Duell, too, for it was decidedly unpleasant to think that this half crazed Malay came and went at will; the thought of the almost naked thief going through the house at night like a prowling cat, presented elements of real danger.

The worry persisted, so in midafternoon, he returned from a short inspection of the northwest field and started for the hills. His route took him through the village and he stopped to discuss the problem with Geer, but the squawman was still at siesta, the store closed.

There was no road inland but now, during the dry season, the trail was hard packed and safely negotiable at good speed. For over ten miles the slope was imperceptible and he made good time, but soon



the increasing steepness slowed him. The trail narrowed, zigzagged into a thicker forest of heavier trees. The putt-putt of his motorcycle—the first gas machine that had ever entered

this virgin hill country—started its wild life. A large doe bounded away, but its fawn stared goggle-eyed as the apparition snorted by. A wild boar, wiry and ridge backed, challenged the monster, grudgingly making way on the trail just as the cycle reached him. A final three miles of stiff climb brought him into a roughening of the trail that made the machine useless. Leaving the motorcycle against a tree, he climbed a rocky pathway that led abruptly into an unexpected clearing. It was a beautiful spot, a grassed bench on the mountainside watered by a clear brook that appeared to steam slightly. Colon-

nades of great trees hemmed in the natural garden, and within their circle there grew the rarer growths of the altitudes—tree ferns, giant cactus, great symmetrical airplants. The effect was luxuriant but restrained, clean, silent except for the lisp of the brook.

Duell wandered about the acre, delighted with his discovery, imagining Feliza's joy when he should bring her to see it. At the eastern side, he came to a small break in the circle, a green vestibule that, as he recognized its full significance, brought him up short. With a little sinking at the heart, he realized that the discovery was not his; that this lovely retreat was never to be shared with Feliza.

For this was Lundu's shrine!

Untold multitudes have worshipped at lesser shrines. In the center of the alcove, a great block of porous lava had once been erupted to form an altar. From its base, there gushed a spring whose source must have been near the fiery core of the volcano, for the water issued from the rock steaming hot. The altar was flanked by two tall treeferns whose chaste columns stood like transfixed acolytes; and a canopy of foliage completely roofed the shrine. A large Moro gong hung beside the altar; its bronze tone would carry miles through the silent forest. Upon the altar were two candles, thrust into enlarged porosities of the soft rock.

A bewildering miscellany of offerings lay in testimony of Lundu's devotion—and of his nefarious genius. There was a woman's earring of black pearl, the horn of a swordfish, a large opal ring, bits of coral, a worn leather purse that bulged, three exquisite pearl shells, the unstuffed pelt of a bird of paradise, the dried crystalline lens out of a crocodile's eye, an old Spanish gold piece, two boar's tusks—and much more. But what interested Duell most was the evidence of the tribute levied by Lundu upon the plantation, upon himself.

The clock was evidently the prized offering, for it stood in the center of the display with its gold pendulum rotating, each twisting movement striking a double glint from the waning sun. Alongside the clock lay the silver tableware, and flanking it were a pipe, a fine riding crop and a pocketknife which Duell had thought lost in the fields.

One by one, he removed his possessions and stowed them in his pockets. But the clock was less easily carried. The mechanism continued its ceaseless winding and

unwinding as he held it and debated its safe disposal. How should he carry it home? And while Duell stood there before the fanatic's shrine, carelessly considering so unimportant a problem as a clock, the black wing of death cast its invisible shadow over him.

Through the fringe of forest behind the white man, came Lundu. The Malay walked erect, fine bare shoulders back, approaching as silently as a thought. His was a frenzy of passion that would have convulsed the face of any other; but his chiseled features were as immobile as brown marble. With eyes narrowed to merest slits, he came to the very edge of the clearing, within two leaps of Duell, a kris in his right hand.

A single step away from the altar would precipitate the leap of the avenger; but Duell tarried, deliberating. There was no easy solution of the problem of transporting so awkward a burden as this fragile clock. Certainly it would be ruined on the motorcycle, the fine mechanism deranged. How carefully Lundu must have carried it!

Duell's slight frown gradually smoothed out. Why take it today? Some other time, perhaps, or, for that matter, did he really need it?

The thing had meant so much to Lundu that he had risked his life to possess it. Unselfishly, too, for it was not for his own enrichment, but as an offering. A queer fellow, this Lundu; handsome, with a grace beyond all telling. A thief, yes, probably worse; but with the courage of his own standards.

This secret altar, dedicated to a god fabricated out of the Mohammedanism of his forbears, a smattering of Christianity and bits of racial superstition.

Duell carefully rewound the mechanism and replaced the clock upon the ledge, then one by one laid the other articles back in exactly their former positions. Slowly, with a delicacy that became him, he bared his head as he would have done before a conventional altar worshipped by a multitude. As he walked across the little paradise he could not know that a dread, invisible shadow no longer hovered; that from behind a tree, black eyes followed him as they would a brother.

SUNLIGHT shot horizontally through the aisles of trees, purpling the greenery with the faint pinks of sunset. Near the equator, night comes like

the turning of a switch, and Duell hastened. Hurrying too fast, he took the wrong turn in the trail, and just at dusk rode into one of the score of little villages hidden on the great wooded slope.



Dismounting in the grassy street, he tested the acetylene generator of his headlight. It lacked water, so he went to the nearest stilted hut. Three heads appeared beneath the outflung thatching of the window but bobbed back in fright at sight of a white man. Shortly, the youngest of the women reappeared, timidly listened to his request, but could not understand his words. He repeated in two dialects, but the hill girl shook her head.

He turned away—to find that the entire village had swarmed out to see the foreigner and his strange machine. An old headman approached, uneasy but not forgetful of the dignity essential before his people.

"I understand," he said. "You want petroleum for your lamp. I will have it brought to you."

"No," Duell responded. "I want water for it."

The headman smiled kindly. "It is a difficult tongue, I know. Water is to drink; petroleum is for lamps. It is coming from my small supply."

"But, listen," Duell patiently began again, "this is a different sort of lamp. It needs water."

The kindness faded from the headman's countenance and he drew himself up. "I offer you my poor services, but you would make sport of me before my people. Youth may affront age, but no man may laugh at a headman."

He turned and stalked away down the dark street, Duell trundling the heavy motorcycle behind him, at a loss between compunction and laughter. The crowd trailed behind, encircling the two as Duell caught up with the insulted chief.

"Now, listen!" he entreated. "You've been fine to me, and I want to prove to you that I am sincere. Just a minute!"

An earthen jar stood at the entrance to the headman's house, and from this Duell took the needed water. Pouring it into the generator, he waited until the gas siz-

zled freely, then touched the burner with a lighted match. A chorus of acclaim greeted the brilliant illumination, and he rode away on the wave of applause.

That night in the village a score of natives strove for hours to duplicate the white man's magic.

MERCADO met Duell at the doorway, but the houseboy had no word of welcome, no interest in the outcome of his master's mission in the hills. His pitted face was at once important with news and charged with a cold wrath. He wasted no time in preliminaries. "Sar," he announced with something partaking of gloomy gusto, "our mill burn down."

"What!"

"Yes, sar."

"But—why—I——"

"Yes, sar," Mercado interrupted, "it mek fine blaze. We could not get you. Somebody set it afire."

"But surely—why, who would do such a thing?"

"I don't know whose match for sure. But I know whose scheme."

"Whose?"

"Sotto's!"

Duell was too stunned by the disaster to argue against the houseboy's conviction.

"Mebbe," Mercado finished with his darkest scowl, "mebbe you think prett' soon that some piple don't like us here!"

"Never mind that, Mercado. Where's T'ai Fu?"

"In his room. Door locked."

"What's he doing?"

"Praying his joss. Or meking sharper his three throwing knives. I get you little lunch now, then you go sleep; no call him. Now you back, I go out myself."

"But, look here! Where are you going?"

The lust of battle lighted the boy's face and his hard body tightened. "Oh, I just tek look around. But if Malabar carries Swede match like this—" he exhibited two which he had found near the fired framework that was to have been a mill—"if he he's even one he will be ketching trouble — trouble that I hev a-plenty of for him!"

WITH the house dark, Duell went to the north porch, and nausea sickened him at sight of the collapsed structure showing gaunt in the smoldering flames. The loss was like an

amputation. The first shock passed, but the specter of ways and means rose hard on its heels; for this represented a financial blow that would bring his balance critically low.

The burning might have been accidental; but here he felt upon insecure footing, for a framework of hard wood is comparatively incombustible. He strove hard against the sequence of ideas, but inexorably they led down the lane of thought to one man—Sotto.

Who was he? And where; and just what? What was the secret of his power? And why this enmity toward Duell, the newcomer?

He leaned against the porch support, disheartened, pondering. A low male chant carried from a group of his laborers returning across the dark field from the village; it came to him faintly, oriental, mystic, charged with the lament of a race. A breeze swelled the sound, then it died out on a minor note.

Sotto—T'ai Fu praying, or sharpening throwing knives—

Duell wondered a little wistfully, if it were clairvoyance that always brought thoughts of his father to link with Sotto. Always, when warned of vague dangers by Geer, or Mulvane, or Feliza, his thoughts turned to his father. Was there, he pondered darkly, some instinct at work in his own mind, or something occult?

Though he refused to admit it even to himself, he knew in his heart that his enemy was the unknown and mysterious Sotto. In numerous ways, the authority of the man had been brought home to Duell. Sotto ruled the island; his word evidently was law.

Duell wearily left the porch for his room. The night seemed hot, stickily humid. A two inch cockroach skittered across the floor into the shoe Duell had just discarded; he never could accustom himself to these big vermin that invade the most scrupulously kept tropical houses. His cane bottomed bed was uncomfortable, the mosquito net stifling. A flare from the still smoldering timbers of the mill reddened the dark walls.

His mill burned! He flung out of bed, sat at the window to watch the play of heat lightning about the crest of the distant volcano. Well, he would play out his game as he had begun it—squarely, with no marked cards; after all, what was this but a mischance, a setback to be remedied by harder work, by fighting, by economies?

CHAPTER VII

GROWTH OF THE CANE

WORRY had gradually cost Duell something of his fine enthusiasm. Overwork, isolation from his own countrymen, and the rigors of the hot season were taking toll. Three months had brought the end of the hot season and blessed rain was daily promised but none fell. The mornings and evenings were delightfully cool, but even the natives hid from a sun that at noon cast no shadow. Heat waves were ghosts of dervishes dancing to shrill orchestrations of myriad insects. But the sun stimulated plant life.

The cane flourished. With the drying of the surface soil, the plants sent compensating roots deeper into the moist subsoil, and the stimulated stalks fattened. The entire plantation was now in cane in varying stages of growth that would mature over a considerable period of time and thus not jam the mill, which, rebuilt, was still no more than an immense hulk of corrugated iron awaiting digestive mechanisms.

Duell's labors had borne fruit, for the plantation was no longer a mere plan. It had become a fact, a definite achievement. The soil—six feet of black loam—was a storehouse of plant food; there had come no storms or locust plagues while the plants were tender, and cultivation had been scrupulous under Duell's jealous eye. The humidity, a bit oppressive to human lungs, was life to growing vegetation. The cycle between plough and refinery was now



more than half finished without setback to the crop, and there remained but the constant warfare against weeds. It was well that the cost of operation could be curtailed, for Duell's obligations just balanced his resources. More

and more of his time went to his office at the house, estimating expenses up to the time of harvest, eliminating every possible charge. He had worked at the problem all this day, but at five o'clock the result was the same—he had pared to the bone but found nothing. He had no additional mar-

gin. Hereafter things *had* to run smoothly!

With a frown he loosened his collar, dejectedly filled a pipe, forgot to light it as he slumped down in the chair. Mercado, with bare toes clutched into fresh banana leaves, skated back and forth across the open doorway in maintenance of the floor's high luster. From the kitchen, where T'ai Fu sweated over an iron stove, was wafted his interminable sing-song, the themeless off-toned melody with which he beguiled the hours; projected against the arch of his mouth, the notes were neither tenor nor baritone nor bass, but a mingling of each. A week sometimes passed without Duell's laying eyes on him, but he was always in the kitchen or his little room, giving the plantation life its continuity, its spirit of permanency. Through the open window great airplants rotated from suspended wires on a porch shaded by Japanese curtains. An orchid bloomed purple and white from a shaggy and sterile cocoanut shell.

Feliza—Duell stirred moodily. She had not come again. Mulvane, a little depressed, had told of her having contracted a fever, of convalescence at a missionary hospital in Borneo.

"Of course, she's all right," he had explained worriedly to Duell. "Those missionaries will take good care of her. But she's such a—a—well, she's got all the deviltries of the Irish and the—the—sex of the Spanish. Ye can't chart a course for such as she, for there's nobody like her, b'God! I oughtn't to have taken this side voyage, but there was fine money in it."

A good soul, Mulvane, and canny; for he charged Duell full freight on cases of whisky which no one drank but Mulvane himself.

THE three months had been comparatively uneventful, an interlude of peace. Lundu had not been seen or heard of, and no more thefts had occurred at the bungalow. During the height of an exodus of labor from the plantation, Duell had come upon Malabar in the north field, evidently trying to frighten the ploughmen off the estate. At Duell's approach, the bully again had evaded the issue by limping swiftly away, but with muttered threats.

Defections of labor continued, but were welcomed by Duell in view of restricted operations; and better luck might hold before he needed a big gang for the harvest and milling. Gradually, he was getting

closer to the little brown men, for his nights had gone largely into a study of the language and he was now able to converse freely. Possession of a common tongue was at least a bridge thrown across the racial gap.

His efforts to secure contracts for milling the cane from the eight small plantations had failed. Each native owner admitted the probability of greater profits to himself through modern processing, but would have none of it. They gave no reasons, but seemed blandly skeptical of Duell's success.

The refusal might easily prove disastrous to his entire venture, for in the event of a poor crop of his own—entirely possible this first year—he had figured on being tided over by much profits from the mill. He had interviewed all but Sotto; each was immovable, but one had inferred that they awaited Sotto's decision. If he contracted with the new mill, all might follow. Sotto was the key.

Inevitably, the burning of the mill had focussed Duell's thoughts upon Sotto, and without display of undue interest he had been uncovering what he could of the man's history. Information was meager, for the natives were as evasive as Geer; the casual mention of Sotto brought a blight over any group. However, Duell gleaned sufficient scraps to derive a sketchy background for the man.

Sotto, it appeared, was the son of a small Chinese trader who had landed on the island forty years previously. This father of Sotto had brought an absurdly small stock of matches, thread and similar penny goods. Prospering as Chinese always do, with the years his shack became the big island store that drew patrons from all the isles within five hundred miles. Petty, and at times serious piracy was a major occupation in seas unpoliced by torpedo boats that could run down the *vinta*, and doubtless the trader, Sa To, owed his riches to his status as middleman to the pirates.

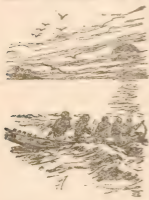
But Sa To's native wife had first fattened and then died, and the son, grown to his twenties, had become suddenly aggressive, with the result that the aging father was shipped off to decline and die in his native Canton. Immediately, too, the son had changed his name from Sa To, the despised Chinese, to Sotto, disposed of the store and invested in rich lands on the coast.

But, so guarded rumor had it, Sotto's premature seizure of his patrimony hardly

explained the degree of his sudden wealth, the amount of gold with which he had become the largest landholder. The general opinion, Duell found, was that Sotto had profited hugely through being the confidant of Captain Duell, then viceroy of the island. Repeatedly Duell encountered this idea; that Sotto's standing as adviser to the white governor had given him advantages with which he had climbed to the top. Once in eminence he had retained his power through a certain indefinable strength. Certainly he knew his people, played upon their fears; and, most shrewdly he remained out of intimate contact, established himself as higher caste by rigid isolation. Most discussed of his known habits was his passion for gambling for huge stakes that augmented his prestige among a people with whom gambling was a lust.

THE meeting was pure accident. Duell had happened upon a group embarking in a big proa, and his attention was caught by the fact that Malabar was among them. Before Duell reached them a final passenger crossed the beach and was carried through the surf to the boat—like a white man. It was Sotto.

He was middle aged, short, with a strong frame overlaid with a cushioning of fat, like a buxom woman. Very small feet were encased in white canvas shoes, and his hands were as small and as soft as a young girl's. But, despite his effemina-cies, he was a powerful man physically, could rise to emergencies calling for great strength. His gait was assured and without effort, his alert gaze took in all within his vision. With his coming the gaiety of the crew was arrested, and all stood in silent restraint. For a moment he stood



erect in the boat inspecting the profuse details arranged for his comfort, then with a little wave of a left hand that bore a big yellow diamond, he seated himself among the cushions. As though the flash of the jewel released a spring, and the proa paddled swiftly into the west.

Discipline, yes, Duell admitted, as he

watched, but nothing in this man to inspire dread. But for days afterward, Sotto's face haunted him, for it was a countenance of singular power. Lighter in color because of yellow blood and freedom from exposure to the sun of the fields, it was smooth as a boy's, unwrinkled and beardless. The strength lay in its calmness, in an utter absence of emotion, a placidity that in an older man would have been termed venerable. His hair, stiffly pompadour, was flecked with gray and added to the impression of well being seated in wisdom. Yes, this was a man—perhaps terrible, but certainly to be reckoned with.

Mercado, finished with his athletic polishing, ventured to remind his moody master of an affair that worried the boy. "Me, I like know where Malabar gone. I think mebbe we catch hell when that devil come back. He gone with that devil man, Sotto, and—"

Duell flared up. "Mercado, for a second and last time, hear this; if you say anything more about Sotto, you find a new job! You sabe that?"

The houseboy nodded abstractedly, torn between surprise at this outburst and pleasure that his docile master could show spunk. "Yes, I sabe," he admitted, "but you no fire me anyway. I here for stay. I, Mercado!"

Which Duell recognized as fact, for Mercado was of the breed that adopts a master for life. Ashamed of his temper, Duell grabbed a wide Stetson and rode away on his pony. "This heat must be getting me," he muttered. "Maybe white men can't live here." A mile later he added, "If I don't live here I can die here. I'm 'here for stay' too. I, McKenzie!"

The ride bored him, for the men had quit for the day and the fields were deserted. Turning off the plantation road he passed down an interminable lane between two ranks of cane that were ten thousand soldiers bearing a million green javelins. The sinking sun lost its ardor as he rode dejectedly on, and a few great drops of rain fell out of an apparently cloudless evening sky. Night dropped like a collapsing black tent, and he turned homeward.

Only the kitchen lights glowed, the porches were dark. A stableman took the little stallion, jerking the reins in time to save Duell's sleeve or arm from its too playful teeth. No rain tonight, Duell told himself despondently, for the moon detached itself from the rim of the volcano

for its journey across an unobstructed heaven. As from time immemorial, distant dogs challenged the great yellow orb. The isle seemed contracted, insignificant.

He wearily climbed the steps. A slight movement caught his eye—and his heart jumped. Incredible, yes, but it was true.

Feliza!

But a different, an even dearer Feliza. In lacy white she was slender, virginal; taller than he had thought. Her hair, drawn into a gleaming formal coil atop her fine head, contributed to the illusion of height wrought by the slender symmetry of her form. A little smile played upon her lips, uncertain, baffling. It was as if by the mere changing of coiffure, she had banished comradeship and evoked the enigma of sex. There was no hint of her power as a swimmer in the white smoothness of her bare shoulders; her bosom was delicately molded, yet utterly feminine, a femininity deliberately enhanced, as by all the daughters of old Castile—patrician and peasant, courtesan and bride—since Spain began.

She did not speak, but as she read the glory in the tired man's eyes, her little smile became more tremulous. The gentle sea murmur, the drone of night insects, the warm evening breeze seemed to enfold him; standing a mere arm's length from the radiant girl, he was suddenly flooded with an engulfing loneliness for her. She seemed as baffling as her smile, as elusive as the faint fragrance of her perfume. His arms reached out; she did not draw away.

CHAPTER VIII

SWORDFISH

HEAVY steps grated on the shell road; and Mulvane came up through the dark, roaring a hearty greeting.

"But," the big fellow said, as he swung the younger man into the light, "ye've been a-skinning' down, ye've been a-skinning' down! The heat, eh? And a bit of worry about the crop and all. Take it easy, me boy—as I've been a-tellin' Feliza here now that she's sound again. This land's all right, me boy, if ye take it easy and keep out of the sun and away from the fresh vegetables, but ye've got to discourage the germs by keepin' a little alcohol a-circulatin' through your system. How's tricks?"

"Pretty good," Duell assured him; but Mulvane, who knew what he knew and

understood the islands well enough to guess the rest, was not convinced. However, he was too shrewd to comment.

"No, we can't stay for dinner," he said, "for I've promised to show Geer a lot of junk this evening and he'll soon be aboard. Nor can the girl, for she's got to keep hospital hours yet a while—and there's no use a-makin' sheepseyes at me, Feliza. See you in the mornin', Duell."

"All right. I want to talk business, too, for I'd like to have you handle my sugar, when it comes on."

"Fine! I've been a-hopin' ye would. I'll treat ye fairly. Of course we've got to see about the anchorage here in the bay—I've never sounded it and the charts don't tell. I don't see why we can't make this island big again, like in the days of old Sa To. A nice run for me, just Hong and back, instead of galivantin' all around. And for Feliza here. Yes, we'll talk it over, Duell. How about the other planters; ye goin' to grind their stuff, too?"

"Well, I haven't made any headway yet."

"U-m-m. Well, ye've got your work cut out—if all this isn't to be just a dream."

"Yes."

There was so much to say to Feliza, but Duell found himself discussing business instead. "Yes," he repeated, "there's much to do. By the way, my mill equipment has not reached Hong Kong yet?"

"No. And no manifests. But I'll have a look around again this time. Ye're still a-wantin' me to fetch it?"

"Of course. I'm all ready for it. Are you sure you can't stay for dinner?" he added, looking wistfully at Feliza. "T'ai Fu is—"

"No." Mulvane was emphatic. "Another time. Come along, girl."

He hustled her down to Duell's dock where the two embarked in the captain's gig and were speedily gone beyond the headland. Left alone again, Duell retired shortly after dinner.

TOWARD morning he woke from a dream and sat upright, convinced that a second person was in his room, but it was only the faint persistence of her perfume. Before sleep could come again, he heard T'ai Fu and Mercado astir.

Then a clear voice hailed the house from just offshore, "Hey, sleepyhead! They don't bite all day!"

Feliza! He raced into his clothes and hurried out into the dawn, saw her ap-

proaching the beach. The Lascar steered the snow white proa along the dock, and Duell leaped aboard. The girl cleated the sail before turning to him. "Big fish are running," she exulted. "We ought to have good sport for an hour."

Hair bundled into a balanced heap upon her little head, Feliza was again an eager sparkling comrade imbued with all the crisp vigor of the dawn at sea. A breeze chopped the water into little waves that flung spindrift into stinging faces as the light craft skimmed the crests at a quartering angle that slapped spume aboard drenching the three. For three minutes, as the sun came above the mountain, the playful sea was bejewelled with thousands of tiny rainbows briefly resplendent above wind flayed crests. Full sunlight brought a clear green surface that became blue as they reached the deeper quiet water. As the shoreline receded, the little bays became etchings of graceful palms over brilliant sand; the river's mouth was somber



with mangrove; the coral reefs were the disjointed backbone of a monster lying submerged along the coast.

The girl had played out a long line with a bait of flying fish. She was immersed in the sport, untalkative, acknowledging Duell's presence only with occasional flashes of fine white teeth. Her hair, wet by the spray, was like a polished carving of dark mahogany. The Lascar, as faithful and as bored as a watchdog, suddenly stifled a third yawn and pointed a brown arm southward.

"Look," he said, and there was a warning in his tone.

A mile distant they saw a sinuous column of water risen from the sea and ending funnel-like in a low cloud. Majestic, bending and twisting like a great serpent, it came on, its rotation flinging dark objects as from a mammoth centrifuge. The worried Lascar tacked frantically, but in a moment the waterspout was a half mile, a quarter mile, from their little boat. Duell rose, white and grave, but at that instant, the spinning column lost momentum and bent gracefully into a figure S, then slowly buckled upon itself to drop back into the sea with a roaring rush of falling waters.

The intrepid girl laughed happily. "It's the nearest I ever saw a spout! I've often—oh! What a strike!"

A violent tug on the line had all but carried the rod from her grasp but she clung desperately while the reel sang.

Eager but coolly competent, she gave the quarry a hundred yards off the spool before curbing its rush. But as, despite her efforts, the line continued to play out, a startled uncertainty darkened her eyes. Ten minutes of grim work ensued before she voiced her elation.

"I think—I have—a swordfish—at last!" she panted, pumping hard at the sulking weight. But immediately dismay brought her close to tears, for the line went slack. "I've lost him!" she wailed. "The first one I ever—"

Crash!

A hundred feet to the left the swordfish broke water. Large as a full grown man, great sword projected skyward, it threshed mightily across the sea, walking its tail in a lust of fury against the hook. Smashing down into the sea, it reared erect, shaking its great armed head to dislodge the barb, a terrific figure in purple and white with a bloody froth thrown by flapping gills.

As it went down again the Lascar turned the boat away from the hazard. "It is a tiger of the sea," he muttered. "This is a small boat."

Duell, similarly opposed to needless risk, drew his pocket knife and reached for the line.

But Feliza was of other temper. "If you do!" she flared. "If you cut that line I'll—"

A third time the battling sea tiger burst into sight, fairly exploding the sea fifty feet from the canoe—and when it came down, its sword was pointed straight toward the boat! It had seen the cause of its torment and furiously drove at it.

"Look out!" Duell cried, instinctively leaping toward the girl, but before he could take three steps, the great fish struck them. There was an instantaneous glimpse of a hurtling purple tornado before the great ram struck—then resistless upheaval; a splintering, tossing confusion. The shock threw Duell clear of the outrigger, and when he came up, he found Feliza beside him, swimming easily. The Lascar, too, was at home in the water, but his gaunt brown face showed deep concern as he trod water beside the white girl. At his muttered warning, the others paused, even Feliza paling as she realized their utter helplessness before the matador of the sea.

No one spoke during a period of suspense. Would the fish resume attack? A long minute dragged by as they trod water beside the demolished proa. Then, "All right now," from the Lascar. "He only

mad at boat. He bust that. Now he happy again. He gone."

The Lascar struck out, leading slowly in the swim, for the shoreline was perilously distant. Duell swam a stroke behind the girl, watching for signs of faltering. A short distance and she fell back to him.

"My dress," she complained, "can you tear it from my shoulders?"

He tore the restraining garment free, and soon her crawl outdistanced his conservative breast stroke. But the three had not covered half a mile when the *putt-putt* of Duell's launch fell upon welcoming ears. The alert Mercado had discovered their predicament, and now came up, grumpily happy.

Feliza went aboard, then the Lascar, Duell coming last turned to wring out a white object he had carried looped through his belt. It was the girl's dress, and he busied himself with the motor until she was ready. Her thanks were the exact words she had used at their first meeting, "I like you for that."

She perched herself on the little deck-house, humming contentedly as sun and wind rapidly dried her garments. There was no slightest indication of reaction from a hazardous adventure except disappointment in not having brought the monster to gaff. Her salted hair concerned her; it must be washed as soon as they reached shore.

SHE stood up and gazed around. "We're miles from your place," she told Duell. "There are the *Siete Picardes*—Seven Fishermen. I have been on all of them—the most gorgeous orchids! There is the Timaurus lighthouse, and—and—yes, there's Centipede Island!"

His smile was a little tolerant, and she flared up. "You don't believe it? You'll see! Mercado, steer yonder."

Mercado was reluctant but under her imperious orders he steered toward an isle so small that it seemed merely the crest of a submarine mountain. As they approached closer, Duell saw that it was volcanic, very porous and scantily vegetated. When they were alongside, Mercado fidgeted uneasily and the Lascar muttered rebellion in unintelligible gutturals.

Feliza laughed. "None of the natives will approach this place," she explained to Duell. "It's taboo. Look!" she cried, pointing to a spot where she imagined life stirred in horrible form. "There's one!

And another! They say there are millions!"

With a quick motion she tossed a seat cushion that landed on a bare rock, and a curious thing happened. Instantly, as if every crevice had poured out a grisly little inhabitant, swarms of small brownish objects converged upon the cushion; the inert black pad became a palpitant reddish thing. Imagination of the plight of a human marooned there reduced Duell's spine to cold jelly; nor could he join the girl's restorative chaffing of the two Malays whose complexions had turned green. None of the four objected when Mercado, kicking the accelerator to its last notch, steered straight for home.

The *Soopa* lay anchored almost in their path, and as they passed the steamer, they



saw a miscellany of second hand stuff being lowered into Geer's lancha by hand power—Molvane not being one to waste steam in winches when muscular crews stood otherwise idle. The *Soopa* was a snooty little craft, full chested, all cargo space;

with paint liberally applied only on the hull, where paint paid dividends. Mulvane loved his vessel, but, as Feliza naively explained to Duell, he wasted nothing on what he called ship's cosmetics.

Feliza's clothes were dried by the sun, and as Mulvane was ashore in the village, the girl listened to Duell's plea that she breakfast with him at the bungalow: At the house, he showed her to the spare room while he prepared to change to fresh ducks.

Fifteen minutes later, Duell emerged from his room whistling gaily. He was to breakfast with Feliza! But, as he turned, after closing the door in his habitual precise way, his sleek head came up in surprise, for, amazingly in this efficient household, there was no breakfast in sight. The table showed only a bare mahogany surface. Mercado was not in evidence. The kitchen was silent. Vexed that his trained establishment should have faltered on this most gala occasion, he strode angrily to the back of the house.

It was deserted, too, but in the back yard he found a singular group. Mercado was fiercely hurling questions at the foreman in charge of the plantation herds, questions

answered laconically, as if in defense. Another of Duell's best men stood by, scowling at his own bare toes that dug the soil. T'ai Fu, as if uninterested, his back to Duell, was viciously throwing a heavy kitchen knife into a palm trunk a few feet distant; time and again he sent it quivering into the soft tree, each toss imbedding the point unerringly in the same slit. It was as if the Mongolian sought relief from pent up anger in physical action.

"What's wrong with you both?" demanded Duell. "With the first guest in the house that we have ever entertained, you've gone crazy! Now, hurry up with the breakfast."

With the rebuke, T'ai Fu became immobile and the foreman's uneasiness increased. As usual spokesmanship devolved upon Mercado.

"Breakfast!" he growled. "When you know, you no longer hongry."

"Know? Know what? What's wrong now?"

"Wrong plenty! All our carabaos and steers have got seeck!"

T'ai Fu's compassion told more than Mercado's words.

Duell's shoulders went limp. "What sort of sickness?" he asked, surprised at the thinness of his own voice.

"The foot-and-mouth!"

"Why, I don't see how—this island is clean from—how *could* the infection reach us!"

Mercado spat viciously. "I told you we ketch hell. Sotto and Malabar return six days now—bring infected animal—that stray animal still in our corral. Now," he added with fierce hopefulness, "now what you want me to do—go kill Malabar—or serve breakfast?"

CHAPTER IX

PESTILENCE

MULVANE and Geer came hurrying to join Duell and Feliza in the big corral. The infection was already widespread, one out of every four or five animals was affected. The hairless water buffalo seemed more susceptible than the steers, a score of these huge animals being helpless in the grip of a disease that attacked mouths and feet simultaneously. Their plight was pitiful; heads drooped almost to the ground, thick ropes of mucous drooled from swollen lips, and the agony from inflamed feet kept them shifting weight in ceaseless and futile effort to ease each afflicted hoof. The in-

fectected steers showed similar lesions: their coats stood erect, and they shivered with each surge of mounting fever. It was a scene of wholesale pain, suffered silently except for the champing of lacerated mouths.

Duell was haggard as he turned to Geer and Mulvane. "We've got to do something for them!" he cried desperately. "We can't stand here and let them suffer like that! Isn't there a cure?"

Both shook their heads; but Feliza's tense countenance did not express a similar hopelessness. She spoke an aside to Mulvane, who suddenly struck the top bamboo of the corral a mighty blow.

"Of course!" he cried. "Now that you remind me of it, there is a doctor over at Samali—a missionary fellow—makin' his annual search for sick—and souls. I'll put in there and get him to come over at once. Or better, why not sling that launch of yours on my davits, and take your boy along to rush him back?"

Feliza nodded competently. "Yes, and as soon as we get aboard I'll use the wireless. Some boat may be anchored at Samali and we may get word to Stevenson and hold him."

Anything, Duell wanly agreed, was better than inaction.

Mercado, whom they found at the house putting razor edge to a dagger, postponed this pleasant task when apprised of his important rôle. Also, there might be handsome wenches on Samali—

He came tardily from his room, arrayed in fine blue cotton, hand embroidered by some feminine conquest in the village, and strutted down to the dock.

There Mulvane saw fit to caution Duell against excessive hopes. "All that I've heard about this disease shows it's bad stuff," he said sympathetically. "So don't get a-thinkin' that it's all over when we get this Doc Stevenson. But good luck, anyway!" And he gripped Duell's hand in his paw.

Feliza and the Lascar stood apart, she issuing instructions to which he nodded understanding. At the dock she took the Lascar's hand and placed it in Duell's. There was something infinitely tender and fiercely protecting in the gesture with which she gave Duell her trusted Malay.

"He will be your man," she said, "until I get back or until you need him no more."

He nodded, at once miserable and inexpressibly happy.

Mulvane grumbled a bit but gave consent rather than wage a losing contest with

Feliza. "He can be sounding the bay for us," he conceded. "The beggar knows how."

"If he has time," Feliza amended. "First, he's going to build a new proa for me. But he's not to work too hard day-times, Mack, for he's going to be your night watchman—for me."

She spoke lightly, but as the boat drew away from the dock her eyes were darkly luminous. She stood in the stern, as the launch headed out. Duell stood watching. Then the launch rounded the headland behind which the *Sooa* was anchored. Soon there sounded the faint rumble of the winch at the anchor, and three short whistles announced departure into the north.

Resolutely squaring his shoulders, Duell returned to the house, where T'ai Fu in-



sisted upon serving the delayed breakfast. Duell ate listlessly, then started for the corrals, only to turn back in realization of his helplessness there. Nothing to do but await the doctor.

T'ai Fu came to him. "Some men to see you," he announced, studying Duell enigmatically. "Eight men. Planters."

Duell knew them all, for these were the owners of the small plantations whose cane he had hoped to contract for his mill. Their methods were haphazard, their mills small and absurdly inefficient; but the total of their output if properly handled would comprise a very considerable business.

They stood in a compact group, a little uneasy before the white man. Without a spokesman, they stood silent for an interval, and Duell noted again the uniform looks of Malay men, how gracefully they age. The eight were formal in white tunics and three had sacrificed comfort by donning shoes for this call of state upon the white man.

"What can I do for you?" Duell asked.

The oldest, a gray haired but physically able fellow named Tibonan, had been nudged into the forefront. "We came to see about your epidemic," he began. "We are sorry for you."

"Thanks," Duell returned gratefully. "It was good of you to come. Perhaps you can suggest some remedy?"

"No!" came from three or four of the group at once as if rehearsed.

Another awkward silence, then the spokesman went on. "No, there is no remedy. That is why we came."

"Go on."

"Your infected herd threatens ours, the whole island," he said hurriedly, not liking his task. "So we ask you to kill yours at once and so save us."

"Oh!"

"That is the method used in your own country with foot-and-mouth. So, of course, you will do the same here."

Duell knew this to be so, and a great responsibility was now added to his own immediate disaster. If infection should spread to the herds of these innocent men—yet the doctor was coming. And the wiping out of his own herd—one hundred and eighty-four fine animals imported from Pnom-Penh and immune to rinderpest—would effectually end him; the cane-fields would again become the jungled prowling ground for wild boars, this bright home the musty abode of creeping things. Duell wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

T'ai Fu seeing sacrifice written on his master's countenance, intervened roughly. Pushing past Duell, he directly confronted the natives with a personality immeasurably stronger than their combined own. His eye met and conquered each opponent in turn, not scornfully or aggressively, but with a keenness of perception that made him master of the group. They shuffled awkwardly, gave ground slowly.

"You talk freely," he said. "You come with a plan too carefully prepared. When did you think all this, and where?"

There was no answer, but a telltale exchange of suggestive glances among the leaderless group.

T'ai Fu followed up his advantage, seizing the spokesman by the jacket and pulling him close to Duell and himself. "Tell me now!" he demanded. "Who put these fine words into your mouth?"

Detached from his compatriots, the old man lost his courage. "We all talked it over, last night," he declared.

"Where?" T'ai Fu still gripped him

"At—at Sotto's," the other confessed.

"So!" burst from the Mongolian. "Sotto!" With a quick motion he sent the Malay reeling back into the group. "Go back to Sotto," T'ai Fu bade them, "and tell him you failed; that a white doctor is coming to advise us. Go now!"

They went, hurriedly; but at the edge of

the clearing, the old man, Tibonan, who had betrayed Sotto, detached himself from the others and disappeared into the brush, manifestly fearful of reporting in person to the overlord of the island.

T'ai Fu lingered but a moment, his scarred lip twisting faintly; then went kitchenward without discussing the event with his master. Nor was discussion necessary; the story was too fully told to be commented upon.

The revelation was a blow to Duell. He had wanted to believe the best of a man once identified with his father, but he was no dupe. Proofs of villainies were mounting up. There must be a reckoning, an immediate showdown.

"T'ai Fu!" he called; and when the cook came, "I'm going over to see this Sotto. Right now. No, I don't want my revolver. I'll be back about noon." His jaw set grimly.

IT WAS four miles to Sotto's place, and Duell rode slowly, thoughtfully, unconscious that a handsome figure shadowed him; that methodical, graceful strides kept pace with his pony's jogging trot. Lundu, uncannily omniscient, accompanied the white man he respected.

Sotto's house was a fine old structure, hardwood, but going to seed like its surroundings. Set upon a rise, it commanded a fair prospect of sea and forest, but the personal care that would have given it personality and life was missing. It seemed deserted but as Duell drew near, a young boy, ragged and unkempt as a beggar, opened the door from within with a furtiveness become habitual. Mounting a short staircase, Duell came into a large, square room and unexpectedly stood before his man.

It was unmistakably Sotto.

The planter raised his brows in interrogation. There was no welcoming word; a mask seemed fitted across the countenance so curiously benevolent—yet not so. He stood motionless, with his right thumb caught in the heavy gold chain that carried from pocket to pocket of his white tunic, his left hand slowly clasping and unclasping, his only betrayal of possible emotion. Thus he made Duell's introduction of himself as difficult as might be, for, as in all conflicts, the first slight victory might prove conclusive.

"I've been coming to see you for some time," Duell said.

There was no answer, merely an exaggeration of the bland, silent interrogation.

"I've wanted to talk over several things," Duell went on more harshly, "things of decided importance to you."

Sotto spoke, evenly and without emphasis. "When I want to discuss matters with anyone I send for him. Yes."

Duell flushed. "You forget yourself!" he snapped. "Now listen to me! I'm here to find out one thing—and I'll give you a chance to answer, even if it's plain enough now. Did you cause my herd to be infected? Answer!" His fists clenched. He stepped a yard nearer.

Sotto's feigned benevolence faded, and for a moment, the heavy mask lifted to disclose the devil's own malignity. "Listen," he said thickly, "you come uninvited to my house. Yes. As you came un-

wanted to this island. Think what you will; do what you will; But make the best of your —your luck! Yes. Good day to you."



It was dismissal, and open enmity! Under the smart of the man's confident declaration of war, a taut wire seemed to snap

in Duell's brain. With three steps he reached Sotto and whirled him about. Large as he was, undoubtedly powerful, Sotto spun in the American's grasp to face him.

"Now you listen!" he cried huskily. "I get you. You hate me, the son, because of evil you did to my father! That's why you're trying to drive me away. You fear I'll learn what you have done! And—" it rang out like prophecy—"and I will!" Disregarding his own weapon, or any the planter might carry, he swung the flat of his hand in two stinging slaps straight into the hateful face.

Sotto's mongrel skin went sickly green, red spotted. As Duell released him, he fell back from the white man as from a specter. But as Duell stalked from the room and down the stairs, Sotto seemed to go mad. With a face distorted by fear and passion, he leaped to the window. "Malabar!" he shouted. "Malabar! Stop him!"

And as the youth emerged into the open, the lame killer raced toward him from a

thatched shed, a big work machete readied for a task longed for since Duell had first frustrated him. A task doubly pleasant, now that it was to be performed under the very eyes of his patron. Duell, hand on the butt of his weapon, waited grimly. But, as Malabar's grotesque but swift leaps cut down the distance to the helpless white man, a new factor entered the situation—Lundu!

He stepped from around the house, erect, unhurried, graceful as a cat and as negligently wary. His fine brown torso was naked even of its *anting-anting*, and in his right hand he carried a waved, slender kris that would slice through thick bone. The grace of the man belied his speed, for, before the crippled assassin had covered half the distance to his supposedly unarmed quarry, Lundu stepped before Duell facing Malabar. There was no doubt of his purpose, no question of his efficiency. Malabar limped to a pause, and at ten paces, stood staring stupidly at the defender.

For a long minute, the curious tableau held—a splendid naked madman against Sotto's brutal Malay hireling. Sotto broke the spell, disappearing from the window and leaving his henchman without even moral support in the contest from which Malabar shrank. Malabar suddenly felt woefully alone. He turned toward the brush, and as he went, he gathered speed.

Alone with Lundu, Duell tried to thank him but was stopped by the other's expressive gesture. Lundu's firm brown hand closed about his arm and guided him toward the tethered stallion.

"You have suffered much," the Malay said softly, "but your troubles from these two are over."

It was simply said, but with the finality of a deity speaking from Olympus. Lundu's was an ease of mind that matched his supple body; his confidence was as perfect as the coordination of muscles that helped Duell into the saddle. Duell would have tarried with him, wanted to fathom this totally unexpected friendship from one adjudged an enemy, but there was dismissal in the very smile with which Lundu bade him farewell.

"If you want anything—ever—come to me!" Duell said.

Lundu's smile widened faintly as his brown hand covered the white in a contact of brotherhood. But he made no other acknowledgment. As if Duell, or anyone, could ever help him!

AT FIRST Duell thought it was coincidence that, as he rode back through Sucat, the villagers hurried away at his approach. But when even Geer, a white man, evaded him by hastily disappearing into the movie house, Duell understood. This visit to Sotto, this open enmity, was already known and all would evade him hereafter until the battle was done.

His own outburst at Sotto had been unexpected; his accusation had been largely a sudden inspiration prompted by Sotto's insufferable egotism. But the moment the words were spoken Duell had known that he was right; that Sotto's hatred of him, the son, was founded in some older villainy, some dark deed which the half-caste feared might be resurrected from a past he thought buried. Duell now knew that he must learn the truth. He must. He must. But how?

Passing the corral he stopped to hear the report of the corral boss—eleven more animals with the dreaded symptoms. The bamboo enclosure was a welter of dumb suffering; it was as though even defeat could not come unattended by visible misery that he could not allay. But, with Sotto's hand disclosed, Duell would not kill the herd until the doctor came. Then, if killing became necessary, he would collect in full from Sotto—at the point of a gun, if necessary!

Twenty paces from the porch he drew rein, surprised to see an unfamiliar object dangling over the threshold. A short bamboo pole had been stuck into the lattice work above the steps and hung from this by a cord was something that gleamed in the sunlight. As he rode beneath it he recognized the object.

It was Lundu's silver bag, his invaluable *anting-anting*!

Duell grinned—but not at all in derision—as he realized the full significance of Lundu's sacrifice to his protection. Partially deranged though the Malay doubtless was, he had been given a sure instinct that had told him that crisis impended, and without hesitation, he had lined up with the weaker force. This pathetic *anting-anting* was the portable symbol of his shrine, Lundu's own talisman, his certain guard from personal harm. And he had now given it to his white friend. A splendid gesture!

T'ai Fu spoke gravely from the shadow of the doorway. "Lundu did not know that I watched him hang it," he said. "I let him do it."

"Yes. Of course!"

T'ai Fu's upper lip twisted, as always when he was deeply moved. "Lundu by placing it there, enlists under your banner, and warns all others that no harm shall befall this house."

"Yes. We will let it stay there. Hm. You speak good English when you wish to, T'ai Fu!" he added pointedly.

CHAPTER X PLASTERED!

THE ensuing four weeks were probably the busiest of Duell's whole life. The missionary doctor fortunately had been located by Mulvane and rushed back by Mercado—the missionary as indifferent to the hazards of the long



trip in the inadequate launch as Mercado himself.

He had come ashore casually, indifferent to his surroundings, peering nearsightedly at Duell and asking

ing to be taken at once to the infected corrals. Except upon the subject of diseases, he had acted as bored and disillusioned as a bartender. Three days passed before he could remember Duell's name. But he did know his business, with the result that at the end of a month, the herd was saved.

With his task done, the missionary had drifted away as casually as he had come, leaving Duell to complete a meticulous disinfection aimed at the elimination of any lurking germs. As a final precaution, the recovered animals were driven through an antiseptic dip into a new corral, and Duell happily touched a match to dried grass strewn a foot deep over the old enclosure for a final rite of disinfection by fire.

The bamboo fencing caught the flame, joints popping merrily in the general rejoicing. The men, who for weeks had been confined to grass huts thrown up in the corral, laughed as they stripped naked under Duell's orders and tossed their garments into the cleansing flames. Lastly Duell led the way through a creolin bath, and presented each man with new clothes better than those destroyed. Dismissed, the men hurried to the beach to participate in the barbecue the master was giving in celebration of the victory.

It had proved something of a burden

financially, though. The expenses of disinfection, new corrals, extra labor, had mounted high, and Duell faced the fact that he would enter the period of harvest crippled for funds. Just how he would manage he did not know. The shortage was small, but the lack of adequate finance was a worry, for unexpected items had a way of cropping up. And there hung the shadow of a ruthless enemy. What would be his next point of attack?

Stevenson had warned Duell about his health, had spoken of malaria in what he termed the "crescent form"; but Duell had been too worried over the herd to spare himself. Of late he was susceptible to periods of lassitude and headaches, but gave small heed. When little fevers had set in, he had allowed Mercado to dose him with the missionary's white tablets; but any reference to possible illness made him irritable. Tonight he refused Mercado's potion and demanded to be left undisturbed. He was, he told himself, feeling rotten and wanted only to be left alone.

Mercado cocked his head at the curt order, decided that this was one of those occasions when the master was really master, and soon left for his nightly strut before his newest brown skinned conquest. T'ai Fu's movements in the kitchen died away, and the stillness of a hot evening clamped down upon the house. Duell moved uneasily in the long chair, his head a dull ache.

A billow of fever flushed his cheeks, subsided; he settled deeper into his chair for comfort that was not there. The sun had gone, without color. Out of the west issued a skirmish line of shadows; then the black troops of night charged across the sea in resistless onset. A carabao wandered from the village, blundered across the lawn; catching the strange scent of the white man, it snorted once before its gray bulk faded into the night. A huge bat fluttered in crazed zigzags about the porch, collided with a post and departed. A shadow heavier than its neighbors floated slowly past the porch—the Lascar in his sleepless vigil.

At the doorway, the swing of Lundu's *anting-anting* caught Duell's eye, and he lay down comforted. But the fever gripped him again. He heard Mercado enter after midnight; and later the tinkling spatter of rain upon the corrugated roof. It was good for the cane, he thought deliriously; the stalks would grow an inch during the night. Or Mercado would. Or something. He saw the Lascar forty feet

tall; then Lundu strode into his delirium to lay the golden keys of heaven upon the stone altar. For a moment it was Sotto and not the *aning-anting* swinging from the bamboo pole. Then the fever broke and he lay exhausted but very happy. For the *Soopa* was due tomorrow, and Feliza.

THE *Soopa* came in at ten next morning but, Mercado having torn down the motor of the launch after its long sea journey, Duell had to school himself to patience until Mulvane and Feliza came ashore. Mulvane struck the dock with his big hand outstretched, a wide grin making a gap in his thick copsis of whiskers.

"We heard the good news at Samali!" he cried. "Fine business, me lad, fine business! Not a head lost! But say—you don't look any too good yourself. Been a-worryin' too much, eh?"

"Oh, I'm all right," Duell assured him, and turned to Feliza. In a simple white frock, she was girlish, almost prim. She wore no hat, but carried a vivid Chinese parasol through which the sun struck faint splashes of color.

"Your—your proa is done," he stammered, flushing a little to match the glow within him. "The Lascar has slaved at it. And been awake every night besides."

"I want to see it," she said. "Now." Mulvane had other plans, but they waited until the new boat had been inspected. It was a thing of beauty, exquisitely fashioned out of quarter inch hardwood, fastened to a keel hewed from a block of heavy molave. Painted snow-white. It stood on the beach ready for launching.

With ten words the girl amply paid the faithful Lascar for all his pains with it. "He worked hard to finish it today," she softly told Duell. "It is my birthday—my twenty-first."

"Then we'll have a fiesta, at my house!" he cried gaily. "Please let me! In your honor!"

She smiled, nodded her imperious little head. "I had planned just that," she confessed. "Just you and I—for you can't come, Mulvane. There is so much to talk about, Mack, so much to tell me about—about everything!"

His heart leaped at the thought that she was shyly recalling their last meeting when Mulvane's coming had interrupted them.

"Feliza! Oh—I—you—yes, Mulvane, I'm coming."

He turned reluctantly to where the captain had been drawn aside by the Lascar to inspect a crude chart showing the soundings of the bay. "It looks good to me, Duell," Mulvane opined. "There's a break in the reef there, and clean sand bottom. I can anchor her about there, and she can swing so."

But he loved his boat too well to risk it without personally going over the ground. "I'll tell ye what," he concluded. "It looks like a fair anchorage but we'll make a few more soundin's this mornin', to be certain sure. It will mean a good deal when we come to load your sugar, and also when we unload your mill machinery—and that's next month, me boy, for it's due in



Hong Kong this week. It's on the Korea."

"How are we going to get it ashore? It's heavy stuff, Captain."

"Easy. I'll anchor right in this bay, close in, lower the machinery into lighters and poke them right onto the beach. Leave it to me! But before we bring the *Soopa* into your bay I want to check up these soundin's. You'll have to help me, for I see Feliza has gone gallivantin' off in her new proa, tryin' out her birthday present. Let's go. It won't need but a few soundin's to see if the Lascar is right."

Duell looked longingly after Feliza and the Lascar putting out in the new boat, but the skipper was not to be gainsaid; and Mulvane's few soundings proved endless.

It was well when the task finally was finished, for Duell's long exposure to the noonday sun had hastened the onset of his daily fever. A rending headache dazed him, so that he let Mulvane return to the ship without thinking to invite him to lunch. Dizzy, half blind, Duell stumbled at the steps, and Mercado hurried out to lead him. Duell fell upon the bed and the boy removed his leggings and shoes, then dosed him liberally with the febrifuge. Turning his face to the wall, Duell sank into partial coma, just conscious enough to recall that the attacks usually subsided in a couple of hours.

But this attack did not. The malarial plasmas swiftly multiplied in his bloodstream, releasing toxins that seemed to explode in his head. Headache became

intolerable, and he called Mercado, who responded with another dosage of quinine. Niagaras roared in each ear, and delirium peopled the room with phantom figures. Mercado, worried, summoned T'ai Fu, who shook his head after feeling the master's cordy pulse. The two servants hung about the sickbed all afternoon, frightened at the violence of this attack.

At six o'clock, Duell sat suddenly erect, his cheeks like chalk, his shining eyes wide open but unseeing. "Mercado," he called weakly, "I'm thirsty."

The boy, dozing in a chair beside the bed, came awake in a little ecstasy of joy over Duell's apparent recovery from his profound stupor. "I'm thirsty," the sick man repeated, and Mercado hurried after ice water. But as he was pouring it, an inspiration came to him; why not a stimulant to carry the sick man safely over this crisis? Why not a little of the strong medicine other white men used so freely? A little whisky would stir his blood; that is, if he could persuade the abstemious patient to take it.

Mercado was one who tried anything he thought might succeed; no mere theorist, he. Hesitant, uncertain of his reception, he carried in a glass half filled with whisky, and supporting Duell's head, placed it to his lips. Duell drank greedily, choking at the unaccustomed bite at his throat, but finishing the heavy drink. Mercado retired, as pleased as he was surprised that there had been no resistance. He now rated his master a good patient.

Ten minutes later, Duell again rose in bed. "I'm thirsty," he complained. His cheeks bore some color and his voice was stronger, favorable symptoms that proved to Mercado the efficacy of his prescription. He poured another stiff drink of whisky down his master's throat.

Mercado, ministering angel!

Five times, Duell proclaimed his unappeased thirst and Mercado responded, with no faintest suspicion that his victim was delirious from raging temperature, that he was as unconscious as though dead. In less than an hour, Mercado had administered more than half a bottle of potent Scotch to a total abstainer weakened by a month of intermittent fever.

Disaster was inevitable.

Just as it grew dark, Duell suddenly flung himself out of bed and stared wildly about until his eyes focused upon Mercado. He strove desperately to summon memory, but the fumes of the stimulant befogged his mind, so that he could not re-

call his dinner in honor of Feliza's birthday.

"I gotta—gotta 'ngagemen'—I gotta meet—shay, who've I gotta?" he demanded thickly.

His lids drooped and he swayed precariously, but a tremendous effort of subconscious will power steadied him. His hand picked uncertainly at his brow as if wiping cobwebs away, and desperation haunted his distended eyes.

"I gotta shomething," he insisted. "I tell you I—I—I just gotta!"

Memory would not function and terror seized him. "I tell you I gotta—I gotta—I just gotta! There's shomep'n——"

His cry died out in a whine, and with inebriate tears he sat down deliberately to think. What was it he had to do? No, not sugar cane—foot-and-mouth disease; no—a shrine; no—nor a mill—as if a drapery had been lifted Mulvane's last sentence came to him, "I've brought some good movie films for Geer. Comedies."

"Thass it!" he cried thickly. "Movie show. G-Geer's. Fli—fim—fillums. Gotta go. You and I. Now!"

Then at last Mercado woke to what he had wrought. But too late, for Duell was already under way. Drunk, all inhibitions removed, his square jaw still asserted itself, so that it was with difficulty that the boy stopped him long enough on the porch steps to clothe him. There was no time to secure T'ai Fu's help, for Duell drunk was a tyrannical Duell; a true white man, imperious and in a hurry. Mercado could but follow loyally, steadying the master now and then when equilibrium deserted, and listening to Duell's rambling talk.

"You're all righ', Mercado," he asserted as the boy brought him erect out of a wide careen that threatened to become a detour. "You're all righ'. Good houseboy, good mechnic — mechanic — good ev'thing. You're good 'piple,' boy. Yep. So we go movies—my treat, too. Yep. Here we are now. H'lo, Geer. Two tickets—firs' clash tick's—no, you keep change."

They lunched past the amazed Geer, entering a hot darkness packed with villagers seated on bamboo benches set on a flat dirt floor.

"Here we are! Yep. Fine movie, too, jus' like he said. 'Mer'can life, I don't think! Marble baths and marble faced women—look at that! Reg'lar harem scene! 'Merica, my ear! What d'ya think we 'Mericans are, anyway!"

He went on loudly ridiculing a hectic film of silken legs and satin vice exported

as American home life. But not a word of profanity, though the words were drunken. In the dim light reflected from the cotton sheet his face was deathly white, his eyes deep in darkened sockets. All about him brown faces looked in wonderment. And he waved a leering greeting that included them all. His was a high good humor.

But something was missing—and suddenly he exclaimed with all the gusto of original research, "Say, M'cado, there'sh no moos—music! What good are pitchers without moo—music? Come on—I saw some!"

Dragging the boy bodily, he reeled back past the astounded Geer and into the adjoining store where he pawed over Geer's second hand stock until he dug up his trophy—an old snare drum. With critical gravity he tightened the head, testing it until the results were to his absurdly exacting taste, then turned upon the boy.

"Whatta you play?" he demanded. "I usta play this in prep school. School band. Good one, too! Yep. I was offered jobs in orchis—orchestras. I'm good! Mine's drums. What's yours?"

Mercado was for once beyond his depth, but there was no denying this transformed master. "Me? I play accordion."

"Ta! Eyetalian bagpipe, eh? There's one. Over there. Lesh hear!"

Mercado's tentative notes convinced him, and he collared the boy to drag him back into the theatre and down the aisle to the conventional position of theatre orchestras. Seated before the screen, he studied the distorted figures directly over his head, striving to think of something interpretative of the scene. He gave it up.

"You play, M'cado," he ordered, "and I'll follow. Yep. Letter go?"

Mercado began poorly, but catching the contagion of the adventure, he soon did let go. This would make island history—and he was a factor in it!



WITH the first bars Duell's teeth shone through his stiffened lips, and his shoulders rocked as he gave himself to his theme. His long fingers barely moved as he beat sharp mea-

sure, but a steady and exact rhythm rolled from the taut hide, so clear and smooth as to be music in itself. An artist working with his chosen medium; syncopation of the melodies the entranced Mercado poured from his concertina as from a miniature pipe organ.

A hundred dark shoulders rocked in unison with the drum, a scattering applause broke out, swelled, then died out in greater tribute. On and on, two unlovely instruments, but in the hands of genius they blended in perfect harmony. The operator at the crank caught the infection of the rhythm—and the figures hurtled breakneck across the screen. A drunken American and his Malay servant—on and on—exaltation!

The steady hammering of his own drumming beat upon Duell's brain like the shapening blows of an artisan's tool. Gradually shapelessness took form. He stopped automatically to catch Mercado's new tune, and his hands fell at his sides as he recognized the lilting melody. It reached his befogged mind not as the wheeze of a concertina, but as clear notes carried over a sea in starlight.

If I only knew—"

The melody was like a breeze clearing his befogged brain. As if just awakened, he stared up at the screen, blinking, trying to orient himself in the bizarre surroundings. The lights snapped on, and in astonishment he looked at his drum, at the now silent accordion in Mercado's hands, at the two hundred brown faces grinning into his.

It was all unbelievable, some disordered dream, a part of the dizzy weakness that kept him swaying on feet that were icy cold. All those brown faces—were they laughing with him, or at him? What could he have—how could he—why—

Above the rows of grinning teeth he saw a movement, the departure of two white clad forms. With a hand on Mercado's shoulder he steadied his weaving body; strove desperately to focus his wavering vision. For just a moment the blurred figures were clear cut.

Mulvane and Feliza!

He was glad, for they would help him; would understand how ill he was, would get him home. But they had not seen him, for they still moved swiftly toward the exit. He tried to call out, but his voice was a mere whisper. When he sought to catch their attention by waving an arm he

lost balance—and there was a laugh from the crowd, a laugh at him!

The derisive outburst was the tonic that restored his memory. Feliza! Her birthday! His dinner in her honor! Frantically he got out his watch. Ten o'clock!

She had paused at the exit, was looking straight at him. Her eyes were ablaze with contempt, with outraged pride. With one hot glance she blasted him as that lowliest of mortals, a drunken white man sunk to clowning before natives. Her scorn was devastating, final, beyond repair.

Then she was gone. But her flashing contempt was seared across his brain like the arc of a thrown torch.

CHAPTER XI

FLOTSAM

MERCADO and three of the plantation laborers carried the collapsed white man from the village, and he lay on a long chair, wretchedly ill, so weak he could scarcely raise his hand, while recollections of the girl's anticipations of her birthday with him were a torment.

She had come to the house, T'ai Fu told him, in her rarest mood. With his Mongolian gift for terse description, the cook somehow enabled the sick man to see the girl's effervescence, the gaiety overlying a shy reticence. Her silvery gown; high heels; a festive mantilla caught upon a Spanish comb thrust deep into massed hair. With a dull ache in his heart, Duell saw it all—the surprise of T'ai Fu and his confession that there had been no mention of a dinner—the grievous hurt that had flamed into blazing anger. Insult! And at his unwitting hands.

Duell had no whisper of rebuke for Mercado, for the boy's rôle had been but that of a mistaken Good Samaritan. At least the boy's heroic treatment had cured the fever, though it might have killed. Reaction from the terrific stimulation left Duell burned out, numb. He lay outstretched with heavy head on trembling hands.

His homely duties finished, T'ai Fu peered thoughtfully out into the rain which now fell steadily; the warm nourishing downpour that energizes the tropics. The drip from the palms was monotonous, lulling; slowly he returned to the side of his nerveless master, and even in his extremity, Duell sensed the cook's compassion.

"Tomorrow will be another day," the Chinaman said.

"Yes," Duell whispered. "I'll buck up."

And later, "Another day like these last ones?"

T'ai Fu might have been a father schooling a son. "There is a saying," he answered softly. "Time is a gentleman."

"A—what?"

"A gentleman."

"You mean that—that—"

"Yes. Time

will work things out. Always."

"Oh."

Duell pondered. But it was not a time for philosophy; he wanted Feliza.

"Has her boat gone yet?" he whispered hoarsely.

"She said at midnight."

But Duell was still so dazed that the cook had been gone for some time before the new hope dawned on him. He weakly studied his watch. It was now eleven o'clock. He might see her yet, might explain his miserable failure. With a tremendous effort he got to his feet. His legs were fluid, but his will carried him to the door, stumblingly down the steps, out into a gusty wind that shot stinging wet dots into his face. He must see her, must explain. Fumbling blindly with the motor launch he found it still in disrepair and turned back baffled. But there was the blur of the white proa on the beach—she had not taken it! He put his shoulder to the stern of the feathery craft but his weak thrust merely tumbled him into the wet sand. He failed again; and again; he must see her, he must make her understand!

Again he strove to launch the proa, and this time it moved forward as if endowed with life, and a firm hand steadied him into the boat. In the splashing darkness, the newcomer seemed disembodied, but the craft was launched with a deliberate and easy competence, and a trained paddle turned the proa, straight into the teeth of the storm. Duell, inert where he had collapsed against the bamboo brace of the outrigger, was so exhausted that he did not realize that he was lying in a swishing pool of rain water, that he dripped as though fresh from the sea. Opening his eyes, he looked up through the driving downpour



into the dim countenance of his friend in need, then closed his eyes with the confidence of a tired boy come home.

"Thanks," he whispered hoarsely. "It was good of you to help, Lundu."

"I know," Lundu soothed in his pleasant baritone that made music of the bevowelled tongue he spoke. "I have been with you all through this night. I know all. We may be in time."

Lundu sat erect, paddling with strokes curiously restrained, as though he metered his strength. His brown torso was cast of bluffed wet bronze that shed the glistening cascade. The frail proa rose and fell to a sullen swell that was running southward down the straits, as if some distant and unseen force was astir in the depths. A typhoon hovered over the night. Far to the north thunder rumbled. Raindrops were dull pearls rolling aslant down black velvet. Lundu's expert paddle was silent, the boat seemed motionless, suspended between two black voids, but soon to the right there came the sound of swells washing rocks, and Duell sensed that they had rounded the dim headland.

He turned his aching body in the waterlogged canoe—and what he saw brought a little cry of misery. The *Sooa*, sailing at eleven instead of midnight, was a storm smutted double row of yellow lights, miles distant.

The paddler sat immobile. "They sail southwest," his voice came out of the dark, "out of the path of the storm. They will be safe."

Duell's mind was a dull ache. The rain veered to pelt his back as Lundu skillfully brought the proa about. They came opposite the dock light but the paddler kept straight on. In the indifference of weary pain, Duell made no comment, but soon the Malay informed him.

"There is another thing on the night," he said in melodious gutturals, "a thing you should know."

As they bobbed from trough to trough of the fast mounting seas, Duell wondered vaguely how Lundu learned so much. He was never in evidence, never talked with others, but in some mysterious way he knew more than any twenty others. More even than T'ai Fu.

The rain became a downpour of long javelins, the seas a menace, the night blacker. But suddenly, a half mile directly ahead of them, a torch flamed through a diagonal pattern of rain grooves. The glow disappeared, but Lundu had as guide an eerie instinct, for soon the proa

grounded softly on a pounded beach alongside a larger craft. Lundu assisted Duell ashore, then spoke a single word that brought several figures into dim relief against the night. Three mariners, then a taller and thinner form that Duell knew. It was Geer.

Duell's body was an empty husk but the veil was rent from before his mind and instantly he understood. Harried, as he was, there was to be this final consequence of his unconscious folly. The weak as well as the strong were to be lost to him, to his cause.

"You're leaving the island, Geer?" he muttered despondently.

"Yes, I'm going," the squawman admitted, and there was desperation in his tone, the desperation of one who has fought a losing battle with his better self. "Yes, I'm going. It's all up—after tonight."

"You mean my—my coming to your place?"

"Yes. I didn't get you at all—soused like that—you! But you identified yourself with me, and they'll get me. I know! You think I talk wild at times—scared of shadows—but I know, I tell you!" His breathings were gasps, insufficient to fill his larynx throughout a complete sentence.

The rain had stopped suddenly, and a great wind tore at the black lining of the sky. Ominous gusts bent palms that groaned, the swells raced by in closer formation, hungry packs ahunt on the dark waters. Out of Geer's tossing boat a woman spoke to him, her words scolding, but her voice tremulous with terror of the storm.

"Yes, I'm coming," Geer called to her. Her torch was thrust out to guide him through the litter of their possessions to the door of the woven bamboo shelter and in the brief glare Duell had a photographic glimpse of the man—a walking cadaver. A last jerking step that flapped his wet garments about his bones took him to the door, and the torch disappeared. Duell thought he was gone, inside, but his voice sounded as the mariners got under way.

"Yes, I ought to have stayed to help you—as you helped me. For—for I could have helped. Yes, I could."

He seemed to be debating something. "I could—I could," he repeated, as if raising his courage. But to the last it failed him. "But I guess I—I can't, after all. But—look out for Sotto—or he'll get you—like he got your father!"

Duell's sagging frame straightened as if

galvanized. "What?" he cried out. "What? Come back, Geer. Oh, come back! I've got to know! Man—man! Come back!"

But the labored creaking of the boat was absorbed into the vast sponge of the typhoon.

Suddenly Lundu stirred, some sixth sense alert. A stronger wind buffeted the sheltered bay, and a rotted tree crashed in the forest behind them. Lundu spoke and his single word brought a cringing mariner out of the surf. Two more came to Lundu, reluctant, defending what they had done. Geer's sailors had deserted the doomed proa, had swum ashore!

"He would go on," they repeated fearfully, "into the storm." The three huddled closely, staring into the mystery that raged over the waters.

Duell bit convulsed lips. "I drove him away! He chose the storm, rather than the fear of the knife."

The wind whipped Lundu's soft gutturals into Duell's face. "He went south into the storm. He may die, yet who knows? Beyond the storm may lie his sunny isle."

Things had piled up too fast. Duell's mind was a chaos, he was unutterably tired. "I would like to go home now," he said faintly.

CHAPTER XII

DESERTIONS

DUELL recovered very slowly. The high temperature had undermined his system and the strong liquor had seared the membrane of his stomach, so it was weeks before he regained full strength. In time he came back to full vigor, but never again would his shaving

mirror reflect the bright face of youth. Illness, experience and worry had etched lines that would never erase; had revised his character.

The mill was ready to receive its machinery, had been ready for many days. When the *Soope* had missed two calls in succession, Duell had been dejected for several days; but he knew it was no fault of the skipper. For Mulvane, although sharing Feliza's hot rage at Duell, would bring the equipment after it reached Hong Kong, not alone for the freight revenue but because of his pride in the little steamer as an emblem of service. Even if Duell were his worst enemy, he would deliver the machinery. But delivery could not delay much longer, for Duell's great canefields were ripening fast. It was high time the mill was completed, the complicated mechanisms tested, the gangs of men trained to their specialized tasks. Else the cane would rot in the fields.

Duell was worrying about this as he rode homeward near the end of a long day in the fields. T'ai Fu and Mercado stood at the porch end apparently studying the *onting-anting* that still swung before the veranda. But, as he came closer, Duell saw that it was not Lundu's charm that interested the two so keenly, but a bird of paradise that had taken perch upon the bamboo pole. In the full sunlight, its hues were gorgeous, its tail a feathery spectrum. With head cocked to one side, it seemed to be studying the house with eyes that were jewels. Exotic, jungle bred, mystic, the bird seemed curiously out of place; a spy, unfriendly. Suddenly, as if it had solved some great mystery to its satisfaction, the bird lengthened its neck, and, out of a lovely throat, that should emit liquid melody, there issued a



single note, the raucous croak of a black crow! Then the bird was gone, its flight an explosion of color.

Mercado shook his head woefully. "It means bad luck," he pronounced dolefully, "very bad luck!"

T'ai Fu, seldom superstitious, seriously nodded his head. "I have heard it said that it brings evil," he agreed.

Duell laughed shortly. "Hard luck!" he cried. "There's nothing much left except an earthquake—or an eruption of Canlaon. Hard luck, hell!"

It was the first bitterness that had escaped his lips, and both servants eyed him with such surprise that he hurried into his room, a little shamefaced. He emerged to take the tea brought to the porch by Mercado.

Worry over Geer's fate had given him little peace, for he had felt that he had driven the man and his family into the typhoon. But he was now freed of that grief, for a pearling boat owned by a French Jew—an almost naked Jew, so long in the tropics that he was darker than his crew—had put in with a message from Geer. The letter was brief, telling of his survival but little more. He had lived through the storm, been blown straight south and was now far below the equator, and still sailing south to make a last stand for the sake of the "kids." Duell would never see him again, he had written—and no one on the island ever did. He was gone, but his last words as he had sailed were graven upon Duell's memory.

The secret concerning his father's fate—and Sotto's hand in it—was an undying mystery. It had gone with Geer, was hopelessly lost, but Duell pondered constantly over the futile riddle. One thing was certain; Geer realized that he knew too much and the possession of this secret had been at the bottom of his racking fear. From this had come his dreadful fear of the knife.

These thoughts, always in the background of Duell's mind, passed kaleidoscopically while T'ai Fu patiently waited beside his chair. "Yes, you were right about Geer, T'ai Fu," Duell repeated. "He's safe. But he's gone—gone with a secret I'd like to have known."

"About your father," T'ai Fu suggested softly.

"Yes. By the way, you never speak of him, T'ai Fu. Yet you must have known a lot about him. Were you present when he—died?"

"No."

"And you don't know anything about it all?"

"No. It was very sudden. And sad."

"It just happened. And that's all?"

"Yes. I helped bury him. Then I went—home."

Duell looked up into his yellow face with a new interest. "You say that longingly, T'ai Fu. You're homesick?"

There was no response, but the Mongolian's lip twisted in its inevitable betrayal. This was a new factor, for Duell had never thought that the Chinaman might have home ties. It suddenly struck him that he knew nothing about this man except his loyalty, his calmness under stress, his superb philosophies of life manifestly founded upon studies of Confucius. It galled Duell now to realize how much he had taken for granted in asking T'ai Fu to join him here, how generous he had felt in offering the cook a larger salary than was the current wage. How little, indeed, he knew of the cook! But he had come to understand that T'ai Fu's face could be a mask, so now the Chinaman's seeming indifference to discussion of his home, did not deflect Duell. A quick impulse put his hand upon T'ai Fu's strong arm in a gesture so wistful that it seemed an embrace.

"You may go home any time, T'ai Fu," he smiled. "I can get along with Mercado."

"No," T'ai Fu said. "I stay."

"But you want to go, and you came only because you thought you owed me something. You came with me," he added with quick perception, "because I am my father's son. Isn't that it?"

"Partly. At the beginning it was that."

"What did he do for you?"

"He gave me life—by saving it. But we won't talk of that. I stay."

"Honestly, T'ai Fu, I want you to go.

That is, if you feel like that. If you are homesick. I'd miss you, but I'd rather you'd go. Surely you owe me nothing after what you've done for me."

"It is to ourselves we owe debts. I stay. Until I am of use, real use. Then," and his scarred mouth twitched again, "then I go."

He turned kitchenward, but paused at



the door. "And," he added quietly, "it may be soon that I am useful. There is a shadow over this house."

It was T'ai Fu's first frank admission that danger threatened, and it convinced Duell. Alone, he paced the big black and white tiles of the porch. The house cat, a compact Siamese tom with emeralds for eyes, stalked out from the sala like a householder tolerant of intruders. A gust of wind, harbinger of evening coolness, stirred the bamboo screens and billowed the grass mats laid on the wide threshold. Overhead a house lizard darted for an insect on the high ceiling, lost its vacuum grip and dropped to the floor between Duell and the cat; dazed, its delicate throat athrob like a silken diaphragm, it revived just in time to escape the swoop of the cat, darting up the wall to its inverted hunting grounds. The tomcat's bristles flattened against its cheeks, but with a yawn to prove indifference to the loss of a tidbit, it curled up for another nap preparatory to the night's prow. A great heron flapped southward just above the beach, long legs a-trail.

Yes, Duell told himself, there was a shadow over the house. But, he decided, as he paced restlessly, he could wait. He had invited and gauged Sotto's enmity, knew there likely would be no open attack but a blow out of the air that would seem accidental. There was no telling when it would come, for time was no object with a man like Sotto so long as the objective was attained. He was a man and of a people who relished the scheming of vengeance as keenly as the devastating blow. Duell could but look to his defenses, unless in some manner he secured positive proof of Sotto's villainy—in which case he promised himself to strike straight and hard.

Isolated and shunned as if he had been a leper, yet Duell was convinced that the natives wanted him to win, wished him to stay. It was not alone because they had tired of Sotto's insolent tyranny, of his petty power; but because Duell's treatment of his men was an augury of a new era. For generations the laboring class had been held in serfdom by stronger men who had preyed upon the islanders' good natured improvidence. Wages had not been paid in cash, but in kind, at stores where prices were exorbitant, and where the proprietor kept the only books. Small loans were extended at interest rates as high as twenty per cent. per month; often a loan of fifty dollars impoverished a

whole family for years. The father of any beautiful girl aged twelve found ample credit—and at fourteen the girl went for the debt. Simple, devilish, inescapable among an improvident Malay people. There was but the merest fragment of formal government, and communal organization had progressed but little beyond the tribal state. Missionaries had striven for a hundred years, for a hundred years had failed: Yet there was one yeast at work in the tribal mass, a craving for the knick-knacks brought by traders. Thus Mulvane was a wholesome leaven, for he could bring phonographs and jewelry and sewing machines and shoes; already more than one radio was bringing jazz to mangrove swamps. But these wonderful things of the white men cost money, and men must sweat and save if they wanted to possess.

From the outset, Duell had made it a habit to pay monthly in cash, a revolutionary practice that had been appreciated too much by his families—hence the ire of other planters. There was profit in a plantation store, but Duell had forgone this opportunity, for he regarded first, last and always himself as a specialist, a manufacturer of sugar.

Dinner time brought T'ai Fu to the porch with the announcement that Mercado had secretly fled the menaced plantation. Duell detested himself for the thought, but the legend of his rats departing a sinking ship would recur.

WHEN Mercado had been gone five days, Duell definitely gave him up. T'ai Fu was busied from daylight until long after dark with his double duties, yet neither he nor Duell broached the subject of a substitute for the houseboy. The fifth evening the two went through their daily formula, a dialogue tacitly contrived to postpone a decision both knew must soon be faced.

"No news of Mercado?" Duell asked at dinner, as usual.

T'ai Fu shook his head. "Have some more fish?" he parried.

"Queer about the boy. You don't imagine he could have met with an accident? Or foul play?"

"He is a clever boy. He can take care of himself."

"Where *can* he be?"

"I don't know. But he has many girls."

Duell pushed back from the table, lighting his pipe for a stroll upon the lawn. The setting sun, out of monstrous color

tubes hidden below the horizon, painted the sky with a profligate brush that dripped great blotches on the sea. The evening was perfectly still. A big cocconut dropped sixty feet, just brushing Duell's shoulder and rolling off the lawn down the incline of beach. When dark came, no lights appeared in the bungalow, a symbol of the economy that had ruled the entire establishment these last two months, an economy that restricted even the table. A word to T'ai Fu had sufficed to curb house expenses to the minimum, for the Chinaman had a genius for making much out of little. Knowing that Duell faced a financial crisis, T'ai Fu had even tried to refuse his monthly wage. He had no use for it, he told the master; would take it later, when he needed it, when he returned home. Duell, penetrating the cook's device, had insisted upon paying him; but his further proof of fine loyalty had warmed a heart that needed warmth.

Mercado's desertion had left a hole in the house. Duell missed the boy's dark pock pitted countenance, the flurry of his bare feet, his transparent deceptions not seriously meant to deceive. He had valued Mercado's loyalty as second only to T'ai Fu's, and resolutely fought off the obvious and ugly interpretation of the boy's disappearance. Now, as Duell prepared for bed, he wished the boy's black head would pop in, the harsh voice rasp out some invective against the enemies of the house. Duell blew out the candle, and his last waking thought was of the boy.

How long he slept he did not know. A gentle tugging at his sleeve roused him and he saw a dim form bent over his bed. The awakening was startling but he relaxed when he recognized the whispered voice of Lundu.

"Come. There is a thing on the night, a thing you should know."

Dressing quickly Duell joined Lundu outside. The southern cross was gone, morning was not far away. Lundu, with his fine flat back to the *anting-anting* stood like a posed figure gazing upward at a narrow rift in the clouds through which shone a single star, a symbol of the hope on which men build their faith.

"Come," he said musically, moving off as guide. Again Duell noted the singular restraint of the man's movements, the ease and erectness of his carriage. In the dark, Lundu's bare feet kept to the beach trail faultlessly, and they covered three miles in less than an hour. He veered eastward into the woods, but soon the chill air bore

the taint of fish drying on racks, and they circled a collection of flimsy huts propped up on bamboo stilts. A short distance,



then lamp-light showed through two windows of a larger mixed material house, and Lundu briefly pantomimed the need for caution. Ten yards from the large house there was an abandoned shack, and Lundu led the way up its rickety ladder. From the window of the shack they could see into the lighted room.

Seven natives were grouped about a circular table in the tense preoccupation of gamblers. Duell recognized five of the native planters whose crops he had hoped to contract for his mill. The sixth was a stranger, but he knew the seventh even though the fat shoulders were squarely backed toward him. Sotto.

And a lucky Sotto, for coin and paper money were heaped carelessly before him, and he was fingering the *monte* deck as he taunted the ring of losers.

"Come, one more hand!" he challenged mockingly. "You act like curs whipped by luck. You, Patdu?"

"No," answered the man singled out. "You've won all I own except my land."

"You, Duna?"

"No. My family will know want for a year."

Three more in turn refused him and he turned last to the older native who had been spokesman for him at Duell's house. "How about you, Tibonan? One more card?"

Tibonan's face was haggard. "Not I," he answered hoarsely. "I am ruined now, as you know."

"No more land or money, eh?"

"No more."

Sotto ruffled the deck provocatively. "I will stake you this," and his yellow diamond flashed as he divided his huge winnings roughly in half, "against your—jewel."

Tibonan's eyes narrowed: "You mean?" he queried.

"You know what I mean."

"Speak out, Sotto. You mean my—"

"Yes," Sotto nodded. "Your daughter."

"But you are already married!"

Sotto laughed ironically. "Exactly!" he said.

A tenseness ran through the group, because, while such arrangements were often made in private, it was an affront to broach the subject in public, and as a gambling stake. Tibonan's eyes blazed, but he realized his impotence before the mocking Sotto, and his gaze fell to the stake his adversary had pushed to the center of the table. Insatiable gambling lust burned him to the core and his countenance was a visible battleground as love for his daughter struggled against a rising conviction that he would win. None of the group moved or spoke as Tibonan fought his battle with his better self. Sotto alone seemed unconcerned, but his fingers trembled on the cards.

Lundu was indifferent to the drama but, pressed against him at the window, Duell was as tense as any of the gamblers facing Sotto. A daughter—Sotto—such a stake! That such things could be! Touching the side of Lundu he felt the tremendous, unnatural beat of a pulse. *Thud-uzle, thud-uzle, thud-uzle.* The heart there beneath the native's ribs beat insistently and with a steady monotony that somehow held menace. Curiously concerned by the eerie, abnormal pulsation, he considered whispering to Lundu, but Tibonan's voice stayed him.

"Agreed, then," he said suddenly. "Your deal."

Not even a suppressed "ah" betrayed any of the group, it might have been sculptured stone as Sotto prepared the small deck. He moved leisurely, but his calmness was no index of his emotion as he presented the pack for Tibonan's cut. The lamplight was yellowing about them as the glow of false dawn suffused the world. Tibonan leaned confidently across the table, secure in a certainty that he had not invoked the gods of luck in vain; they would be with him for this one turn. Tibonan was triumphant as if already tasting victory; Sotto was a grin like a playing cat.

Each received two cards, face up. The first to duplicate any shown card was the winner in this mongrel *monte* game invented for swift action. Duell could not see the cards but the faces of the natives were sufficient. Twice they leaned forward as if pushed by a common force, twice each exhaled deeply as neutral cards were drawn. The third card Sotto drew even more deliberately, and brought it into

their view first, its back toward himself. It was the fateful card, on which a small fortune—and a girl's whole life—was pictured. The group stiffened as they saw it and Sotto laughed tauntingly when he saw Tibonan's face twitch violently. These were the moments for which Sotto lived, and he held the card outward, triumphantly, thrusting its face closer to Tibonan that he might the better read what happened to those who pitted themselves against such as he, Sotto.

He laughed—but his pitiless mockery trailed off mirthlessly as he sensed the reaction that twitched his opponent's brown face.

With a quick flip, Sotto faced the card toward himself, and for an instant his bland Mongoloid features were convulsed with a lethal rage. He had lost, and Tibonan was reaching for his huge winnings.

"Wait," Sotto demanded. "One more card!"

"No."

Tibonan was a little fearful of him, but he stood his ground. The minute of dreadful hazard had been terrific to him, and he was like a man relieved. Pocketing his winnings he straightened up from the table.

"This is about what I have lost to you this year," he said defiantly. "I am through."

"You're through, eh?" Sotto answered evenly. "You may be through with this for tonight, but you're not through with me!"

The others stood back when Sotto rose, but he was not a man to do what he could hire done by Malabar or others. Law was remote, but white officers had a way of dropping in long after the event. Sotto



poised over Tibonan like a coiled snake, but after a moment of suspense he strode to the door and went down the ladder. His mien was again calm, almost beneficent; but his going left all hushed and Tibonan in a cold sweat.

As Sotto passed by the eavesdroppers, Lundu with an easy thrust of cool brown shoulder, shoved Duell back from the window

and crowded him against the thatched siding of the hut. Pressed tightly together they waited silently as the others came out to stand whispering a while before the hut, then leave one by one. As he stood against Lundu waiting, Duell again heard that pounding *thud-usle, thud-usle*. On and on, like the echo from a distant and swiftly intermittent waterfall upon soft earth. There was a finality to each faint sound, as if it were to be the very last.

And suddenly Duell knew. His arm was clasped about Lundu's body and his hand strayed to a point midway up his left ribs. The heart was throbbing evenly, but with the violence of organic fault. Even to Duell's unskilled touch the organ struggled to overcome a terrible lesion, beating with the maddened energy of a crippled wing. Duell felt suddenly faint, sickened; and he barely heard Lundu's words.

"I brought you here because Sotto was losing. Losing, he talked wildly, and his talk was of you. His luck must have changed while I came for you. Another time you may learn more. No, do not go yet. Wait till they are well gone."

To escape from the thudding within his afflicted friend's breast, Duell went to the window that faced the village, unashamed that his eyes were blinded with tears. His friend—given so perfect a form—doubly afflicted—why did the gods jest so cruelly?

"We go now," Lundu whispered, and he led the way down the steps and into the brush. Circling the village he conducted Duell to the head of the trail, and there he stopped. "Another time another luck for you," he prophesied.

He did not smile, but his eyes were warm, like a friendly hound's. There, too, something of a hound's earnest effort at thought about his dark eyes, as though he were always just upon the verge of portentous solution of some great mystery that baffled him. A certain sweetness softened a countenance so pure of line that otherwise it would have been ascetic; a sweetness as of one who listened to ineffable music. For a long minute he regarded Duell calmly, then left as he had come, without salutation. Not abruptly, but as if he strolled away to return in a moment. A hundred smooth strides took him into the forest.

At last Duell understood the reason for Lundu's unhurried movements, the unfeeling erectness of his noble figure. Either some itinerant doctor or else Lundu's own uncanny instinct had apprised the Malay of the certain outcome of any sudden

physical effort, warned him of the danger of coming quickly out of a stooping posture. The mainspring of his life was held by cobwebs—and Lundu knew it.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GONG OF DOOM

FOUR more days passed, days of anxious scanning of the western sea for the steamer, for now all depended upon the early arrival of the machinery. At last a smudge of dirty smoke appeared on the horizon, and excitement stirred the plantation. A foreman hurried the news to Duell, who galloped breakneck down the long service road that led from the north field to the house. There he found that even T'ai Fu had caught the infection and was out on the porch studying the steamer that was still a mere dot at the edge of the sea.

"It is coming nearer," T'ai Fu stated.

"The *Soopa*?"

"I believe it."

"Get a good lunch! They must—" Duell's enthusiasm weakened as he recalled the break with Feliza and he hedged. "At least prepare for three. They *might* come to the house. That is—if it is the *Soopa*."

Ten minutes and the binoculars assured him that it undoubtedly was the awaited vessel. He paced nervously about, alternately hot and cold as hopes flared up only to smolder. It was not alone the chance of seeing Feliza, of explaining, or reestablishing relations upon a basis that might progress; he also expected letters that might decide the outcome of his entire project.

With a clear perception that disasters had cut dangerously into his resources he had moved at once to forestall a shut-down of operations, had sought financial aid. He had put his case up squarely to the principal bank at Iloilo. A first tentative letter had brought response; they had demanded more details of his affairs, a complete analysis of his condition. He had written fully of his plans, but, with innate honesty, had set forth his disappointments, his series of disasters, and he had not minimized his unfortunate relations with the most powerful man on the island, Sotto. A frank statement, he knew, was due to men charged with the investment of others' savings; and Duell could have followed no other course even if the thought had suggested itself.

The steamer drew on, her fore end a braggart's chest. Duell nervously paced

the beach past long rows of nets drying on rough racks, back to the dock; back and forth. This steamer held such vast potentialities. What could he say to Feliza? To Mulvane? Did the *Soopa* bear his letters from the bank? The machinery? Back and forth—

The steamer came straight on till he could see the forms of sailors preparing to anchor. A favorable augury; she did not swing for its old anchorage north of the headland but came straight for the bay—into it! Full speed, for Mulvane loved his airy gestures. A bell rang and water churned frothy at the stern, the anchor dropped. A white bearded face megaphoned through cupped hands, "Get your lighter, Duell! I have your stuff!"

At last! With a wave, Duell happily acknowledged the order and ran to the house to ring the steel triangle that summoned all hands. Forty laborers came running, the three foremen relaying instructions. His men moved like clockwork, for Duell had had ample time to perfect unloading arrangements to the last detail. In a few minutes his four new lighters emerged from the river mouth,



poled by playful natives to whom this relief from the monotony of the fields was a frolic. Coming beyond the depth of the poles, they adjusted long oars that with the inevitable perversity of Oriental customs, they pushed instead of pulled. Duell was hither and yon, busy until all was organized, then he cranked the launch and sped to the ladder lowered from the freighter. Mulvane met him at the top.

"Glad to see ye," he affirmed, with no noticeable diminution of his old heartiness. "I see ye're all set to take the freight. How ye been? Ye look better, not so peaked."

"Fine!" Duell beamed. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm a-livin', I'm a-livin'." He eyed the lighters suspiciously, but found them to his liking. "They'll carry it, all right," he assured Duell. "Ye did a good job. Better let the Lascar handle your men; he savvies how to make 'em step. I'm responsible till we get it onto your lighters, then it's up to you. Though I'll be glad to help. What ye goin' to do after ye get the lighters behind the mill? Lift the

crates with gin poles and skid it into the mill?"

"Yes. I've improvised a pretty good derrick, Captain, and have made a wooden track fitted with hardwood rollers. We can handle it, I think."

"That sounds reasonable," he conceded, shooting an approving glance from the corner of his eye, "especially the trackage." He considered his thumb carefully, then. "How's things ashore? How ye gettin' along with his nibs?"

"Sotto? The same, I guess."

"Nothin' new, eh? No more bad luck?"

"No. Everything's all right."

The skipper spat prodigiously. "Well, ye're a game lad. Quit fidgetin' and gappin' around when I'm talkin' to ye! What are ye lookin' for? Nothin', eh? Well, if Feliza is the nothin' I'm a-tellin' ye she ain't here."

"Oh."

"'Oh,' is it? And I've been a-havin' one hell of a time with her since—since we put out from here that night. She had to go, though a typhoon was a-runnin' just north and the bottom of the glass had fallen out! Boy, ye raised hell that night—though I'm not the one to say it, for I've drunk my bunkers overfull many a night ashore."

"But Captain, I didn't know—you see I was sick and—"

"Yeah! The best remedy, too. But ye must learn ye're own draft! But I don't want to fool ye; the girl's done with ye. I don't mind sayin' I'm sorry, for I—well," he spat again, for any sentiment must be doled out parsimoniously, "well, ye're a stanch craft, Duell. Ye'll stand a lot of bad weather."

"Thanks, Captain. I hope there won't be any storms."

The big man grinned, appreciative of a grit unwittingly revealed. "Haven't had any weather yet, eh?" he grunted. "Well, mebbe not, mebbe not. But as I was a-sayin', ye sure raised hell. With yerself—and with me!"

"I'm sorry if you—"

"Ye don't have to be sorry for me! Ye've got enough to worry about yerself, unless I miss my guess about yer feelin's for her."

"Where is she? Feliza?"

"Oh, a-visitin' those missionaries who pulled her through the fever. Glad they got her, too, damn her! Though don't *you* be a-damnin' her! Ye'd a-thought I'd done wrong myself—highly-tighty she was with me, and with everybody on the boat. Even her Lascar caught it! And say, do ye know

I had the damndest time a-gettin' her not to bob her hair? Yes, sir, she just was a-go'in' to do it! Why? I dunno, except she knew it was lovely and wanted to rid herself of it. Said she didn't *want* to be beautiful! She was like that for two weeks, a-thinkin' up deviltries and keepin' me half-reefed. Then she suddenly took another tack; nothin' would do but she would go back to the convent—where they chucked her for mischief—as a nun. A *nun*, her! She had me plumb capized by the time we got south, but I raised storm signals to the missionaries and they saved me by takin' her off my hands. Don't know what I could have done otherwise, for I'd promised to bring this stuff to ye, and she won't come here again."

"N-never?"

"No, so she said, quietlike, one night. And when she says things, solemn like that, she means 'em. She's done here, Duell. So," and he slapped the other's shoulder to disguise a delicacy he felt inappropriate to his rôle in life, "so ye'd best forget it all. I don't know as I should be a-tellin' ye all this, but ye're square, and sort of lonely like, and it's a-comin' to ye."

He bit off a fresh chew, secretly studying Duell. "He takes it a-standin' up," he said to himself. "But look at the gills of him! White as sailcloth. Too bad!"

For Duell, realizing the difficult position of the skipper, had rallied to remove its cause by suppressing his own emotion. There were everyday matters to accomplish, there was a degree of forgetfulness in work. With an effort that no whit beguiled Mulvane, he strode straight to him.

"Captain," he said steadily, "let's get the machinery out now. If we can get it on the lighters before low tide we can get into the river tonight. There's a sandbar there, you know."

"Ye're right!" Mulvane agreed heartily. "Let's go! Remember, I'm responsible until each crate hits your lighter decks; then ye're a-holdin' the bag! Ye go down, and I'll tend to things up here.

WITHIN ten minutes, the winch was groaning under an unusual strain, the boom slowly swinging to lower the first of the massive crates. On deck things went smoothly, but Duell's men were hard to handle; they persisted in risking their lives directly beneath the tremendous weights, pushing when they should have pulled. It was all a holiday for them; but finally the first great vacuum pan was safely dropped into a lighter.

The lighter sank perceptibly under its cargo, and at Mulvane's shouted suggestion, Duell held up the unloading until the four lighters were cleated firmly together to form a pontoon raft, each lighter contributing to the general buoyancy. Two more crates were safely overboard and the work was suspended when eight bells sounded noon and dinner to the crew. Duell sent his own gang ashore in two launch loads, and accepted Mulvane's hospitality at lunch.

A gargantuan meal served by an automaton on a table whose faultless array of silver and satsuma could have had but one inspirational source, Feliza. With Duell in an anchored seat which Mulvane tactlessly pointed out in a momentary lapse as Feliza's place.

The girl was all about Duell. He did not know what he ate, nodded yesses where his host's monologue called for noes. Yet Duell was reluctant when time came to leave the little dining saloon made dear by her association with it.

The unloading went more briskly, but for a while Duell toiled without interest until he noted several strange faces among his men. It puzzled him and he summoned his headman.

"Who are these men?" he demanded. "I know every one of our families, but these men are strangers."

"They asked to come," the foreman told him. "They enjoy the excitement. Our people are like that. This is a big day and they want to be of it."

"Do I know them?"

"Most of them. Some work on other



plantations, two are fishermen, three are strangers here. You want them ordered away?"

"Yes. Oh well, not if they enjoy it. Pay each a day's wage and make him

earn it. I guess we can use some extra help, for we want to get this stuff down safely. And there's a bigger job waiting at the mill."

The balancing of the cargo became a ticklish job as the lighters filled and demanded all of Duell's attention. As the men tired, the frolicking ceased, and the toil assumed proportions that wrung sweat from bare backs. Fortunately the sea was calm, facilitating the work. But it was

five o'clock when the last crate was stowed on the lighters.

"It's done," Mulvane called down, and there was relief in his tone. "The machinery's yours! How about a little celebration—a peg? Or are you on the wagon? Well, never mind. The tide's low and your lighters are drawing four feet. Can ye get into the river now?"

"No," Duell called back, "I'll have to wait till eight. It will be dark then, but I'm going to take them in. It might come a blow, so we'll play safe. How about dinner at the house tonight, Captain?"

Mulvane was about to decline—he wanted to get away at nine—but he could not deny the planter's need of a white man's company after two months of loneliness. "Sure I'll come. Can ye make it early?"

"How about seven o'clock?"

"Sure. I'll be there. And say—I'll be a-bringin' some mail ashore—ye've got letters, and some magazines from the States. And say, I'll be a-wantin' somethin' cool to drink after this day's work!"

Instructing his headman that two men were to be left in each lighter, Duell took the balance of the gang to the mill, where he worked until dark perfecting his unloading apparatus, setting acetylene flares, readying all for the night job. A final inspection proved everything in order and after directing the men to be back after supper, he left the mill. Porches and house were gala again with electricity—trust T'ai Fu! Mulvane was already there, comfortably disposed in a long chair with a stocked taboret drawn up beside him.

"Makin' myself to home," he told his host, "thanks to yer Chinaman. The tide's turned—another two hours ought to float the lighters over the river bar. Ye're all ready to unload into the mill?"

"Yes. I think we'll have no trouble with it."

"Sure ye don't want me to stay and help?"

"Thanks, but I'm sure. You'll excuse me, Captain? Just a quick shower and some fresh clothes. Twelve minutes, and we'll have dinner."

Mulvane, alone, chuckled as he refilled his glass. "There's the boy for ye!" he said half aloud. "Not ten minutes or fifteen—but twelve. Aye, but he'd make a good sailor." Taking his thick watch from a breast pocket he kept it in his left hand, his right intermittently occupied with the glass; eleven minutes brought Duell out in white linens, a healthy glow in his cheeks and much of his reserve forgotten in the

eagerness of a hospitality starved for long weeks. He was older, met Mulvane more on a parity of competent manhood.

"We'll have dinner family style," he told Mulvane when they were seated, "since you're in a hurry and because we're without a houseboy. I notice that the *Soopa* has swung around."

Through the open window they could see the ship's lights and the four torches that illumined the lighters alongside. The anchored vessel was a symbol of civilization just beyond the horizon, a buttress against isolation. It seemed to mother the lighters, protecting them with its bulk.

"The tide. Ye've got four feet in the bay, and she's a-comin' fast now. This house is only five feet above mean high tide; did ye ever think what a little tidal wave would do?"

"N-no."

"Well, ye needn't, for that's mostly story book stuff. A fine cook ye've got, boy."

Conversation languished, for Mulvane frankly came to the table for practical purposes. During one of the lulls, Duell finally broached a subject he found difficult.

"The proa, Captain. It's still here."

"The girl's?"

"Y-yes."

"So it is. So it is. I'd forgotten it—and she's never mentioned it, though she's never been without one before. Well, well!" He pondered heavily, pulling at his tobacco yellowed beard. "No, I won't take it. I won't see her for three weeks, for I'm a-swingin' north out of here. No, ye keep it tied alongside your dock. In the water, so it won't warp. It may come in handy, too, for launches don't always run." T'ai Fu brought coffee and cigars to the porch, and the repleted Mulvane sank down with a force that creaked the cane chair. "That's a big mill ye've got," he stated judiciously. "Too big for just your own cane. Got any contracts yet?"

"No."

"Well, stick to 'em and ye'll land 'em.



Ye're a-goin' to get ninety-four per cent. extraction, ye told me?"

"Ninety-two or better."

"Exactly. And they're a-gettin' fifty-five in their old mills. Ye're bound to land

'em, boy. Common sense is a-pullin' for ye. Say, what's that dingus flyin' from that bamboo pole?"

Duell explained the *anting-anting* briefly, but Mulvane pumped him for more. Lundu intrigued the sailor, and he persisted until he had learned all Duell could tell him.

"Fine business!" he decided. "Ye've got things a-comin' your way. I always said ye would win out here; it's on the cards!"

STIMULATED by Mulvane's interest, Duell gradually thawed out, told details of his plans, his hopes. Not alone for the plantation, but for the island. He pictured a developed isle, richer, more comfortable; the necessities and simpler luxuries to come to bettered native homes. Artesian wells like his own, bringing pure water to every village; infant mortality reduced from its present pathetic rate of seventy per cent.; an isle freed of cholera, of dysentery, of malaria. Schools, roads, a doctor, sanitation—

And Mulvane, listening as the younger man expounded ways and means, finally nodded agreement. It was not a dream, the skipper told himself; for the first time he began to appreciate Duell's insight, realizing how thoroughly the young planter had prepared himself for his lifework. And Mulvane's interest became a genuine admiration.

"Ye're crazy about this sugar game, aren't ye?" he queried.

"Y-yes," Duell admitted. Then, in the first full rein to which he had ever given tongue, he told the older man something of his hopes for himself. He was to profit, of course; but Mulvane could see that the unselfish portions of Duell's dream outweighed the hope of personal gain, that Duell saw his own prosperity shared by all on the island.

"Sugar!" Duell wound up enthusiastically. "A perfect food, a necessity of the world. My cane! Grown only in the tropics; over a year in growth; beset by a multitude of menaces; using up the energies of a thousand men; requiring heavy investments; to be ground under terrific pressure, evaporated, crystalized, refined; transported across the seas in great ships; distributed by water and rail and animal and man—and on every table at ten cents a pound! Ten cents a pound—in the diet of the poorest—yet imperial Cæsars knew it not. It's the romance of the ages, Mulvane!"

He finished suddenly, flushing at his own flights of fancy. But Mulvane's big head went on nodding, like a mechanical doll's while he reviewed the story of sugar for future use. For Duell's revelation of his viewpoint had pleased Mulvane mightily, had given him a new pride; that his *Soopa* carried a commodity that the ancient emperors could not command.

Lighting a fresh cigar, Mulvane settled deeper into his chair for the hour that remained. It was a pleasure, he told himself, just to be with this young fellow: one need not talk. He informed Duell contentedly that he guessed he would stay till the machinery was in the mill. There might be difficulties, he might prove useful. The night was warm and very dark, the air heavy with the pungency of sea and beach. In the stillness Mulvane, his mind on sugar, fancied he could hear the cane growing in the field behind them.

But it was Duell's sensitive hearing that caught a peculiar sound. It was hardly a sound, more like the beat of tremulous air waves, a quivering of the atmosphere. Mulvane evidently did not hear it, but a sudden restlessness moved him in his chair, and his big hands fidgeted with his beard as if he were nervous, as if he felt something he did not hear. The vibrations continued, increased; seemed to flood down the slope from Canlaon. Duell started violently as he solved the mystery, and uncontrollable chills raced up his spine.

Lundu's invocation! The altar! The big gong hung before Lundu's shrine in the hills! It had been struck, and the night shook with the distant, awe inspiring resonance!

Then some faintest breeze brought the full zooming tone. It was like the distant stroking of a giant harp of one string, the far hum of a silver airplane. As though the forested slope were a huge sounding board the single note hung to the air, fading away only to recur louder, then growing faint. At last the night was still again, stiller than any Duell had ever known. All creation seemed to doze. Then—

"*What's that!*" cried Mulvane.

A piercing wail had issued from the sea! Mulvane and Duell leaped to their feet, sprang to the rail to lean forward staring toward the steamer. Both recognized tragedy, overwhelming disaster.

In the dim light reflected from the steamer's portholes, they saw the waters lapping the gunwales of the sinking lighters. There was another outcry as the

stern lighter went down, its flaring torch extinguished in the sea. For what seemed an eternity to Duell there were three torches and three reflections on the calm bay. Then his agonized vision counted only two. In an utter silence more devastating than shrieks, he watched until there was but a single torch above the black waters.

Then—none!

CHAPTER XIV

THE SINKING SHIP

ALWAYS Mulvane was to remember Duell's reaction to an event that represented the crashing of the whole structure of his life. As the last torch was extinguished, Duell vaulted the railing and struck the ground running. "Come on!" he cried. "There were eight men on the lighters—they'll drown!" He had the launch underway as Mulvane lumbered up, and spun it around toward the ship. It was less than a minute to the scene of disaster, yet there were only six heads bobbing in the water in the dark lee of the ship. Two of the eight laborers were not in sight. For an instant a brown hand showed above water, clutching feebly at the air then went down. As the launch shot past the spot, Duell abandoned the wheel and plunged headlong into the night waters where the man had disappeared.

The momentum of the launch carried Mulvane well beyond the steamer before he recovered the helm and put back. There was no sign of Duell. Mulvane alone in the launch with the motor racing was fairly helpless; if he stopped the motor he was adrift, with it running he could not stand by, and there was danger of running down Duell or the other swimmers in the dark.

Resourceful in emergency, he steered straight against the side of the steamer, the propeller holding the launch as if anchored while the six swimmers climbed aboard. Growing anxious as he scanned the dark surface for Duell, Mulvane barked an order, and there were heavy splashes all around the launch as a number of his seamen dove from the deck above.

The Lascar came aboard the launch to take the wheel, and at that moment Duell's head and left arm appeared twenty yards from the stern of the launch, only to be dragged down again by the frantic struggles of the Malay he was trying to save. The water was agitated above the two by Duell's terrific efforts. Mulvane's sailors

were swimming toward the spot to aid him as Duell reappeared with the Malay's arm clamped about his neck like a vise. The Lascar, steering to the scene, casually se-



lected a light wrench, took deliberate aim at the temple of the frenzied field hand and struck as the launch drifted past. Two sailors brought the dazed laborer to

the launch and the Lascar helped Duell along the gunwale till his hand was caught by Mulvane.

Half drowned and giddy, Duell collapsed on a cushion. But a half minute brought him erect again, desperately searching the faces of the survivors. The wet and bedraggled crowd counted only seven.

"There's one missing, Mulvane!" he cried. "We've got to find him!"

Mulvane knew the futility of further effort—more than ten minutes had passed—but he organized a thorough search because of the anxiety of his young friend, a searchlight being hastily improvised.

But it was all useless. As he realized that the man was lost, Duell's countenance grew haggard in the powerful light. "He's gone," he finally conceded. "Who was he?"

One of his men spoke up: "It was Guba, a ploughman."

"I remember him. He had a family, didn't he?"

"Yes. A wife and four children. Pretty soon, five children."

"You tell the wife about this—accident. I'll see her when I'm feeling better. But you may tell her tonight that she need not worry about money; that I will continue to pay her his monthly wages."

Mulvane took charge, putting the laborers ashore but turning back toward the steamer before Duell could rise. He sat quietly, white, and seemingly indifferent to what went on about him until they came to the ship's ladder and Mulvane urged him from the launch, when he made objection.

"No, Captain. You must get away early, and I don't want to detain you."

"Forget that!" Mulvane growled. "I guess I'm human. Come on up to my cabin. We'll have—well, some hot coffee. Get ye warmed up. Ye're a-shiver-

in', boy. Some dry clothes are a-comin' back on the launch. I told your Chinaman myself. Come along now. Steady, boy! Raise your feet. Come on. What's the matter now?"

Duell had stopped on the lower platform of the ladder and was peering intently down into the water. Mulvane tugged at his wet sleeve, thinking it best to remove him from the sight of the sea that had drowned his man, but Duell resisted stubbornly and then as Mulvane saw what had claimed Duell's piercing interest, his own jaw tightened in astonished rage.

One of the lighters floated beside the ladder, bottom side up. A shifting of the heavy cargo had overturned the lighter as it had sunk into the depths, and, freed of its burden, the buoyancy of the wooden structure had been sufficient to bring it to the surface. Mulvane leaned over to peer closely at the expanse of new planks that formed its bottom, then shouted an order that turned the searchlight fairly upon it.

It seemed unbelievable, but there it was—the whole dread story!

Duell had discovered the evidence of treachery first, but he continued to stare down dully, loath to accept this proof floating before his own eyes. But the burly skipper raised his big fist aloft in a rage that set his great frame a-quiver.

"May the curse of God blast the man who did it!" he cried hoarsely, and he spoke from the bottom of his heart.

Three holes bored through the bottom of the lighter told the story of a calculated villainy. Duell stood immobile, stunned by this proof that men could be as relentless as carnivora. Who had done this? Which of the strangers who had volunteered help had been Sotto's man? Who knew? Who would ever know? He leaned farther over the sea, staring at the surface. The water was like liquid smoke, enveloping, impenetrable, secretive. Down there—ninety feet down—was the machinery that was to have vivified his dream. Ninety feet. It might as well be on the moon. The drowned man? Was he on the bottom? Under a crate? Already nibbled or—

Mulvane literally dragged Duell up the ladder. "Come on!" he growled. "D'ye want to go clean loco?"

A LITTLE later, with Duell warm and dry in fresh clothes brought by T'ai Fu, Mulvane sought to lift him out of his dumb misery by discussing the extent of the disaster.

"Now, me boy," he said earnestly across the table littered with charts, "there's some angles to this thing I'd like to get. First, Sotto did it; that is, he had it done. Yes?"

"Probably," Duell answered grimly.

"Not probably, but absolutely! Next, what are ye a-goin' to do about it? What are ye a-goin' to do to him?"

"What would *you* do, if you couldn't prove anything?"

"Me?" bristled the big fellow, his blue eyes ablaze in the white tangle of his head and face. "Why, I'd—yes, I'd—well, I dunno but what I'd do as ye're doin'. I guess I'd have to wait till I was sure. But when I *was* sure—" His fist was like a mallet. "What are ye a-goin' to do? Buy some more machinery?"

Duell shook his head, with what effort Mulvane could not guess.

"Why not?" demanded Mulvane. "Ye're not givin' up?"

"I—I fear so."

"Why? Isn't there any more sugar apparatus in the world?"

"Plenty. But not for me. And I couldn't get it here in time any way. My crop is nearly mature now."

"So." The skipper was at a loss to proceed, for Duell was not responsive. Mulvane wanted to help, felt that there was desperate need for him; but Duell's attitude was difficult.

What Mulvane could not know was that Duell had decided that the captain, being Feliza's uncle, must know nothing of his need for assistance, for money. He knew that in a moment of impulse, the generous Mulvane might risk investment with him, but he was determined that the girl's future should not be jeopardized. Also, beneath Duell's reserve there lay a certain self-reliance, a desire to stand upon his own feet, or to fall alone.

But a sudden inspiration struck the skipper, and he smote the deck another mighty whack. "I have it!" he declared, leaping upright in his earnestness. "There's a salvage outfit at Iloilo right now! I saw 'em

last week. A complete outfit they've got—pontoons, derricks, deep sea apparatus with expert British divers. Everything! Boy, it's a wonderful chance, made to order for just this fix ye're in!"

Duell was scarcely listening, for he had



not surplus dollars for any purpose. If he hired the salvage done he could not pay his labor, could not meet any of the other heavy expenses of harvest. Salvage, he realized, was feasible if modern equipment were made available. But he could not take advantage of it, for divers cost big money. And yet—he turned to the skipper with the first interest he had shown. If the Iloilo bank would finance him he might yet triumph.

"Captain, you mentioned some letters," he said, a new note in his voice.

The skipper went to his safe to fetch a bundle of mail, giving Duell most of it. One of the letters was from the Iloilo bankers and Duell's fingers trembled slightly as he opened the fateful envelope. Here might be the saving grace. He read:

My dear Mr. Duell:

Our Board of Governors has carefully considered your second letter requesting a loan upon your plantation and prospective crop of sugar.

I am instructed to state that such an extension of credit is too hazardous for an institution responsible for the investment of the savings of others.

Very truly yours,
DWIGHT DAVIES, Sec'y.

Beads of perspiration broke on Duell's forehead, but otherwise he did not visibly wince under this last twist of the knife. His fingers fumbled ever so slightly as he returned the letter to its envelope, but with a splendid nerve he simulated interest in the balance of his mail. No, Mulvane must not know his desperate situation.

To Mulvane he was a riddle. The skipper was studying him closely, wondering when the lad's courage would break down, wondering why he did not want the salvage outfit, wondering what Feliza would want him to do, wondering what he himself ought to do, ought to say.

"Say!" he burst out finally, "did ye know the Chinaman has been a-listenin' to all this?"

"Is T'ai Fu still on the boat?"

"Sure!" Mulvane whirled about, glad to find a target. "T'ai Fu!" he called sharply. "Come here!"

The cook stepped inside, wearing his most perfect poker face. A few steps took him to the captain; but without pause he passed on to stand beside his young master, a natural position he somehow contrived to make significant. He stood beside Duell quietly facing Mulvane as if he had come not to receive protection but to give it.

"What d'ye mean, a-spyin' on white men's talk?" Mulvane demanded.

T'ai Fu made no answer, but regarded the angry Irishman gravely. There was no humility, no subjection, in his manner. Without effrontery he silently established his equality. Potentate that Mulvane was on his own vessel, he sensed the superior quality of the Mongolian who confronted him. Caught in the spell of the serious slant eyes, he was amazed as the Chinaman seemed to approach him without moving—the illusion was so perfect that he felt as if he must give way, make room for the Celestial!

Duell's voice broke the spell, and the Chinaman seemed to recede, assume normal proportions. But his even, unblinking gaze continued to hold Mulvane. "T'ai Fu is all right, Captain," Duell said. "I don't mind saying that he's my best friend. His overhearing me was all right; I trust him with everything."

Mulvane, bewildered, could only nod vaguely; still held by T'ai Fu's steady eyes.

The cook's scarred lip flickered into the merest shadow of a smile. "The house is alone," he said. "I go now. I will take your mail."

As if he took Duell's permission for granted, he collected the letters and magazines and left the cabin. When the muffled tread of his padded slippers was gone, Mulvane wiped his brow. "What is he, any way? A hypnotist?"

"My cook, Captain, and a good one."

"A cook!" Mulvane snorted. "Cook, hell! Say, there's a lot a-goin' on that I don't sabe—and ye don't sabe, either! Ye'll see! Dammit! This thing's got me a-goin', I guess. I'm a-seein' things. But, to get back to business, shall I call at Iloilo and order this salvage outfit here for ye?"

"No, I'm much obliged but you needn't bother."

"But what ye a-goin' to do?"

"We'll see." Duell managed a smile as he rose to go. "I've held you up too long now, Captain. You're two hours late getting away. So I'll say goodnight. And thanks for all your trouble. You've been fine to me."

Before Mulvane could think of the right thing to say, Duell was gone over the dark side of the steamer and the launch was taking him shoreward. Mulvane stood at the rail, his hands still a-tingle after Duell's convulsive grip. The Lascar came up behind him, waiting orders, but Mulvane was oblivious.

Bad as things looked for Duell, Mul

vane knew that facts were somehow even worse. He had never talked money matters with him and Duell's payments had always been by check and on the spot; so Mulvane never thought of finances as a possible contingency. The Lascar shifted from one bare foot to the other, patient, but the owner was lost in a melancholy study of the dark shoreline, the darker silhouette of the mass of Canlaon. The night sky was boiler plate riveted with diamonds. Across the black silence there sounded the distant wail of a Malay woman just widowed, a cry more poignant because there was no repetition.

The master stirred nervously, and the Lascar spoke, "We have one passenger, third class, to Illoilo."

"I don't care a damn!" Mulvane exploded. "Let's get underway."

"At eight bells," the Lascar corrected softly.

"Now!"

"I promised him it would be at eight bells, Master."

"Well, have it your own way. I used to run this ship myself, but since Feliza—hell! I wish she was here!"

DUELL was glad to get away from the probing Mulvane. He hurried the launch across water now horrible to him, and hastened to his room where he closed the door as if to shut out all that had transpired. He wanted to think. But he could not think. What was there to think about, to plan? There was no tomorrow, nothing to wake to. A dream had become a nightmare, his plans a hollow chaos. He turned out the light and flung himself across the bed.

A rap on the door, and without bidding, T'ai Fu entered, a transformed T'ai Fu. He had changed his white livery for the dark cottons in which he had come down from Hong Kong. Under his arm he carried the same little wooden chest.

Even before he spoke, Duell knew what it all meant. The final blow!

"You're going T'ai Fu?" he asked, and

there was a catch in his voice.

"Yes. If you permit. A vacation. Come back soon."

"You leave on the *Soopa*?"

"Yes, if you permit."

"Well, you've earned it, T'ai Fu. Of course."

"I go now. G'bye."

He seemed to hurry to escape his master, but Duell detained him while he opened the plantation safe to count out a hundred and sixty dollars which he gave to the cook.

"You'll need some money on your—vacation," he said kindly. "I've included your wage to the end of the year, so in case anything happens and you don't get back—or if I'm not here—or anything."

His explanation of the gift was a little lame, and T'ai Fu seemed momentarily at a loss. But he accepted the money, stowing it in his voluminous pants as he turned toward the doorway.

"Come back soon," he said briefly.

Duell nodded, as though he believed the artifice. In a way, the cook's acting upon his own initiative was a relief, for it would have been difficult to turn him off when within a few days dissolution would strike the entire establishment.

"Take good care of yourself," Duell bade him, and without further formality the Chinaman left the house. But Duell overtook him under the palms.

"Shall I run you out on the launch?" he offered in final friendliness.

"No. The Lascar has a boat waiting." A long pause, then, "I go now. Come back soon."

And he left—identically as he had first come to Duell—in the night, on the sea, shouldering his cheap little box. On the beach another figure joined his, and presently there was the creak of oars. In five minutes the *Soopa's* winch groaned up the anchor and immediately the lights of the steamer floated seaward. Slowly at first, then swiftly toward the horizon as if she fled a plague spot.

Behind him the house loomed ghostly, untenanted. Never again the quaint singing in the kitchen! No more of Mercado's spells of fierce energy! Tonight Duell saw things in a clear light, saw how hopeless had been his lone tilting against the opposing forces of the island.

He slowly approached the bungalow but paused again at the steps, loath to enter a house now abandoned by all but himself. As with his father, the house was the silent mausoleum of his own high hopes, the sepulcher of an ideal. In the starlight it again seemed neglected as when he had first come. He fancied he again smelled the odor of its inevitable decay, heard the scampering of mice in repossession. Again musty cobwebs would reclaim the walls, the floors sag beneath the weight of an appalling desolation. His brooding gaze

went eastward across the fields now gravid with cane. He foresaw the jungle's slow creep, the fair acres succumbing to the tangled invasion, heard the grunt of wild pigs returned to lush pasturage.

His glance strayed upward. The bamboo pole still projected from the porch roof; but he started as he noted a discrepancy. Lundu's *anting-anting* no longer swung from the pole. Both charm and cord were gone!

CHAPTER XV

THE COOLIE PRINCE

WHEN T'ai Fu left Mulvane and Duell in the cabin of the *Soo-pa* he went straight to the Lascar and made arrangements for steerage passage to Iloilo and was immediately put ashore to secure his petty baggage. The washerwoman was there with the week's house laundry and by her he sent to the village to draft into Duell's service an old woman who had cooked for Geer. Moving methodically T'ai Fu accomplished many final tasks about the house and then went into his own little room, locking the door. For long minutes he sat on his cot, hands folded in his lap, eyes almost glazed with thought. He moved only once, and then to reread Duell's letter from the bankers.

"There is a time for meditation; and a time for action!" he murmured.

Decision was made. With unhurried sliding gait he moved about in preparation for departure. Unlocking his camphor-wood chest, he sorted over the neatly arranged contents, extracting a clean dark suit and a pair of street slippers. Next he took out a canvas money pouch, a pipe with a bowl like a thimble, and a fresh package of cheap tobacco, which he stowed into capacious pockets. Kneeling again before the chest, he lifted the top tray and carefully sorted through the miscellany of small articles stored in the bottom. A hand printed volume of the *Analects*, a tiny bronze Buddha, a woman's gold ring, he placed in his pocket; at the very bottom of the chest he found that for which he searched—a long script in Chinese characters written upon exquisite Tien-Tsin paper. This he carefully wrapped in a fold of oiled silk and placed inside his shirt.

Next he unrolled a cloth bundle revealing three curious knives. The blades were about six inches long, double edged from point to shaft, keen as razors and each was tapered to a point as fine as a needle. The

handles were so short that an infant's hand might have covered them, mere knobs of heavy metal that furnished weight and balance to the weapons. His face was a yellow mask as he ran his fingers across the edge of each in turn, tested each point, then carefully rewrapped them in the oiled cloth, replaced the bundle in the chest and turned the key in the lock. Finished he filled his absurd little pipe and smoked its dozen puffs. When Duell's steps sounded he went in to announce his immediate departure and was rowed to the *Soo-pa* by the Lascar.

It was three days to port, but T'ai Fu was trained in the school of philosophy to which inaction is not a scourge but an opportunity for introspection. He spent the days in the shade of the canvas awning, smoking his pipe and communing with the everlasting mystery of the sea. His mind, unfettered by inelastic dogmas, he pondered the enigma of human existence; and he found satisfaction if not an answer to the riddle.

Disembarking at Iloilo, a port precariously reared upon a flat sandspit, T'ai Fu trudged a quarter mile along the water front to make certain that none from the *Soo-pa* had him in sight, then summoned a rickety two wheeled conveyance; and having given directions, he calmly intrusted himself and his precious box to the tempestuous street. A maelstrom of oxcarts, lumbering water buffalo, cargadors, Fords; a multitude of sounds and smells, a medley of commotion somehow kept orderly by seemingly indifferent police. At last they drew up before the establishment of Yap Cy, famed as the owner of a dozen great shipping enterprises, the acknowledged money power behind a score of rubber plantations ostensibly owned by white interests.

The cook's request to be taken to the great man was coolly rebuffed, three subordinates in turn offering their services. But T'ai Fu persisted and at last was ushered into an inner chamber. An aged Chinaman of the great merchant class



sat alone at a frugal breakfast.

"How may I serve you?" the venerable Mongolian queried, thinking this another

coolie come to ask largess or protection against the Chinese baiting Malay.

T'ai Fu took out his parchment, unwrapped the folds of protective silk and placed it before Yap Cy. At first the patriarch scanned it casually, pausing once to peer at T'ai Fu as if in unbelief. Concluding, he rolled the parchment carefully, then rose and bowed profoundly to his visitor. "T'ai Fu," he said. "T'ai Fu! Welcome to my house. My friends are your friends, and all that I have is yours!"

He clapped his hands to summon a servant. "Another stool for the illustrious T'ai Fu of Hong Kong. Bring refreshment for him. Stay! Tonight I would have a fitting feast prepared for an honored guest. There will be ten invited. Stay! There will be twenty. See that no pains are spared in its preparation."

For an hour Yap Cy and T'ai Fu conversed, their topics intimately concerned with the vast trade of the East. Not of dollars and cents like petty traders, but of trends of governments and of remote underlying conditions whose effects would influence coming years. The whole panorama of a world commerce unfolded as they talked; and always the old man listened as to an oracle when T'ai Fu spoke. At the end Yap Cy made T'ai Fu's mission easier to broach.

"T'ai Fu," he said, "I know you did not come—in this garb—simply to honor an old man. You have some purpose. How may I serve you?"

T'ai Fu tersely sketched his requirements. "I need twenty thousand dollars gold. Today. It would take me weeks to communicate with Hong Kong, so I come to you, the friend of my father."

"You did well. I will provide the twenty thousand gold within the hour. Now let us talk of other things."

"I do not desire that the money be given to me, but that you arrange with the bank to furnish my friend with credit that was refused."

"Good. One of my managers will arrange, if you give him the name. Consider this done."

"There is one thing more," T'ai Fu went on. "My friend has immediate need of a salvage vessel that I understand to be here."

"It is here," Yap Cy informed him. "It happens that I have a principal interest in it."

T'ai Fu explained the sinking of Duell's machinery; then: "I would have this ves-

sel put out at once for this island, the captain to be instructed that every crate be recovered without fail, and that the cost be not too heavy. If it exceeds five thousand, the balance is to be written against my account. Can this all be arranged? And the salvage vessel should arrive one day after a special mail boat, so that my friend may first learn of this credit at the bank and thus be in position to hire the salvagers."

"It will be done, for I control the salvage ship. There is nothing more?"

"You will understand Yap Cy, that no one must ever know of my part in this. My benefactor is very young, very proud and a white man. He must never know."

"It shall be so."

"My words of gratitude falter but my heart is strong. You have enabled me to serve a friend who is in bitter distress."

"My part is nothing, but you have attained great excellence. 'The fruits of friendship mellow on the tree of merit.' I go now to adjust this matter at the bank. Until I return you will rest upon the silken couch in my unworthy chamber."

Alone, T'ai Fu gravely donned the rich garments brought by a servant, then sat meditating until the old man returned.

"It is done," Yap Cy announced, "and I have arranged that one of my smaller boats stop at the island with mail, so that your friend may know at once."

"And I will return on it," Tai Fu said. "You are very kind."

"It sails when you are ready. But you must not depart too soon, for we would keep you, honored son of an honored sire."

T'ai Fu inclined his head gravely. "You have not asked me why I come in this masquerade. As a servant to a white man."

Yap Cy's gesture dismissed the need, but T'ai Fu felt impelled by the other's implicit confidence in him. "It is a long story," he began, "but I will be as brief as possible." For half an hour he discoursed, the patriarch nodding but never interrupting. The strangeness of the story brought a glint into his eyes and at the end he studied his compatriot like a connoisseur appreciating a work of art. At last he spoke.

"T'ai Fu," he declared. "T'ai Fu! You have attained great virtue. I have never known greater."

He clapped his hands; and to the servant, "We will have thirty guests. Nay, forty. And distribute freely to the poor

of this city. This house was never so honored as this day!"

CHAPTER XVI

SING-SONG

DAWN flooded over the ramparts of Canlaon, flowing down the cool forest slope to sift into the house like a thin luminous cloud. As the gray light filled the bungalow, a dark figure barefooted through the living room, paused to survey it with scowling cheerfulness, then padded into the bedroom where Duell lay asleep. Quietly, cautiously, the little Malay moved, gently raised the mosquito netting that draped the big carved bed, bending over the unconscious form to study the profile of the sleeper. Duell's breathing was slow and deep and his mouth formed soundless words as if he talked with phantoms. The bent figure reached out to touch his shoulder with fingers like feathers.

"Master," he whispered softly. "Master. Master——"

Over and over he repeated the low call, his tone gradually rising in slow crescendo. Beginning with muted whisper, it at last became low full voice. For Malays never rouse sleepers suddenly, lest the soul, separated from the flesh during slumber, be lost forever in the mysterious realms of dreamland.

"Master—master——"

Duell's eyes opened but his cheek remained against the pillow, for this voice was surely but a fragment of his dreams.

"Master——" The gentle tugging at his shoulder was no dream; he turned to blink into a pitted face he was mighty glad to see. With a single motion he was out from under the net.

"Mercado!" he exclaimed joyously. "I'm glad you're back! Where have you been?"

"Bimeby I tell you plenty," Mercado evaded.

But now he busied himself about a room not at all to his liking. In his opinion, sketchily set forth, housekeeping indubitably had gone to seed since his departure. One by one he remedied defects to his liking, heaped soiled clothes upon the floor, dusted, polished. And when Duell came hurrying back from the shower bath he valeted him as unconcernedly as if there had been no interruption in his service.

Breakfast found him in a great gust of energy. He flew back and forth from the kitchen, his voice hectoring as he belated

bored the old woman who was hopelessly lost in the assembling of ham and eggs as white men wanted them.

Duell bided his time, knowing that the boy would tell his story when, and only when the spirit moved him. With Malay love of the theatrical, Mercado sustained the suspense, but when breakfast was done and the table clear he handed Duell a filled pipe and explained the story of what he termed his "vacation."

It had been a girl, of course—and an irate father with a threatening bolo. And the unfortunate phase of the affair was that in this particular case Mercado had been guiltless. There was no doubt in Duell's mind of the boy's honesty about this, for he told about it with a shamed face; all of his skill had been unavailing



with this one daughter of the island.

As was his invariable practice about the house, Mercado recited his tale in English. Shrewdly, too, for it enabled him to bridge embarrassing gaps by implying faulty knowledge of the tongue. It was a weird narrative, jumpy and disconnected, but Duell could imagine the whole. A suddenly suspicious father who would have made the boy a bridegroom or a boiled corpse; the boy's nervousness while he played for time; a quick determination to take French leave of his master until it all blew over. But the father had been watching him, overtook his canoe and detained him while they awaited the girl.

With penurious words, Mercado somehow managed to build up this episode; the three all night together in an isolated fisherman's hut down the coast; the obsessed father guarding the only exit while he significantly sharpened a bolo already at razor's edge; the girl spitting hatred at Mercado; the boy's final capitulation to the father, principally because the girl did not want him at any price, and because she was virtuous. With the two married, the father had departed, leaving the boy alone with a bride who had fought him from morning till night, had driven him into the jungle to sleep and recalled him each morning to resume her wildcat tactics.

"A tiger," Mercado finished, "but she loves me now."

"That's fine!" Duell congratulated him.

"She is evidently a good girl and will make you a fine wife."

"Yes. You see."

He shot out of the room and returned dragging his bride by the arm. She was little more than a girl, about fifteen, but full bloomed by the forced growth of the tropics. Shy and small and softly brown, she shrank from the white man in an agony of embarrassment, her shoulder constantly seeking Mercado's in token of dependence and pride. No prince with a new princess could have possessed more than was Mercado's at the moment, and his fiercely proud mien proved that he knew it.

"That's fine!" Duell said again. "But you'll want a home for her. Let's see. You can have the little house at the edge of the north field. It's the best on the place."

"I know it," Mercado brazenly admitted. "We already moved in it. With some blankets and things you no use here. We already fixed good, thanks."

Duell grinned; he repaired with Mercado to inspect the little house, bidding the boy bring a few more essentials from the bungalow and lingering until he was satisfied that the two were comfortable. Mercado's return had pleased Duell tremendously, restoring something of his faith in his kind. But with his own departure imminent it also presented a problem. What would the boy do when he was gone, the plantation abandoned? Having been a retainer of the defeated white man, the boy would be in a difficult position, might find it hard to support his bride.

The solution struck him. He had accepted defeat, said farewell to the cane, but the prospect of permitting his father's house again to revert to ruin had galled him. Keeping it up would be Mercado's job, his pension for faithful service, for a fine loyalty. The boy and his little wife could remain indefinitely, keeping the bungalow in order, varnishing, oiling, polishing. Duell had sufficient funds to leave every account squared, and there was enough material about the house to keep it in order for years. The small salary paid Mercado, Duell could send monthly out of earnings from whatever work he found to do. The acres would become entangled, the mill an empty rusty shell of iron, but his father's house would continue fresh, livable, defiant of surrounding decay.

The thought stimulated Duell, and all day he went about his final preparations for departure with less unhappiness than

otherwise would have been possible. He was going with flags flying, retreating in order. Even in defeat the spirit that had motivated the entire venture was to be unimpaired. He had announced his intentions to no one, had maintained a smiling front throughout the eight days since the sinking of the lighters. There had been no slackening of needed work in the fields, for he loved the cane that had been the cause of his travail. To the last moment he would care for it, would leave with a memory of tall colonnades nurtured by perfectly cultivated soil.

After lunch he rode his pony to the village and paid a few last small accounts in the petty stores. It was market day, and he passed scores whom he knew by sight, a few by name. Always the way was cleared for him, little groups disintegrated before his coming. None sought him out, but he was far past the period when he had minded. His head was high during this last visit to the village, for he knew that despite their timid avoidance of him, these simple people liked him, would have been happier had he won. Smiling and nodding into the blank brown faces, threading his way among groups of placid Malays, squatted on heels and interminably



stroking the gorgeous throats of valiant fighting cocks, he won through a last maze of baskets and came to the stall of an old market woman whom he owed for fresh eggs and fish.

His account with her finally balanced and settled, he still lingered a moment as the woman pointed out her day's bargains. He barely heard her, for his mind was clogged with the vague respect and compassion that contact with these people always engendered. The old woman was a model of lifelong patience; her eyes aged, yet almost infantile; face seamed yet girl-ish; her coconut oiled hair gray yet parted like a schoolgirl's.

The woman nervously clutched—as she had nervously clutched for sixty years—the upper folds of a hookless and ever-slipping red calico skirt, as she praised the freshness of her eggs. Her hens were good hens, uninfluenced by any evil eye; the eggs would therefore nourish. The fish was a *lapu-lapu*, the only one in the

market that day, caught by her man at midnight and gutted by herself; very clean, see? The eggs at two cents each; the fish at three cents the slice wide as three fingers.

Duell, as an excuse to loiter for a last enjoyment of the smelly market place, offered twenty cents per dozen for the eggs and forty cents for the fifteen slices of fish. "No."

He persisted, suggested the advantage of disposing of her stock in one cash trade. But the white man's conception of trade was as far from hers as the pole.

"No," she said definitely; if he wanted so much of her goods, his need must be so great that he should pay not less but more; and, she confided, she preferred not to close out her stock, else she would have nothing to do the rest of the day! He did not want them? Then God go with him.

He turned away in time to see a bare-foot Malay step full upon a live cigar just discarded by another. Duell would have warned him but he was too late. He stopped short expecting to see the Malay leap; but a long half minute passed before the reflex of pain carried to the fellow's brain. A mild reflex, for the native lifted his naked foot casually; dug the hot coal from his charred sole, then placidly assembled lime leaf and betelnut for a crimsoming chew.

Yes, Duell told himself, as he rode away, these people were different. Well, why not? What race offered the perfect pattern? Certainly not his own people; certainly not himself. There was no diverting himself; always his thought led straight back to himself, to his failure.

Slowly his eye traveled, lingering a last time across the wide acres that, less than a year ago a matted jungle, had become splendid expanses of cane; a lavish return for a lavish effort. The mill; as sterile and empty as his own shell of hope, but, ah, the dreams had been worth dreaming! The house nestling in the fringe of palms beside the beach; cool and clean and wholesome—the *House of Duell*. Lundu's bamboo, with all its pathos. The dock, Feliza's proa alongside. The launch that was to bear him away in the morning. In the morning. Not again to see these familiar things, to hear familiar voices; no more to look seaward for the *Soopa*. T'ai Fu—Feliza. His strong shoulders sagged and in sudden boyish agony, his face sank into the mane of the pony.

AN HOUR later, he rode at a brisk trot up the trail to the house. His storm was over. His head was high and he was debonairly singing that never would it rain no' for the information of any and sundry who might be concerned in his weather predictions—or secretly interested in the white man's demeanor in the face of defeat. Mercado, surprised at his master's unusual lapse from reserve, cocked his head suspiciously, but at once announced an interesting event.

"You got plenty mail inside," he said. "Come two hours ago."

"But how? The *Soopa* surely did not—"

"No *Soopa*. Chinese steamer, Portigee captan, a dirty fella but very nice piple. He send boat ashore with mail and respects, ask if you all right, then go fast. Boat bigger than *Soopa*, got better engine." Here spoke Mercado, the mechanic. "Sail very fast. Gone three hours."

Duell glanced seaward, interested. He might, he thought, have sailed with the courteous captain had he been here. Mail and respects! A prestige, a recognition—but come a little late. A smudge of smoke caught his eye and he pointed it out to the boy.

"It couldn't have been a fast boat," he said. "It's still on the horizon, after three hours."

"No," Mercado negated promptly. "This boat is west. The other go straight south."

"You're probably mistaken, Mercado. We're out of the way of steamers. This isn't a crossroads."

"No mistake," Mercado insisted stoutly. "Other go south. I know. Once I am a sailor."

"All right. Have it your own way."

"You have tea?"

"No. I'm going to work in the office,



Mercado, and I don't want to be bothered for an hour. At six o'clock you come in, for I want to tell you—some things."

The boy ducked his head in token of understanding, and at his desk, Duell finished his final settlement of accounts. A few checks for

Iloilo grocers and other tradesmen, an overhaul of his limited letter file, and a small file of papers burned in his metal wastebasket. He hurried through it all, but it seemed less than an hour when Mercado presented himself. Duell went straight to his subject.

"Mercado," he began, "here is six months' pay for you. I am——"

Mercado took the money matter of factly but he was piqued and would not listen. "I said you got mail," he complained. "You no look at it."

The boy stuffed the money into his pocket as he extended the tied bundle to his master with his other hand.

Without interest, principally to appease the disgruntled houseboy, Duell sorted through a miscellany from advertisers of books, radios, machinery, the whatnots offered to white men marooned on the Pacific. But suddenly his careless air dissolved as one envelope caught his eye. He tore out the letter and read:

My dear Mr. Duell:

Our governors have instructed me to advise you that reconsideration has been given your financial problems.

At a meeting this morning it was unanimously voted that credit be extended you. In view of the fact that your operations may be enlarged beyond your present plans, the board has credited your account with four thousand pounds sterling instead of the two thousand you requested.

If this credit prove insufficient, or if there is any other way in which we can be of service, you have us to command.

Cordially yours,
Dwight Davies Sec'y.

Twenty thousand dollars! More if necessary. "*Cordially yours!*" And these British always meant far more than they said! Duell leaped to his feet, grinning, exuberant.

"Mercado, let's have a drink! No, no! I mean tea! No—I don't want anything! I—oh!"

Without seeming effort he lifted Mercado bodily and stood him upon the desk, then leaped to the Siamese tom which stalked by and outraged its fulsome dignity by swinging it by the tail. The cat fled, sputtering; but Mercado grumpily surveyed him from his elevated post.

"You want tea?" he demanded, "or no want tea?"

"No want! No want nothing! Have got plenty, Mercado."

"What you mean about six months' pay?"

"Oh! Y-es. Let me see."

But Mercado now a benedict with re-

sponsibilities, struck hard while the iron was hot. "I gueses I know," he hazarded, his head cocked as he closely studied his master's reaction. "You give it. My wedding present, eh?"

Mercado had him over a barrel and Duell knew it. "That's it, Mercado"; Duell laughed, "a wedding present."

But Duell, in turn, had an inspiration. "But on second thought," he added as Mercado held out his hand for the money, "wedding gifts always go to the bride. I'll give it to her myself, for she will know how to save it. She won't gamble. And she——"

Hoot. Hoot. H-o-o-t!

Duell beat even Mercado to the beach. A strange steamer had nosed carefully through the channel into the bay and soon her anchor chain rattled and she swung to the tide. Astounded by the calling of two vessels in one day, Duell sprang into the launch and put out toward it. She was a squat vessel rigged with a forest of booms. He had never seen anything quite like her, nor so many white men upon an island boat. A smart British officer greeted him at the lowered ladder introducing himself as Captain Chesterton of the *Grasp*, a salvage expert.

"Heard you might want a job done here, Duell," he said crisply, "and thought I'd run down on the chance. We're home-ward bound anyway, and this wasn't far off the course. Was I right?"

"You were!" Duell assured him. "Why, of all the luck! I would have started tonight for Iloilo, for I'd heard you were there. Who told you of my—hard luck? Mulvane?"

"Oh, just shore front gossip," the captain said carelessly. "We try to learn where we're needed. Our business, you know. You'll have tea with us, of course. And then we'll talk shop."

IT WAS a stimulating hour for Duell, spent with a dozen Britishers, as clean and stiff as their starched white uniforms. The vessel was a floating power house that operated great cranes capable of lifting huge weights. Three big Cornishmen were deep sea divers, four Scots were engineers, the navigators were three cousins hailing from Lancaster. There was no promise of what could be done, but competence spoke for itself, and the questions concerning the task left no room for doubt. These men knew their business. There would be no hitches to any enterprise they undertook.

Duell's business talk with Chesterton was brief; one had a job to be done, the other wanted a job to do. No haggling over the cost, which was a fair one. To insure against any possible mishap, Chesterton contracted that the machinery should not only be raised but should be placed in position in the mill. Luck had brought him these skilled men with their modern equipment simultaneously with financial aid and Duell took fullest advantage of the break.

The captain and his staff seemed extraordinarily interested in him, in his affairs, his well being. They pressed him to stay to dinner but Duell felt the need of getting away; he wanted to be alone for an exultant hour, an hour of thanksgiving. It seemed impossible; but at daybreak the work would begin, the divers already having gone to bed to rest up against their ordeal of the morrow. Speeding shoreward in the launch, Duell noted that the house was illuminated from end to end, the porches ablaze with gay lights as if in celebration of this eleventh hour turn of fate. He raced up the path from the dock, elated, happier than he had been since—since—

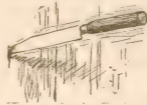
The thought slowed him. There was much missing from his triumph. Feliza, above all. And then something more—he lagged in his stride, trying to think just what the deficiency was. Then it came to him; there was no one to whom he could confide his happiness. His house would never again be the same. Its spirit had departed. T'ai Fu, too, was gone. Without him the bungalow was like a clock without hands, like a church without an altar.

His head lifted slowly, unbelievably, as he listened to a rising sound. A fresh land breeze swept backward through the house, rustling the floor mats and deadening the sound; but immediately the music carried to him unmistakably. Quaint, appealing, monotonous, there was wafted from the kitchen the blissful little sing-song of T'ai Fu!

The door crashed before Duell's rush. He skated perilously over Mercado's freshly polished floors in his headlong dash kitchenward.

T'ai Fu, with yellow countenance glistening from kitchen heat, was squaring croutons with a long knife, which he wielded with a curious skill. The long blade fairly glistened as it flew in his deft fingers, then—amazingly—with the last square sheered off, T'ai Fu tossed the

knife at the wall, where the point imbedded itself exactly between two others. The



throwing motion was effortless, merely a flipping motion of fingers and wrist, yet the shaft vibrated a full minute from the force of the throw. He was scraping the bread cubes into a bowl when Duell broke in upon him.

"I'm back," T'ai Fu announced casually.

The cook was seldom so trite, but Duell did not notice. In his ecstasy he felt impelled to take the cook to his breast, to show him how much he was appreciated; how profoundly the suspicion of desertion had depressed him. There was so much he wanted to tell this cook; of his dependence upon him, of a mutual loyalty handed down from father to son, of a—yes, of a love for him. All this Duell had charged out to say, but he was a white man with a white man's inhibitions, plus his own habitual reserve.

So he said rather chokingly, "You're back! Have a good time?"

"Pretty good," the cook informed him noncommittally.

"Phew! Well, I'm sure glad. For I've had great luck today, T'ai Fu—and now I'm going to have a good dinner!"

But there was a glory in his eyes that T'ai Fu understood.

CHAPTER XVII

HARVEST

SUGAR!

Turmoil, uproar, but as orderly as the turn of a waterwheel, with Duell as active as three men and with the enthusiasm of ten. Every day he wore down both of his ponies, and every man on each of the three eight-hour shifts felt the drive of his stimulating earnestness. He seemed tireless, but at last T'ai Fu expostulated.

"You need rest," he warned the master. "You are not a machine."

"Rest? Sleep!" Duell laughed at him. "There'll be time enough for that while the next crop is coming on! Be a good scout, T'ai Fu, and make some hot coffee. Strong, too. I want to get into some dry clothes and go back to the mill."

At mid-forenoon he had just come in after a whole night of absorbing supervision of his big organization, but after a

cool shower, fresh khaki and a good breakfast he jumped upon the stallion and trotted back to the fields. Already the section nearest the house was denuded of cane and the cutters were harvesting the adjoining field of its twelve-foot stalks. The air throbbled with the thudding machetes, the rustle of felled cane stalks that were fountains of streaming leaves. Stripped of foliage the cane was heaped high upon carts which steers in tandem hurried millward under the urgent cries of harried cartmen. Almost as fast as the gleaners stripped an acre, it came into the care of the ploughmen who ripped the soil in preparation for the next crop. A riot of energy but the force was controlled to a single purpose.

All roads led to the roaring mill. The great galvanized structure was a living thing; the hot breath from its tall stack a plume of victory to the entire countryside. It had become, as if overnight, the heart of the enterprise, the plantation roads were mere arteries and veins carrying the ceaseless floods of carts and cane. Every piece of the mill mechanism had been recovered by the efficient salvage crew, and, out of a personal interest in him that Duell could never fathom, they had loaned him an engineer who had remained two weeks to perfect every bearing, align every wheel, test the entire layout through a week's faultless performance before leaving in Duell's launch to overtake his vessel at Malale.

This day Duell remained in the field until the second shift had come on and was functioning perfectly; then he hurried to the mill. He was always hurrying—and his hurrying invariably took him to the mill. He loved its vast rumblings, the heat of its interior, the forced draft flames from firepits that brought every active figure into brilliant yellow relief. Endless belts fed cane continuously into the insatiable maw of ponderous crushers that rolled with the ravenous impersonality of juggernauts. Carried into the recrushers that extracted the last vestige of juice, the cane issued as dry pulp that in turn was automatically stoked to the firepits. Thus all the cane was grist, the waste cellulose furnishing the fuel that evaporated the nectar of the plant.

At mid-afternoon, Mercado brought him sandwiches and iced lemonade, yelling something about a boat, which Duell failed to hear above the roar of the mill. Nor did boats matter to him.

Darkness came, marked only by a

change of crew and the switching on of flood lights above each vital machine. Duell, studying a sugar flux through the glassed peephole of a vacuum pan, was suddenly brought erect by a big hand which reached down and lifted him bodily and he squirmed around into the shaggy countenance of—Mulvane!

Even the skipper's booming tones could not surmount the pandemonium.

"—in hell—ever sleep? Ye'll—a-gettin' sick! —great place—you—welcome I get!"

Duell fairly beamed upon him, would have taken him outside at once, but the skipper first prowled about on a critical inspection of the mill, nodding approval now and then as some refinement of mechanics struck his appreciative eye. Outside he voiced his complete approval.

"Ye've got the right idee, Duell," he concluded. "Always make things better than ye need, and bigger. Then ye've got something to grow into. How've ye been? Though I don't need to ask—ye look good enough to be Irish!"

"I'm fine! And how have you been—and—everybody?"

"Oh, I'm all right. But I'm fairly thirsty after that sweathole in there," he hinted.

"Let's go to the house. I imagine Mercado is still about. When did you get in?" Duell asked as they walked across the fields that showed bare under a rising full moon. "I didn't hear your whistle."

What Duell wanted to learn was the whereabouts of Feliza, but he talked of cane and milling till they came to the house. Mulvane's thirst was so prodigious that Duell fell to wondering if the girl were not aboard, for when alone on the ship the master tumbled as he wished and was not avid for whiskey ashore. Several times Duell gave him opportunity to tell of her, but always the skipper parried—whether by accident or design, Duell could not guess.

"Boy," Mulvane exclaimed expansively over a fourth Scotch, "ye've got a wonderful organization! Ye must have sweated some trainin' these natives. Ye've sure got the world by the tail. And I don't mean just this fine harvest and splendid mill and all that, either! Say," he leaned forward intently, vastly interested, "how did ye ever win that Iloilo crowd?"

"You mean the bank? I just wrote twice and told them my—"

"Bank nothin'! Why, the whole port is a-talkin' about ye! It's Duell this and

Duell that, every place ye go. Why, even old Yap Cy asked about ye!"

"Yap Cy?" Duell puzzled.

"Yes, Yap Cy. And don't ye go to be tryin' to pull the wool over me eyes any more! Ye're a deep one, ye are! I'd rather have that old Chinaman behind me



than all the rest of the Archipelago! Millions he's got, and always on the lookout for young enterprises that'll grow. Boy, ye're sure sailin' on the tide!"

"But, Captain. Honestly, I don't know what you're talking about."

"No?" Mulvane studied him closely, and doubt slowly replaced his convictions.

"Well, I dunno!" he finally growled. "Maybe I'm crazy. I get to thinkin' one thing about ye on the boat, but when I talk with ye I see things different. Ye seem downright sincere—but ye keep on a-pullin' big stuff. It's all right though! This island's loco anyway. Anyhow ye're sure in right over at Iloilo. The big crowd's a-watchin' ye. Yes, a little more of the same, thank ye."

Mulvane drank, then fumbled in his pocket and brought out an old pair of brass rimmed spectacles which he donned for a better study of his quiet young host. He grumbled incoherently as, having adjusted the spectacles, he dropped his chin to peer not through but over the lenses. He spat over the rail, then growled again.

"What was that, Captain?" Duell asked.

"Nothin'. Can't an old man even spit without bein' questioned about it?"

He lapsed silent, manifestly at a loss, with something on his mind. Soon he raised up to spy suspiciously about the now darkened porch, fearful of being overheard in his betrayal of a trust. "Say, boy, I'm for ye! Every way and all the time. Listen. Ye come out to the boat in the mornin', see?"

Duell debated. "I'm mighty busy," he finally declared, "but of course I'll be glad to come if I can do anything for you."

"For me? Highty-tighty! Me! It's for ye, Duell! Ye'd best come, I'm a-tellin' ye! No, I can't say more; I've said too much already! Well, I guess I'll be a-sayin' good night to ye."

He reluctantly eased himself out of the big chair, fumblingly straightened his wrinkled uniform, gathered his hat and the big walking stick he always affected while ashore, gazed affectionately at the glass and syphon, then abruptly lurched down the porch as if running away from the temptation to take another drink.

"I'll tell ye what I'll do," Mulvane said in parting. "I'll begin loadin' in the afternoon. There's a lot of copra to be shifted first, for I wasn't sure ye'd have much sugar ready, and I ain't ballasted right for so much heavy stuff. At three tomorrow I'll take yer first lighter."

"Yes, Captain."

"Ye'll have everything ready at three?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Say! Are ye a-listenin' to me or ain't ye?"

"Yes, Capt—well, I *was* wandering a bit. You see, I'm trying to think why you wish me to come out to the ship tomorrow."

"Oh—well, whatever ye're thinkin' is—is probably right. And there's no use askin' any more, for I'm an honorable man and keep my word. *Almost* keep it, anyway! She—*did ye hear that, Duell!*"

Duell had heard it. It was a single blast from the mill whistle. An alarm!

Duell bounded from the dock; but Mulvane was not to be left out of it. "Wait a minute!" he shouted after the racing Duell. "I'm a-goin' too! What's up?"

Duell slowed down until Mulvane came lumbering alongside, and the two ran toward the mill.

"What's up?" Mulvane repeated.

"I don't know," Duell admitted. "Something serious, or they would not have sounded the alarm. Hurry!"

AS THEY drew near, Duell's worry increased, for to his practiced ear there was no break in the harmonious rumble of the mill. If naught was wrong with the mechanisms, then what *was* wrong? He burst into a run, outdistancing the puffing Mulvane, and dashed into the mill.

A swift glance about the huge shed showed him that every machine was operating smoothly, but the men had abandoned their posts and now formed a compact group in front of a battery of big vacuum pans. Puzzled and angered by their negligence, he vaulted over an intervening vat, pulled the master switch that stilled all the machinery, then hurried toward the assembled crew who, all facing away from him, were unaware of his ap-

proach. He came directly into the group from behind a steam retort—and saw the cause of their fearful preoccupation.

Malabar was confronting the gang. Unaided, the powerful ruffian cowed the entire crew, taunting them as he swung a heavy sledge.

"With this I am going to smash your master's fine machines!" he gloated. "All these pretty white man's inventions! Where will this fine stuff be when I kiss it with this?"

He swung a mighty preliminary blow with the iron sledge, the muscles of his naked torso writhing like snakes beneath his brown skin as the heavy sledge whirled an arc above his head.

"One blow to each fine piece—and then what will he have?" Malabar cried theatrically. "What will he find when he comes in the morning? Tell me that, you white man's slaves!"

In Malabar's hands the big hammer was a terrific weapon. He played with it as an ordinary man would handle a stick, enjoying his moment in the center of the stage before working havoc among the delicately adjusted mechanisms. Twenty men cowed by one—but the one had vast forces arrayed behind him, as Duell instantly saw. Duell's men were loyal to him, ordinarily would have risked even Malabar's great hammer to protect the mill, but superstition held them back. For around his strong neck Malabar wore the *aning-aning* of Lundu! He was thus invincible.

Fortified by the mystic charm, Malabar was confident, derisive, dangerous. And when Duell came into the group from behind the pan, Malabar not only stood his ground, but came a step nearer, bracing himself with his shorter leg as he brandished the heavy sledge.

"Ha!" he laughed shrilly. "Here comes the white boy himself! And just in time to see Malabar play around with this!"

Duell had advanced until he stood just in front of his men, white faced and intense, regarding his enemy with a concentration almost studious. The sight of Lundu's treasured charm about Malabar's neck concerned him only less than the threat to his mill. Here was the thief; and Malabar's swaggering confidence proved his implicit belief in the efficacy of the talisman.

Mulvane, now coming up beside Duell, grasped the situation instantly. Knowing Malays to the core, he warned Duell about the man facing them.

"He's a bad man, Duell," he cautioned in a low tone. "He's a killer. I know them. Step to one side, slowly. Now. I'm going to shoot!"

But Duell's curt gesture waved Mulvane back, and as Malabar extended his chest, Duell stepped straight toward him. Duell's hands were empty, swinging loosely at his sides; but in the floodlight his set jaw showed the working of tensed muscles as he deliberately went to his challenger. Five steps, and Mulvane's voice again entreated him to step one pace aside that he might shoot; but Duell went on as if Malabar were the only other person living at that moment. As Duell came within striking distance, Malabar's grasp tightened convulsively upon the sledge.

The white man went on, was four paces from him—and Malabar tensed for a crouching swing. Demoniac hatred and glee convulsed his ugly countenance. The white man appeared to be unarmed!

Then Duell's arm lashed out like a whip, straight at the taunting chin. *Crash!* His fist came away, whipped back in right-left, right-left solid punches, and a gasp sounded from a score of throats. Even Mulvane, amazed at the unexpectedness of Duell's attack, cursed softly to himself.

Agony erased the taunt from Malabar's broad face, and the sledge rang on the concrete floor as both nerveless hands crept to his breast. Malabar, all of the spectators, had breathlessly awaited the terrible climax, but Duell had simply punched the brute half senseless, then whipped the stolen *aning-aning* from the brown throat.

Malabar reeled, caught hold of himself, and then went wild, came charging toward the men who surged about Duell in a grinning circle of appreciation. Bereft of his magic talisman Malabar was now no more than a man to them. Worse, he was a Malay made ridiculous, who had forever "lost face," and they laughed as they sent him reeling. Never again would the islanders bow fearfully before Malabar. The tide had turned. They would have handled him roughly but for Duell's intervention.

"Let him go," he bade them, "but see that he never enters this mill again."

They rushed the killer to the door, out into the night, then returned to pass the *aning-aning* reverently from hand to hand, each possessor giving it up reluctantly, for all believed in its powers. All but Mercado, who had joined the crowd in the mill. An eternal skeptic, the houseboy

handled the charm carelessly, roughly. When he finally gave it up to his master, Mercado's dark countenance was wrinkled with thought.

"You keep it," he advised earnestly. "Don't lose it."

"But you don't think it's magic, Mercado. Then why?"

"You keep it," Mercado insisted aggressively. "I know why Malabar crazy to get it back, I think."

"Because it's a lucky piece?"

"Yes. But more as that."

"How, more?"

"I think Malabar steal it first for Sotto. Why? Because Sotto has had bad luck. Gambling. He lose everything at monte. So he think mebbe this change his luck, so he have Malabar steal it. See?"

"Go on."

"Then Malabar, I think, steal it from Sotto tonight. And when he go back to Sotto—with no *aning-aning* — *lintik na mo!*"

Mercado made an expressive gesture, as of a throat being cut. He seemed very confident in his deductions, and both white men were impressed.

"Sounds reasonable to me," Mulvane agreed. "I hope ye've seen the last of that killer, but I have my doubts. I'll see that the Lascar stirs around your house all night. Malabar's bad, Duell."

Duell nodded absently, examining the talisman in his hand. Cautioning the shift boss to keep a better watch against intruders he followed out after Mulvane and Mercado. Coming out of the brilliantly illuminated mill was like going into blackness, and he paused just outside the doorway until vision should readjust. He could hear Mulvane's heavy tread down the trail; the utter darkness gradually dissolved so that objects dimly revealed themselves. He took a step forward, then felt the *aning-aning* torn from his grasp! There was a hazy outline of a figure bounding away lopsidedly, then a taunting laugh sounded from the edge of the woods beyond the mill.

"I have it!" came Malabar's voice through the night. "I have it!"

There was a triumphant savagery in his tone, a fierce note that hung threateningly upon the air. Mulvane and Duell listened, each more deeply concerned by the implied menace that he wished the other to know.

But Mercado, a mere gnome beside the giant sailor, sniffed his contempt.

"I have it—I have it," he called mock-

ingly at the hidden Malabar. "Well, *keep it!*" Then lower to Mulvane and Duell, "Some piple make me sick. Very sick. Does he think Mercado a fool? Look here at this."

He extended his hand to expose in the moonlight an object that at first sight seemed to be a white bird's egg. Mulvane poked at it with his great forefinger, and immediately recognized what Duell already had discovered.

The object was a glass eye, evidently once worn by some unfortunate who had lost one of a pair of particularly black and handsome eyes. But the two white men could not understand the houseboy's linking the artificial eye with his mockery of Malabar.

"This," Mercado explained, "is the soul of the *aning-aning*. I take it before I give the rest back to you. Yes," he concluded vindictively as he glowered in Malabar's direction, "some piple make me sick. But I guess he sicker when he try out that empty *aning-aning*. This ends Malabar."



You see," he prophesied as he led the way toward the house.

Duell went to his room, and it seemed that he was asleep before his head touched the pillow. A rectangle of moonlight slowly swung across the polished floor, climbed the bed to touch the face of the exhausted sleeper.

An hour passed, then the shadow of a bare head marred the moonlit patch, slowly grew as a naked torso was outlined against the open window. As silent as the shadow itself, the dark form writhed over the sill, came erect, and glided toward the unconscious white man. A familiar voice, low and pleasantly masculine, spoke cryptic words.

"Come," Lundu bade the sleeper. "There is a thing on the night. Come. This is your night. Tonight the end begins!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THREE FALLING STARS

THESE was an urgency in Lundu's tone that brought Duell wide awake and serious. In a moment he was fully dressed and he hurried out to where Lundu waited at the foot of the steps. Again, as on another night, the Malay stood like a posed figure gazing up at the naked bamboo pole.

"Who has done this?" he asked quietly. His voice was little more than a whisper but it carried a tremendous emotion.

"Malabar stole it," Duell told him. "He confessed it to-night."

"For himself?"

"Mercado says not. He thinks that it was stolen for Sotto."



Lundu had not lowered his gaze, still stood with head uplifted in a way that emphasized the classic profile of his throat and face. For a long minute he stood thus, motionless, thoughtful, as if his confused mind struggled with a problem. But it was instinct rather than thought that brought the truth to him.

"It was Sotto," he declared. "Sotto. He has dared. Now there is more on this night."

There was no venom in the quiet words, but a chill raced down Duell's spine, for Lundu's declaration was like a whisper of shrouded doom.

"Yes," Lundu spoke again as if to himself, "there is much on this night. We go now, for the way is long."

He set off with his stately stride, but Duell bade him wait. "How far do we go?" he asked. Not where were they bound, or why; for he would trust this strange being with life itself. But how far, he wanted to know.

"About two fast hours."

"Two hours afoot?"

"Yes."

"Why go afoot?" Duell questioned. "I can carry you on the motorcycle. It will save time."

"Time may be worth much," Lundu admitted gravely.

Duell trundled out the vehicle, closed the cutout, cranked the motor, hoping that the muffled explosions would not wake T'ai Fu or the more distant Mercado. Astride the machine, he indicated Lundu's seat on the luggage carrier, and the two set off, Lundu's arm pointing out the trail leading toward the mountain. The night was so bright that the spotlight was unnecessary.

A curious journey—a white man motorcycling a moonlit tropical trail with a half mad Malay guiding him to an unknown destination. But to Duell it did not seem strange. There was a comfort in the mere contact of Lundu's warm bare breast with his shoulders; and he went ever more carefully lest some sudden jolt sever the fragile threads that held Lundu's life intact.

"It is a short way from here," Lundu said. "It will be well to hide the machine, for now we go quietly, so that they do not hear."

He turned down a sloping trail leading north, and Duell could not but follow him. A short distance, and Duell was oriented; they were approaching the plantation of Tibonan, the gambler who had had the temerity to outface Sotto. Presently Lundu left the trail and sought the shadows, with Duell close to him. They passed stealthily through a ragged growth of banana and papaya, and Lundu's hand closed upon Duell's arm in signal for the need of greater caution, for the white man's shoes could not match his own cat-like tread. An awkward step snapped a dead branch under Duell's foot, and the two froze in an attitude of intense listening.

There was no sound. Yes—the still night carried a faint grinding from steel teeth that chewed everlastingly at its sweet diet. It seemed to impress Lundu, who turned his head slightly in the direction of the distant sound. To his deranged mind, the mill was more than a mill; he saw it as a symbol of the mysterious urge of the white people; he saw it as one of the vast powers that white men conjured to do their bidding. A god that labored, a god summoned by the mere turning of a switch. Now its heavy groan carried to him over a long stretch of woods and brush; and Lundu heard.

"It is always awake," he said softly, "your *anting-anting*."

"It is no *anting-anting*," Duell whispered earnestly. "It's just a mill, Lundu."

Lundu's smile was white amid the shadows. "Call it by your own name," he conceded, "but it has worked great things for you. You will win."

"Win—what?"

"Everything. All you strive for. I know. Though I may not see it."

"Why won't you see it, Lundu?"

"I saw three stars fall in a dream. Three. And I was one—the last that fell. There is much on this night. Come."

Again Duell's spine chilled before so isolated a personality, but there was nothing to do but follow. Lundu strode like a shadow, three paces ahead, a dim erect figure that seemed less flesh than wraith.

THE grove ended abruptly and across a narrow clearing set with scattered palms, a light gleamed from the window of a small frame house built ten feet above the ground upon heavy timbers. There came the murmur of masculine voices, then a louder expletive from a man enraged.

"Sotto," Lundu whispered and there was a faint hint of exultation in his tone.

Moving along the edge of the clearing, he led Duell to the base of a young palm that stood twenty feet from the house and in direct line with the open window. The tree leaned slightly and Lundu indicated the staggered notches carved in the trunk by nut gatherers.

Grasping his idea, Duell climbed up to a position opposite the window where he was screened by the low-hanging fronds. Slowly, moving with the least possible effort, Lundu came up and clung just below him.

It was practically the same group of gamblers, there in the lighted room, to whom Lundu had led him before. The picture was almost identical with that of the other night, the same grouping around a table, the same effect of a big game almost completed. But now there was one vast difference; this time Sotto's chief adversary, Tibonan, leaned over a large heap of winnings, and Sotto had nothing left. The winner had evidently lost all fear of Sotto's power on the island, and was eyeing him with a sarcasm that told its own fluent story.

The eavesdroppers heard his taunting words, "No, Sotto, I don't want your promises. You would not take mine. I play cash against cash, or I play no more."

Sotto's lids nearly covered his black eyes but his singularly benevolent counte-

nance was a mask as he repeated evenly, "But I have no more money with me. I—"

"You say you have no more with you. Have you more, anywhere?"

It was a direct insult, gave the lie to his inferences, and for a tense moment, Sotto's eyes closed entirely as if to veil lurking devils. He maintained his grandfatherly air, but the strained attitudes of the other gamblers were evidence that a crisis was imminent.

"You are a hard man, Tibonan," he said with a smile that was only of the lips. "I have lost a real fortune tonight, the heaviest loss in the history of the island, yet you refuse me a last chance."

"But I don't refuse you a chance, Sotto. You can have your chance—as you gave me mine. But you made me bet something dearer than money. What have you to put up against—this?" Tibonan carelessly shoved the huge stake toward his adversary as if to flout him.

Sotto considered, the lust for caros insatiable. Luck had gone against him again tonight as it had nightly for nearly four weeks. His patrimony and all his nefarious gains of years had gone within the month, and tonight finished him unless he could recoup by some bold stroke. He made the cast.

"Against the half of your winnings I'll stake you—Lundu's *anting-anting!*"

In the tree, Lundu did not stir, but Duell



felt the one reflex that even Lundu could not control. *Thud—thud—thud—thud—thud.* It was like the swift flutterings of a wet wing.

Tibonan pondered, his eyes a-glitter at the chance of possessing the talisman. But he shook his head.

"No, Sotto. It has brought you

no luck since you had it stolen. And even if I dared to possess it, you do not seem to have it with you."

Sotto shrugged imperturbably under his opponent's jibes. "Malabar stole it," he admitted, "but I will give it to you in the morning if I lose. If I had it with me, you could not have beat me. It is magic.

Yes." Always Sotto added a "yes" to his own statements, complacently, as if in admiring confirmation of his preceding words.

"No, Sotto," Tibonan interrupted. "I don't want it anyway. For," he fixed Sotto with a significant gaze, "I would rather have Lundu's good wishes than to have his stolen charm."

Sotto's start was almost imperceptible, but he glanced uneasily into the shadowed corners of the large room. There was no man upon the island who did not fear the handsome and solitary figure that strode through the nights like a specter, and Sotto secretly held him as half god, half devil. No deed of Lundu's had inspired this universal awe, for no harm had ever come to a soul through act of his; and there were women and children who held him in a respect akin to veneration. The man's aberration, his solitary life, however, his utter detachment from the normal interests that claimed other natives, had woven about him a fabric of mystery.

But Sotto was now desperate, for ill luck had stripped him. "I'll tell you, Tibonan," he said. "I have one thing left."

Tibonan nodded vindictively. "Your land."

"Y-yes. My land. Against all your winnings."

"Write it out," Tibonan said, "while I think it over."

With a hand that trembled Sotto wrote quickly and passed the sheet to his adversary. Tibonan read it twice, his face a blank that gave no indication of his decision. None of the other gamblers had moved a muscle, and it was apparent that they did not share Tibonan's fearlessness of this ruthless man who had ruled the island for twenty years. Too often they had seen others like Tibonan challenge Sotto but only to fail and fail—and too often disappear forever.

As Tibonan hesitated, the interest mounted, for so great a stake had never been hazarded within their memories. This would be a night to remember, to recount to grandsons yet unborn. As if enjoying their suspense—and Sotto's—Tibonan lighted a cigarette, inhaled deeply, again studied Sotto's informal deed of his land.

Then, "One card!" he announced.

There was a sudden stir as of a single body about the table, then the group became brown statuary. Tibonan, master this night, dealt swiftly, facing two cards before Sotto, two before himself. The

first card off the cut deck would tell the tale, and the six spectators within the room craned eagerly over the table.

But Tibonan's two hands swiftly slapped down to cover the faced cards as a new figure entered the room.

It was Malabar, breathless after a long run. Like a dog fearful of a whipping, he limped sidewise to his master, timidly extending a hand that held the chain bag and cord of the *anting-anting*.

"I ran," he explained, "as soon as I learned where you were."

Sotto blazed with rage and Malabar cringed back. But Sotto's baleful eyes went lifeless; Malabar's chastisement could wait an hour unfilled with other pleasures. Snatching the potent charm he turned back to Tibonan with all his former confidence restored. He was like a man relieved, for in his heart he still had implicit faith in the efficacy of the charm.

"Play!" he commanded, the talisman pressed hard against his chest. "Now I cannot lose."

To Tibonan the timely arrival of the *anting-anting* was like an interposition of fate at the crisis of his life, and he paled. He would have quit the game, recalled the wager; but his courage was not proof against the lethal hatred with which Sotto now opposed him. Slowly his hand uncovered the cards and he fumbled with the deck. A first pasteboard fell and the gasp from the onlookers told him that it was the fateful card. Tibonan licked his dry lips, not daring to read the outcome of his foolish wager. But at last his eyes fell to the card—and he gazed in astonishment.

Unbelievably, the charm had failed Sotto!

That lucky card was the last object Tibonan saw in life. He died believing in his luck, died in his moment of exultation.

Beside himself with rage, Sotto, who had never killed—because he could hire it done more safely—struck out viciously at the older man. The blow was merely the reaction of anger, the lashing out of a poor loser goaded by bad luck. But his fist still clutched Lundu's heavy charm and the added weight gave the blow the force of a projectile as it struck the unsuspecting victim squarely on the temple.

Tibonan's head fell limply forward and his face plunged deeply into the heaped pile of his great winnings, as if he gloated over them.

IN THE tree Duell took advantage of the absorption of the actors in the drama to ease his cramped position. Lundu, impassive, silently followed the white man three feet higher where their view was better and where both could sit in the wide spread of the fronds as in a nest. The new location offered imperfect concealment, but that did not matter, so absorbed were the gamblers in their own affairs.

"This is your night," Lundu whispered. "I feel it. Wait."

The effect of the blow seemed to stun Sotto. Fearfully he searched the faces of the group for confirmation. They, too,



"I didn't mean to hoarsely. "I didn't! I didn't! It was this!"

Wild with dread, he flung the unlucky *anting-anting* from him and trampled it with maddened feet. Lundu's charm had betrayed him again, ruined him, for here was a man dead by his hand! Once Sotto had seen a murderer hang—

But Sotto's frenzy passed from him as if he doffed a coat. With low lidded eyes he stood in deep thought, then asserted the qualities of leadership and force that had given him his mastery on the island. "Malabar," he commanded, "carry this Tibonan away. Then come back at once. And you fellows!" he included the six in one threatening glare. "You listen well to me. No one knows of this but you. If anything is ever said, I won't take the trouble to learn *which one* of you talked!"

They stirred uneasily, and he pressed his advantage. This was the time for a show of his strength. "Another thing," he said impressively, "you men did not think that I knew of your disloyalty to me; you thought I knew nothing of your whisperings about signing mill contracts with the American. You have been thinking that perhaps the extra money might offset Sotto's—ah—disappointment. You thought I did not know all this, eh?"

There was a nervous movement among the six, a general fear lest Sotto single out another victim. But Sotto knew his people, how much more could be achieved through vague fear than by direct action. As the six cringed, he felt his sense of power surge back to fullest strength and his small hands toyed foppishly with the gold chain across his heavy chest. His diamond shot yellow sparks.

"You are not to sign these contracts," he commanded, and there was no dissenting voice. "First, because I tell you so again, and second, because in three days there will be no American. As for the mill, that was silenced tonight."

Here a timid planter disillusioned Sotto. "But there's a mill," he quavered. "I hear it now."

Sotto listened, and when he caught the distant rumble of the mill that was the audible evidence of another defeat, his face went livid. Hurrying to the stairs, he called urgently, "Malabar! Malabar!"

The ruffian came quickly, his gait a disjointed run.

"Why is the mill still running?" Sotto demanded. "Did you fail me again?"

Malabar gave a distorted version of his encounter with Duell in the mill; he had been beset by twenty men, he explained. Sotto cut him short.

"Where is the American now? Still at the mill?"

"No, I heard his motorcycle. He is out on it."

"Good! Kill him tonight. You remember the plan?"

"Yes, master."

Sotto eyed him coldly. "You have failed twice. A third time and—"

He did not finish, but Malabar trembled. "I won't fail! I won't! I go now?"

"Yes. And take this with you."

He indicated Tibonan's winnings which Malabar knotted into a sack. Noting the scrawled deed to the land which Tibonan had won from him, Sotto held it coolly aloft and touched a match to it. If he felt uncomfortable at thus stealing from a man dead by his hand, he showed no trace of such remorse. Again he coldly questioned his tool.

"Malabar, you surely remember our plan? There will be no error this time? Then go."

When the killer had gone upon his mysterious errand, Sotto came back to the nervous planters who had overheard his dialogue with Malabar. He felt restored, safe. His hand played with his gold fob;

he displayed his yellow brilliant.

"You heard?" he queried, smiling evilly. "By daylight the thing will be done, and there will be no more white men meddling with this island. And—you—thought—Sotto—was—done! Sit down!" he barked, and the six sank into their chairs.

IN THE tree Lundu thrilled Duell, set him a-quiver with suspense. "Now! It is coming, *what you wish to learn!* It has been on his mind too long. *He must tell!*" Lundu whispered.

His eyes bored straight at Sotto through the dark, as if he compelled him to speak.

Sotto paced back and forth before the cowed group, his brain in turmoil. Plans had all gone wrong; he now owned only what he had taken from a man he had killed. And there was the fateful rumble of the mill! But these six men must remain his. Fear must hold them. Now of all times, he must hold his grip. It was a time for potent gestures. How to impress them?

He made decision. They must learn how terrible his enemy could be, how ruthless his revenge. *He would tell!* Proverbially close mouthed, more secretive even than a fullblood Malay, the floodgates of speech loosened to pour forth a torrent.

"Listen," he said, "and learn how Sotto works his will. Yes."

Back and forth he paced on his small feet, tugging constantly at his heavy watch chain. He *must* tell his story; something was driving him to it. It was as though some occult mind played upon his, forcing him to disclose his secret after all these years. Yes, they should know how shrewd he was, how wily his schemes, how terrific his wrath. Thus he would hold them.

"Listen. You think this young white man has beaten me. Hah! Why, he is to be destroyed tonight—as *twenty-six years ago I destroyed his father!*"

Lundu's arm steadied Duell, else his violent start would have wrecked the son's last chance of learning his father's fate.

Sotto went on, faster, his tongue unaccountably loosened.

"You all remember the captain who was this boy's father? You recall how he came with his soldiers, how he worked? Listen!"

Sotto talked rapidly, talked well. As he paraded details out of the past he stopped his pacing, sank down into Tibonan's seat, facing the window. As always when in repose, his countenance was kindly; he seemed a grandsire entertaining sleepy

children with a story of his youth. His sentences were clipped, terse; but to the rapt listener in the tree, the recital was the unfolding of a vivid scroll.

Captain Duell dwelt again in the house by the beach, a brilliant officer striving to bring order out of the chaos following insurrection. He seemed a buoyant, eager personality who won loyalty by giving it. Sotto enthralled by his own narrative, piled



incident upon incident; the island seemed to echo the tread of soldiers' boots, the silvered call of bugles. Yet this captain's loyal band was not the grim soldiery of conquest, but a disciplined and grinning soldiery inspired to helpfulness by a decent leadership.

Then the lull, and the captain's purchase of the plantation, as a proof of his confidence that all was again safe and sane, though a few brigands still eluded his men in the dark recesses of the mountains. The new bungalow became the center of the isle, the headquarters of a command, the rendezvous of rich and poor among the islanders. All loved the earnest friendly officer, for he loved them all. Thus even Sotto, an enemy, unconsciously pictured the man of whom he at last now told.

"But he liked me best," Sotto boasted with a faint smile, "and respected my advice more than any other. Yes. We were much together. He asking and asking and asking, always eager to learn more; I, waiting and waiting and waiting. For I knew that my time to strike would come.

"And it came. Yes." He paused in relish of a delicious memory. "He had another company across the mountains, under a lieutenant. This detached company was paid from headquarters here. In gold, of course. Mule trains went out every two months, secretly, in charge of rough white men who could shoot like they could curse. I waited and waited and waited.

"One night he stopped at my house, for I had let it be known that I was sick. I was not sick, but after all my waiting, I had formed a great plan. Yes. A great plan, as you shall agree. All was at last ready.

"He was not a drinking man like most

of these whites, and for a long time that had hindered me. But I found a way. You know what *supi* is, how peculiar a drug. That night I pressed upon him some native wine I had made—so I told him—from wild berries. He did not want it, but I made refusal too difficult. Hospitality—you know. Yes.

"He drank a little. A very little. No doubt you recall the rest. How all of his eight men were ambushed in the mountain pass, how all died under the bolo. A perfect ambush, a perfect coup. You know how the captain shot himself through the head when he learned that he had babbled the secret of the pack train in his cups. You know how regretfully I testified against his conduct, how sorry I was that his own people called the dead man a traitor."

Sotto's voice had become a deep purr. He had won his audience, the circle of brown faces following him as one as he moved slightly, pausing in his tale with a sure instinct for emphasis. It was a high moment for Sotto, and, enthralled by his own narrative of his greatest success, he settled back comfortably, like a well fed cat.

"You know all that," he went on, "but you don't know that those bolomen were *mine!* You don't know that the gold bought the land—the acres that Tibonan thought he had won from me. And, you don't know the best thing of all, the great joke!"

He paused again, dramatically, living again the thrill of his most terrible coup.

"Listen! The great joke. The captain was not drunk. No. He drank less than half a glass of weak wine. Yes. But while he was stupefied by the drug I made him think that he had babbled about the gold, that several had overheard him. I can see him now, leaning across my table and staring at me while I told him all this; when he realized what he had done; what he *thought* he had done, he just sat there, trembling, and white like chalk, and his eyes sank back into their sockets as I watched. He suffered! Yes. Even more than I had thought he would—even more than I *hoped* he would! You never saw a man stricken so; it was worse than any pain, worse than any death.

"And I smiled to myself as one low voiced, agonized word was wrung from him. For, you see I had at last brought him down. All along I had known about the pack train, when it was to start, how much gold it carried, its exact route. I knew it all, from a native mistress of one of the

packers. She had been an old *querida* of mine, and I had placed her where she would learn things for me.

"No, he did not betray anything, ever. But he went down to hell thinking that he was a traitor.

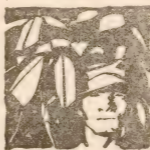
"I, Sotto, did that. Yes!"

"God!"

The cry rang out of the night, a single strangled note that seemed torn from an agonized throat. It was not a profanity, but a cry of anguish that carried a more dreadful woe because of its abrupt termination as if by a smothering hand. The unhuman sound was not repeated, but it hung upon the air like a weight—horrible to Sotto because the single word was the same as that one whispered concession of a strong man in mortal agony. And—terrifying to Sotto beyond all telling—the *voice was the same!* It seemed to the superstitious half-caste that the Duell of whose treacherous destruction he had just finished boasting had cried out across the years—the agonized whisper swelled to trumpet call.

Sotto's cup of triumph, barely tasted, was dashed from his lips. Transfixed by fear, he stared toward the open window through which had sounded the awful call. But the suspense was unbearable, and, grasping the oil lamp, he rose unsteadily and bore it to the window. Pallid, shaking as with an ague, he lifted the lamp high and fearfully searched the surroundings beneath the window.

For an instant he looked straight into



the implacable eyes of the only two men whom he had ever feared, and as he realized the full significance of his self betrayal, Sotto grew suddenly faint. The lamp slipped from his

hand, was broken and extinguished on the ground below.

In front of him, in the tree, were two enemies whom he had mortally offended!

TO DUELL the descent from the fronds was a leaden footed nightmare, for Lundu was beneath him, could not be hurried lest a sudden strain burst the bubble of his heart. Even in the blinding passion that consumed Duell,

he did not forget the trick Fate had played upon Lundu. Duell's fingers were like talons that bit into the bark of the palm. When his feet touched the ground, he dashed past Lundu, up the steps and into the dark room.

But the house was empty.

Berserk, growling in his throat like an enraged beast, Duell, charged madly from one dark corner to another, then leaped recklessly through a window to crash into a young papaya plant. On his feet again, reeling, he raced aimlessly around the house, pausing at last to listen. There was no sound of running feet from the forest.

Baffled, choking out fragmentary sounds, he bit the knuckles of his clenched fist. Wave on wave of formless passion overrode him, a devastating craving literally to tear Sotto apart. Every normal instinct, every other consciousness was obliterated.

A dark figure emerged from the obscurity of the grove, seemed to be wafted toward him through the shadowed moonlight. It was Lundu and he came straight to the white youth.

"Did you see him go, Lundu?" Duell begged. "Where is he? Oh! Where is he? Tell me quick!"

Lundu was unruffled, almost studious as he regarded his friend. "He is gone," he announced calmly. "He had his pony."

Duell's choked outcry, his convulsed disappointment, seemed to interest the Malay, who studied him curiously, as if he were a specimen.

"Listen," Lundu bade him. "Your mill sings its song."

Duell heard the distant rumble. "Yes," he said shortly, wondering what Lundu was driving at.

"It is not music in Sotto's ears," Lundu went on softly.

"I—I suppose not."

"He is done."

Lundu seemed to be thinking aloud, trying to knit his tangled skein of thought into a definite pattern. He stood facing in the direction from which he had emerged from the grove, and his manner was one of intent alertness, as if he heard voices not for the ears of other living men. Without relaxing from his strange attitude, he went on in his hushed tones. "I let Sotto go," he said. "He is not yours."

"Not—not *mine*? I don't understand, Lundu!"

"He violated my *anting-anting*. Sotto is mine."

His brown form seemed to float across

the moonlit patch. A moment and he would be gone. Something welled up in Duell's throat and with a cry that was almost the hunting call of the male tiger, he halted the native. "Never!" he refused, raising a clenched fist. "He murdered my father. I forbid you to touch him!"

As well might he have commanded a stone image; later he knew it. In the bright moonlight Lundu looked squarely at him, seemed to realize that this was farewell. His eyes were steady, beautiful. For the first time since he had taken Duell under his protection, Lundu made a gesture of affection—his fine brown arm rested for a moment upon the white man's shoulder. As he faced Duell directly, his countenance lost its ascetic shadow, became warm flesh, intimate, brotherly. A face and a torso unflawed, classic—and young.

"Never worry, you will have great happiness out of this night. I know it. The more that you will not have blood upon your hands!"

Again Duell protested, this time with his voice shaking; but the brown arm was gone from his shoulder and Duell despairingly saw that Lundu no longer heard his words. His eyes were veiled with a baffling light, as if he were blinded by some brilliant vision.

"I saw three stars fall in my dream," he whispered. "Three. And the third was mine. The other two—"

Without another word, he turned and walked into the grove. For fifty yards he was intermittently in sight as he crossed moonlit patches between the trees, his brown figure graceful as a dream. Then the dark shadows of the forest shrouded the splendid form from the sight of the white man whom it had been his joy to protect, to befriend.

Distract with forebodings that he could not have explained, Duell followed a short way on the path Lundu had taken. The hoofprints of a galloping pony showed plainly on the soft earth. Lundu was in pursuit.

BACK upon the trail and with his motorcycle humming beneath him, Duell came back to sanity. Mounted on a prosaic vehicle and riding swiftly toward home, he no longer felt the craze of fury, or the mystic spell that the Malay had always exerted. He dismissed thoughts of danger to Lundu, for Sotto was mounted, was gone into the night. Lundu could not find him. Sotto was done—would flee the isle if he could get away.

His killing of Tibonan, though largely accidental, would compel his flight.

All was well, Duell told himself; not in exultation but with profound gratitude. The road of his life was glorious with promise. He had been one of the victims of a terrible brutality, but its evil was now exhausted. Vindication, final and complete! With the power of Sotto broken, the planters would join him, the islanders would be free to come to him. Already he was out of debt to the bank; Mulvane's first load of sugar would cancel his overdrafts.

There remained but one rift in the lute. Feliza!

He had forgotten Malabar, and Sotto's mysterious instructions to his killer, however.

In the first sheer joy of mere living that



Duell had ever known, he opened the throttle to its limits; the machine leaped forward like a thing possessed. The diapason of the twin cylinders was music in his ears; his muscles tensed against the wild clutch of the wind as tall

palms trooped past like a stampede of wraiths.

During the flicker of time that separates two thoughts, he caught a shadowy glimpse of a rope drawn suddenly taut two feet above the road. He felt no shock of impact, only a curious sense of well being as he hurtled through the air. For an instant, after he shot from the machine, the ribbon of moonlit road unwound before his vision; then all the forces of the universe unleashed their might upon his head and night crashed down upon him.

CHAPTER XIX

THE OFFERING

SOTTO'S discovery, that his confession had been overheard by the two whom he most hated and most feared, was paralyzing. Fairly benumbed, he turned around for help, only to find that the dark room was emptied of his friends. He was alone; and the thought had an awful significance for him. He called to them frantically; but there was

no answer. He must escape the oncoming avengers!

The stairway might lead him straight to the two hunters, so he scrambled awkwardly through the window. Unaccustomed to physical effort, he handled his fattened frame clumsily, falling unbalanced to sprawl heavily upon one foot. The ankle turned, a sharp pain brought a cry which he stifled lest the pursuers discover his whereabouts. Limping, he ran into the grove where he had left his horse and with a choking cry of relief, climbed into the saddle and lashed the beast into a run. Just in time, he knew exultantly, for in the moonlight he saw Lundu advancing toward him through the grove.

The willing horse burst into a wild gallop, Sotto clinging to the saddle with one hand and flailing the little steed with his free arm. Too fast through the night forest; where the roots of a tree long dead had rotted, a hole yawned, and the pony went down. The beast struggled gallantly to arise, but a snapped foreleg made its courageous efforts a horror in the dark. Believing that the little stallion wilfully sulked, Sotto, maddened by fear of pursuit, whipped the beast till his arm ached and continued to unload his cruelties even after he discovered the animal's plight. Twice he rested, then whipped the pony until his arm could no longer lift to strike again. But his passion was displaced by sheer panic as a movement in a moonlit clearing two hundred yards distant caught his eye. He stared wildly.

Lundu!

Turning from the heaving pony, Sotto ran deeper into the forest. On and on he hurried, always peering behind to see if he had shaken off the deadly enemy who dogged his trail. He had no goal in mind, only escape from Lundu. Daylight found him halfway up the great slope. His injured foot had become a swollen agony, and when he fell again, he stayed down. Anything was better than this pain of flight. He lay there in the grass for ten minutes; then through an opening he saw the pursuer steadily climbing the slope on his trail.

Lundu came on slowly, deliberately, stepping carefully as if he carried something fragile. His naked torso was borne upright, his head had the proud carriage of a noble. The deliberation of his pace was deceptive, for Sotto escaped only when the pursuer was almost upon him.

Sotto had thought himself exhausted but panic drove him on and on. The slope

became too difficult, and Sottò turned to the north and hobbled along the easier contour of the mountain. Noon found him panting, famished, a-thirst. He came suddenly upon a stream, but when he fell face down to slake his thirst, he found the water hot. Steaming! Whimpering, he followed the stream toward its source where it might be cooler, and came out into a clearing whose loveliness impressed itself upon even Sottò's fevered mind. Water! Following the stream, he traced it across the clearing to where it issued from the rock.

But the water was gently a-boil, worse than useless to a thirsty man. His cry of despair rattled in a dry throat. Was this more evidence of Lundu's necromancy? Further proof of the dreadful potency of the *anting-anting*? Glaring feverishly about he saw the altar set with Lundu's offering, and all of his sufferings welled up in a surge of passion. Recklessly, snarling, he lurched to the shrine and viciously scattered its treasures. A final vindictive sweep of his strong arm sent the clock careening across the grass to crash against the base of a treefern; the glass shattered to bits, but the clock balanced upright so that the mechanism was not interrupted, the two golden balls continuing their rotation. Sottò's hand was raised to tear down the sole remaining treasure, the big gong, but at that moment some instinct warned him.

He whirled around. Lundu approached toward him across the clearing. Lundu, deliberate, tireless, erect. A spasm contorted Sottò's face as he fled from the being whom he had doubly despoiled.

Lundu surveyed the wreck of his beloved cloister. His breathing was heavier but otherwise he showed little evidence of his long march after the despoiler. He appeared to be puzzled, to be seeking the solution of some intricate problem; how had mortal hand effected this devastation in the very face of his powerful gods? But gradually the significance of the disaster dawned upon him. A shadow that was a blight darkened his eyes, and he made a little gesture of hopelessness that held infinite pathos. He straightened, seemed to grow taller as he approached the altar, where he raised his right hand, palm outward, to his forehead in reverent salutation to—what?

"I know what you wish," he said softly. "I will bring this offering."

When his hand came down he departed, not with his face toward his altar but away

from it—for he could trust his gods.

From a nearby summit, Sottò saw Lundu leave the clearing to take up his trail with the same indefatigable gait. Beside himself with dread, the killer of Tibonan tore limpingly down the slope. His white clothes were bedraggled rags, his tight canvas shoe bit into the swollen ankle; but Sottò was racing for life dear to him. For three hours he maintained his



lead, never sighting the pursuer. The sudden glint of the afternoon sun upon the distant sea was a ray of hope to the fleeing man giving direction and plan to what had been blind flight.

If he could find a boat and Malabar! Yes, Duell's launch would be better in case there was no breeze to drive a sail. Yes, Duell's launch. It became his goal, an obsession that kept him struggling toward the coast after his vitality seemed utterly drained.

AS THE afternoon waned he would have welcomed death if he could have been certain that it would bring rest—and food and water. Weeping, he decided he could stagger no farther, would face Lundu and take the hazard. He collapsed, fell in a semi-swoon.

But when the tranquil brown form appeared on the back trail, he fled on sinews borrowed of fear. Why didn't the madman run at him? Why that steady pace that never quite caught up, but was never to be distanced? Why? Oh, why?

The sea! The sight of it only a mile distant gave speed, hope, and he raced on. Without a limp, for now the punished nerves of his sprained ankle had at last become numb. The foot no longer seemed a part of himself but an encumbering weight, as he threshed through the last fringe of woods at a run. Fleeing blindly without definite course or knowledge of his whereabouts, he came out on the eastern boundary of Duell's estate. Sottò's half crazed mind was set only upon the sea as he burst across a field now stripped of cane but dotted with busy men and beasts.

Workmen halted ploughs to stare at

the grotesque figure that burst sobbing out of the forest to stumble blindly past them toward the beach. This figure of despair, this scarecrow hobbling across new furrows; this could not be Sotto, the man of power! Silently, impassively, they watched him stagger by. They coolly gazed upon this ugly pageant of flight, of retribution long delayed. But with the unerring instinct of the Malay, they knew they were watching a thing that would become an island classic, island history.

To Sotto they did not live. Nothing lived save the being that dogged his step, that might emerge from the woods before he could reach the launch. Escape! Nothing else mattered, nothing else lived.

But yes, another lived. Another was desperately needed. Sotto stopped suddenly in the center of the bare fields.

"Malabar!" he cried. "Malabar! Malabar!"

His first attempt was a mere croak, but the third call sounded clear in the quiet of the evening. It came to him, as his own voice echoed, that the mill was at last silent, there was no stir at the bungalow. Malabar had succeeded! And Malabar would come. Good man, Malabar!

Malabar came. Abandoned by his master and with no place to hide safely until the success of his coup was known and the old reign of terror reestablished, the killer had spent the day in the woods where he could spy upon the Duell house while awaiting his master. Now he came bounding across the new plowed fields to join Sotto, and the two ran for the dock, each trailing a wry foot in physical evidence of a common fate.

Malabar was first to the launch, to the engine, but was checkmated by a machinery of which he knew naught.

Sotto, glancing back over his shoulder as he passed the still bungalow, saw that his Nemesis stalked across the fields with that same measured step that ate up distance with an appalling regularity. Lundu was like Time, as stealthy as inexorable. Dry sobs wracked Sotto as he hobbled across the dock, to be lifted down into the launch by his faithful retainer.

Sotto fumbling with the mechanism with hands that seemed palsied, could not start the motor. And Lundu's head appeared above the little slope leading down to the beach, then his fine bare shoulders.

"Malabar!" Sotto panted. "Stop him! Stop him!"

Malabar hesitated, for his superstitious fear of the keeper of the altar was as deep

seated as Sotto's. But Sotto was wildly insistent; and Malabar had always called him master. Reluctant but loyal, he stepped out of the launch as Lundu strode into the shadows of the palms.

Malabar was barely out of the launch when the motor coughed, then hummed steadily—and Malabar's heart sank as he saw his master speed the motorboat past the anchored *Sooopa*, turn northward from the setting sun and disappear behind the headland. Malabar was deserted at the end.

Alone, Malabar faltered as he faced toward Lundu who came on legs that swung like bronze pendulums. Down the slant of the beach Lundu came like clockwork, and when he halted at the edge of the dock, he seemed an automaton run down. Well might Malabar cower, for after the agonies of his terrific chase, Lundu's brown visage was spectral, a thing to haunt with its drawn lines and eyes a-burn out of sunken sockets. There was no concession of his splendid physique to the privation and fatigue of the long pursuit, but his face was a ghastly dial that had registered every bitter stride. He stood quiet, his spent breast heaving as he earnestly regarded the headland that concealed his escaping quarry. Of Malabar he was oblivious.

Suddenly Malabar's dread was replaced by cunning, and he fumbled at the waist band of his cotton pantaloons, withdrawing that which he had again purloined when Sotto had ground it into the floor when it had brought him ill luck. The *anting-anting!*

Swiftly he looped the charm about his neck—and stood panoplied in full armor against the foe. His broad countenance broke into a derisive grin as he fearlessly stepped nearer his enemy. Now that he was bucklered with the talisman of Lundu he was triply armed against him. Now Lundu could not harm him; nor could any other.

Throughout the long chase, Lundu had gone barehanded. How he had planned to cope with Sotto was a mystery that never can be known. At any time Sotto, had he but known it, could have ended the punishing flight, for the arm that had killed Tibonan could easily have stilled a heart that was bound with threads as delicate as spiderweb.

Malabar did not know this, but it was enough for him to know that his adversary bore no weapon, and to feel the ca-

ress of the protective talisman suspended from the powerful column of his neck.

A stealthy glance around him showed Malabar that he was unseen. The bungalow was still as death, no laborers were near enough to interfere, the mill was life-



less, and there was no movement upon the decks of the anchored steamer. Elated, Malabar drew his short wicked knife and crept toward Lundu, the thick but keen edged weapon projecting upward from his fist for the abdomen ripping stroke of the trained killer.

Lundu ignored him utterly, standing as though carved, his suffering eyes fixed upon the headland that obscured the flight of him who had so grievously wronged him. He breathed deeply, his beardless face seemed moistened with warm dew.

"He is mine," he whispered. "And I have promised him."

He was but an embodied will power, to him Malabar did not exist, and he made no slightest movement to resist as the assassin closed in. Fifteen feet, twelve, ten—another catlike creep and Malabar's knife would have grievously flawed the perfect body, but another actor entered upon the tragedy.

T'ai Fu came raging across the porch like a tornado of Asiatic fury!

A single bound took the Mongolian high over the railing, and while Malabar hesitated, he charged beneath the palms to take his stand beside the oblivious Lundu.

Malabar snarled. This was only a despised Chinaman, a white man's servant. Confident in his own great prowess, but-tressed by all the power of the stolen talisman, he diverted his attack and swept down toward T'ai Fu in a cold fury.

As the killer charged, T'ai Fu's right hand flashed to the point of one of the three curious knives he bore in his left hand. His throwing arm swept backward in a swift arc, then whipped forward in a gesture as though he pointed straight at Malabar's neck. The knife left his fingers to turn a single gleaming cycle, and its edge grazed Malabar's neck at the spot where throat joined chest. The knife

missed flesh but nevertheless wrought its ruin.

Its cord severed by the thrown knife, the *anting-anting* fell at Malabar's feet. For an instant, a strangely baffled look clouded his eye. Then the second weighted knife whirled unerringly to bury itself in the depression just above his breastbone. So terrific was the force of the thrown weapon that it sank to the hilt, impaled with such pressure that not a drop of blood escaped the terrible wound.

The third knife hung poised in T'ai Fu's hand, for Malabar was still on his feet, the stiff shorter leg held him up like a pole thrust into the ground. It seemed that he would never fall, but suddenly the knife dropped from his nerveless hand, the stiff leg crumpled like chalk, and with a single explosive gurgle of pentup breath he collapsed like wet rags.

SOTTO wept for joy as the launch bore him around the headland and away from all the potential terrors grouped about the bungalow. He would show them yet! He would drive the launch far into the night and land at some island that should become a rallying place for his own forces. He would show them yet!

He was at the verge of physical collapse, but his brain seemed abnormally clear. Plans, schemes of dire vengeance, raced through his mind as he drove the speedy craft through the choppy sea. For a few minutes a broad red avenue led over the horizon to the setting sun, and his confidence increased with the promise of early night. He was safe!

He looked back over the two miles he had come—and his mouth again writhed with surging fear.

A flying proa had turned the headland, and as he watched with staring eyeballs, the sail bellied with the strong breeze and the craft was steered into the wake of the launch. His face blanched as he recognized the snow white proa—the only craft that in a light breeze could overhaul the launch. The bellied sail hid the steersman from Sotto's anxious vision until, with the rudder obviously secured, a man appeared to take position on the outrigger, balancing the craft against the "one-man breeze." At once the proa righted to an even keel, and no longer dragging an impeding outrigger through the waves, seemed to spurt forward.

With a hunted cry, Sotto yanked at the mechanism for greater speed, but the launch was at its best. Through the fad-

ing light Sotto feverishly watched the pursuer, fascinated by Lundu's immobile form balanced against the thrust of the proa. Lundu's poised figure was still, astral, but to Sotto's feverish eyes it seemed that a leg was ever on the verge of a long stride toward him; the filled sail seemed a great pinion conjured out of Lundu's ghostly realm to lend him winged speed.

But dusk speedily obscured the poised form. For a few moments the sail remained a pallid blur beneath the descending dome of night, then the black cover settled tightly over the sea.

Dark had come. Saved! Sotto twisted the wheel and raced westward. Now, with Lundu upon the water, Sotto sought land. Any island, any place to rid himself of the proa. A dim bulk seemed to float past on his left, and he knew it for land, an isle. Frantically he brought the launch about and steered straight for it. Wily, he stilled the motor lest it be heard by the pursuer, and drifted upon a ledge of rock.

Thinking fast, he leaped overboard and threw his weight upon the gunwale of the launch until it shipped water, sank. No trace of him now! He waded shoreward.

Another inspiration; lest his white clothes betray him, he stripped to his brown skin, and shaking his fist in derision of an imaginary Lundu, he climbed the porous rock to effectually conceal himself. A few steps and his ankle demanded relief, every nerve cried for rest. With a tremulous sigh he sank prone upon the spongy lava.

Warily his hand brushed something from his face. Then from his bare arm. His neck. They were all over him!

Then he knew. *Centipede Island!*

In the gloom the pores of the rock seemed to exude hundreds of horrible creatures, thousands! As he tore one from him, a score of the armored crawlers took its place. The isle was a wriggling horror. Wave on wave they came, and his frenzied screams tore into the night. Anything but this—anybody—

"Lundu!" he cried. "Take me off! Lundu!"

No answer. To be thus alone—

Shrieking, Sotto leaped off the rock into the sea. The rock sheered off abruptly to the ocean floor.

So To, the old Chinese trader long since banished from the island, had often admonished an indolent son who would not learn to swim.

Later, the white proa grounded gently upon the porous rock and Lundu stepped

ashore. In the moonlight scores of brown things, attracted by a scent, skidded toward him with a curious sidewise gait. He disregarded the crawlers as he pondered, trying to piece what he found into a coherent pattern. Thought was so hard.

The launch, now half exposed at low tide; a heap of soiled white clothes! one small white shoe. At every step the crevices expelled fresh dozens of crabs that charged valiantly, then retreated. Lundu knew the forests, the sea, the isles; the madman was the only islander who did not subscribe to the legend of Centipede Island. He knew. The crawling things were not centipedes but small crabs.

The clothes, the shoe, confused him. If only the winds in his mind would quiet. He made his way along the shoreline. Floating against the ledge, held tightly by the press of the waves he found what had been Sotto.

An hour later he steered the snowy proa



into the bay towing a weight some instinct warned him not to lift. Beaching the boat, he passed into the palms and to the hut of a plowman, who listened to his

grave request for help, nodded agreement to the proposal of the man whom he loved as he feared.

Lundu was waiting when the plowman returned driving a bulcart. He waited until the reluctant friend had transferred the towed weight to the cart, then carefully raised himself to the driver's seat, and set out, alone, upon his long journey.

The steer plodded wearily after five miles, nor did Lundu, himself all but exhausted, urge the tired beast. Up the slope the cart crawled, the driver buried in thoughts that never quite took form. But here in the forest it did not matter; it was his home. The shadows cast by the sinking moon were nearly horizontal when the steer halted. It was the end of the trail, the cart could go no farther. The tired steer lay down.

Removing one rope from the wooden yoke, Lundu tied it to the other, fastened one end to the weight he had transported up the mountain, then spoke to the steer. As if it understood the importance of its share in the night's work, the beast

groaned and struggled to its feet, and Lundu led the way up the ascent. Coming into the alcove that screened the altar he released the beast from the burden it dragged, and it wandered off into the larger clearing to graze placidly.

In the eerie gray light of pre-dawn, the clearing was an etching of tropical beauty, unshaded, each fern and shrub and tree as clean of outline as if seen through plate glass. It was minutes too early for song-birds or insect chorus or for the breeze, so a profound peace pervaded the sylvan spot; the clearing might have been a lovely garden submerged beneath a crystal sea, the dew on the sward, a silvered ocean floor. Utter quiet.

At the base of the giant treefern nearest the altar, the clock pendulum rotated regularly, ceaselessly. As if time could matter here ever again!

Lundu was alone with his altar.

Yet not alone. For his own nebulous world fluttered with phantoms that had been familiar and friendly through all these years that other men had deemed lonely for him. Dawn struck pale upon the clearing, into his face; a face that in its etched gauntness was too beautiful to be a man's or a mortal's. There was a faintest hint of a smile upon his lips as he stood watching the East until the upper edge of the red disk appeared.

As if that were the signal, he turned and in four gliding steps stood before the despoiled altar. His right hand touched his forehead in a stately gesture, then for a moment he remained in abeyance—upright, composed as a just god must want his men-children to confront him. Four steps took him back to the burden he had brought over water and land.

"*He is mine,*" he had said. And this was his final tribute to his beloved shrine.

When he bent down, he must have known what it would cost him, but as he raised the body of Sotto he thrilled with a purer joy than is given to normal men.

With a single tremendous surge of his fine arms, he raised Sotto's heavy body, swung it full arm's length overhead, and advanced toward the altar. One stride, infinitely graceful, two—three—

But his spirit had torn loose from its delicate mooring. He seemed to hesitate, a tremor shook him. But some power sustained him through a last stride that delivered to the base of the shrine his superb sacrifice. A double offering; the profaner of his altar and his own body in all its splendor.

As he fell his hand struck against the gong. Its deep tone hung upon the forest colonnades like a minor chord.

CHAPTER XX

HOME

MULVANE was nervous, and although a cool breeze played through the porch curtains lowered against the sun, his uniform stuck to his perspiring back. The big cane chair no longer comforted his great frame, which was to be expected, for he had spent the best part of three days and nights in the chair, falling off into uneasy dozings only to wake abruptly to worry about the occupant of the sick room.

"It's that damn' silent mill, b'God!" he grumbled half aloud—but instantly quit talking even to himself, for the habit of absolute silence had fallen upon the place. The mill was stilled, no laborers worked in fields near the house, the house itself was as silent as though deserted. For three days, Duell had lain unconscious from a concussion following his terrific fall from the motorcycle; and even to his amateur nurses, the gravity of his condition had become increasingly apparent. In the absence of a doctor there was so little to be done for a man who lay inert, scarcely breathing. Their helplessness had been a grief, and to none more than the big awkward sailor.

He had denied himself even his allotted drinks, for he would not indulge himself when his young friend lay at the brink of the Valley. The abstinence contributed to his nervousness and he gazed at the empty taboret like a man denied at the gate of heaven.

He half rose, but eased himself back quietly as the chair creaked. "Damn!" he told himself fervently. "Wouldn't that steamer *ever* come with the doctor? They had answered Feliza's wireless!"

T'ai Fu came on noiselessly felt slippers, stood beside him. The cook was grave, restrained, but he radiated an air of security. His tireless vigils beside the sick bed were etched into his yellow face, but in some way he conveyed a confidence that all would be well. He willed it, and it must come to pass.

"The doctor is here," he whispered.

"Here?"

"Yes. The steamer is anchored beyond the headland."

"But when? I've been a-sittin' here since——"

T'ai Fu's fugitive smile flickered. "You have slept three hours."

"Well, well! A-doizin' off like a cat.



Guess I'm a-gettin' a long in years! A bout through with the sea." T'ai Fu disappeared noiselessly within, but the skipper continued his whispered monologue. "Guess I'm due for a berth ashore. Nice place this—if only he—and if he gets well. And if only she—hell! What's that doctor a-doin'?" I can't just sit here!"

Rising gingerly he tiptoed into the house, joining T'ai Fu and Mercado where they stood just outside the bedroom door, listening to the hushed voices within. The three eavesdroppers seemed to become inanimate, so intent were their attitudes. The doctor's examination occupied but a few minutes, but to them it seemed years. Abruptly, the professional sickroom murmur altered to crispness and they overheard the doctor addressing another person in the room.

"Nothing broken," he informed. Just shock. He ought to be snapping out of it any minute now!"

Two tears rolled off Mulvane's lids to become lost in his shaggy beard. "Oh, Lord!" he exclaimed devoutly, "I thank ye!"

But, this he decided an instant later, was out of keeping with his gruff pose, and he took it out on the missionary, Doctor Stevenson, when that rather ungroomed but competent personage issued from the sick-room.

"What's been a-keepin' ye?" Mulvane demanded testily. "With a sick white man here ye take three days to get here. What'd ye come on, a whaler?"

"No," Stevenson assured him goodnaturefully. "Yap Cy sent the best boat in the harbor, the *Snola*."

Mulvane was mollified, interested. "She's big. Is she a-goin' to carry back some of this sugar? There's a raft of it."

"So I understand from the captain. She came empty, and fast. Forced draft, at Yap Cy's order. She made a record trip."

"She would," Mulvane acknowledged thoughtfully. "Yap Cy has tied to this boy. A good friend! But say, Doc, are ye sure that the boy is a-goin' to be all right? And soon?"

"I'm sure. There's nothing wrong, and he has the constitution of a horse. He'll

be conscious in a few hours. Then he just needs rest and an interest in things."

"Then we don't have to go tiptoein' around any more; we can make ourselves to home?"

"Surely."

"Praise be! And say, Doc, can't we start his mill a-goin'? He'll be a-wantin' to hear that when he wakes up!"

"No harm in that, either."

"Then I'm a-goin' to start it right now! I'm a-goin' to take charge. I've always liked this sugar stuff, Doc, and maybe I can—"

Whatever his hopes were he did not voice them, for he left the missionary unceremoniously and lumbered across the porch and down the steps. There he hesitated, fought an unequal battle, capitulated. Hurrying back he summoned Mercado.

"Boy," he growled happily, "the doc says your master is a-goin' to get well chop-chop. What d'ye say to a little celebration for the old man, eh?" His voice was half commanding, half wheedling. "How about a little—you know—a good big drink!"

Mercado slowly padded out, returning with a loaded tray. As the skipper eagerly poured out his generous potion, Mercado lugubriously scratched a bare shin with a prehensile toe.

"The doctor say everything all right?" he demanded surlily.

"Yep. Fine business, eh?"

Mercado considered. "Some piple have all the luck," he complained.

"Eh?"

"While me, Mercado, have to fix up motorcycles other piple bust."

He went out, a picture of desolation. But soon a happy whistling sounded above the rattle of the tools with which he repaired the machine for the master whom he loved in his own way.

The old skipper grinned at the sound, for he understood Mercado. As he again squirted the syphon into clinking ice, his hairy hand suddenly halted in midair as, from the kitchen, there sounded a little sing-song.

The off key refrain went on and on. It was as though a long familiar clock, for a while strangely silent, had resumed its homelike ticking.

IN THE tropics day may be a fever, but dawn comes fresh and fragrant and roseate like a maid laden with blossoms. There is a period when the skies

flush pink, the dew lies iridescent, the air glistens like wet pearlshell. The period is fleeting, but during those brief minutes men feel the exaltation once known to Eden. It was to such a liting dawn that Duell opened his eyes.

His head felt queer, bound yet light. He could not raise it, but as his eyes opened he looked out of the open window at the palms etched against a heaven of blue overlaid with filmiest gray. Where was he? Home. How did he come to be lying thus, feeling like this? The motorcycle—Sotto—Malabar. Gradually his brain cleared, and he pieced together a sufficient pattern, so that he understood something of what had happened. The mill? He heard its contented rumble, and his eyes closed happily.

All was well. But he was tired, sleepy.

A sound within the room roused him, and with an effort he weakly turned his head. He knew then that he was dreaming.

For Feliza stood before his mirror and he could see her full reflection. She was as he dreamed of her, combing her lovely hair. The mass of gleaming mahogany silk was swirled into shape under her swiftly competent hands, and finished, she surveyed herself as impersonally as though the reflection was that of another.

Over hair parted and smoothed she drew a small starched cap like a nun's coif. Under its flat linen band her big eyes registered humility, suffering devoutness. Watching her Duell remembered with a heart shaking pang that Mulvane had said

she wanted to become a nun. Dreaming or waking then, she was lost to him.

But, not quite satisfied, she discarded the cap, contrived another effect.

A Spanish scarf lay upon the dressing table—his dressing table, he thought with a thrill, a thing of lacy hand-wrought beauty. Catching this up, she threw it over her head, and draped its edges about her shoulders. The new pose seemed to intrigue her; she made deft little changes, altered her fluent countenance until the character was perfect.

"But," she said whimsically aloud to her reflection, her voice alit with the witchery of the dawn, "you can't be a Madonna without a child. Later, perhaps. Not yet."

He knew now that he did not dream. This indeed, was the voice of a Feliza gloriously of the flesh, playing new rôles to his mirror in the dawn.

A few more insignificant touches—but they were the touches of an artist—and now her beautiful hair waved softly over the low brow, the lace scarf fell about her temples. A bridal veil! She gazed demurely into the mirror but this time there was no conscious assumption of a rôle. Slowly her eyes widened, as if she gazed through a gorgeous dawn at a long pleasant vista, and her soft mouth grew wistfully tremulous.

"I am glad I am—a little—lovely," she said to the mirror. "I want to be beautiful—for him. For Mack."

Another voice, faint but ineffably happy, came from the bed. "*I—like you—for that!*" it whispered weakly.

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THE END OF THE ROPE

A Bear Paw Range Story

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A DRAMATIC EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A COWHAND FROM THE CROSS SEVEN, WHO CAME CLOSE TO DEATH, TOOK UP A DESPERATE TRAIL AND FOUND THE FRUITS OF VENGEANCE FAR DIFFERENT THAN HE HAD EXPECTED

BOBBY SNEYD made a noon camp by a little spring which he found under a steep bank as he went down a canyon that pitched out of the northern plains into the Bad lands. Bobby had fourteen Cross Seven horses ambling ahead of him. One carried his bed and a little food. He was bound for the Capital K to represent the Cross Seven during beef roundup. He rode in strange territory, in a region where wheeled vehicles seldom went. Bobby's home range lay eighty miles behind him in the Bear Paw mountains, a faint blue smudge on the horizon. Ahead, to the east, the Little Rockies loomed near at hand, bold needle peaks above a wild jumble of pine-clad hills. The Capital K lay on the farther side of those mountains. Plains, flat as a ballroom floor, yellow with ripe grass, ran north to Milk River, to the Canada line, an unending level, treeless and dry, shimmering with the heat-wave of early August. All southward of him spread a gashed and torn country, a strange confusion of gulch, canyon, plateau, etched out of the general level—like a vast field plowed by giants in drunken carelessness. The wind and the sun and the rain had worked their will in curious effect and design since the

prehistoric time when that region was ripped to pieces. Grass grew here, sagebrush here. Masts of juniper clothed barren sidehills and pine trees stood in thickets, in fringes along the steep canyon rims.

Bobby had been on the move since the cool airs of dawn. Water—good water—was scarce in the fringe of the Bad Lands which he had been skirting all forenoon. The little creeks were dry. Coming down this earth-walled gorge Bobby had happened on a cold clear spring about ten o'clock and halted for a noon rest, for a bite to eat and a cup of coffee. He expected to make some ranch in the foothills of the Little Rockies by dusk.

By the time noon had passed Bobby had lain as long as he cared to by the spring. His horses had grazed. He caught two fresh ones, lashed his pack on one and saddled the other. The packhorse he let go to run with the loose string. The saddled horse he tied to a sapling. Though there was shade and water it was like a furnace for heat in that bottom, and Bobby wondered if there would be any breeze on the high ground as he stood whistling a plaintive tune, thinking of such things as a cowpuncher thinks of when he is alone.

Ordinarily if a range man has to go

three hundred yards he mounts a horse. Bobby, in the gut of this canyon, speculated upon his best route thence. A seaman plots his course by chart and compass. A plainsman depends upon his eye. He goes by the lay of the land, contours, watersheds, distant landmarks that he knows. Bobby concluded to cast his eye over the country before he started. To do so he must climb a hill. And the hill behind the spring was a matter of only a few rods, accessible to a man afoot, but too steep for any horse to climb—to ride there meant nearly half a mile back up that canyon to an easier grade.

So he took Shanks' mares to the top, straight above him. A fringe of pines grew there, just masking the rim. Bobby moved up to where he had a clear view eastward, found a dead antheap and sat on that smoking, conning the roll of the country between him and the Little Rockies. He saw that he could follow the canyon down a mile or two and take a draw heading east that would bring him by an easy grade out on the prairie that ran in a gentle wave to where the north wall of that isolated mountain range lifted abruptly as the Pyramids lift from the sands of Egypt.

Bobby perched his elbows on his knees, put his chin in his hands. That vista somehow pleased him. The Lord alone knew what he was thinking about—horses, cattle, far horizons, men and women, trail herds, rivers in flood, all the curious panorama of range life that had been shifting under Bobby Sneyd's blue eyes since he uttered his first baby cry on a lonely ranch in Texas, twenty-six years before. He smiled as he sat there. The world had been good to Bobby because he had a smile that was the radiation of something genial within. Horses and dogs and little children almost instinctively made friends with Bobby Sneyd.

A faint patter of hoofs made him turn his head. A rider was loping down the narrow bench between two canyons. He rode a black horse. He had on a belt-gun. A Winchester carbine lay snug under his left stirrup-leather. He was about Bobby Sneyd's age, fair under his coat of tan. He had come either very far or very fast because his horse was roughened with sweat and he stood rather passive when the man pulled up beside Bobby.

"Howdy," Bobby greeted.

"She's a trifle warm," the man commented.

He threw one leg around his saddle-

horn and rolled a cigarette.

"See anything of a little bunch of broomtails with a couple of broke horses as you come along?" he inquired.

"Uh-uh," Bobby shook his head. "Not a hoof in sight. There's fresh tracks in the gulch below though. I made me a noon camp down there. I'm bound to the Capital K to rep for the Cross Seven."

"I expect they're farther down the bench. They generally are," the stranger observed. "I'll pick 'em up below. I wonder if old man Gibson is at that horse ranch of his'n down in the breaks."

"Couldn't say. Don't know this country at all," Bobby answered frankly.

"It's about six or seven miles down here. I'll hang out there tonight, I guess whether there's anybody there or not." He uncoiled his leg from the horn and gazed casually about. "Gosh, she's sure a dry country. You camped in the gulch, you say? Any water fit to drink?"

"Good little spring," said Bobby. "Straight under this bank. I was about ready to go on an' hoofed it up here to look over the lay of the land."

"Guess I'll go down an' get me a drink," the man gathered up his reins.

"You'll have to ride back there about five or six hundred yards," Bobby told him. "I climbed up afoot rather 'n' ride half a mile."

"Old Nightshade here ain't sufferin'," the man remarked. "He wet his nose in a alkali hole a ways back. But I couldn't drink it."

He cast another sweeping glance about, then dismounted.

"I guess I'll save the old *caballo's* legs," said he. "I've come quite a ways an' I want to ride this bench to the jump-off at Gibson's. Keep a hold of this pony for me, will you, partner. He don't stand good an' I'd hate to be set afoot this far from home."

"Sure," Bobby reached for the black's bridle rein. "The spring's in plain sight right where my horse is tied down there."

The man took a canteen off his saddle, walked over the brow of the steep bank, vanished. Bobby sat on his anthill. The black horse drooped his head, dozing on three legs. The sun struck glints from the varnished stock of the carbine sticking out of its scabbard. A wasp came droning around Bobby's head, the only sound in that hot, hushed midday. Five minutes passed, ten.

Bobby's gaze wandered off to the Little Rockies, toward the wrinkled network of

broken land to the south. Idly he looked northward over the way this rider had come. His eye fixed on a row of bobbing dots. They grew rapidly larger, became riders, six abreast, rising and falling in rhythmic unison. They drew nearer until Bobby could make out the color of their horses, their white hats, the sun-burned faces under the hats. One was an elderly man with a black beard, two or three were young men, one was a mere youth, a slim wisp of a boy about sixteen. They slowed to a walk. Bobby noticed that four of them carried rifles, not in scabbards but held in their hands across the fork of each saddle.

They came up to him riding abreast, spaced about six feet apart, their collective gaze steadily upon him. And at a distance of fifteen feet the muzzles of all four rifles flipped down on smiling Bobby Sneyd.

"Hands up!" one barked and Bobby—his welcoming smile vanished under a mild surge of surprise and protest—instantly obeyed.

The youngest, the boy, pointed a slim finger at Bobby, at the black horse.

"That's him, all right," he said briefly.

They dismounted. Two approached Bobby from the rear, felt over him as if seeking weapons. Then they yanked his arms down, drew them together behind his back and lashed his wrists tight with a short length of rope. They stood surveying him in frowning silence—until Bobby found his voice.

"What in Sam Hill's this for?" he demanded. "What you fellers think I am that you swoop down on me like this? You—"

One of the men struck him an open-handed blow across the mouth.

"Close your yawp," he said. "You got nothin' to say."

"The hell I ain't!" Bobby got that far and the man struck him again.

"Will you shut up," he cried, "before I have to dirty my hands on you any more?" You're at the end of your rope, Stevens."

"I ain't no Stevens," Bobby asserted unflinchingly. "My name's Sneyd. I'm a Cross Seven rep bound for the Capital K. My pack outfit an' string of horses is down in this canyon. If the Stevens you want rode on this black horse he's down there too, gittin' himself a drink. You got the wrong bull by the tail."

They paid no attention to this statement. The boy looked at the elderly man with the short black beard.

"I reckon there's no chance for a mistake," he said slowly. "That there horse is enough. Put him on Nigger, boys."



They heaved Bobby up on the black. He had cut into this brief exchange of words with a protest. And since two blows had failed to silence him they

forbore further abuse—only they paid no more heed to his words than if they had been deaf. There was a sinister determination in the look and attitude and words of these men. Bobby Sneyd was no fool. He knew the man they wanted was below in the gulch. But his recital of that fact brought no flicker of interest. They merely looked at him sitting there on the black horse and muttered to each other. Bobby fell silent. He was a prisoner. Ultimately they would discover their mistake and set him free.

But that comforting assumption speedily vanished. One led the black horse along the fringe of pines. The others followed. They looked at the timber and at nothing else as they moved. And when they halted by common consent under a pine taller, with longer stouter boughs than the others Bobby didn't need to see one loose the reata from his saddle-fork to feel the first faint touch of panic.

"Look here," he said steadily. "You got me foul. There's nothin' on God's green earth to keep you from hangin' me higher'n a kite. But if you don't want to be sorry for what you aim to do you better look over into this canyon. My outfit's there, if the jasper that rode the black hasn't run 'em off. My bed's packed on one horse. There's papers in my warbag 'll prove what I say an' who I am."

"Damn all this talk!" the slim boy snarled. "That's him. I got a look at him. He had on that kind of a shirt an' gray cloth pants. I seen him plain as day. He shot Ed down like he was a mad dog. Swing him—or I'll beef him with my gun right now!"

His Colt leaped clear of the scabbard. The man with the rope rode beside Bobby. He grinned feebly, as if he had no stomach for carrying out the mandate of Judge Lynch. But he snugged the noose tight about Bobby's neck. The other faces

were hard and watchful, tight-mouthed. All but the boy's. His lips were parted. He bent forward, flipping the gun in his hand with nervous motions. And his eyes burned with a hot rage, a hunger for vengeance. Bobby had only an inkling. There must have been a killing, a dirty killing, to rouse this stripling to such an insensate fury.

The rope stood taut now, over a high bough and fast about the lower trunk of the tree. The tired horse between his legs was a living scaffold. Bobby looked them in the eye. There was no mercy there and the subtle inner essence that had made Bobby Sneyd go smiling through life made him smile a bit wistfully now in the face of death.

"You're a bunch of fools or plain yellow dogs," he defied them. "You're goin' to hang an innocent man for some other feller's deviltry. And I wouldn't want to be in your boots when Eph Marks of the Cross Seven finds out what you've done to me."

The boy raised his quirt.

"Wait!" the man with the black beard lifted his hand.

"Wait hell!" the youngster gasped.

The snappers of his quirt stung the black's flanks. Bobby felt the beast leap from under him. For one second blue sky and hot sun blazed like an immense sea of shifting color before his straining eyes. Then it all went black as the weight of his kicking body buried the half-inch rope deep in the flesh of his neck.

He came back to consciousness with the feeling that he must be in some hell devised to make a cowpuncher feel at home. There was a peculiar smell of horse. The first thing his eyes beheld was horses' legs near him, grass beside him, a bewildering bright hot sky overhead. Everything seemed rather foggy. He felt sore and tired and weak, as if he had wrestled bull calves by a branding fire all day. His neck ached with intolerable pains, much as if his head had been torn out by the root from between his shoulders. But these peculiar uncertainties cleared in a few seconds. He perceived that he was lying on the ground and that the elderly man with the black beard bent over him with a look of concern holding in his hand a pan that Bobby recognized as out of his own pack. There was water in the pan and Bobby's face was wet.

He sat up. A snarl of rope with a severed end lay by him. The remnant still encircled the pine trunk.

"I'm powerful sorry, son," the old man said. "We gave you a rough deal an' a close call."

Bobby rubbed his aching neck.

"How come you all changed your mind?" he asked.

"The boys is trigger-quick an' they kinda forced my hand," the old fellow said soberly. "I never suspicioned you wasn't Brock Stevens myself till the last minute. A feller would naturally swear black was white in that kind of fix. Anythin' to stave it off. Only there was somethin' in the way you stood up to us at the very last gasp. I'd 'a' talked it over then—only the kid forced my hand. Hit the horse an' jumped him out from under you. About that time I seen a string of horses, one packed, come into sight away down the canyon so I out with my knife an' cut you down."

"Much obliged," Bobby said ironically. "Would you mind tellin' me why you were all so set on a hangin'?"

"This here Brock Stevens is one of four that held up a Great Northern train a few days back. A citizen posse surrounded 'em at the east end of the Bear Paws. There was some shootin'. Three deputies killed. Two outlaws killed, one captured. Stevens got away. He come to our place up on Cow Creek, about sun up this mornin'. My nephew Ed had just saddled up this here black horse outside the corral. Stevens he rides around the corner of the stable, shoots Ed in the back, mounts the black and dusts. Tommy—that's the kid—Ed's brother—sees the play, sees he's fair, dressed like you, too. Tommy grabs a horse an' takes after Stevens, throwin' lead as he runs. Stevens



kills the kid's horse. Tommy has to walk in, saddle a fresh horse, ride three miles to where me an' the other boys is at a hay camp. That's why we're so far behind. But we're on his trail."

"The yeller dog," Bobby grunted. "He knowed you was after him, that's why he was castin' glances behind. That's why he left me hold his horse. He figured on

gettin' my fresh mount while you fellers surged up an' surrounded me like a bunch of hornets. He made his getaway on a good horse, too."

"I reckon, but the boys are on his trail," the old man repeated.

"Well, maybe they'll get him, if they don't stop to hang every strange rider they happen on," Bobby observed.

Bobby rose. His string of Cross Seven horses was bunched near at hand, grazing on the plateau.

"I got my neck stretched," he muttered. "The Cross Seven loses a good saddle-horse, an' I lose a good ridin' rig. By God, if it wasn't for lettin' the outfit down I'd foller that jasper to hell an' back!"

"He's got your saddle all right," the black-bearded man said. "But you can keep the ridin' outfit that's on the black till you get your own back again. It belonged to Ed Stark an' Ed's lyin' at the ranch waitin' for a coffin. He won't need it no more."

"All right. I'll use it," Bobby accepted. "How do you feel? Fair to middlin'?" the old man inquired.

"Barrin' a sore neck I'm all right," Bobby answered shortly.

"Then I'll be ridin'," the other said. "I kain't never ketch up with the boys now. I had to stay an' look after you. An' somebody's got to get back an' tend the ranch. My name's Stark. I'm powerful sorry we made a mistake an' was so hasty with you, stranger."

"S'll right. You might 'a' got him if you'd listened to me," Bobby returned. "But I guess the evidence was all agin me. I don't blame you so much as I do that dirty, cheatin' murderin' hound for trickin' me into it."

"He was desperate, I reckon," Stark said. "Well, I'll be ridin' as soon as you catch yourself a fresh horse."

They bunched the Cross Seven string, roped one, and Bobby transferred the riding-gear from the black horse to his own. Stark took the black's lead-rope. He rode away up the bench leaving Bobby Sneyd, mounted, armed, sitting his horse in a spell of frowning thoughtfulness.

Something seemed to burn in Bobby's heart, a rancor he had never experienced. Strangely enough it wasn't directed at the Starks. Near as they had taken him to the gates of death he didn't blame them. That was simply a mistake made by honest men. But Brock Stevens had tricked Bobby into being the victim and he burned

with a strange lust to get his hands on this man, train-robber, murderer, cheat—who had already forfeited his life before the law as well as in the eyes of men. That feeling took instant and complete possession of Bobby Sneyd, whose smile was gone, whose face since the moment the noose encircled his neck had lost something bright and disarming. He looked hard and calculating and ruthless as he sat there deep in reflection, a wry twist to his lips and an intermittent dilation of his nostrils.

"For two pins I'd back track to the home ranch an' make 'em send another man down below," he muttered. "An' I'd foller that jasper till I drilled him with his own gun."

He drew out the Winchester to inspect it—a .30-.30 carbine, bright and new. Bobby tried it at his shoulder, looked in the magazine to find it full.

"Put his light out with his own weapon," he murmured as he squinted over the sights.

He sat there on the lip of the canyon thinking of that outlaw threading furtively the maze of the Bad Lands with those five riders on his trail. They could track him. The Cross Seven horse he rode was fresh and shod, the best of a string of fifteen good ones. He was astride of Bobby Sneyd's beautifully carved saddle. Bobby tried to visualize old Eph Marks, who owned the Cross Seven listening to his account and saying at last, "Whyn't you foller him?" A thief and a murderer who had stolen a Cross Seven horse and brought a Cross Seven rider almost to a bitter end. The raw welt where the rope had bitten into Bobby's neck stung and burned with less fire than his hunger to pay off that score.

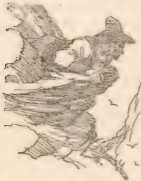
His original task was as imperative as ever, to join the Capital K. The interest of the Cross Seven was his first consideration. But he had a strangely profound conviction that Brock Stevens, mounted on a fresh horse, would get away from the Stark riders whose mounts had already done twenty-five miles at a hot pace—and that he, Bobby Sneyd, could smell him out and get him.

The wish perhaps fathered the conviction. On a sudden impulse Bobby headed his string down the canyon and followed it south instead of debouching eastward lower down and holding straight for the north slope of the Little Rockies. A day or two more or less didn't matter. He could turn back out of the Bad Lands any

time and reach the Capital K in a day's hard riding.

Thirty miles south the Missouri flowed through that broken country. Bobby followed the canyon which grew deeper, narrower, until it became a gorge, straight-walled, sage-floored, four hundred feet below the upper benches. He looked once or twice to find the tracks of a single shod horse and the five smooth-footed pursuers. After that he looked no more. There was no turning aside from that deep trough. In the twilight he came out in a river bottom. He let his string go while he searched the sandy river's edge for tracks to tell whether Brock Stevens had breasted the big water or turned west or east. He hadn't crossed. He had watered his horse and turned east. Bobby found the tell-tale hoofprints leading out of the lower end of the sage-brown river flat.

Bobby considered awhile. Between the crest of the Little Rockies and the Big Muddy lay a nightmare of jumbled country. Game abounded and water, bands of wild horses and equally wild cattle. A lone man could dodge a score of riders in there, or fight them from safe ambush. Bobby knew that part of the Bad Lands



only by hearsay. But he was sure the outlaw headed for that sanctuary to do as other men had done before him—lie low, living off the country till pursuit was abandoned, till the hue and cry died down, then

leave it fifty miles behind in a single night's riding.

"I'll foller these tracks," Bobby said to himself. "I can make it through to the Capital K along the south side, anyway. An' I might have luck."

The trail climbed a steep slope, crossed a narrow hogback, and dipped to the next river bottom. It was dusk when he reached that. He made camp, hobbled his horses, cooked his supper and turned in. His sleep was disturbed by unpleasant dreams and he rose to make his breakfast fire with a scowl on his face and a wry stiff neck.

Late that afternoon, long after he had hopelessly lost the track of that shod horse in a desolate labyrinth he climbed laboriously out of a deep hollow to cross a nar-

row ridge. From the top of that he saw mounted men far off and halted to watch them. They rode his way and he waited. He stood out plain. With his loose string of horses he was easily distinguishable. They drew up shortly and sighting him turned toward him—the five Stark riders weary in their saddles, on weary horses. One had his arm bound with a blood-stained cloth. They had ridden for two days, laid out one night, without food. They drew up and regarded Bobby Sneyd out of red-rimmed eyes.

"We was kinda rough on you," one said at last. "Hope you don't hold no grudge."

Bobby made a gesture of dismissal.

"You get that *hombre*?" he asked.

"Uh-uh," the youngest said morosely.

"We jumped him last night about sundown. Least we reckon it was him. Was the horse he stole from you a sorrel?"

Bobby nodded.

"Then it was him. He threw lead at us as soon as we come in sight. We smoked him up for a minute, but all we had was a flash of him. He winged Dave. We couldn't pick up his trail this mornin' an' after scoutin, around all day we give up. Our horses is done. We got no grub. We reckoned we'd have to find a cow or spot a deer or somethin'. Dave's arm is bad. We got to get him home."

"There's meat in these breaks," Bobby said. "Anyway, I got some grub. Is there water handy the way you come?"

"Just down this ridge a ways there's a spring," one said.

"Back track with me to that an' we'll cook an' talk this over."

They shook their heads when Bobby proposed to remount them and look farther for Stevens' tracks. They were tired, disheartened. The fury of reprisal had died out of them. The man Dave was in agony with his arm. It was swollen and discolored where a .45 slug had torn the flesh and raked the bone.

"There'll be posses all around on the lookout for him," they said. "They'll get him sometime."

"Look," said Bobby, "does the whole crowd of you have to get back to your ranch? Could one of you take on a job for me?"

"I might," one said. "I just stopped in at Stark's on my way down to Milk River to see if I could catch on with one of them cow outfits. I rode with the boys here because I don't like murder."

He was the man who had, with visible reluctance, put the rope around Bobby

Sneyd's neck at the pine tree.

"Are you game to go with me?" Bobby asked. "I'll give you a job."

The man nodded assent.

"I'll leave you fellers coffee and a piece of bacon," Bobby made instant decision. "You can get somewhere tomorrow. I'm goun' on."

"Can you remember the place where you all shot at this Stevens last night?" Bobby asked when he got under way with his companion, whose name was Bill Harper.

"Yeah," Harper assured him. "I got the place in mind. We sure threw lead for a minute."

Bobby reflected awhile.

"I tell you, Harper, I don't want you to go man-huntin' with me," he said at last. "What I want you to do is show me the place where you come on him. Then I want you to take my string an' join the Capital K in my place. I can't let the Cross Seven down. And I want to hunt this outlaw."

"S a tough game single-handed," Harper said. "I'll stay with you if you like. Personally I'd rather join the roundup. I don't feel like I'd lost any train-robbers."

"I've lost this 'un," Bobby muttered. "I won't rest till I find him. He's got a Cross Seven horse. He's got my ridin' outfit. An' I got the mark of a hangin' rope on my neck to remind me."

"You couldn't hardly blame us," Harper said. "Now, could you?"

"I don't," Bobby replied. "But he left me to hold the sack. He put me in that fix, as much as if he'd roped me with his own hands. An' he did it so he could get away himself."

They rode on until in the distance Bill Harper pointed out a dome-shaped hill with a bald, whitish head and clumps of pine timber in the draws that scarred its sides, little ravines that pitched sharply down to a maze of canyons.

"He was crossin' that," Harper said. "We hailed him. He fired on us an' ran for it. We smoked him up till he got outa sight in the timber."

"Didn't touch him?"

"Couldn't find either tracks or blood," Harper answered. "It was gittin' on for dusk, remember. He had all night to make his getaway. Probably he's fifty miles from here by now."

Bobby had his own opinion about that but he didn't voice it. He caught the pack-horse, put a frying-pan, a little food and coffee, in his saddle-pockets. Harper was

mounted on a Cross Seven horse. His own tired pony moved leaden-footed with the loose horses.

Bobby pointed north where the rugged crest of the Little Rockies loomed over them.

"You better ride straight to the head of the breaks," he said, "then foller the foot-hills around to the Capital K. You might strike a ranch to lay up tonight. If you don't you can make a night camp an' reach the Capital K tomorrow."



"I won't have no trouble," Harper declared. "I been through them mountains."

"If I don't turn up at the Capital K," Bobby said, "you're workin' for Eph Marks till further orders."

"I sabe," Harper nodded. "Wish you luck."

Harper kept on high ground, a bench that ran clear to the mountains. When he had grown dim Bobby rode straight for the bald knob. He still had an hour or so of daylight. Whether by luck or because he was a more keen-eyed tracker than the Starks in twenty minutes circling the low bare hump he picked up the hoofprints of a shod horse leading into a brushy canyon.

Now Bobby Sneyd had a theory that his man craved the sanctuary of this, the roughest, loneliest section of northern Montana. Otherwise Bobby reasoned, he would have got out of it. He could have crossed the Missouri and gone into a wild country toward the Mussellshell. He could easily have doubled back on his tracks, riding by night, and tried for the Canada line. Since he had done neither it was a logical surmise that he meant to do his dodging here in the Bad Lands until he judged it safe to go elsewhere. He would try to exchange the Cross Seven horse for one with a less widely known brand before he sought a more open country.

"Like as not he's within ten miles of here right now, maybe less," Bobby murmured. "I better step soft an' keep my eyes open."

He got down off his horse. The tracks kept to timber. Where soft earth lay they were plain. On mats of pine needles, in grass and scrubby sage they were difficult to follow. Bobby led his horse by the reins. Sometimes he had to stoop and peer for marks. He meant to follow those

tracks no matter how slow his progress because their direction would tell him whether Brock Stevens was traveling to get somewhere or merely lying low.

The pines ran in a belt from the edge of the bare knoll all along the western slope of a ravine less steep than most Bad Land canyons. There was a lot of cover there. Bobby knew what risk he took, must take. Night was coming on. He could hardly hope to get anywhere much in the daylight now. He would have to find water to camp before dark came on. But he still had some leeway. And when he had traversed some five or six hundred yards he stopped with a grunt of satisfaction. The pine needles were darkened with a splatter of dried blood.

"They hit him—or his horse," Bobby murmured.

He needed to be wary. Stevens might be near at hand. His horse might be crippled. The man himself might be wounded, or dead. If he were alive and afoot he would be lynx-eyed and deadly. Bobby squatted on his heels and pondered for a minute.

Then he rose, led his horse aside into a dense part of the stand of ledge-pole pine, tied him short, pinched the noseband of the *haquima* tight so the beast couldn't whinny, unsaddled and hid the saddle in a thicket nearby. Carbine in hand he took up the trail once more, gliding wary as an Indian, looking well to the side and ahead.

Three hundred yards farther half a dozen buzzards flopped up and away. At the point of their feast—only a feast brings the buzzards to earth—Bobby found the Cross Seven horse lying dead, the saddle still cinched on his swollen carcass, upon which the buzzards had barely begun. Grimly he removed his saddle and laid it aside.

He would come back and get that saddle presently. Brock Stevens wouldn't be far if Bobby Sneyd read the sign aright. The man was hit. He had crawled away from there. The ruffled pine needles, the scraped soil, little specks of blood on leaf and earth told the story. Like a bloodhound Bobby nosed his way, two hundred yards, a quarter of a mile, half a mile. The pines ended. A bald stretch of flat adobe soil, baked to flint hardness, slanted down. The tracks ended on that.

Bobby halted in the edge of the timber. Stevens must have tied up his wound. On that hard surface his creeping left no mark. But a man wounded so badly he must crawl on all fours wouldn't go far,

couldn't go far. He would seek cover—and water.

Bobby's gaze searched steep earth walls above, little gulches heading down to a deep sage-floored canyon. He stood on the edge of a rough basin. There might be a spring in any hollow under his eye. A trickle of alkali water was fairly sure in the bottom. Unless the man's wound was slighter than his progress indicated he couldn't be far.

He kept to cover, skirted that bare slope and cut the trail on the farther side. He cursed the Starks for giving up so easily. They could have picked up those tracks and ran Stevens down in an hour. The man's crawling track lay plain again. It didn't occur to Bobby Sneyd that with weariness and hunger the lust of the chase burns low in the normal man. He didn't realize that the pain of that rope about his own neck had filled him with such a passion that he had gone "bad" himself. He was cool enough outwardly. Inside he was stirred by a concentrated ferocity such as he had never felt in his life. Yet it seemed natural. To Bobby, Brock Stevens wasn't a man like himself. He was something predatory, dangerous, like a calf-killing wolf, like some beast of prey with a devilish intelligence, a malignant cunning. And Bobby was quite well aware that he courted destruction himself. A wounded outlaw, his life already forfeit for his deeds, hidden in the brush by some waterhole, was deadlier than any man-eating tiger.

That was why he kept to cover in a wide circle of the adobe patch and moved with caution when he found the tracks once more. It was very plain on the soft earth among the pine thickets. It dipped into a gully. Peering ahead Bobby saw a patch of bright green grass, a sure indication of water. Whether a spring or just seepage he had to find out. So once more he turned aside to circle and learn if the trail came out on the other side, or if it ended in that gully.

He had traversed perhaps another hundred yards. He had stopped to peer, to listen, at a point where he could look through a brush screen into the short gully. It was very still in the cover of the pines. Shadows were creeping into the low places as sundown neared. In that voiceless hush Bobby could hear the beating of his own heart. And it doubled its beat and then almost stood still at a metallic snick at his left, followed instantly by a hoarse voice so close that it seemed at his elbow, say-

ing: "Don't move! I'll drop you in your tracks if you bat an eye."

A wave of fury swept Bobby. He had walked blind into Stevens. His body obeyed the order, but his eyes turned slowly to look into the muzzle of a six-shooter trained on him at a distance of fifteen feet or less. It rested against the six-inch trunk of a bushy pine. Behind the gun and showing above a clump of juniper loomed a face.

"Drop that rifle."

Bobby obeyed. He had his .45 on a belt. To raise the rifle or go for his Colt was suicide. His brain worked in illuminating flashes. Stevens would have fired without speaking if he had meant really to kill. What he probably wanted was Bobby's horse. Mounted again he might act on the old assumption that dead men are harmless. But until his finger actually pulled trigger Bobby felt that he had a chance. All this between Stevens' commands.

"Turn your back to me."

Again Bobby obeyed.

"Unbuckle your gun-belt and let it drop."

"Now," when Bobby had disarmed himself, "step over this way."

Bobby faced about. The outlaw pointed to a spot with one finger. Bobby moved ten feet into the clear. The gun bore on him steadily. Above it Stevens' face was strained, anxious, feverishly intent. His eyes were bloodshot.

Bobby could see him now clearly and he was a ghastly sight. One leg, stretched out before him, was bared to the knee, tied up with strips of bloody cloth. It was swollen twice the normal size. His shirt was off—he had torn it for bandages. The cotton under-garment about his torso was stained with streaks of dried blood. The stubble of his unshaven face was black over a fever-flushed skin. They stared at each other in silence.

"So you follered too, eh?" Stevens said at last. "Did you want your horse an' saddle that bad? I left you a ridin' rig in exchange."

"You left me holdin' a stolen horse. You left me to get shot or lynched by them that chased you," Bobby replied sullenly. "I had the closest call of my life over your play about gettin' a drink at the spring."

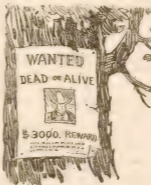
"So I suppose you aimed to kill me for that, eh?"

"Oh, no. You done me such a good turn I rode after you to thank you for your kindness," Bobby's lip curled.

"I could 'a' killed you any time in the last five minutes," Stevens said calmly. "I could kill you now. Maybe I'll have to before I'm through. But I don't want to. I'm sick of killin'. If I let you go will you do somethin' for me—not for me, personal, but for somebody else that ain't concerned in this?"

"A promise made under a gun ain't worth speakin' of," Bobby muttered.

"I'd take a chance on you. You look white," Stevens said. "I'm at the end of my rope, an' I know it. I want to square somethin' for a innocent party that trusted me. I've got the drop on you. You got to listen to what I say. You know there's a reward out for me? Three thousand dollars—dead or alive."



"I didn't," Bobby declared. "Makes no difference to me. I'm after you on my own account."

"Somebody could collect that reward," Stevens continued. His

eyes burned over the barrel of his gun. "But not unless I want. I can put your light out an' crawl away an' die where nobody'd ever find my carcass. But I'll give up to you—let you take me in—if you'll promise me, honest Injun, you'll pay half that reward, fifteen hundred dollars of it, to somebody I'll name."

"That's a hell of a proposition," Bobby's mouth stood open in amazement.

"It's a fair one. You win all the way. I lose. I'm bound to lose anyhow. It's the only way I know how to fix it so somebody I'm interested in won't get too much the worst of it. Will you take me up?"

"An' if I don't you'll put my light out?" Bobby glared at him suspiciously. "You got some new trick up your sleeve."

Stevens shook his head.

"No trick in it. I'm laying myself wide open. I don't want to snuff you out. I'm sick of killin', I tell you."

"You shot one man that I know of down in cold blood," Bobby accused.

"I know it," Stevens passed one hand over his forehead—but the gun barrel held steady on Bobby Sneyd's breast. "I ain't excusin' myself. I was crazy with what was behind me. No use talkin' about what

I'm wanted for. Will you promise to do what I want if I surrender?"

"Darn it," Bobby retorted. "Well, you got a cinch on me, ain't you? You make a queer offer. What's back of it?"

"Simple," Stevens wrinkled his brows as if in pain. "I left a woman an' kid over in the Gallatin early last spring an' come north to make a fresh start an' stake. I've been in trouble before. I meant all right when I hit Milk River, but I got mixed up with some hard citizens. The easy-money, take-a-chance talk got me goin'. We stuck up this train. Here I am. Ain't a chance in the world for me. I can lie here an' die like any wounded animal an' my bones never be found. I'd take that in preference to that penitentiary. Only it ain't the pen—it's hangin' for me, now. I ain't worth nothin' layin' dead in the Bad Lands. But I'm worth three thousand cash delivered to the Choteau County Authorities."

He passed his hand across his forehead again. The bloodshot eyes burned into Bobby Sneyd's over the Colt.

"Sibe the play? Fifteen hundred dollars is a lot of money to a woman. It'll help her take care of the kid. You can tell her I sent it to her. That I cashed in—horse fell on me—somebody shot me—anything you like but the truth. She don't need to know I went like I'll go. She can't find out. I ain't going under my right name. Will you do it?"

"If I refuse you'll snuff me out?" Bobby said slowly. It was part question, part statement.

Stevens nodded.

"The railroad an' the county offered three thousand apiece for us hold-ups right off," he said. "Nobody's goin' to collect on me unless it does some good. I don't want to kill you. But I can't let you walk away and come back an' surround me. I got a poisoned leg, a hole through my middle you could put your finger in. I'd rather rot here than die on a scaffold. Unless—will you promise?"

"Suppose I do?" Bobby felt a queer incredible feeling working inside him, an emotion like pity, which he would have denied. "What's to prevent me promisin' you the earth? Once I get outa here I don't have to live up to no promise forced on me at the point of a gun."

Brock Stevens lips parted in a weary grimace.

"I'm takin' that chance," said he. "I don't know why, but I'm bankin' that if you promised, even under a gun, you'd

keep that promise. I was raised in a cow country. I never seen a range man yet that wouldn't go out of his way to help a woman and a kid. An' I'm payin' for it, ain't I? I'm willin' to take what's comin' to me, to square accounts. Would I sit here chewin' the rag with you if I wasn't? I ain't afraid you'll go back on your word. You don't look to me like that kind of a hombre."

"I ain't," Bobby answered shortly. "Let's get this straight. You want me to take you in, collect the reward, pay it to this party you name—all of it—I don't want no blood-money in mine. Is that it?"

"Correct."

"All right. It's a promise," Bobby said slowly.

Brock Stevens laid down his gun and put his hands over his eyes.

"Thank you, partner," he said with a queer thick note in his voice, as if something choked him. "Have you got a pencil an' paper?"

Bobby had a little notebook and a stub of a pencil in his pocket.

"Write it down," said the man. "My name ain't Stevens. You keep that to yourself. Her name is Mrs. Alma Prentiss. Lives in a town called Highgate, on the Gallatin River. You know the place?"

Bobby nodded as he wrote the address.

"She's a little bit of a dark-haired woman with gray eyes. The kid's four, a girl, blue eyes like me, an' yellow hair. Oh, God! I've been a fool. Tell her any kind of story you like to account for the money, about me cashin' in. I can't think straight right now. It'll hurt her like hell. She stuck by me through everythin'. She'll have that money and she'll be free an' she'll never know how I finished up. That's all."

They sat staring at each other for a minute. That last of the sun made a golden glow on the opposite canyon rim. Twilight shade settled in the pines. A cool breeze rustled the boughs above.

"How bad are you hurt?" Bobby asked. "It's goin' to be tough packin' you outa this rough country."

"I won't holler. I won't make no trouble. I'll take it as it comes. I don't care much now," Stevens muttered.

"I better go get my horse before it comes dark," Bobby said. "There's water right below you here, ain't there?"

"Trickle of a spring," Stevens told him. "I ain't been able to get to it since noon. Say, before you go, leave me that pencil an'

a leaf. I want to write down somethin' else while I think of it."

Bobby gave him a sheet and the pencil, picked up his own gun-belt, buckled it on, took up the rifle, walked away, hurrying without knowing why. He had stolen down through those pines keen on the trail,



hot to kill, burning with a sense of outrage. He was soberly thoughtful now, a little sad, oppressed by intangible moodiness. A man like Brock Stevens—peace officers shot such on sight.

Still—Bobby shook himself impatiently. He had a momentary vision of Brock Stevens facing the hangman, taking his last look at blue sky from a wooden scaffold, and it gave him a strange distaste.

"Hell an' damnation!" he exclaimed impatiently. "In another minute I'll be helpin' him make his getaway. An' he has got it comin'. He is bad. Gol darn his hide, anyway!"

Halfway to his horse Bobby stopped dead in his tracks. Behind him deep in the pines a single shot sounded, muffled, yet unmistakable in that hushed loneliness. He turned and ran back. Instinctively he

knew. And his intuition was correct.

Stevens lay stretched by the pine tree, a white-handled Colt close by his outspread fingers. On the rough bark of the tree a bit of paper was pinned by the blade of a pocket knife. Bobby took it down, peered close in the gathering twilight to read the pencilled words:

"Tell that I resisted you and you plugged me. According to the reward I'm worth as much dead as alive—and a heap less trouble to everybody. So-long."

Some obscure impulse made Bobby Sneyd bare his head. He stood for a long time staring at that still figure, sprawling face down in the pine needles.

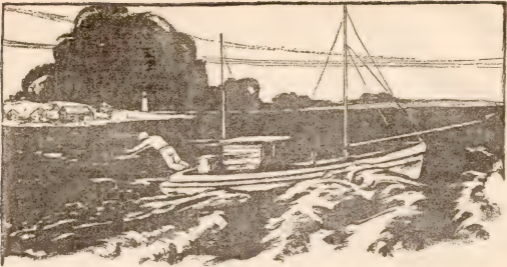
"I had a kind of a hunch you'd do that," he murmured at last. "I don't know as I'd 'a' stopped you if I could."

He turned away. This time he gained his horse, saddled him and rode down to the spring, let him drink. When he had staked the beast on grass for the night Bobby stood by his mount for a second, rumpling his mane and staring across his withers at the evening star gleaming like a pale jewel on the darkening forehead of night.

"Queer things happen in this old world, Jumbo," he whispered. "I got to turn you into a hearse in the mornin'. Then we got to have a funeral procession sixty-five miles to the railroad. After that we got to collect a lot of money an' see it goes to a widow an' a orphan."

INDIAN WOMEN

THERE has always been much misunderstanding in regard to the status of Indian women, who often have been regarded by casual observers as little more than slaves. As a matter of fact, however, the position of Indian women in the tribe was by no means a lowly one. To her, of course, were assigned the purely domestic work and all that pertained to it, and the care of the children, while the man was the provider and protector. Hunting in winter, especially when enemies were lurking about, was anything but a sinecure; but the man's work was ended when he delivered his game at the door of the home—then it was the task of the woman to prepare it for food. Often an Indian on the trail, with eyes alert, followed by his wife bearing a child on her back in addition to the burden of camp equipage, would be regarded by the stranger as a kind of overlord whose spouse was a mere drudge. But as the protector, his hands must be free for attack or defense at a moment's notice; otherwise he became a veritable target for an aggressor. Among the Pueblo Indians the status of women is very high, for they own not only the children, but the house. If a husband should chance to become "too fresh," his wife is likely to tell him to take his belongings and sally forth to his mother's home, there to remain; and if the wife is inclined to be obdurate, he has no redress. "Women's rights" was an institution among the Pueblo a thousand years before Susan B. Anthony was born.—F. W. H.



PREACHERS NEVER TELL

By HERMAN HOWARD MATTESON

Author of "Pile Driver Methods," "Blow Lucky West Wind," etc.

PUGET SOUND HAS SEEN SOME QUEER DOINGS ALONG ITS TREACHEROUS SHOALS AND SHORES; BUT SURELY NOTHING STRANGER THAN DAN PARR MASQUERADING AS A PREACHER AND THE SECRET OF OLD HIYU HILGARDY

DAN PARR felt his mouth and lips growing dry as ashes. His heart stopped, actually stopped for an instant, then began thudding away as if it would stave a way through his ribs. Here was an opportunity, if only he cargoed the sand, kept his head; played the game, to transform himself from a ragged, despised beachcomber into a very rich man. All that was required was a bit of nerve, a cool head, a resolute stifling of that weak and fool thing Boat Preacher Joe Wilkins was always prating about—conscience.

Dan wet his dry lips, twisted his thick fingers nervously. The girl who had just paddled in in a canoe had mistaken him in the darkness for the preacher. Dan Parr, beachcomber, waterfront thief if the truth must be known, to be mistaken for the Reverend Joe Wilkins. It was funny.

"Please come quick," the girl pleaded. "My dad is dying. He's got something grievous on his mind—got to tell—confess. He just can't die the way he is. Hurry! A word from the Book before he goes, a prayer to comfort him, and me too—Oh, hurry!"

For a fortnight, the beachcomber had

been puttering about, killing time principally in the employment of Joe Wilkins, boat preacher. Wilkins' parish was all the farther islands of Puget Sound, his pulpit variously the deck of his little gospel ship, a boom of logs, or the rough plank platform of a salmon trap. Wilkins, absent at the time in Seattle, had left Dan Parr in charge. Parr, looking to the mooring of the gospel ship for the night had just rowed in when the girl arrived in the canoe. She had said that her name was Huiil Hilgardy, that she had paddled clear from Sucia Island nearly twenty miles away.

What a piece of luck, Dan reflected, still cracking his thick fingers as he stared down at the anxious figure before him. Dan had heard a very great deal concerning Old Hiyu Hilgardy, who was dying, who wanted to ease his sinful soul with confession. Hiyu Hilgardy, it was said, for thirty years had gathered in his rapacious dragnet loot from all the seven seas; pearls in the Marquesas, sea otter skins in Charlotte Sound, seal pelts from the Bering, gold and more gold. All of this desirable treasure, it was declared, none of it acquired honestly, was hidden

somewhere on his island in Puget Sound. If Hiyu Hilgardy was dying, wanted to confess, it was a skookum bet. Dan Parr reflected, that the old picaroon would reveal something about the hiding place of his plunder.

"Hurry!" repeated the girl, plucking at Dan's sleeve. "You, a preacher, would you let my dad die sinful? I heard if a party confesses, no matter what he done, and has a verse, and a prayer, why he don't go to the bad place. Oh, hurry!"

The beachcomber struck a match, let its fitful light fall upon the girl's pale face, staring eyes, and upon his own hard, sinister countenance.

"Will you hurry!" she demanded angrily.

He pinched out the match flame between thumb and finger. Still the girl thought that he was Joe Wilkins, boat preacher. What a bit of luck.

"I'll go," said Dan Parr. "We'll go in the gospel ship, take your canoe in tow, make it back in no time to your island. Just a second."

A qualm of the weak and fool thing called conscience assailed the beachcomber as he entered the cabin. This had been a hospitable roof to him. Joe Wilkins had trusted him. No man ever had before. It was coming it low down and scurvy on Joe Wilkins to steal his fair name, his reputation, usurp the functions of his holy calling. Poolie! What of it? When he got a fist into Hiyu Hilgardy's cache, he would slip Joe a few hundred for his seamen's gospel mission. That would square it.

Dan reached for the long skirted, black ministerial coat that hung upon a nail. The coat fitted him. In a facetious moment he had tried it on, had stood before the mirror striving to grimace his evil face into the expression that Joe Wilkins called, "saved and sanctified." The uplifted dirty hand of the beachcomber faltered. It was a rotten deal that he was giving Joe Wilkins. He reached out again, felt the bulk of the little, pig skin covered Bible that rested in the left hand pocket. While he might manage a verse or so from the Book, how about the prayer. The prayers of the wicked are an abomination. Joe Wilkins had said so. While he was praying Old Hiyu Hilgardy out of his rich secret, what if a thunderbolt mowed him down, or a punitive rafter fell from the roof and battered out his brains?

Dan guessed maybe he'd better pass up the gospel job after all. He started back

for the doorway, paused, struck himself a violent blow alongside the head, uttered a savage oath. Recollection had suddenly flooded over him. Dan's earliest memory, when he had been four or five years old, was of having traveled a long, long way with some Indians. He had lived with these Indians on a river, the Columbia he afterward learned. Then he had left the camp, flunkeyed for some fishermen, slimming salmon, shoveling fish offal into scows. He had gone to school for a brief winter or two. He had gone to sea, flunkeying again, as always, and to the Bering Sea in a cod fishermen, splitting and salting fish. Back on the Sound he had bull cooked for a logging outfit, peeling millions of spuds, washing mountains of greasy pots and pans, flunkeying, always flunkeying, hated, suspected, but respected and let alone just the same by virtue of his gigantic strength, and rattlesnake temper. But no man had ever trusted him until Joe Wilkins had taken him in. It was a rotten deal to give Joe. Just the same— How differently folks would act, how everybody would toady and lickspittle when he had fifty or a hundred thousand dollars poked down into the pocket of his filthy tarpaulin pants.

With a savage snort he ran, yanked down the black, ministerial coat, thrust his long arms into the sleeves.

"We'll go," he said, hurrying out upon the beach. In a moment the gospel ship was underway, the canoe trailing and bobbing astern.

THE girl sped up the trail that led from the dock to the dark cabin. Dan came heavily after her, the pigskin covered Bible pounding his thigh. The girl flung open the door, lighted a kerosene lamp. Too late.

Old Hiyu Hilgardy had struggled out of bed, had crawled or staggered toward the rear door when death had struck him down. There he lay, a horrid, huddled heap, dead fish eyes open, staring, the thin lips set as if his last breath had been expended in a shriek for mercy.

Dan Parr lifted the gaunt body, disposed it upon the bed. With awkward hand pittings he strove to comfort the distracted, hysterical girl. Finally she became composed, sat, hands clasped, dry eyed, staring at the body upon the bed. She turned her face of wretchedness upon the fake boat preacher.

"Do you suppose, him dying like he done, maybe out of his head entire, do you

suppose—? Is they a hell, preacher? Answer me. Is they?"

Dan Parr drew the pigskin covered Bible from the pocket, held it up to view. "It says so," he answered solemnly.

"Would a confession a done any good? Or is that all *cultus wawa*?"

"*Cultus wawa*," is Puget Sound vernacular for lies, or nonsense.

"I heered the preach—the Book says confession is good for the soul."

A shudder shook her body. She covered her eyes from some terrible vision that tortured her.

"I just been thinking," said Dan Parr. "Nothing could be terribler than dying with contraband cargo on your soul. I just been thinking. Your dad hain't slipped his mortal hawse for so very long. It's must be a tolerable longish voyage from here, to—to Heaven, or 'tother place. And maybe now a soul don't wing out immediate when it's cast its moorings. If you was to confess for your dad, like he'd a done if we'd got here in time, and then a verse from the Book, and a prayer, why that prayer and verse winging aloft, it might get there first, and plumb fool the watch at the pearly gate, and when your dad hove in, chances is they'd let him sheer on in and berth without a squawk. What think? Maybe now your dad's soul is a hovering, a waiting, hoping you'll do for him what he'd 'a' done if we'd got here quicker."

The girl's slouched, dejected body straightened itself erect. New hope shone upon her face. What the boat preacher had said sounded reasonable. Her father's spirit might be hovering, waiting for her to confess for him, for the preacher to shrive and purify his guilty, fearful soul. She began to nod her head eagerly. "I will confess for him," she said. "Then you pray, read from the Book."

For just an instant she sat studying the features of the boat preacher. "Course," she said dubiously, "preachers never take advantage of anything they might learn from a dying party, or one talking for some one that died. I can't think a preacher would ever tell a confession, or use it any way."

"A preacher that got a confession, told it around, or used that confession private, why he'd be a bilge rat," answered Dan Parr promptly. "I'd never tell, if I was keel hauled, sanded down with a shark skin. Preachers never tell."

The girl looked reassured, drew a deep

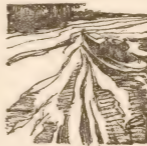
breath. "Years ago," she began, "my dad and a partner he had for years, pearl fished together in the Marquesas. Then they whaled, sealed, traded sea otter skins up north way. They made money, lots of it. But not fast enough to suit my dad. They had money, seal pelts and sea otter, pearls, and a big hunk of the whale spit they call ambergris.

"They was resting here in this very cabin, my dad and his partner. My dad's partner wanted to quit, settle down. My dad's partner had a little boy boarding out, and he wanted to fetch the boy to a home, and kind of look after him. My dad argued they would make one more trip to the Marquesas, clean up big, and then both settle down. My dad's partner said, no, he'd had enough.

"It's just then a old Chink called Let Gee comes squandering into the cabin. Let Gee is a China boss that furnishes hands to the salmon canneries. Let Gee tells dad and his partner he wants terrible bad to get ten China boys across the line from Canada into the United States, and will pay a thousand dollars each, ten thousand.

"Dad's partner says no, that Chink smuggling is illegal, dangerous. My dad shows his partner how it can be done easy and safe. My dad, being more stronger minded, talks his partner into this one last venture when they'll both quit and settle down.

"In a gas boat, my dad and his partner warps out at dead of night. They loaded the ten China boys into the gas boat. They've just made across the line by Patos Island light onto the United States side when out pops a revenue cutter, and blows



five short blasts for my dad to heave to.

"My dad just shoves the timer clean to the brass, and away goes the gas boat quivering like she'll start a seam. The cutter hain't so

slow. In no time the flame is pouring from her funnels, and she blows again for the gas boat to heave to.

"My dad he sees in a steady run, the cutter will overhaul 'em. He picks up a thirty-rifle. 'If I lam loose a couple, three shots by their ears, they won't be so ardent to overhaul us,' said my dad. He

slings up the rifle to his shoulder, fires, two, three shots.

"Sure enough, the cutter kind of wabbles off its course, and the gas boat gains. Then on comes the cutter again. My dad sees they'll be overhauled sure.

"My dad looks ahead and abeam through the night glasses. Matia shore hain't so far off. My dad, thinking fast, goes through the ditty bags them ten China boys had fetched along. Like he figured, them China boys has two, three opium smoking outfits, and maybe a dozen five tael tins of Pen Yen smoking opium. My dad takes the twelve tins of opium, stands 'em up on the transom seat.

"I got a terrible cunning idea,' my dad says to his partner. 'We can make that mud flat shore of Matia before ever they can overhaul us. Let's do it. One of us will wade ashore with them ten China boys, hide out in the woods. The other of us will stay on the boat like we just got stuck in the mud. The cutter will board the boat, find one of us, and twelve tins of hop. The cutter'll think this gas boat was just running a cargo of hop. Get the idea? The one of us that gets took will be fined three hundred dollars, and lay in jail six months. The other one of us will be safe ashore with the ten China boys, get the ten thousand dollars. Hain't that clever?"

"I got a little boy,' said my dad's partner. 'I don't want to go to jail.'

"I got a little girl,' my dad says. 'I hain't honing for jail neither. But I'd lay in a while for five thousand dollars. I'm game if you are. Let's cut a deck of cards, high man wins, to see who goes to jail, see who takes all the blame for this job. Are you game?"

"My dad riffles the deck. They cut. My dad has got a king, and my dad's partner has got a eight spot.

"It's agreed then,' my dad says. 'You stay aboard, face all the music alone for this night's job. When you come out, why we'll divide all we got, pearls, otter skins, the ten thousand dollars.'

"They shake hands solemn, my dad and his partner, the partner to stand the racket all alone for the job. The gas boat pokes its nose up on the mud flat. My dad piles overside with the ten Chinks, and in no time they're hid out in the woods."

"The partner, your dad's partner!" interjected Dan Parr excitedly.

The girl shook her head, looked commiseratingly at the still figure upon the bed.

"That's what's been dad's terrible secret all these years, what he wrote out onto a

piece of paper once, lost his courage, hid the paper. It's what he'd 'a' confessed to you, if only we'd got here sooner."

"What? What happened to the partner!"

"The cutter sent in a work boat, took dad's partner prisoner, packed him ashore with the tins of Pen Yen smoking. But it wasn't just smuggling they took him for. No. It was murder. One of my dad's rifle shots had killed the quartermaster at the wheel of the cutter. My dad's partner, because he'd shook hands solemn with my dad, agreed to face the music all alone for the night's job, he never whimpered. He went to the Federal prison, my dad's partner did, for life. He died three years ago."

"Didn't your dad even hunt up his partner's Kid, do the square by him?" demanded Dan fiercely.

In shame the girl hung her head, answered in a voice that was almost a whisper, "No, that was part of my dad's terrible sin. He just couldn't stand to divvy up the pearls, the sea otter skins. Oh, is they a chance, any chance for a man that done that, standing to the bar of judgment? Hell fire for ever. Oh, it's terrible. Pray for my dad. I tell you to pray for my dad."

She reached, clutched the beachcomber's thick arm. Angrily he flung off her hand. "You hain't told only part of a confession," he said accusingly. "Where's the plunder hid at, the ten thousand, the pearls, all the otter skins? You can't ring in no ranikaboo on Providence, or us preachers neither, just tossing us part of the log. You got to come clean, tell it all, or the powerfulest prayer would stick in the rafters like a cobweb. Come clean. Tell it all. Where's the plunder hid at?"

Catching the wolfish gleam in the beachcomber's eyes, the hungry licking of his thick lips, the girl drew suddenly away, as from a proffered blow. "I don't know where my dad's stuff is cached," she said coldly. "I wouldn't tell if I did. What's that got to do with the confession of the wrong he done? I aim to find that fortune, that much I say. I aim to find the little boy of my dad's partner that died gamer than a stinger fish there in prison without ever a word. I'm going to do the square by that little boy, a man by now, if it takes every pearl, the last otter skin. Are you going to read a verse, pray? Maybe it's too late now. Maybe is. Poor dad, he suffered. Are you going to?"

The predatory, savage gleam in the eyes

of Dan Parr faded. The sinister lines erased themselves from his hard face. Slowly he drew the pigskin covered Bible from the pocket of the black coat. Awkwardly he slid from the chair to his knees, opened, closed his mouth like the gills of a dying fish. He prayed:

"Oh, Lord, if so be this party that just slipped his hawse hain't berthed for good and all, give him consort into pleasant harbors safe and snug. Blot from his log of life all *cultus*, wicked deeds, and let his reckoning read clean and good in the pilot book on high. Amen."

Still upon his knees, the fake boat preacher pawed over the leaves of the Bible, opened them, darted down his thumb upon a verse. Stammeringly, slowly he read, "For there is nothing that shall not be manifested, neither is anything kept secret that it shall not come abroad."

Back into his gray-green eyes flooded that look of avarice, greed, lust of gain. "There," he triumphed, "even the Book says you should ought to come clean, tell where the plunder is cached. Did you hear how the Book said, 'Nothing can be hid, nothing kept secret?' You can't work no hocus pocus on Providence, or us preachers. You going to tell it all, make a confession that'll stick?"

"I tell you I don't know where it's hid," she answered, distrust, suspicion in her voice. "If it's your pay—"

The girl crossed the floor, opened the cupboard door. In a moment she returned, dumped a bill and a little silver into the wide, unclean hand of the fake boat preacher.

"It's little enough," he said, grimacing, "just twelve dollars for praying for a old scuttler like Hiyu Hilgardy into bliss. Maybe though it didn't take, that prayer and verse. You just can't work no hold-out on Providence, or us preachers. That's up to you, being bereaved. I might as well go."

Dan Parr walked aimlessly about the floor for a turn or two, as if to give the girl one last chance to come clean. Oblivious to his continued presence apparently, she sat staring at the body upon the bed. Dan Parr opened the door reluctantly, closed it after him. He walked a few steps toward the boat landing, paused. The muffled sound of tearing sobs came to his ears. With cat foot tread he returned to the cabin, peered in at the window. Upon her knees, her body flung across the figure of old Hiyu Hilgardy, the girl was sending upward such a pitiful,

earnest little prayer as surely must have mounted straight to the throne on high.

For a moment Dan Parr looked, listened. He flung his long arms skyward, muttered, "Listen to her, Lord, listen to her. She's fitten to hear. I hain't."

He turned away, went slowly down the trail and out upon the wharf. He cast off the moorings of the gas boat, let it drift slowly away while he primed the cylinders of the engine. A sharp creaking sound arrested his attention. He thrust his head from a port. The girl was standing upon the dock, peering after the drifting boat. She had come to the dock obviously to make sure that the boat preacher had left, that she was all alone upon the island with her treasure and her dead.

The fake minister uttered an ugly oath, gave the starting crank a savage yank. When the boat got under way, the girl turned, made back toward the cabin.

Dan Parr chuckled. He changed the course of the boat sending it nearly parallel to the shore. A distance down the beach he headed the craft for open water,



leaped to the deck, sprang from the stern rail, swam swiftly to shore.

"I'll fool her yet," he muttered. "She'll hear the boat keep on going, think I'm aboard."

Cautiously, by a roundabout way, he returned to the cabin, came to a stop in a clump of brush. The rear door opened. The girl stood upon the step for a moment, her face lifted to the stars. She descended the steps, entered a faint trail that led away from the rear of the house across the island. Noiselessly as a stalking cougar Dan Parr followed.

With a pace that quickened almost to a run, the girl continued across the island, came to a stop only when she stood upon the brink of a rocky bank, at the feet of which the tide swirled and fretted.

The beachcomber crouched in a tangled fern bed, watched. The girl was leaning forward, peering down into the depths. Dan heard the swish of fabric. Suddenly the girl had whisked off her simple gown, had cast it aside. She poised her body

upon the rock crest, leaned out into space, dived.

In a bound, Parr was at the brink of rock. Below him twisted and spun the black waters, with long, sinuous, snaky length of the kelp sea weed undulating in the current. No sign of the girl.

A cave, a hidden, submarine cave! The treasure cave of old Hiyu Hilgardy! The girl had dived into the cave, to count, finger over the plunder, gloat and exult.

Primordial, murderous rage possessed the beachcomber. A twelve dollar prayer, to hope to get a thieving beach rat like old Hiyu Hilgardy into Heaven for twelve dollars. Pearls, sea otter skins, seal pelts, money, money, and a hunk of ambergris! Treasure in that cave, treasure. Dan Parr meant to be weak no more. He would have his if he had to—

Again his mouth grew dry, and his heart thudded. The girl had been below a long time. Unless there was a terranean opening to that cave the air would be foul, vitiated. Hiyu Hilgardy, cunning, would never be the fool to cache his plunder in a cave the opening to which showed at any tide stage. The girl had been down a long time.

Seconds passed that seemed minutes. She might have miscalculated, struck her head in diving. Kelp is a swimmer's deadliest foe. She might have got tangled in the kelp. If something had happened, if she never came alive out of that cave—Treasure, seal pelts and pearls, and money.

If something had happened—Retribution! For holding out on Providence, and a preacher. In the mad swirl that was taking place within his brain, the beachcomber, for an instant, imagined himself part and parcel of a divine wrath come to visit itself upon this girl.

He leaned, stared down into the cold, forbidding, dark depths. What a death. It was terrible, the girl so young, filled with life. What pleasant ways might lie ahead for a girl so young, with money, gold, the treasure of a king.

That water was cold, and deep, and hungry. The undulating kelp stems looked like coiling serpents. Aye, courage the highest it took to dive into that threatening depth. Cold, cold and deep and black.

Dan Parr straightened erect, emitted a maniacal laugh. What would Joe Wilkins, the real boat preacher have done in such a deadly crisis? He had Joe Wilkins' coat upon his back. In the pocket was the pig skin covered Bible of Joe Wil-

kins. Why he was wearing also Joe Wilkins' name, and his fame, exercising the sacerdotal functions that were Joe Wilkins'. In the name of Joe Wilkins he had read from the book, knelt in blasphemous prayer. What a scurvy trick to play a man in whose blankets he had nestled, whose food he had eaten, who had trusted him, who had said that underneath his rind of ugliness he, Dan Parr, was still a man. Later, it might be said that Joe Wilkins, poltroon, coward, hypocrite, had let a girl drown, miserably perish because he was shy the sand to fetch her out.

Whimpering, blubbing like a whipped school boy, Dan Parr began running back and forth along the rack. He tore off the long skirted, ministerial coat, hurled it into the brush. He sprang to the brim of rock, leaned, dived.

Down, down he went. He turned like a fish, swam against the face of the rock bank, felt with his hands. One hand slid off the rock, thrust itself into space. Into the black, terrible hole he vermiculated his long body, arose to the surface, arms held aloft.

Around the narrow brim of the Stygian rock bowl he swam, paddling with one hand, fending, feeling with the other. His reaching fingers clutched upon soft, human flesh. He wrapped the long, spar like arm about the slim body. His lungs seemed on fire. A deep breath of the mouldy, vile air he drew, sank with his burden, swam like an otter through the narrow tunnel to the open water. He came up fanning the water prodigiously. Kelp stems wound snaky coils about him, but he threshed free like a bull walrus tearing a fish net. In a stroke he made the bank, seized a jutting bit of rock, drew himself and his limp burden up the bank.

With the girl in his arms he ran down the trail, kicked in the cabin door. Upon the pallet, beside her dead he laid her. He found the match box upon the wall, struck a light.

A great gash showed upon her forehead. She was groaning weakly, tossing her arms. For the first he noted that one hand held a clam shell in a death clutch.

Jackknifing her body, he freed the lungs of the trifling bit of water that she had breathed in. She opened her eyes, stared uncomprehendingly at Parr, closed them again in a sort of torpor.

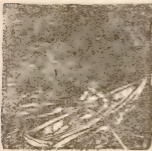
Gently the beachcomber pried the clam shell from her fingers. This was no ordinary clam shell of the beach or rock ledge. It was such a common clam all right, but

the edge of the bivalve had sometime been sealed by the application of a strip of the waterproof adhesive tape in use about gas engines. But the shell had been cracked. In her frantic effort to recover the clam shell from some rock ledge within the cave, she had struck it, cracked the shell. As he lifted it, the salt water ran from it.

In a moment he had the shell opened with a blade of his knife. Within the shell rested a bit of paper, the writing already nearly blurred into illegibility. A few moments longer in the water, no human eye would have been ever able to read the words that Dan Parr laboriously spelled out:

All the money, skins, everything is hid under the big madronna trees at the far west end of this island. Half of all belongs to the son of my old partner if he can be found. My partner's name was Dan Parr, his boy's name the same. Hiyu Hilgardy.

Dan dried the paper over the flame of



the lamp. The girl, still dazed, lay muttering. But she would soon be all right; of that the beach-comber was convinced. He laid the paper, and the shattered clam

shell beside her, opened the door, sped to the beach.

Helping himself to a battered dory, he rowed away. A mile across the channel, upon a mud flat of the adjoining island, he found the gospel ship with her nose buried in the sands. He tapped in the emergency tank of gas, started the engine, bore away toward the parsonage of Joe Wilkins.

IN THE early morning, a canoe put in upon the parsonage beach. A girl walked slowly to the cabin. A very giant of a man, with a boy's grin, stood in the doorway.

"I'm looking for the boat preacher," said the girl.

"I am the boat preacher. What can I do for you?"

The girl was staring hard. "You—I thought—you honest the boat preacher?"

"Yes. I've been away. I came from Seattle on the night boat."

A moment longer the girl stood regarding the Reverend Joe Wilkins. "My dad died yesterday. Some neighbors is coming. We aim to bury him. Would you come? And they is another thing. Will you help me find a party named Dan Parr, somewhere on this coast?"

"I will perform the last rites for your father, surely. As to Dan Parr, perhaps we may find him, perhaps not. Dan Parr has been staying with me. When I got home, I found my black coat gone, and my pig skin covered Bible, and twelve dollars on the table. He's gone. He took his blankets, some *muckamuck*, sailed away some time before six this morning in his old dory. He's gone."

WHAT MAKES FUR SCARCE

THE fur catch at Fort Yukon this year is exceptionally poor. Though the surrounding district, the upper Chandalar, the Black and the Porcupine rivers and the McKenzie delta is the greatest muskrat country in the world, the rats are dying by the thousands from a disease similar to that which periodically reduces the millions of rabbits. Last year's catch was only fifty per cent. of the previous year's; and this year's sixty per cent. of last year's.

The disease forms an abscess on the front shoulders. When this appears the rat holes in and starves to death. After last Spring's breakup trappers found great numbers of rats which had apparently been dead in their houses for several months.

Lynx reported leaving the Arctic in great numbers are beginning to show up in the upper Black River, but have not yet reached Fort Yukon.

The alarming increase of wolves is a problem faced by the natives of the district who rely on trapping as a means of existence. The wolves preying on fur bearers are also making inroads on the caribou. Some of the packs number as many as one hundred animals and in self defense the natives have turned to wolf trapping. The territory pays a bounty of \$15.00 and an average pelt is worth \$25.00. The wolves made it so interesting for Eliza John, an educated native, that he abandoned other work and declared war, and latest reports credited him with 35 pelts.—F. R. P.



JUDGE COLT

A Fighting Epic of Lost Park

By WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

Author of "The Desert's Price," "The Last Shot," etc.

CONCLUSION

THIS IS THE FINAL ACT IN THE STRUGGLE OF THE MEN OF THE HIGH RANGES OF THE CATTLE COUNTRY AGAINST THE LOST PARK GANG. THIS STRUGGLE WAS TO TURN JIM TURNER, THE YOUNG UNTRIED BOY, INTO A MAN AND FIT HIM AGAINST A REPUTED BADMAN SUCH AS TOM TRUESDALE; WAS TO BRING THE RANGERS INTO THE GAME; WAS TO PROVE WHETHER HUGHES HENRY OF LOST PARK WAS A LOYAL MAN OR NOT; AND WAS TO WRITE ANOTHER CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF THE GREAT RANGES IN THE DAYS WHEN JUDGE COLT RULED

CHAPTER XXXI IN THE DARK

THERE was no longer need to ask why Tom Truesdale wanted to marry Sue Tedrow. The only question was as to the best way to circumvent him.

"Miss Pattie said to bring you both back with us," Jim said. "I reckon that would be best. It wouldn't hardly be safe for you to stay here. He might get another hurry-up notion an' push the marriage ahead."

Neither father nor daughter made much protest. They were content to leave the burden of decision to the two, who would also have the burden of defence. They hurriedly gathered a few clothes, flung them into an old telescope grip, and mounted two horses which the young man had roped and saddled.

Half an hour later they reached the Henry ranch. Pattie came down from the porch to meet them.

"I'm so glad you came. I thought you

might have decided to stay at home, and I think that would have been foolish. Come right in."

Hughes Henry presently came into the living room to welcome his guests. There he and Pattie learned the news that Sue and Jim were brother and sister.

"It'll come right soon to a showdown," Hughes Henry said. "Soon as Tom knows you're gone an' find out where you're at he'll come bustin' in. He'll sure be on the prod too, if I know him. He's some impatient, Tom is. I've seen him smash through a door rather than wait to have it unlocked."

"Does Truesdale come up to your place every evening, Mr. Tedrow?" the ranger officer asked.

"Pretty near every evening when he's in the park."

Lawrence turned to Jim. "What say we drift up that way?"

The old nester showed unease. "You're not intending to have any trouble with him," he said a little timidly.

"Not any, if we can help it. No, I

thought if we were there and he didn't know it, we might stumble on some evidence."

"I'd be very careful."

"I'll go along," Hughes Henry said.

"No, I'd rather you wouldn't," Lawrence told him. "We're on this job, Jim and I. We're men hunters. But you're not in it. Besides two men can stay hidden better than three."

"Oh, if you don't want me," Henry replied, a little huffed.

"It's not that," the officer answered with a friendly smile. "But we don't want to get you into trouble. You know these men. They are your neighbors. They are no friends of ours, and it's up to us to handle this thing without having you come into the open on our side. We are not ready to arrest Truesdale and his crowd yet. But he may force my hand, and if so it's at least an even bet that he wins out. So you'd better keep yourself in the clear far as you can."

"Sounds like good medicine to me, Mr. Henry," Jim agreed.

"Maybeso. Well, have it yore own way, young fellows. If you take my advice you'll move very slow before mixin' it with Tom an' very fast afterward."

The two young men rode back to the Tedrow place, and as before they tied their horses several hundred yards from the house.

The place was dark. There was no sign of life in or about the house. But as they crept up to the porch from the rear they heard the sound of horses moving along the trail. Almost at the same moment they could make them out emerging from the grove.

The two young men scuttled for shelter. They had no time to agree on a place of hiding. It was each one for himself, and the run for cover took them in different directions. Lawrence made for the stable by the corral. Jim dropped down behind a pile of corded wood not far from one side of the house. The Bar X Y rider regretted almost instantly this choice of a screen, but it was too late now to change his mind. He drew from its holster his revolver and crouched low.

The approaching riders were two in number, he judged. Their voices became more distinct. He made out words

"No lights," one growled. "Can't have gone to bed, can they?"

Jim recognized, with a quickening of the pulse, both this voice and the answering one.

"Bed, no! I told 'em I'd likely be along."

The second speaker was Black Tom Truesdale, the first was Sam Marshall.

"Then where are they?"

Truesdale's voice lifted to a snarling oath. "If they're playin' any monkey tricks with me—"

Jim could hear them swing from their horses.

"Lo, Tedrow!" Then, with the flare of anger, Truesdale's summons carried suddenly the crack of a whip. "Come outa there, both of you, or by God—"

There was no answer. Truesdale took the porch steps in two leaps and tore open the door. He strode into the house, shouting Sue Tedrow's name. Presently he came out again. The silence within may, perhaps, have daunted him a little; at least bewildered him.

"They've gone," he said, stupidly.

His companion was pleased at the check Truesdale had received, but he dared not show it. The discomfiture of someone else always rejoiced his soul.

"Gone where?" he asked.

"How do I know?"

"Do you reckon they've heard anything?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, I dunno. About the Flyer an'—what happened after."

Truesdale put it into hard and brutal words. "You mean about you murdering old By Gar."

"Psh!" warned Marshall.

"What if they have? What could they hear that everybody won't know soon?"

"Well, maybe—oh, I dunno!" Marshall's voice dropped. "He was a kinda friend of theirs, the ol' man was."

"He was a kinda friend of everybody, you treacherous wolf."

"No sense talkin' thataway, Tom. I had to do it to cover our trail," the other pleaded in a whine.

"Yore own trail, you mean. You're not worried none about ours."

"Tell you I had to do it, Tom, jest like you had to bump off that fool express messenger."

"Not the same," Truesdale denied harshly. "He reached for a gun an' I let him have it. The fool asked for it. But ol' By Gar! Hell, you're too much of a yellow coyote for me. He never did you or me any harm. More'n once he did both of us a good turn."

"Goddamnmighty, Tom, don't you get the point? I had to do it. He come out when

the dog barked an' found me in the corral ropin' a horse. I walked back to the house with him explainin' how I didn't want to rouse him from sleep an' was borrowin' the loan of a bronc. All the time I was figurin' that there wasn't any other way out. When the news of the holdup came he'd know for sure who did it. No other way, I tell you."

Truesdale heard him without deigning a word of reply. The fellow's protests were only words.

"Where have the Tedrows gone?" Black Tom demanded, scowling.

"To Henry's maybe. Keep yore shirt on. They'll be back, I reckon."

This was probably true. They might have gone on a neighborly call. But even this irritated Tom, in view of the fact that they might reasonably have expected him to ride up to the place.

"Wait here!" he ordered.

He strode down to the corral. Two horses, a sorrel and a gray, were missing from the little bunch at the watering trough below the windmill. He shouted the information back to Marshall, then moved toward the stable to confirm his suspicion by checking up on the saddles.

Behind the door of the stable a man waited for him, revolver in hand, nerves and muscles tensed for instant action.

Then a startled voice lifted itself into the night air from the direction of the house, and flung out a frightened oath. Black Tom knew that "Goddlemighty!" came from Marshall's throat. Dragging a revolver from its scabbard, he had just turned to run back along the path from the stable to the house, when he heard the sound of a shot from the same direction.

Then a curt command near at hand halted him. "Hands up!"

He swung round. In the doorway of the stable stood the ranger lieutenant. His gun covered the outlaw.



I n s t a n t l y Truesdale's weapon flamed. Almost simultaneously Lawrence flung back his answer. Firing as he moved, the bandit padded to-

ward the stable to lessen the distance between him and his foe.

The ranger lurched against the door post, then steadied himself to continue firing. It was impossible to count the shots that passed between the men, so fast they came. Jack Lawrence was hit. He felt himself sliding to the ground, knew that he was beginning to swim into darkness. What followed he did not know.

He did not hear the cry for help that came from Marshall. He did not see Black Tom turn and make for the house in a lumbering run.

CHAPTER XXXII

AT CLOSE QUARTERS

JIM TURNER lay crouched behind the pile of corded wood and heard the confirmation of his suspicions as to the murder of old Joe Tolman from the lips of the guilty man. There rose in him a surge of horror, a renewal of hatred against the villain so strong and overpowering that after Truesdale had left for the corral he could scarcely refrain from rising and ordering the murderer to reach for his weapon and fight it out.

But this was not his private feud. He was here under orders. Lawrence and Lutz wanted to bring home definitely to these men the crimes of robbery and murder. He had to wait and let events take their course.

Jim rose to peer over the piled cordwood in order to see what Marshall was doing. He moved a little to one side, since his view was obstructed. As he did so his foot rested on a round length of sawed wood. It turned beneath his weight. He stumbled, and his body plunged against the piled barricade.

The sound startled Marshall. "Anyone there?" he demanded.

Jim made no answer.

The outlaw had no doubt the sound had been caused by a mountain rat or some other denizen of the wilds. Had he guessed the truth he would never have moved forward to investigate.

There was no chance for Jim to slip away. A crisis was precipitating itself upon him. He had no time to decide whether he would kill this man or arrest him. The pressure of events would decide that. It did not occur to him to destroy his enemy safely from ambush, as Marshall would have done had their situations been reversed.

Face to face they met at the end of the wood pile.

"Put 'em up!" the Bar X Y rider ordered.

Marshall's jaw dropped. He was taken completely by surprise. The amazed "Goddemighty!" that broke from his throat was an index of the helpless dismay, of the fearfilled realization that he had walked into a trap. The only flash of defensive thought that came to him was that he must gain time.

The dim light made distances deceptive. As the killer flung his hands out and up in sign of surrender one of them struck the barrel of Jim's revolver and knocked the muzzle of the gun skyward, at the same time flinging a bullet into the air. Marshall grappled with his enemy instantly. This had not been in his plan. It had been a bit of unexpected luck.

They struggled, swaying back and forth as each tried to get his weapon into action. Jim was the lighter of the two, the stringier of build. He lacked the bull strength of the outlaw, for his bones and muscles had not yet developed to the full. He had one great advantage, that of a stout fighting heart. Instinctively he knew that the best way to evade the bear hug of the other, the best way to free himself from the fingers that encircled his right wrist like a steel band, was to give his foe no time to get set.

He writhed away like a tiger, then plunged back fiercely at the scarfaced man, butting at him with head and knee again and again, on top of him every moment, fighting with every ounce of force in him.

Marshall lifted a cry for help, giving ground before this savage assault. His foot caught on a log and he went down, dragging Jim with him. Trying to save himself from the fall, the outlaw's fingers freed the wrist of his foe.

As they struck the ground Jim was on top. His knees clamped themselves to the outlaw's thick waist. One hand found the fellow's hairy throat. He raised himself by it to an upright position and struck hard with the barrel of his revolver once—twice—a third time. The muscles of the man beneath him grew slack. The arms dropped limply. For the time at least he was out.

Jim became aware of the slap of running feet. While struggling with Marshall he had heard a rapid drum-fire of guns and had guessed that his friend and Black Tom had clashed. One of them was heading his way now. Which?

Swiftly, quicker than one could tell it,

his hands found first one of Marshall's guns and then the other. He flung them into the darkness and rose hurriedly, gripping his own weapon, to face whatever was impending.

As he waited at the back of the woodpile, near one end of it, the fingers of his left hand closed on a stick of wood. It was a length of heavy piñon resinous with pitch.

The heavy figure lumbering toward him was not that of the ranger. He knew that before he recognized the dark savage face of the killer.

Later, when he came to think it over, Jim could not understand the unconscious psychology of his action. It seemed to be without volition that his left arm lifted and hurled itself forward. The sawed piece of piñon shot through the air straight at Black Tom and caught him on the chin.

The blow did not stop the big man's rush. Jim fired wildly, and almost at the same instant Truesdale was on him. For a moment Jim did not realize the situation. He knew the man's arms were over his shoulders and that his bulk was smothering him. He expected a shift of position, one under which his ribs would crunch from the force of the killer's tremendous muscles. It took him a few seconds to realize that Truesdale was clinging to him helplessly, that the arms were limp and the legs sagging. The outlaw was not unconscious. He was what is known in the ring as groggy. Give him time—a few seconds, a half a minute perhaps—and the strength would flow back into the great forceful body.

Jim knew that he must snatch victory now, before Truesdale recovered, or he was lost. He tried to escape the man's clinging arms, the weight of his body, even as the killer tried to hang closely to him. The range rider told himself he must not lose his head, must not get excited, and in the same split second of time his clenched fist moved up hard as he could drive it beneath Truesdale's chin—and again a second time.

The big man lurched forward, arms hanging, the whole frame lax.

Jim could have killed him as he stood there. Instead, measuring the distance, he drove his left, with all the packed strength of his weight behind it, straight to the point of the exposed chin.

The man went down like a pole-axed bullock.

CHAPTER XXXIII

JIM PLAYS A LONE HAND

THE young range rider lost no time. He had had luck, unbelievable luck, he told himself. It did not occur to him that he had largely made his own luck by the courage and the swiftness of decision with which he had faced these redoubtable ruffians.

He ran to the horses of the two outlaws and secured the ropes attached to the saddles. With these he securely tied the two men, both hands and feet. Marshall was recovering consciousness and entered a protest before Jim had



finished.

"You got no right to tie me up," he complained. "I'll not stand for it. What's eatin' you anyhow, fellow?"

His captor tied the last knot, then looked into the man's face.

"I'd ought to have killed you," he said quietly. "I'll do it yet, if they don't hang you."

Marshall gasped. His heart seemed to turn over with fear. The struggle had come upon him so quickly that he had not until now recognized his opponent. He told himself that this Turner would kill him as soon as he had a good chance. He would never give him up to the law, not unless he was a born fool.

As soon as he knew that his prisoners were secure Jim ran down to the corral. What he found at the door of the stable did not surprise him—the body of his friend lying propped against the wall. He stooped and felt the ranger's heart, but he could not tell whether it was beating or not. Probably he was dead. There seemed to be no life in the limp body lying huddled in that shadowy corner.

He rose, deciding swiftly what was best to do. His prisoners must be taken to a place where they could be held safely and help must be brought to Lawrence. The thing to do was to get as soon as possible to the Henry ranch with his prisoners. Afterward someone could ride out and get Sheriff Lutz at his camp.

He returned to his prisoners. Marshall began to beg and to threaten.

"Let's call it quits, fellow," he whined. "No use you an' me scrappin' this-away all

the time. I'll say I done you dirt, if tha's what you want. But you can't get away with this kind of business. You'll get gunned sure."

"Lemme worry about that," advised Jim, untying the man's feet and knotting the end of the rope to the horn of the saddle.

"But you ain't got ary right——"

"You'll find I've got right enough. We're gonna take you down to be hanged by the neck for the murder of an old man who never harmed anybody."

"I never did," the man screamed. "I wasn't nowheres near there when old By Gar was killed. I swear on a stack of Bibles——"

"No need lyin'. I heard Black Tom accuse you of it an' you didn't even deny it. Point of fact you admitted it."

"Goddlemighty, you're fram'in' me," the murderer yelped. "An' me an innocent man. Jest because you got a grudge at me. Honest to God, I was only a-foolin' that time when I kinda played I was mad at you on the ledge. Can't you take a josh?"

"Don't move from where you're standin'," the Bar X Y man advised. "Try to climb on that horse an' I'll pump you full of lead."

About this time Truesdale awoke to consciousness of a most unsatisfactory world. As soon as he realized that he was bound and helpless he broke into furious threats and curses. He would kill Turner, the smart aleck, sure as he was a foot high. If he thought he could play monkey tricks with Tom Truesdale he had another guess coming. He stormed on, struggling to free his hands, interrupting himself to fling wild and appalling promises of vengeance, couched in bloodcurdling terms, at the young fellow who had committed the lese-majeste of manhandling him.

"No use beefin'," Jim told him. "You're going with me down to the Henry ranch, an' you're going as my prisoner. No two ways about that, get on the prod all you like."

Truesdale refused flatly to go.

His captor brought up a horse, then did some expert rope work, at the conclusion of which the rope that bound his hands was attached by a slip knot to the bad man's throat and was tied also to the horn of the saddle.

"Please yourself, Mr. Truesdale," Jim said evenly. "You can walk or you can be dragged. All one to me. Now if you're both ready, let's go."

The range rider swung to the saddle of Truesdale's horse, to which both of the men were tied. He stopped to address a word to Marshall before they started.

"Truesdale can do as he pleases. He can trail along an' eat my dust, or he can lie down an' be dragged. Any way that suits his fancy. But not you, Marshall. You'll trot right along like a good li'l boy. If you hang back I'll gun you pronto. Get me?"

Marshall understood. He was in a different relationship to this young fellow than Truesdale, and he knew that he had to take orders tamely. As for Truesdale, he was furious but impotent. A man can lie down and let himself be dragged by the waist if he is dour enough, but even the most obstinate cannot lie down and let himself be dragged by the neck. There is a limit to the endurance of human nature.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"Nothing But A Criminal At The End Of His Rope"

IT IS safe to say that the next hour was the most humiliating ever endured by Tom Truesdale. He had been used to trampling on the feelings of other men. His vanity had demanded that they sing small before him, and often he had shamed them before their fellows merely because he was by nature a callous bully.

Now he followed in the dust of another man's horse, hands tied behind him, a rope around his neck. Furious gusts of rage swept him. His anger was the more bitter because his captor was a youth, one with no reputation as a bad man. Nothing less than the young fellow's blood would satisfy him when his day of vengeance came.

It was gall for him to trudge up the path to the Henry house and face the battery of eyes turned upon him when those inside trooped out in answer to Jim Turner's "Hello the house!" The three Henrys were there and the two Tedrows.

All five of them were astonished beyond expression. It was hard to believe that Sam Marshall, a hardy ruffian, and Black Tom Truesdale, the terror of the territory, had been dragged in at the end of ropes by this young fellow as cowboys do coyotes. Yet here they were, both battered and bleeding, and their captor had not a scratch on his smooth face.

Truesdale broke into a storm of threats and explanations. Sudden death was the

least he promised the condemned fool who had tied him up while he was senseless. In the midst of his tirade a man rode up to the house out of the surrounding darkness. He was a nester in the park, a man named Marbury, known as a garrulous gossip. His reputation was neither good nor bad.

Hughes Henry turned to Jim. "Onload yore story, boy. Where's Lawrence? Howcome you to take Truesdale and Marshall?"

"I had luck," Jim said simply. "Afraid Lawrence is dead. Truesdale shot him."

"An' I'll get you too, fellow. You're all swelled up like a poisoned pup because you tied me up when I was knocked cold. You cut this rope right away, or—" Again the bad man poured out venomous threats.

Pattie looked at Jim, her brown gold-flecked eyes shining. She was a hillgirl, brought up in that outdoors school where courage is esteemed the first virtue. Black

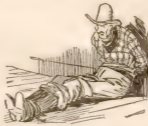
Tom was the most dangerous man in Arizona. He was strong, game, aggressive, and a dead shot. Add that he was ruthless, and one gets a combination almost irresistible. But this boy had beaten him somehow. A wave of color surged into her smooth tanned cheeks. It was born of the racing excitement of exultation. They had come to issue, her friend and Black Tom, and Jim had had the best of the battle. She had seen Truesdale bully the young fellow, but now the tables had been turned. She was shocked at the news about Lawrence, but even this could not obscure her pride in Jim.

"I'm not cuttin' ropes tonight," Jim said. "I admit I got the breaks. Leave it lay that you're outa luck."

"All the breaks. I'll say so," Marshall whined. "Why this fellow ain't one two three with Tom."

Truesdale appealed angrily to the other men present. "Cut this rope, some of you, an' I'll show this guy. Gimme a gun, Hughes, an' I'll clean up right damned now."

"Not just now, Mr. Truesdale," his captor returned quietly. "I reckon you'll have to postpone that pleasure. You're my prisoner, arrested for train robbery and murder." His eyes met those of the killer without excitement or fear. "You're



nothin' to me but a criminal at the end of his rope. The law wanted you. It reached out an' got you, like it would a Mexican sheepherder."

"You're talkin' to Tom Truesdale, you li'l squirt," the bad man snarled, his face twitching with rage.

"I'm talkin' to a thief an' a murderer I'm takin' to jail. An' that'll be enough from you unless you want to be gagged."

The killer turned to Henry. "Turn me loose, Hughes. We been good friends. It's all I ask of you."

Hughes shook his head. "No, Tom. You an' I had that out long ago. I told you when you started to follow crooked trails where they would lead. You were hell bent to go yore own way. I can't help you now. I don't know what they've got on you. It's up to you to prove innocence if you can."

The eyes of the bad man grew bleaker. "So you're throwin' me down, Hughes. You figure it's time to throw in with these spies."

"I'm not throwin' you down, Tom," retorted Hughes angrily. "You've thrown down yourself. But I'll say this, by God. If you stood for killin' Uncle Joe, for shootin' him in the back, hangin' is none too good for you."

"You're a liar if you say I killed him," Truesdale flung out.

"I don't say it. You're game, Tom, whatever else you are. I don't reckon you'd shoot a defenceless old man in the back. But you train with one that would—and did. You shield him an' back his play. An' there's the man right by yore side."

Henry's finger pointed straight at Marshall who began at once to protest his innocence.

"I heard him admit it," Jim cut in. "But let that go right now. We've got work ahead an' lots of it tonight. Where can I lock up these men?"

"You can keep 'em right here in the house."

Truesdale appealed to Marbury. "Jack, gun this damn fool spy for me, an' I'll sure make it right with you."

Marbury was a man with no force in him. He slid a look which took in Hughes Henry, the young officer, and passed on to Truesdale. It apologized to all of them.

"Why Tom, I'd sure like to oblige you anyway I could. I reckon you'll be free right soon. If there's anything I can do—"

Jim cut into his evasions by taking his

prisoners into the house and leaving them in the big room downstairs. He put Bob Henry in charge of them, and he took pains to see that the boy was well armed.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON GUARD

IT IS amazing what success will do for a man. Two hours ago Jim had been a subordinate, an untried boy chosen by Lawrence to assist him because of the fortuitous circumstance that he knew the location of Lost Park. Now he had emerged from his baptism of fire startlingly victorious. His chief had been struck down. Alone he had carried through. The adventure had transformed him. He felt stirring in himself qualities of leadership not hitherto suspected.

The most important immediate business was to get help to Lawrence if he was still alive and to send a messenger to Sheriff Lutz to guide him into the park. For himself, he did not intend to leave his prisoners, though his heart ached to get back to the ranger.

Briefly he consulted with Hughes Henry.

"My job is right here," he concluded. "We're sure short of hands till Lutz comes. Do you reckon Bob could find his camp?"

"I expect so. He knows this country mighty well."

"Then I guess I'll send him. Can you take yore buckboard and get Lawrence? I don't know whether he's still livin', but he'll be at the stable door near the corral. Better take this man Marbury with you."

"That's a right good idea. If I don't, he'll have the story all over the park in a couple hours. An' that would be invitin' trouble. There are probably eight or ten men here who would be willin' to try to rescue Truesdale. We'd better keep it under cover that he's been captured, anyhow until after Lutz gets to the ranch. It'll be up to him then."

Jim returned to the big room and described to Bob as well as he could the location of the sheriff's camp. The boy rode away into the night and presently the buckboard followed him, diverging from his trail a hundred yards from the house to turn to the left.

The Bar X Y rider was none too easy in mind. He was alone in the house with two desperate men except for an old man and two girls. The feeling persisted that the capture of these bandits had been too

easy. Events might soon begin to occur that would restore the balance. They were in the country of the outlaws. As soon as word reached the associates of Truesdale and Marshall that they had been taken some attempt at rescue would be made. Not all of those engaged in this would be habitual criminals, not all of them "bad men," as the phrase is used in the West; they would be, some of them, merely neighbors under an obligation to Black Tom, men more or less at outs with the law and willing to lend a hand to defeat its incursion to Lost Park.

Black Tom's rage had died down to stullen anger. He sat glowering at the floor in silence, rejecting Marshall's overtures at conversation.

There came a tap on the door of the room and the sound of Jim's name. The young man knew that vibrant voice instantly and unbolted the door.

"I've brought some sheets to hang over the windows," Pattie explained. "Someone might creep up and shoot you from outside."

The heart of the Bar X Y man lifted. She was so sweet and clean a thing, this brown slim girl, and he knew with deep joy that she was his friend.

He got her a chair to stand on, and while she tacked the sheets in place he watched her. Every rhythmic motion of her limbs and body delighted him, spoke of the freedom that had come to her from years of living in the rare sunshine of the high hills.

When she stepped down from the chair she stopped to whisper to him. "I'm so proud of you, Jim. I don't know how you ever did it. Nobody else could have done it. But I do wish the sheriff would come. I'm still scared, Jim."

She glanced apprehensively at the two bound men. Black Tom was still staring sullenly at the floor, but her eyes met the malignant scowl of Marshall and the hatred in his face gave her a shock. She knew that if ever she or Jim came into the man's power he would be ruthless.

"Don't you," he advised. "He can't hurt you."

Jim spoke more confidently than he felt. Even if Lutz put these men under lock and key it would not end their power for evil. There would be a trial, appeals, perhaps a hung jury or a jail break. It was more than an even chance that one or both of them would some day return to the park.

"I know," she admitted reluctantly, as though she were haunted by a fear that

he could and would. "Still, you'll be awf'ly careful, won't you?"

"I'll not throw down on myself," he promised. "If I did he'd gun me in a



minute. So would Truesdale for that matter. No, ma'am, I've got a right healthy respect for both of these guys. They wouldn't be here now if I hadn't had a big slice of

luck."

Her soft eyes showered gifts on him, largess of admiration and love. "I know better. Look at them, all bruised and battered. You beat them both fair and square, and oh Jim, there isn't another man in Arizona could have done it."

While her praise embarrassed it tremendously thrilled him. She was so quick with life, so eager, so generous. He loved the brown face that responded to emotion so instantly and became an expression of what she felt. Moreover, the boyish vanity in him was warmed by her appreciation. He knew he had won his spurs. To every remote ranch within a hundred miles the news would drift that he had captured singlehanded these two notorious desperadoes wanted by the law. The very notoriety of the Truesdale tradition, his farflung repute as a killer, would insure the fame of the youth who had rounded them up.

"Luck," he insisted. "Nothin' but luck. I'll tell you about it some time. I saw them comin', and they didn't know where I was at. I had a chance to kill 'em both easy. If I'd known then about Jack being dead maybe——"

"You'll never be safe as long as they are alive——never."

They were standing near the window, talking in whispers.

"Lemme tell you something, Pat," he said, and there was a gleam in his eyes she had never seen before. "It's like I told him outside. These fellows are just criminals. Truesdale, too. They've come close to the end of their ropes, both of 'em. I usta be mightily scared of Black Tom. But not now. I'll tell you why, girl. A good man has a shade on a bad man every time. He has got back of him something the other fellow hasn't got. He don't have to be scared for fear his friends are be-

trayin' him. An' he don't have to lie awake nights worryin' about whether the law is ready to pounce on him."

"Just the same Tom shot Mr. Lawrence."

"An' when he did he shot a game man an' a first class officer. I'll just say this. Sometimes the good man goes down, but in the long run the law gets the fellow who is a crook. Bob Ford killed Jesse James. Pat Garrett got Billie the Kid. The time was ripe for someone to get Black Tom, an' I reckon it was written in the book that I should get him. Tha's the way I look at it."

She shook her head, not at all reassured. Truesdale had been too present in her life, his reputation had been too much a legend, for her to accept such a view. It was all very well to say that a good man had a shade on a bad man, but she felt that the truth was quite the reverse. Jim had had the drop on both these men and he had not killed them. In his place they would have shot him down like a wolf because they were not handicapped by moral scruples. The killer had the edge on a conscientious officer every time.

He bolted the door behind her and returned to his watch. Time wore itself away so slowly that each five minutes seemed to him an hour. More than once he rose nervously and examined the bolt of the door. He made sure that the sheets completely covered the window panes. More than once he inspected the ropes that bound his prisoners, making sure that the knots had not worked loose. Yet he was not really afraid of any attempt to escape they might make. What disturbed him was the chance of an attempt at rescue on the part of their associates.

It was close to midnight. Soon now Hughes Henry would be here and Bob would arrive with the sheriff's posse. They ought to reach the ranch any minute now. Jim was nervously anxious to turn his prisoners over to Lutz. As soon as he did so his responsibility would be over.

Presently he glanced at his watch again. As he did so he heard a shout. There came to him excited voices, the slap-slap of running feet passing down the passage and out of the house.

Jim jumped up and stood rigid, listening intently. Had it come, the expected attack? Apparently not. There was no evidence of it. He was almost sure that one of the voices had been that of Pattie. Probably her uncle had arrived.

He tried to see out of the corners of

first one window and then the other. The moon was behind a scudding cloud and he could make out nothing.

Then a woman's voice was lifted in a scream.

CHAPTER XXXVI

FIRE!

JIM'S nerves tingled. He stood for a moment uncertain what to do. The eyes of the two prisoners fixed on him. They too guessed that drama of some sort was impending.

Their captor could not endure the suspense. If Pattie or his sister was in danger he could not stay here guarding these men. They were bound hand and foot. There could be no risk in leaving them for a moment or two. He passed from the room, closed the door behind him, and stepped out on the porch.

From where he stood he could see nothing unusual, except that there was a glow in the sky to the right. He ran to the end of the porch and jumped to the ground. As he swung around the corner of the house he became aware of fire. A burning haystack in the meadow was flinging great tongues of flame skyward, the light from these making strange contorted plunges into the encircling shadows.

A shot rang out. Into the air lifted a cry that set all Jim's pulses drumming. It was a scream of terror, and he knew it had come from the throat of a woman.

He headed for the meadow at a run, revolver in hand. The distance was perhaps three hundred yards and he covered it in record time. The figure of a man ducked into the willows. Nobody else was in sight.

The young man stopped and shouted. He called first the name of Pattie, then that of his sister. An answer came, from the pine grove well to the left, half way between him and the house. He hurried toward it. Before he reached the grove he heard the thud of horses' hoofs. Vaguely, he could see the animals moving through the darkness in the direction of the house.

A voice, a woman's voice, called again. He answered, moving that way. He came presently on his sister Sue.

She ran straight to his arms. For she was frightened. She clung to him, trembling with fear.

"What is it?" he asked.

"They shot at us," she gasped.

"Who?"

"I don't know. Some men."

"At you and Pattie?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"She ran to the house—to warn you that they are here."

"You mean Truesdale's friends?"

"Yes."

"God! They've headed that way. They may find her."

"Yes."

"Wait!" he ordered. "Stay here. I'm going to the house. They won't find you in the grove. Anyhow they won't hurt you. When they fired they must have thought you were men."

He left her there. He was running fast, .44 in hand. In a flash of insight he saw the plan of these men. They had fired the stack to draw him from the house. Probably at this very moment they were freeing his prisoners. The probability of this set his feet to quicker time.

He heard a shot—another—and another. He heard a heavy voice shout triumphantly, "Got him, by God!" There reached him the diminishing drum of horses' feet, the sound of a wild yell in the distance, and close at hand the quaver of a disturbed question.

"Are you hurt, Hughes?"

It was Homer Tedrow's voice, and the answer came from Hughes.

"The hellhounds! They took Pattie with them."

Jim was beside Henry in another moment.

"Taken her! Who?" he demanded.

"Truesdale an' his gang. Saddle me a horse quick, boy." Hughes swayed as he spoke, clinging to the porch for support. "Get a move on you. I got to hurry."

"You've been shot," Jim said.

"Don't I know it? The damn sky's tiltin'. Get me that horse, I tell you."

Hughes Henry sat down on the edge of the porch, still clinging dizzily to a post.

Once more the night became vocal. Voices and the tramp of horses made themselves heard. A group of men rode up. As they swung from their saddles Jim recognized Bob Henry and Sheriff Lutz. He saw Buck Sturgis come bowlegging forward.

"What's all the shootin'?" demanded the sheriff.

"Truesdale's gang. They've rescued my prisoners. They've shot Jack Lawrence and Hughes Henry. They've taken Pattie Hughes with them."

"Might a-known it," Lutz replied abruptly. "Sent two boys to mill. That's what I did. Spill yore story, Turner."

"Not yet. We gotta look after Hughes here. Lawrence is dead, I reckon."

From the buckboard, drawn up in the shadows, by the house, an indomitable voice broke in weakly. "Important if true, Jim."

The Bar X Y rider's heart leaped. He ran to the buckboard and looked down into his friend's pale face.

"I thought you were—gone," he said.

The ranger grinned at him. "I'll take a lot of killing yet, Jim. But I sure made a plumb bad mistake. I should have shot first, and then told Mr. Truesdale to shove his fists up. That guy's middle name is Sudden Death."

"Hurt bad?" Jim asked anxiously.

"I'll make the rifle, if that's what you mean. But I'm certainly out of this man hunt. It's up to you and Lutz."

"They've taken Pattie with them." For a moment Jim's voice threatened to break, but he picked up and carried on. "They've headed for hell crosslots, that crowd. If they hurt her—"

"Pick up the trail warm, Jim. Ride them down fast. And when you meet up with any of these birds don't stop for conversation. Shoot and keep on shooting till they're out of business. Hughes Henry and I both gave Black Tom a chance to surrender—and see what he did to us."

The two wounded men were carried into the house and put to bed, Hughes protesting fretfully both to Lutz and to Jim that they were not to mind him but get started in pursuit of Truesdale.

"We'll do that right soon," Jim promised. "They won't do her any meanness. They daren't. All Arizona would hunt them down."

None the less he was himself greatly disturbed. It was contrary to the code of bad men to war on women or use them as pawns against their enemies. For in the outdoors West such men had as much respect for a good woman as any Galahad could have had. Generally speaking, she would be safe with them at any time, any place. But the circumstances were unusual. Truesdale was a lawless devil with a grievance against her uncle. He was



subject to wild and savage impulses. He would follow his own desires, whatever they might be. Yet at the worst he would be less dangerous to Pattie than Marshall, who was both cruel and revengeful by nature. His frustrated vanity, his rage, his hate, all entered into the equation. She had scorned him as a suitor. Her uncle had flogged him like a cur. Her best friend was the bandit's enemy and had captured and humiliated him. Every impulse in his nature—except the one of fear for his own safety—would urge him to strike at her.

Whenever he let himself think of her danger Jim's heart turned over. He had to find what comfort he could in the reflection that Truesdale and Marshall were not alone. The men with them were not mad. They must know how fatal it would be to them if any harm came to Pattie Henry. And in truth these others would not wish any harm to come to her, but would probably want to protect her if necessary.

The members of the posse consulted together. They were in the room where Hughes Henry was lying.

"We can't follow these guys in the dark," Lutz said. "Point of fact we don't know in what direction they're headed. This country is all new to me. I'd get lost sure."

Buck Sturgis turned to Henry. "What do you think, old-timer? What about these lads on the dodge? Where they likely to hole in at?"

"How can I tell?" Hughes answered hopelessly. "They might move back into the Eagle's Nest country or they might cross the pass an' drop down to Barlow Park, or again they might make a break for Old Mex if they figured they could get through. But if they hurt my li'l girl I'll—"

"Marshall is mighty oneasy in his mind," Jim said. "You can bet on that. He'll be for a long trail over the border soon as it's safe."

"Tha's jest it, soon as it's safe. Right now it ain't, with the whole country patrolled by rangers. No, they'll stick to the hills, for a while anyways," Sturgis predicted.

"I don't hardly reckon Black Tom would leave the country, not unless you crowd him awful close. I'm not sure he would then. More likely turn on you an' fight it out." This was Hughes Henry's opinion. "The hell of it is you fellows have got to sit here on yore rumps till

daylight while they're makin' tracks."

"If they're headin' for Eagle's Nest they'll have to pass Donnelly's ranch, won't they?" Jim suggested. "They might have been seen. Why not send someone to Donnelly's and ask him?"

Hughes nodded in approval. "You're damn whistlin', boy. Bob, you fork a bronc an' burn the wind there. Ask Mac if he's seen or heard anybody passin' thataway. It's not likely he would, seein' it's so late. But you never can tell."

After Bob had ridden away Jim asked Hughes a question.

"How did Truesdale's friends know we had taken him?"

Hughes swore, by way of expressing his feelings. "That fellow Marbury gave it away. We met Tige Ball a mile or so down the road an' Marbury shot off his mouth before I could stop him. I figured I'd get back before Tige gathered his crowd, but he rounded 'em up quicker than I thought."

Inside of forty minutes Bob was back. "Struck their trail all right," he cried out as he came into the room. "Mac Donnelly not only heard 'em. He saw 'em,



too, by jiminy! He was expectin' a cow to come in an' was down at the corral when the gang passed. Five of 'em, all told. He's right sure Tom was one of 'em. Heard

his voice. They were makin' for the Flat Tops, looks like. We can get after 'em right away without waitin' for mornin'."

"Was yore sister with them?" the sheriff asked.

"Mac couldn't say. It was kinda dark an' they were indistinct."

"Funny he heard Truesdale's voice," Jim said, frowning in thought. "He musta been talkin' right loud. Now why would he do that, do you reckon? You wouldn't expect him to advertise the way he was going."

"You're thinkin' my thoughts, boy," Buck Sturgis agreed. He turned to Hughes Henry. "What about this Mac Donnelly? Do you reckon maybe he's coverin' Tom's tracks, that maybe they haven't gone thataway a-tall?"

Hughes brushed this aside at once. "If Mac says it's so, it's so. You can tie to

him. I've known him thirty years, an' I never knew him to break his word or lie. He's one square hombre."

"Then let's go," Jim urged. "The quicker the sooner."

They filed down the road toward the Donnelly ranch. Bob rode with the posse. He knew the Eagle's Nest country and was to act as guide. One of Lutz's men stayed at the Hughes ranch to help take care of the invalids.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"On The Prod"

FROM the window of her bedroom Pattie had seen fire flame up in the meadow.

"What's that?" she asked Sue.

Her friend came to the window. "It's this side of the creek. See! The willows are behind it."

"One of the haystacks," Pattie decided. "I'll go see. The others may catch."

She caught up her cloak and ran out of the room. Sue followed more leisurely. Temperamentally she was not so impetuous as Pattie. She saw Pattie running down the slope toward the blaze. The sky was red with the light thrown up from the shooting flames. Against the blackness beyond, the edge of the willows was sharply outlined.

Pattie had been right. A haystack was furnishing the fuel for the fire. She wondered how it could have been lit and her quick mind found an answer. Truesdale's friends! But why? She could not find a reason.

But she knew Jim was in danger. If he should be caught unaware his life might be snapped off before he had a chance to defend himself. She must get to him with a warning.

The girl turned to run to the house and presently met Sue.

"It's Truesdale's gang. I've got to tell Jim. I'm afraid," she cried.

What it was she was afraid of she did not say. But it was not for herself. They would do her no harm, these men. She was of no importance to them one way or the other just now.

To the girls drifted the sound of voices. "They're between us and the house, aren't they?" Sue asked.

"Don't know. We'd better go back by way of the grove. Whoever it is will be less likely to see us."

They moved to the left toward the grove. By so doing they missed meeting

Jim. As they reached the first of the pines a shot rang out. A cone, cut by the bullet, dropped at their feet.

Sue screamed. Someone had fired at them.

"You'd better get back into the trees, Sue," her friend said.

Pattie herself started on a run toward the house. Beneath the shadow of the firs it was very dark, but Pattie had known the path since childhood and traveled fast. As she came into the open near the house she became aware of moving figures, of saddled horses, of the crash of breaking windows. She hurried forward, ran up the steps, and passed into the house.

The door into the big room downstairs opened to her hand. She walked in, and came to an abrupt stop. Jim was not in the room at all, but Tige Ball and Brad Reeves were. They had just finished cutting the ropes that bound the prisoners.

"Where's Jim Turner? What have you done with him?" the girl demanded.

Truesdale strode forward and caught her wrist. "I'll ask the questions, girl. You answer them."

He had a revolver in his right hand.

"I suppose you'll shoot me if I don't," she said scornfully.

"Don't badger me, you poor fool," the killer flung out savagely. "Where's that girl Sue Tedrow?"

"I don't know where she is."

"You lie. She's somewheres around. I want her. Where is she?" His fingers tightened on her wrist till she could have screamed with pain.

But the eyes that met his did not quail. "I don't know—and if I did I wouldn't tell you."

"By God, you will!"

The stubborn will in her set itself to meet the physical agony. "I'll not."

He ground his teeth furiously. "If you try to get in my way, girl—"

"You bully, if my uncle was here you wouldn't dare touch me," she taunted him.

Tige Ball interrupted. "Better leave the girl alone, Tom."

With a sweep of the arm Truesdale flung Pattie against the wall. He turned on Ball. "Don't tell me what to do, Tige," he stormed. "I want Sue Tedrow. She's somewheres near. Find her for me."

Marshall whispered in his leader's ear, nodding toward Pattie as he did so.

"All right. See she don't get away from you," Truesdale growled, leading the way out of the house.

There came the sound of wagon wheels.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

CROOKED CANYON

A buckboard drew up at the corner of the house. Hughes Henry, the reins in his hands, descended to the ground. He saw Tom Truesdale on the porch, feet wide astraddle, head low and thrust forward, a revolver in his hand. Back of him was Tige Ball, and behind him, just emerging from the house, Sam Marshall holding Pattie by the arm.

At sight of her uncle Pattie cried aloud his name. Hughes took in the situation at a glance.

"Hands off my girl," he ordered.

Marshall's hand dropped from Pattie's arm. Truesdale moved a step or two nearer Henry.

"Don't get on the prod, Hughes. I'll not stand for it. I want the Tedrow girl, an' I aim to get her. Yore girl knows where she is."

Hughes Henry dropped the reins, his right hand falling to the butt of a revolver strapped to his side.

Instantly Truesdale fired. Hughes staggered. His weapon came out and he fired from his hip. A second time Truesdale's gun blazed at him.

"Got him, by God!" the killer shouted.

From out of the darkness a man galloped.

"Bunch of riders comin' down from the ridge," he shouted.

There was a stampede for the horses. Pattie, running down from the porch

to her uncle's aid, met Truesdale face to face.

"You coward," she cried, her eyes blazing out of a bloodless face. "You've killed him."

Black Tom was drunk with the lust of battle. He did not think of consequences, of the future, but only of his savage desire to get the best of these enemies who harassed him and had brought him to the humiliation of temporary defeat. He snatched the girl to him, caught her up in his arms, and ran to the nearest horse. In another moment he was astride of it. His men were already galloping away. Truesdale followed, Pattie struggling in his arms.

They rode swiftly down the meadow, pushed into the willows, and splashed across the creek.

Sheriff Lutz and his posse reached the ranch just in time to be too late.

AT DONNELLY'S ranch the posse drew up to gather what information it could. In spite of Hughes Henry's assurance that the ranchman Donnelly was wholly to be trusted neither Jim nor Buck Sturgis was convinced that they were on the right trail. They wanted to talk with Donnelly and hear his story. It seemed strange that Truesdale would openly advertise his destination by practically shouting it aloud in the night.

Donnelly had nothing new to offer. He told his story again simply, and there was nothing to add to it.

"I done told Bob here all I know," he insisted. "I seen 'em, five of 'em, an' I heard their voices. Onct when he talked I was pretty near sure of Tom Truesdale's. They were headed for the Flat Tops, looked like. That surprised me some, for Crooked Canyon is no trail to take on a dark night. Naturally I wondered who they were an' where they were going. I started onct to holler out an' then I reckoned I'd better not. It's kinda been my motto to lay off'n night riders."

"Did they act like they were slippin' by an' didn't want to be noticed?" Jim asked.

"Well no, I can't say they did. I had a lantern with me. They musta seen it. But it didn't keep Tom Truesdale—if it was Tom, an' I'd bet my boots it was—from talkin' right out in meeting."

Buck Sturgis rasped his stubby beard thoughtfully. "You pays yore money an' takes yore choice, Sheriff," he suggested. "Either Tom didn't care a damn whether you knew where he was going, or else he wanted to be sure you did know."

"Looks thataway to me," Jim agreed.

"Bright idea, boy!" Lutz applauded with sarcasm. "Why for? He knew I was outside with a posse, ready to crowd him hard an' sleep right on his trail. Why would he announce where he was headin' for?"

"That's the question I'm askin' myself," Jim replied.

"Yes, an' what's the answer?" the sheriff jeered. It struck him this young fellow was taking a good deal on himself merely because by a piece of incredible good luck he had captured Truesdale and Marshall. After all he had not been able to hold his prisoners but had been outwitted and outmaneuvered.

"Like Mr. Sturgis says, you take yore choice," Jim replied. "Either he's gone crazy with the heat an' is invitin' you into



the hills to fight it out with you, or else he isn't going where he lets on he's going."

"Meanin' that he was aimin' to back track on us," Sturgis put in. "Maybeso, at that. He tried that same trick before, right after the train robbery, an' he almost threw us off the trail. What about it, Donnelly? Could he start up thisaway an' then give us the slip by lightin' out for some other place to hole up?"

"Not unless he turned back through Crooked Canyon again. He wouldn't hardly do that. No sense to it. He'd be throwin' away time he can't afford to lose."

"He couldn't push on from the Eagle's Nest country into any other mountain district, could he?" asked Buck.

"No. If he keeps going he'll come back into the ranch country."

"Then what's his play? Beats me."

Donnelly gave an opinion. "Why, if you knew Tom Truesdale like I do you wouldn't need to ask that. He don't give a cuss who knows where he's gone. Tom's thataway. Likely he's hopin' you find him so as he can see it out with you to a fightin' finish. Course he's got to make a bluff of hidin' out or the rest of the gang wouldn't stick by him. I'll tell you another thing. He may turn on you any time. Among those rocks an' gulches he'll have plenty of chances. You want to travel with yore eyes wide open, Lutz."

The sheriff considered. "I'll leave a man here above the canyon to watch it. If Truesdale doubles back our man can come after us an' let us know."

"Yes, if he ever found you. This country stands right up on end. It's full of gulches an' blind pockets. He might get lost for a week."

"Wish that moon would come out so we could get started," Bob murmured uneasily to Jim.

He could not bear to sit still in the saddle and lose precious hours. Nor could Jim. He too was tortured with anxiety on account of Pattie. To one thing he had made up his mind. Lutz was nominally leader of the posse. That was all right. He was a much older man and he was sheriff of the county. He had ten times the experience of Jim.

But when it came to the final showdown with these outlaws Jim did not intend to take orders. He was not a member of Lutz's posse, but was on special service with the rangers and therefore independent of the sheriff. As soon as they established contact with the bandits he intended to go after them. If it was a

fighting finish Truesdale wanted he was going to be accommodated. Talking did not get anywhere. No use arguing with Lutz. Might as well wait till the time for action came. He was not going to forget that he had first claim on Marshall because of Hal and on Truesdale because of Jack Lawrence.

Yet even while he told himself this Jim knew that the danger of Pattie Henry was a far more potent spring of action than either of these two. He loved her. He knew it now. And with that knowledge had vanished all the awe of Black Tom as a killer that had formerly obsessed him. The fellow was nothing but a criminal. He was no superman. Jim had bested him once, and he meant to do it again when the hour came.

The moon presently reappeared from behind scudding clouds and Bob Henry led the way into Crooked Canyon. Before they had



traveled a quarter of a mile the going became rough and steep. Boulders filled the bed of the stream which ran through the gorge and much of the time no light whatever

reached the bottom of the rift.

The riders almost groped their way. It was necessary at times to give the horses their lead and let them pick a path for themselves. Once a cowpony went down, stumbling to its knees and flinging its rider into the bed of the creek. The man swore ruefully as he nursed the bruised forearm that had saved his head from contact with the rocks.

After three quarters of an hour of this Lutz called a halt. "We're liable to get some arms an' legs busted if we keep followin' this narrow ledge. It's climbin' way up above the creek. How much more of it, Bob?"

"Maybe a half a mile or so. It's not so far to the Flat Tops where we can see." Bob's report was favorable because he wanted to keep on going. He was in a fever of impatience and fretted at every delay.

"Only half a mile—or so—maybe. An' gettin' steeper an' rougher every dawg-goned minute," Sturgis grumbled cheerfully. "Lead on, son. I'm an old man an' won't live more'n thirty or forty years

anyhow, even if I make the grade this trip."

Jim later went over that trail by daylight and he wondered how they had ever negotiated it in utter darkness. Part of the way the sloping pathway of the ledge was so narrow that there was scarce footing for a horse. The least misstep would have flung mount and rider into the chasm of the gorge below. Stones and boulders obstructed the line of march, and in places the ascent was so precipitous that a mountain goat might have hesitated. Yet the cowponies of the posse, in the dead of night, had managed to clamber up, and so had those of the men they pursued.

When they reached the Flat Tops the traveling was easier. The terrain was rough enough, but at least the riders did not have the dread of plunging down a hundred feet to the rocky bed of a stream.

Daybreak found them far up in the high mountains, lost for the time in a heavy mist which penetrated chilly to their bones.

"We'll throw off here an' make camp till the fog lifts," the sheriff announced. "I'll feel better after I get outside of some hot coffee an' grub."

They lit a fire and cooked breakfast. It fretted Jim to have to wait, but he recognized the wisdom of making haste slowly. They had in any case to eat, and it would save time to get it over with before the mist lifted.

Around a camp fire they breakfasted. The men joked each other about the experiences of the night and speculated as to the whereabouts of the outlaws and the probability of running into them.

The fog still hung heavy after they had eaten.

"Can't do a thing till it lifts," Lutz said. "You boys better grab what sleep you can. No tellin' when you'll get yore next chance."

Jim offered to keep watch against the millionth chance of a surprise attack. "I couldn't sleep anyhow," he said. "No point in keepin' anybody else awake."

He roused the others two hours later. The fog was lifting. Came presently a faint gleam of sunshine. They saddled and packed, by which time the mist was retreating to the pockets at the foot of the peaks which ran like sentinels to their left.

The sun grew warmer. Some of the posse offered nervous, but apparently casual predictions that they would soon come up with the outlaws.

"Hmp!" grunted Buck Sturgis. "You

lads make me laugh. Black Tom is nobody's fool. He's been runnin' around these hills for thirty years an' he knows every trick of the game. Right now he may be lying up on that ledge there laughin' at us. I'll bet he's got a better notion of where we are than we have where he's at. Why, he could keep on the dodge here in these hills for a week an' us never lay eyes on him unless we jest plumb stumbled on him."

Jim recognized the truth of this. It was even possible that they were following a wild goose chase and that the outlaws were not headed for the Eagle's Nest at all. His heart was heavy. He thought of Pattie in the hands of these villains, and when he did so the bottom dropped out of his courage.

He kept bolstering up his spirit with the assurance that they dared not hurt her. They dared not—if they valued their lives. The trouble was that Tom Truesdale did not value his and that Marshall would strike at her only when he saw a chance to do so safely.

But if that chance came—

CHAPTER XXXIX

JIM CUTS LOOSE

IT WAS the fourth day of the man-hunt. The posse had climbed hills, slithered down into draws, searched gulches. The terrain around the Eagle's Nest had been combed as riders do the range on a roundup. No trace of the outlaws had been seen, not even a wisp of smoke rising from a distant wooded slope.

This morning Jim and Bob had clambored to the summit of the great cliff which gave the place its name. They stood on the edge of the bluff, sweeping with their eyes the reaches of forest below.

Bob let his discouragement escape into words. "They fooled us, looks like. We've sure hunted thorough as we could, but they might be holed up in some pocket or draw right close to us."

"Yes," Jim agreed absently.

He was brooding over the situation, and as he did so he came to a decision. It was this, that he was not going to hunt in such a large party and that he would do his searching in the Barlow Park country and not here.

"I can't get Pattie outa my mind," Bob said hopelessly. "How can I go back to Uncle Hughes an' tell him we fell down on this roundup?"

Jim offered arguments that did not con-

vince himself. "Black Tom will look out for her. He's one tough nut, the worst kind of a killer one way of speakin', but I don't reckon he would harm Pattie."

"How do we know that? He may be drinking, an' if he is likely he'll get to figurin' on how to get even with us all. He an' Pattie never did get along. He said more'n once he'd like to have the runnin' of her so as to break her spirit. Then there's Marshall. He hates the whole caboodle of us. He'll not forget how Uncle Hughes quirted him till he yelped for mercy. Give him a chance he'll sure take it outa Pattie."

"He'll not get the chance," Jim valiantly assured the harassed brother. "Tige Ball is there, an' this fellow Reeves. They are not plumb fools, either one of 'em. D'ja reckon they would sit by an' let Marshall devil her? Not on yore life. They know if they did this country would hunt 'em down like wolves. Besides, they are men, both of 'em, neighbors of yours. I've heard yore uncle say that Tige is a hardy devil. Betcha he'd fight at the drop of the hat for Pattie if it came to a showdown."

"Against Marshall maybe, but not against Tom Truesdale."

"Against either or both of 'em." Jim's thoughts recurred to that aspect of the case upon which he had been deliberating. "We're not gettin' anywhere, Bob. These fellows may be up in this neck of the woods, but I don't believe it. First place, they came up here too openly. A trick, looks like, to throw us off the scent. We've hunted thorough, an' we haven't seen hide nor hair of them. No smoke from their camp fires. No tracks. No signs of their stock. Why? Because they ain't here."

"But we know they headed this way. Donnelly wasn't lying to us."

"No, they used him to trick us, I expect. I never was satisfied they were here. This country we've been coverin' is a big pocket. If they got penned up there's no way out except into settled valleys. The Barlow Park country is different. Hardly anybody lives there, an' it leads anywhere—to Old Mex say, when they're ready to make a break through. Why would they come here instead of going there?"

"No use befin' about whyfors. They *did* come here. We know that."

"They came through the canyon. We know that. But did they stay? Isn't there any possible trail across to Barlow Park from the Flat Tops?"

"Across the mountains?" Bob looked at him, startled to attention.

"Yes, across the mountains. They didn't go back through the canyon. We know that. How about some pass leadin' across?"

"Why, it's been done. Tom Truesdale an' Uncle Hughes made it onct twenty years ago. They started right close to the canyon end of the Flat Tops. They kinda had to hang on by their eyebrows. I don't reckon Truesdale would tackle it with so big a party an' one of them a woman."



"If I had a thousand dollars I'd bet it he tried just that an' got across. Pat can go anywheres a man can, an' Tom Truesdale knows it. We're foolin' away our time here."

"Lutz says—"

"I know what Lutz says, that they're on the dodge right here. He's a stubborn Dutchman, an' he takes a lot of convincin'. Different here. I'm going over to Barlow Park, an' I'm going over the mountains, same way they went."

"Me too," Bob cried.

"If my hunch looks good to you. This party is too big. We advertise every move we make. Even if Truesdale's gang was here, those fellows could slip away an' sidestep us, unless we were lucky enough to surprise them, jump 'em at their camp, say."

"Something to that," Bob admitted.

"A lot to it. So we'll travel alone, just you an' me. Betcha we strike a lead over there in Barlow Park. Are you acquainted with any ranchmen there?"

"Yep. With old Bart Castleman. We've been at his place, all of us. He's right friendly with Uncle Hughes."

"Then we'll hit the trail *my pronto*, boy."

"What will Lutz say?"

"Only that we're darned fools. He's pretty near ready to quit anyhow. A couple days more will be enough for him."

They descended, following the shoulder of the cliff, to the place where they had left the rest of the posse.

"Couldn't see a sign of them," Jim reported.

"We'll comb that south gulch again," Lutz decided.

Jim told him of the plan formed by him and Bob.

The sheriff barked a short sarcastic laugh. "You're a cocksure young devil,

Turner. I'll say that for you. But suit yoreself. I've got no kick comin' if you lads want to go rampin' over the mountains on a cold trail. You won't find Black Tom's gang, an' that'll be lucky for you. If I figured there was a chance on earth of you fellows meetin' up with these birds I wouldn't let you go a foot of the way. They would eat you alive."

The bright eyes in Buck Sturgis' brown leathery face took in Jim with shrewd approval. He did not share his chief's opinion of this young fellow. Anyone who could, with or without luck, arrest Marshall and Truesdale singlehanded and drag them in as prisoners would do to watch.

"What do you aim to do if you find Truesdale, Jim?" the old frontiersman asked.

"Why, we could come back an' let you know where they're at," Jim said innocently.

"So you could." Buck grinned appreciatively. It was his opinion that Jim Turner would not do any such thing. "Only be sure he don't find you too, because if you an' Mr. Bear get too close you may have to holler for us to help you turn him loose. An' be mighty careful not to start any powwow like Lawrence an' Hughes Henry did."

"I never was any good a-tall at oratin'," Jim answered.

Sturgis patted the weapon in his sagging belt. "Me, I'll take my own advice if it comes to a showdown. I've got no notion of givin' these birds an even break. None of this 'So long, Tom, how're you feelin' this glad day' stuff. No, sir. When I meet Tom I'll let li'l old Tried an' True do the talkin' for me. I'll go to fannin' smoke right away pronto sudden immediate from the word go. Either that or me for the tall timber, an' I reckon I'm too old an' logy to travel faster than Tom's bullets."

"Hmp!" grunted the sheriff. "We ain't any of us gonna get a chance to meet him, looks like."

"Might be somethin' to Jim's notion," Sturgis went on. "Why haven't we bumped into Mr. Black Tom an' his friends? Maybe it's because he's not here, him or any of his outfit. I never was satisfied we were on a hot trail."

"Easy to say 'I told you so'," Lutz growled. "Maybe you think you would have done better in my place, Buck."

"Not a bit," admitted the deputy cheerfully. "You're majordomo of this outfit, an' you've done all that could have been

done so far.. But we've about reached the end of our rope here. They've sure out-guessed us to date. If they are in this Eagle's Nest country they must have gone into a hole an' pulled it in after them. Well, why not try this hunch Jim has got? Barlow Park sounds good to me. Why not let these lads cross the mountain while we swing round by way of Lost Park, us pickin' up what information we can on the way. We can meet at Castleman's ranch, say."

"I'm not satisfied they're not here," the sheriff replied obstinately. "Maybe in a couple days I'll talk Barlow Park with you."

So it was settled that Jim and Bob should be free to do as they pleased. Inside of an hour they had eaten, saddled, packed, and were headed for the Flat Tops.

CHAPTER XL

TIGE BALL SPEAKS OUT

PATTIE sat on a flat rock which cropped from a hillock sixty feet from the camp. Her chin was cupped despondently in the palm of a hand. It was the sixth day since Truesdale had fung her across the saddle in front of him. They had been days of hard travel, including one dangerous ten hour traverse of a steep and rocky range, and after each day there had been anxious hours of worry before she could fall asleep.

Black Tom had not deigned to tell her what he meant to do with her. Perhaps he did not know himself. He had been full of a dark and bitter moodiness, probably because he could not get out of his mind the galling humiliation of the hours when he had been the prisoner of Jim Turner. The man's savage pride had been hurt, and he longed for a chance to wipe out the stain of defeat. Mostly he was silent, but it was plain that the thoughts behind his dark and swarthy face were not pleasant ones.

She had begged him to let her go home, and he had brushed aside her petitions roughly. It was dangerous to hold her. For that very reason he would not let her go. He would show Hughes Henry—if Hughes were still alive—and these hounds of the law with whom he had allied himself that they could not play monkey tricks with Tom Truesdale.

Already he had the laugh on Lutz. He had lain on a ledge in the darkness and heard the posse pass below him on its

futile way to Eagle's Nest. Already he had punished the ranger Lawrence and Hughes Henry for their temerity in facing him. But he would not be satisfied until he had killed the young cockerel Turner. His own inclination was to turn on his pursuers and hunt this cowboy down, but he realized that his followers would not stand for that.

As Truesdale came out from the live oak grove where the horses were tied he saw that Tige Ball had joined Pattie where she sat on the rock hill. Black Tom scowled. Tige was uneasy because of the girl's presence and he had more than once protested to his leader. If it had not been for sheer obstinacy Tom would have sent her back to Lost Park with Tige. She was both a danger and an inconvenience. But



he did not intend to let anybody dictate to him what he should do.

Now he went striding forward to join the man and the girl.

"Startin' in for to be a lady's man,

Tige," he jeered. "First thing Sam will be gettin' jealous. Can't have that happenin', lovely lady. Have to send you home if you start to flirtin' with the boys. Either that or marry you myself to keep the peace."

She ignored his ironic sneer. "Send me home," she begged. "Or give me a horse and let me go by myself. I want to get back. I'm worried—about Uncle Hughes. I ought to be there."

"If you hadn't taken up with that spy Turner you wouldn't need to be worryin' about him. I told you how it would be, but you were hell-bent to have yore own way. You've got nobody to blame but yoreself."

"I'm not asking for myself." Her throat filled up for a moment. "But Uncle Hughes may need me. If you'll let me go home I'll never forget it."

"I'll let you go when I'm good an' ready," Truesdale told her gruffly.

"Tige says you ought to let me go," she pleaded. "I'm only a girl, Tom. You've known me ever since I was a baby. I'd think you'd want—"

"So Tige says I oughtta let you go, does he?"

Ball answered for himself. "Tha's what I told her, Tom, an' it's what I told you. If you'd look at this right you'd see we've got no business keepin' her here. Why, dad gum it, she's one of our neighbor's girls. Like she said, we've known her since she learned to walk. I've carried her in my arms when she was a baby, an' I'll be damned if I'll stand for any harm comin' to her."

Hardeyed, Truesdale looked at him steadily. "You talk mighty brave, Tige."

The other outlaw did not flinch. "Might as well get down to cases, Tom. We're where we've got to hang together. I'm with you till the cows come home long as you're anyways reasonable. You know it. You know I'll take my fightin' chance with you. I've traveled a lot of crooked trails in my time. But I claim to be a white man. I'll not stand for any harm comin' to Pat Hughes. There you've got it short an' sweet."

Truesdale struggled with his temper. The eyes in his dark saturnine face told as much. Ball faced him hardily. He knew that his life lay on the incalculable chance of the killer's self control. Of late the man had been morose and quarrelsome. What he might do now was wholly uncertain.

What he did was to swallow his overbearing pride, his rising resentment.

"Don't run on the rope, Tige," he growled sulkily. "I wouldn't stand for having the girl harmed any more than you would. But I'll not let you or her either dictate to me. I'll stand pat on what I said before. She'll go home when it's convenient for me to send her—an' not before."

Ball had made his protest. He had declared himself, at a very considerable risk. If it came to a showdown he was ready to fight for the girl. But it had not come to such a pass and probably never would. Truesdale evidently had no intention of injuring her. No use pushing him too far. He had made a larger concession than Tige had expected that he would. Let it go at that. For the present, anyhow.

Tige's protest was therefore only perfunctory. "That's all right, Tom. I'm not tryin' to run you. All I say is that we're not fightin' women an' Pat has lots of friends an' there's no sense in lookin' for more trouble when we've got all we can handle right now. When you get ready to send her home I'll be glad to see her go."

"I'd never have brought her if she

hadn't been so bossy," Truesdale declared bitterly. "She ran Hughes, an' look what came of it. She took up with this spy Turner an' broke up the friendship between Hughes an' me. It was through her Lutz an' his posse came into the park."

"It wasn't either," she denied. "I hadn't a thing to do with it. I didn't know they were coming."

"If you hadn't made Hughes so soft with this Turner the spy couldn't of guided Lutz in. Girl, you can cry yore fool head off. Some grief was comin' to you the way you acted."

A man rode into view up the rocky path.

"Sam Marshall," said Ball.

The rider came at a canter. He flung himself from the saddle at the same instant the horse stopped.

"Strangers at Castleman's ranch," he announced.

"Know who they are?" demanded Truesdale.

"No. Didn't want to get too close so they could see me. But I reckon they're some of Lutz's posse."

"I'll ride down an' find out," Truesdale said. "You an' Reeves will go with me, Tige, if that suits you."

He felt that nothing would soothe his riled temper more than a brush with these busybodies who insisted on interfering with him. If young Turner was with them so much the better.

CHAPTER XLI

BELOW THE RIM ROCK

JIM and Bob reached the Castleman ranch after a very hard trip across the mountains. They had got lost up in the high hills and had spent a night and two days there before they could find a pass that could be negotiated. The night had been bitterly cold, and they had been able to snatch only an hour or two of uneasy sleep. Therefore they were fagged out when they reached the ranch.

But there was one compensation. They knew they were on the trail of the outlaws. They had read sign in four or five places which showed that a party had preceded them over the pass.

Tired though they were, Jim decided not to sleep at the ranch. It was very likely that Truesdale kept contact established with Castleman's to have a check on any pursuers who might come into the park.

The two spent riders sat down to dinner with the ranchman's family. There were three stalwart Castleman sons and a pretty

girl of about Pattie's age. They called her Mollie. She waited on the table while her men folks and the guests ate.

Jim dropped casual questions and comments designed to elicit information. A certain wariness in the replies of the Castlemans told him more than their words.

"Reckon you don't see many strangers in this neck of the woods," Jim suggested.

"Not many," old Bart agreed.

"Probably we're the first visitors you've had for quite some time."

"Came over the mountains from the Eagle's Nest country, you said, didn't you?"

"Yep. Kinda looked by the tracks as if some party had crossed ahead of us."

The old rancher was slightly deaf. Now he turned this liability into an asset. He heard as much as he wanted to and no more.

"Party! Was it a dance? Down in Lost Park?"

"I said we weren't the only folks that had come over the hills, looked like."

"Came over with Bill who?"

One of the young Castlemans snorted. "The old man is deeper than he usta be," he explained.

"He seems to be right deaf. It's an affliction." Jim poured molasses over his biscuit and dropped a piece of news. "Expect you've heard that Tom Truesdale shot Hughes Henry."

Bart forgot his deafness. "Shot Hughes Henry! When?" he demanded, astonished.

Jim gave details in the hope of loosening the old man's tongue. These had the effect of making him more cautious. He had no intention of getting mixed up in the row. While he cared nothing about Truesdale and his outfit he knew it was not safe to give any news about them to their pursuers.

After dinner Jim and Bob rode away. Somewhere in the rough country near they would find a camping ground.

As they moved through the chaparral a voice hailed them. Mollie Castleman came forward.

"You boys are lookin' for Black Tom's outfit, aren't you?" she asked.

Jim did not beat about the bush. "That's what, Miss Mollie."

"They're back in the rock rim somewheres. My brother Lyn says they've got Pattie Hughes with them. Is yore posse in the brush near here?"

"Not so awful close," Jim hedged. He knew this girl was on his side. His instinct told him that. But he did not know how discreet she might be. "Do you know where Black Tom is camped?"

"Not exactly. About two-three miles from the ranch, I reckon. Northeast, I'd



say. It's right rocky up that-away. Are you aimin' to get Black Tom or just to take Pattie home?"

"We want her first. That's most important. If there's any way you can help us—"

"I would if I could. It's outrageous of them to take her with them. But that Black Tom. He's awful. Still, I don't see what I can do." The girl's dark eyes pitied Bob. "You're her brother, aren't you? I know how you must feel."

"You might pick up some news," Jim said. "Some of Truesdale's men may come down to the ranch. Let me know if they do."

"Yes," she said dubiously. Then, in a little burst of confidence, "I'd like to help Pattie Hughes. Once I stayed at her house for a week. I like her. But father wouldn't like it. He says it's better to keep out of this. He says it's not safe to make Black Tom mad. Still an' all, I'll let you know if there's anything comes up. Where will you be?"

"We'll be out here in the chaparral. Give us a hail an' we'll come out to meet you. An' if you want to know what Bob an' I think of you, why you're all wool an' a yard wide."

"Thank you." She made a mocking little curtsey. "An' in return for yore compliment I'll give you some good advice, both of you. Keep away from Black Tom an' let Sheriff Lutz meet him. He'd just make mincemeat of you nice boys."

With which she left them.

But inside of an hour they heard her "You-hoo!" and came forward to meet her. She had brought news. Black Tom and two of his men had come down to the ranch and was now there with her father. One of his scouts had informed him of the arrival of strangers and he had ridden in to find out who they were.

"Did he say what he was going to do—whether he would start lookin' for us right away?"

"He swore something awful when he

heard it was you had ridden into the park. It gave me the shivers to hear him. You'd better look out."

"Much obliged, Miss Mollie," Jim said. "But it's no news to me that he doesn't like me. I'd kinda suspected it. Was he still at the ranch when you left?"

"Umpha! He went into the house with father. They're gonna comb the chaparral for you. If I was you I'd certainly light out an' keep going till I had met up with the rest of the posse. If he caught you two boys alone—"

She left the rest to their imagination.

"Good medicine," agreed Jim. "We'll hit the trail *my pronto*. Now you better slip back home, Miss Mollie, before yore father misses you. We don't want you gettin' in trouble on account of being friendly with us."

The young men were in their saddles before she was out of sight.

"Where are we headin' for?" Bob asked.

"For the edge of the rim rock. My idea is to leave you there in the brush while I go ahead on foot an' find out what I can."

They stopped in an arroyo filled with aspens. Here Jim left the horses with his friend. He moved forward to the rock rim and climbed it, going as fast as he could consistent with a reasonable amount of caution. For ten or fifteen minutes he advanced, crouching low and taking advantage of what cover there was. It was necessary to take the risk of being seen if he hoped to reach the outlaw camp while Truesdale and his two associates were away.

Presently from the edge of a ledge he peered down on what he knew must be the spot where the outlaws were camped. Under a live oak two horses stood drowsing in the warm sunshine. Saddles, bridles and gunny sacks lay scattered near. He could see the black charcoal of the dead camp fire. But from where he lay he could not see any person. A ridge of higher ground ran parallel to the ledge on which he lay and back of the camp fire. It was possible that Pattie and her guard might be on the other side of it. He slipped down the broken rocks to the sandy level below, keeping a careful watch against surprise.

Voices reached him from the other side of the ridge, one of them heavy and menacing, the other clear and indignant. At sound of them his blood quickened. He knew that Sam Marshall and Pattie Hughes were moving toward him, that in

another moment or two they would come into view.

There would be instant explosive battle. Instinctively his brain functioned for defence and attack. He made sure of his rifle and waited, tensely, one foot resting on a large log in front of him.

Above the crest of the hill appeared the heads of the man and the girl. They were close together. Yet another moment, and Jim saw that Marshall had his left arm tucked under the right arm of Pattie and that his fingers were fastened to her wrist.

"You'd better let me go, you brute, if you know what's good for you," she warned, her voice high with excitement.

"Hold yore horses, sweetheart," he jeered. "I'm runnin' this rodeo, an' don't you forget it, you li'l catamount. That bullyin' uncle of yours ain't here, nor that damfool pilgrim Turner—"

Then, swifter than words can tell it, the long-deferred crisis leaped upon them. Pattie caught sight of Jim and cried out her astonishment. The young man had his one-instant of time advantage, but he could not use it. He dared not fire, lest he hit the girl.

Sam Marshall's "Goddlemighty!" fell snarling from his lips as his revolver leaped to the air.

The outlaw's weapon rang out.

For an eyebeat Jim stood staring at him, the young man's face a map of puzzled dismay. The rifle clattered from his hands. He half turned. His body sagged. He went plunging down behind the log.

CHAPTER XLII

ALONE AT LAST

MARSHALL could scarcely believe his luck. It had been a swift shot from the hip with no chance to take aim. Yet he had dropped his enemy. He stood looking at the spot where the young man had been and now was not. Triumph surged up in him, drove from his face the first momentary expression of heavy bewilderment.

"Got him," he screamed, adding an oath that was a whoop of joy. "Bumped him off. Told the idjit I would. Told Tom so. Told you an' yore interferin' uncle. An' I done it, too."

He straddled forward, beside himself with exultation. He had no least doubt but that he had got his man. Yet the cautious instinct for saving his own skin asserted itself. The man might not be dead yet, and dying men sometimes sent swift

messages of vengeance. Life still might be flickering in him, even though his rifle, pitched at an angle where it had been flung by the jerk of involuntary muscles, lay on this side of the log with barrel pointing downward. The outlaw meant for good measure to fling a couple of extra bullets into the prone body. In days past he had once given it as a maxim to his cronies that you can't kill a man too dead. That was still his opinion.

The body lay out of sight behind the log, and the approach to it was awkward. At each end of the log grew a heavy screen of shrubbery. Marshall hesitated, then made his choice. He moved toward the



less dense bushes at the left.

"You've killed him," Pattie cried.

For an instant she had been palsied by horror, but now she was running

swiftly straight for the log.

"Come back, girl," the outlaw ordered. "Goddlemighty! Come back, or I'll fire."

She paid not the least attention to his command, none to his threat. Her flying limbs took the log in their stride. A gasp was shocked from her throat as she sank down to the sand, and hard after this a quavering cry, "He's dead."

So he was dead? Marshall changed his mind. He walked straight for the log, revolver held close to his side. He stepped upon the dead tree and looked down.

There is a saying among the three-shell gentry that the hand is quicker than the eye. The very instant that Marshall stepped upon the log fingers encircled his ankle and dragged him forward. Even before he fell into the arms of the man waiting for him the bandit knew that his enemy had trapped him. As he went down he tried in panicky fashion for a shot.

He never had a chance to fire. One of Jim's hands closed on the right wrist of his foe, the other encircled the heavy shoulders of the squat bandit. With one tremendous heave the young man flung his enemy against the log, back down. The impact of the fall knocked the breath out of Marshall. Jim's right hand caught the man by the hair and dragged his head backward.

The murderer was stretched helplessly against the log, his spine tortured by the pressure of the cowpuncher's body. He

had no chance to use his superior strength. His eyes, meeting those of his foe, reflected a ghastly fear. The slightest extra pressure of the fingers dragging at his hair would break his neck. All the fury of fight had been driven out of him. Only the terror in the eyes showed the vitality of life. He could neither cry out nor whisper an appeal for mercy.

Slowly, inch by inch, the outflung arm with the revolver began to bend beneath the pressure of the muscular fingers that gripped the wrist. It swung in a semi-circle until the rim of the barrel rested against the outlaw's temple.

Neither of the men moved. They lay there, eye to eye, engaged in an awful struggle of the will. Marshall was a defenceless victim of inexorable Nemesis. He knew the end of life had come for him and that he was being offered a choice. The spasmodic crook of his own forefinger would be enough, or if he had not the courage for that the downward push of the arm the fingers of which gripped his hair.

The doomed man made his choice.

Jim rose, his whole body limp with the shock of what had occurred. Sick and trembling, he stared down at the huddled figure which a moment before had been a breathing man. A thin film of smoke rose from the barrel of the weapon.

"My God! My God!" he shuddered.

The girl recovered herself first. "You had to do it," she said, almost in a whisper. "Yes— Yes— I daren't let him live, but—"

"You're not to blame, Jim."

"No— He brought it on himself. It had to be."

Courage flowed back into her body. "You were that cool—making him think he had killed you."

"I couldn't get a shot at him, where he stood behind you and so close to you. But it was you that was cool. When you found me ready for him and cried out that I was dead."

She drew a long ragged breath. "I thought till then that—that he had killed you."

Presently they came to consideration of the course of action best to pursue. He explained that her brother was waiting for them, at the same time busy saddling a horse for her.

They talked, as he walked beside the animal she rode. She asked about her uncle, and was profoundly relieved to know that he would recover from the wound inflicted on him by Truesdale.

Bob was waiting in the arroyo of aspens. At sight of his sister the boy's face worked with emotion. He had all he could do to keep from joining in her tears when she flew into his arms. He gulped a sob down, boyishly, ashamed of his emotion. She had been in danger, in the hands of an enemy who had no mercy in his heart. Now she was with him again, safe and sound.

The same emotions moved Jim, together with other more complicated ones. He was no more clear as to his faith than the average cowboy, but in simple childlike fashion he thanked God that he had been permitted to rescue her. It was wonderful to have her riding beside him, knee to knee, to see her brown face, with freckles sprinkled lightly above the straight nose, turned toward him eagerly. There were gifts of love in the deep soft eyes. Jim's heart sang within him, gay brave little songs such as the meadow lark flings out in spring mornings of sunshine.

CHAPTER XLIII

WITH HIS BOOTS ON

THEY rode through the chaparral, the three of them, threading their way among mesquite bushes and clumps of clutching cactus. When any of them spoke it was in undertones, for it was likely that Truesdale and his associates were searching for the two young men.

Jim was anxious to escape without battle. He was shaken by what had taken place. So far his luck had stood up fine, but he did not want to press it too far. The most important thing was to get Pattie back to the ranch in safety. The law could wait to get Black Tom, and Jim was privately resolved that if he could slip down into Lost Park he would in future give the killer a wide berth.

The hardbitten frontier had been Jim's school. He was no soft hearted fool. Sam Marshall was better dead than alive. He had at last paid the penalty of a lifetime of crime and evil doing. But it would take Jim some time to forget the look of paralyzed fear in the fellow's eyes during those few moments before death reached out and claimed him for its own.

The exultation of the lover had died down within him and given place to apprehension. All he desired now was to get back to Lost Park without meeting Black Tom or his men.

"We'll keep among these low hills not

too close to the ridge," Jim said once. "The brush is thicker here, an' there is less chance of their jumpin' us."

The little cavalcade covered a tortuous mile, and still another. In front of them rose the rock walls of the pass. If they reached it the chances were that they would be safe. From Jim's heart the weight began to lift. Soon now, if all went well, they would be riding down the heavily wooded gulch which led to Lost Park.

Jim was riding fifty yards in front of the others. He had told them to lie low in case of trouble and to watch for a chance of escape. If they heard firing they were not on any account to ride forward to assist him. That was imperative. It would do him no good and would endanger them.

His glance swept the entrance to the pass as he topped a rise, and his pulse leaped to excitement. Tom Truesdale was there, on horseback, a rifle in his hands. Evidently he was holding the gateway of escape in the expectation that his men would drive Jim toward him.

It was a split second before the killer saw the young man, and so much advantage Jim had. The shock of the adventure unsteadied Jim. Before the echoes of his shot had died down the horse of Truesdale, wounded in the flank, had flung its rider and Black Tom had reached the shelter of a boulder.

Jim swung from the saddle and raced for cover. He found it, behind the gnarled trunk of a live oak, but not before a bullet sang past him as he scudded for the tree.

A narrow arroyo, not more than two or three feet deep; ran from the roots of the live oak. From where he lay Jim could not see the outlaw nor be seen by him unless one of them exposed himself. If Jim could have trusted Pattie to do as he had told her he would have waited patiently for his chance. But he knew her impulsiveness and was afraid that she would come running into the danger zone.

Jim crept along the arroyo for seven or eight yards, then cautiously peered through a clump of cactus, his eyes searching for Truesdale. Simultaneously there came the crack of a rifle. A bark chip flew from the trunk of the live oak. The bandit evidently thought his foe was still behind the tree.

Truesdale's shot told Jim exactly where Black Tom was lying. He was crouched behind a rock spur, close to the smooth

face of a granite wall which rose at the entrance to the pass. Not an inch of the man's body was visible.



Jim's moment of panic was past. He was as cool as any old-timer could have been, and his brain was functioning with swift clarity. Why not try a ricochet shot? He had heard Hughes Henry tell of such a shot killing, by sheer chance, an Apache stalking a ranchman. If it could be done by chance, why not by design?

The young man took very careful aim at the face of rock and fired. He had been able to do so without exposing himself to return fire.

The spit of the bullet as it struck the sand told him that he must allow for a more obtuse angle than he had expected. He drew another bead on the rock wall. Truesdale's shot anticipated his, and a spurt of dirt flew over his head.

The echoes of Jim's third shot came booming back to him. From the rocks at the opening of the pass a man rose and came lurching forward.

"Come out an' fight, you damn spy," Truesdale roared.

By the man's zigzag course Jim believed that he was wounded. But it might be a trap. The young man took careful aim and sent another bullet winging across the desert.

Truesdale staggered, came on another step or two, tripped over his own feet, and plunged to the ground.

Even now, remembering how he had trapped Marshall, Jim would have taken no chances if he had not seen Pattie running forward, if he had not heard her fear-filled voice calling him. Jim could not get another shot at Truesdale in the slight hollow where he lay, and he dared not wait till Pattie reached him. He rose and ran toward the fallen man, moving with a crouched tense watchfulness.

Jim stopped. Truesdale had raised himself on an elbow, dragging himself up with extreme difficulty. Somehow he managed to raise his heavy revolver, though it swayed drunkenly. Before Jim could fire, two explosions rang out, the two sounding almost like one.

It was the man's dying effort. Only his gameness, his stubborn will to kill, had made it possible for him to send those wild

bullets from the weapon. His head sank down, and he lay in a huddled heap. Black Tom Truesdale had come to the end of his trail.

Jim did not turn at sound of Bob's excited voice, at Pattie's shrill demand to know whether he had been hurt. Slowly, watchfully, he moved forward till he stood above the man who had been Arizona's most notorious killer.

The arms lay extended, the limp fingers of one hand still curled around the butt of the Colt's.

"See if his heart is beating," Jim said quietly to Bob, his weapon still covering the lax figure.

Bob's fingers trembled as they searched beneath the man's clothing. He nodded, presently.

"You sure got him, Jim," he said, and his voice was shaking.

Jim made no comment, unless it was one to say, in a throaty voice, "Let's get outa here—quick."

They mounted, rode into the pass, through it, and into the timber of the descent which led them to Lost Park.

Not till they reached the Henry ranch and found the sheriff's posse there did Jim breathe easily. He had expected the challenge of the two remaining outlaws, and for one day he had burnt all the powder he wanted to.

CHAPTER XLIV

TRAIL'S END

BUCK STURGIS bowlegged forward. "By gum, if it ain't young Hellamile, sure as I'm a foot high. What's new in Barlow Park, boy?"

"We found Miss Henry," Jim said simply.

The old-timer's bright eyes gleamed. "You don't say! This the lady, I reckon. Pleased to death to meet you, ma'am."

Pattie was slipping from the saddle. "How's Uncle Hughes?" she asked breathlessly.

"Fine as the white. Rarin' like a wild colt because we didn't find you. He'll sure be plumb tickled to meet up with you."

Already Pattie was flying into the house to her uncle's room. On the way she passed Sheriff Lutz coming out. Sturgis called to his chief, jocosely, in his lazy drawl.

"Here's your plugged nickel back again, Lutz, looks like. He chassed into the young lady an' brought her back with him."

"That ain't all," burst out Bob, no longer able to contain the news. "He jumped Sam Marshall an' Tom Truesdale, an' sent 'em both to kingdom come."

"What!" ejaculated the sheriff, dumb-founded. "You mean killed them—Marshall an' Truesdale both?"

"Bet yore boots!" The boy began to get expansive as his admiration burgeoned into words.

"Dawg my cats!" broke in Buck Sturgis. "Spill yore story, boy. Onload it quick. How, where, an' when?"

"Not much to tell," Jim said, embarrassed. "I had luck."

"I'll say you did," Buck agreed. "Any-one who mixed it with Black Tom an' come out alive had luck—giltedged luck, too. I ain't disputin' that none. But tell us about it."

"Why, I seen him first an' dropped his horse. We both ran for cover. He was in the rocks, an' I took a whirl at a ricochet shot. Second time I hit him. He come runnin' out an' wanted me to fight



in the open. Then I drilled him. Nothin' more to it."

"There was, too," denied Bob. "You ran out, an' he took two cracks at you with his six-gun."

"That's so too, but he was most dead when he fired them. If it hadn't been for that ricochet shot, a plumb lucky accident—"

"Hmp!" grunted Buck. "You *made* that accident happen, didn't you, boy? Dawggone my skin, I never heard tell of the beat of it. Marshall an' Truesdale both. An' you a kid still. You're sure the go-get-'em guy. The Lost Park gang is busted flush now."

"Sure you killed both of them?" asked the sheriff. This was a story difficult to accept. It had improbability written all over it.

"I didn't kill Marshall. He shot himself," Jim said.

Bob looked at the sheriff, triumph riding in his dark eyes. He was thinking that Lutz had jeered at his friend Jim and his plans.

"They'll never be deader, either of 'em," he said.

"How d'you mean shot himself?" Lutz asked.

Jim told the story briefly. Buck looked at him with shining-eyed admiration. He had lived his life on the frontier and had known many bad men and many desperate encounters, but he had never known anything like this before.

"You sure take the watch, boy. Got 'em, by gum, spite of hell an' high water."

Jim was taken into the house, to tell his story again. He found in the big room downstairs Hughes Henry and Jack Lawrence. Both of them were on the road to recovery.

What Jim had to say was said in a few sentences, but Bob and Pattie were present to elaborate the theme. This they did, with enthusiasm so exuberant that he blushed with shame.

"Sho! I jest happened to be Johnnie-on-the-spot," he demurred. "An' my luck stood up fine, like I keep tellin' you."

He reached into his pocket for the makings, not because he wanted to smoke but because it relieved his embarrassment to be doing something with his hands. Having spilled tobacco into the paper, he rolled and lit the cigarette.

"Boy, I give you best," Hughes Henry told him. "Tom flung a blue whistler into me an' one into Lawrence here. But you did his business for him right. He was one bad hombre, an' Sam Marshall was another." His arm was around his niece and it tightened as he spoke. "We sure owe you a lot, we Henrys. I reckon I can't tell you how much. Well, let that go. But if the time ever comes when you need friends, an' need them awful bad, why don't forget we're waitin' for a call, son."

"If you want a job in the rangers—" Lawrence began.

"I don't," interrupted Jim hurriedly. "I hope I'll never use a gun again as long as I live. I'm through, unless someone pushes me."

After supper Jim went to the corral to look after his horse. A slim shadow flitted toward him in the moonlight. His heart beat faster while he waited for Pattie to join him. With that lilting step came enchantment and romance. She was so young and slim and vivid. Joy of life sang in the movements of her light limbs. It was too good to be true. He was not worthy. He had lived with rough hard men, and she was that mysterious unknown creature a sweet clean girl. None the less she loved him, even as he did her.

He knew it. Her deep eyes had flashed him that wonderful message.

They moved straight into each other's arms, without words. He forgot his shyness, his awkwardness. He told her, in the voiceless way of the universal lover, that she was the center and circumference of his world.

And she in turn let him know how completely she had surrendered her heart into his keeping.

A thin wafer of a moon, a million stars, looked down on youth's supreme moment of happiness.

THE rest is anticlimax.

Jim returned to the Bar X Y and found that Walter K. Trapper had in his absence been busy in the matter of the Sloan estate. He had unearthed witnesses, one of them the woman who had taken care of him in his mother's absence. Proof of identity had been gathered, sufficient to satisfy any just court.

When the time of contest came Custer Turner had disappeared. It was one thing to put up a fight when he had Black Tom Truesdale's fighting prestige behind him; it was quite another to play a lone hand against this redoubtable youngster who had back of him Trapper, Hughes Henry, and the moral support of the rangers. Wherefore the street fakir quietly slipped away, realizing that the cards were no longer stacked in his favor.

The courts decided Jim and his sister were the rightful heirs to the Sloan property.

So Jim and his young bride moved to the Sloan ranch to seek their happiness there. And there they found it. If by some strange chance you should drop in upon them today a darkeyed woman will bid you welcome graciously. She is still beautiful and vivid, but she is matronly. For stalwart sons and slim tall daughters call Pattie mother. And it may be that a big heavysset man in dusty corduroys and broad pinched-in felt hat may canter down the road and swing from the saddle in front of the house. Anyone in a dozen counties can tell you that this is Jim Tedrow—he no longer calls himself Turner—the man who wiped out the Truesdale gang years ago and brought law and order to the district. He is lord of wide acres and thousands of cattle, but better than that he holds the respect of everyone who knows him.

My tale is told. Therefore I write



THE LAURELLED LIE

By HOLMAN DAY

Author of "Defiant Honor," "Man the River," etc.

A "HERO" OF THE BIG WOODS FINDS THAT IN THE WORLD OF THE CITIES OUTSIDE YOU MAY COME UP AGAINST A SITUATION THAT REQUIRES HEROISM OF QUITE ANOTHER SORT. MR. DAY HAS COMPRESSED MUCH DRAMA INTO THIS STORY OF ANOTHER WAY WITH HEROES

OVER the low watershed between Karntah River and the Wissatoquick Lake to the south there extends for a mile a log-carrier operated by the Grand Telos pulp concern. Power developed at the Karntah Falls operates a cable fitted with dogs, and the logs are hauled along in a chute up the moderate grade from the river. At the peak of the slope a volume of flooding water pours into the chute from a diverted stream and the logs sluggishly move along by their own momentum and are sluiced into the lake.

A wayfarer too lazy to foot it, with time enough for the caterpillar progress, can sit on a log and be transported from river to lake.

Murtagh O'Meagher was journeying one day by that route. He had all the time in the world, no particular ultimate destination, no schedule. He was squatting on a big spruce log that had a flattened base, timber malformed in growth. It had appealed to him as an especially safe char-

iot; it would not roll over in the chute. Once he would not have minded how much a log rolled. But he was no longer an agile riverman.

He carried his right leg on his back, slung there by a strap around his neck!

The leg was artificial—the very last word in that sort of a contraption. Nearly as many gears as there are in a fivver! Polished wood and shiny metal! There was a silver plate with the legend:

"To Murty from the Boys. A Present to a Hero."

Naturally, Murty was very choice of that leg, now carrying it high on his back. He was giving sloppy water no chance to rust or tarnish.

In general brightness his countenance matched the sheen of the leg in the sunshine. No hint of despondency because he was a cripple! As a matter of fact, he had developed a mood in which resignation had flowered into rosy satisfaction with his lot. Drab duties, grinding toil, had been shifted into something like a

bland life of leisure. And everlastingly the incense of praise! He had been exalted as a hero! The thing had gone to his head. His whole nature had undergone a change in a manner to make the judicious grieve.

Until the devil had taken toll in the way of a leg, O'Meagher was as modest and meek a man as there was in the whole North Country. And he had a lot of worthy deeds to his credit, at that! Now, only the glamor of a recent sacrificial deed kept his associates from perceiving that he had become an insufferable Big Noise. But he was not admitting for a moment that he had been spoiled. Nobody had said so except the field manager of the Telos Corporation, having his last talk with Murty that very morning.

Even the field manager, indignant as he had been, had not dared to bounce O'Meagher. Murty had resigned! Nothing less than that! And with swaggering impudence, too! He had been feeling for some time that his job as a wangan storekeeper was below him, peddling out slop-stuff and marking up candy and cigars against Polacks, and obliged to go to all the bother of making up his own nicknames for them, unable to understand their lingo or spell their real names.

"Mistakes I've med', have I?" he sneered in the face of Manager Weston. Murty even puffed into the manager's face the smoke from one of the company's cigars; the storekeeper had become a persistent end-to-end smoker, everlastingly lighting a fresh cigar from a glowing butt, and not bothering to smoke the butt down very far at that! Nor did he trouble to charge the cigars to himself: As a hero who had saved for the company a man's life and indemnity insurance, was not Murtagh O'Meagher entitled to his drag? "Mistakes, eh? Do ye dare fire me? Tell me that!"

"No!" admitted the manager grudgingly.

"Right ye are! The crew would walk out on ye! They've made that their stand—and we all know it! But I don't tek none o' yer lip! It lowers me. I have a reppytation to keep up! I'm resigning. I'll tell the boys so, to save ye'r face, else they'd walk out behind me." It was condescending assurance from a man mighty in his own conceit. "I want to get out o' here, anyway. I'm oneasy! I want to cash in on something whilst it's hot. No matter what 'tis. It's me own business!" He patted his breast importantly. "So

good-by to ye. Put this job in ye'r eye. 'T will not bother ye about seeing past it, so small it is."

In the bunkhouse at noon Murty patronizingly made his farewell speech.

One man frankly wept. This was "Que-daw" Bissette, the riverman after whom Murty had gone down the swirling torrent of Hell's Stewkettle, saving a life and losing a leg between grinding logs, so the affair had been accepted.

"Mark ye, it's resigning, I am!" stressed O'Meagher. "So ye have no call to put up ye'r fists to the Telos comp'ny. There are big things f'r me outside. And I sha'n't forgit ye, byes! Sha'n't I be walkin' on this?" He pulled up his trousers to show the artificial leg and patted the silver plate. "Ye all chipped in to give it me! And it fair talks to me, ev'ry step I make. On'y a little squeak but there's language f'r me all the time. I'm going on my own hook, of my own free will. So ye have no call to jack your jobs."

And a little later he marched away, his trouser leg still pulled above his knee to exhibit the workings of the gift, and the men hoorayed for him and bawled hopes for his success, keeping it up as long as he remained in sight and hearing; there was hardly a limp or catch in his gait as he strode. The observers felicitated themselves; they had given their hero the best that money could buy, they boasted, and he would surely make his way in the world with a fancy leg like that.

Before Murty reached the near end of the log carrier, haughtily disdainful to ask for a ride on the company tote-team after his run-in with the field manager, the adoring Bissette overtook the hero. "Bagoosh, I go off onto de world wit' you!"

The panting, stuttering satellite chased doggedly along in spite of Murty's profane protests. There was something deeper than mere vexation in the hero's expression and in the tone of his commands. It was as if Bissette were an unpleasant reminder—an accusing conscience on two legs, pestering by pursuing.

"Now look ye here, Canuck!" Murty halted and brandished an admonishing forefinger. "I have big plans outside and ye won't fit into 'em. Trot ye back to ye'r own concerns, else I'll be tempted to slash off the lifewarp I spliced for ye."

"Oui! Yes! She all belong to you, dat life!" The French Canadian's face worked with swift emotion, his eyes gleamed with unsatisfied curiosity. "Now you go off onto de world and thees poor Canuck he

don' know all dat brave t'ing w'at you done to save me." He emphasized speech with violent gestures. "Slosh, I go off onto de water—and I don' know no more teell I been lift off'm dat water and poof, poof on ma breat' so as to be alive som' more! And you don' tell maself how you breeng me off'm dat water—and nobody tell me 'cause dey don' see! Dey come on de run and you poor leg she ba'n chaw off!"

Murty sliced the air with his palm. "Nuttin' to it, Quedaw! Let it all stand as it's braced! Ye owe me a lot o' thanks, hey? Well, then, show best regards and so forth by beating it back to camp." Murty flapped the palm. "Scoot!"

The worshipper backed away. "I don' have now so beeg a story to tell about you," he mourned. "I like to tell somebody ev'ry day. But I can't make de nice long story so as to praise you."

Murty whirled and trudged on his way. There was a queer twist in his features. Conscious that it might be a revelatory grimace he was more at ease when he had turned his back on the adorer; the god was unmistakably embarrassed.

"Ye're alive, Quedaw, after going t'roo' the Stew-kittle! What's the need o' more story than that? Good-by to ye—and kape ye're-driving-calks sharp after this!"

When Murty had found a safe seat on the flattened log, and was voyaging along the chute, he put out of his thoughts what he was leaving behind. He was journeying toward a future; again he had the poise of a hero, on his way to realize on fame.

Here and there were sluice-tenders on platforms; he beamed on the greeters patronizingly when he moved past. "I'm on me way, byes! Big things f'r me outside, ye know!"

They swung their caps and cheered as if they did know.

Murty was not confessing to his own soul that he himself did not know what was ahead of him. But there must be something good, he felt. He had been receiving admiring letters from certain parties down in the city. They had been urging him to come out of the woods and show himself and be hailed as a hero by the bunch. They said he had earned a good time. They had sent to him clippings from the newspapers and were profane in denouncing the carelessness by which his name had been printed "Martin O'Mara." But the sting of the error had been quite removed by their assurances that the friends all knew who the hero was and had

passed the word generally about the mistake in nomenclature.

Murty stuffed hard candy into his cheek, lighted a fresh cigar in the way of a double treat and pulled out the clippings, at ease on his log. A rewrite man had frilled



up a story for a Sunday paper, with an artist's drawing of the thrilling rescue. There was a half page of it—a glowing tribute to Martin O'Mara and to woodsmen all, heroes always ready to sacrifice for a comrade in peril. The article was an excellent soporific for nag-

ging doubts; they did persist in waking to do their stuff! But here was the tale of doer and deed, all set down in print—and print put a seal of authenticity on the affair.

So Murty munched his candy and puffed on his cigar and believed that he had made no mistake in telling Boss Weston what was what. The crop of fame must be ripe for the reaping. Murty read over again the clippings, as he had read them daily, and made no account of the fact that the world is concerned mostly with the news of the day and date.

At the peak of the watershed the dogs released their clutch on the big log and it coasted slowly down the sluice on its way to the lake. Far ahead he could see the gang of pikepole men rafting logs for the tow across to the outlet. He decided to make a bit of a dramatic entry on the scene. That was to be the general scheme of his advent into the world outside, where folks had been apprised of his derringdo. He made up his mind to start in as he purposed to keep going—show 'em something!

Therefore, instead of playing carefully safe by dropping over the edge of the sluice onto the shore of the lake, he stood up on his hale foot, whooped shrilly to draw attention to himself and tried to ride the log in its sluggish plunge from the mouth of the sluice.

On two feet and with boots armed with calks there would have been no two ways

about the feat; in his day Murty could run a log with the best of 'em! But the big stick thudded against the rafter timber, rolled half way over and dumped the rider into the water.

He made an inglorious exit from his bath. A river jack thrust a pikepole into Murty's clutch and another helper dragged the choking adventurer up onto a boom headworks. Still another man, after the victim had spewed water and had recovered from his strangling, proffered a mackinaw and assisted Murty in drying the artificial leg.

Old Seth Martin, guide, trapper and woods cynic, came to the platform, poling his canoe along clear spaces between the floating logs. "Pride goeth before a fall, Mister Hero!"

"I didn't take 'count o' what was ahead o' me," confessed Murty, a bit humbled for the moment by the show he had made. The jacks had laughed at him—they couldn't help it.

"Looks to me like you're headed for the outside," said Martin. "Be ye taking any 'count of what li'ble to be ahead o' ye there?"

"I ain't worryin' none," retorted Murty stoutly, stripping off his sodden garments in order to adjust the harness of the gift leg. "I've got something coming to me, and I'm going after it."

"Guess you'll get it all right—but I ain't saying where I think you'll get it!"

"Lay off'm your slurs, Seth," protested one of the crew. "Remember you're talking to a hero."

"Let the old fool gab!" Murty blustered. "The whole world knows what I be!"

"If they don't already know," affirmed Martin, "they're sure in a way to find out. Seeing as how you've called me an old fool, I'll have to come back at ye, Murty." He fumbled among his belongings in the canoe and brought forth a blanket. "Toss me your clothes and we'll let 'em dry on the thwarts while I paddle ye to the stage depot. Wrop up in this blanket."

"You'll paddle me, hey?" stammered the hero, taken aback by the kind proffer.

"Oh, yes! It's all in the way o' grudge. Sooner you get to the outside, the sooner you'll be getting what's coming to you, due and proper. I'll furnish a smart ash breeze."

Squatting in the bow of the canoe, facing forward, O'Meagher was silent for most of the way across the lake. Martin paddled sturdily with little grunts of effort. Speech boiled in the hero at last, though

he did not turn his head when he spoke. "Seth, ye've got a damned currycomb in ye'r mouth 'stead of a tongue."

"Oh, yes! Most human hides need currycombing." Martin took the time to bite off a chew of tobacco, resting the paddle across his knees.

"Well, ye're raking on me against the lay o' the hair, blast ye!"

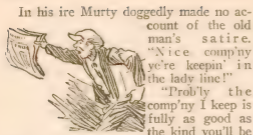
Seth began to paddle again, chewing in rhythm. "Well, le's comb the smooth way for a minute! Murty, you've al'ays been a square-shooting, up-and-coming cuss in the woods. Never a spryer riverman on the Karntah waters. You've follerred the straight an' reg'lar road o' woodsmen all! The meek and honest kind! You've done a whole lot o' big chores, resking your life to do 'em. And when they've tried to hair-oil you with praise you've grinned and told 'em all to go to hell. That's good woods style!"

"Much obleeged!" scoffed Murty. "But lay off'm the soft guff!"

"Al'ays perfectly willing to 'commodate! So here's t'other tack." The old man swung the dripping paddle over his head and drove deeply on the other side of the canoe. "I've al'ays reckoned that good sense and honest notions and all sechlike qualities are in a feller's brains or, at any rate, are sort o' spread 'round through his system. But in your case they seem to have been settled in that right leg o' your'n. Leastways, when you lost it all the other things was yanked out o' you. You've now turned into something that's a mix-up of ostrich, peacock, rooster and damned fool. And that ain't praise!"

"It don't need no logmark on it to class it as your kind o' timber," snarled the hero. "And I ain't different from I ever was. I'm only taking what's due me—what *has* been due me f'r a long time—only I hadn't woke up. This leg speaks for what I am." He patted the possession. "The boys nigh went broke giving it to me! And if ye knowed how to read, ye cussed old grabbyneck, ye'd see how I've been played up in the newspapers."

"I know!" There was deep sarcasm in the reply. "I got a pretty little schoolmarm to set on my knee and read it all out loud to me. And she says, says she, when she finished, 'This ain't the first time them devilish newspapers has raised p'tickler hell, torching a decent feller up and sp'il'ing him. Some good friend oughta go 'round and stand on one foot behind Murty O'Meagher and use t'other foot where it'll do the most good!"



In his ire Murty doggedly made no account of the old man's satire. "Nice comp'ny ye're keepin' in the lady line!" "Prob'ly the comp'ny I keep is fully as good as the kind you'll be falling into, once you're outside. You're in for a gadawful tumble—wusser'n you got off'm that log. All so proud and gay—and souse into the drink you went. That ought to be a sign and a warning, son. Now, Murty, what say! All dirt sech as the lake water didn't wash out of you, this nice breeze ought to be dusting out, now 't you're dry. If you're fairly clean once more—and you know what I mean—suppose I turin 'round and paddle you back to the woods ag'in."

"Not by a damsite!"

"Oh, very well!" agreed Martin serenely. "It's sure in you, the dirty stuff, deeper'n water, wind and a currycomb tongue can reach. So go on into the outside suds—and through the wringer. If there's any rags of you left later on I'll paddle 'em back into the Karntah region pervidin' I'm handy by or you'll get word to me."

He helped Murty disembark on the shingle of the shore near the stage depot and assisted him in dressing behind the screen of a logpile.

"Well, anyway le's shake hands—and no hard feelings!" proposed the departing hero.

"Sure thing! I said at the start off of our little friendly confab, you was al'ays toponotch on the river. I've only been calling to your 'tention how as you can't boom logs with a weak link in the coupling-grab. Get me, don't you?"

"Naw!"

"Sorry. The idea is, you never did make nothing special o' things when you deserved to. And now you're all a-whoosh in cashing in on a bum proposition. There's al'ays a kickback in sech stuff, Murty. I say again—sorry."

The hero swung away, handling his gift leg as jauntily as possible. "Don't ketch ye f'r a minute, Martin!" he declared stubbornly.

"Listen, Murty!" called the woodsman in tones prudently muted. "I'm the one and only man in this region who has had the right to warn ye, like I've done this day. You'll meet all your worries outside.

I don't want ye should take any worry away with ye! It's p'tickler nice because a good and close-mouthed friend was the only one who stood on the edge of Hell's Stew-kittle on a certain day and date, That's me. And that's all! Go fight it out by yourself."

He hopped into the canoe, driving it off the shore by a kick of his foot. He stood in the middle of the craft and paddled with all his strength, paying no attention when Murty yelled incoherently.

II

FROM the terminus, the jumping-off railroad station, Hero O'Meagher wired to the city, addressing an admiring friend who had been especially helpful in collecting newspaper clippings—a friend who had been urging that the hero come forth and show himself.

Therefore, a considerable gathering gave tumultuous greeting in the big trainshed in the city. The general mob flocked around the greeters and cheered, not bothering to get the details of what it was all about.

O'Meagher accepted the demonstration at face value when he was carried on the shoulders of two friends to an automobile. He beamed and he ducked acknowledgments and assured himself that this was the life!

Then the panorama began to revolve, speeding up. It became a dizzying blur for the eyes, and the ears were unable to translate the big noise. The acclaimed hero gave up trying to keep account of time or events or places. Eventually he was as impervious to all sensation as was the artificial leg.

When the verities returned they emerged slowly from a fog of forgetfulness which Hero O'Meagher never did penetrate in later times. Shame dulled curiosity then as it did afterward.

Lying prone on his back on a hard bench, his first consciousness was that a sun was shining through the forgetfulness-fog. Soon he ascertained that the illuminant was an electric lamp in whose light certain ominous iron bars were disclosed.

He was in jail, in a cell. In his old roistering days he had had his experiences in that line. But they were laughed off by reckless youth as a part of the game; the gang always reassembled in the court room and paid the minor fines and nudged and winked and giggled—and flocked out for an eye-opener.

But Murtagh O'Meagher now had gray

at his temples—and he was a hero! He had disgraced himself in his new attitude toward life; he had smutched his escutcheon; perhaps his name would be in the newspapers again—this time tagged as “drunk and disorderly.”

He groaned.

Came a voice from the other side of the cell. “It sure does beat hell, pard, the stuff they sell you for booze nowadays!”

Murty rolled his aching head and saw a grimed nondescript, a common bum, reclining on the bench opposite. O’Meagher instinctively fumbled at his pockets; they were empty.

“Don’t think I nicked you, old sport! They frisk all of us upstairs before we’re dumped down here.”

“Do you know what time it is?” moaned Murty.

“Just heard a tower bell hit off five.”

“Were you here when I came in?”

“Yep! You were lugged in—paralyzed—all of you matching the dummy leg.”

Murty groaned again; fine company, he, for that gift brought by the hard-earned wages of hero worshippers! He rolled over on the hard bench and faced the concrete wall. It was as blank as his future.

After a long session with his torturing thoughts he was released and limped in the line of unfortunates to take his turn in front of a callous desk sergeant.

“Name!” It was curt demand.

“Murtagh O’Meagher.” The hero expected to strike a spark from the flint. But there was not even a recognizing blink of the hard gray eyes of the sergeant. He was fumbling cards in a little file.

“Listen, sir!” mumbled Murty, gripping his courage to make his well-conned appeal. “This happened because I was being honored as a hero and—”

“The judge will listen to all that. Here’s your ticket for your stuff!” He pushed along the desk a bit of cardboard.

“But you must ‘a’ read about what I done in the Karthah and—”

The deskman flipped a gesture and an officer gave Murty an impatient push.

The clerk who presided at the cubby-holes where prisoners’ belongings were tucked, a perpetual victim of blasé indifference, handed over Murty’s watch, knife and the packet of newspaper clippings. They were stained and torn and gave forth an odor of stale alcohol; a flash of memory informed the owner of the zeal with which he had passed those clippings around at the request of clamorous unknowns who wanted to post up on the hero’s deed.

“Where’s my money, mister?” choked Murty.

“You’ve got all that was took off’n you, boy! Crowd along! Give the others their chance.”

Police officers were grouped, idling, ready to go into court as witnesses in the cases where they had been engaged. One of them noted O’Meagher’s distress and stepped forward. “I helped raid the joint we lugged you out of. Most of ‘em got away. But you didn’t play in any such luck, old top, with that bum leg, and being dead to the world! Guess you were a sucker for the gang. Must have been Sammy the Spender last night! I didn’t find a cent on you.”

In the ranks of the herded prisoners Murty failed to find one face he knew.

This officer, killing time before court attendance, seemed to possess some measure of friendly inclination.

Murty anxiously thrust forward the clippings. “Here’s who I be, Mister Cop. It’s all printed about me. Of course, my name ain’t spelt right but it’s me and I was being done honor to.”

“Whatever was done it was done good and proper,” declared the officer, pushing back the hand with clippings. “Got no time now to read or talk! Only wanted to set you right as to the force. You were cleaned out before we scampered into the dump!”

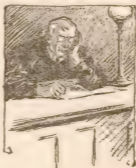
He rejoined his fellows and Murty went along with the ragtag into the hopper of the court. His gaze ranged eagerly over the scattered groups of listless spectators. Surely some of the ardent backslappers of

the night before would be on hand in the morning to rescue a hero; Not one of the avowed friends was visible, however.

And as steadily as the endless chain in the Karthah sluice the relentless court procedure

went on—“You are charged—you are fined—you are committed till payment.” The hero, struggling up when his name was called, was dumped just as he had been dumped at the end of the big sluice in the woods.

Murty tried to get in a word to the judge who droned, his eyes on his papers.



But another victim was on the grid immediately and speech stuck in the hero's throat when a bailiff warned that making a disturbance in court would provoke a worse dose than a mere drunk charge.

Back in his cell, waiting to be transferred to the county jail, Murty got the attention of a trusty and the later consented to do his best to get a message to the prisoner's friend who had acted on the telegram from up-country.

But hours of detention followed and finally the trusty reported, with discouraging lack of interest in the matter, that the person could not be located.

"That's the style of most of 'em when they're dodging a touch, old sport! Might's well make up your mind to take it easy for thirty days!"

But Murty had already decided on a desperate alternative. He implored the trusty to call the turnkey. To that functionary he confided the artificial leg, sole asset in that time of stress. "Get it hocked f'r me, sir! Rather would I hop on me one leg in the free air o' God than have the two props under me inside a jail."

The turnkey was sufficiently compassionate to attend to the commission. Also, it would be better for the city to have the cash than for the county to go to the cost of boarding a one-legged prisoner for a month. However, he enjoined on his emissary, "Only get enough on this jogger to settle the fine and the trimmings. If he grabs onto more cash he'll bang it for booze."

Later, the turnkey came to Murty and exhibited a release slip, showing that the fine had been turned into the hands of the court. Also, the officer brought a crutch from the ruck of salvaged articles in the storeroom. He presented the crutch with his compliments and with some tart remarks on the folly that had brought Murty to his sad state. "And here's the ticket for your leg." He dusted his palms after passing over the pasteboard.

"And no extry dollar or two?" queried Murty wistfully. "Begum, I'm hungry!"

"Most anybody on the street will slip a one-legger a piece o' change for a bite and a bracer of coffee, son. Only watch out that a cop doesn't get you for panhandling. If you had raked down nore money on that leg you'd never catch coin enough to redeem it. Now hop away!"

So Murty hopped. He sunk his chin on his breast to avoid the stares of the city throngs. A few hours before he had been carried on men's shoulders and had been

acclaimed by a cheering congress of humanity. Now, a devil of a hero was he!

"Seth Martin," he muttered, "ye raked me and ye rasped me and ye madded me. Ye told me to take warning fr'm the flop off'm the big log. Now I've flopped down off'm a damsite bigger log. Wurra, wurra! What'll I do?"

He was obliged to rest often, unused to this hitch-and-go gait. He turned his gaze from cooks who were tossing pancakes behind glossy windows. His stomach, raw with liquor, craved coffee; but he closed his nostrils to savory whiffs from the doors of restaurants. Beg? A free woodsman was not down to that! Odorous swirls of tobacco smoke assailed him. And his hand had been everlastingly in a cigar box at the store-camp! He had a dim memory of handing out to sycophants, the evening before, all the cigars with which he had stocked his pockets. "Dammit," soliloquized Hero O'Meagher, "in cashing in right, it ain't what folks say about ye, it's what ye know about ye'rself. What-in-ell will I do?"

This perpetually nagging query was answered in part a bit later. Murty was resting again. He had taken refuge in the alcove-entrance of an untenanted store. A snappily-dressed young man trotted past, flung a glance at Murty, whirled and returned. "Want a job?"

"But I'm only a one-legger."

"What the—? Say, don't you think I've got eyes? I wouldn't hire a man with two legs. Talk quick—yes or no!"

"Yes—and damn' sudden."

The chap flung up his hand and hailed a taxicab passing without a fare. It swung to the curb.

Murty's woodsman honesty struggled to the surface, dragging up doubts. "I don't want to git into no underhand stuff, mister!"

"What you'll be doing will be so open it'll be like sitting on top o' the world, uncle!" Boosting and pushing, he got his new employee into the cab and slammed the door. He gave a direction and money to the driver and the cab buzzed away.

"Well," mused Murty, "this ain't much like old Seth's canoe—but it's sure happened along in the nick o' time."

But he was not a bit exalted in spirit while he bounced on the cushions. This quick, unquestioning grab for a cripple could mean no good, he was sure. He had a woodsman's blunt and uncomplimentary opinion of conditions outside the forest. His woeful eyes surveyed the bustling

throngs on the sidewalks—folks who plainly had work to do and homes to go to, and all that! He fumbled in his empty pockets; then he tried to remember what he had done with his duffel bag.

When the cab stopped, a black man wearing a red cap opened the door and added to Murty's deep humiliation by a hasty hunt for baggage. He noted the leg-stub propping out the sagging pantaloons. "Hy-ah! Hy-ah!" he chuckled. "Boss, you done belong, hey?"

"I don't belong to nobody," growled Murty and he yapped a curse when the redcap yanked the crutch out of a limp hand. The driver flipped down his meter tab and joined the black man.

"What's the giggle about, redcap? Tickled because a white man is trimmed up to suit you?"

"I don't laff at dis gent—no, sah! But dey done come a-drivin' up—odder gents what has mis-laid deir laigs. De's flockin' in de waitin'-room."

"What's the big idea, mister?" The driver put this question to Murty.

"You know as much about it as I do," admitted the passenger, accepting the help of the two in getting out of the cab. He hobbled after the redcap who volunteered to show the way to the other gentlemen who were short of legs.

There were five of them ranged in a row along a bench in the smoking room of the railroad station. Two of them had crutches, three were provided with peg legs. Murty eased himself down at the end of the row and made the even half dozen of lopped humanity.

The new arrival's anxious questions were forestalled. One of the group queried with anxiety of his own, "Say, Kid, what's this all about?"

"You say!" snapped Murty. He was not favorably impressed by the looks of his mates. They were frowsy floaters, that fact was plain enough. Not one of them had ever seen another till that meeting, they promptly disclosed to the newcomer. They had been snapped up on the street by a dude with a pearl-gray suit and a billycock hat; so had Murty. The dude had told them they did not need to know anything except that they were hired. All they could do after Murty's arrival was canvass the situation with increasing wonderment.

"Well," confided one, "I don't give a good damn hooted into the bunghole of an empty scuttlebutt! I'm a sailor that had his leg chawed off in the bight of a hal-yard. And I've been on the rocks ever sense! As to this gag now! Anything for three squares."

"Same with me about the eats," declared another. "Was riding the rods and greased the track with one o' my legs. Been trying the pencil gyp on the streets with the A Eee Fff gag. But the cops kept a-rushing me off to one o' them soldier hospitals—and then 'twas off to jail when I couldn't prove up."

Another tossed his cap with a deft swing to the end of his wooden leg. "A cave-in got me on the pen rockpile. Wish now I had been sent up for manslaughter. Would be took care of, 't any rate! If a pan-handler tells the trut' about how he warn't no soldier nobody'll believe him. All say go to a hospital where you belong."

"Yah-h-h! That's where they rushed me when a truck smashed me prop," stated the fourth in line. "It could 'a' been saved, all right, if I'd had dough. But they let the saw-kids dock it off'm me for practice. Damn a hospital when you ain't got dough."

The fifth in the flotsam, the man sitting next to Murty, disclosed in his turn. He was curt and spoke out only after he had been prodded. "Got drunk and laid out and it froze on me."

The hero of Karntah remained silent. One by one, the heads in the row dipped forward and the unfortunates all stared at him, mutely questioning. A man presumed with speech. "Well, bo, unload!"

Murty, his eyes set straight ahead, now desperately burying fame which till then he had vaunted proudly, snarled from the corner of his mouth, "Go to hell, the whole of ye!"

"Oh, if it's something you're ashamed of, keep it to yourself," said their spokesman airily.

Something he was ashamed of! After what those muckers had confessed! He wanted to yank out his newspaper clippings and fling them into the blowy faces and bang their skulls with his crutch. However, as he sat in that company and condition, a devil of a hero was he!

After a silence there was a suggestion from one of the group. "Time hangs heavy right now. What say, feelers, if we start a guessing match as to how this hollerer for hell lost his pin?"

They agreed heartily and pestered



Murty to the point of fury by their hazarded opinions.

In his fear lest he might commit assault and get back into that dreadful jail, he spoke out. "Will ye promise on the square level to shet your yawp if I'll tell ye what did happen to me?"

"Sure thing!" they chorused.

"I was up in the big woods and a bingle-hooper bit it off!"

"We'll stay shet," affirmed the spokesman, "if ye'll tell us what that animile is."

"I'm taking ye at ye'r word—and there'll be trouble if ye don't keep it!" He shook his crutch over his head and his countenance was twisted with malignant threat. "So I'll tell ye! It's a brother of a cat-terwhump!"

They mumbled rebelliously, but he kept his crutch poised, and the status quo was maintained until their minds were taken up with a matter of real importance.

The employer arrived, entering at a brisk pace. He had acquired items, to wit; a bamboo cane, a pink for his button-hole and a youngish lady, fat and transcendently blonde.

"Well, here they are, Maudie! Pass 'em the O. O. and let me know if they rank okay."

Up the line she waddled and down the line she side-stepped, peering sharply. The young man accompanied her, tapping his cane against the outthrust peg legs, switching gently the empty, flapping trousers.

"They're sure a bum bunch," she stated, showing no regard for the feelings of the listeners. "But I guess they'll pass after they're rigged and renovated. Lookit, you bozos, can you sing?"

Murty still kept his eyes straight ahead, his jaws rigid.

The other five swapped glances in the way of mute interrogation—and shook their heads.

"Guess we ain't much as canaries," avouched the volunteer spokesman.

"Have you lost your voice and hearing along with your leg?" demanded the lady, confronting Murty.

"Show your manners, Son!" adjured the snappy chap, tapping O'Meagher's shoulder with the cane.

"I asked you, can you sing?" The lady was offensively imperious.

Murty's temper had been whetted by the others; this last attack on him was giving wrath a wire edge. Asking the best come-all-ye shanty-boy of the north country, could he sing? But he was in no mood to expose himself or his accomplishments.

"What's this all about, any way?" he growled.

"None of your blasted business, not now!" snapped the cane man, swishing the stick in front of Murty's face. "I'm giving you down-and-outers jobs and seeing to it that you're carted and vittled! You're going to clap eyes on a lot of the country, first and last. But, one and all, you're going to show your confidence in me by coming along without fool questions. I'll let you in when I'm ready to have you know. That goes for the bunch, and quitters may now step down—on one leg!" He put suggestive emphasis on the last words.

"That feller has been high-hatting the whole of us," volunteered the talkative recruit. "He ain't going to be no great addition to a jolly party."

"No use lugging along a disturbing element," said the employer. "Back to the pave for yours, Crutchy!" He pointed to the exit with his cane.

The outcast felt his heart fairly go bump on bottom somewhere inside his breast. Empty pockets, recreant friends, no hopes, no haven, no anything except this peculiar opportunity, whatever it was! He gazed doglike, hungry, anxious, at the young chap who began to sort railroad tickets—tickets that promised a way to escape from the city where a hero had been shamed!

"Mister, I'm sorry ye ain't gitting me right!" It was humble surrender. "I'm afeared it's that way with these other fellers. But I've been through a whole lot o' trouble lately. I'll be glad to go along and ask no fool questions—a n d I'll mind me manners. Furdernore"—he stressed the declaration—"I'm a damn' good singer!"

The young man and the plump lady looked his way with fresh interest and he hastened to work upon that favorable sign.

"I can carry a tune mighty good—and I know how to train fellers to come in on the chorus, even if they ain't nothing much else than cawbirds," he urged.

"What say?" asked the young chap of the lady.

"He seems to be pegged back now



where he belongs, Sporto! Bring him along!"

Immediately the procession formed and moved. Lady and young chap were vanguard. Behind, dot and carry, followed the one leggers in single file.

They were herded into a smoking car and were left to themselves after the employer had done business with the train conductor, before rejoining the blonde lady in de luxe quarters.

"We don't know where we're going, but we're on our way. So wot t' 'ell!" said the man who had done most of the talking.

III

THERE was a railroad ride of a day and a night. The recruits slept as best they were able in the seats of the smoker.

The gabby man put the gist of the situation into a pronouncement. "Gad, we've got to do like as he says for us to do when we get to wherever we're going. We've been pulled up by the roots from where we belong. This bokay will wilt damn' sudden 'less it's took tender care of." He looked around on the individual items of the aforesaid bouquet. He fixed long, evil and accusatory stare on Murty. "Cuss ye, ye ain't no kind of a rose to look at but ye've got thorns. You're li'ble to sting him ag'in, and then he'll heave the whole of us over, mebbe. What's on your mind right now? Going to stick in the bunch and do all pleasant, whatever it is he wants us to do?"

"Yes!" admitted Murty. "I'm sure licked as it stands. I've got to stick."

In other phraseology, in the cozy draw-ingroom of a sleeper, the same general sentiments were conveyed to the blonde lady by the boss of the outfit. "Pick 'em raw—jump 'em so far they're dizzy! They'll feel it's a case o' stick or starve."

The fat lady, fresh from the diner, languidly picked her teeth. "Going to hold out pay on 'em, of course!"

"All but smoke money! Carry the bones in a bag and the pups will chase!"

So, in a far city, the recruits trailed obediently. The lady went to a hotel; a bus took the boss and his subjects along the streets, into an alley, to the stage entrance of a vaudeville theater. It was a Sunday afternoon. Men were unloading props and sets from trucks and lugging the stuff in. The overlord led his charges into the dim retirement of a section back-

stage. He ranged them about him and disclosed:

"Men, I'm Mister Porting. Bear hard on the Mister when you speak to me. I'm putting on an act. You're in it. Billed, 'Maude Mason and the Heroes of Gettysburg.' You're the heroes—like hell you are—but that's the that! Don't worry about your not being artists. You'll be drilled by me, starting mighty sudden, and I'm some driller! Le's see! One of you bragged he can sing." He singled out Murty. "Go ahead and pipe!"

This adventure of the moment was very much like a dream to Murtagh O'Meagher. The vast, gloomy, mysterious interior! The queer upheaval of everything in sight! So this was the stage of a theater! This was the fairyland on which he had gazed from a gallery seat on those rare occasions when he had come down to town to do a bit of sporting! His mouth was open; he turned his head from side to side; his avid gaze sought everywhere.

Mr. Porting cursed. "Don't you hear me? Sing!"

"I don't feel like singing," gulped Murty.

Mr. Porting cursed again—a whole string of oaths. "Sing, damn ye!"

Murty looked about helplessly for something to sit on; a woods vocalist is in a way to be mute unless he can perch on a deacon-seat, the long bench of the bunkhouse. There was a wardrobe trunk handy; he hobbled to it and sat, his elbows on his knee.

But all the song spirit was smothered in him by his amazing environment. And melody could not be cursed out of a singer! However, necessity was imperious if he were to eat without begging bread. He stirred the echoes with dolorous tones:

*"Ow-w-w, there was a bo-huld baker of
Banbury Town,
Sih-hing 'Whoop fuh la larry, sih-hing
Larry o day!"*

"That last line is the chorus, Mister Porting, sir. It's where all the others come in and——"

"Cut the monologue stuff! We ain't trying no chorus now. Sing!"

*"Arn-n-nd the baker to Mansfield market
was bound,
Sih-hing whoop——"*

Mr. Porting sliced the air with condem-

natory palm and cut off the song with a scornful yap. "Omigord! And he said he could sing."

From the obscurity of the wings a grip proffered dramatic criticism. "Trained pup act? Give him a bone and shut him up!"

"Lucky thing for you you've got only one leg. Your *voice* don't land you in the act," stated Mr. Porting. "Here's where we start in making legs do their stuff."

Five minutes later he was drilling his squad. From his props he had brought six peg-legs of uniform make. March and countermarch! Parade rest! Hours of that dreary business! Coffee and sandwiches rushed in from a hole-in-the-wall handout! More marching!

In the evening came the blonde lady to work with the squad.

"For the opening—and prob'ly the whole first week—we'll have to can 'em so far's singing goes, Maudie," declared the sweating driller. "Your ballads will get us by! By next week's opening we may be able to cuttlefish 'em up enough so they can yawp a chorus."

She disparagingly surveyed her raw material. "Thought one of you rabs claimed to be a singer!"

"Leave *him* be, Maudie! If you tune in on him he'll break your nerve for the week!"

O'Meagher endured the continuing insults in grim silence. He was conscious of dull fires starting deep within himself. He hoped they would not break out. He was not yet fully in the know as to what all this parading signified or what the full scope of the stage performance would be. He was already tasting the dregs of humiliation; they were bitter enough. But he was not able to guess what sort of fire he would later be called on to swallow!

His fellows, herded at midnight into a sort of "ram pasture," the six in three double beds in one room of a cheap hotel, lamented their aches and their physical weariness. Murty's woodsman's physique had endured better than their soggy bodies. His suffering came from his mental stress—the shame of this teaming about—his fall from freedom to slavery—his obligation to endure scurrility. There were hotter fires in him! With woodsman's apprehensiveness as to firebrands, he anxiously did his best to beat out the flame and prevent a conflagration.

They were routed in the early morning and were put again to the wearying, dull round of repetition. Again they ate, catch-

as-catch-can from their hands.

Then the boss shooed them into a big dressing-room at noon and told them to peel off and get ready for the dolling-up!

Impressario Porting had a keen eye for quirks in human nature, detecting untractable qualities in Murty from the start. Now he made Murty victim Number One in order to give him no time for observation or to develop rebelliousness from what he looked upon.

Grease paint, deft penciling of wrinkles, manipulation of certain mats of hair—a coat—a hat! Then Porting stood his subject in front of a mirror.

Murtagh O'Meagher squinted, gasped, mumbled. He beheld a veteran of the



Grand Army of the Republic, from corded hat down over white locks and snowy beard. Holy saints! He was the living image of his own father! The Phil Sheridan Post No. 70, G. A. R. guard of honor had

lowered into his grave Color-Sergeant Dennis O'Meagher, garbed in a uniform like that!

"I'm standing here a damned lie—and I won't go through for any sech!" raged the son.

"You'll go through, condemn you, else I'll have you in jail inside o' ten minutes for breaking contract, taking my money under false pretences, crimping me at the last minute before an opening—and for a lot of other offenses. I'll think of 'em, all right enough!" Mr. Porting was chilled steel and in his tones there was the clink of key in cell lock. A dethroned hero had already had too much of jails!

The twist grip was holding, the boss noted.

"Next!" he called.

Murty backed away from the mirror and hopped to a chair in the corner, having an ugly sense of being unwilling to use Porting's peg leg even for that curtailed journey.

At last he had come to the hottest fire in his nightmare of degradation! He was shaming a father who had venerated the garb of honor. He was making mock of a sacred organization. In the company of bums and muckers he was about to parade before the public, "taking off" real heroes, dishonoring them. That was the way Murtagh O'Meagher looked at the thing!

He was not able to view it in any other light with his single-track prejudice.

"Gee! This is a lark and a half, all right!" giggled the hobo who had tried to trig a car wheel with his leg. "It's a shame to take money for the job."

'Twas no use trying to beat down the fires! The conflagration would surely break out! Murty resigned himself to that conviction. Just when or in what way he was dizzily uncertain. To rebel utterly at that moment meant only the ignominy of jail, shunted there in secret in a city where he had not a soul to hear appeal. "I'll be going into the calaboose, sure enough!" he told himself, his sombre gaze resting on the renovation of his unspeakable comrades. "But I'll try to do me bounden duty first; and may good Saint Anthony who has a kind thought for pigs—and I'm sure one—may he show me the way to turn that same trick!"

Maude Mason and the Heroes of Gettysburg went over with a bang at the matinee. It was a sure-fire act.

The blonde lady made her slow entrance on a dark stage while an introductory film was running; the picture showed the Boys of Sixty-one—the youngsters—marching away to war. She sang, "We Are Coming, Father Abraham."

Then in the full glare of the footlights she marched to and fro and caroled lustily some stirring war songs.

Lights dimmed! Marching, thump-thump, behind a gauze drop, filed the six "veterans" while the orchestra blared. They countermarched behind the flimsy curtain and the music changed and sank to sentimental strains. Miss Mason sang "Tenting Tonight On the Old Camp-ground" when her soldiers came upon the stage in full view and seated themselves after a salute. The native awkwardness of the men added to the effect; they seemed to be the real thing—not mere actors trained for theatrical smart stuff! There were encores till folks' palms ached. There were audible sobs all over the house.

Mr. Porting took his stand in the wings and banged the back of each recruit as the men filed off after the final curtain. "You're daisy-cutters! It's a wow!"

To the dressing-room he brought a box of cigars, gold-banded, wrapped in foil, and invited each man to dip for himself.

Murty would not accept a cigar, even when Porting selected one and proffered it. Wages of shame! He was not taking them—not any more! This torture of

soul was developing mania in the man from the north. He was making no attempt to view the situation in any aspect except that he was a living lie, a cheap cheat, disgracing the uniform which his own father and other brave men had honored. Only acting, was it? He was no actor and made no allowances for that kind of business! He doggedly clung to the belief that nobody had any right to dishonor a sacred thing. In this idea was a particularly stiff backbone—his abhorrence of the low-lived scalawags who were taking part in the mockery, sitting there and puffing smoke and spewing their cheap gibes about their "army records."

And right away Murty's shame was cap-sheafed.

Porting went to the door to answer a modest rap. A kind old face was revealed, only a face, because the boss held the door almost shut with his toe against it.

"I'm commander of the Grand Army Post here, mister. I'd like to shake hands with our comrades and tell 'em how noble they acted their parts."

"Can't be arranged today, old top. It's a new act and we're rehearsing."

Murty cringed, hearing the flip refusal. "Tonight's our regular bean supper at the Post. Prompt at six! Won't you let me take the boys down in cars? I'll hurry 'em back for the show."

"Nothing doing! Got to rehearse." Porting pushed the door shut and locked it.

Whirling from this dismissal, Porting caught Murty's malefic stare. "Look here, harp! Skin seems to be off'm you in a good many places! What's the special raw spot now?"

"Ain't none!" growled the other. "Glad you booted him away!" There was sincerity in the declaration. It was better to let that fine old soldier depart without knowing the truth.

"I'm going to keep you goats close under the shed when you're in make-up," stated Porting. "And when you're out and loose by yourselves keep mum about your jobs. That way you hold 'em longer!"

Murty had by now hammered one hot nub of resolution out of the flaming stuff within himself; he would hold that job till evening, no longer. "I ain't just sure how 't will come off," he admitted in his thoughts. "But I swing a mean torch when I'm setting a backfire! When ye intend to go out in a blaze, by mighty, best mek' it a good one!"

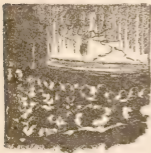
IV

THAT night Maude Mason and the Heroes of Gettysburg stopped the show.

It was at the end of one of her songs, after she had screamed in a veritable frenzy of vocalism, swinging the Star Spangled Banner from a staff:

*"God be good to the soldier!
God bless the brave!
Cheer again for the noble men
Who gave—gave—gave!"*

Men and women, that audience rose and



obeyed her injunction to cheer. They continued their acclaim. The orchestra sawed, banged and bellowed and the blonde lady shrieked the verse over and over, unheard in the

general tumult.

"We hear all kinds o' brags about knocking 'em off their seats," said the house manager, standing with the hilarious Mr. Porting just offstage. "But this is the first time I've seen it really done in this theater. I'll sign you for a repeat week." "That'll be okay for me—but my ante is doubled!"

"Doubled it is! We'll get free publicity—so much of it that—"

"What the wah-hooted hell!" stormed Porting, leaping away from the house manager's side. At the risk of revealing himself to the audience, the boss of the act was leaning forward from the first entrance, his hands scooped at his mouth for a magaphone. "Here, you! You damnation harp! Back up! Back up!"

Murty had stumped sturdily down to the footlights. He had his hand up for a signal that he wanted to speak to the audience. The conviction that this was an interesting part of the act, their respect for the venerable figure presented by this man, the instant curiosity—all these elements dominated. The audience hushed its applause.

"It's a blasted shame to have ye all took in by this stuff," was the amazing outburst. "It's all fake and fraud, and me and this gang o' skindloorums is cheats—and I'm

the worst cheat of all because my case goes further back and I'm the meanest in the bunch and so that's why I'm taking it on meself to speak out f'r all!" The words had rushed in a torrent of speech. Bitter earnestness was back of them. The audience was won to an eager mood of harkening.

"Ring down!" bawled the house manager. He made frantic motions to the curtain tender. "Asbestos, too!"

Under the descending curtain ducked Porting.

Murty had been sure that there would be interference and he had made ready by loosening the straps of the peg leg. Now he yanked it off and poised the ponderous weapon, balancing with riverman's nimbleness on his hale leg. He made a swoop at the infuriated boss and sent him staggering back.

A big man in the audience yelled raucously. "Let—that—man—talk!"

From the gallery roared endorsement. "Leave him be or we'll wreck the joint," was the snapper on the significant din.

The curtain was down with a thud. Pulling it aside, the house manager thrust himself onto the stage and grabbed Porting by the shoulders, forcing the frantic meddler off into the wings. "You damn' fool, if you block that man you'll start a riot out there!"

Murty glanced about and noted that he was alone, in front of the curtain, in the presence of a hushed audience. For a few dizzy, dazzled moments he was a victim of stage fright, aghast, voiceless.

"Go on, old man!" called a kindly voice. "We're all with you!"

"Begorry, I'm awful scart!" confessed Murty with winning naïvete. "I've been saying me prayers to good Saint Anthony, but I guess he's more for the pigs than out to help the spachemakers."

The rippling laughter, sounding cheerful and encouraging, put some sort of grit in him. He yanked off wig and beard and flung the hateful stuff on the stage.

"Now, me friends, one and all, I'm jist plain Murty O'Meagher from the north woods. And I'll only tell ye about meself—to be honest and square with the world once again. Up on the big river a lad he fell into the white water and I tripped meself and fell in after him, not meaning to do it. In times past I had gone in and saved men, but we'll let all that pass by 'cause it has not a bit to do with what I'm confessing to. I was that scart to be in the river without any intintion—I tried to

ride that lad like he was a log, and I nigh drowned him. I was that rattled I let me leg be chewed off atween logs. Some way we two wrassled out onto the shores—and then the byes ran down and thought I'd saved the lad. They all chipped in and bought f'r me a fine and fancy leg wit' a silver plate onto it about me being a hero—and I came down out o' the woods to cash in on being that lying hero. I got drunk and was heaved into the jug and I pawned the leg to pay me fine, and I was so hungry I let meself be picked up to make this show. And now I'm shamed and sorry for the sake o' me brave father who was Sargint Dennis O'Meagher with Phil Sheridan—may the saints lind the two of 'em good hosses over where them heroes may be this day. That's all and me conscience is clear. I'm only a sneak and a coward and if the fine ladies wasn't here I'd call meself worse names. And that's all! And good evenin' to ye! And how the—where's the way off'm this damn' warping-headworks?" He peered to right and left hopelessly, standing on his one foot.

Men came leaping out of the stage boxes while the standing folks roared their cheers—cheers glorified by honest laughter in friendly spirit.

He was handed down to other men who came crowding to the stage's apron. He was borne up the aisle on carrier's shoulders. All in all, it was a glorious demonstration by city folks whose jaded tastes had found something deliciously spicy in the entertainment line.

A great deal happened to Murty O'Meagher before he went to sleep in a classy hotel. He was guest of honor at a supper. They gave him a purse in order that he might go back to the woods. And the man who made the little speech said, "This night, Mr. Murtagh O'Meagher, you did what only a few men have the courage to do. So that makes you a hero, after all, and that's why we do you this honor."

But Murty dolefully protested that they were all wrong. That declaration and his persisting conviction on this point made wholesomely for the good of his soul!

V

THE newspapers had much to say about the affair. This time they got the name right and identity was established. In his office in the metropolis President Goodrich of the Telos Corporation read the accounts with interest and kindly understanding.

So his emissary came hunting up Murtagh O'Meagher, like a good fairy. Such things do happen in real life, when hearts are touched.

And the emissary, taking full charge of Murty's affairs, went with him and reclaimed the gift leg; Murty wanted to pry off the plate bearing the complimentary legend. The emissary carried Murty to President Goodrich and the latter gave strict orders that the plate must not be tampered with.

"After this, sir," pledged Murty humbly, "I'm minding careful all orders from the Telos, sir!" He choked.



ways 'lowed to tell the truth when I show me leg?"

"That will be heroic," smiled the president. "Use your best judgment."

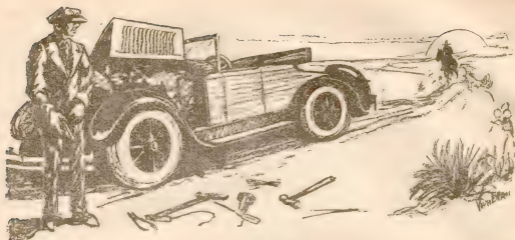
In this way it came about that Murty went back into the woods to his new job, one suitable for a maimed man who had served faithfully in the past with two natural legs and would now do his best as he stood!

It also came about that Seth Martin paddled Murty back across Karntah Lake. They had much to talk about!

WILLING INDIANS

A BIT of the ancient and modern clashed recently at Sitka, Alaska, when two Indians drawn for petit jury duty were found absent from their homes. Investigation disclosed they were attending a potlatch in a native village, whereupon the marshal reported the natives not found and unserved. Later the natives returned and demanded they be put upon a jury.

—F. R. P.



THE LITTLE GUY

By W. B. CORCORAN

Author of "The Sands of Justice," etc.

THESE OLD-TIMERS OF THE DESERT SOMETIMES HAVE A TRICK OR TWO UP THEIR SLEEVES EVEN WHEN CONFRONTED WITH A MODERN PROBLEM LIKE A CITY GUNMAN TRYING HIS HAND IN THE WEST

APPARENTLY he was discovered only now, after riding securely for miles over the baked desert. Anyhow, it was just as the train was pulling away from the weatherbeaten station that he emerged from the box car door. He did so with obvious unwillingness, flying abruptly through the air and landing asprawl in the dust beyond the freight platform. Immediately he was on his feet again with a vicious scramble, and he ran after the car, from which peered the grinning face of the brakie.

The train, a five car combination, was picking up speed too rapidly for pursuit, and the little man halted and shook a raging fist after his ejector. He made no sound, but anger shook his small frame with terrible intensity. Then he calmed, and used the lowered fist to brush the dust from his tight fitting suit. It was a dark suit, and with the gray cap and low shoes made an outfit strange to this remote section of Arizona.

Old Savi Pollard, seated comfortably on a crate of freight, grinned appreciatively as the little stranger walked back to the platform. The newcomer's face was unpleasant at this moment; its sallow color was flushed, and his eyes, green with a

touch of yellow in the whites, were snapping with anger.

He glared suspiciously at Old Savi. "What the hell you laughin' at?" he barked.

"I ain't laughin'," replied Savi, ejecting a spurt of tobacco juice. "I'm just offerin' condolences."

"Keep 'em," retorted the stranger.

"Shore will."

"I don't stand any laughin' at, get me?" continued the stranger. He extended a lean finger after the vanishing train. "Some day I'm gonna get that bozo—get him proper so he'll need an undertaker. If he's got any friends in this town that goes for them, too."

"Personally, feller," Savi observed mildly, "I don't know him from your grand-daddy, nor does anybody in town, I guess. But if you was to *insist*, you'd probably find he had a lot o' friends hereabouts."

"I'm lookin' for them then." The little man moved off in the midday sun, flecking the dust from one sleeve.

"Who will I say inquired?"

"The Little Guy," snarled the stranger. "The Little Guy from Big Chi."

Old Savi watched him as he strode up the single street that served the town of

Solo. Once an important shipping point, the town was now a drowsy way station on a spur line. A few heavy walled adobe buildings, a scattering of corrals by the tracks, and one combination dancehall, movie palace and poolroom, were its main features. One incongruity it boasted: a gasoline station with shiny red pump half way down the street.

Savi saw the little man stop at that point. From all the curiosities of the town, his eyes had picked on the one object he was likely to be familiar with. It was a handsome, racy roadster parked at the edge of the board sidewalk, a low car with eight powerful cylinders under its hood. Savi moved his lean old body off its perch and took up a position at the corner of the freight shack where he could better observe the maneuvers of the man.

The Little Guy gazed with absorbed interest all over the car. He stepped beside it and peered in to the dashboard. His hand fell on the door—and withdrew quickly, for the metal was scorching hot from the sun.

Then he stepped back again and a sigh of obvious admiration escaped him. He was not aware of the approach of a tall angular man from the cubbyhole in rear of the gas station. The service man addressed him. The Little Guy turned quickly, took in the grimy overalls and amiable grin, and made a monosyllabic and surly reply. Then he walked away. The service man scratched his head with a puzzled finger, shrugged his shoulders, and returned to his shady cubbyhole.

Old Savi smiled to himself while he rolled a cigarette, and when the stranger peered into a building fronted by the sign "EATS" and then entered, Savi moved down the street in turn.

Before a many paned double window, behind which were displayed articles ranging from candy to revolvers in careless array, Savi halted.

"Oh, Hank; you there?" he called in the door.

"Comin'," echoed from the recesses of the store, and a portly, mustached man in a striped apron appeared promptly. "Howdy, Savi," he greeted. "When did you git in?"

"While ago," replied the old man. "Eastbound ain't gone through yet; west-bound just passed. Got some stuff comin' on it. But listen—a fella with the appearance and general disposition of a yearlin' coyote with the mange just hit town. He's feedin' himself now in the Ching's."

"Thasso?" Hank Jimson gazed up the street with interest. "What's he here for?"

"Nothin' good, I expect. You just keep an eye on him for a while."

"Sure will." Hank grinned. "You don't think no tenderfoot can run a sandy in Solo, do you, Savi?"

"Mebbe not, old-timer. But I'm thinkin', mebbe too, that he'll try it."

"Ho, ho, ho," the portly man chuckled deeply. "Hope he does. Might put some-thin' across on you, you ole oriana, but not here, Savi."

The old man nodded amiable agreement. "I can't allow I'm not as handy with my head or my gun as I used to be when I went sheriffin' all over this country years ago, Hank. Times has changed; a new breed o' crooks has sprung up. They're too low-down for us old fellers to handle any more."

"Well, let 'em come," declared the store-keeper. "For your part, you're actin' real sensible, Savi, considerin' your age. As fer me—" he waved a belligerent fist in the air—"let 'em come!"

A while later old Savi Pollard was engaged in an occupation that gave him un-failing pleasure. He was grooming the big straight eight roadster for its trip over the desert. He made sure that there was the correct pressure in the tires, he poured oil in the crankcase till the gauge recorded correctly, he filled the thirty gallon gas tank, and last of all he was pouring water into the capacious radiator when the Little Guy emerged from the restaurant plying a toothpick.

Savi was starting on the second canfull as the stranger stopped beside him. "Gettin' her ready?" he inquired, studying the engine revealed by the open hood.

"Yep," replied Savi. "She's got a long trip to make, an' there ain't no service stations out there. Forty mile to the first waterhole." He nodded toward the desert that stretched to the dim blue mountains in the west.

"Who owns this boiler?" pursued the little man.

"Oh, a feller."

"What feller?"

"Friend of mine," stated Savi.

"Listen, guy," snarled the little man, "don't crack so wise; you'll overheat your brain." He gave the old man an ugly glare, and then opened the door and slid behind the wheel in a businesslike manner.

Old Savi lowered the water can. "The feller who owns this don't like strangers

medlin' with his car," he observed coldly.

"He'll like it less," commented the little man. His hands were busy beneath the dashboard, and though his gaze fastened on the old man he seemed to know exactly what he was doing without its aid. "If the guy who has the keys of this car was around he could save me some trouble. Keys ain't no good anyway."

His adjustment apparently completed to his satisfaction he sat back in the seat. He stepped on the starter, choked the motor a little, fed it gas—and despite the locked ignition the engine suddenly throbbed with quiet power, like some enormous whispering.

Savi lowered the can to the ground and moved with surprising quickness to the running board. But even as he grasped the door handle he was halted by the menace of a black automatic facing him in the man's hand.

"Hold it, fella," cautioned the Little Guy. "No buttin' in on this game. Don't move; here comes the gas man. We'll let him join the party."

The angular attendant in the greasy overalls ambled up to the car. Then he gasped as he sighted the pistol, and automatically his hands shot skyward.

"Put 'em down," barked the little man hoarsely. "Wanna give me away?" He climbed out of the seat, carefully covering his captives with the gun. "Finish filling that radiator," he ordered Savi. "You stay put," he snapped at the service man. His glance darted up and down the reassuringly empty street.

Old Savi picked up the water can again, emptied it into the radiator, and sighted with one eye into the aperture. "Filled," he announced in a flat voice.

"Nothin' doin'," said the little man. "Go get some more an let me see it runnin' over."

Slowly and with movements that showed his weight of years old Pollard procured more water. The hose was in plain sight and he had no chance of escape. He poured the additional water in the radiator, and trembling with the reaction of defeat, spilled a good quantity of it over the shiny surface. Much of this fell inside the open hood. Then the liquid overflowed.

"Fine," announced the stranger. "Now, wise guy, let's see you wipe that engine dry. Thought you could get water in the magneto or the distributor an' stall it on me, eh? If yu'd tried a little harder I'd 'a' pulled this trigger."

Humbly and silently Savi drew forth a

large red handkerchief and mopped up the mingled grease and water on the forward part of the motor. An inarticulate gasp and start from the petrified service man caused the stranger to turn on him. "What's bitin' you," he snarled. Then, "Keep your hands down," he shouted as the other repeated his automatic movement.



"Think this is the daily dozen?"

Savi lowered the polished hood and snapped it shut.

"Now walk ahead of me to the back," ordered the little man. He herded

the two into the tiny office, keeping the gun alert at his side.

He made Savi bind the other to a chair with lengths of copper wire. When that was done he performed the same operation on the old man. Then he thrust cotton waste into their mouths and tied cloths about their faces firmly.

"You won't get outa that in a hurry," he said when the job was finished. "By that time I'll be a long ways off. So long, fellas. Thanks for the car." He grinned mockingly and departed.

HANK JIMSON was busy adding up accounts in the charge book when the Little Guy entered the store. Hank promptly shut the book and moved watchfully to the center of the broad counter that ran down one side of the square room. The walls were lined with loaded shelves, and merchandise was piled in corners and about the floor in careless profusion.

The stranger smiled ingratiatingly and seated himself on a stool. "Kinda hot, ain't it?" he offered.

"Yep. Usually always is around here." Hank recollected Old Savi's warning. "Stranger here?"

"Passin' through," replied the other. "Need some grub and things. Might as well get 'em here."

A more pleasant light entered Hank's eye. A customer was always innocent until proved otherwise. At the little man's direction he piled a heap of supplies on the counter, and his suspicions were more and more allayed as the size of the purchase grew. It included food, cooking utensils, cartridges, tobacco and various incidentals

a man might find useful on an extended trip far from a base of supplies.

When his customer expressed satisfaction Hank loaded a gunnysack with the supplies and deposited it on the floor. Then he went into executive session with a pencil and paper, and at length announced the total with a smile of triumph. "That'll come to thirty-nine dollars and sixty cents."

"Make it an even forty," suggested the little man. He rose to his feet casually, and with the same nonchalance displayed his automatic. "And keep the change."

Hank Jimson stared into the muzzled of the gun in consternation, then in cold murderous fury. "A holdup, eh?"

"No," grinned his customer, "just an accommodation. I'll be a lot more accommodated if you'll pull out that till and let me see what's in it."

Hank could only obey, and he choked with wrath as he saw the contents of the cash drawer disappear into the pockets of the little man.

"Now come out from behind there."

Again Hank obeyed.

"You an' me ought to do business oftener," commended the customer, "we understand each other real well. Now I'll say good-by, an' don't walk outside for quite a while, 'cause I know how to use this and it makes an awful mess." He backed toward the door, picking up the gunnysack as he went. But just as he reached the threshold he stopped and froze into mysterious immobility.

"That's right, podner," came a soft voice from the doorway. "Jest you hold your pose, an' drop that half pint gun on the floor." A slender, lean jawed man in chaps and spurs pushed through the door with a big six-gun trained on the little man's middle. A glance over his shoulder satisfied the latter, and he released the automatic in his hand. He uttered no sound.

The storekeeper made a dive for the gun and his anger burst from him in a torrent of oaths. "By God, you'll be strung up for this!" he shouted. "I'll stretch your neck for you myself, you weasel faced polecat! You damn' misbegotten whelp of a—"

"Careful, you'll bite your tongue, Hank," cautioned the new arrival. "Here, lemme see that thing." He took the automatic from the storekeeper's hand.

"Did you see him, Slim?" Hank Jimson demanded. "Did you see what he was

doin'? You came just in time, by God!"

"Whoa, Jenny!" soothed the cow-puncher. "Sure I saw him. I saw him first in the restaurant an' wasn't a bit favorable impressed. Then comin' out I spotted him on his way in here. Thought I'd trail him on general principles. I did. I'm here. He's here—an' he's gonna stay a while."

The Little Guy stood where he had halted, immobile but for his eyes, which burned as they darted about the store. A slow smile soon spread on his thin features, and he shrugged his shoulders in fatalistic submission. "All right, fella," he said. "I'll stay. I know when I'm licked."

"You're real bright," observed Slim. "Sometimes I am," the other admitted.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead." Slim was hefting the automatic in his hand; he gave a tentative pull on the trigger, gripped it tighter in surprise as it exploded toward the floor, and when it barked twice more in abrupt succession from his jerked grasp on the trigger, dropped it in complete dismay. "Gosh a'mighty, that ain't no weapon," he declared, "that's a self-windin' instrument of suicide."

Hank Jimson stared at the floor. The Little Guy laughed softly. He held a cigarette in his mouth and his right hand searched his pockets for a match. Then the storekeeper yelled in alarm.

"Drop him, Slim! He's got a gun!"

The cowboy swung the six-gun on the captive in a split second. The Little Guy stood in fright, his right hand in his coat pocket, seemingly afraid to move. "Cripes—I ain't got no gun! Keep that thing away!" he begged.

"Pull it out slow," Slim ordered softly.

"Don't shoot!" The little man swallowed in an excess of fear. His eyes widened and his lungs seemed to retain his breath in a state of suspension. And then he played his trump card.

The cloth of his coat pocket leaped with searing flame as a second automatic roared into action. The tall cowboy had not even time to press the trigger that tensed under his finger. Three leaden slugs tore in a breath's space into his side and flung him about. He fell with an unconscious gasp, dropping the gun from limp fingers.

The Little Guy whirled in his tracks. "Put 'em up!" he snarled. "You gotta work fast to put one over on me." The blunt muzzle of the automatic came out of the clip which held it in his pocket with-

out revealing its outline. Hank Jimson reached high.

"Now I'll say good-by again, an' I don't need to tell you I mean it." The little Guy swung the gunnysack over his shoulder and turning, raced through the doors.

Hank Jimson waited only a moment. But when he too darted outside with the puncher's gun he was only in time to see the powerful roadster complete its turn in the street and leap into roaring speed out of town over the desert road. It was obscured by a cloud of dust that traveled with unbelievable rapidity into the distance.

LATER, after the town's inhabitants, awakened from their midday somnolence by the echo of the shots, had rushed into the street; and after Hank Jimson had cursed sulphurously to exhaustion and begun again on the discovery of Old Savi and the service man in the office—later, a mood of pessimism fell on the whole town.

Solo had been dishonored. Solo had allowed a tenderfoot, a city gunman and a mere sliver of a man at that, to overawe and outshoot them. True, the cowboy named Slim would not die, but that was not the stranger's fault—he had tried hard enough for anybody. The last straw was the confiscation of the fastest car in the country. Pursuit in any other car was futile.

But Old Savi Pollard, when he had rubbed the pain of confinement from his limbs, was not depressed. He had reason enough to be, for it was his car the gunman had raced off in, the car that was the pride of his declining days now that his oldest son Dave managed the Pollard herds.

"Listen here, Hank," he insisted, interrupting the storekeeper's tirade, "you quit your worryin'. I lost more than you, didn't I? An' I ain't worryin', am I?"

"How the hell do I know?" exploded Jimson. "If you ain't you're crazy; an' if you are nobody could ever tell from your blasted poker face."

"Well, you ought to know. 'Member the last time we sat in at stud—?"

"Urgh!" Hank strangled. "I remember." He returned to his point. "Anybody'd think you was glad the feller got away—think you was *helpin'* him!"

"I ain't helped him git away, Hank," denied Savi. "But I *am* gonna help him travel back."

"Back—what?"

"Let's have a drink," suggested Savi irrelevantly.

The two disappeared in the rear quarters of Hank's store and were lost to sight of the town for some time. When they emerged again Hank was in good humor and he slapped Old Savi on the back in high glee several times.

Then he went with the old man and helped him select a horse from the livery stable and personally cinched the saddle on the animal. Leading him back to the store together they filled and hung on the



saddle four gallon cans of water. Hank brought out his old cartridge belt and gun and Savi buckled it on his middle. A curious crowd attended these ceremonies, but Old Savi's calm visage and Hank Jimson's

mysteriously joyous manner gave them no information. Nor did they get any after the old-timer set the horse off at a lope out of town toward the west. Hank's shout after Pollard, "Don't bother about the hoss, Savi; he knows the way back to his oats alone," gave them nothing but further mystery.

Two hours later the curious who still watched out over the shimmering desert aroused themselves with a start. Far out on the wastes a tiny twister of dust announced the coming of something—an automobile by its rapid progress. Word passed around and soon the entire population of Solo was in the street in silent waiting.

The dust rose high behind the car which speeded over the road. It was first visible over five miles away, but it was scarcely more than five minutes later that the big straight eight roadster roared into town and pulled up sharply before Hank's store with a slithering stop.

Seated at the wheel was Old Savi, his wrinkled face mild and innocent as he observed the forty pairs of eyes bent his way. He stopped the engine and climbed out of the seat. Then the screen doors of the store opened with a bang and Hank Jimson ran out on the board sidewalk.

"Did you get him, Savi?" he shouted.

"Yep." Old Savi sighed and rolled himself a cigarette.

Hank looked all over the car. "Where is he?" he demanded. Then he looked

aghast. "Savi!" he exclaimed. "Yuh didn't—?" The pause was obvious.

Savi shook his head regretfully. "Nope, Hank; didn't have a chance. He was just too ornery to fight a-tall."

Hank walked deliberately to the running board of the car and looked inside. Then he walked around it. His search was unrewarded.

"Savi, you double-faced ontruthful cuss, what did yuh do to him?" He turned to the dozen men who stood nearby grinning at his discomfiture. "Can yuh beat this ole son of a gun?" he demanded indignantly. "Yuh know what he did? He opened the watercock underneath the radiator of the car when he was fillin' it, so that when the little feller stole it it would run dry an' freeze on him out there. Then he went out with water to refill it when he caught up. And the son of a lycin' gambler brings back the car without the feller that stole it!"

"He wasn't in it when I arrived," said Old Savi mildly. "He had started back, and I found him with his tongue out about a mile from where the car quit on him. He was all in."

"Oh," said Hank, dimly comprehending. "So yuh let him walk all the way back." Old Savi moved to the rear of the roadster. He fished in his pocket for keys, and

inserted one in the lock of the rear compartment. Then he swung the rumble seat upward, uncovering the compartment beneath.

"Outa there!" he ordered.

There was a feeble stirring, a whimper. Then a limp, drawn faced figure appeared over the side of the compartment, and with fear on his countenance the Little Guy climbed to his feet, toppled over, and collapsed headlong into the road.

"There you are," Savi said to Hank Jimson. "Lock him up in yore store room and treat him careful."

"Him!" scorned Hank, his anger rising at sight of the gunman. "Him careful!"

"Just what I said," assured Old Savi. "He's valuable. He swapped me some information for a drink of water out there. Back where he come from they want him real bad—five thousands dollars worth, he told me. I probably gotta git my cylinders rebored after the way he burned 'em out, an' I need the money."

"Huh." Hank was popeyed.

"An' besides," Old Savi sighed, "I ain't nowise capable of handlin' these modern gunmen, Hank. Like yuh said, I'm gettin' too old." His face was childlike in its innocence. "I'm kinda anxious for someone to take care of him that knows how."

The HARD TRAIL

By Edgar Daniel Kramer



HI, YI, YIP! You dogies,
Keep a-ploddin' down the trail,
An' we'll be landin' somewhere
Just as sure as there's jail.
But, if you'll take advisin',
I'm now handin' you a bit:
"The more you fret an' bellow,
Why, the thirstier you git."

Hi, yi, yip! You dogies,
Keep a-liftin' up your feet,
As we're on our way to water,
An' the drinkin' will be sweet.

Hi, yi, yip! You dogies,
Keep a-plowin' through the dust,
An' leave these hellish stretches,
Where the cactus is up-thrust,
But, if your ears are open
To a simple-minded guy,
"Your bellows cack your gullets
With this tasty alkali."

Hi, yi, yip! You dogies,
Keep a-shuffin' through the sand,
For we're on our way to water,
An' that means the promised land.

W.M.A.



THE SILENT CABIN

By EVAN MERRITT POST

THE TRAIL WAS ROUGH, THE CRUEL ARCTIC WINTER WAS ALREADY CLOSING IN, AND THE SETTLEMENTS WERE STILL FAR AWAY. THERE WAS EVERY NEED FOR HASTE. AND THEN THEY CAME, THE OLD-TIMER AND THE CHECHAKO, TO THE SILENT CABIN BESIDE THE TRAIL

FARRELL knew that he was a dying man. There remained in his mind not the shadow of a doubt on that score.

Sitting at the present moment in the open doorway of his cabin, he gazed out over the frost colored forests which for five years now had been a part of his life. A very close and integral part. He loved the forests, and especially did he love them in the flaming beauty of the fall garb which cloaked them at this time. His only regret, now that he knew he was leaving it all for good, was that he hadn't come up here sooner in his life.

Well, he reflected, he had nothing to complain about, by and large. His life had on the whole been an eventful and satisfying one, and even the touch of tragedy that had sent him north no longer caused him the inward pain which it had at first.

Yes, taken as a whole, his had been a happy life, as lives go. He was sure of that. And if he had erred here and there—and he knew, of course, that such had been the case—he had, by the same token, now and again gone out of his way to do things that had caused others happiness. At the present moment this was a comfort-

ing and reassuring thought. Somehow he felt strangely at peace with the world.

Nor did the conviction that he was soon to die alone and unattended up here in the wilderness appall him. He found himself looking forward to it, rather, with a certain contented resignation, as do men who have an abiding faith that the next world is one step better than the present plane.

At any rate he had no regrets as he sat now in his doorway, smoking his pipe and gazing out over the gold and crimson forests which he loved so well. That is, he had no regrets save one. One thing did trouble him, it is true. It had been troubling him for some days past.

Dying alone as he knew he would, it would be hard to attend to, and there was furthermore no certainty that anyone would pass this way for some months to come.

He pondered for some time upon this, turning it over in his mind, seeking a solution and gradually as he puffed upon his pipe a way out occurred to him. He nodded his head as if in approval.

"Yes, I guess that's the best, Farrell," he mused presently, "I'll do that. Sort of let it rest that way."

And rising and going slowly to the table, he took up a piece of dry birchbark and proceeded to write thereon his last request.

WINTER had laid hold of the Fairbanks country. Snow bowed the limbs of the spruces. The strong Alaskan cold had come to stay.

Two men were making their way over the Chena trail from Nation to Fairbanks, where rumor had it high wages were being paid in the mines. Over the welcomed noonday fire, while the dogs rested, the younger of the two men remarked, among other things, "If this trail doesn't improve, Miller, we won't get through to Fairbanks for another three days."

Miller shrugged his shoulders and helped himself to another cup of the black coffee to top off the meal they had already finished. "With my luck," he observed, "I'm thinkin' we'll be lucky if we get through at all. Confound such luck! And the chances are there won't be a job left, time I get through, anyway. My luck always was rotten."

The younger man smiled. "You make it so by talking that way," he reasoned.

The other snorted. "Dry up with that kid philosophy of yours, Steel," he said. "I'm gettin' fed up on it."

"Yes, but it's so all the same," the younger man argued. "Every time you talk that way, old man, you're just putting in an advance order for hard luck."

And in the silence that followed, he studied the other man's face, round, heavily bearded, bearing marks of dissipation about the eyes.

Steel was young, twenty-five, and he had come north solely in a spirit of adventure. To him good luck and hard luck were all a part of the game. Miller, on the other hand, was nearer forty, and whatever spirit of adventure he once might have possessed had long since been lost in his life of hard reality. He made life hard. He had ceased to have visions. Among men he had earned the name of "Hardrock" Miller because of an incident that occurred one fall down on the— But no matter. That is another story.

To get back to Steel: he was, at the present moment, beginning to regret his accompanying the older man on the trip through to Fairbanks. Miller was proving himself far from the best of company. And the younger man reflected that he might better have waited until someone else was going through. But there, no use grumbling. The trip would soon be over. In the

future, however, he assured himself, he would pick his trail partners with considerable more care.

"Well, let's be movin'," Miller remarked shortly, rising from the log he had been sitting on. "Suppose you take a turn breakin' trail, kid."

"Sure," said Steel willingly, "I was just going to suggest that." And he took his snowshoes which he had stuck upright in the snow behind him, and proceeded to put them on. He added, as he did so, "Here's hoping the drifts aren't so bad up ahead. Likely they won't be."

"Oh, they will be," the other corrected, stepping to the handlebars of the sled. "The devil knows when I'm comin' along and sprinkles the stuff heavy along the trail."

Steel chuckled, and in another moment, at a word from the man behind the sleigh, they started forward. The sun, which had put in a brief half-hour's appearance, had now gone down amid a bank of purple mist, and the world which a while ago had sparkled like a carpet of diamonds was now a dull, cheerless gray. The long Arctic night was closing in. Too, it was growing steadily colder.

After perhaps half a mile had been covered, Steel observed, "Hello! There's a cabin up there on the left." He pointed a mittened hand. "Could just as well have stopped there for dinner, if we'd known."

"Wasn't there six years ago," Miller replied. "That was the last time I mushed this trail."

Steel, who had been studying the small cabin that stood on the wind swept crest of a hardwood knoll, now remarked, "There's



no smoke coming from the chimney. Must be deserted—hello!" he interrupted himself, "what's that?"

"What's what?"

"That on the door. Looks like something white's been nailed there. Perhaps we'd better take a look. Wait, I'll run up."

But Miller, from behind, said disapprovingly, "We ain't got time to waste foolin' around. Keep goin'."

"But something might be wrong," Steel reasoned. "I think we ought to take a look."

Miller emitted a snort. "Well, if you're set on it, go on. But make it fast. I didn't agree to take you on a sight-seein' trip."

"It won't take a minute," Steel assured him, and he swung up the slope on his snowshoes. A moment later he called down to the waiting man, "Say, come up here!"

"What for?"

"Read this!"

Miller joined him presently and Steel pointed to the piece of birchbark that was nailed to the door. The writing on it made any words on the younger man's part unnecessary. It read:

I will be dead when you find this. My name doesn't matter. I leave nothing of value and I have no living relatives and no particular friends who interest me, or who would be interested in my death. But I have a simple request to make. The past five years have been the happiest in my life. And the happiest hours in those years were spent right in front of my door, where I could look out over the woods at sunset. It is my wish that I lie there.

It was signed merely, "Stranger."

Miller gave his characteristic snort and tried the door. But the melting snows of early fall had frozen about the sill and the door wouldn't move. He thrust his great shoulders against the thick panels, but still the door held fast. And he said, "No use. Can't budge her. I'll go down and fetch the ax." There was in his voice a somewhat eager note. Steel understood why, and he disliked the man for it.

Presently the other was back with the implement and after hacking the ice away around the bottom, finally got the door loose. With a shove of his shoulders it flew open. He went in. Steel entered behind him.

It was a simple cabin, equipped with homemade furniture of rude yet serviceable design. On the one bunk that was built in against the wall opposite the door, the writer of the note lay, stiff with the cold. Steel went over and looked down upon the figure. He shook his head slowly.

"Too bad you had to die all alone that way," he said. "It must have been pretty lonely for you during those last hours, old-timer."

He heard Miller, who was standing be-

hind him, give that snort of his, and somehow the sound got on Steel's nerves, as any characteristic substitute for words will do if repeated often enough. Steel said, "Pretty tough, just the same, to pass out that way." He turned and faced Miller. The bigger man had a rifle in his hands, eyeing it critically and working the breech.

"Little rusty," Miller observed, "but she ain't half bad. Better'n mine, anyhow. And—say, here's something!"

The speaker went quickly to where a pair of Indian-made moccasins of finest moosehide stood on the floor near the long neglected stove. They were, Steel saw, covered with glittering beads that were woven into strange, fantastic patterns. He had never seen a pair of moccasins like them, and he guessed that they must be rare.

Miller had picked one up. He now measured it against the sole of one of his own boots. "Say," he exclaimed, "they'll just fit me, and I'm here to say gear like them ain't found every day."

Steel watched him with growing disapproval. Under ordinary circumstances he himself might have been tempted to take some of the dead man's belongings, particularly those moccasins which had caught Miller's eye. They would, if left, only fall to pieces and rot. But somehow the very eagerness with which the big man had seized upon the property of the dead man created in him a distaste for the proceedings.

He came to dislike Miller in this moment, and inasmuch as he felt this way, he disliked also the man's actions, disliked the way he fondled those moccasins which the dead man once had worn. Oh, he was probably a fool no doubt, he reasoned, feeling this way.

He shrugged his shoulders, but said nothing. And if Miller noted the young man's unspoken distaste, he too said nothing. He suggested finally, though, "Say, ain't you goin' to knuckle onto some of this truck? Might as well," he pointed out.

Steel smiled. Then slowly the smile hardened. "You seem to have taken about everything for yourself," he said.

Miller snorted. Steel felt like hitting him.

"Well, kid," the other said, "up in this land, you've got to look out for yourself. If you wanted them moccasins, why didn't you take 'em? Judgin' by the way you act, you'd done well to brought your nurse along when you come north."

Steel took a step forward, then swallowed hard and choked down his growing

wrath. He said, meeting Miller's eyes, "I'll overlook that this time. Next time, be careful though."

Miller continued to meet the younger man's eyes for several long seconds in a challenging way. He said truculently, "Well, if you ain't goin' to take anythin', come on! We've got to be movin'. Been wastin' enough time as it is."

Steel, looking squarely at the other, shook his head. "You can go along if you want to," he said. "I'm staying here."

"What?" Miller stared at him.

"I'm staying here," Steel repeated in the same tones, and Miller laughed.

"Say, you gone craz-?" he asked.

"No," said Steel.

"What are you gonna stay here for?"

"To do what he asked," was Steel's reply.

Miller snorted. "Well, you damn fool!" he said. "That's all I can say for you."

"That's all you have to say, Miller. Goodby. The door's open."

Miller went toward the entrance, the newly acquired moccasins and rifle in his hand. He picked up the ax where he had stood it against the door-jamb a few moments before. Turning, he said, "You needn't think I'm goin' to wait for you. I can get through them damned trails alone, without your help."

"I hope you can," said Steel. "I'm not asking you to wait for me. In fact, the sooner I see that back of yours, Miller, the happier I'll be."

Still Miller hesitated in the doorway, as if realizing that starting on alone would more than double the task of getting through to Fairbanks. "Well, it's your funeral, but you'd beter think it over," he said. "Stay here, and you'll be up against it."

"Don't worry about me, Miller. Don't concern yourself. There's food enough here in the cabin to last till spring, if something else doesn't turn up. I'll make out all right."

Again Miller shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, and without another word went down the drifted slope to where the sled waited. A moment later the jingling bells of the departing team drifted back through the still, frosty air to the young man.

FOR two days Steel worked. The frozen ground was indeed like solid concrete. Even the pick which he had found in the shed adjoining the rear of the cabin failed to make much impression. That six-foot-by-three hole seemed

to include the universe. His back by the end of the second day seemed to be on fire, and the muscles of his arms and shoulders throbbled from the ceaseless jarring of steel on unyielding ground. And still he was only down a foot and a half. Scarcely that.

He leaned on the pick at the end of the second day, and surveyed the pitiable results of his labor. And he was a little ashamed of himself for thinking now that maybe he had been a fool, as Miller said. What did it matter, he asked himself, whether a man were buried or not? Out here in the wilderness what difference did it make? It all amounted to the same thing. Death was a stern, inexorable thing, and graves meant nothing.

But even more than this, he was appalled by the thought that now, without dogs, he must remain here throughout the long,



lonely winter, at least ninety miles from the nearest point of civilization. That is, unless some traveler happened along who would be willing to take him out. But there was no counting on that. The trails were bad, they wouldn't be much traveling over them. And he couldn't help wondering about Miller, half wishing he had gone on with the man. But there. The thing was done now. No use thinking of it.

Again he fell to work. And suddenly he pitched forward on his face. The pick, instead of coming to the usual shocking halt on the frozen ground, had sunk deep and had thrown him off his balance.

Amazed, he extracted it. For a moment he stood looking wonderingly down at the round black hole it had made. Then he fell to work with eager excitement. And in another moment, from a box that was half-filled with small leather bags, he had taken a note and was reading.

Dear Stranger:

I have no relatives, and no friends. This ten thousand in gold dust is yours. Anyone who is white enough to do what you have done is worthy of it. Many thanks, Stranger. And good luck.



SQUARE-SHOOTERS

By HARRY ADLER

THERE ARE MORE WAYS OF SERVING LAW AND ESPECIALLY JUSTICE THAN BY PUTTING MEN BEHIND STEEL BARS. AND WHERE SQUARE SHOOTERS ARE CONCERNED THE SYSTEM IS A PRETTY SAFE BET

JOHN LUND, in placid contentment, cleared away the simple paraphernalia of his supper and put his rude little log shack in order preparatory to turning in for the night. Outside it was raining heavily, the wind tearing down the gulch in sudden gusts that lashed the rain against the cabin's little window in slashing streams. Crashes of thunder reverberated against the canyon's rocky walls and flashes of lightning slashed vivid rents in the outside blackness.

The old prospector tossed more wood into the little stove that glowed in one corner, drew up a rickety chair before the stove's cheery warmth, and stretched himself out as comfortable as a cat for a last smoke before turning in.

He was not to be left long, however, in this peaceful state. Above the roar of the storm outside came a pounding at the cabin's door and a voice raised in a request for admittance.

John lifted himself from his chair, walked to the door and threw it open. The flame of the coal oil lamp flared up smokily in its chimney at the entering gust of wind. Outside in the darkness and the rain stood the dim figure of a man, but the keen perceptions of the prospector noted that despite the fierceness of the elements,

at the door's opening the stranger backed swiftly away farther into the open and that his hand hovered close to his gun side. His head alone thrust forward to study sharply the bearded face in the open doorway, to peer suspiciously into the room's dimly lighted interior.

"Can you bunk me for the night, old-timer?" the stranger asked. "It's pretty tough going, tonight."

John Lund gave the other a moment's quiet scrutiny. Then he stepped aside.

"Come on in," he invited. "Guess I kin fix you up."

The stranger entered as bidden, but as he crossed the threshold his hand hovered still more tensely over his hip and his whole body radiated a wariness and caution quite foreign to a man hurrying into shelter from a raging storm.

The prospector slammed shut the door and pulled up a second chair before the stove.

"Better peel off your boots and other duds," he suggested. "You're pretty wet."

Apparently satisfied with his scrutiny of the cabin's interior, the stranger's manner relaxed somewhat. He followed John's suggestion but partly, stripping off his coat and hanging it to dry on a nail behind the stove. Then, with a sigh of weariness, he

dropped into the chair and stretched his soggy boots out to the glowing red iron belly.

"It's a rotten night," the stranger vouchsafed. "A fellow can't get far tryin' to travel through this."

John, piling more wood in the stove, rattled the glowing lid into place.

"No," he agreed. "Ain't no use tryin' to travel in this. Specially on foot."

The other man shot a sharp glance at John's impassive face, as if in suspicious search of an ulterior thought lurking behind the remark.

"More bad luck," he growled morosely. "In this blackness my pony went and twisted his knee on a rock—some little ways back here in the canyon. Nothin' to do but shoot the poor devil an' dig along afoot."

"How about a bite t' eat?" inquired John. "Hungry?"

"Well," confessed the stranger, "I could put away a little grub, if you got a bite or two handy that you can spare."

In a few minutes he was ravenously consuming, from a tin plate on his lap, a pile of baked beans, flanked by a chunk of fat pork, and washing it down with great gulps of hot coffee. The coffee cup was refilled and drained several times, and the plate was as clean as though freshly washed before the stranger, with a sigh of contentment, finally deposited them on the table.

"Pardner," he told John gratefully, "that's the finest grub that ever I tucked myself around. I sure was hungry and no mistake. I could've eaten my dead horse down there in the canyon."

He helped himself further to John's hospitality by filling his pipe from the prospector's proffered tobacco pouch, and a few minutes later both men were seated before the stove, their pipes going like twin smudge pots.

"You stay here all alone?" inquired the stranger, making causal conversation.

"Yes—I'm pannin' the gravel in Rifle Creek, down below here."

"Doing any good?"

"Fair. It's low grade, but enough color in each panful t' make it worth while."

The stranger was about to make a further remark when suddenly his body tensed. His eyes narrowed and a hard, desperate look sprang into them. Through a momentary lull in the lashing of the storm had come the sound of movement in the muddy ground outside. The next moment, for the second time that night,

the door shook under a heavy knocking and a voice halloed loudly.

The stranger inside the cabin leaped to his feet. His hand, at his hip, half drew his gun from its holster.

"Go answer that door," he ordered between his teeth, "but stand out in the clear! And remember, if whoever it is comes in, anything I says goes—you back me up. Remember, my hand is goin' to be mighty close t' my gun—anything I says, you back me up! Go open the door—and stand clear!"

Many years had the old prospector lived in the West and many strange situations had he encountered during those years. Now, without a shade of disturbance ruffling the imperturbability of his tanned and bearded face, he rose and walked quietly to the door. But as he opened it and flung it wide he was careful to heed his guest's admonition to stand clear, should any immediate violence develop.

As the door opened a man, dripping wet, stepped in quick relief into the room. He was short and stocky, powerfully built, with a forceful face lighted by a pair of keen, piercing gray eyes. Standing now, adjusting his vision to the lamp light after the blackness of the night out of which he had emerged, those keen eyes roved boringly, questioningly, over the two occupants of the room.

"I'm Sheriff Ellerbee, of Placers," he introduced himself. "Got caught in this storm and want to stay here for the night, if it's convenient."

The sudden, unexpected strain upon his hospitality and facilities seemed not to disturb John Lund.

"Sure," he promptly agreed. "Ain't got nothing but an old shack, but there's plenty of blankets and plenty of grub. So come on in and make yourself comfortable."

"My horse is outside—how about him? I think I saw a barn back of the cabin."

"Yes—help yourself. Plenty of oats and hay. Wait till I light a lantern; I'll go out with you."

At the prospector's last words the first guest, who had remained standing, alert, by his chair before the stove, half started forward as if to intervene. But any protest to the arrangement he may have intended making was rendered needless by the sheriff.

"No—no use your getting wet. Give me the lantern and I'll take care of him myself."

While John lighted the lantern, Sheriff Ellerbee stood leaning back against the

door, eyeing with a steady, calculating glance the other stranger.

"You prospecting?" he queried sharply. "You staying here too, Mr.—er—?"

His slurred pause was pointedly obvious. A moment the stranger hesitated.

"Riley's my name," he answered the sheriff's unspoken, suggested query, following with a reply to the spoken question. "No, I ain't a prospector. I'm a cow hand. Been travelin' up from the Muddy Hills country over to North Park. Been stayin' here for a few days to rest up."

Ellerbee did not reply, but his unblinking eyes bored deeply into the other man's. Silently he took the now ready lantern from the old man and passed again into the night.

Riley—or at least the man who had so labeled himself—dropped again into his chair. Thoughtfully, his brow knit, he refit his pipe and sucked deeply of the smoke. John Lund, anticipating the sheriff's desires upon his return from tending to his mount, busied himself about preparing another huge plateful of beans and again set the coffee pot to boil. Then, his preparations complete, he resumed his seat and his pipe, as calmly undisturbed as before.

"Lots of comp'ny tonight," he remarked mildly.

Riley turned a contracted brow upon his host.

"Listen, old-timer," he said, a deadly earnestness in his voice. "You've treated me white—fed me and warmed me and giving me a bed for the night. I don't want to harm you none. But I can't take no chances. You just back me up in what I say—that's all I ask. If you don't—well, my gun hand is goin' to be mighty nervous tonight."

John turned a mild, reproving eye upon his guest.

"Stranger," he said, "that's the second time you've threatened me with that there gun of your'n. Listen—I plays my own hand the way I sees the cards. And don't you fergit I ain't no slouch with a six-gun myself."

Sheriff Ellerbee's return prevented further discussion. With a sigh of relief he hung his coat on a nail beside Riley's and pulled a third—the only remaining—chair up to the fire. He greeted the prospector's production of the beans and coffee with a grunt of contentment and attacked them heartily.

Silence, save for Ellerbee's voracious gulping, filled the cabin until the plate was clean and the coffee pot empty.

"A fine night to be out on the trail," Ellerbee grumbled, as he filled his pipe.

"Anything special goin' on, Sheriff?" John queried.

"Bank robbery in Placers," the other rejoined. "Didn't take any cash—afraid the currency would be traced by the numbers, I guess. Just took the gold dust they been buying from the miners and prospectors. He timed it pretty good, too—there was over five thousand dollars' worth of the dust. The bank was figurin' on shipping it to the Denver Mint in a couple of days."

"Know who did it?" The question, casually spoken, came from Riley.

"No." Ellerbee's eyes were fixed sharply on his questioner. "It was a one man job, apparently. Jim Watson, the cashier, who lives upstairs over the bank, heard a noise and looked out of his window just in time to see the robber jump on his horse and light out. He took a shot at him, but missed."

"Too dark to get a look at him, I s'pose?" John suggested.

"Yes. I grabbed a few deputies and we picked up the trail. In fact, we caught a glimpse of him and shot his horse dead under him. He had to skip out on foot after that, but he managed to give us the slip, up north here a ways. This storm washed out the trail completely. What



with the darkness and the rain, I got separated from my own men; so figured I might as well turn in here till morning and see if I cant' pick up the trail again tomorrow."

Those keen eyes of his were still studying Riley.

"You look like you been out in the storm yourself," he commented, glancing at the others damp boots and the coat drying behind the stove.

"Yes—I was caught out when the storm started. Been foolin' round doing a little prospecting while hangin' round here," Riley readily explained. "I was quite a ways down the canyon when the storm bust loose and the way it come down it didn't take no time to get plumb soaked."

Ellerbee sucked reflectively for a few minutes on his pipe.

"That's a mighty fine horse out there in the barn," he remarked, apparently irrelevantly. He turned suddenly to Riley. "Where's your pony?" he demanded.

"That's my horse you seen out there," Riley promptly claimed. "Dad here don't need a pony, he says; he don't travel none."

John nodded.

"Yes, I ain't got much use fer a pony. I ain't been out o' these hills hereabouts fer a good many years. That pack jack you seen in the barn is all the transpo'tation I needs."

The little shack seemed slated that night as the stage setting for much unusual dramatic activity. A slight noise at the door drew the eyes of the three occupants of the cabin; then, before they could prepare themselves, or realize what was occurring, the door was flung open and they found themselves staring into the barrels of a pair of menacing guns. Back of the guns two figures crouched, ready. Their faces, dimly revealed by the light of the lamp, were partially covered by large handkerchiefs.

"Up with 'em!" the two intruders commanded, and the menace in their voices and the unwavering weapons left the others no choice but to obey.

The newcomers came into the room and kicked the door shut behind them.

"Lots of company you got tonight, Lund," one of the men remarked. "We didn't figure on that—guess it don't make no difference, though."

Being closer now to the light, the uncovered portions of their faces betrayed a certain proportion of either Mexican or Indian blood.

One of the men took his companion's gun, keeping both weapons trained on the three men about the stove. The second intruder then took from his pocket a ball of heavy, stout cord and proceeded in businesslike fashion to lash John to his chair, his feet corded to the rungs, his hands tied helplessly behind the back. Next Riley was treated in similar manner; and last Sheriff Ellerbee. Not, of course, without vehement and profane protest from all three, especially Ellerbee. But the intruders remained impassive before the verbal assault, their eyes leering evilly above their masks.

"Now, Lund," said the one who appeared to be the leader, "where's your little cache of gold?"

The prospector's only reply was a fierce stream of oaths.

"Take it easy, old-timer," the bandit advised. "We're goin' to get that gold of your'n, so you might as well come through with it now."

"I ain't got no gold. I don't pan out of that creek more'n enough to git by on."

"That's a lie," the other calmly contradicted. "You've been workin' this creek for a long time an' we've found out you don't never sell much o' the dust. And everybody says you keep it hid away in this shack."

John shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Find it," he suggested succinctly.

The bandit's eyes narrowed viciously.

"You kin bet we'll find it," he declared.

"Fact is, you're goin' t' find it for us."

"You're a wise pair o' crooks," Sheriff Ellerbee snorted contemptuously. "There ain't enough gold along Rifle Creek t' fill your teeth."

"That so?" the bandit retorted. "Well, we're just damn fools enough t' think there is—an' that there's a nice pile of it stashed away in this here shack somewheres."

He pondered for a few moments. Then he walked to the stove and regarded the red hot lid.

"Bill," he addressed his companion. "Mebbe this ought t' make him some talkative—don't you think?"

The other laughed, a cruel, mirthless chuckle.

"I'd say it was worth a bet. Let's try it."

He dropped on one knee before the prospector and, under protection of the other villain's gun, unbound John's feet. Roughly he unlaced the old man's boots and jerked them off, removing also the socks. The bare feet he then retied to the chair run.

But not until the leader, having lifted the cherry red stove lid with the lifter, approached John did the horrible purpose in the fiends' minds strike full upon the understanding of the three bound men. Riley's face went white with horror and his eyes blazed up fiercely, as he strained at his bonds. Sheriff Ellerbee belched forth a torrent of terrible oaths and threats and he jerked madly to free himself. The menaced man himself sat quiet, but beneath the leathery tan his cheeks turned a ghastly gray.

"One more chance, old feller," the bandit offered, kneeling and holding the glowing iron plate ready for application against

the unfortunate prospector's soles. "Tell us where the gold is, or I'll tickle your toes—and this ain't no feather, either."

"I ain't got no gold," reiterated John. "And," defiantly, "even if I did have it, I'd see you in hell before I'd tell you."

The smile went out of the others' eyes. Only vicious cruelty lay there now. His fingers tightened on the lifter handle. But even as his muscles tensed for the horrible act, Riley's voice interrupted.

"Put away that stove lid," he directed. "The old man is right—he ain't got no gold. He had it, all right—but I took it from him."

Eight startled eyes centered on the speaker. His face was white, but his voice and mien were calm.

"I been watchin' this place for a long time," he declared, "hoping t' find out where the old man kept the stuff hid. I found out an' grabbed it tonight. But on account of the storm I got him to put me up till mornin'—him not knowin', of course, that I had his dust."

"It ain't true," John cut in. "I didn't have no gold. He's lyin' just to save me."

"The dust is in a bag inside my shirt," Riley went on. "Come an' get it."

"If he's got any gold there," John insisted stoutly, "it's his own."

The two bandits had straightened during the controversy. At Riley's last declaration they flung the lid back on the stove and pounced upon the bound man. Swiftly they ripped open his leather vest and tore away his shirt buttons. And inside, as he had affirmed, they found a measurably heavy canvas bag. With swift fingers they loosened the strings and glanced inside the bag to satisfy themselves as to its contents.

The leader dropped the bag into his coat pocket. He regarded Riley admiringly.

"You ain't no slouch," he complimented. "You hook the old man's gold and make him feed you and bunk you to boot. You're way ahead of us."

Riley regarded the man with cold repulsion.

"If I thought being a crook put me in the same class with a cold-blooded devil like you," he said, "I'd turn preacher tomorrow."

The other took an angry step forward. His fingers half reached for the gun he had replaced in its holster. But his companion interrupted impatiently.

"Cut out the gab, Blackie," he remonstrated. "We've got the gold. What do we care whose it is or how he got it—or what he thinks of our style? We got the dust—let's go."

They retreated to the door, passed through and slammed it behind them. A few moments of shuffling while they mounted their waiting horses and then the three bound listeners inside the cabin heard the horses' hoofs slosh off through the mud, into the distance.

Unnoticed, the storm had gradually spent itself. The rain had now ceased entirely and through the cabin window came an occasional gleam of the moon as it crossed the widening rifts in the clouds.

For some minutes silence reigned within the shack. Then John Lund turned his head in Riley's direction.

"Thanks, pardner," he said simply. Then, after a short pause, "I can't pay you back that gold. I was tellin' them the truth—I ain't got it. I know some folks figure I've got a pile hid away, but the fact is this creek pans out just about enough t' keep me comfortably in beans. So all I kin give you is an old man's thanks an' the promise of a friend if ever you need one."

Riley shrugged his shoulders.

"That's all right, old timer," he deprecated. "Glad to do it."

"Riley," Ellerbee tendered his respects, "you're a square-shooter and a game guy."

Each man fell to straining at the cords binding him, tugging and twisting desperately. But the bandits had done their work thoroughly and at length, their strength exhausted, the three captives were compelled to cease their efforts.

"Barring a busy night like tonight," Sheriff Ellerbee inquired with grim humor of John, "how often do you get callers at your shack?"

The prospector chuckled.

"They don't batter down the door none," he admitted. "I ain't never invited social callers much."

"Well, here's hoping somebody comes along and cuts us loose before we starve to death."

The minutes dragged slowly, the light in the room growing dimmer as the wick in the lamp burned low and the unregulated flame smoked the chimney. At intervals, as his strength and spirit fresh-



ened, each man would make renewed efforts at release, unavailingly.

Upward of an hour passed thus, when suddenly there sounded outside the muddy plop of approaching hoofs. For a hesitant moment the prisoners glanced at each other, dubiously debating whether those passing might be friends, or the bandits returning. Then, simultaneously deciding to chance it, they raised their voices in loud shouts. There was the sound of sudden pulling up of horses, a murmur of voices, and then the door was thrown open and four men, tired and worn looking and damp, pushed into the room.

At sight of them Ellerbee let out a cry of glad surprise, echoed by that emitted by the new arrivals.

"Bob Ellerbee!" they cried. "What in the Sam Hill are you doin' here—tied up this-a-way?"

"Come on, boys—cut us loose," the sheriff requested. "I'll explain afterward. These danged cords have about cut clean through my wrists."

He turned to his fellow prisoners.

"These boys are my deputies," he explained. "I lost 'em some distance back, before I got here."

In a trice the binding cords were slashed and the three captives got to their feet, stretching their cramped muscles and rubbing their chafed wrists.

"We got the son-of-a-gun we was after, Bob," one of the deputies announced jubilantly; "an' got the dust back."

He reached into his pocket and drew forth a canvas bag, measurably heavy! He handed it over to Ellerbee.

The sheriff took the bag. He studied it silently. Between him and Riley and John Lund passed a long, significant look.

"How did you get it Jerry?" Ellerbee asked, slipping the gold into his trouser pocket.

"We lost you up north here at Windy Gulch," the other man explained. "In the rain and dark we thought you turned off there an' we followed. It wasn't till we was into the gulch quite a ways that we missed you. We kep' on, figurin' on finding shelter somewheres, but nothing showed up. At Sugar Creek we cut back to Rifle Canyon, coming out about five miles south o' here. We started up north agin, figurin' there wasn't much use huntin' any more and expectin' t' pick you up somewheres along the way back to Placers.

"And then we run plunk into a couple of hombres ridin' south hell bent fer leather. We hails 'em, but before we kin

catch our breath they plows right past us and shoves their ponies even harder. Of course, that's enough fer us t' figure something's up, so we light out after 'em, and when they don't stop, we starts talkin' with our guns. They were mean hombres, pluggin' right back at us with their guns. Tony here got winged in the shoulder"—the listeners noted now that one of the men's arms hung in an improvised sling—"and when we see they meant business we went at 'em fer keeps—an' got 'em. And when we pick 'em out of the mud what do we find in one o' their pockets but the bank's bag of dust."

"We was wrong figurin' there was only one man on the job," a second deputy spoke. "There was two of 'em."

"We only seen one, though, when we first picked up the trail," objected the first narrator, Jerry.

"He must have pulled the job alone," Sheriff Ellerbee suggested, "but had his pal waiting for him somewheres along the canyon." He turned to Riley. "Look that way to you, does it?"

"Why, yes, Sheriff," Riley drawled quietly, "I wouldn't say as how your guess wasn't right."

"We did a good job when we bumped 'em off," the man called Tony put in. "Remember, Bob, the circular we got to look out fer a couple of bad men—half-breeds—from Lincoln County, wanted there fer stickin' up the California Limited an' killing the express clerk and the engineer? These were the two, all right; fitted the descriptions and pictures exactly. I guess we just saved Lincoln County some expense. We left 'em by the roadside—we can send a team after 'em tomorrow."

Ellerbee had been listening quietly to his deputies' narrative. His brows had been wrinkled in cogitation and he had been plucking thoughtfully at his lower lip.

Now he spoke. "They were a tough couple," he agreed. "They were the ones who rigged us up this way. They thought old dad here had a pile of gold dust cached away and they figured on pickin' it up on the way out with the bank's dust. They were a nery pair, all right, to try that knowing we was on their trail. But I guess they hated to pass by without picking up anything that might be lyin' round handy. We bluffed 'em out of it, though—they were afraid to fool around too long, with us behind 'em. Lucky for me it was too dark back there on the trail for the first fellow to recognize me. If he'd known I

was the sheriff more'n likely I'd have got the rope round my neck instead of my wrists."

"Wonder where he picked up another horse," Jerry pondered. "We shot his pony out under him. When we run into 'em they was both ridin'—we brought the ponies along with us."

It was John Lund who spoke up now, addressing Ellerbee.



"It must 'a' been they who stole Riley's horse—don't you think so, Sheriff? Remember when I went to the barn with you to help you with your pony we found Riley's

pony gone and he figured on goin' out to hunt the thief when the storm let up? They must 'a' stolen his pony and stayed hid around the shack till we settled down to give 'em their chance to come in on us like they did."

"Guess you're right," Ellerbee gravely agreed. He reached for his coat and pulled it on.

"I'll go saddle up," he announced; "then I'll be ready t' ride back to Placers with you boys."

John, still in his bare feet, lit a lantern for the sheriff and they all trooped outside,

the deputies mounting in readiness. Ellerbee fixed Riley with a calm eye.

"Pick out your pony, Riley," he directed, waving his hand at the two spare mounts.

Riley stepped forward, made swift selection, and led his choice to the barn, followed by the sheriff. In silence he unsaddled and bedded the animal, while Ellerbee saddled his.

Then Riley approached and thrust out his hand.

"Sheriff," he said, "a little while back you called me a square-shooter. I want to say that tonight you've done the whitest thing I ever come across. I won't forget it."

Ellerbee gripped the other's hand.

"Riley," he said, "if you're still of a mind to ride over to North Park, if you'll hunt up my good friend, Tommy Hayes, of the Circle Z, and mention my name, he'll take care of you. I expect to run over there for a little fishing later on and I'd be happy to renew the acquaintance with you—if you're still there."

The man who called himself Riley looked out into the now beautifully calm night.

"P'rhaps I will be, Sheriff," he said softly; "p'rhaps I will be."

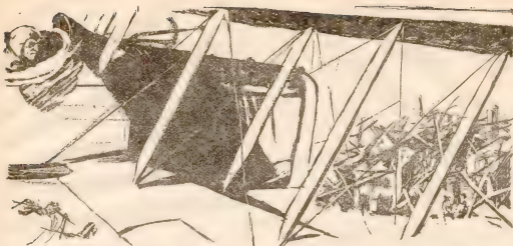
And when Ellerbee, after a last hand clasp had trotted away, Riley, before going into the cabin for the balance of the night, still stood in the barn entrance, staring at the stars, murmuring dreamily:

"P'rhaps—p'rhaps I will be."

THE NORSEMEN AND AMERICAN NATIVES

IN THE year 986 Eric the Red discovered Greenland, and shortly after the Norse began to establish colonies along its coast. For a long time they did not meet any of the natives, although they found traces of their former presence. It was not until the twelfth century that Norse hunters who had ventured far to northward met tribes of Eskimo who were equipped only with implements of bone, ivory, and stone. At first their meetings seem to have been peaceful, but in the fourteenth century troubles developed, which led, in 1349, to the destruction of the Norse settlement at West Bygd. In 1379 East Bygd fell also, and the entire colony was wiped out shortly after 1409.

About the year 1000 the Norse not infrequently coasted off Labrador, and southward as far as Massachusetts, in which neighborhood they located the country of Vinland. Leif Ericson wintered in Vinland in 1000, and during the next few years there were repeated difficulties with the natives, whom the Norse call "Skraelings" in their sagas. These Skraelings, who were no doubt the local tribes of Algonkian Indians, were clad in skins, and their weapons were bows and arrows, slings, and stone hatchets, and one account seems to mention a medicine or war bundle; at least the Skraelings bore into battle an object resembling one, which they bore from a pole.—A. S.



WINGED LAW

Flight III THE STORM PATROL

By THOMSON BURTIS

Author of "Dumpy Does His Stuff," "Handicapping the Climax," etc.

WHEN A TORNADO STRUCK THE OIL BOOM TOWN OF FOLWELL, TEXAS, AND HELP WAS NEEDED FOR A DESOLATED COMMUNITY, WORD WAS SENT TO MCMULLEN FIELD FOR THREE PLANES TO FLY TO FOLWELL, GIVE WHAT AID THEY COULD AND SEND OUT NEWS OF THE DISASTER. THIS, THE STORY OF THE THIRD OF THOSE THREE PLANES, SHOWS IN THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN KENNARD, THE SORT OF MAN WHO IS IN COMMAND OF THE GREAT DEHAVILANDS WHICH ROAR UP AND DOWN THE RIO GRANDE, KEEPING WATCH ON THE BORDER COUNTRY

IT WAS nearing the witching hour of 11 P. M., which made one Captain George Kennard, of the Army Air Service, feel no better. He was prowling around the big DeHaviland airplane which loomed darkly in the moonlight, and the sigh of the wind through the wet mesquite was as dreary as his thoughts. For the tenth time he strode around the small clearing, his flashlight winking on and off as he speculated on chances for a successful take off.

"I've got a hunch things are in a damned bad way in Folwell," he informed his companion, repeating the remark he had made several times before. "It's probably crazy, but I've got to get there tonight. That's all."

Mr. Jim French, cowpuncher on the Blackburn ranch, drawled his reply. "You shore spoke a mouthful, from my angle, when yuh said that was crazy," he stated.

But the stocky, bowlegged, scarred-

faced flyer only grinned and surveyed the sky which, for the past two days, had been shedding water, and hurling thunderbolts, as only the heavens above Texas can. It was clear now, however, and a three-quarter moon rode high and serene in it. Folwell was less than an hour away. And that same town was like a magnet, drawing the little commanding officer of the McMullen flight of the border patrol toward it. Partly from a sense of duty, because he had been ordered to go there. And partly, be it whispered, because the flyer hated the thought of missing any of the events which probably were transpiring in that roaring oil town.

There was abundant reason for thinking that extraordinary happenings might be found there. Folwell was the newest and biggest and wildest of the oil boom towns of Texas. That is, it had been, up to two days before. Then had come a combination of norther, tornado and cloudburst

which had devastated large portions of south Texas. Folwell had been squarely in the path of the storm—and that meant that it was in ruins. Even a sturdily built town could not have withstood the power of that storm at its height. And Folwell, like all mushroom boom towns, had been a large collection of temporary shacks, tents and quickly-thrown-up buildings centering around the few dozen permanent buildings which had been the original little village from which the swirling oil town had sprung.

Any Texan could have predicted what had happened to Folwell as far as physical damage to it was concerned. The river which ran past it had risen to such an extent that it had completely inundated the flat lands surrounding the mesa whereon the village itself was located. Folwell, now was an island in an inland sea. More than that, telegraph and telephone wires were down, the single railroad had been washed away, and there was no means of access to the town, save by air.

That, in itself, would have been sufficient reason for the orders which had been received at the McMullen field that morning. Three planes were to fly to Folwell, find out exactly what supplies were most urgently needed, and radio the news to San Antonio.

But every one in the Southwest who knew oil towns realized that the havoc of the storm would not be the end of Folwell's troubles. Any boom town was a wild town. And Folwell had already gained the reputation of the wildest since Mexia. Nearly fifteen thousand men, and a few women, had descended upon it almost over night, when the field was proven. And in that mass of roughnecks, leaseholders, drillers, scouts, land men and other genuine oil men there had been, as is always the case, hundreds of outlaws, on the trail of big and easy money. Before the storm had come the newspapers had carried stories about the herculean efforts of the few Folwell authorities to maintain some semblance of law and order. So great was the criminal population, and so large the number of serious crimes, that a big stockade had been built to house the prisoners.

And now that the storm had made of Folwell an isolated, helpless heap of ruins, reports were that it was being looted by hordes of hijackers, with the civil authorities helpless before them, Captain Kennard, in command of the three planes from McMullen, had been prepared to declare

martial law in the town if necessary—the odds were ten to one that martial law would be the only law there was there.

Besides running the town with an iron hand he had intended to send up one plane to radio Donovan Field exactly what supplies were necessary. A great fleet of planes from Donovan would fly the supplies down immediately. That the food situation would be critical could be taken for granted. And also that medical supplies would be practically nil. Folwell, before the storm even, couldn't begin to import enough merchandise to take care of its overnight population. And here was Captain Kennard on the ground, a take-off very close to, if not entirely impossible. Bad luck had dogged him right up to that moment. The three-ship formation of which he had been in command had hit a terrific storm and been separated. The captain himself had been forced down in that tiny clearing which he was now pacing. What had become of the other two planes, and their passengers, he did not know. It was almost inconceivable that either one could have made it through that storm. Doubtless they, too, were down in some remote section of the mesquite—probably both planes wrecked and the flyers, perhaps, hurt and helpless.

Chances were that Folwell was exactly as badly off as it had been that morning, and as a climax Jack Beaman, the captain's observer, had slipped and fallen not an hour before, and broken his leg. He was lying over in the ranch-house now. If Kennard got to Folwell, he'd have to go alone.

He started to speak to the cowboy who had come from the ranch to his assistance, then checked himself abruptly. For the last time his clear gray eyes glanced over the layout. The clearing was smooth, wet sand, which would drag at his wheels considerably. And he estimated that it was not more than a hundred yards long. It was surrounded by gnarled mesquite on all sides. It had been comparatively easy to stall into it, but taking off was another matter entirely.

"I'm going to do it," he said abruptly. "Let's see if we can find ourselves a couple of logs. If not, we'll have to cut 'em."

Flashlight gleaming now and then, they searched through the light undergrowth, and finally found two logs which suited the airman. As they searched, the weatherbeaten cowboy stole surreptitious glances at Kennard. He'd heard plenty about the border patrol, and particularly the McMul-

Jen flight thereof. And not a little about that same stocky C. O. who was about to essay that take-off. The hundred odd flyers, picked from the cream of the service, who sent their ton-and-a-half DeHavilands roaring up and down the border from coast to coast on regular patrols, were almost all known by name to the citizens of the Southwest. The McMullen flyers—McMullen being the most easterly flight of the patrol—were like old friends to Texas in general.

"We'll stick this one underneath the wheels," panted Kennard, as they reached the ship.

The D. H. was already backed up against the mesquite on one side of the clearing. He placed one log beneath the wheels. The other, after considerable thought, he spotted about thirty yards from the opposite rim of mesquite.

"Now if you wouldn't mind running back to the ranch-house, after we start the motor, and getting another man to help out, it would be a considerable favor," Kennard informed him, and the cowboy nodded.

After the latter had gone clattering away on his horse, Kennard warmed the ship gradually, his eyes reading the instruments automatically.

One of the most nervewracking ordeals of the flying man was just ahead of him. He was gambling his life on a few inches, one way or the other. And it had to be done in cold blood—just push the throttle on, and trust to luck.

But Captain George Kennard was bound to get to Folwell.

In a few minutes. French and another puncher were back, and the captain was telling them what to do even as he adjusted his goggles. In the white moonlight the clearing was fairly visible, although the mesquite at its lower end was masked in dense shadow.

According to instructions the punchers set themselves, one at each wingtip. Their hands were on the leading edges of the wings as they braced themselves to pull backward, standing alongside the edges of the wings.

The captain's idea was to get up speed as quickly as possible, saving a few precious feet of space. The small log under the wheels acted as a wheelblock. With that, plus the backward pull of the assistants, it was possible to open the motor wide, nearly, without the ship getting under way. When it did, it would get under way at full speed. Then, if he con-

trolled it accurately, he would hit the other log, down the field, with his tires. That would bounce the ship in the air, and catapult it out of the clinging sand. If he could keep it in the air, all might be well.

A last look at the punchers, and he was easing the throttle forward, until the four hundred and fifty horsepower motor was turning up a full sixteen hundred revolutions a minute. He pushed the stick forward. The terrific propeller blast acted on the elevators as though the ship had been in flight and the tailskid left the ground. Now the D. H.'s nose was down, as though taking off, and the drag of the tailskid would not impede him when he started. The tires were flattened against the log, the punchers straining desperately to hold the ship.

One hand on the stick, the other one raised in the air, the captain braced his feet against the rudder bar. With a little prayer to the flyers' gods, he dropped his hand. The cowboys did their share. As one they released the ship, and in an instant it was darting down the clearing as though shot from a gun.

Kennard, a grimaced statue in the front cockpit, could feel the drag of the wet sand on the wheels. Had he tried to make an ordinary take-off, he realized now that he would have been doomed.

Head thrust out of the side of the cockpit, he used his rudder bar to steer for the second log ahead of him. His wheels must hit that squarely, too—if one of them struck it a split second before the other, he would be helpless. The chaparral was rushing toward him with dizzying speed. It did not seem possible that he could make it, but there was no turning back now.

The next instant the big pneumatic tires hit that carefully placed log, and because the captain was a flyer worthy of the border, they hit squarely. The small length of wood was not large enough to make the shock more than the landing gear would stand; it protruded above the ground level just enough to bounce the ship high in the air. For a wild second the airman fought his ship as it settled. With stick and rudder he strove to keep it in the air so that the wheels would not dip into that clinging sand.

He nosed down, momentarily, to gather speed. When he was about to scrape the ground he leveled off—and the wheels did not touch. But the 'squite was only a few feet ahead now, and back went the stick.

Momentarily the ship answered, and cleared the chaparral. Immediately it

started to settle, until the landing gear was swishing through the tops of the trees. For ten seconds it was touch and go, with not an extra mile of airspeed to help. Finally, however, the ship drummed along level, and settled no more. Then a slight opening, a little dive, and a last zoom which carried it to safety.

Kennard's masklike face split into a boyish grin, and he cursed contentedly. Another incident of the air was over, and he was on his way.

HE CLIMBED steadily above the moon-silvered sea of mesquite, until he was three thousand feet high. The motor ahead held his safety in its cylinders now, a forced landing would mean a crack-up in the mesquite. But it sung its rhythmic song without a break, and the ship was traveling at a hundred miles an hour through the smooth night air.

He'd hit the river, then cruise to find Folwell, he decided, and despite the fact that the captain's mind was set on his objectives, constant worry about the other two ships and their flyers was with him. He hoped devoutly that they had reached Folwell; failing that, that they were not lying out in the mesquite somewhere, hurt and without aid.

It seemed to Kennard that his ship was only crawling along through the night. He was as nervous as an actor on a first night, straining forward as though to help the ship along, and deep within him there was an anticipatory thrill—for almost anything might happen. Peering ahead, as his watch showed that he should be near the river, his eyes froze to a plateau which rose from the surrounding flat country. Then as what looked like cleared land came into



view ahead, he was sure that he was nearing the river.

A second later he drew in his breath quickly.

"All water!" he told himself. "And that must be Folwell there—but not a street light!"

Then he realized that there could be none. Naturally the lighting system was destroyed as well as the lines of communication. In a moment he was over the flat lands alongside the river. For miles they were covered with a shallow sheet of water. And on the northern side it was as bad. Even in the moonlight he could see something of the havoc that had been wrought. Dead cattle and horses lay here and there, houses had been blown down, and the banks of the river were outlined by massed wreckage.

And Folwell itself was a sight. There was practically no one on the streets, which were cleared lanes between heaps of debris. The boom town, an expanse of frail shacks and tents and temporary structures of various kinds between the few permanent buildings, had been totally wrecked. Occasionally an unhurt building stretched skyward through the tangled heaps around it. Overturned automobiles lay here and there on the streets, and out in the field, north of town, what had been a forest of derricks was now like a forest through which the lumbermen had just passed. Almost every derrick was down. There were fires all through the field, and he could glimpse many toiling men.

"Trying to get their wells in shape to work again," he surmised. "Wonder, with all that lightning, that there weren't some well fires. Maybe the rain helped."

However, the immediate problem was landing. His eyes surveyed the terrain closely. Not a ship could he see. Sleepy Spears and Slim Evans—the pilots of the other two ships of his flight—must never have made it through the storm.

Then Captain Kennard was sending his D. H. downward in a steep dive. Over on the banks of the river, visible in the bright moonlight, he suddenly made out two wrecked planes. East of town, they were, both in a little ravine which led from the river inland. Then he saw a stockade, and a milling bunch of men in it.

"Must be the temporary jail," he thought swiftly. "Maybe they tried to escape and the boys stopped 'em with their guns and were wrecked."

It seemed as though he must get down right that second to find out what was what. Why were the streets so barren of people? It was only midnight—and yet Folwell was like a deserted village, save for the fields. A few men, perhaps guards, were wandering around. Now that they heard the motor, others were visible.

Suddenly he saw the winking of a flash-

light on the ground. He was only five hundred feet high, now. He got out his own light and signaled down by the International code. "Kennard," he spelled. If one of the flyers were down there, unhurt, he could get some information for the landing.

An airman *was* there. Flying automatically, he kept his eyes on the slowly flashing light below. "Hickman. Field northwest of town one mile. Bad. Wait for fires."

Hickman was one of the patrol's veteran observers, and had left McMullen with Slim Evans. Kennard wondered briefly whether the pilots had been hurt in those wrecks. Evidently Hickman had come out all right. One thing was certain—things had been happening.

He thought he saw the field, now. A road ran through it. He dropped very low to look it over. It certainly was bad. Deep cut ditches criss-crossed it, and there were dark spots which might be anything. He'd have to wait for the fires.

As he zoomed upward, and reached two hundred feet, he started circling monotonously, always within gliding distance of the field. Without particular interest he noticed a group of four men, riding northwest. They weren't bound for the fields—their course led to the south of the derrick. Just to pass away the time, more than anything else, he headed toward them, very low.

As he got close to them they stopped, sheltered by a clump of trees. Head over the side, he gazed down and waved at them. Queer that they should have stopped like that, as though to hide, he thought. Perhaps they were afraid of their horses.

As he swooped past them he glanced back for a second, and saw what appeared to be flashes of gun fire. For a split second Kennard wondered if they could be signaling to him, then with startling suddenness the DeHaviland started to vibrate like mad. Every strut and spar was quivering, and the wires were bands of light two inches wide.

Something had happened to the propeller—a piece out of one end of it, doubtless. Cursing savagely, he cut the gun to thirteen fifty to ease the strain. It must be the propeller—it was clear out of balance.

"Deliberately shooting at me!" Kennard communed with himself as he sent his wobbling plane back toward the field. "And they knicked my propeller. According to those wrecks planes have been rais-

ing hell around here, and they've found out what machine guns in the air'll do—"

He glanced backward. Just visible were the riders, and they had not moved.

"If anybody was up to something they'd want the plane out of commission," Kennard pursued, a glinting light in his eye. "And it looks as though I'd have to land, pronto!"

Which was no more than the exact truth. It takes but very little to throw a six-foot propeller, whirling fifteen hundred times a minute, so far out of balance that the crankshaft is cruelly strained and the frail ship a shivering and unstable thing. And with every passing moment the vibration was getting worse. The instrument needles were dancing, and the captain's body being shaken up considerably. At any moment a number of things might happen: gas line sheer off, propeller splinter, motor go completely bad.

He had to land.

The road was the logical try. It would be madness to try to set the ship down anywhere else—that field looked to be a mess, as far as an airplane was concerned.

It was a very tense, watchful, fearful pilot who eased his ship down over the mesquite, and leveled off above that road. It was badly rutted, but on either side the terrain was even worse. There were deep ditches alongside it, too. He must keep the ship from swerving, if it was not to be destroyed.

He stalled it down, and for a moment, as the right wing dropped, he loosened his muscles for a wreck. One wheel was in a rut, but the wing-skid saved him. And the rut helped, finally, because it kept the ship rolling straight. He came to rest safely, and once again that grin wrinkled his mahogany countenance.

"Folwell'll have to show something to follow this last hour!" he told himself, and shut off the motor.

He inspected the propeller tips with his flashlight. Bullet marks were only too apparent. A clearcut chunk was cut right out of the tip of one of them.

"Which means that those hombres were up to something, and wanted me on the ground—for good," he thought quickly. "And if so, they won't miss paying me a visit."

The next minute was devoted to considerable labor. His short legs twinkling along rapidly, he plowed through the clinging gumbo mud and found three or four pieces of wood he could use. With these he propped up the tail, until the top of the

radiator showed him that his front guns would shoot at a height of about five feet, a hundred feet away.

The other machine guns—double Lewis—were mounted on a scarf mount which ran around the rear cockpit, and could command three hundred degrees of a circle at any height.

This done, he snapped on the switches, and swung the propeller. The hot motor caught instantly, and he toned it down to idling. The propeller could stand three hundred revolutions, and it was necessary to have it going to use the front guns.

He hunched himself down in the rear cockpit, out of sight, and waited. He hoped devoutly that Hickman and his aids would arrive soon—before the riders did—although it scarcely seemed possible. Perhaps he was all wrong, but it seemed reasonable that those men who had fired at him would hustle over to make sure that they had crippled the ship. Perhaps they were making a getaway right then. No, they wouldn't have shot, under those circumstances. But they certainly didn't want any ship in the air.

There they were. Outlined against the



sky, they came over a slight rise in the road, loping along easily. The tail of the ship was pointing that way, which helped.

Kennard crouched at his guns, and waited. They made no attempt to hide their approach. They had left the led horses behind them, he noticed.

They were a hundred yards away when he cupped his hands and shouted, "Stop where you are, and don't move except to throw up your hands!"

"What?" came a roar from one of them.

They reined up short, and again he shouted his orders.

"I'm shooting in the air to show you you're helpless!" bawled the captain, now enjoying himself thoroughly.

The vicious roll of machine gun fire split the quiet night.

"Come forward slowly, hands in the air, until I tell you to stop!" he rasped, and they obeyed.

Twenty-five yards away, his finger on the trigger, he stopped them.

"Throw away your guns!" he commanded. "I'm Captain Kennard of the Army Air Service. If I find one gun left I'll shoot the man that's got it, and right

now I don't care who you are!"

Under the muzzles of those guns they had no choice. Silently they threw away their guns, dismounted, and walked forward, hands in the air. He marched them right up to the guns, bade them turn around slowly, and inspected them for suspicious bulges.

Not a man had said a word. They seemed utterly dazed, as well they might be. They were dressed practically alike—overalls, flannel shirts, sombreros, boots. One comparatively young fellow, and another chap who looked dark enough for a Mexican, were not at all inviting in appearance. A stocky, barrel-bodied man with a round red face and small eyes tried to smile genially, but it didn't quite come off. The fourth, a gaunt, mustached man with a thin, seamed face and sun-crinkled eyes, was more reassuring to look at.

It was he who spoke first.

"Is it in order, Cap'n, for us to enquire, respectful-like, what the hell this is all about?" he enquired.

"Certainly," barked Kennard, continuing his scrutiny of the captives. "First you birds shoot at me while I'm in the air. Figuring that you wanted me on the ground for good, I thought it possible you'd come hiking right over here, which you did. No honest men would want this ship on the ground!"

The other three stole glances at each other, but the spokesman's gaze did not waver from Kennard's snapping eyes. The Texan's long, humorously crooked nose seemed to droop lower over his mustache, and there appeared to be a gleam of gentle humor in his eyes.

"Cap'n, yuh shore were seein' things," he remarked. "We never shot at you."

Kennard, despite himself, was impressed, with the man's apparent sincerity, but he knew also that without a doubt he had been under fire; he felt that these men were responsible.

"Granting that for the sake of argument," he returned briskly, "I suppose you can explain several other things. Number one, where were you going, with led horses, at this time of night?"

"I got a friend named Sam Basson back in the country. He's no doubt in bad shape," drawled the spokesman. "We was bound to see whether we could git there ridin', and brung some horses to git him and his wife and the boys that works for him out. Water's gone down some. It's a cinch his stock was mostly killed."

"That sounds a little fishy," Kennard

told him, his square jaw outthrust. "And you tried to hide under a tree——"

"Just a bit surprised tuh see another plane this time o' night," the weather-beaten Texan cut in. "And we come back tuh see whether yuh was hurt or not and tuh see what we could do."

For a few seconds Kennard hesitated, but within conditions such as obtained in Folwell, no organized outlawry must be permitted to even get under way.

"If you're all right, we'll soon know," he stated. "Personally, I know you shot at me. There's one chance in a million that I was mistaken—but that hole in the prop speaks for itself. However, within a few minutes some people'll be here from Folwell, and if you're O. K. they'll identify you. Give you a certificate of health, so to speak."

The tall leader protested and swore, losing his lazy drawl and the humor in his eyes. But Captain Kennard hewed to the line he had set for himself.

"You're pretty wild for an innocent man," he said evenly. "And from this moment on you keep your mouth shut, see? If you're all right, you've got nothing to fear, and you know conditions."

Very soon after that voices sounded from across the field. It was Hickman, yelling a greeting, but for the moment the captain made no reply. A freakish idea had flashed into his mind—a stratagem that might work in the present emergency if he'd estimated these men correctly. One wreck back there in the ravine was only a partial one—he felt assured the tail surfaces had appeared to be thrust in the air, undamaged.

"Now it's all right," Kennard forced himself to say mildly. "Well, this boat is on the ground for good, until another propeller can be flown down to it. I've sort of changed my mind about you fellows. I was just bluffing about seeing you shoot, but there is a suspicious looking hole in the propeller which forced me down. If no one in this bunch has anything against you, I'm going to set you loose—for lack of evidence, as it were, and I might even apologize."

They were like statues, utterly stunned by surprise. Finally the leader's Adam's apple moved convulsively, and there was a new, eager note in his voice.

"Spoke like a sensible man, suh!" he said. "And I'm right sorry about the plane." But yuh couldn't have gone up, now, on account o' the propeller."

A moment later Hickman and four other

men rode into the clearing, each man carrying something for a fire, and in spite of Kennard's anxiety for news of the other McMullen ships, and of the fate of their pilots, his first remark was:

"All of you look over this crowd, and see whether you know any of 'em."

The curious newcomers crowded close, and one thin, dried up little rider took a closer look at the spokesman.

"Hellow, Zeke. What the hell're you doin' here?"

"Ask the cap'n," returned the man addressed as Zeke. "Tell 'im, Dunham, whether yuh ever knowed me tuh be a murderer or anything——"

"What about him?" asked the captain crisply, darting a look at Hickman.

"What Dunham says will be all right," that large blond young man said hastily. "He's a deputy sheriff here."

"Why, I'll tell yuh," Dunham said haltingly. "I've seen Zeke in three oil booms—sometimes drillin', sometimes rough-neckin', sometimes runnin' a place. Far's I know he's never been afoul o' the law, but I ain't no blood brother or anythin'. What's the whole lay about?"

"Untie 'em then, boys," derected the captain. "All right, Zeke—I'm sorry. I suppose you're in a hurry to get to your friend, if you can. So take your guns and your horses, if you want to, and slope, eh?"

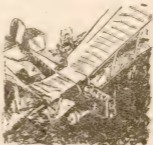
"Thanks," nodded Zeke quietly, and with his three followers made off.

No sooner were they out of earshot, picking up their guns, than the captain had told the story in a few terse sentences.

"Sizing 'em up," he concluded, "I knew it would be next to impossible to get a one of them to talk. Of course, I know they were the birds who forced me to land, but now I've led 'em to believe that they weren't suspected—and that this ship would be useless for a day or two. George, am I right in thinking that wreck over there by the stockade isn't so bad? Tail is sticking up into the air, undamaged."

"Right. Slim got her down pretty gently—considering everything."

"Good. Then the point is that anything they might have had in mind will be pulled



tonight, they thinking they're unsuspected, and that no airplane can interfere with 'em. We'll do two things. Track 'em, and fix up this ship with a propeller from Slim's ship. A matter of givin' 'em rope to see what's up, and catching 'em red-handed while they're at work! These men are helping you, are they George?"

"Uh, huh!"

"Who wants the job of tracking these babies at a safe distance, trying to see whether they're up to anything, and reporting back?"

"I wouldn't mind," a young fellow burst forth. He was rather stout, and dressed in elaborate chaps, wide leather belt, highly embossed cowboy boots and a ten gallon Stetson which hadn't cost a cent less than sixty dollars. He grinned delightedly as he made his offer.

"Knockout puncher, they tell me," Hickman whispered. "Name's Dryden. Great shot, good with a rope, bulldogging, anything. Works rodeos considerably, and had a season with a Wild West show. A good kid, and no false alarm."

"O. K. We'll leave it to you, youngster," the captain stated. "If you catch them up to anything, ride like hell for headquarters in town."

With a joyful wave of the hand, the picture cowboy rode, his quarry having disappeared over the rise.

"Well, George, what's what?" demanded the captain. "In a few words, before we start to town and get busy fixing up this ship in case of emergency."

"And believe me, Cap'n," drawled one of the Folwell men, "this town's learned already what a couple of flying machine guns can do."

"By the way, Captain, meet these men," said Hickman. "This is Mr. Pete Holloway, foreman of the Double X ranch, who happened to be caught in town. This is Mr. Dunham, deputy sheriff. And Mr. Javlin, here, is a driller. All three of 'em have been my right hand men."

"What about those wrecks?" snapped the captain.

"Nothing serious. The first plane in was Sleepy Spears'; he got through the storm without landing. A thug who'd pulled a robbery met Sleepy right here, and forced him at the point of a gun to fly him to the border. So that eliminated Sleepy pronto.

"Slim Evans and I got in late this—yesterday afternoon. A while ago the prisoners in the stockade tried to pull a jailbreak. Slim stopped them by going

up and using his guns, and finally wrecked. The other ship you saw belongs to a civilian flyer who dropped in and helped. Both Slim and he are in the hospital, but O. K. Donovan ships will be in at dawn—this field would be suicidal at night."

"Good. Martial law?" asked Kennard, not mentioning the fact that he had just landed on it.

"Sure. You see, this Folwell was only a village, and if every resident of it had been on the police force there wouldn't have been enough of 'em to come close to running things. Martial law has impressed the town—and believe me it was a wild onion when we got here!

"It's a mess, of course. Just how many killed we don't know until the wreckage is cleaned away. In the hundreds, anyway, and enough wounded to make an impression on the war statistics. At the start there was considerable looting, and a lot of men were shot. But the authorities, in general, were straws against a torrent. You know these oiltowns—a lot of out and out bad eggs, and a whale of a lot of roughnecks who aren't really bad, but still aren't above a little illegal lark, as it were. And get really tough on small provocation.

"Main danger was lack of ammunition—which still is a bit shy of what we ought to have—and that stockade bunch getting loose. First thing we did was have oil company heads get every last driller, roughneck, toolpusher, fireman or what-not out in the fields, where they belonged, and get 'em out of town. They're at it right now, trying to clear away their wells and get started toward resuming work. Then we put out a curfew notice, and nobody can appear on the streets without a pass. We only gave passes to people who were absolutely reliable.

"The sick and wounded are around in the few buildings that amounted to anything and are still standing. They're packed in like sardines, but it's the best we could do. Around six hundred of 'em, pretty well concentrated. Every house is filled to the brim, too. The undesirable element, which includes any strangers we didn't know, are herded into the three churches, and told to stay there. All food has been thrown into one heap, served from a gasoline station, and it's been a matter of lining up and getting a cup of black coffee and a slab of bread or something until tomorrow. The roughnecks—and a lot of other men—are simply going without food until tomorrow. This overgrown town hardly had one day's reserve of food.

"Things are pretty well in hand. We've got guards on every corner, and they shoot any person entering the wreckage. Anybody on the street without a pass is popped in the stockade, unless they're well known and have a good story.

"As a matter of fact, there are only two worthwhile pieces of loot left, and we think that part's over. The bank is the juiciest, of course, but the jewelry store isn't bad. These new rich oil men go in for \$5,000 diamonds and that stuff. The bank, handling all the business of the town has more than a half million, cash, in its two by four vaults, and we've got a heavy guard around it.

"Everybody in town is just about exhausted—not a wink of sleep, little food, and awful strain. I shoed the mayor and the marshal and everybody else off to bed, and got some boys like these to help me out. The guards are dead on their feet. I shouldn't be surprised if we found half of 'em asleep right now.

"Things are quiet, and the Donovan ships'll be in at dawn. And it's hell. You scarcely see anybody that hasn't lost one of the family, or all his money, or something tragic. But as far as we're concerned, it looks as though all we could do has been done."

"Unless," the captain said grimly, "what's just happened here means something. Well, let's get started. I'll take charge of the town, and you get busy, George, on getting the new propeller blade on this ship. We ought to leave a guard here, too, in spite of what I told those bozos. With these guns it'll be a simple job, but the man's got to have his nerve and stay awake."

"How about you, Pete?" queried Hickman, and Pete nodded. He was a bowlegged and competent little man whose eyes were bloodshot with lack of sleep.

Kennard rode Holloway's horse, and they started for town. It was a long and tedious trip through the gumbo—so thick and sticky that it was impassable for cars. The plateau itself, while it held pools of water, was comparatively dry, having drained off. On every side, however, were evidences of the storm. Shacks blown down, dead cattle, wreckage of every description increased as they approached Follwell proper, and the stench of decay was nauseating.

Kennard's square, strong face showed deeper and deeper lines as they rode through the quiet, deserted streets. Occasional flickering lights showed in sturdy

houses which had partially withstood the storm, but otherwise the moonlight was the only illumination. Toward the center of the town what had been visible from the air became obvious in all its tragic ugliness.

Headquarters for the military government was in what had been the City Hall—a small brick building set in a scrubby, mesquite-decorated square. Every window was out, the porch was no more, and the tower on top had been blown down and had made a hole in the roof. In the lobby was Hickman's temporary office, and one young man and one girl, dressed in overalls, were asleep at desks.

"They make out passes," whispered Hickman. "Let 'em sleep—it's due 'em."

They were in a small room off the candle-lit lobby now, and Kennard could talk.

"How long will this marooning last, I wonder?" the captain asked, and Javlin, the driller, answered promptly.

"Men on horseback can get through tomorrow if there's no more rain. River's starting down already, and the fields'll drain off, I reckon."

"Well, George, it looks as though you and Slim between you had done



pretty well——"

"Damn' well!" stated Dunham, and he said it with energetic conviction. "It didn't take this boy an hour tuh get his mob together and get the town under control, and that hombre Evans, that held the starboard—if he ain't a flyin' fool there never was one."

Hickman grinned without embarrassment. He had an air of competence and quiet self confidence which can be born of only one thing: habitual gambling with death, and cheating it.

"Well, Cap, guess I'd better ooze over to Slim's D. H. and get your propeller, just in case," he suggested. "I——"

"Lieutenant—er—what's his name in?" just then came a booming voice, from without, and footsteps were audible.

"Why—no, sir, I don't think——" started a sleepy voice, and then Hickman reached the door.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Thomas," he greeted the unseen visitor. "My name's Hickman."

As Kennard followed his observer out into the lobby he saw that the massive, gray-haired man with whom Hickman was shaking hands was not alone. There was a girl with him, and also a man. And to that man the captain's eyes were drawn, despite the attractiveness of the accompanying girl in riding breeches whose eyes seemed fastened to Hickman's face.

As Hickman was presented to the other two the captain was thinking:

"If that redhead isn't a bundle of TNT I'm the Emperor of China this minute!"

"Captain Kennard, Mr. Thomas," Hickman was introducing him. "Mr. Thomas is the president of the Folwell Bank."

The bank president was a large, stout and impressive looking gentleman, iron gray hair crowning a broad, fleshy face which still retained a remnant of brown. The grip of his huge paw was that of a bear. Despite a Panama hat which hadn't cost a cent less than fifty dollars, and a suit of clothes which might have come from a Fifth Avenue tailor's shop the day before, he gave the impression of a man who had spent most of his life out of doors. His rather small eyes were gimlet-like as they met Kennard's.

"Got in a little late, eh?" he rumbled. "This is my daughter, Vivian."

The slim attractive girl, who didn't seem to have left her teens behind her yet, bowed unsmilingly. She darted a glance at her father from stormy dark eyes.

"This is Ray King," Thomas finished. "My right hand man in the oil business, and cattle. I have interests all around Texas, and Ray's my messenger and representative."

The captain shook hands with the tall, slim, red-headed chap who'd drawn his attention at first sight. In riding breeches and high-laced boots which were spotted with oil, he looked to be unusually slender and long-legged. However, the appraising captain noted that the wide, sloping shoulders denoted physical power in every line, and that the narrow jaw was square. Below arching red eyebrows two eyes which seemed to have irrepressible devils dancing in them sparkled greetings into the captain's.

"Greetings," he said blithely, his thin lips curved in an infectious smile.

The amazing thing about him, though, was not his lean, fleshless frame or strongly chiseled face. In movement and speech he was not at all nervous or high strung, and yet he gave the impression of tremendous energy bottled up within him.

His curly red hair, cut short and standing straight up seemed like so many well-charged electric wires, and his eyes to be concentrated spots of perennial energy. Vitality fairly crackled from him, as it does from a high strung thoroughbred.

His face held a few lines, which seemed to strengthen it, and the thin, well-cut lips and strong jaw completed the ensemble of a statue with a furnace within.

"Can the clerks go out?" boomed Thomas. "Naturally, we didn't come here in the middle of the night for a social call."

The captain pricked up his ears, and Hickman forgot his ingenuous admiration of Miss Vivian Thomas as her sire gave vent to this hint. The banker moved to a chair, and as he did so the captain observed that not even his expensive trousers could hide the fact that he was bowlegged.

"Looks as though he might have started as a puncher, got to be a stockman, and ended up as a banker," surmised the captain, which guess was exactly correct.

Kennard removed his helmet as the two sleepy clerks moved out of the room, ran his fingers through his brush pompadour and then pinched his short, straight nose. Those two gestures meant that he was turning something over in his mind.

"George, I'll feel worried until we get that ship fixed—just in case, you know. And yet I don't want you absent if there's anything up—"

"I can fix that," stated Hickman, and raised his voice, calling Javlin.

"Mr. Javlin, I wonder whether you'd mind going over to the hotel, and getting a fellow—Gray his name is—out of his bed on the porch. He used to be a mechanic in the Air Service, he said. Tell him I said to get a man to help him, a couple of horses, and go over to Evans' wreck at the stockade. He's to take off the propeller and carry it over to the landing field and put it on the captain's ship. Tell him to be careful when he arrives—that guard might pot him just for luck."

A few more instructions, and the stout little driller was off.

"Now, Mr. Thomas, shoot," commanded Captain Kennard.

He glanced from the banker's heavy, ruddy face to the others. The girl had been looking at George Hickman, as though fascinated. King's gaze was also frozen to the big observer, a quizzical look in his eyes.

As Kennard spoke to Thomas, however, the Folwell man's daughter darted a look at her father. As when they had first ar-

rived, the captain was aware of the fact that there seemed to be very little filial love discernible in the girl's eyes. With mounting interest he felt a curious undercurrent between the two—a very remarkable situation for father and daughter.

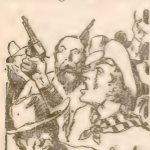
"The dictatorial old boy has just about bawled her out within the last few minutes," Kennard decided.

"First," Thomas said weightily, "a little resume to inform you of the situation—something Hickman does not know. The young man has done well, Cap'n—fine. But King here has been sort of looking around, and is just in from the fields. He knows everybody. The fact of the matter is that a bunch of the roughnecks are pretty well in a stew. There was considerable promiscuous shooting, a few men shot who probably didn't exactly deserve it—just stopped, say, to pick up a necktie or something without realizing what they were doing. Then when the boys arrived and martial law with 'em, and everybody was shunted out to the fields to get 'em out of town, they didn't like it. It's cold and wet, of course, and you know how a bunch of roughnecks are. In general, they resent the authority. They wanted some liquor and a sort of—er—"

"Picnic around town, eh?" interjected the captain.

He glanced at the girl again. Her face was now sullen, and those turbulent eyes never left her father's face. She seemed to be indulging in considerable internal resentful derision of his every word. King was listening as though thoroughly enjoying himself, and every time he looked at Vivian his face assumed a more sardonically mirthful expression.

"Well, yes; you might call it that," Thomas resumed. "Anyhow, that's that—an undercurrent of resentment and unrest through the fields. With half a chance,



it might result in their deciding, half in the spirit of a lark, to come into town any way, break open a saloon or so, and get drunk regardless of authority."

"I see," nodded the captain. It did sound reasonable, at that, particularly with a few burning friends of dead men to stimulate the enterprise.

Thomas settled back in his chair, and gazed at the ceiling as though collecting his thoughts.

"Now—" he started ponderously, when King interrupted him.

"Pardon me," he said as he got to his feet with a pantherlike movement. "You're in a draft, Vivian. I'll close this window—"

"It's all right," she told him. "In fact I—"

"I'll close it anyway—it's still a draft!" he told her calmly, and proceeded to do so.

He had bent over her solicitously when asking the question, and her father's face was suddenly frowning and his eyes glowing dully as he followed King's figure to the window. Vivian, too, watched him as though unable to take her eyes from him. Then she glanced at her father, caught his expression, and Kennard swore he could see a slight toss of her head. As though suddenly conscious of the outsiders, she darted quick looks at the flyers, and her eyes sought the ground.

"Maybe just a difference with her father over King," thought the captain. "But if King's such a good man, and all Thomas says he is, that's a bit peculiar, too."

When King sat down his body slumped easily, and those sparkling eyes were full of quizzical deviltry.

"Now to get down to something more definite. That's the background," Thomas resumed after a moment of curiously strained silence. "I'm president of the Folwell bank. We've got more than half a million dollars in there. You've got it guarded, I know. But your men are dead on their feet, and some of 'em, while honest, aren't what you might call gunmen. The reason for what I suggest you'll see in a minute. What I want your permission to do is to put a guard around that bank for tonight of some dozen men that Ray has gathered up around town and out in the fields—hardboiled fellows who know how to use their guns. Then your men can rest, poor devils, and I'll feel easier.

"Because, gentlemen, it's pretty thoroughly established that there's going to be an attempt made to rob the bank at just about four o'clock this morning!"

"Huh?" grunted the surprised captain, and big Hickman was on his feet.

"How do you know?" he asked swiftly, his eyes flitting from one face to the other.

King's eyes were blazing with enjoyment, that aura of vitality seeming almost physically visible. Vivian, though, was

coiled in her chair, motionless, gazing resentfully at her father. Bank robberies were nothing in her young life, apparently.

"Tell him, Ray," commanded Thomas. "And for Heaven's sake get it over with!" Vivian burst forth. "I can't stand for—"

"Vivian!"

It was not her father's voice, but King's. And it was like the crack of a whip. It stung the girl into silence. She crouched in her chair, gazing unwinkingly at the still smiling King, in the manner of a bird looking at an approaching serpent. Thomas's heavy hands were on the arm of his chair, his face a lowering mask, and he appeared on the verge of leaping at the redhead. King's glinting eyes met the banker's, and Thomas relaxed. Thin lips curved in a smile, eyes sparkling eerily in the flickering candlelight, King faced the airmen.

"Of all the crazy stuff I ever heard of," Kennard was thinking in amazement. "Am I going out of my mind and seeing ghosts by candlelight? Here Thomas is King's boss, and played him up first; now it looks as though he hated him, and that King had something on him. Maybe over the girl. But the girl obeys King like a trained cat, and yet seems at times to—resent him. And the atmosphere's about as comfortable as it would be in the death house."

He forgot the little drama between the three, however, as King started.

"All very simple," the flashing redhead said easily. He was standing now, leaning against the wall. "I know a lot of men, especially in the oil business, representing Mr. Thomas' interests as I do. That includes a bunch of more or less outlaws—hijackers and gamblers and that bunch. It helps in my business to know exactly what's going on in an oil town.

"To make a long story short, as I was dropping around here and there to see the situation, I overheard a conversation in a partly blowdown camp next to a partly completed well. Two of the men I knew. One is Curly Harbord, a driller who isn't above pulling a big crooked deal, and the other Sim Farwell, who's been acquitted of murder three times on pleas of self defense.

"A minute later, having made a noise, I was compelled to walk in boldly, and then things stopped. But from what I overheard it's almost certain that they intend to lead a bunch of about twenty men into town, sneak around through the wreckage and tie and gag a few guards in the neighborhood of the bank, then ride up

and shoot it out with the bank guards if necessary. I have an idea, though, that one or two of the bank guards at present on duty are in on it. Naturally the thieves wouldn't want to make much noise. With the aid of a couple of crooks in the armed force, matters would be much easier and more expeditious.

"However, the method is immaterial. Curly Harbord is slick and brainy, and he'll have that figured out. If I'm right, and I'm sure I am, the stunt'll come off about four-thirty."

"How would they figure on getting out of Folwell?" barked the captain, striding up and down the half lit room with enforced short steps.

"They can make a few miles, horseback, in slow time, and then be in the mesquite, probably. They figure on no telephone or telegraph communication, of course. I imagine they've got some hideaway where they figure on holing up for a while, although I don't know. They must know more planes are coming tomorrow from Donovan Field—"

"And that there's one on the ground now," Hickman interrupted.

"This was before you arrived, Captain," King told him. I imagine they'll figure on putting your ship out of commission."

"They have already!" Kennard told him, and narrated what had happened an hour before.

As he talked he was thinking two things at once. One was exploring the possibilities of the situation. The other—a sort of vague, wordless speculation at the back of his mind—had to do with King. The man talked with a New England accent and the modulated correctness of a cultured man. At a guess, he was a college man. Not long out of college, at that.

Thomas, the girl, and King listened with tense interest. Finally King shook his head.

"Zeke Brady couldn't possibly be in on it, could he, Mr. Thomas?" he asked, and grinned as he asked it. "In that particular case you must be wrong about the shooting, Captain. Unless one of the men with him was sore at the flyers for something or some motive like that."

"Then if this robbery is coming off, they'll rush the ship before they start, and it behooves somebody besides one guard to be there!" rasped Kennard. "With a ship we can stop anything—"

"Just a second, Captain, if I may," King interrupted quietly. Lounging against the wall, he was the incarnation of utter re-

pose, and yet there was an effect of a coiled spring about him.

"What you say is true, but I've got a scheme—or rather we have—which I think will prevent anything at all happening. Assuming, of course, that something is scheduled to come off. First, of course, for additional safety, putting our own picked guards around the bank. That's in case of emergencies.

"My idea is this. Curly Harbord, especially, is a keen hombre who knows his onions and knows 'em well. He wouldn't put his head into the noose for any amount of money. A keen article, that boy, who's pulled off many a deal and never been



caught. The fact that he's in this makes me certain that every step has been carefully figured out. In other words, that their getaway is planned carefully, and that by dawn they think they'll be safe. If

he knew that I suspected him, and had talked, or even if I hadn't talked, he'd call the whole deal off in a second. Or kill me, if he could get away with it.

"Here's the proposition. Neither he, nor anyone else in this whole town, is going to kill an army officer. Particularly one of you border patrol birds. They figure you're like the Rangers—that you'd take turns on leave, if necessary, and pot the man that did it in Mexico or Tierra Del Fuego.

"If you're willing to do this I'll go with you. If you and Hickman here just rode into Curly's camp, with me, right away, as though nothing was up, and—"

There was a sudden gasp from the girl, so loud that King involuntarily stopped. In a second the girl was on her feet, her chest heaving stormily. She was gazing, flashing-eyed, at her father. Twice she opened her mouth to speak, while the amazed flyers watched wordlessly.

"Vivian!"

It was King's voice, and his body was suddenly tense. She whirled and faced him. For a few seconds their eyes locked. Then, with startling abruptness, she burst into a storm of weeping, and ran out the door and off into the night.

Thomas' face was a mixture of utter amazement and helpless rage. King looked at him for a moment, smiling a mirthless

smile. Kennard watched them both alternately, still dazed with it all.

"She seems a bit—er—overwrought," stated Hickman easily.

"That's it," Thomas said slowly. "She's had practically no sleep, and is far from herself. I didn't want to leave her alone, as I said, but she should be in bed. We had a bit of a—misunderstanding on the way over."

He stopped, and looked at King. Then, as though the words were dragged out of him against his will, he went on heavily.

"She doesn't like the idea of Ray going out there to see Curly, under the conditions, I presume."

"Somebody ought to see that she gets home all right," Hickman suggested uncomfortably. "I'll follow her—"

"No, no!" thundered Thomas. "The house is only two blocks away—she'll be better off by herself. And there's no real danger, of course. Guard right on the corner. Go ahead, Ray."

Captain Kennard, sunk deep in his chair, said nothing. The relationships between those three were certainly highly peculiar. Vivian acted as though she heard her master's voice when the dynamic King spoke to her, and if she felt any love for her deep-voiced, massive father she had hid it well. And if that same father was at all pleased over a prospective affair between his daughter and his aide he didn't show it.

King was as calm as though nothing had happened.

"I've practically finished," he stated.

"Just what I said I think will be best. The three of us simply go in there, on some excuse. You could say that you heard Curly was an excellent shot, or something like that, and that you were going to press him into service as a guard or something. We'll figure that out in a logical way. By the time we get out there, chin around, and get Curly and maybe one or two more, the plan will be abandoned. They won't know which way to turn while you're there, and with Curly gone the others won't make a break. He wouldn't lift a finger against you—he wouldn't even start the job if any identification of him with it was possible.

"I think it'll save bloodshed, trim the whole thing off in the bud, and be the easiest way out all the way around. Of course, it's letting prospective criminals off without a scratch, but the idea is to keep order here, isn't it?"

"And the robbery would complicate matters, even if it was foiled, in case some

roughnecks try to get gay in their boyish way. You might have your hands full there, without any holdup to make things worse. And it'll save a few lives, maybe.

"Of course," he concluded smilingly, "you're the doctors. I'm simply giving my suggestions, which suit Mr. Thomas, as a man who knows the lay of the land. As a last resort, we have our new and tough guards to hold the fort if we fail and—"

"What's that?" boomed Thomas.

Something heavy hit the steps, and there was a scratching sound.

"Anybody—in there?" panted someone.

Kennard was at the door in one bound. A man was staggering up the steps, bearing another in his arms. His burden's head was covered with blood, his clothes with mud, and he seemed unconscious.

As the guard—for it was a guard—carried him into the lobby and laid him down he panted, "He insisted on seein' you officers—"

"It's that cowpuncher we sent after Zeke," snapped Kennard.

Dryden opened his eyes, and essayed a grin.

"I'm—all right," he said weakly. "Just a belt on the head, really. But I—wanted tuh tell yuh that somebody got me from behind not ten minutes after—I left. They—whoever it was—tied me up, but I got loose. Thought yuh might like tuh know—damn' dumb o' me—mesquite—bushes and—"

He passed out there, while George Hickman bathed his head and Kennard, his gray eyes glinting with icy fire and his hand running through his hair, took a turn up and down the room.

"It means that this Zeke whatever his name is isn't so damn' innocent at that!" he said slowly. "So he's had a good reputation all his life, has he? Well, he's gone wrong now! And there's one bozo that's going to be got, and got good, before I leave this town! It wasn't his fault that I didn't die in a crash, or that this boy didn't bleed to death."

"I—I can't believe it!" puffed Thomas. "Why—I can't, that's all! Maybe robbery was the motive—somebody out in the bushes—"

"It doesn't seem possible," agreed King without excitement, but his eyes were like windows into an internal furnace which was burning with blinding light. "It'll be easy to find out, though. Who knows? Maybe Zeke's run into hard luck and is part of Curly's band."

"George, take care of getting this boy fixed up, and a doctor at work," commanded Kennard, and Hickman and the guard promptly departed for one of the emergency hospitals, carrying the puncher between them.

Kennard was in a mental tailspin, to use his own expression. The logical explanation was that Zeke was part of Curly's group, although it was possible that he was generating an enterprise of his own. Somehow the border patrolman, accustomed as he was to directing offensives against all types of criminals ranging from Mexican bandits to American cattle-rustlers, was nevertheless at sea.

"Maybe this candlelight, and this stinking shambles all around here have got on my mind, and this chilly air into my bones," he told himself grimly. "But somehow I feel as though there was more afoot than meets the eye."

Thomas and King waited in respectful silence as he formulated his plans. Twice he looked up, absently, and found them gazing at him eagerly, as though trying to plumb his innermost thoughts.

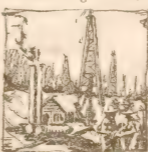
"All right," he said abruptly. "Mr. Thomas, you're president of the bank, and if you want other guards it's O. K. with me. In fact, your suggestion is excellent. George said the ones we've got are dead on their feet. Where are they?"

"Out in the fields, most of 'em. I can collect 'em in less than an hour," King responded. "Are you and Hickman going to take my suggestion about Curly?"

"Yes. But if this Zeke is there, there's going to be some excitement," the captain told him grimly.

"Suppose we do this, then," suggested King, straightening up. "I'll get gone immediately, and send in the guards in a body with a note signed by me. Mr. Thomas can stay around to identify 'em, and you'll have somebody in charge here, of course.

"Then I'll go on over to Curly's camp



ahead of you. He's been drilling a well for the Tehia people—he's an all around ol man—and that's where they'll be. I can make a good excuse for another

visit, and look over the lay of the land. If there's anything that looks bad—as though

your coming would be unwise, I'll leave and meet you on the road and warn you. If nothing happens, come right ahead.

"Follow the road through your field. It forks a half mile north. Take the east road, and watch for a very slightly defined temporary road leading off to the left a few hundred yards further on. The first derrick—blown down by the storm—is the place. His camp is partly destroyed, too, but you'll see some sort of a light. Don't try to sneak up; they might shoot before they know you. Make some noise, and I'll tend to the rest. Both you and Hickman'll come, eh?"

The captain nodded.

"O. K.," he stated. "Better be going."

King turned in the doorway. In the shadows his sparkling eyes were like twin electric lights in his lean, clean-cut face.

"You'll tend to Vivian, of course, Mr. Thomas?" he said—and it was more of an order than a question.

The banker, his fleshy face showing signs of weariness and worry, nodded unsmilingly. With a wave of the hand and a flashing smile King was gone.

A second later Javlin came in.

"I went out with 'em and got the stuff—they're out at the ship now fixin' you up," he reported, sinking into a chair. "Anything up, Cap'n?"

"Plenty," Kennard told him, and outlined the events of the past hour.

"I'm going to the house to see if Vivian is all right," Mr. Thomas said, getting heavily to his feet. "You'll find me there, Cap'n. Who will be in charge to see me, if you're gone, and make sure about the guards—?"

"Mr. Javlin here," Kennard told him.

A brief conversation settled the details, and the banker left, walking, suddenly, like a very old man.

"The ship, I imagine, will be all right," Kennard said absently. "Those machine-guns are protection enough, with only one guard, and this scheme ought to prevent any attack being made, anyhow."

Javlin nodded.

"That King is a right smart hombre," he stated. "Got the nerve o' the devil, and a brain like a steel trap. He works pretty rough for the old man, sometimes."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, squeezing a little guy when they get a chance—that's the oil business—and driving tough bargains. And if it comes down to the real rough stuff, King can hold his own with any man, and be two jumps ahead of him."

"Funny situation, sort of, between the three," Kennard told him. "Looks as though King was in love with the daughter, and Thomas didn't like it—"

"Hardly," the fat little driller cut in. "This Thomas trusts everything in the world to that boy. The girl, I hear, is sort of funny. Some say she's upstage, and others that she's just got a temper, and so forth. Maybe spoilt. Since I've been seein' her around she's always acted kind o' unhappy, yuh know. Maybe the old man's too strict with her, but she's been away tuh school a lot and has everything in the world."

"She seems to be half afraid of King and—"

"Lots o' people jump when Ray cracks the whip," Javlin said slowly.

"What do you mean?" snapped Kennard.

Somehow the tenseness between those three intrigued him. For no particular reason that he could analyze, he wanted to find an explanation for it.

"Nothin' special—just do," Javlin said vaguely. "I understand it didn't take him two weeks after hittin' this country tuh be in with Thomas, and as far as oil is concerned he runs things more'n his boss does. Ray's a coldblooded bird—maybe the old man's got a hunch King wants tuh sort of supplant him. And maybe he don't want to give Vivian to no man. But it's natural, if the kid likes Ray at all, that she'd be well bossed by him. He bosses lots harder critters than a nineteen-year-old girl without no mother!"

"Here's George," Kennard said as light footsteps came up the steps. "We'll get going, and you're in charge. How's the boy, George?"

"Fine as a fiddle," Hickman responded with a grin. "When he came to and we got his head bandaged and he got a shot of whisky he was O. K. Hard job to keep him in bed, and I really don't believe he needs to stay there. Say, Cap, what do you make of this? A little boy just jammed it in my hand and made off like a rabbit."

The captain took the grimy piece of paper, and read it with difficulty. It was in crawling handwriting, and read:

"Don't trust nobody and watch your step. Tear this up right away."

"Well I'll be damned," breathed Kennard, and examined the note more carefully.

Javlin was looking over his shoulder. It was written, apparently, by a man—and

by a man unaccustomed to taking his pen in hand. And yet, that might be just an attempt at disguise.

"Funny, eh?" said Javlin.

The captain nodded.

"Well, we've got no time to waste," he stated. "I don't see that we can do anything about this except watch our steps closely, according to instructions. One question more before we start, Javlin. What's your idea of the possibilities King and Thomas outlined about the rough-necks? That is, do you think they're really sore and might decide to come roaring into town and get themselves some drinks and raise hell generally?"

"Maybe," responded the little driller. "That is, some of 'em, if they was smoked up by some soreheads or somethin' like that. But I don't reckon it would amount to much—unless they got drunk and ugly."

"And we can't afford any flouting of our authority, although we've only got four or five more hours to go without help. Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Come on, George. Got your Colt? O. K."

The two flyers went out into the dank night, and as soon as they were out of earshot Kennard gave utterance to his thoughts.

"I said no more about this note just to be safe," he told the observer. "It may mean nothing. If it does mean something, it means trust nobody. And that might just as well be Javlin, say, as anybody else. We can't logically figure somebody's warning us against Thomas, leading citizen of the town and well known in the state. Maybe King—yes, although that's pretty far-fetched. He might be double-crossing his boss. I presume.

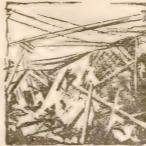
"And this note may be the work of a crank or a sorehead. I can't see any reason why we should give up our trip to see Curly Harbord—it strikes me exactly as it did King. That is, as the best and easiest way to avoid a lot of trouble and bloodshed. But we can be on our guard, and I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't a pious idea to have some reliable man sort of follow us, and watch what happened, just in case anything does."

"I think so," agreed Hickman. "I think Chubby Dryden—the puncher—is the man. He's all right now, and he's just pining for action. I'll go get him."

"And some horses, and hustle!"

Kennard waited alone on the deserted street. The breeze was chill and damp, and the wreckage piled about him, the

solitary guards here and there, and the nauseating odor of the town combined to form a scene so repulsive, so horrible,



breathing disaster and death that even the hardened army man felt its effect on his spirits. Somehow it seemed as though anything could happen in that shambles.

Five minutes later they were on their way, riding. The bandaged Dryden was to approach the camp from another direction, and lie in hiding, waiting to see whether any untoward event came to pass.

As the two flyers approached the ruined derrick they saw a flickering light in the bunkhouse. It was a lonely spot, the drilling machinery looming black in the half light and the boiler, a hundred and fifty feet from the derrick, a shadowy, lifeless mass. Despite himself, the airman felt a certain half-pleasurable, half fearful succession of tiny chills go over him. Somehow the conditions made what they were about to do take on all the elements of wild adventure.

They talked loudly, and their horses' footsteps, as the shoes clinked on bits of machinery lying around, made considerable noise. A man threw open the door. His face was indistinguishable, with the candlelight behind him.

A moment later the slender figure of Ray King could be seen behind him.

"It's the officers!" Kennard heard him say loudly. "Hello, Cap'n! Why way out here?"

The captain returned the greeting, and both he and Hickman dismounted. He saw four other men within. Hands close to their Colts, they clumped up on the porch.

"I want to see Curly Harbord," the flyer said tersely.

"I'm him," said a huge, hard-faced young fellow from within. "Come in!"

The captain entered the door first, Hickman right behind him. King followed them.

Before either airman had a chance to move they were hit from all four sides. From both sides of the door, from in front, and with King attending to the rear, the outlaws made their moves. Not even big Hickman could tear his arms from the

grips of King and another man, and the kicking, struggling captain was helpless in the grip of Curly Harbord and another oil man nearly as large.

Not a word was spoken as the raging flyers were expeditiously bound and gagged. When they were laying on the floor King, like a redheaded streak of flame, grinned down at Kennard.

"Too bad, Cap'n, but I couldn't let a chance like this go. This night I get mine! There's going to be a bank robbery all right—I didn't lie to you!"

And he was gone. A moment later galloping horses could be heard at a distance.

Kennard was half crazy as he writhed and twisted in his bonds. He thanked all his stars for that note, and the happy thought which was responsible for Dryden, somewhere out there in the mesquite. They'd be released soon, but every second was an eternity.

He thought he could see through every detail of the scheme now, and the utter audacity of King, plus his unblemished reputation, were responsible for its perfection. King had told Thomas of the proposed robbery—leaving out only the detail that he himself was the head of it. And those special guards were doubtless the thieves themselves! What might happen to Thomas he did not know. Probably the old man would be unharmed. He would O. K. the guards as a matter of form, and then go to bed, probably.

If only Dryden would hurry up and come! Would the outlaws rush the ship? Possibly, but not probably. Not only had he and Hickman walked into the trap like two amateurs, but they had tipped their hands to King in detail. The oil man knew of the machineguns, and he'd figure that the flyers were safely out of the way for a couple of hours, at least.

Which brought on the last, and most puzzling thing. King was far from being a lunatic, if the captain sized him up correctly. Where in the world were the outlaws going to flee? They knew that a dozen planes from Donovan Field would arrive shortly after dawn, and that they stood small chance of getting to the border in safety. Not only that, but the flooded flat lands would make any sort of progress slow, if not impossible, for the fugitives. There must be eight or nine of them, the captain estimated, and some of them at least, were known. They must have a course of action laid out—but what could it be? The town would be searched from end to end, of course. Unless they

had a hiding place ready which was impossible to detect, they stood no chance whatever of escaping with their loot.

And what that hiding place could be was a puzzle. It was certain, though, that it would be so difficult to discover that catching them redhanded would save a great deal of trouble.

Where in the world was Dryden? Kennard, maddened by his helplessness, struggled fiercely, as though he could break the bonds he knew he could not. Suddenly his body lapsed into utter immobility. The crack of a pistol had split the stillness of the night. A moment's silence, and then another, followed almost instantly by a third. Then a yell of anguish, and a wild "Whoopee!"

"Try to shoot me, would yuh?" came Dryden's voice, from a considerable distance.

The outlaws had left a guard. That was the reason for Dryden's delay.

A moment later the fleshy young puncher staggered into the shack, and with him, half leaning on him, was the man whom Kennard knew as Zeke. In a trice the cowboy had cut the flyers free, and was looking at them with shining eyes. Zeke lay quietly on the floor, wounded in the thigh.

"What happened?" demanded Dryden breathlessly, and when he heard the brief tale he whistled.

"A half hour's start they got—they're half way to town now!" he said excitedly. "We've got to—"

"Wait a minute," interjected Kennard. "So you're in the thing, too, eh, Zeke? Well, we'll bind up that wound of yours and then see to it that you get to a place where you won't need that leg much. Got anything to say to make it easier for yourself?"

"Not a word," drawled the melancholy Texan.

As he bound up the wound quickly, Kennard's brain was casting around for the best method of procedure. There was very little time to lose—should he use the plane?

"Oh!"

It was a gasping exclamation from the doorway, and all three men whirled, guns out. Standing there, shrinking against the jamb, was Vivian Thomas.

"What in the name of the seven-toed soothsayers are *you* doing here?" rasped the dumb-founded captain.

"I—I—was afraid something had happened—"

"That's why you wrote the note, eh?"

It was George Hickman, taking a wild shot in the dark. The girl's shadowed dark eyes turned to him in utter astonishment. For a moment she hesitated, and then straightened. Slim and tense, she faced them, and nodded her head.

"How did you guess?" she asked quietly.

"Never mind, Miss Thomas," Kennard said incisively. "What we want to know is: how did you know what was coming off, why didn't you tell us before, and what are you doing here?"

The captain had spoken none too gently, and the girl did not answer. She seemed more mature and womanly, then—as though she had passed through an ordeal which had burned away all remnants of childishness.

"Does your father know you're here?"

Hickman asked gently.

"He's not my father!"

"What?" barked Kennard.

"He's my stepfather—and I hate him!" she said slowly, and her very lack of emotion added immeasurably to the force of her amazing statement.

"How about telling us the whole thing—quickly, because we've got to move fast?" Hickman suggested with a sunny smile.

His blue eyes were blazing with enjoyment of the whole situation—and in anticipation of what was to come.

"It's—really nothing, that you don't know," Vivian said steadily. "I suspected that—my father was forcing Ray into doing something—criminal, and—"

"Thomas forcing King?" interjected Kennard surprisedly.

"Yes. Maybe not forcing him—but that they were going to do something. I overheard them talk before we came to see you. I just knew they were going to—to do something wrong. I wrote the note, and then came out here to see whether they had done anything to you.



Thomas is a—thief, and always has been one. He's as hardhearted as a stone. And miserly and everything. I don't know just what they intend to do about—"

"We do. Rob the bank!"

"So that's it, is it?" she said, a trifle

wearily. "I didn't think it of—Ray. I—thought quite a good deal of him. That's why I didn't warn you right away. I didn't know what to do."

"Why would your father take this method of robbing his own bank?" Kennard asked swiftly, as though thinking aloud. "A bank president could accomplish that little matter much more easily, and under better circumstances, and without splitting with anybody else. I wonder—"

"Suppose his investments went wrong, and he'd started borrowing money from his own bank in an illegal manner, and was taking this opportunity to cover his embezzlement by a robbery?" suggested Hickman. "Maybe he won't get a dime in cash, but trade the cash in return for covering up the shortage he's responsible for."

Kennard's face split in a grin, and solemnly he shook hands with the observer.

"You're a Sherlock Holmes," he chuckled delightedly. "O. K. Miss Thomas, have you a horse?"

She nodded.

"Will it carry you and George?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Dryden, your horse is nearby?"

"Yes, suh!" exploded the puncher, whose eyes had been fairly popping from his head.

"Good. George, you start for town as fast as the Lord'll let you, and get yourself as big an army as you can for emergencies. It's my idea that possibly King and Thomas had agents at work in the fields, and that they'll organize a gang of roughnecks to stream into town for a few drinks, or something, to distract attention.

"I'll fly. I don't want to get in the air before they've started work, so they can be caught with the goods on. I'll keep watch from the air—you have twenty-five or thirty armed men hidden out around. I'll try to get there just as they start, and before they make off for a hiding place which still puzzles me.

"Dryden, you'll have to stay and guard Zeke, I guess, for a while. Let's go!"

And Captain Kennard hied himself toward his ship with considerable celerity.

Within a minute Hickman, the girl in front of him, was galloping toward town. Then they had to slow down as the sticky gumbo became hard for even a horse to traverse.

"This must have been a tough session for you," Hickman suggested as the horse plowed along.

She nodded without looking around.

"But I feel so much better to have everything off my mind," she said quietly. "I've always suspected Thomas—he went through my mother's money pretty well before she died. I think that's all he married her for. As for Ray—even that's a weight off my shoulders. I—was unhappy because I liked him, and at the same time felt that he wasn't—worthy, perhaps."

Her utter frankness was surprising to the big observer, and somehow the unforced sincerity of it impressed him profoundly. That flapper he'd seen back in the office had disappeared, and a woman was riding ahead of him. And a very good looking one, and George was a blithe young animal to whom an attractive girl was one of life's most pleasant interludes.

"Well," he said after a few minutes of steady conversation, "here's where we can gallop again. But in case I'm in too much of a hurry when we get to town, I'll tell you now. You sure were a peach to do what you've done, and I'm tickled to death that things have happened—as they have. Maybe I'll get a chance to tell you more about that, eh?"

She looked around, and up into his smiling, boyish eyes. She smiled herself, for the first time that Hickman had noticed.

"I'd like to listen," she laughed—and that was that.

Kennard reached the ship only a hundred yards back of Hickman, who did not stop. The new propeller was on, Dunham stuttered with surprise, and begged to be allowed to ride in the back seat.

For a moment the captain hesitated. It would be highly advantageous to have a man for the rear guns, too, but on the other hand the take-off was dangerous, and if the motor cut out over the town—at least before dawn—a bad crash was inevitable.

"Married?" he snapped, and Dunham nodded.

"Working at it?"

Dunham grinned acquiescence.

"Then you don't go," the captain told him, and a second later was in the cockpit.

He calculated that the bandits were just arriving at the bank. It was a mean job to taxi to the end of the road and then turn for the take-off without running the ship over into the rough, but with Dunham heaving mightily on one wing it was done.

Kennard waved a farewell, and gave the D. H. the gun. With barely three feet to

spare, it swept over the encircling mesquite and was in the air.

He wasted not a second gaining altitude. At a hundred feet, the Liberty turning up a good fifteen-fifty and the instrument readings as they should be, the ship flashed over the town.

The captain's square brown face showed a grim hint of a smile as he thought, "The noise of this motor is just spoiling the evening right now for a few birds around that bank!"

He glanced northward. In the moonlight it was difficult to see very far, although the earth directly below him was almost as clearly visible as it would be at dawn. But he thought he saw, on the main road from the fields, a large body of men, walking.

"In a minute I'll see, and put the fear of God in them!" he exploded savagely.

A few seconds later, so low that he was almost scraping the rooftops of the awakening town, he was sweeping around the bank. And the half dozen men outside of it were moving excitedly. One of them disappeared into the building. Their horses the captain could not find. That was peculiar. Perhaps the guards were to pretend that they'd been overpowered by the actual thieves, but said inside men needed horses. Unless their hiding place was very nearby.

Suddenly a freakish idea collided with Kennard's fast-working brain. The reckless audacity of King and his plan was such that no solution for the puzzle would seem far-fetched. Would it not be in keeping with the rest of the scheme if the robbers were to take shelter in Thomas' own house, there to lie as long as necessary for the hue and cry to die out a bit? Perhaps a hidden spot in the cellar say, or the attic. Matters would have been arranged so that the eminent banker could not be suspected of complicity in the robbery, and if there was a place in town immune from search it would be his home.

Kennard, his eyes on the ground, permitted himself a raucous laugh. That would have been the crowning touch—the robbers in hiding within a block of the scene of their crime!

Six men were running from the rear of the bank, now. No, not running, but walking swiftly. A moment later six horses appeared as though by magic from the shelter of a ruined building, and they were riding in a compact group, and riding fast, for the eastern edge of town.

Hickman was too late, but the posse he'd

gather would give chase anywhere the airplane indicated that the quarry was. Its flaming exhausts would be signal beacons to the men on the ground.

As soon as they got out of town he'd hold them with his guns. It would be impossible to shoot now; he'd kill dozens of innocent bystanders if he attempted any target practice over the town.

Folwell was throbbing with activity and interest, too. In front of buildings—some of them appearing so ruined that it was surprising they still sheltered any one—the sidewalks were thronged with people. The riders met with no resistance, however, as they galloped for the open country.

Kennard took a chance, and circled his



thundering plane northward. Not for more than five seconds at a time did he lose sight of his prey, but he also gave some attention to the field road. Might as well stall off any trouble from that quarter. Every available man might be needed to round up the outlaws, who would doubtless resist to the last. There was no time to waste on crazy roughnecks.

There they were; easily fifty men, walking toward town. They had probably been stimulated into the belief that it was their right to have a few drinks in town. If the guards gave battle, as they would, an ugly situation might arise. Cursing the thoughtlessness of men who would complicate an already tragic situation, the captain made his preparations. While he flew over the robbers, he wrote a brief note.

"This is Captain Kennard, commanding officer of Folwell. No matter who or what you are, do not enter Folwell for at least three hours. Move after you receive this and I'll plow you down with my machineguns, and I don't mean maybe!"

Stick between his knees, he tied the note around a socket wrench, and a moment later was flying up the road, scarcely twenty feet high. A hundred feet in front of the oncoming column of men he dropped it, squarely on the highway.

With a mighty zoom he reached two hundred feet. He waited the few seconds until they'd picked it up, and read it. Banking around over them, heading toward town, he went into a dive and pressed his machinegun control. A burst of bullets tore into the road, as a concrete illustration of what he could do to them.

And that stocky little flyer, overwrought from lack of sleep and the perils which hung over him and his ship, would have shot them down without losing a heart-beat.

He was through fooling with certain denizens of Folwell, Texas.

They seemed to be having a consultation, but he did not wait. He thundered across the mile intervening between them and his most important quarry. The half dozen robbers were in open country, now. He thought he could pick up King—that slender figure on a piebald horse who was leading the way. They had been powerless to use their prepared hiding place, knowing that they were observed from above.

Kennard waited a moment, and then made his move. No note necessary now. Their kidnapping of himself and Hickman had given them away completely, and they knew it.

Gathering himself, Kennard sent his huge ship into a steep dive. He ringed the galloping fugitives with a drum of machinegun fire which cut the undergrowth and mesquite within fifty feet of them. Not until the DeHaviland was quivering like a wind-tossed leaf, and the altimeter showing a hundred and eighty miles an hour, did he pull up.

They had stopped now, just visible. The moon was down, and dawn not yet graying the eastern sky. He cocked his ship up in a sixty degree bank, a hundred feet off the ground, and circled them. He never lost sight of them for a minute.

They fired at him continuously, but a ship in the air is a poor target for the best of shots. Kennard roared through the fusillade disdainfully.

Then that piebald horse shot out of the group. And on it was the rider whom Kennard picked as King. Contemptuous, it seemed, of the aerial death above him, the rider swept on.

And Kennard held his fire. Out from town a cavalcade was on its way. Probably Hickman, at the head of some hastily gathered men. And Kennard, not a blood-thirsty man to start with, did not shoot. The man, whether King or not, could not

escape. He was sure it was the flashy, indomitable redhead, who but him would ride into almost certain death, taking a million to one shot at escape in preference to being caught?

"Maybe he won't be taken alive—but I'm trying," Kennard told himself. "I sort of admire the devil—and he can tell a lot, maybe."

Going higher and higher to watch both King and his subordinates, he nevertheless stayed directly over the five quiescent outlaws in order to guide Hickman's men directly to the spot. In ten minutes they were there. The fugitives had their hands in the air, and capitulated without a struggle.

Without an instant's delay, the captain turned his D. H. eastward. The sky was lightening now, and he was flying directly east. King was riding like a wildman, southeast. His course would finally lead him, on a diagonal line, to the river.

Kennard sent his D. H. hurtling past the rider, within twenty feet of him. It was King, without a doubt.

The flyer waved his arm as a signal for him to stop. Shooting with one hand, King put the thumb of the other one very close to the end of his aquiline nose, and his teeth flashed white across his tanned face.

Kennard pulled up and around, and shot a burst ahead of the fleeing rider. Without so much as a temporary pause, King rode on.

Three times the airman's fingers were on the lever at the side of his stick, and three times they were loosened. He hated to kill that dauntless outlaw, and he decided on one last effort to take him alive.

His colt reloaded with a new clip, he sent his ship down over the open field through which King was urging his horse. The D. H. roared directly toward him, from the front. What Kennard had counted on happened. The frightened pony reared and plunged, and King was powerless to shoot with any accuracy. But as the ship passed him Kennard, turned completely around in his cockpit, poured all six shots at his antagonist. Shooting back over his own trail that way, there was a possibility that he might make a hit—and that the hit would be only a wound.

He did score a hit, but it was the horse. The pony reared, fell, and lay motionless. King, running like a deer, sped for the river.

As an act of mercy, despite his certainty that the horse was dead, the flyer

shot once more with his machineguns. Then, scraping the ground in the gray dawn, he watched. Hickman's men could get King now that he was on foot.

Why was he going toward the river?



It was a swollen, rushing torrent still, bearing on its fouled bosom a crust of wreckage. Uprooted trees, portions of ruined houses — everything conceivable was there. Its flood level had fallen

somewhat, its surface was easily forty feet below the rim of the mesa.

At the edge of the cliff King stopped. The D. H. thundered past him, but this time there was no shot from the fleeing man. Hatless, red hair glinting in the level rays of the sun, he poised there a moment, and waved a farewell to the flyer. Then his slim body clove through the air. In a bit of open water barely ten feet square he hit the river, and disappeared.

And he never came up. For ten minutes the ship flew up and down over the filthy stream, but no flame-topped head appeared. There was a possibility that he had reached the bank under water, and was in the bushes. But more probable was the captain's conviction that the unconquerable King had found the bottom—too suddenly.

Two weeks later, far down the river, an unidentifiable body was found—that of a tall, slender man whose skull had been crushed.

The captain headed for the field, and a half hour later arrived at headquarters just as Hickman rode up from the other direction. Vivian Thomas with him.

"Safe in jail, all of 'em," retorted Hickman jovially. "What about King?"

Glancing at the girl, the captain told them. There were tears in her eyes, but her voice was steady.

"That's just what he would do," she said.

Javlin's rotund body filled the doorway of the lobby.

"Hi, Cap'n," he chuckled. "Big doin's, eh? Well, George, we went tuh git Thomas—and found him."

"Yeah? What——?"

Javlin's fat face was serious now, as he glanced down at the letter in his hand.

"Miss Vivian," he said awkwardly, "yuh

might as well know. Mr. Thomas wrote you a letter when he heard the ship over town, and then shot hisself."

For a moment the girl who'd thought she hated her stepfather was like a statue—and as white. Then she swayed slightly, and Hickman caught her. Careless of the increasing number of ragged pedestrians who were abroad, she cried on the observer's shoulder while he patted her arm awkwardly. Kennard noticed the look on his face, but he didn't get as suspicious, to use his own term, as he was to be a few weeks later, when an increasing correspondence between the two could scarcely be overlooked.

But now the captain read aloud the letter from Thomas to an audience of three who scarcely winked an eye as they listened.

"Dear Vivian:—

When I heard the airplane motor, and knew that Kennard and Hickman had escaped, I realized that what King and I had planned to do would not be successfully completed. The bank's funds are \$150,000 short, and I planned to have it robbed to cover the shortage. They were to hide for a week in my house. It would have been done some time any way. I thought the storm had provided a lucky opportunity.

Show this letter, if they get Ray, because it may save him a little. He killed a man just before I hired him. Possibly he was justified, but my testimony would have hung him. I used this, knowing his ability,

to keep him in hand as my confidential man. Then he got to know so much about me that I was more or less in his power—it was a case of mutual suspicion, and guilty knowledge. Perhaps he wouldn't have been a party to this, had I not held a club over him.

After my estate is settled, and the shortage made up, there should remain to you at least \$20,000 of your patrimony. You are my sole heir, of course. A small legacy from a reputed—and real, at one time—millionaire.

Barton W. Thomas."

Vivian was crying softly now, and Hickman and Javlin helped her into the lobby, away from curious eyes.

"Well, that's that, I suppose," mused the doughty little C. O. "A considerable twenty-four hours, all in all."

Sleepy's plane was nestling in the Rio Grande, Slim's in that ravine by the stockade.

"Three little ships flew to Folwell," he quoted whimsically, "and one little ship came home!"

His thoughts changed abruptly. A low, resonant buzzing reached his ears, and his eyes turned westward. Like a flock of gargantuan geese, a V formation of fifteen planes flecked the smiling sky. Donovan Field, bearing tons of supplies, had arrived.

"Now I can sleep," quoth the captain.

The border patrol's work was done,

THE COWHIDE RAILROAD

THE historic railroad known as the "Cowhide," to give it the name by which it was humorously referred to in the '70s, began operation between Wallula and Walla Walla, Washington, in 1873. The first dozen miles of trackage was built entirely of wood, the rails being four-by-six fir stringers. Travel over the road soon wore the wooden rails to splinters, and since iron was scarce the head of the company, S. D. Baker, resorted to another and novel method of preserving the track. Every cowhide in the surrounding country was bought up and cut in strips, which were nailed on the wooden rails for a distance of ten miles.

The experiment worked splendidly all summer, but when an unusually severe winter set in the wolves and coyotes, unable to find food, swarmed out of the forests and attacked the railroad. The smell of the cowhide had attracted them and they chewed and pulled at the hard strips until the rails were once more bare. Later a quantity of strap iron was procured and nailed on the stringers, and a few years after the original tracks were replaced with twenty-six pound steel rails.

Although just a dinky narrow gauge road it was so great an improvement over the stage-coach that the latter was virtually put out of business in that section. In 1882 the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company acquired it and quickly transformed it into a standard gauge road to meet increasing business, also extending it to Huntington, where it met the Oregon Short Line, a branch of the Union Pacific.—J. R. J.



CORSON OF THE JC

The Story of The Fight For a Lost Ranch

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of "Bar 20 Rides Again," "Cottonwood Gulch," etc.

THE appearance of a new story by Clarence E. Mulford is an event of historical importance. The announcement of one is the signal for a gathering of the fans such as otherwise only rarely occurs. Therefore we have chosen this original way of telling you that a new full length Mulford Western is to begin in the next issue of SHORT STORIES.

Here is what in motion picture language would be called a preview. Anyhow it is one chapter from the first installment of "Corson of the JC" which begins in the next issue and runs through four issues, each part of novelette length. This chapter sets the keynote for the whole book. If you read it you will simply have to read the whole thing. So be warned.

If you miss meeting Nueces and Bill; young Bob Corson, old man Jim Watson, El Toro and the rest, you will miss a treat. These characters, and this story will rank in popularity right up among the Mulford leaders. Every reader who knows and enjoys the adventures of Hopalong Cassidy, Johnny Nelson, Tex Evatt, Red Connors and the rest of the old Bar 20 crowd will certainly want to meet Corson of the JC, Nueces and their friends. This is an introduction to them.

"Gents, meet Bob Corson, Nueces and the boys of the JC outfit. You'll find 'em all salty."

THE BOX M "MEDICINE MAN"

IN THE little town of Willow Springs two Box M punchers were laboriously holding up the shady side of Lawton's general store and running out of conversation when one of them saw a horseman riding in along the Cactus trail; and conversation took new life and forthwith boomed again.

"Here comes Bob Corson," grunted the tall puncher, a friendly smile breaking over his face. "That's one hombre that shore is playin' in mean luck." The only heir to the best ranch in a couple hundred miles, an' done plumb out of it. One Ace-high feller, too, Bob is. Life shore is hell, Shorty."

"Yeah, shore is; an' there ain't no fool like a' old rancher, Nueces," replied the short puncher, frowning. "Now, I figger a man that's been married onct shore has

been married enough. He oughta set back an' sorta rest up for the remainder of his ruined life; but some folks just nat'rally ain't got no sense, a-tall."

"Yeah; bad enough to be gettin' on in years, without havin' yore cinches slippin' all the time," replied Nueces. "Ol' John shore was a hopeful gambler, figgerin' on pickin' two winners straight hand runnin' in a game like that. You take ol' Missus Corson, now, an' you shore had a real woman. Rolled up her sleeves, she did, an' helped bulldog the JC from a cowless hunk of land into the best stocked range hereabouts. Cooked, an' worried, an' worked, an' borned Bob, an' made a man outa him; helped everybody that needed it, kept Ol' John outa mischief, saw the ranch grow an' things start comin' her way; an' then she had to up an' die. My land, Shorty, I remember a hunk of pie she gave me—" he grew silent, looked up at the slowly rid-

ing horseman, and nodded warmly, his face wreathed in an affectionate grin. "Lo, you ol' cross-eyed hossthiel!" he called.

"Lo, you sheep nurse; 'lo, Shorty. Aimin' to stick up the bank an' make some comparative honest money?"

"You go to hell!" grunted Shorty, his grin threatening to meet at the back of his head.

"How's all the rest of the dogies on the Box M?" asked Bob, stopping. "What you doin' in town?"

"Well, they ain't exactly hangin' 'round no waterhole," chuckled Nueces. "We rid in for the mail, an' to get some wire."

"Bob, you've done insulted us, all an' entire," complained Shorty. "*Dogies!* Huh!" He glanced proudly down at his flat stomach, mentally comparing it with the water distended stomachs of orphaned calves, and finding assurance that in that most prominent dogie characteristic he was blameless. "Let's drown our sorrers, Bob," he suggested hopefully.

"Thereby startin' a crop of sorrers for somebody else to drown," said Nueces, showing more interest in the present moment. He caught sight of the faded wooden signboard down the street, on which the word CHEYENNE could just be made out. "Betcha I can come closter to the last "E" in that sign than you can, Bob," he suggested, half drawing the long, wicked looking Colt from its battered, open top sheath.

"Huh!" snorted Shorty. "You never could tell which bullet holes belonged to us," he said, visualizing the peppered condition of that signboard. The sign would have been repainted long ago, except that the brightness of new paint would have been an added temptation to target practice. "Let's drown our sorrers," he persisted.

"Ain't got none," replied Bob. "Anyhow, I'm in bad company. You boys get the mail an' the wire, an' go back where you belong. Mebbe I'll see you before you leave?"

"If you ain't blind in both eyes you mebbe will," answered Nueces. "This was payday on the Box M, but we beat the rest to town. Aim to create a couple local disturbances before we go back, huh, Shorty?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Shorty. "Yore aim is first class." He looked up at the smiling horseman. "You see, Bob, it's this-away: there ain't no mail for us; an' Lawton's got to order the wire. We was sorta

figgerin' on stayin' over in town tonight, hopin' there'd be some mail in the mornin'. When we're sent on an errand, we allus try to bring back the stuff." He stretched and yawned. "This here country's too blame' peaceful. There ain't no excitement, nohow." His face brightened at a sudden thought. "Hey! Let's start a cattle stealin' outfit, what say? Sorta wake folks up, an' tire out a lot of cayuses." Then he grunted pessimistically. "That won't do; El Toro don't want no competition."

"Aw, shucks!" grunted Nueces. "If you want to start some excitement an' tire out a lot of cayuses, why don't you get after El Toro, an' earn the reward?"

"By gosh! Me an' you, an' Bob! An' split the money three ways!" exclaimed Shorty, turning a hopeful face to the horseman. "What you say, Corson? If I could read sign, an' foller tracks like you can, I sure would 'a' been after that rustler long ago."

"I got a feelin' that you wouldn't tire out many cayuses if you tried to put yore hand on El Toro, an' knew where to look," answered Bob enigmatically, but not expressing his thoughts as well as he might have.

"Bright an' intelligent remark," observed Shorty ironically. "You blame' fool, if you knowed where to look for somethin' you wouldn't have to hunt for it, would you?"

"Bull's-eye, Shorty; you step right up to the head of the class," chuckled Nueces. "I allus said you wasn't quite as dumb as most folks think."

"Don't see how he could be," offered Bob, pressing his knees against his horse. He rode on, nodding to acquaintances, and pulled up under the faded and bullet-riddled signboard.

"Wonder what he meant about huntin' for El Toro?" queried Nueces, thoughtfully and glancing at the Mexican part of the town.

"Not nothin', a-tall; he was just talkin' to hear hisself."

"Ain't so shore; ain't shore a-tall," muttered Nueces. "Lots of times when that Corson feller opens his mouth he says somethin'."

"An' lots of times he don't," retorted Shorty. "Somebody oughta caress Ol' John with a whiffle-tree," he added, apropos of nothing.

Nueces lazily shifted until his other shoulder bore the burden of holding up the store.

"If Ol' John is hell bent to go East an' make a fool outa hisself," he said, "why don't he hang onto the ranch, an' let Bob run it; or sell it to Bob on easy terms?"

"Huh! That would be too sensible a thing to do for a man that's in his second



childhood," replied Shorty. "Anyhow, I reckon Mrs. John Corson, the Second—an' worst—wants all that money to onct. She ain't gamblin' on Ol' John gettin' his senses back an' tellin' her where to go to escape the cold weather." He rubbed the stubble on his chin and reflected a moment. "Did you ever see her look at Bob? Comin' right down to cases, did you ever see her look at anybody that lives out here?"

"Yeah; I did. She looked at me, onct," answered Nuces, grinning at the reminiscence. "I felt just like a pane of glass. Didn't interfere with her view of the sagebrush a-tall. She looked right through me, an' sniffed kinda suspicious, like there was a stable, or goat pens som'ers near. She's a mighty purty woman, though."

"Yeah; bright paint is allus purty. But me, now, I sorta like 'em when they look the same way after a rain. Oh, well, it's shore tough on Bob. What you say we herd some pool balls, an' cut out the One ball for money? Shofe I mean it; come on."

They slowly and a little regretfully pushed away from the wall and started down the street, Nuces with his eyes fixed on the signboard of the Cheyenne. As they came to the first break between the buildings they almost ran into Jim Watson, whose swarthy face looked as though soap and water would do it no permanent harm. A collision was avoided only because Watson did all the sidestepping, and moved with tigerish swiftness; and the newcomer scowled very frankly as he got his feet out of their way.

"You got title to this here street?" he demanded angrily.

Shorty cocked his head on one side and minutely scrutinized the speaker; and then he moved sidewise and craned his neck to peer curiously behind Watson, his face bland and innocent. The latter instinctively turned halfway around and looked down behind his back. His expression plainly asked a question, and it received a prompt answer.

"I was just lookin' to see if you had a board, or somethin', in the seat of yore pants, Mr. Watson," explained Shorty gravely. "I got a in-growin' toenail, an' has to be careful."

Watson's face flamed as he swore, but he was stepping gingerly backward and taking no chances. He glanced around to see if any of his men were within call.

Nuces turned lazily and also looked around, and his face fell a little. Watson's imported gunmen did not sit any too well on him, and he was in a reckless, mischievous mood. He looked at Watson and sorrowfully shook his head.

"They're mebbe washin' their faces som'ers," he said pointedly, his gaze roving deliberately over the swarthy face before him. "You buyin' the JC?" he asked, thirsting for information which he already had.

"What of it?" snapped Watson, his eyes flashing.

"Nothin'; nothin' a-tall; I was just wonderin' what brands hereabouts could be worked over thataway," came the drawled reply, dripping insult. "Reckon the Box M is safe, anyhow; what you think, Shorty?"

"Ain't I done told you to quit puttin' everythin' up to me?" demanded Shorty. "Can't you think for yoreself, you bowlaigged fiddle-string?" He turned indignantly to Watson. "You'd shore think, to listen to him, that I knowed every cattle thief that ever came to town! Them Texans of yours come in to town yet?"

"Shorty!" snapped Watson, his face suffused with anger. "Some of these days yo're shore goin' to die!"

"Yeah; if Methusalem had to die, what chancet have I got?"

Nuces grunted, stepped quickly forward and poked Watson in the ribs with an elbow that felt like a pointed sledge hammer.

"Shore enough, Shorty; but Methusalem didn't stretch no lariat, did he, Watson?" he asked, chuckling; and then his face grew hard, and he pushed it within a hand's breadth of the other. "An' he wasn't filled chock full of forty-fives, Watson. You shore want to remember that when you start prophesying Shorty's finish; you an' yore Texans, too. They're a long way from home, they are, Mister; but the Great Divide runs right plumb through the middle of yore ranch. You savvy Nuces, the medicine-man of the Box M?"



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

CORSON OF THE JC

JUST ahead of this number of the Circle we have printed a "sample" of the Clarence E. Mulford serial which is the opening feature in the next issue of *SHORT STORIES*. We haven't very much room to spare for further description of this story, but do want to quote a little from the outstandingly interesting letter Mr. Mulford wrote us about the story, and which is in itself an answer to the many times we have been asked if the new serial were going to be a Bar 20 story:

"I try honestly to accede to the wishes of the majority of those unknown friends who write to me and ask me for this or for that; and that, perhaps, is the real reason why the Bar 20 stories have run to an even dozen books. I said honestly: I mean just that, for there are times when I cannot write a new Bar 20 story and be honest with my readers, my characters and with myself. So how did I come to write 'Corson of the JC' and why was it not a Bar 20 story?

"A stranger moved out upon the little stage in my study. He was long and lanky; he had a horse face; there was a certain intriguing, deadly humor about him; when I looked at him and he moved a hand I did not know whether he was going to scratch himself, or pull a gun. I laughed with delight, and dropped beside him what I hoped would be a counter-balancing influence; it was Shorty, and proved to be an irritant, instead. What should I call this horse-faced person? I looked him over while I snickered, and thought that he was about as uncertain as one of those rivers on the high plains of Texas; Nueces—that would do. Nueces also means "nuts" in Spanish—truly a happy choice in cognomen!

"Here was a gift from heaven: Nueces and Shorty. Should I let them play around, and make use of them? Well, what do you believe? In order to be irresponsible, they should have no worldly possessions: real estate and wealth are deadly anchors to a

soaring nature. All right: they should own what they stood in, and very little else. A third figure wandered out of the ether and made faces at me and at them. This chap seemed to be troubled, so I gave him a string on some real estate, and some potential wealth. The three seemed to be old friends, and exchanged grins. I wish you could have seen it! Nueces asked the newcomer what was troubling him—and away he went: the play was on.

"That is how I came to write 'Corson of the JC,' and I claim that it is a perfectly good reason. If the story lives up to my visual images of Nueces and Shorty, then it certainly is a good reason.

"I may never write another Bar 20 tale. My readers will have a deal to say about that; my readers, and that priceless, little study stage of mine. If the story is there, like murder, it will out; if it isn't then there will be no forcing, no straining, and no Bar 20 tale."

A SIERRA TRAGEDY

TO PROVE our contention that the thrilling days of the Western frontier have not completely passed, we have from time to time printed current newspaper accounts of actual happenings: cattlemen's feuds, rustler raids, hold-ups and gunfights and other exciting occurrences. But the New York *Times* of October 24, 1926, prints a true story that might have been told of the buffalo hunting days of a century ago.

In 1924 it was discovered that the wild deer herds in the great Stanislaus National Forest of California had become affected with the terrible foot-and-mouth disease so dreaded by cattlemen. If the disease was not stamped out immediately all the rigorous quarantinings against this epidemic would have gone for naught as the wandering deer carried the infection over forest trails from Canada to New Mexico and over the divides into the great livestock sections of the plains. The only alternative was to destroy all the deer in the in-

fectured forest—a tremendous undertaking considering the size and nature of the country affected.

But the Government, having through stern necessity turned from protectors to slaughterers, moved with relentless vigor. A great natural abattoir was made out of a thousand square miles of forest and mountains between the Sierra crest and the Merced and Stanislaus rivers. Into this the deer were driven, and cordons of hunters thrown around it. Deadlines were set on all sides to prevent infected deer escaping into uncontaminated areas, and then with gun and poison the extermination began.

Pack trains loaded with strychnine mixed with salt went into the mountains, too, and scattered the deadly mixture to bring death to countless wary deer. By the end of spring the tragedy was consummated. Twenty-five thousand wild deer—more than five times the total number estimated to be in the forest before the killing began—had died by gun and poison. Of the seventeen thousand killed in the autumn nearly half had been found to be suffering from the disease. Of those slain in the spring, only some 10 per cent. had been infected, showing the efficacy of the measures.

But with the ending of the tragedy, the epidemic was finished, too. The forest slopes were clean once more. Once more the barriers were thrown open, and into the fatal area wandered deer from north and south and from beyond the High Sierra, to become the nucleus of a new and swelling herd that some day will make the Stanislaus National Forest once more a mecca for the tourist and nature lover.

THREE NEW CIRCLEITES

IN THIS issue of *SHORT STORIES* we are fortunate in having three newcomers—and we hope in course of time they will be oldcomers. Mr. Charles Goff Thompson, author of the complete novel "Challenge," writes us from Crater Lake National Park, Oregon:

"Charles Goff Thomson: born at Little Falls, N. Y., 43 years ago. Cornell, 1907. After graduation I skidded half way across the globe into the Philippine Service, from which base I saw a good deal of the Orient during ten years of super-activity directing large organizations of soldiers and technical men in the suppression of animal diseases. In a weak moment the Governor General promoted me to the staff of the government, so that at 29 I was Assistant Director of Prisons. That job was too good to remain true, so the world went war mad in 1914, and I similarly mad in 1917, sailing ten thousand

miles to sign up against the kaiser. How I won the war is too long to detail here. I got a free ride across the Atlantic, and thank the gods, a ride back.

It took three years to land my present job with this best of all services, but I'm here running this two hundred thirty-nine miles of Oregon wonderland called Crater Lake National Park. Tonight, as I write this, we have already had over sixty thousand visitors from all over the States, doubtless including some of you who read this.

"Challenge"? Its background? Well, it's the natural reaction to a more or less adventurous twelve years spent among fifty-three different peoples, principally in the Far East. Sugar—that product of romance and splendor—is the motif. I've already done hemp in my first novel, and I hope to do the other great tropical products, tobacco, copra, rice and rubber before turning to closer fields. Several of the important episodes in this story are out of my own experiences. For example, duty compelled me to sign the death order of the villain of 'Challenge'; I saw him hanged. Not pleasant, but it's life. Always, when I write, some unexpected character slips out of hand, becomes very dear to me; thus it was with Lundu—I wept when, at two o'clock one morning, he slipped forever out of my keeping; the dying note of his beloved gong sounded in my ears for days.

"In fact, its people are very genuine, very intimate friends of mine. And in the same way that all of us want our friends cordially received into new circles, I hope that the *SHORT STORIES* legion welcome them. Especially, be kind to Lundu, try to understand him—poor fellow!

Cordially yours,

C. G. THOMPSON."

Then there is Harry Adler who wrote "Square Shooters" for this issue of *SHORT STORIES*. Mr. Adler says:

"I am afraid a record of my life would make rather dull reading. I was born in London, England, surely an inauspicious enough start for the writing of Western American and rugged adventure fiction. However, when I was quite young my parents came to a realization of the injustice they had done me in imposing such a handicap upon me, and proceeded to attempt amends by starting westward.

"Later for some time I lived in a mining camp in the heart of the Rockies, a town that was at one time one of the centers of gold dredging in the United States, and it was there that I obtained most of the material that forms the basis for my Western stories. It would be an unimpressible spirit, indeed, that could pass much time in those surroundings and not absorb something of the romance and the glamor and the glory—and yes, the pathos, too—of the fierce adventuring of the human race in search of gold. There where every mountainside showed its abandoned tunnel mouths, like eyes from which the light of life had been extinguished; where heaps of bare stones, like sun-bleached bones, told of long past hydraulic giant operations; where aged prospectors still lounged pathetically before the livery stable, speaking in quaveringly hopeful tones of the 'strike' they still hoped to make—in such surroundings the dullest soul must be gripped by something of the thrill that has pushed adventurers beyond all known frontiers.

"My story, 'Square Shooters,' I cannot trace to

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OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:

Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1 _____ 3 _____

2 _____ 4 _____

5 _____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

any specific origin, unless it be to a theme that is rather a favorite of mine—that human nature is somewhat too perverse a thing to permit exact classification of men; that 'bad men' are not always entirely bereft of noble impulses.

Sincerely yours,

HARRY ADLER,
Denver, Colo."

And finally some interesting sidelights from Evan M. Post, whose story, "The Silent Cabin" in this issue is the first one of his we have had in SHORT STORIES:

"All my life adventure has been just one jump ahead of me. I think I must have been born dreaming of Indians and rescuing beautiful damsels in distress. But if such were the case, the dreams most certainly fell short. I grew to a fighting age only to discover that all the Indians had been peacefully placed on reservations; and whatever beautiful damsels have chanced to cross my path have done so merely on their way to other fellows. I never saw the beat of it.

"With the declaration of war my hopes again rose. Here was my chance. Lying about my age, I enlisted, but the Allies, getting word somehow or other of it, promptly put a stop to the war. So I had to go home without my medals or my overseas cap, and go on dreaming about Indians and heroes and things.

"I was eighteen then. I am twenty-five now. But I haven't improved with age. Having lost every job I ever held, until the words 'Post, you can get your time this afternoon,' were as frequent as the repetition of some popular song, I tried my hand at writing. In desperation. You know. Like the drowning man and the straw.

"Well, now I have my laugh on the world. For no one can fire me. That is, outside of boarding-house keepers and things, and I am used to them by this time. I can, instead, jingle my two dimes together and chuckle up my tattered sleeve for my heart's in the game.

"Adventures? Well, nothing much to speak of; just a few of the minor sort. On my way

to Alaska two summers ago I got into a dispute with the C. P. R. over the proper mode of travel. As it happened, the railroad won, its argument being that tenders were designed primarily to carry coal and water for the engine, and not to accommodate passengers.

"So I exchanged my berth in the tool-box of the tender for a berth in the Sudbury jail. And there was no mattress and no blankets, and water was the chief item of diet. There was plenty of that.

"Some days later I came out a wiser man. Now, when I feel the urge to travel on the railroad, I wander in to the ticket office first. Well, that's about all there is to tell. I had a few experiences in Alaska, but I was never shot-at.

Mighty sincerely,

EVAN MERRITT POST,
Erie, Pennsylvania."

THE NEXT ISSUE

BESIDES the first part of the Mulford serial our next issue contains some particularly interesting items. William H. Hamby has written a long adventure novelette centering around state politics and the editor of a small Western newspaper, the politics being of such a deadly variety that this particular editor found that none of his immediate predecessors was alive to pass on any inside dope on his job. To his rather bewildered question of "Why kill the editor?" he received the laconic answer "Why not?"—and the game was on. It's an unusual story and we think you'll enjoy it.

Also in the next issue there will be an L. Patrick Greene "Major" story, a Bedford-Jones sea adventure tale, a Jimmie Lavender-Vincent Starrett mystery story and many others.

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