

"The Seven Frightened Mandarins" — WALTER C. BROWN
A long novelette of Halfaday Creek — JAMES B. HENDRYX

Short Stories

September 10th

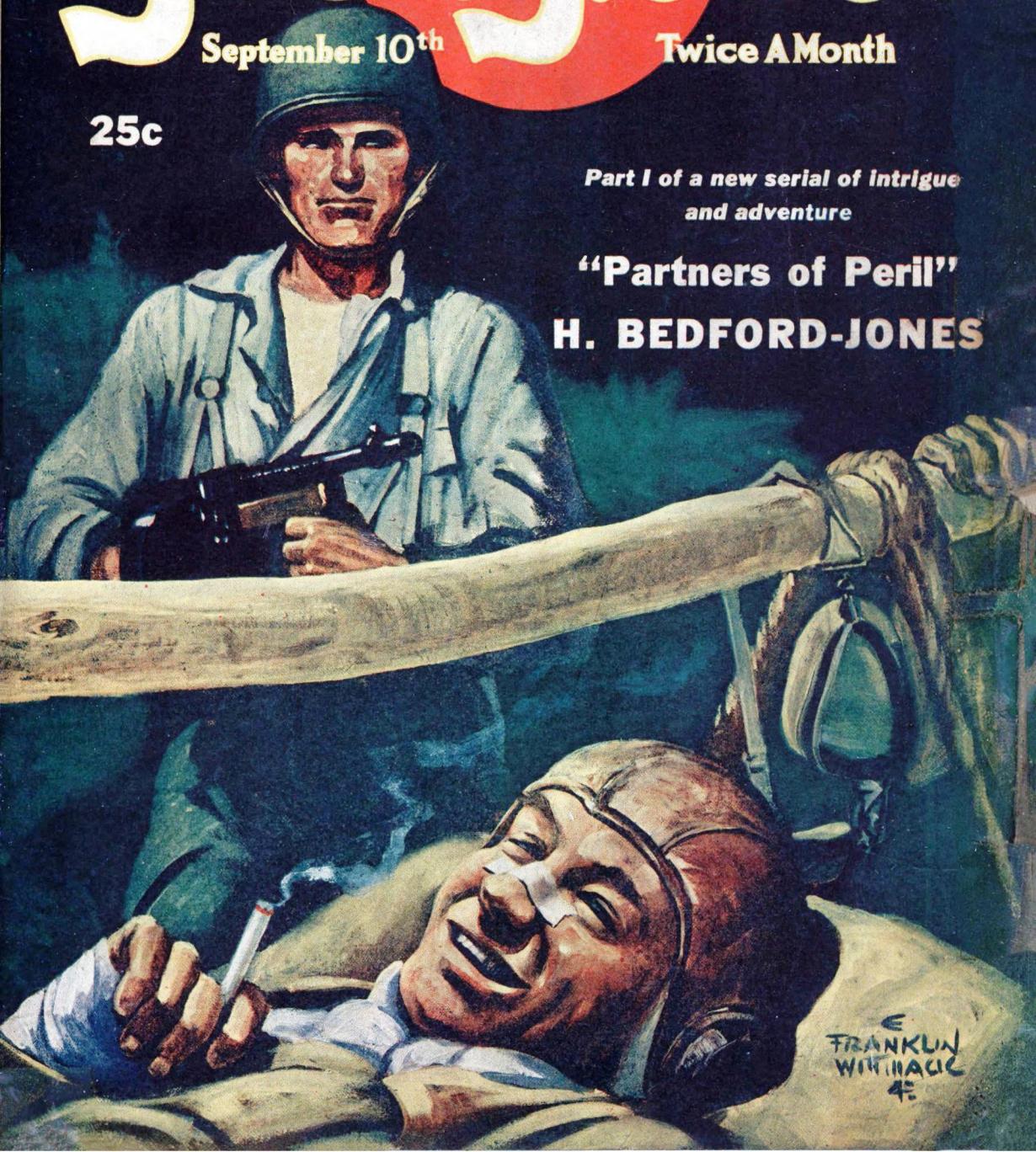
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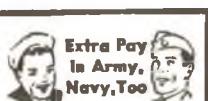


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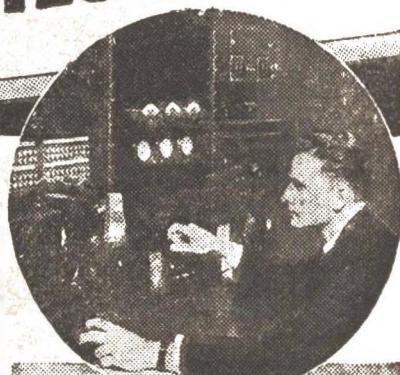
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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, N. Y., and entered as second class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, \$5.00 per year; to Canada, \$6.50; and to all other countries, \$6.60. Price payable in advance. September 10, 1943. Vol. CLXXXIV. No. 5. Whole Number 905.

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
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The Story Tellers' Circle

In Italy Ahead of the Troops

EVERYONE knows about the invasion of Sicily, but it took H. Bedford-Jones to tell us the story of a certain American who was in Sicily and Italy ahead of the Allied invasion troops. He did it in the epic "Partners of Peril," starting in this issue. About the story B-J tells us:

In presenting the narrative of Joe Casella, which I have edited and brought up to snuff, so to speak—yes, I made quite a few changes in his story to suit the requirements of **SHORT STORIES**—I have labored under a lot of handicaps.

First, while I don't imagine that the Nazi high command is studying the pages of pulp magazines looking for informative military information, a lot of other people seem to imagine it; therefore, I had to edit Joe's narrative with an eye to giving pointers to the enemy. Further, I like the Italian people. And, to a certain extent, I used to like the Fascists. They did a lot for Italy, before Musso became a megalomaniac and then got ousted altogether.

I once spent a nervous, highly nervous, week in Rome, because my pockets were filled with a lot of anti-Fascist data I had undertaken to smuggle out of the country. It had to stay in my pockets as the only safe place for it, and I had a date for a private interview with Musso and had to hang around his headquarters talking with his aides, and my nerves were getting worse every day. Finally I threw up the private interview idea, to the utter amazement of his secretaries, who said that nobody had ever done that before—he had already set the date. I pleaded urgent business in Paris and skipped, and my heart did not get back to normal until I was across the frontier.

A lot of us sneer at the Italians these days. We ought not; they're the closest to us of any of the Axis crowd. After the war, we'll learn a lot of things that happened in Italy and parts adjacent, and we'll be properly surprised when we do.

So, if there are some errors in Joe's story, blame me and not him. There are a lot of little points in it that may catch your eye if you've been in Italy, like for instance the dancing birds, and the aviator's coral bracelet, and the Adriatic lobsters, and Alfredo's fake golden spoon—the Kaiser was the real villain of that story, but Joe made it Hitler and I let it stand. I think somebody slipped one over on Joe there, but actually the author knows no more than you just what is going on in the Italy of today. If he dares to

write a story about it, his story must be based on his imagination to a certain extent; it must also be based upon what he can gather from press reports; but it must, further, be based upon his own knowledge of the country about which he writes.

Another thing: From now until the war's end, we in America are going to hear more and more of what figures in this serial as the "Waffen-SS"—just as we are going to hear more and more of the coming chemical warfare, foretold in fiction, scoffed at by theorists, and now being frantically prepared for by the Allied governments.

The Waffen-SS, which may be translated as the Black Guards in Arms, is no figment of fiction. It has been described in detail by what we may call the Free German or Anti-Nazi press, which flourishes in England and elsewhere. It has many branches. It is a recent development of the old SS, the political Death's Head organization. This Waffen-SS or military organization was formed by Himmler to guard against rebellion within the German armed forces, by killing off all dissatisfied customers from generals down to privates.

The military group, as used in the story, is not an organization with its own uniform. Those composing it are identified only by certain markings on their regular army uniforms, so far as we know. To speak of Italians murdered by Nazis, or even of Germans wiped out by Germans, is by no means an absurdity. Nazis and Fascists and Japs alike operate on pure gangster psychology, which has no logic whatever and no law except ferocity.

H. Bedford-Jones.

Communication from Halfaday

IN connection with his Northern story in this issue, Jim Hendryx sent us on a couple of letters he received lately. The first one is from Dr. Sutherland—Hendryx describes him as "the oldest practising physician in Alaska" and an old friend of his. The second one is from no less a person than Old Cush of Cushing's Fort on Halfaday Creek.

Dear Mr. Hendryx:

*I have been reading several of your stories in the **SHORT STORIES MAGAZINE** and see you are still taking my name in vain.. Why in the devil when you have me at—*
(Concluded on page 79)

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PARTNERS OF PERIL

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Part I



I

THEY had poor old Gnuri Pezzo, or Signor Pezzo in Italian, handcuffed.

It was my hard luck that, so soon after I reached Palermo, the Ovra or Fascist secret police and the Gestapo, who worked together, should

have struck. It was my good luck that they missed me—or so I thought.

The first inkling I had of it was when I was on my way to catch the Monreale tram. I was standing at the corner of the Piazza Bologni, I remember, outside Reber's bookshop. Picture me there—a dark, skinny guy with a big nose and mustache, far too much jaw for beauty, and

plenty of ability to take punishment. I had a faded infantry uniform, a captain's képi, an Iron Cross prominently displayed on my tunic, a bad limp and a heavy stick in my hand. My right foot had stayed in Africa and the substitute I wore was clumsy.

They came marching him along—four of those damned blackshirt hounds, with a Gestapo agent leading. He was in the center, arms twisted behind him and hand-

on his short-wave radio that a messenger from Rome would be here to meet me. At eleven this morning I was to go to the convent of the Cappuccini, and again at five in the afternoon if no one showed up the first time. But I must be prompt, prompt to the very minute!

And now, this moment, I was on my way there—when he came past, marching to his death with the marks of the torture on him. Brave old 'Gnuri Pezzo, musician



cuffed, so that he bent forward as he walked. 'Gnuri Pezzo, a thin, gentle old man of eighty who gave music lessons. He had a Christlike look; his white hair and beard were smeared with blood.

Ten hours previously I had sat in his library, wondering at his marvelous efficiency and quiet charm, as he gave me my instructions. He had just received word

and patriot and saint! His eye caught mine for a flash, but he marched on without a hint that he knew me. About his neck was a sign, rudely scrawled: "Death to defeatists, traitors!" Some women hooted, a few cursed the Germans, others cursed the blackshirts in dialects not known to the Fascists. But the sullen, cowed throngs dared do nothing. Their men were gone

to prison camps in India or Russia, and the lordly blackshirts, in their stage costumes and cruel authority, were ready for more victims.

But I stood there learning the eloquence and majesty of death—the same death that was so close to me. The horror of it appalled me; not the danger, but the horror for this splendid old man. I stood there quivering with the hurt of it, and knew there were tears on my cheeks.

An old hag in a smelly shawl crowded close to me and spoke in the Palermo dialect.

"No tears, gnuri! There is nothing terrible about it; rather, it is glorious! I was sent to find you and warn you."

"Then you know me?" I asked, catching a glimpse of a repulsive, vulture-like profile under the ragged shawl. Her voice was a harsh croak.

"You are known by sight to all of us. Only two or three are left now. They raided headquarters and caught nearly everyone. Somebody must have talked under torture. We are helpless; no one is left to direct us. However, someone will come from Messina. Get away from Palermo as quickly as you can, and talk with nobody here. Understood?"

"Thanks, yes," I said. "But I must remain another day or two."

The old hag—or so I thought her—moved away. The tragic procession had passed out of sight. I glanced at my watch, a beautiful gold Soligenes looted from a Fascist general in North Africa; too late, too late! This scene had taken time. I had been particularly instructed to be exact at the rendezvous. Now I must wait till five in the afternoon, or seventeen o'clock.

I turned, intending to make for my hotel, but someone glimpsed the Iron Cross that I wore, and a growl went up. Both the Nazis and the Fascist blackshirts were hated bitterly enough in Italy, but far more so here in Sicily. I have always thought it a great pity that the Allies did not pour all their Italian prisoners slap into Sicily—

the war would have ended that much sooner.

Shrill curses rang out. A stone flew, and hit me. Then someone gave a yell.

"Leave him alone! He's a wounded veteran!"

"He has no business wearing that devil-cross!" came a snarling cry. "Any friend of the Tedeschi is our enemy! Stone him! Down with the blackshirts! Death to Mussolini!"

Poor desperate, starving folk! How were they to know that the Iron Cross I wore was the very token of my success as an Allied agent—that it would be a badge of recognition to the unknown agent who was to meet me this very day! How were they to know that this limping veteran, Captain Giuseppe Casella, a respected friend of the Nazi high command, was actually Joe Casella from Fourteenth Street?

More stones flew. The maddened crowd of women were really ganging up on me when along came a German staff car. It scattered the throng and the driver halted at the curb, amid threats and curses from the women. In the back seat was Ober-Kapitan Fritz Ude, a lady at his side. He opened the rear door.

"Hop in, Casella!" he exclaimed, laughing. "Headquarters to the rescue! Can we give you a lift somewhere?"

"Anywhere away from here," I said and got in. A shower of stones converged on the car, but the driver was already roaring away. Ude was keenly amused over my adventure with the women.

"Then come along with us to the Marina and see what's left of the old port after the visit of those damned American bombers last night," he said. "That appliance has come from Berlin, by the way; they flew it here. I'll send it to your hotel this afternoon."

He turned to the lady. He was speaking Italian, of course, because I spoke no German, or pretended that I did not. So he presented me, and I touched my lips to her fingers.

"You should be able to write many stories about Captain Casella," Ude went on. "The bravest of the brave—one of the few Italians we hold in real honor and respect. It was thanks to him that my brother, in the air corps, got away from Libya, among others."

You may think this a queer conversation; so it was. Fritz Ude was really a swell guy; level-headed, quiet, capable, and not at all the Hollywood type of German, at least on the surface. He was not a Nazi, but head of the Army Intelligence here in Sicily. And Signorina Kettel, or Fraulein Kettel—well, she bowled me over and no mistake. She was on an Italian tour for some newspapers in Germany, and certainly was none of your brazen Nazi hussies. She was beautiful—just beautiful!

WELL, we went down to the waterfront, to what had been the Piazza Carbone, the ancient port of Palermo called the Cala, now used by small craft. Yesterday it had been surrounded by old palaces of the Saracens, filthy squalid tenements where princes once lived. Now the docks and installations and ships were gone in ruins, for a group of Liberators had come over during the night and early morning.

Then we went over to what was left of the Marina. It was mighty little, but one of the old restaurants was in shape, and we stopped in for belated luncheon. And every minute, the more I saw of Elsa Kettel, the more I fell for her. That girl simply had everything. Captain Ude told me on the side that she was a particular friend of Der Führer, and belonged to an old and noble family.

We had a bottle of wine, real wine. Over it, Ude asked what I meant to do now.

"Go home," I said. "Get out of this uniform for good and all. My family lives near Urbino, you know, up in Italy toward Rome. I'll get off in a day or two."

"Travel isn't very easy now," he said, "with these cursed British and Americans

bombing trains and railroad centers. I might make things a bit easier for you. Suppose you drop in and see me in the morning. The high command is grateful to you, Casella. Would you undertake a little work for us?"

"For you, yes. Not for the Gestapo," I said boldly. I could afford to speak my mind, with the good stand-in I had.

He laughed. "Right. I'll see what I can do."

The fraulein questioned me; she did want to get a story from me, and I gave her a good one. And all the time I was thinking of that gentle old man with blood on his face and Gestapo bullets in his heart; and the instructions he had given me.

We separated there, and I touched the fraulein's hand with my lips, and they drove away. I headed uptown again, heading for the old but beautiful Hotel des Palmes, which the Nazis had taken over, and in which they had given me a room. But, as I turned into the Via Stabile and waited for a file of ammunition trucks to pass, an old man hobbled up and stood at my elbow. I heard his voice and it startled me; it was like that of the old woman who had accosted me in the Piazza Bologni.

"I was sent to find you," he said, pulling a threadbare old cape about his shoulders. "Keep away from the Cappuccini. A trap has been set there by the black-shirts; everything has been betrayed. You should get out of the city at once. Go to Messina."

"Can't, until tomorrow," I rejoined. Here was another member of the underground. "What about the messenger who was to meet me?"

"He'll be lost; we can't help it. Everything's lost here. Pezzo and eleven others were shot. You may still be safe if no one has betrayed you. The rest of us are not."

He hobbled away, and I went on to the hotel.

Scared? Of course I was; so scared that my back teeth were shaking. Ma Casella's boy was in a jam and no mistake. Evidently the whole underground system in Palermo had been knocked out. This system was composed of Italians in general, with one of our own people here and there. The swaggering Fascisti party members were almost worse hated than the Nazis by the average Italian, who wanted only peace—at any price.

Hitler had just clamped down on the Duce, getting ten new divisions for the shattered Russian front, and sending more Gestapo into Italy to repress defeatist activities. Nazi forces were pouring in too, and Sicily was practically a Nazi camp, to head off any attempt of our forces in North Africa to move in. Things were hot and getting hotter each minute.

Not go to the Cappuccini? But I must! The agent coming there was my sole link with all that lay ahead—my work ran up to Rome itself. Old Pezzo was dead. I knew nothing about this agent except that he was one of the best in Italy, bringing me vital information and risking his neck to do it.

And now I was warned to keep away; the enemy had set a trap. Before five o'clock I had to make my decision. Either sneak away somewhere to safety like a yellow cur and let a brave man be lost—or else put my neck in a rope and try to save him. Most likely he had sent word ahead to old Pezzo by short-wave radio, making the appointment; and the black-shirts had picked up the message. Well, it was not my affair. I could argue myself out of it very nicely; I was worth more to the Allies alive than dead, and so forth.

Be damned to all that! I was going, and knew all the time I was going.

It had taken a long, difficult build-up to get me here with my maimed leg and my knowledge of Italian dialects, ready to take up the work ahead. The war is not over, as I write, so I cannot tell you exactly how I reached Palermo; but when I got

there I was the white-haired lad with the Nazis, and no mistake.

You must go farther back to get the picture in its true light. I was Joe Casella from Fourteenth Street, New York City, when I got to North Africa with the first crowd of macs who came over to show the Limeys how to assemble U. S. fighting planes. I did not lose my foot in any heroic exploit. It got blown off when Rommel was kicked out of Egypt, because I found a swell Leica camera that turned out to be a booby trap. I was lucky at that; the two guys who were with me got their tickets West.

This was up at the advanced base; they slammed me in the hospital there, and I had a lot of fun with the wounded Italian prisoners. You see, around Fourteenth Street I had grown up with all kinds of Italian accents. My folks were Sicilian, but I had learned the correct Roman speech from a professor, because my old man wanted me to be a gentleman, and his notion of a gentleman was one who spoke Roman. Yes, even in America! But on the street corners I picked up all the slang and argot and dialects the other kids knew.

To please my old man I studied the violin—arrgh! How I hated it! Those hours of scraping were endless torment. By the time I ended up a fair fiddler, I was learning to be a mechanic on the side. The war came along and—zowie! Mechanic in the Air Corps, and then Africa away ahead of anybody else. That was luck.

And now I was Lieutenant Giuseppe Casella of the 31st Alpine. There actually was a Casella family near Urbino, too. When some of the Britishers heard about the success I had with the Italian prisoners, they got hold of me. With a foot gone, I was all washed up—unless I wanted to take a whirl at the secret agent business in Italy. One thing led to another, and here I was in Palermo.

The build-up in Africa was that I, supposedly an Italian prisoner of the Allies,

had helped some Nazi officers to escape, and had saved a couple more from being shot by excited Aussies. All this was a frameup, of course, to get me in solid with the Nazis, and it worked like a charm. When I showed up in Palermo, after presumably escaping with a couple more Nazis that the British Eighth Army decided could be spared, they hung the Iron Cross on me and sent all the way to Berlin for an artificial foot of aluminum, which had just arrived. Those Nazis were as grateful for a friend as a sick dog. They had mighty few friends in Italy.

Two strangers had now addressed me on the streets. Obviously I was pretty well known by sight to everybody in the underground; the Iron Cross did the trick. Once out of my uniform, with an artificial foot that worked instead of my rude wooden foot and stick, I'd be a different person. Also, Fritz Ude might fix things up for me in great shape, according to what he had said. And at five o'clock—the trap.

Damn it, I had to go! That unknown agent was depending on me. At four-thirty I was back in the Piazza Bologni where was the terminus of the Monreale tram. I stepped into the ticket booth, bought a ticket to Via Pindemonte, and limped aboard the tram. I was on my way. My destination was just outside the Porta Nuova; once a suburb, now it was to all intents part of the city.

Far above, the continuation of the Corso ran on to the heights of Monreale; villas, hedges of gigantic cactus and scarlet geraniums, orange groves, lemon groves, with the town and cathedral up there on the height above all. No bombs had touched that place of historic beauty, and I hoped none would. I wanted to visit the Norman-Saracen church up there once more, if possible, before starting on my way, for its sheer splendor.

I HOPPED off the tram at my destination and followed the diverging street to the unadorned façade of the Capuchin.

A trap? There was no sign of any, as I walked along under the lengthy convent wall toward the arched entrance. A German armored car, not unlike one of our own jeeps, stood in the street; beyond it was hitched a donkey and a little painted cart of the kind peculiar to Sicily. Evidently other visitors were here, but not a soul was in sight. A couple of Capronis droned overhead on patrol, and the palm trees rustled in the breeze; it was a south wind, the sirocco wind. That meant sand in the air tomorrow.

The appointed rendezvous was in the famous burial crypt of the convent. Ages ago the place had secured a lot of sacred earth from the Holy Land, and it was the fashion to bury people in this miraculous earth, which was supposed to preserve them; then dig them up and make room for others, and store the original remains underground. All that was long ago. Now those poor devils were on exhibition for tourists. Few tourists these sad days!

I yanked the bell-pull at the entrance. The door was opened by a cowled monk who took the ten-lire note I handed him and gestured me to enter. I followed him by flowering gardens where cypresses swayed heavenward and roses scented the air, and down old cloisters crumbling with age.

At the foot of a stairway I was turned over to another brown-robe who led me into the lantern-lighted corridors of their chamber of horrors.

Here I was not alone. Two groups of Italian soldiers were in sight, another group of German soldiers, and three nuns draped in black. You found nuns everywhere in Palermo, so it was no surprise to find a party here. A guide was showing the visitors around, lecturing in a singsong voice, and nobody paid him much attention. The wall of these subterranean corridors were, actually, glassed show-cases, behind which were crammed the mummified dead. Sight of them drove everything else from my head for the moment.

The eyeless sockets of past ages stared out at us in hollow agony. Monks and cardinals and gay dandies in court dress were crowded here. Some were in coffins, some dangled from hooks like sides of meat, others were jammed into a horrible welter. Farther along were women in laces and shawls and jeweled gowns, their withered faces simpering and gibbering. Then came children and babies, staring out with leering grins. I had seen some ghastly sights in Africa, but this place gave me the jitters.

I trailed along, looking for someone who might be the expected messenger, but no one seemed to fill the bill. One of the nuns, face hidden within a great stiff black hood, had fallen behind to study those God-awful babies. I passed her; as I did so, I caught her voice and it fairly jerked at me.

"Chichiri, 'gnuri! A chi dici chichiri—"

It was part of a six-hundred-year old song in the Sicilian dialect, about the murderer of the French rulers. Further, it was the password to be given me by the unknown agent. A nun! I was startled, then shocked. But I recollect the answer, which had something to do with throat-slitting, and voiced it:

"Si chi tagghia lu coddu pri so' gloria!"

No Germans, and mighty few black-shirts, could make head or tail of that Sicilian dialect; it was appropriately chosen for its present purpose, too. I pressed against the lighted showcase. The nun crowded close to me and slid a foot-long package from under her black robe, thrusting it at me and speaking.

"The bust unscrews. Where can we talk? The Monreale Cathedral at one tomorrow—thirteen o'clock, the siesta hour? At the staircase to the roof?"

"Right," I said. "But look out for a trap here—"

"I was warned. They are waiting outside," she said, and went floating along to join her companions. Something in her voice went through and through me, as a

note of music will sometimes do; a most remarkable voice. So this sister was the secret agent from Rome! Well, nuns or priests or monks or kids from New York's 14th Street—we were all in the war.

I trailed along after the groups, fingered the package she had slipped me; it was long and slender, and I knew what it was; a crucifix. A perfectly innocent object to be carrying in Italy. Indeed, just inside this convent entrance was a whole wall-section of crucifixes and similar objects on sale, which I remembered with a jolt.

The one in my hand was not innocent, as I very well knew. In it must be concealed my instructions and the other data I required; dynamite or worse! She had passed me the buck and got out from under. And did it burn me, as I fingered the outlines of that crucifix! What a sap I had been, to get myself into a jam like this. Some of those soldiers or Nazis in the groups around were waiting to grab the spy—

When I had come here it was against my better judgment, with my nerves on edge, and those corpses jammed everywhere had given me the jumps, I admit frankly. I just turned around and went away from there, saying I was sick. The soldiers laughed. Plenty of tourists must have got an upset stomach here.

Nobody followed me, however. I found my way back to the entrance and the monk-porter. I stopped and talked with him, told him what I wanted, and a few lire fixed things up. I had been doing some fast thinking ever since meeting that nun, because I was in a tight spot, a breathless spot, where rapid action was needed. She knew about the danger here—and she had loaded me up with the hot stuff!

All set at last, I tucked the parcel under my arm and the porter let me out. I started back toward the tram-line. A cigarette felt mighty good, and so did the fresh air. The sun was just down, and everything shone in a reflected golden light from the clouds—

And then, coming from nowhere, two

blackshirts approached along the convent wall. They had the complete getup—dagger, black tasseled cap, Sam Browne belt and so forth.

"Ha! A soldier! An officer!" exclaimed one, nodding at me. "Your papers, my friend. Viva il Duce! Let's see what's in that parcel. Let's see what's in your pockets."

I showed indignation, and was told to come along elsewhere if I refused to be frisked here and now; so I let them frisk me. It was decidedly not my place to start any war with the blackshirts. A wounded officer fresh from the front—that melted them a trifle. I had nothing in my pocket but a packet of letters from prisoners in Africa, addressed to their home folks, of which I had assumed delivery, and this melted them further. They had heard of me, I was evidently all right. But I was not a party member, and anyone not a Fascist member is just dirt to the blackshirts.

The package? They opened it together, dropped it, and broke it! a very fine plaster crucifix a foot long. With a laugh and a shrug, they bundled it up again.

"Who's going to pay for it?" I demanded. "Now I must go back and buy another. I promised my aunt in Urbino to bring her one of these blessed crucifixes. This one cost me ten lire and you've broken it past mending—"

I set up such a wail that one of them thrust the money into my hand.

"Go and get another, then, and clear out of here," he said impatiently. "Hurry up! We've no more time to waste on you."

There were other blackshirts about; I could see two down the street, in the other direction. So I hurried back into the convent entrance, and the porter let me in. The other visitors were just coming from the catacombs, and I wanted to get off ahead of them.

Those blackshirts were watching for something, and were no fools. They were no longer worried about me, at least, so I

could take the chance now. The monk-porter must have thought me a bit cracked; no matter. He took the smashed crucifix I handed him, took from under his counter the parcel the nun had given me, and thrust it at me. I popped it under my arm and left, pausing to light a fresh cigarette.

The two blackshirts were sauntering along. I held up the parcel, so obviously a crucifix that they broke into a laugh and waved me on. Two others were half a block away, but having seen me thus passed, merely gave me a nod and a salute. I hobbled on past them. Presently, looking back, I saw the three nuns come out and climb into the painted cart. The two blackshirts spoke with them and evidently passed them freely, for the donkey came to life and away went the cart.

At the tram line I waited for a tram, got one, made my way back to the hotel, and in my own room opened the parcel. There was a crucifix, quite an ordinary one. I tried the bust as ordered, and it unscrewed; from it came a little roll of onionskin paper.

That evening came my aluminum foot, a gorgeous affair of intricate workmanship, with Fritz Ude's compliments. After a little practice, I was going to be able to walk once more and it almost made me feel grateful to the Nazis.

I enjoyed a very good dinner in vast relief. I had squirmed out of a bad fix, the future was opening up nicely, and by tomorrow night I should be on my way to Messina. Yet I could not forget the white-haired, bloodstained face of gentle old Pezzo.

And as I left the dining room I found a visitor waiting for me. I turned aside into the smoking-room where he was waiting. We had it quite to ourselves, by good luck.

II

SIGNOR VOLTORE, as he introduced himself in fluent Roman, was at first glance an old man with a hooked nose,

decently but poorly dressed, with an enormous gold-headed cane. The gold was, of course, imitation. There was a vague familiarity about his features which puzzled me until, leaning forward, he spoke very quietly.

"So you do not remember me?"

The voice did it. I was startled, but thought it best to show off a bit.

"Of course I do," I said coolly. "You are the old woman who spoke to me this morning as poor old Pezzo was led past. And you are the old man who spoke to me this afternoon in the Via Stabile. Now you are a very different old man. You must be an actor."

He chuckled slightly. "Thank you. I am the makeup artist, or was, at the Teatro Massimo, the opera. Tonight I have given you my real name. Our organization here is smashed. I have no money. If I'm here tomorrow, I'll be shot; they're hunting down everyone of us. If I can reach Rome, I'll find friends. Can you help me?"

It was a bit ironical. I was the stranger here, the one who needed help and protection; instead, I had to give it. This old fellow with his vulture's beak and scrawny neck was certainly one of us, and a sharp one; he had twice warned me today.

"We can't talk here," I said. "Now, I've not been in Messina, but I've been told where to go there. Look up a dentist in the Via Garibaldi, an old man named Dottore Guido Morisani. He's one of us. Do you know him?"

The old fellow shook his head. "No. I have been here five years, never away once."

"No wonder I thought you were a native of Palermo!" I laughed. "Well, I'll be in Messina within a day or so. Wait for me there; you can be of use to me, I can help you. Here's some money, so get off tonight if possible."

He took the money and thanked me gravely. "Yes, Signor, I can be of use," he said. "I shall become your servant at Messina; I can play that part very well indeed."

He departed. I was amused at thought of him, working here for five years and never once leaving the city; it was quite typical. My amusement did not last long, however, for the alert sounded and I spent two hours in the bombproof while our planes pasted the docks and shipping and railroad termini once more. It was no fun.

WITH morning I forgot old Voltore and his apt name. Wearing my new foot, I went to see Fritz Ude, and soon had more important things on my mind. Ude was delighted with the way the foot worked; he was a Hamburg man, a sunny, pleasant man of thirty, thick in the chops and with a beaming smile. He vowed that he actually loved me because I had helped his brother escape from Africa. His quarters were in the Palazzo Sclafani, which the Nazis had taken over as administration building.

Complimenting me on the foot, he passed out cigars, leaned back, and beamed.

"Well, I have things fixed up for you, my friend! Elsa Kettel wants to get back north, and I'm sending her today in a staff car to Messina. You shall go along."

"You're giving me a charming companion," I said, smiling.

He blew a kiss from his fingers. "You're telling me, Casella! Ah, she is magnificent! I'm giving you Sergeant Jarchov as driver; he knows the roads. At Messina, Colonel von Roden will take you both in charge."

"You spoke of doing a bit of work for you," I said.

He nodded. "We are teaching these Italians how to police their country," he said. "It's not my work, of course, but spies and defeatists do have a bearing on military intelligence. We've just cleaned up a nest of those rats here in Palermo—rather, Baron Scalatti has."

"Who is the worthy baron?" I asked.

He waved his cigar. "Oh, an Italian secret agent belonging to the Fascisti. A marvel, they tell me; I never met him personally. Yes, we cleaned them out here;

got a short-wave radio station, too. Baron Scalatti and some of our Gestapo agents are working together. We simply must mop up the spies and anti-Fascist elements here and in Italy, you know. Pardon me—"

He answered his telephone. I leaned back, puffing luxuriously; it was a good cigar. And the prospect of going to the other end of the island in a Nazi staff car—well, that was luck! So was Elsa Kettel. I was glad now of my new clothes.

I was out of the dingy uniform and wearing a very decent suit of flannels. With this I could not wear the Iron Cross, of course, but its insignia was at my lapel—and I had a handsome Fascist party emblem to wear, once I got into Italy. A risky thing to do, in a way, but the advantages were many.

"Now, then!" His telephone conversation finished, Ude turned to me again. "You're going to Rome. I may be transferred there at any time, certainly before the end of the month. And Elsa will be there, too." He winked and broke into a laugh. "Well, well! You're one of *i mutilati*, the wounded veterans, and not a black-shirt, and back from Africa; everyone will trust you like a comrade. You can even indulge in anti-Fascist talk, quite safely."

He handed me a slip of paper bearing some names and addresses.

"Baron Scalatti gave us these names of suspects between Messina and Roma—at Tropea, Salerno and elsewhere. He can't trust his own Italian secret service, but you are ideal for the job. Stop off on your way and see these men, talk with them, feel them out. Any who are actually dangerous must be removed; so far, they're only suspects. We're particularly anxious to locate any short-wave radios."

So was I. In fact, I knew of three with which I was to get in contact, to send out my own reports. I was glad to take over the job.

"Splendid!" Ude beamed. "I'll give you an identity card connecting you with us, and I'll have it stamped by Fascist head-

quarters also. That will help you in any contacts with our men or the blackshirts."

Glory be! I could have hugged myself at this piece of luck. It did not occur to me that such an identity card would also put a finger on me whenever I used it.

After the bombing raid I had worked late into the night. The papers enclosed in that hollow crucifix were now destroyed. I had in my head the names and addresses of certain agents I was to contact, and information about Nazi airfields and operation to be sent from the first short-wave on my way north; it was across the straits at Tropea.

"To Messina is only a hundred and twenty-five miles," Ude said. "A pleasant afternoon's ride. Be here at three; fifteen o'clock. The sirocco will be all over by then. I'll have the identity card ready. Send your baggage here from the hotel."

"Right," I said, rising. "I'm merely to investigate these suspects, eh?"

"And report to our Rome office—to me, I hope," said Ude. "See you later!"

I shook hands and left. Back at the hotel I packed, and hugged myself anew. Did ever any secret agent—or spy, to use the right word—fall into greater luck? I was actually a Nazi and Fascist agent, with nothing to fear from Gestapo or black-shirts!

Well, it only goes to show that the biggest sucker is the smart guy who thinks he knows all the answers.

When I looked at the paper Ude had given me, I got a bit of a shock. These suspects were all names of secret agents I was to see on my own account. That damned Baron Scalatti must be a wizard! And the first of all, across the straits at Tropea, was my short-wave radio agent, supposedly unsuspected! He was an Englishman who had lived in Italy for above fifty years and was naturalized here. Another old man. There were no young men left to play the game, unless they were crippled, like me.

My program was now clear. At Messina I was to contact Colonel von Roden, the

Nazi intelligence officer, who would arrange my passage to Rome, probably by train. Also, I was to contact our Allied agent, the dentist Morosani, and pick up old Voltore; since he wanted to reach Rome, I could give him a lift and it would give me better standing to have a servant along. Italians pay attention to such details.

How far Elsa Kettel would be mixed up with the trip, was uncertain. I did not particularly care. Joe Casella was not the man to turn a cold shoulder to a charming girl, especially if she had the come hither look in her eye—as Elsa had. Yes, I was glad of my new clothes and fancy hat, and the new foot that let me walk like a man once more!

I GOT an early lunch and started for Monreale. The sirocco was blowing and everybody who could keep off the streets did so. White clouds of dust were adrift. The sky was like lead, but was a deep and ominous red from southern horizon to zenith—red African sand mounting in a cloud on the hot wind. Just now it was hot as hell and equally unpleasant, but as Ude had said, it would be all clear later. The sirocco never lasts long, and ends in a refreshing rain.

It was a little before one when I reached the glorious cathedral on its far height. Between the sirocco and the siesta hour, everything was absolutely deserted. The big bronze doors of the cathedral and everything else that might be damaged by bombs were under walls of sandbags, but a tiny side door was open. Gasping from the sand-filled air and the heat, I ducked gratefully into the cool dimness. A good place to meet a nun, this!

Although I had been here once before, the transcendental magnificence of the scene overwhelmed me anew. Floors and walls, steps and ceilings—everything was a glory of mosaic and gold, forming pictures and tapestries and lacework in cut stone of gorgeous colorings. A few people were in

sight, mostly women wrapped in shawls. However, I was here for a purpose, and with a sigh turned to the staircase entrance, at the beginning of the south aisle. No nun in sight, however.

Nobody at all, I thought. But, as I stood there, a step sounded; a woman appeared on the steep little staircase that wound to the roof. She halted and stood looking at me. No nun, either. She was smallish and brown of hair and eye; she wore a sort of half uniform with a large Red Cross badge on the left breast, and a dark veil framed her features. They were lovely, composed, sensitive features, touched with a singular nobility of character; for an instant I thought her some painter's model for the Madonna, posed here.

"So you, too, have changed!" she said quietly, composedly. I knew her at once by the voice. It was the voice of my nun in the chamber of horrors. She beckoned me, and I followed her in upon the stairs. "We can talk here, Captain Casella," she said. "Not too loud."

"So you know me! And you're not a nun," I murmured. "That's good. Why did you go to so much trouble with that crucifix?"

"I was searched twice," she replied. "Too late, I was warned of a trap at the convent yesterday. They said you would not be there."

I could not take my eyes from her face, so lovely was its composure. Her brown eyes were alight and laughing; but her voice, too, was utterly serene.

"Well, I thought you might fall into the trap, so I showed up."

"That was good of you. Luckily all went well. What terrible things have happened here! Nearly everyone, they say, was caught and shot. I shall have to go back at once; I am in the service of nursing, you know."

"Back where?" I asked impulsively.

A smile touched her lips. "First, to Naples. By air, I think. The messages were all that you sought?"

"All correct," I replied. "How did you know my name?"

"One of our people here who escaped, an old man, told me yesterday. Voltore, I think his name was. Terrible things, yes, but that's what we must expect, now and then. Things can happen to the other side, too. If Baron Scalatti can strike like a thunderbolt, so can we. Perhaps you'll see when you get to Salerno; a blow is being prepared there."

"I'm leaving this afternoon," I told her. "And I shall be, in a way, a Nazi agent. Now, can I be of any service to you?"

"No," she said. "My errand here was to bring you that crucifix; what it contained was vital. And I wanted to see what you were like. I think you may succeed. If you reach Naples alive, your chances will be good."

"How much do you know about me?" I asked.

Her eyes leveled on mine. "As much as you know about me, except for my name; it is Francesca Conti. That makes us even. Those of us who are in this work should not know too much about one another."

"Perhaps," I admitted. But in her eyes was liking and acceptance; I could sense the intangible bond between us, the sympathy. "I intend to know more about you, Signorina; you are not just a woman. You are a spirit, a—well—"

"Angel," she said, mockingly, laughter leaping in her face.

"No," I said, though I knew my cheeks were red. "I'm in earnest. I want to see you again; I shan't let you go forever! You are like this glorious building, something to remember and come back to."

I was awkward and gauche about it, of course, because I meant what I said. She saw that I meant it, and her face softened a little.

"Once I lived for compliments and pretty phrases; now it is different," she said gently. "I had a brother, whom I worshiped. He was in the aviation; he disappeared. Where? Here in our own coun-

try; somewhere in the mountains, south of Naples. The plane was never found. That was over a year ago. Well, I believe Marco is not dead, but alive—somewhere. I go here and there. I look. I listen for some word, I think of nothing else. I do my work among the wounded and sick, and go on hoping and trusting. Some day I shall get news of him, if God is kind—and God is always kind." She put out her hand to me. "Now we must part. I have work to do. We cannot leave here together. Good-by for this time, and good luck."

It was her way of telling me, of course, that she had no inclination for flirting.

"*A rivederci*," I said, holding her hand. "Not good-by, but until we meet again! Thank you; I understand your meaning, Signorina, but I, too, am serious. Wait! One thing—what's this Baron Scalatti like? How can I know him if I meet him?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. It's a famous Sicilian family; but I never met the man and no one seems to know just what he is like. A mystery, I fear."

"All right. Good-by—for this time." I did not brush her fingers with my lips, as polite Italians do; I kissed them. Then I turned and made off, and saw her no more.

My heart was thumping as I made for the tramway; the mere knowledge of this woman, the contact with her, was like a glimpse of heaven. I mean just that. She made the thought of any other woman cheap and ignoble and worthless. Francesca Conti—I did not know, then, that in Rome this was a great and noble name among the ancient families. But I knew she was no ordinary woman.

And she, more than anyone else I had met or would meet, was very much her quiet, serene self; this is an excessively rare thing. The first detail to be learned in undercover or spy or intelligence work or secret service—anything you want to call it—the first and greatest instruction is that no one, absolutely no one, is what he appears to be.

This is very largely true of life in gen-

eral, too. Upon ignorance of this basic fact are founded most of the errors of our press, our police, our novel-writers. A person in a book or story is good or bad—is a doctor, therefore a kindly fellow—a Nazi, therefore a brute—a loving husband, therefore trustworthy. All baloney! Nobody is either good or bad. No one, man or woman, is what he or she superficially appears to be. All intelligence work is based on this fact, and in Africa it had been drilled into me by experts.

Indeed, it is easy to go a step farther and say that if a person appears to be some certain thing or type, the opposite is probably true. This is easy but dangerous, because it is true only part of the time. But in underground work nothing can be taken for granted because it looks that way.

I did not, for example, believe that Fritz Ude was just an open-hearted friend or that Elsa Kettel was a simple sob-sister for Nazi papers, or that old Voltore was a humble and very minor member of the underground because he was willing to pose as my servant. I accepted these evidences, yes. What the truth was in each case, I had no idea; but it was not what it seemed—any more than Giuseppe Casella was what he seemed. As long as I could make the enemy accept me for what I appeared to be, as long as I could make them forget this first rule of the game, I was safe.

With Francesca Conti it was very different. She might not be a Red Cross nurse any more than she was a nun; but her character stood at full face value, perfectly poised, serene, utterly efficient.

I WAS back at the hotel in time to pack and send off my bag by a porter to Ude's office. Sure enough, the sirocco had blown itself out and a fine burst of rain had followed; there was just enough rain to paint the trees and buildings and streets red, as it precipitated the red sand from the air, but not enough to wash away the stain.

Stepping into the bar for a farewell

drink, I ran into two Nazi officers of the high command—colonels, I believe. I had met them both and they insisted on buying me a drink. I made no secret of my departure for Messina. When it was time to be on my way, they walked a little way up the street with me, enjoying the fresh cool air after the rain. We parted at a corner, but as we were shaking hands, one of the donkey-carts which had replaced taxicabs went past.

Sitting in it was Francesca Conti.

"What a beautiful woman!" I exclaimed. "Who is she?"

One of the officers smiled. "You may well ask! The Marchesa Conti, of Rome; she's the head of some Red Cross organization among women of the noblest families. She's everywhere—here today, in Naples tomorrow, in Genoa the next day. She does a splendid work, and I believe rates travel by air, which is rare. Well, all luck go with you!"

So we parted and I went my way. A *marchesa*, eh? Nobility. Well, she looked nobility if any woman ever did!

When I reached the Sclafani palace, Elsa Kettel had just arrived. Her luggage was being stowed in our car by Sergeant Jarchov. He was a regular animal Nazi type, efficient and humorless and inhuman. The car was a small armored vehicle, heavily marked with the reversed Swastika of the Nazis. Captain Ude was talking with the fraulein at one side.

As I approached, the air-raid siren began to scream and the whole landscape seemed to jump in nervous haste. Ude darted at me and thrust an envelope into my hand.

"Your identity card as I promised," he cried, hastily shaking hands. "Get off, get off! The safest place is outside of town—off with you! See you up north—"

Amid hasty farewells Elsa piled in and I followed her. Jarchov slid under the wheel and saluted, and the engine roared. We, of course, had plenty of petrol. Next moment we were on our way for Messina,

through streets flooding with frightened people as the damned wailing siren pierced brains and nerves and souls.

How shall I describe that accursed ride? The motor road roughly followed the railroad along the north shore of Sicily to Messina; but for the past year this road had been chopped to pieces by army trucks, artillery, tanks large and small, and all the motorized war heading for Africa. Luckily the rain had laid the dust, but it had not softened the ruts. From Palermo came the infernal racket of anti-aircraft guns. From high heaven descended the infernal roar of invisible planes; some became visible, and the railroad ahead was bombed and a train destroyed. An interminable file of army trucks on the road was also bombed and strafed.

We got through all this, some halfway on our journey, to be greeted by rifle fire from the rocks overhanging the road. Peasants, sniping at Germans! The bullets came close, but Sergeant Jarchov stepped on it and we went away fast, regardless of ruts.

Elsa Kettel and I were hanging on to the straps and to each other, dignity laid aside. She proved, indeed, to be a good scout, and while we had little opportunity to do any conversing, we got pretty well acquainted none the less. Once she got a bad crack against the top of the car that left her a bit dazed and knocked her hair loose in a red-gold torrent, but she only broke into a laugh and demanded a cigarette.

The only town of any size we passed was Cefalu, once a great city, now a pile of ruins for tourists and there were tourists on hand. American sky-tourists, giving their attention to a new airfield close by, and to the railroad and to a number of small ships in the harbor. There were bombers and Lightnings as well, and there had been some enemy planes, but two big gouts of smoke to seaward showed where a couple of these had ended.

What those boys were doing to the railroad and the endless line of motor vehicles on the highway, was plenty. Trucks had

exploded, others had gone off the road and burned, others had been strafed into bloody wreckage. Most of them were German, I was glad to see. The Nazis were rushing all sorts of equipment into Sicily, expecting that we would attack there when we got Rommel cleaned out of Tunisia, and were building airfields everywhere in the island.

However, we got through it all, hit some better road, and pulled into Messina toward dark. It was an arrival to remember. The harbor, the straits, and Reggio across the way on the mainland were ablaze with lurid fires; anti-aircraft batteries were pumping away full tilt and bombs were dropping; there was a rustle and rattle from the roofs where the flack shrapnel was coming down like rain.

Driving into town we passed an exploded truck with a couple of wounded Germans beside it. I made Sergeant Jarchov stop, much against his will neither he nor Elsa gave a damn for their own wounded men, it seemed. We crowded both of them in, and since the big army camp and forts outside town were being bombed, they directed us downtown to the Nazi headquarters. These were located in the University buildings.

The show ended before we got into the city, and a good thing, because the railroad terminals lay on our way and they had caught it heavy. We detoured and came to headquarters, where everything was as cool and orderly as though nothing were happening. Colonel von Roden came out to meet us, seeming to pay Elsa no end of respect. He was a hard-eyed, fish-faced Nazi who heiled Hitler every five minutes. Our picking up the two wounded men created quite a sensation, because my name and story had gone ahead of us; officers flocked around to shake my hand. They called me the good luck of the Swastika and so forth.

Headquarters was at mess, and Colonel von Roden took us right in with him as guests of honor. We met a couple of Nazi

generals who made a fuss over Elsa, had a good meal in spite of the candle-light, and I was glad to find that a room here in the block of buildings would be given me. The colonel said that Fritz Ude had phoned him about me and all was set. Then, the meal over, he took me along to his office.

This was poorly lighted, because of the blackout.

He produced some good cigars, then uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Ha! I nearly forgot. Are you acquainted with a man name Vulture—Voltore?"

I had to think fast. If the old chap had been picked up by the Gestapo, any knowledge of him might be dangerous. Still, it might be still more dangerous to lie.

"An old rascal with a beak like the bird of the same name?" I said, and laughed.

"Yes, I engaged him to meet me here and act as my servant. He had excellent references, and with my crippled leg I can use him."

The colonel struck a bell. An orderly came in, saluted and clicked heels.

"The man Voltore," said the colonel. "Free him. Bring him here and leave him. Will you excuse me for a few moments, Captain Casella? I'll return and settle everything with you—an important message has just come in for the general—" He departed with more heiling of Hitler, and I sat back enjoying my cigar. Better spend a day here, I reflected, and contact Dottore Morisani. He was supposed to give me the latest data concerning the new airfields being built in this part of the island, which I would get off via short wave from Tropea. Probably old Voltore had already contacted him.

So the old chap had been picked up and detained, pending my arrival! A good thing I had told the truth. There was a shuffle of feet and I looked up to see him brought in by two guards, who saluted and departed. With a cry of joy he came to me and fell on his knees, kissing my hand. He had a handkerchief wrapped around

his bald head and smelled strongly of garlic.

"Careful, 'gnuri," he said, suddenly abandoning his pure Roman speech and falling into the Palermo dialect impossible for German ears to understand. "It is not safe to talk here! They detained me when I looked up the friend you told me about; luckily, I made use of your name and they knew it."

"Didn't you find the dentist?" I asked.

He grimaced horribly. "Yes. You can find him, too, if you like, but he won't talk. He's been hanging from the balcony of his own house ever since morning; the secret police did it. That accursed baron got to him ahead of us!"

Once more, Baron Scalatti had come close.

III

DOTTORE MORISANI and a dozen more citizens of Messina had been strung up this very day, it proved, as defeatists and anti-Fascist agitators. Colonel von Roden spoke of it quite frankly, after sending Voltore off to get my bag and take it to the room assigned me here. I asked him about picking up Voltore, and he grimaced.

"He came to see a suspect who had just been hanged, yes. You've heard of Baron Scalatti? He was here for an hour and obtained results; gone now, no one knows where! Yes, the old rascal used your name. We would have let him go, otherwise—we don't bother with scum like that. The people who need hanging are the ones we hang; examples, well-known citizens. These filthy Italian swine—pardon me," he broke off in confusion. "I meant no insult, my dear captain. I have been rubbing elbows with the filth of Messina lately."

I smiled. "I'm a Roman, not a Sicilian; I can sympathize with you. These Sicilians are indeed filthy. Well, about my journey to Rome—I'd like to get off at once, since I must make a number of stops—"

I gave no sign of the shock I had re-

ceived. My best bet was to clear out, quick.

The colonel swung around and jerked his finger at the big wall map of Sicily and Calabria, across the straits. For most of the two hundred and fifty miles up to Salerno, the railroad ran slap along the water; there were eighty tunnels in that distance alone. There was no space between sea and mountains for towns of any size. Calabria was a waste, repeatedly shattered by earthquakes, most of its people emigrated long ago, or dead of malaria. The town for which I was headed, Tropea, was no more than a fishing village of a few thousand souls, or had been; now it was probably half depopulated.

DOWN this railroad, which followed the highway, poured men and guns and machines for Tunisia and Sicily. Those who went south by sea from Naples must run the gantlet of Allied ships; and those same ships came in along the shore to gun the devoted railroad, shelling the trains and blowing up tunnels.

"To keep the line open is impossible," the colonel said. "To reach Salerno might take you days or weeks. I can't spare a car and driver. Do you know what happened today? Those damned Americans had learned where our armored vehicles were parked and camouflaged; they bombed them, destroyed nearly all! And the ferry from Reggio was also bombed, with its docks; the biggest ferry is sunk, useless! We are cut off from Italy, for the moment."

Inwardly, I felt like letting out a whoop. To think of that entire park of camouflaged tanks and cars and trucks destroyed! It was a tremendous blow. Word of the exact location must have been sent out by the old dentist, Morisani; he certainly had got in a body-blow before they hung him! And destroying the elaborate car-ferry system was another hard stroke.

Fraulein Kettel was being sent north by air, the colonel went on. Since I wanted to stop at Tropea and elsewhere, a boat

would suit me better. When did I wish to go?

"In the morning. As early as possible," I said, little thinking he might take me at my word. I forgot German efficiency.

Settled, then; he said his orderly would call me for breakfast and see me off. The boat would be ready. Voltore was to accompany me. I would find everything done to further my comfort and safety.

Upon this we parted. I shook hands heartily with Colonel von Roden, not dreaming how soon I was going to kill him, and departed to my own room.

This was a clean, uninviting place, with a bunk for Voltore and a picture of Der Fuhrer on the wall above my bed. Voltore grinned at me, as I dropped on the bed and lit a fresh cigar. What a loathsome old rat he was, with his scrawny neck and hooked beak and bright eyes! But looks don't make the man in the business we were in.

I TOLD him about leaving early, then asked about Morisani. He knew little, but had seen Baron Scalatti. This news made me sit up with an eager word.

"Quick! What's he like? Did you see him close?"

"He questioned me himself." Voltore grimaced. "I pretended to be a Roman, so he spoke Roman. A small man, slightly hunchbacked, with two large moles near his right eye. That is all I remember. Per Bacco! I was frightened, let me tell you."

So here, at last, was a good enough description of the mysterious baron! This delighted me. I questioned Voltore about what had happened at Palermo, and how poor old 'Gnuri Pezzo had been trapped, but he knew very little, or said as much. I doubted this. He was of sufficient importance to have been told about me, which very few were; he was immensely clever at disguises, had saved me by his warnings, and had known about that messenger meeting me—Francesca Conti. All in all, he was probably some big shot in the organi-

zation. Now, as we talked, he gave me a sharp look.

"You did not go to the Cappuccini to meet that messenger?"

"Yes, in spite of your warning," I replied, smiling.

He grimaced in surprise. "Oh! And nothing happened?"

"Nothing," I said laconically.

He rubbed his long beak. "And who was the messenger, Signor?"

"Too much talk killed the monkey, said the crow." With this country proverb I flung him a laugh. "Why ask me? You spoke with her and warned her; she told me so."

"Right, excellency; forgive my silly question. I knew her by sight but not by name."

I inspected my prize possession—the identity card Fritz Ude had given me. He had worked fast. It bore my picture and signature, both taken from my army papers; it bore seals and signatures, both Fascist and Nazi, and was an imposing object. I showed it to Voltore, who inspected it and held up his hands in mute amazement, but said nothing.

Beyond the fact that we were stopping at Tropea, I gave him no hint of my business ahead. Nor did I mention the beautiful artificial foot I now wore. I still limped and still used my stick, for I could not get the full advantage of the appliance at once.

He knew Francesca Conti, the Marchesa Conti, by sight but not by name! Either Voltore lied flatly, or else he was remarkably simple. Well, he was anything but simple, so he had lied. Why? To keep me aware of his humility. He did not want me to think him an important member of the underground. Why? No answer.

"The young lady who came from Palermo with you," he said. "She likes you."

"What makes you think so?" I replied.

He shrugged. "Oh, one hears talk! I saw you with her in Palermo, and with Captain Ude," he said with a shrewd glance

and a wink. "When you reach my age, excellency, you can read a woman's eye. Yes, she likes you. We shall see her again."

"To the devil with her," I said, turning in. "Blow out the candle when you're ready."

He did so, and I heard his cackling laugh in the darkness. But I wanted no more word or thought of Elsa Kettel; to think of her, so soon after Francesca Conti, was like an insult. Not that there was anything wrong with Elsa—it was simply that Francesca Conti carried an air of nobility, of high serenity, that banished any other woman from the picture.

It did not occur to me that Voltore might be a very wise man, far wiser than I could guess! I might have profited from his words, had I taken them seriously. Unfortunately, I was absorbed in my visions of Francesca Conti.

For some reason her features lingered with me in the night. I might see her again at Salerno; she had spoken of a blow to be struck there at Baron Scalatti. And there the real business of my own job would begin. I had not been landed here at the cost of so much care and effort and money, just to piddle around saying hello to the organization. I had had definite business in Sicily, too, but Baron Scalatti had wiped that off the slate. I went to sleep with the uneasy certainty that there would have to be a showdown with the baron before long—and it would be bad luck if he caught up with me.

It was still dark when we were wakened; Colonel von Roden took me at my word with a vengeance. The orderly was a brisk young fellow, a machine like his chief. He woke us, lit a candle for us, and said to be ready for breakfast in twenty minutes. All was prepared for our departure, he said, but the colonel wanted a last word with me before we left.

"He's not up and around so early?" I said in surprise.

"He has not yet been to bed," said the orderly, and left us. Voltore wagged his

bald head at me as I splashed water over my face.

"A worker, that man! A devil, some call him. He came down here from Turin; they say that up there he shot two hundred students in one day. They belonged to some secret order and planned an anti-Nazi demonstration. That's the sort of man he is."

"You seem proud of him," I said sharply.

He nodded. "I admire an efficient man, excellency. Too few of our Italians are efficient; that is why the Nazis and black-shirts rule us."

I got out my Fascist party emblem and pinned it above the Iron Cross insignia, on my lapel. Voltore's eyes bugged out when he saw it.

"Efficiency," I said. "And you'd better save some admiration for me. From now on I'm just as efficient as any red-handed Nazi murderer. Don't forget that you're my servant or I'll fill you full of castor oil!"

He grinned at my mock ferocity. It was to be put to the test all too soon, however. Before the twenty minutes were up I was ready and joined the orderly. He led me to the officers' mess-hall; Voltore would be fed elsewhere. We ate a hurried breakfast by candle-light, in company with half a dozen other headquarters officers bound for early duty. German filled the air like a vast cracking of explosive nuts, and I got some information.

Big things were happening in Tunisia; it was the day, I later discovered, of Rommel's last forlorn fight. That he would be utterly destroyed was freely predicted at the table. More, something big was happening here; no one was quite sure, or would say, what it was.

We finished breakfast and went to Colonel von Roden's office. He had just been supplied with a steaming mug of coffee and was sipping it with appreciation when we entered. As he looked up, the telephone buzzed loudly. He picked up the

receiver, answered, then leaned back and gestured at us.

"Sit down, Casella," he said, and looked at the orderly, with a jerk of his head. "Go and have the car ready; be waiting in front. You know where the boat lies. Get away as soon as Captain Casella comes."

The orderly saluted and went out. The colonel gave me a grunt.

"Sorry. Long distance—an important call from Rome."

I lit a cigarette; apparently he regarded me as one of the family. A silver candelabrum, probably looted from some church, was on the desk, half a dozen candles burning; it was not yet daylight. In front of the colonel, by the coffee mug, was a large envelope freshly sealed.

The call came through. Von Roden was speaking with some general; there were the usual *heil* Hitlers and *sig heils* and so forth. Probably he trusted in my ignorance of German.

"It is wonderful! Magnificent!" he was saying. "I have been working on it half the night. Scalatti was here, yes; you got my radiogram, eh? Well, he turned over complete evidence. I have just finished sealing it. I'm sending it by air this morning—we can give charge of it to Fraulein Kettel's pilot. Not another soul knows about it!"

He broke off, listening. I could hear the sputtering accents of the German general. Von Roden shook his head. He spoke placatingly but firmly.

"I am sorry; it is absolutely impossible to breathe the name. The person is of such importance—Scalatti would go to Rome himself, but he is engaged on another job. The name positively must not be mentioned. It is, I may say, that of a woman. Yes, absolutely the head and brains of the organization against us! Scalatti has given me the evidence which will convict her of treason; no mercy must be shown. She is going from Palermo to Naples by air, I believe—yes, one of our own planes. A person whom you know well. No, I re-

gret; one mention of the name might be fatal. And I am not alone here in the room, you comprehend."

I felt a prickle steal up my spine and lift my back hair. That devil Baron Scalatti again—and this time I knew who was in his claws! Colonel von Roden's words pointed to her with fatal precision. That sealed packet on his desk, so important that a special plane was to bear it north—that envelope held the fate of Francesca Conti.

There was no doubt of it. Scalatti, the mysterious and dread agent who was helping the Nazis enchain his own people, had swooped upon her, had discovered her activities, and had given von Roden the evidence to send north. And she had come to Palermo to find me and give me the vital information I needed!

"Not another soul knows about it—" Those words burned into the back of my brain. The colonel was joking with his superior, finishing his conversation; the minute seemed like an hour. I lost track of time. My business, of course, demanded that I barge ahead and let the Marchesa Conti suffer; this was impossible. "Not another soul knows about it—"

Baron Scalatti knew; he was off on some other job. Colonel von Roden knew; if he perished, if that envelope were destroyed—Francesca Conti would have time to escape. I could send the warning by short-wave from Tropea. The whole possibility flitted across my brain. I was alone here with the colonel, the door behind him was closed, outside the building was waiting a car to whisk me to the boat—my action would not be suspected, would not even be discovered for some time—

A paperweight stood on the desk, a long, conical, deadly Bren gun shell. I stood up, pressed out my cigarette in an ashtray, and took hold of this shell, just as the colonel put down the phone and looked up.

"A letter came in for you during the night," he said. "From Fritz Ude in

Palermo. It is here, under those papers—why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," I said, "provided that information about the Marchesa Conti doesn't go any farther."

Amazement flashed into his hard, inhuman features.

"What! You know?"

"Yes," I said. "One too many knows."

He saw my purpose; it salved my conscience a trifle, to give him a moment's warning. But it was his life or hers, and the knowledge nerved my blow.

He was quick as a snake. He had a pistol out—but not quick enough to shoot. That pointed shell went through his skull like paper, and he crumpled forward without a sound, falling from his chair to the floor, half under the desk.

I snatched up the pistol, took a fat wallet from inside his tunic, and shoved his body farther under the desk; only a search would disclose it. Catching up the sealed missive from the desk, I found the letter addressed to me, and pocketed them with the pistol and the wallet. Then I blew out the candles; the first gray light was stealing in at the window.

OUTSIDE, the car was waiting; the orderly and Voltore were there, my bag was in, the driver under the wheel, and we started as soon as I climbed in. There was no morning; a funereal pall of smoke hung over the city and harbor and straits.

The sickle of land that formed the port, holding the old citadel and strong fortifications, had been bombed to nothing but a fragment of hell.

Our car followed the Corso north of the harbor and drew up at a landing stairs and mooring along the sea-wall, where the boat was waiting, with a captain and two men. Five minutes later we were standing through the straits for the open sea, and Sicily was behind us.

Once out of that smoke-pall, we could see Etna lifting into the sky with its thread

of vapor. Then we were out of the straits and pitching to the brisk wind and sea.

"Alas, excellency! Behold my devotion, dear master! For no one else would I have gone to sea; for no one else would I submit to such tortures!"

That was Voltore groaning his heart out. No sooner did we head north along the coast than he went to the lee rail and stayed there, sacrificing to Neptune and bewailing his ill luck, while the crew grinned and cracked jokes.

The skipper and his two men were merry fellows, capable, without interest in politics. When they found I spoke Sicilian as well as Roman, they liked me better. The boat was well stocked with food and wine and water, the weather promised well, and all was pleasant.

Although not fast, the craft was solid and there was a fairly decent cabin to which I retired when the sun came up and the smoke-pall of Messina was out of sight. By water, instead of the curving railroad, it was only thirty or forty miles to Tropea; we would get there early in the afternoon. I figured we would get away and be heading north again with sunset, if I found my man without trouble. The cabin was large enough to sleep us all.

My immediate occupation was with my loot.

The pistol was a beautiful weapon of German make, not large, so flat that it could be carried neatly inside the shirt, and of sufficiently large calibre to serve its need. It carried nine cartridges and was full. I stowed it away, thankful to have a weapon.

The note from Fritz Ude merely enclosed a sheaf of hundred-lire notes "in case I needed money." My first impulse was to bless his kind heart, then I looked again at the banknotes, thoughtfully. They were brand new. I compared them with some of the notes I had brought from Africa, taken from prisoners; they were the same, but bore series-numbers of a totally different type. New notes, of this

size, were very rarely seen. I slipped them back into their envelope, for the present. I was not so sure about good friend Ude, after all.

Now for the sealed letter. It was addressed to General von Falkenberg, head of the Intelligence Service at Rome. I tore it open and found a letter from Colonel von Roden to his chief. My worst fears were confirmed. The enclosed documents involved Marchesa Conti; and "our excellent friend and assistant, Baron Scalatti" requested urgently that the lady be arrested and publicly executed at once, as an example to the Italian populace. The documents were letters of thanks from two English prisoners whom she had helped escape, and a letter in her own handwriting—presumably—addressed to Dottore Morisani, the late unfortunate dentist of Messina. It thanked him for certain information he had sent her, and warned him in future to use some other channel. If genuine, here was enough to condemn her before any Nazi or Fascisti tribunal. What incredible folly of Morisani in leaving this letter unburned!

I touched a match to the lot and watched them curl into ash, then turned my attention to the colonel's wallet.

This produced some remarkable Intelligence documents—a real haul of prime importance covering German activities which ought to reach our own side at once. Our man at Tropea was the person to handle them. It also produced some notes, made the previous day, regarding Baron Scalatti. This proved that the good colonel had lied like a trooper to me in saying that Scalatti had come and gone in an hour, no one knew where. He had gone north, according to these notes, to wind up a big case at Salerno; at least, he was to be at Salerno in four days' time. I remembered what Francesca Conti had said about a blow there that would trap the worthy baron. The chief Nazi or Gestapo agent at Salerno was one Otto Hovek, a renegade Czech.

Beyond some identity cards and several

thousand lire, the wallet held nothing else. The money looked like that sent me by Fritz Ude but again had vastly different serial numbers. I tucked it away, put the wallet through the cabin window into the sea, lit another cigarette and reflected on my loot.

At Tropea, I must turn over this stuff to our agent, Andrea Scotti—probably born Andrew Scott before he came to Italy. His short-wave radio would take care of everything and transmit a warning to Francesca Conti. Also, he must be warned himself. And he must get off my own information for Africa, in regard to German airfields in Sicily and ship movements. So far, so good.

Further, the safest thing for Captain Casella was to disappear at Tropea, if that were possible. To go on further by boat would be very bad judgment, in view of what had happened to Colonel von Roden. I had definite work ahead at Naples and Rome, and must stay alive to handle it.

This desolate mountain country was not going to be invaded by any Allied force, but things might well happen up in the north. The Nazis were in actual hard control of Italy, abetted by the blackshirts, who were struggling desperately for survival. The Italian people hated both of them fiercely; revolt was everywhere, under the surface, but was being kept down with iron hand. And revolt in Italy meant finis for the Axis.

All this had taken time. I went out on deck to find the boat chugging merrily up the coast. Old Voltore was looking like a dying vulture and no mistake, but I spared little sympathy on him and kept company with the skipper, one Salvatore Patani. He was a shrewd fellow and very close-mouthed, but presently I got under his skin with a hint here and a smile there. He said very frankly that he was pro-nothing; he was for anyone who paid him. And in this case, the Germans had paid for the trip to Salerno. Including the telegram.

"What telegram?" I demanded quickly.

He showed white teeth in a flashing smile. "From the railroad station at Tropea, of course. To Captain von Ulm, at Reggio, telling him of our safe arrival."

"Oh!" I said. "Write it out and I'll send it and pay for it myself. I must visit the railroad station in any case."

I spoke with authority, and idly fingered my Fascisti emblem. The skipper took the hint and gave me Von Ulm's address at Reggio. I jotted it down, promising to send the wire.

Here, across the straits in Italy, we would be in Captain von Ulm's district. Why was he to keep an eye on us—on me? It might be quite all right, but it looked fishy. Perhaps my guilty conscience made a coward of me. Anyway, I took alarm then and there. Out on the wide sea there was no running away, no evasion. Fast craft could come after us, an airplane could catch us up—anything might happen. It was more and more certain that I must somehow disappear at Tropea.

I handed the skipper a batch of my ill-gotten currency, and his eyes bulged.

"That," I said, "is additional payment. I'll go ashore at Tropea. My servant may also go ashore. If I'm not back in an hour, put to sea and continue your voyage to Salerno. Is that understood?"

"Continue?" he repeated. "Without you, signor?"

"Precisely."

He winked at me and stuffed the money away. It was understood.

IV

THE morning was sunny, the sea a trifle rough, the high coastline good to look upon. We had left a war-swept world behind, though I had a most uneasy conviction that there was going to be hell ahead. I sat beside Voltore and tried to get him talking, but he was too miserable. The old codger was green and yellow and claimed he was dying.

"You'll be all right when we land at

Tropea," I said, but he only groaned, so I left him alone.

For the life of me, I could not imagine how I could slip out of sight at Tropea, but perhaps Andrea Scotti might help in this, so I let it wait. In killing Von Roden I had burned my bridges, but it was worth it. That note and money from Fritz Ude worried me, too; I could not tell why, but it had a phoney ring, somehow.

It was close to noon when the skipper pointed to mountains ahead; we were five miles or so offshore. That was Cape Vaticano, said he, with Tropea just around it; an hour would see us there. I suggested that the hour would be well spent in despatching the grub and wine put aboard, so we went to it.

Voltore gulped down some wine, but a very ripe goat's cheese drew a gasping moan from him, and he vanished in the cabin below. His *mal de mer* was, ultimately, a perfect godsend so far as I was concerned; but it did not seem so at the moment. Instead, I was irritated at the impossibility of consulting him about plans and schemes.

As we ate and drank and made merry, the two men of the crew exchanged a few words between them in their Messina dialect, which was almost Greek. They were talking about Voltore, and were astonished when I showed some acquaintance with their dialect and asked them to repeat. For some mysterious reason they seemed to dislike him intensely.

"Why," said one, laughing, "I said he showed poor judgment when he selected this boat last evening! He said he was after speed, and he got it."

"He?" I echoed. "My servant, Voltore? He didn't engage you!"

"Oh, he was with the German who did. He translated, and made such a good bargain with the padrone," he nodded at the skipper, "that he got twenty lire for himself, eh?"

To this the skipper assented; it was a good joke. And I, like a fool, paid no more

heed to it; oh, what a ruddy fool and a blind one! In fact, I thought the old chap must have ingratiated himself with the headquarters crowd at Messina, and admired his shrewdness.

The skipper knew Tropea well. Nothing but a fishing village, he said; since the railroad was built, a few good houses had been built because of the charming view. Since the war it had gone to ruin, like everything else. Long previous to black-shirt days, the government had tried to people this bleak Calabrian country with settlers from Albania; but not even Greeks could live here. The fishermen at Tropea were of Greek extraction, said he. Signor Scotti? Why, yes, he knew of the man—an old, white-bearded Englishman by birth, who was now a fiercely fanatic Fascist, an ardent supporter of Mussolini. A retired merchant who had lived on his means before the war in a big house.

He had not been at Tropea for a couple of years, but vividly described the place to me, and Scotti's house, off by itself at the end of the village by the cliffs. As we were talking, there happened one of those bizarre, incredible incidents that seem more like dream-figments than bits of real life.

FROM the blue sky-depths came the sustained stridency of many motors. Although Captain Patani got out binoculars, nothing was visible; but the vibration filled the whole air. Fortresses and fighting planes, I could guess, going to raid Naples.

Then, unexpected, we heard a keener, more piercing sound—a diving plane, screaming down like a bullet from those invisible heights and apparently trying to reach the coast. Behind and above it appeared two others—Lightnings, these, as their twin-bodied shapes proved. The first was a Italian fast Caproni fighter; I had seen them at work in Africa. The two Lightnings were after it like hawks after a rabbit.

Curiously enough, the Caproni made no attempt to fight. It did things in its en-

deavor to escape, however; its pilot must have been a wonder. It cut all sorts of capers, getting closer to the coast as it did so—now diving, now twisting and zooming and flashing about, never fighting but intent upon eluding those deadly Lightnings. Through the glasses I could see and appreciate the magnificent work of that pilot.

A lone Italian plane, caught in the stratosphere by our Allied fleet, and followed down by the two killers—there was something spectacular and dramatic about it. What had that plane been doing up there alone? Perhaps taking mail of passengers from Rome to Sicily or vice versa. There was a good deal of official air travel. Elsa Kettel had gone north or was going by plane, and so was Francesca Conti—”

They had the Caproni! No, the pilot sideslipped and got away, coming down close to the water. He made a sudden zooming lift. Tracer bullets spurted; once more he slid away from them, lifting, gaining the line of coast—then they got him.

I saw something white flutter and fall, a parachute, a mere dot far to the north against the mountainous shore. The pilot? Not at all; a passenger, and no doubt a precious passenger. Almost instantly the pilot swooped, swerved, headed straight for the two Lightnings, and began to fight. He never had a chance; I felt like giving him a cheer. He emerged in a long seaward dive, afire and smoking; he went down at sea, far beyond sight and over the horizon, but for a while the smoke lifted into the sky. About twenty miles north, I thought. It was a better guess than I knew.

By this time we had passed around the point of the cape and were drawing in upon our destination, Tropea. This fishing and summer-resort hamlet was a little place strung along under the cliffs, in a curving bight of the shore. It was beautifully situated, with orange and lemon groves lifting along the hillsides, and the

deep richness of myrtles blending into the dusty gray-green of olive trees. A rich country, these highlands, but high or low, these coasts were deadly. Once they had been the fairest and thickest populated of the ancient world, until Hannibal's Carthaginians brought the African mosquito, and malaria joined with earthquake to blast the land.

As we headed toward the fishing wharves, one of the men called me and I went below to find old Voltore lying on the cabin floor. He was hurt; he had apparently tried to get on deck and had fallen from the ladder, striking his head. He looked like a livid ghost, and seemed asleep rather than unconscious. I called Captain Patani.

He and his two men appeared, grinning and jesting. Again I noted their evident dislike of Voltore; not only were they quite callous as regarded his injury, but were enjoying some secret joke of their own. I pried it out of them at last; it had a cruel angle. One of the men possessed a bottle of laudanum, with which to dose an aching tooth. He had given old Voltore a dose of it in wine, and now the old fellow was snoring.

“No harm done,” said Captain Patani, with a shrug. “Your servant has the evil eye if ever anyone had it! Let him sleep soundly till night.”

“Be sure and put him ashore before you leave,” I said. We went back on deck. “Give me an hour. If I'm not back, get off without me.”

“It'll be a fair wind,” said the skipper. “We can do without the engine and save petrol. An hour then, excellency!”

A throng had assembled to welcome us, mostly women and children. Few men remained here; the fishing craft, unused, were drawn up high on the beach. A couple of the usual fussy local officials showed up—the agent from the railroad station and the local postmaster. I stepped ashore, with the customary Fascist formula and salute. When they saw by my badge that

I was a member of the party itself, they became subservient.

"I am here on party business, Signori," I told them. "Are the trains running?"

"God knows!" said one. "They come and go. Nothing has come from the north for three days. The stoppage is up there. South to Reggio, the line is open."

"I'll go with you to the station," I told the railroad agent, for the benefit of Captain Patani and his two men. "I must send a telegram back to Reggio."

We left the townfolk crowding about the wharf, and walked toward the station, the postmaster stoutly asserting his own rights in the matter of the telegram. But, before we reached the railroad, I halted.

"Ha! Before sending any messages, I must finish my business here! Perhaps you can tell me whether I'll find Signor Andrea Scotti at his home?"

I WOULD; he would be in his vegetable garden at this hour, was the reply. So I said farewell and started off toward the upper end of town.

It had been a pretty place, until the war ruined its prosperity. I passed a park, with some Fascist statuary, dying palms and a strip of wall erected for the purpose of carrying a quotation from Il Duce about living and dying greatly. Beside it was a dead fountain, and here was camped a queer outfit—a gaudy van painted with the name of Il Glorioso Circus and Carnival. Two scrawny mules were obviously the motive power; a safe bet, because all the horses were long since converted into food.

I saw a couple of slatternly women, a number of dogs, probably trained animals, and three men who were huddled under a big umbrella, playing with dirty cards. Some musical instruments lay in the shade; a huddle of big Japanese paper lanterns lay ready to be strung on wires with darkness.

It was one of those pathetic outfits which have their place in Europe, or had, giving simple amusement to simple people of the back country, who find a paper lan-

tern as wonderful as we would find a Times Square display. The three men spoke civilly as I passed, and then their faces changed abruptly. They had seen my lapel pin. Evidently members of the Fascist party wakened no love in them. I smiled and went on.

Scotti's house, detached from the others, was before me, a garden to the side and rear with the figure of a bent old man working at some tomato plants. As I approached, I was again thinking of that dramatic air duel we had witnessed, and the unknown parachute jumper who had won to safety. I had not the least intuition or warning that the incident might be vitally tied up with me; I just found it sticking hard in my memory.

The old man came to meet me. He had white hair and beard and the gentle features of a dreamer, reminding me at once of old, Gnuri Pezzo, back in Palermo. I responded to his greeting by handing him my identity card.

"You are Andrea Scotti? I'd like a talk with you in private, Signor."

He swallowed hard. A deathly pallor came into his face; his eyes lifted, touched my Fascist button, lifted to my face in piteous terrified shock.

"The police—the secret police—"

"No! I didn't mean to give you a jump," I broke in. "That card is my camouflage; I'm one of our own people, Signor, with important information to be sent out, and even more important news for you personally."

He took a lot of convincing. His house-keeper was gone for the afternoon; he led me into the house, and over a bottle of wine I laid everything before him. Not too much of my own story; just enough to let him know that I was okay. The main thing was the warning to be sent out, and the information for Africa.

"Here." He took me into the library, swung out some of the book-shelves, and showed me the radio knobs behind them. "It is all hidden here, all! I can only send

at certain hours, on certain wave-lengths—to the Salerno agent, and to a boat somewhere at sea, an English boat. That will be tonight. About the Marchesa Conti—yes, Salerno must be warned. And your own work there for the damned black-shirts—ah, that Baron Scalatti! So he's on my trail, eh? The murderous devil! And to think that I knew him well, twenty years ago!"

Between the wine and the realization that I was a friend, Scotti warmed up. He had forgotten how to speak English, except with difficulty.

He was not particularly worried about himself; he could, he said, take a donkey and be gone into the mountains, and wander there indefinitely without danger. He had known Dr. Morisani, the old dentist of Messina, quite intimately, and winced when I told of his murder and that of Pezzo. He had known Baron Scalatti in Messina, too.

"The baron comes of an old family; he has vast estates south of Messina," he said. "A curious, evil man, a damned soul if there ever was one! So you came in that boat, eh? I saw it arrive. Train service to the north is cut off. There is no use trying to reach our agent at Salerno before five-seventeen o'clock. Too bad about my having to leave! This is the ideal spot for a short-wave set; isolated, far from anywhere, hard for the blackshirts to discover—"

His set did not reach far, but others picked up the messages and sent them on. It was not hard to guess that a British submarine, surfacing off the coast at certain night hours, could pick up anything meant for Africa. I jotted down everything for him to get off, and did not hesitate to trust him in regard to my own situation.

"To save her, my friend, you sacrificed your splendid chances of success—yes, but were they splendid?" He frowned, tugging at his beard. "I'm not so sure. That card, that money—hm! Perhaps it was desired to keep very good track of you. Perhaps,

through you, to reach everybody connected with the organization! You do not know their tricks. The infernal cunning of that devil Scalatti would make anything possible—well, well, let us see what news we can pick up. It is time for it."

I glanced at my watch suddenly—the hour was up, and more. We went to the front of the house; sure enough, there was my sturdy boat, brown sails spread to the wind, heading for the north. I laughed.

"They put Voltore ashore and skedaddled post-haste, eh? Well, he'll be glad of it. The poor old rascal has been half dead with seasickness. Did you ever run into him?"

Scotti had not. We went back to his radio and got it to work. He had never heard that mere listening with such a machine could be detected and its exact position tracked down; he had supposed that only when sending could his outfit be discovered. He was about ten years behind the times with his set. It had been a mere pastime before the war.

"Well, now I can tear it out and bury it, or send it up on muleback into the hills," he said. "If Scalatti is after me, it's safest to take no chances—ah!"

The news was coming in from Naples. There had been an air-raid only an hour ago by planes from Africa; no damage done, said the report. I grinned at that. Then I lost my grin as the voice went on:

"Very sad news has been received. One of our planes bound north from Sicily was shot down by these pirates of the air, about noon. This happened off the Calabrian coast, which our heroic pilot tried vainly to reach, near Santa Eufemia. Among the passengers on the unfortunate plane was the Marchesa Conti, whose noble work among the sick and wounded—"

So that had been the plane we saw shot down! Nothing was said about anyone having escaped; perhaps that parachute had been imagination. I said nothing to Scotti about it. He switched off the radio, tears sparkling on his white beard.

"I knew her, I knew her!" he said. "And to think you would have saved that sweet, gracious young lady! That it was for her you risked so much—"

"Never mind," I said. "You get off the warning just the same. Let the underground have all the facts; keep them informed of everything. There's some scheme to catch Baron Scalatti up north and finish him, though I know no details. Where, by the way, is the headquarters of our organization?"

He shook his head. "Nobody knows. Catch Scalatti? Nobody ever will."

"I'd like the chance," I said. "He should be easy to hunt down, with his hunchback and the moles—"

"Hunchback? Moles? You have been misinformed," he said. "No such thing."

"But Voltore described the man! He knew him by sight!"

Scotti laughed, picked up pencil and paper, and sketched a head. He had the genius of capturing a likeness and accentuating it. Presently he swung the paper around to me.

"There! Do you know that man?"

"Absolutely!" I exclaimed. "I thought you didn't know him?"

"Eh? That is Baron Scalatti, my friend—"

"The devil! It can't be—why, it's my man, Voltore! To the life!"

"I suspected as much," he said gravely. "Voltore gave you the false description of Baron Scalatti, being no other than Scalatti himself! Now do you see? Making use of you to track down everybody in the organization. You sent Voltore, you said, to poor old Dottore Morisani; and next day Morisani was hanged to his own balcony and a dozen more were shot. And Voltore had been at Palermo, where Pezzo and the others were tracked down. And those Nazi officers—"

I heard nothing more. Even while he spoke, my brain was leaping to the truth of

his words. Voltore had, with the Nazis, engaged this boat—the telegram was to be sent to Nazi headquarters at Reggio, who would send a squad here by car to nab us, or at least Scotti—and I, Giuseppe Casella, who thought myself so damned smart, was nothing more than bait on the hook, a lure to catch every agent of liberty between Sicily and Naples! Just as poor Morisani had been seized and hung, because I talked too freely!

Anger and dismay and overwhelming shame seized me. I caught up hat and stick and went out of the house, almost on the run. At least, I could haul in Scalatti here and now, and put a bullet in the scoundrel if he gave me a chance, to pay for Morisani! What a poor blind fool I had been!

Hurrying along as fast as I could hobble, I passed the carnival van, and the three men still playing cards. In my tumultuous emotion, in my haste and hurry to get along and reach the wharf, I paid them no heed; yet in this instant the great idea must have flashed upon me.

However, I was thinking only of Voltore now, as I clutched the pistol in my pocket. At the wharf, I could see nothing of him, or of my bag. Here were a group of people coming from the wharf, and I cried out at them.

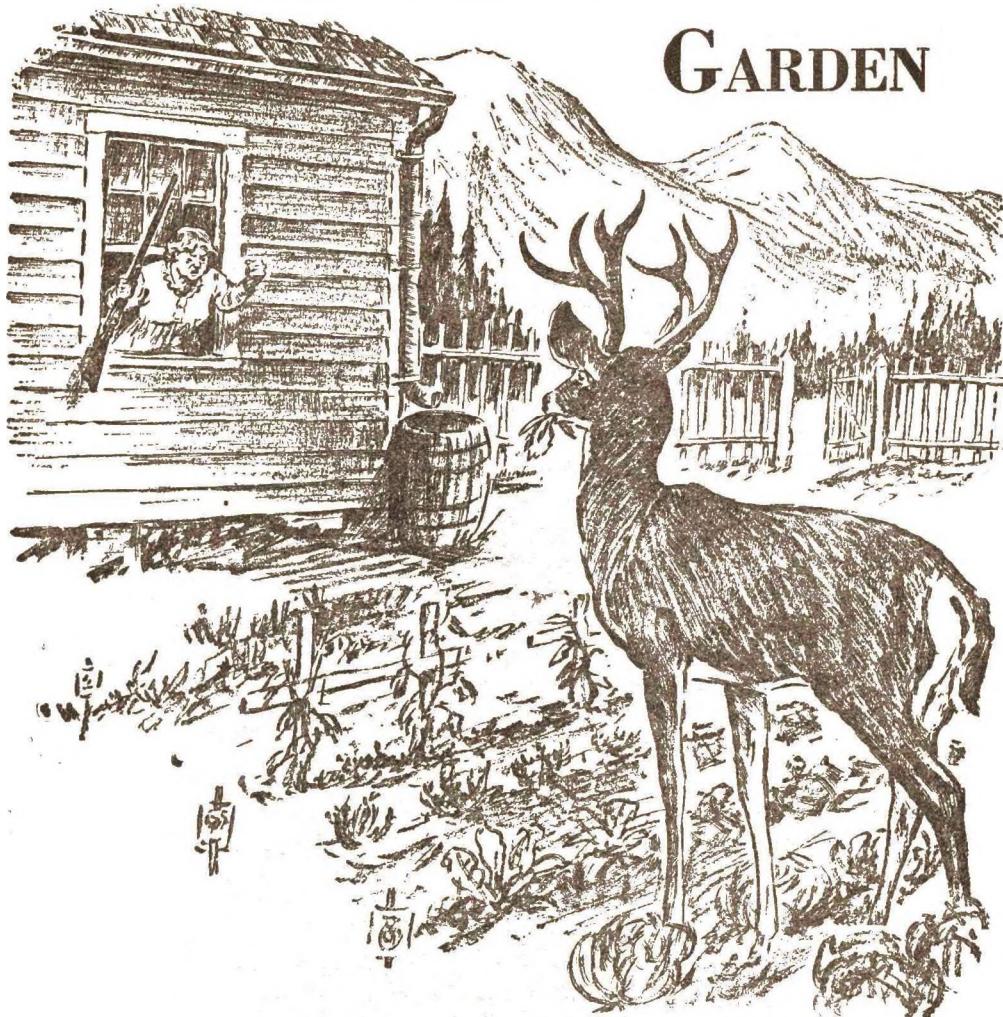
"Where is the old man who came ashore from the boat? Where did he go?"

They looked at me, then at the speck on the horizon that was the boat, then at one another, and a woman broke into a laugh.

"No one else came ashore, Excellency. There was no old man. There was nobody. The men said you had told them to go, and they went."

And they had gone—deliberately taking Voltore with them, by way of a cruel jest. He had never wakened up at all, might stay asleep until darkness came. Gone! I had found Baron Scalatti only to lose him again! And now Joe Casella was in a jam and no mistake.

PANHANDLE PETE'S VICTORY GARDEN



By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

MOLLY REAGAN straightened up slowly, pressing her strong fingers into the small of her back, and groaning. "This weeding is getting me. First it was the spading and turning over the sod that stiffened me up, then it was the raking, and now it's the

weeds. I wonder now, if eating the peas and baking the spuds later on, will show me a new set of muscles to ache?"

Molly was talking to herself. She had no one else to talk to now that her three boys were in the Navy, and her daughter had joined the Waves. She had tried to hire a team to plow up the lot and then

*Panhandle Pete Never Suspected the Part He Was to
Play in the War Effort*

disc and cultivate. But everyone wanted a team for the same purpose and teamsters had to be wooed. Molly Reagan was a widow, but she was wooing no man. She had gone to work with a shovel and turned the sod over. And good sod it was. However, the acre of late spuds she had planned on must be given up. No woman could spade up that much soil, now that the weeds and the bugs were moving in on the fresh growing stuff.

She sighed every time she looked at the acre. Not only would a spud crop produce food, badly needed in the shipyard areas, but the extra money would come in handy.

"And a fine day it is," Molly reflected the moment the kinks in her back stopped bothering her. Mount Rainier stood boldly a few miles distant, its snowfields and glaciers dazzling in the sunlight. Bold sweeps of timber covered the lower mountains, benches and ridges. Everything was green and fresh. The last two days had been warm and things were popping up.

Molly's bush peas were a half-inch out of the ground. Tomorrow she would prepare the ground for the tomatoes—exposing it to the air and sunlight. She went into the house, changed her clothes, got the evening meal, cleaned up the kitchen, then sat down to listen to the radio. When the ball game broadcast ended Molly turned in.

The crowing of the Rhode Island Red rooster awakened her. First she put over the coffee, then she looked out, confident the peas had grown a quarter-inch during the night.

They were gone!

That is, almost gone.

Two Chinese pheasant roosters were eating the delicate green shoots. Molly Reagan blazed with fury. "Why you—" she began, then choked and groped for adequate words to express her feelings. There were none. Her first impulse was to go after them with a broom, then she realized they would either fly or run, es-

caping with ease. Tomorrow they would come back again.

She had a better thought. She ran upstairs to Jim's room. His twelve-gauge shotgun stood in a gun case where he had left it. She had shot it a few times, at tin cans, to give the boys a laugh. Now she was full of business. She opened it and looked through the bore. It was clear. She slipped a shell into the chamber.

"It's pot-shooting," she reflected as she opened the window a crack and aimed at the birds. "And it isn't sporting, but this is war and peas are food. Now just get closer together. That's it! Now—"

"Crack-wow!" The gun kicked and Molly's ears began ringing, but she peered eagerly at the targets. The shot had patterned beautifully. The pheasants hadn't moved. Then it was she recalled a number of things.

"I can get life for this. First, I'm in the Rainier National Park game reserve. Next, it's the closed season on pheasants. Also, I'm hunting without a license. Somebody will've heard that gun. It sounded like a cannon, what with the air being still, and all," she mused. "Well, as the poet says, I might as well have the game as the name."

She imagined people for miles around would be looking at her modest clearing. She put on an apron, a big one, pulled shoes over her bare feet and stepped outside. A few quick strides brought her to the pheasants. "My lord," she exclaimed, "look at the feathers! They would have to fly about."

She pretended to be looking at the peas as she slipped the birds under her apron then achieved what she hoped was nonchalance on the return to the house. She picked the pheasants and burned the feathers, ate her breakfast, hurried outside and gathered up the feathers blowing about. "I guess I wouldn't make a good criminal," she said, "I panic too easily. I was all thumbs gathering those feathers."

At noon, Joe Lynch, a neighbor,

stopped. "Didn't I hear shooting this morning, Molly?" he asked.

"Yes, I heard it too," Molly answered.

"Somebody knocked off a pheasant," Joe continued, "because a gentle breeze came up a few minutes later and I smelled burned feathers."

"So'd I," Molly said.

"The game warden heard, and called me on the phone," Joe explained. "I told him I wasn't doing any shooting. It might be a good idea if you et the evidence and burned the bones. Otherwise he'll take it away from you."

PETE SUDDRETH, the game warden, arrived in mid-afternoon. He found Molly in her garden, replanting the pea area. Molly was filled with indignation and pheasant. To this was added a touch of worry as the warden picked up several feathers she'd missed. "I kinda thought you were the guilty party," he said. "I guess I'll have to take you in, Mrs. Reagan."

"What're you talking about?" Molly demanded.

"Shooting pheasant," he said. "Here you are planting pea seeds. Like as not the pheasants et 'em, and you lost your temper. And here's a feather knocked out by a shot. See, there's a trace of lead on it. Anything you say will be used against you. We got to enforce the law, Mrs. Reagan."

"Mr. Suddreth," Molly retorted, "now I'll talk, and just you try to use what I say against me. It'll be a boomerang. The pheasants ate my peas. Food needed for the war. So I ate the pheasants. Now, if you want to take me in for trial, just hop to it."

"If that's the way you feel about it," the warden said, "I'll sure accommodate you."

"Okay," Molly continued. "My trial comes up, and you know what?" She answered her own query. "I'll demand a jury of my peers. And if ten out of

twelve of said peers haven't broken their backs over victory gardens, then patriotism in these parts is below par. And do you know what kind of a verdict victory garden jurors would return. "NOT GUILTY!" Molly concluded with a roar. "And one more thing. Everybody knows that Pete Suddreth hates to lose a case. The next move is yours."

Pete Suddreth scratched his head. He was a logical man. He loved to get convictions, but he knew when he was out-foxed. Molly Reagan would have public opinion, if not the strict letter of the law, on her side.

As a result of Molly's putting it up to the warden, cold turkey, she ate cold fried pheasant that evening.

Standing in the fringe of the forest, Panhandle Pete, the buck deer that hung around Longmires, in Rainier National Park, took due notice of proceedings. The shotgun blast hadn't frightened him. He had heard stages backfire as they came down the grade from Paradise Valley. He was used to people, and was constantly bumming them for cigarettes.

Within the week, Pete, having a zest for fresh, young green things, had poked his head through a window in the Park ranger's cabin and eaten the potted plants growing on a sunny shelf. Ranger Buck Seaton's wife had given Pete a fine going over with a broom, and he was avoiding the area. Later, when instinct told him things had calmed down, he would return.

At dawn, ten days after the potted plant incident, Pete thrust his beautifully antlered head over Molly Reagan's fence and gazed speculatively at the rows of growing things. He sniffed. "Nice people," he thought, "they've put the eats down on the ground, and in orderly rows. All I have to do is start at one end and finish at the other. How long has this been going on? This is what comes of hanging around Longmires all the time. Well, kid, what are you waiting for?"

He started in on the lettuce. Now he

had eaten lettuce on many occasions—scraps from lunches left by the tourists in the park. But such lettuce was nothing like this—glistening with dew and tender as a lover's kiss. The potato tops weren't bad, either, but after sampling a dozen plants, Pete finished up the lettuce and went after the cabbages.

"Good," he thought, "but there aren't enough of them. A deer has to clean out a row to get a real taste."

There was a good reason. Molly Reagan had transplanted them the day before. Pete was testing the beet tops, small as they were, when Molly awakened.

Day was breaking and the rooster was crowing lustily. It was shortly after five o'clock and Molly turned over for another forty winks, when she remembered the garden. "Like as not there'll be pheasants scratching out the pea seeds," she reflected. "I suppose I'll be arrested if I shoot 'em. Wonder where I could get a silencer for a shotgun, or—a bow and arrow might turn the trick."

She rubbed her eyes and stepped to the window, then she fairly leaped for the shotgun. "Panhandle Pete—I know you!" She opened the window, aimed, but didn't pull the trigger. Pete regarded her innocently. "No, I can't do it. A pheasant is a bird, but a deer is more'n just a deer. Anyway, shooting Pete would be a hanging offense. All the tourists in the country would be after my scalp. But —my garden!"

She wanted to cry. Only last night she had resisted the impulse to pick a few lettuce leaves to see what they tasted like. In the end she had concluded it wasn't right to destroy several tiny plants, which in a few weeks would be forty or fifty times their present size. "It would be wasting food," she had told herself.

"Pheasants and deer eat the stuff before it really is started," she mused, "can't get anyone to plow that acre for the spuds. Can't even hire a boy to help me. I don't know the answer. I might fence things in

with chicken wire, but that's rationed. Anyway, the birds would fly in."

Coffee had often helped her solve her problems. She yelled at Pete, watched him retreat, then started the fire in the kitchen range. She checked on her ration card and decided to go all out this morning—three cups.

The first two laid the foundation, but the third gave her the needed lift and her Irish mind started sparking. An idea came out of a clear sky.

"No," she told herself, "you've got to be practical. It can't be done. Still, Molly how do you know it can't be done until you've tried. On the other hand, you might be killed in the trying."

She viewed the wreckage of her garden, then struggled with her temper again. Panhandle Pete was beyond the fence, eyeing her with misgivings. "All I hope is," Molly said, "—is that you can't read my mind."

She repaired some damage and wrote off the remainder as a total loss. She lit a cigarette, but didn't inhale. She had never got around to really smoking, and was afraid it might make her sick if she actually inhaled. Panhandle Pete sniffed the tobacco aroma, and bit by bit desire overcame instinctive caution. He cleared the fence easily—a beautiful and graceful sight—and approached with hope in his heart.

"Have one—darling," Molly invited. She applied sarcasm to the last word.

Pete chewed down the cigarette. It was old—from a carton overlooked by her departing boys—but it wasn't bad. When Molly sauntered around the house Pete followed. She made her way to the barn. Its original purpose had been almost forgotten. Part of it served as a garage; part as storage space and the rest, including one stall, was more or less neglected.

MOLLY scattered half a dozen cigarettes along the bottom of a manger. Panhandle Pete lost all sense of caution at

the sight. He lowered his head, deftly licking up two of them. And then it happened. A rope went deftly around his neck and as he hurled his head backwards, it tightened. "There, my beautifully horned friend," she said, "I've got you where I want you. I can't eat you, brother. In fact I don't want to eat you. But I can make you pay, and pay, and pay."

Pete fought furiously, his sharp front hooves shredding the manger boards and splintering the floor. He snorted angrily, and at times his eyes rolled back in fury. She left food and water in the manger and departed. "You can think this over," she told him, "and then I'll make the next move."

Suddreth called that evening. "Looking for vension, I suppose," Molly tartly suggested. "Well, Panhandle Pete ruined my garden, but I didn't shoot him. After all——" She shrugged.

"I imagine that you felt like it," the game warden admitted, "but even a jury of victory gardeners wouldn't have freed you on that charge. Where did you last see him?"

"He was sniffing around my property the last I saw him," Molly answered truthfully enough.

"He's missing," the warden said, "and I'm hunting him."

"You know how deer are," Molly said, "here today, gone tomorrow. And there's plenty of forest to roam in. Pete could disappear for days at a time."

"Pete could," the warden agreed, "but he wouldn't. His habits are fixed. He likes civilization. He likes to loaf and live on the fat of the land."

"In other words," Molly suggested, "Pete isn't contributing his share to the war effort?"

"Well," Suddreth said uncertainly, "of course—a deer——" He laughed and continued the quest.

Molly worked most of the night, with frequent trips to the barn to make careful checks on what she was doing. She turned

in at three o'clock and slept until seven. She awakened chuckling. "I don't know what's going to happen, but I think it's going to be a lot of fun."

Suddreth dropped in late in the afternoon. Molly beat him to the draw. "Seen anything of Panhandle Pete?" she asked.

"No. Nobody's seen him."

"He's got into bad company, like as not," Molly suggested. "Maybe he's run away from home."

"It isn't a laughing matter," the warden grumbled. "People with vegetable gardens can get mighty mad. Somebody might've knocked him off. I ain't forgetting there's a meat shortage."

"I couldn't eat him," Molly said, "and I'm too tired to dig a grave. Let me know what you find out."

AT ELEVEN o'clock that night when most people were asleep Molly Reagan hung a pressure gasoline lamp in the barn. Under its white blaze the interior was as light as day. "This, Pete," she said picking up a heavy object, "is a collar. It goes around the neck."

The buck snorted and tried to fight off the object that she dropped across his neck. She buckled the open ends securely, careful to avoid the tossing horns. "This is the rest of the harness," she said. "These long straps are called tugs. They are for pulling. And this business I'm putting around your nose tells you which way I want you to go. We won't bother with that yet. There'll be too many other problems all happening at once."

She herded the deer outside. When he bolted, the tugs stopped him with a jolt. "The ends are fastened to a rope that's hooked onto a stump, darlin'," she said. "If you can pull that stump out I'll turn you loose."

Panhandle Pete made several lunges and went sprawling. He reared on his hind legs and pawed the air, then came down, driving his hooves angrily into the sod. When he relaxed, Molly quickly hooked

the harness to a cultivator. The teeth were set, and promptly dug into the soil at the first pull. Feeling something give Pete took on new hope. He headed for the fence, with Molly holding the reins while she stood on the cultivator to give it weight.

Suddenly the deer turned, but Molly stayed with it, and again the teeth dug in. Under the light of a pale moon, the cultivator covered various sections of the place, including the victory garden.

In time, Pete stopped fighting and dragged the cultivator steadily enough. Molly headed him to the barn, led him to the stall and removed the harness. "You're sweating, darlin'," she said, "and so am I. But we're getting places."

Early the next morning Molly raked over hoof marks wherever they were visible. Suddreth might be along and ask questions. When she looked at the strange pattern the cultivator had left she felt most anyone would be entitled to ask questions concerning the operator's sanity. In the world's history of farming, no cultivator had ever followed so erratic a course.

Panhandle Pete put up a fight that evening when she harnessed him again. He kicked, bucked, snorted and tried to slash her with his horns. When he calmed down Molly gave him a couple of cigarettes. "If you'll just try to understand," she said, "we'll get along fine. You ate up stuff that would be food in a few months. Our soldiers need it. Perhaps not the stuff I raise, but if I eat what I raise then I'm not dipping into the national supply. Now we'll try the cultivator again."

Pete quieted down and permitted himself to be guided when he was convinced he couldn't run away from the contraption. Molly stopped at the acre of unplowed ground.

She hitched up to a light plow and started in. It turned over beautifully, the plow cutting through fern roots and knocking loose an occasional small stone.

When she had gone around once, she stopped and let the buck catch his breath.

She gave him a cigarette and when he had chewed it up, she touched him lightly with the end of a stick. He snorted and tried to run. The plow went deeper and he quieted down again.

After a half hour's work she said, "I guess this is enough for tonight. With luck, I'll get in my late spud crop."

Molly fed Pete, rubbed him down and otherwise rewarded him. He lashed out a couple of times to let her know he had lost none of his high spirits, then resumed his eating.

A neighbor dropped in on Molly Reagan the following afternoon. "Ah, haaa!" she said, "you've been holding out on me, Molly. You hired a team to plow your ground. Well? What's his name?"

"You know how teaming is, Aggie," Molly said, "every teamster is booked up to here, plus a waiting list. I made a little deal. But the party positively refuses to take on any more. In fact if I don't handle him carefully he may leave me in the lurch at any time."

"These temperamental teamsters," Aggie said. "Of course, it was too much to hope, but you can't blame a woman for asking. You'll plant spuds, of course. They're going to be high this year, in my opinion."

The woman departed, moving slowly down the dirt road in an ancient car. Seven miles from the Reagan clearing she met the game warden. "Oh, Pete," she called, "you get around, do you know where I can hire a teamster for a day?"

"If I did," Pete Suddreth answered, "I'd hire him myself. Say, you haven't seen anything of a tame buck deer, have you?"

"Not a sign," Aggie replied. "I'd give a pretty to know where Molly Reagan got her team."

"Her team?"

"Yes. She made a plowing deal. Part's done already," Aggie said. "But the party wasn't taking on any more work."

It had been Suddreth's experience that sometimes people will go out of their way to do a favor for a game warden. Even an

up-stage teamster might be willing to plow a half-acre for him.

He planned to call on Molly about dinner time, but was delayed. It was ten o'clock when he drove past her place. He wouldn't have stopped but he saw a crack of light in the barn and concluded that she was up and about.

Molly was both up and about. She recognized the game warden's car by a peculiar engine knock, and she said, "Heavens to Betsy, he's back." Pete had almost reached the limits of the acre, and when he stopped, Molly kept him going. "Get into the brush, out of sight," she muttered. "We don't want him seeing this layout."

Pete stopped when completely hidden, then he turned his head. The game warden stopped his car, took out a five-battery flashlight to light his way, and stepped through the gate. He closed it behind him, then said, "She might've plowed up the old path. Better size up the situation before I step into a hole and break my neck."



He turned the light around, found the path, then the white finger moved uncertainly beyond the path to the plowed ground. Quite by accident the beam lifted and flooded the woods. Branches and leaves completely concealed Molly, Pete and the plow, but the buck's eyes reflected the light, forming twin, luminous pools.

"Well, I'm a son of a gun," Suddreth explained. Any game warden or hunter would have recognized the flaming pools as a deer's eyes. Their distance apart, and position above the ground was positive proof. "Panhandle Pete, sure as hell." He headed straight for the buck. Molly Reagan, who had had no experience in shining deer couldn't understand why Pete was visible. There was a good, thick screen between them.

"Hello, Pete Suddreth," Molly said, stepping into the open. "And what're the likes of you doing on a night like this?"

"Keeping my eye on things."

"You're on private property," she reminded him.

"There's a deer in that thicket," he said, "and I've a right to look him over. It might be Panhandle Pete."

"Or his son, Chiseler, or any one of a dozen buck deer, or none at all," she said.

"I have a right to——"

"If you catch me or anyone else breaking the law, then maybe you've the right to step onto private property and act," Molly said, "but I'm not shooting deer. I'm just minding my own business on my own place."

"What kind of business?"

"None of your business," she answered. "Now stir your feet and quit poking your nose into my affairs. Of course, if you get a warrant——"

"I'm going to check on that buck deer," he declared.

"Only with a search warrant—if there is a buck deer."

"There is, I saw his eyes. The light reflected them." He started to brush past, but Molly blocked the way. At the same time she drew a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and threw them in Pete's general direction.

Luck was with her. The pack cleared the thicket and fell into a clearing beyond. A few moments later Pete caught the odor of tobacco. He acted instantly. The plow

made a little noise, but his eyes, now turned the other way, no longer reflected the light. "He's gone," Molly said, "if—there was a deer in the first place."

"I'll get a warrant," the warden declared. "There's something rotten and it isn't in Denmark."

"And that's where you're wrong," Molly said, "the Nat-zees are in Denmark."

The warden stamped away. He knew the law.

And so did Molly. There was something about holding wild animals in captivity. She half expected he would come snooping back from a different direction. Evidently he realized she would be prepared for any such move, because he drove away.

MOLLY headed Pete back onto the acre. Under the moonlight, she plowed hour after hour, with frequent rests for the deer. When she came to a hard spot she would say, "I'll break that up with a pick. There isn't much of it." Then she would plow around it.

The job was finished at four o'clock. She gave Pete a fine rub-down, fed him and stopped it off with a pack of cigarettes. She turned in and slept soundly until nine o'clock. As she was having her belated breakfast coffee the telephone rang. It was a neighbor.

"Tim just telephoned out," she said, "and he said the game warden was in town and got a search warrant. He's going over your place with a fine tooth comb. I thought you'd like to know."

Tim was the woman's husband. "Thanks, darlin'," Molly said. "It is a good neighbor you are. And don't worry. Suddreth can search and be darned to him. I wished his name wasn't Pete, though. Pete happens to be the name of a very good friend of mine—a guy who helped me with my plowing, in fact."

Molly hung up. She lost no time in

hurrying to the barn. Panhandle Pete regarded her curiously, as usual. She fed him lightly, then gave him her last pack of cigarettes. "Now, my fine bucko," she said, "you're going to be surprised. She removed the rope that secured the buck to the manger and opened the door. "Hurry up, you chump," she said, "the warden's coming. I hear his car."

Panhandle Pete stepped arrogantly from the barn and looked over the situation. He leaned forward, half expecting to feel the tug of the plow or cultivator. He had dragged both during the night. Suddenly he realized he was free. His legs fairly exploded as he got under way.

He crossed the remains of the garden. There were several tender young plants that he had missed. The dew was still on the leaves, but he wanted none of it. He was a panhandler and he did not believe in toiling nor spinning.

He gathered himself and cleared the fence easily. Molly Reagan's place had loomed large in his plans a few days ago, but he would shun it in the future. If hanging around people's gardens meant hard labor then people who owned gardens were to be avoided.

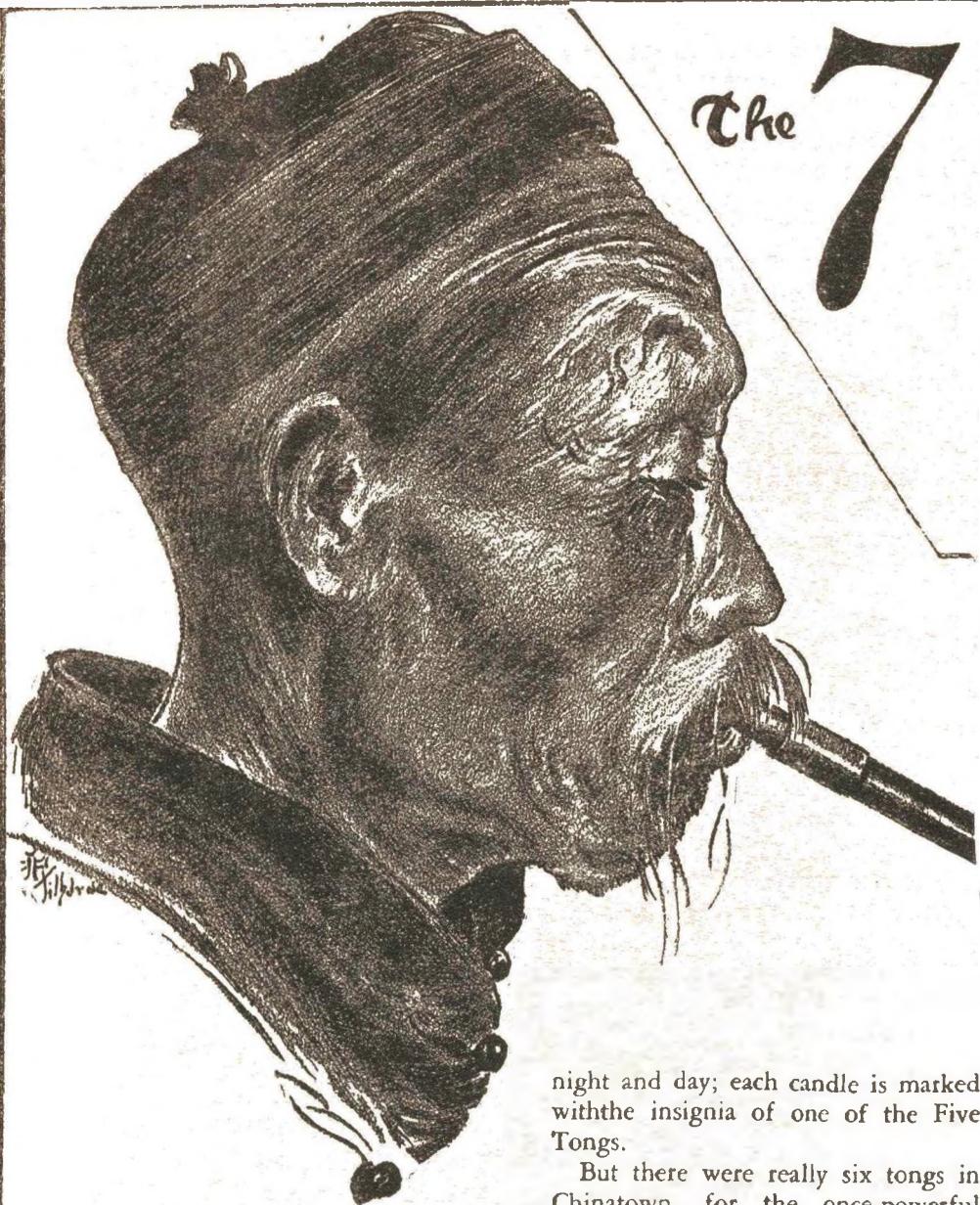
He crossed the road a hundred yards ahead of the game warden. Suddreth recognized him, but nevertheless he stopped and stalked over to Molly Reagan who stood, with her hands on her hips, looking at her freshly turned acre.

"I have a warrant—" Suddreth began.

"Good. Now search to your heart's content," Molly invited. "It's just that I want things done right."

"What was that deer doing on your place?" Suddreth demanded. "I'll bet you had him tied up in the barn all the time."

"Oh, him!" Molly exclaimed. "Yeah, he's been hanging around here, but what of it? Can't a gentleman bum a cigarette or two from a lady, and help her with her plowing, without causing a lot of fuss?"



The 7

ONE of the most famous sights in Chinatown is the Lamp of Peace, which hangs in the Hall of Ancestors at the Plum Blossom Joss House. It is a magnificent, jade-encrusted lantern in the Ming style, with five tall candles that burn

night and day; each candle is marked with the insignia of one of the Five Tongs.

But there were really six tongs in Chinatown, for the once-powerful Mandarin Tong still survived, although time had reduced its silken scroll of membership to a mere seven names.

The Mandarins were not swaggering fighters, like the Hung Teng tongs—the dreaded Red Lamps; nor did they boast impressive headquarters with gilded doorways and lac-

Frightened Mandarins

By Walter C. Brown

Author of "The One-Eyed Mask," "The Camphorwood Chest," etc.

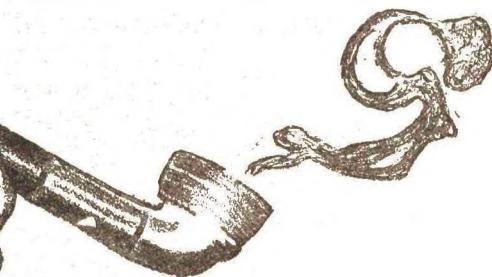
.... *Frightened of the Blue Death, the Poison the Police Surgeon Said Didn't Exist*



quered walls, like the great Tsin Tien Tong.

The meeting-place of the Mandarins was a single room on the second floor of the Little Shanghai Restaurant—meetings marked by a brooding and rather sinister atmosphere as each Mandarin surveyed the other with the sly, slantwise glance of secret enemies.

Sergeant Dennis O'Hara, the famed



"Sah-jin" of the Chinatown Squad, having a pungent sense of humor, always referred to the Mandarin Tong as "the Graveyard Club." And he called those strangely uneasy meetings of the Seven Mandarins "the Death Watch."

But both these phrases of O'Hara's were no more than literal truth, for the founding charter of the Mandarins specified that if the membership ever declined until only five names remained on the scrolls, the Tong should be disbanded, and the long-cumulated surplus in the Mandarin treasury be divided equally among the five fortunate survivors.

The exact amount of that surplus was a secret known only to the Seven Mandarins and to Lee Shu the Chinese banker, but rumor whispered that it was a truly solid sum, so much so that each of the Lucky Five could live out his years in the splendor of a genuine red-button mandarin.

But this stroke of good fortune waited only for five of the Mandarins—and they were seven. Two of them must pass into the Shadow-World to join their honorable ancestors before this fabled "Bone-Money" treasure could be broken up and divided. Who, then, would be the unlucky two?

Who? That was the question the Seven Mandarins pondered uneasily as they watched each other and waited for the Lords of Destiny to set the Wheel of Fortune spinning.

"There's dynamite in that Mandarin set-up," Sergeant O'Hara remarked several times. "They meet and play fan-tan and wait for each other to die. Some day, one of 'em's going to get impatient for his share of the money, and then hell will break loose."

A very shrewd guess on the sergeant's part, for on a certain moonless night a significant event took place in a well-known house on Lantern Court, and the black shadow of Yo Fei, God of Sudden Death, struck chill fear into the Seven Mandarins.

On this fateful night, a silent-footed thief broke into the house of Meng Tai the apothecary and stole a small crystal bottle containing a poison-powder known as Blue Death.

This Blue Death, as the greatly agitated

Meng Tai explained to Sergeant O'Hara, is made from the blossoms of a certain creeping vine found high up in the rocky gorges of the Yangtze River. A few grains of the powder is valuable as a medicine, but a small pinch of it makes a deadly poison.

"Was there much of this stuff in the bottle?" O'Hara asked.

"Enough to send half a hundred Sons of Han to their ancestors!" Meng Tai wailed.

"Damn!" O'Hara swore fervently. "That puts us in a hell of a spot—we sit around waiting for somebody to be murdered!" He paced to and fro angrily, then asked abruptly. "What are the symptoms of Blue Death poisoning?"

THE slant-eyed apothecary explained, slowly and carefully. At first the unlucky victim staggered about like one who had swallowed too much *samsu*, but unable to cry out for help, because the poison clutches at the throat like a tightening noose until the unfortunate one collapsed as his strength ebbed away. Death was a matter of only an hour or so—

"Isn't there an antidote?" O'Hara demanded.

"No, Sah-jin," Meng Tai replied, shaking his head sadly.

"Well, Meng, spread the news around—warn everybody about this stolen poison—post some kind of a notice about it on the bulletin board at Long Jon's Tea House."

"Will do!" Meng Tai assured, and Sergeant O'Hara took his departure, a thoughtful frown knotting his brows as he groped in vain for a method of heading off the stealthy terror that lay in wait for some unsuspecting Son of Han.

But several days passed, and the Blue Death failed to strike. Meng Tai had spread the news of the robbery far and wide, and had posted words of warning in large writing on the south wall of Long Jon's Tea House, where the crowds on

Mulberry Lane could not fail to see it.

More days passed, and still no Son of Han had heard the black fist of Yo Fei come knocking at his door in a sharp summons to the Shadow-World. Indeed, there were some who scoffed openly at Meng Tai's sombre notice—notably Cham Kee, the *tu-chun* of the Seven Mandarins.

Sergeant O'Hara was sitting alone at dinner one evening in the Little Shanghai Restaurant, when he saw Cham Kee and his brother Cham Loh come down the narrow side staircase that led to the meeting-room of the Mandarins on the floor above.

In height, weight and features the two Chams resembled each other almost as closely as twins. But Cham Loh, the elder, always wore a yellow *shaam* and a pair of dark glasses, for he suffered from an eye-ailment that left him half-blind. Cham Kee, the younger, was wearing his customary blue *shaam* and the blood-jade ring that marked him as a tong chief.

"*Ala wah, Sah-jin!*" Cham Kee called out, and guided his brother toward O'Hara's table.

"*Wah!*" O'Hara replied. "Are the Mandarins meeting tonight?"

"No, Sah-jin," Cham Kee replied. "We come here to find my brother's word-glasses he leave behind at last meeting." He chuckled as he held up a pair of thick-lensed reading spectacles. "Two-three time every week he lose them somewhere. I think I fix them on chain around Cham Loh's neck."

O'Hara's eye was caught by the ornate, long-stemmed Chinese pipe in Cham Kee's hand. Bands of engraved *fei-tsui* jade circled the long bamboo stem, and the solid silver bowl was mounted in a block of rare moon-jade.

"That's quite a fancy piper you've got there, Cham Kee," O'Hara complimented.

"Aye!" the *tu-chun* beamed, holding it up proudly. "By Tao, there is no finer smoking-pipe in all Chinatown."

Behind his dark glasses, Cham Loh's eyes twinkled. "It is such Number

One pipe, Sah-jin, that my brother fears to smoke it, lest it become stained and dulled. Of what use is a pipe that is never smoked?"

"Not so, brother!" the *tu-chun* grinned amiably. "Is it fitting that a dish of Ming porcelain be used for plain boiled rice? I seek for a Number One tobacco worthy of my Number One pipe."

They all laughed then, and presently Cham Loh said to O'Hara, "Sah-jin, have you found out the night-thief who steal the Blue Death from Meng Tai's house in Lantern Court?"

"No, not yet," O'Hara answered. "He got away with the poison powder, all right, but if he tries to use it he'll be putting a rope around his own neck. He can strike once, but that'll be his finish. We're waiting for him!"

A bland smile crept into Sham Kee's face. "Maybe you going wait long time, Sah-jin."

O'Hara threw a sharp glance at the *tu-chun*. "What do you mean, Cham?"

Cham Kee's smile widened. "Sah-jin, since Meng Tai cried out in a loud voice about the stolen Blue Death, his trade in pills and potions shows great increase. If any Son of Han suffers now from the smallest pain-devil he rushes with all speed to Lantern Court, shaking with fear that he is seized by the Blue Death."

"I see," O'Hara mused. "You think it was a fake robbery—that Meng Tai is just throwing a scare into everybody to increase his business?"

Cham Kee laughed softly. "I say nothing against Meng Tai, but I observe that his purse grows fat as a summer melon, so that he has wine-sauce for his meat, and tiger-bone wine for his drink, and is given the Number One place at the fan-tan table in every House of Chance!"

After the brothers Cham had taken their departure, O'Hara sat in deep thought, turning Cham Kee's words over in his mind. Was Meng Tai's tale of the stolen Blue Death only a publicity stunt, Chinese

style? Was there, even, such a thing as this Blue Death powder? O'Hara had described it to Doc Stanage, and the police surgeon had given a scornful snort of disbelief—

"Well. Time holds the key to every lock, as the Chinks say," O'Hara reminded himself as he stepped out into the gathering darkness of Mulberry Lane.

Later that evening Sergeant O'Hara found himself in Long Sword Alley, a narrow thoroughfare given over to Chinese wine-shops and gambling *bongs*. O'Hara made it a point to drop in at these places every night for a quick glance around, but he was shrewd enough never to visit them at a set time, nor in fixed order.

On this night's rounds he stopped first at the Black Peacock — then the Happy Door—then the Singing Turtle, which was notorious as a gathering place of the swaggering Red Lamp tongsters.

Sergeant O'Hara's lips tightened in a frosty little smile at the sudden silence which fell upon the slant-eyed patrons of the Singing Turtle at his appearance in the doorway.

"*Mukee-kai, Sah-jin!*" the beady-eyed proprietor greeted in a very loud voice, whereupon the lights in the back room went out suddenly, followed by the scurrying retreat of slippers footsteps through the rear door.

"One of these nights, Charlie," O'Hara said to the grinning proprietor, "I'll come in the back way, and break up that fan-tan game of yours for keeps."

"No catchee fan-tan my place," Charlie replied blandly. "Me savvy Rice Face Law."

The sergeant's glance flicked over the room, and came to a surprised halt at a mild-featured Oriental sitting alone at a table near the teakwood counter.

"*Ala wah, Ah Kim,*" O'Hara said pleasantly, for the yellow man was one of his oldest friends in Chinatown.

But to his surprise, Ah Kim's reply was an insulting "*Yang kwei tzu!*" as he ges-

tured swiftly with his left hand and then spat over his shoulder to make the "finger curse" doubly effective.

A touch of angry color came into O'Hara's cheek as he heard little snickering laughs break out here and there among the lounging Red Lamp tongsters, delighted to see the dreaded Blue Coat Sah-jin in danger of losing face.

O'Hara walked over to Ah Kim's table and picked up the thick-bottomed glass that held Kim's drink. He swirled the pale white liquid around in the glass, sniffed at it, then put it back on the table.

"Better stick to rice-wine, Kim," O'Hara advised in level tones. "This Chinese whiskey is too high-powered for you. You are drunk."

The yellow man swayed to his feet, scowling. "Ah Kim take no order from Rice Face man!" he snarled belligerently, and lurched over to the counter, banging his glass down noisily as he shouted "Make full, Charlie!"

"No more, Charlie!" O'Hara countermanded, pushing the glass aside.

"*Wang put tau!*" Ah Kim cursed, suddenly snatching a double-edged knife from his sleeve. As the bright blade glittered in the light, startled Red Lamps hastily backed away from the dangerous area.

"Put that knife away, Kim!" O'Hara ordered, standing up straight, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the yellow man. For a moment they stood measuring each other, then O'Hara took one step forward—and another—

Ah Kim fell back, pace by pace, then stepped swiftly behind a table, standing at bay, fiercely clutching his weapon, his noisy breathing plainly audible in the hushed room.

Without taking his eyes from the flashing steel, O'Hara grasped the table and hurled it aside, stepping back just far enough to let Ah Kim's furious thrust slash harmlessly through empty air.

Before Ah Kim could regain his balance, O'Hara closed in, seizing Kim's knife-arm

and pinning him tight against the counter. Then O'Hara's right hand cupped itself under Ah Kim's chin, slowly forcing his head back.

"Drop that knife—quick—or I'll break your back!" O'Hara warned, holding him helplessly across the sharp edge of the counter as he increased the pressure.

AH KIM made gurgling noises in his throat, and the bright steel clattered to the floor. O'Hara eased the punishing hold, but he did not release his prisoner. Taking a firm grip of the yellow man's *shaam*, he pushed him across the room, kicked open the front door, and thrust him out into the street.

"Get on home, Kim, and sleep it off," O'Hara growled. "What in hell's the idea, trying to pull a knife on me? If it was anybody else, I'd run 'em in. Go on, now—beat it, before you get into trouble."

Ah Kim stood on the pavement, swaying unsteadily on his feet and drawing deep, hissing breaths as he glared at the Blue Coat Sah-jin.

O'Hara turned on his heel and went back inside the Singing Turtle, where the excited chattering died away abruptly on his return. He picked up Ah Kim's knife, turning it over curiously in his hand before thrusting it into his pocket.

"How many drinks did Ah Kim have, Charlie?" he queried.

"Only one drink, Sah-jin," the proprietor replied.

"Then he must have been half drunk when he got here," O'Hara declared. "He couldn't get that potted on only one drink."

"Ah Kim never ask for whiskey before," Charlie remarked. "Always he drink nothing more strong than Shao-hsing wine. If I know whiskey make him *gila*, I not sell it to him—*Hai-eeeeee!*"

The high-pitched scream was wrenched from the startled proprietor as the front window of the wine-shop exploded with a jangling crash that showered slivers of broken glass all over the floor.

O'Hara ran for the street, shielding his face against flying glass as a second missile from outside demolished what was left of the Singing Turtle's front window.

"Kim!" O'Hara shouted angrily, rushing across the pavement toward the drunken Oriental, who had just pried up another loose brick for hurling. He grabbed the yellow man, and while they were wrestling for possession of the brick, Charlie came bounding out, brandishing a stone wine-bottle and screaming "*Tsai kwei tzu!*" as he lashed out at Ah Kim's head.

O'Hara saved Ah Kim from the furious blow by jerking him aside. "Lay off, Charlie!" he snapped. "I'll handle this."

"He break my window!" the enraged proprietor screamed. "You take him poh-*li*ss *yamen* chop-chop—keep him lock up plenty long time!"

"Calm down," O'Hara said, tightening his grip on Ah Kim. "You'll get the money for your broken window."

"Not so! I pay nothing for window!" Ah Kim shouted.

"You'll pay for window—not go poh-*li*ss *yamen*!" Ah Kim snarled, struggling and twisting like a madman until O'Hara subdued him with a relentless wristlock. The Sergeant's police whistle brought a squad car rolling to the scene. Ah Kim entered the car without further resistance, and O'Hara squeezed in beside him.

"Precinct!" O'Hara ordered briefly, slamming the door.

AS the car started up, Ah Kim stuck out his head and yelled "*Hsiao! Ching!*" as parting insults to the already furious proprietor of the Singing Turtle.

At the Precinct, Ah Kim stood sullenly before the railing as the desk sergeant entered O'Hara's charge on the blotter. He had refused to answer any questions or make any statement beyond a snarling "Ah Kim will pay nothing!"

"I'll talk to you in the morning, Kim," O'Hara said as the turnkey led him off to the cell-block. "A night behind bars may

change your mind." But Ah Kim shuffled out without even turning his head.

The desk sergeant looked at the blotter. "Ah Kim? Isn't he the same Chink you got out of a tight jam with one of the Five Tongs a couple months ago?"

O'Hara nodded.

"Well, that's the way with these yellow devils," the desk sergeant remarked. "You go out of your way to do one of 'em a favor, and all the thanks you get is a knife in the back."

"Forget about the knife," O'Hara said. "Ah Kim didn't know what he was doing. He was all hopped up with that white Chinese whiskey. The damn stuff looks just like water, but it'll blow your hat off."

"This must be a Chink holiday," the desk sergeant said. "Officer Burke brought in another Slant-eye a little while ago, also loaded to the tars."

"What was his name?" O'Hara asked.

The desk sergeant flipped over a page of the blotter. "Dai Yao," he replied. "Lives on Pagoda Street. Know him?"

"Dai Yao!" O'Hara exclaimed. "Say, that's a queer coincidence! Dai Yao is one of the Seven Mandarins—and so is Ah Kim!"

"Well, the Mandarins must've had a wet meeting tonight," the desk sergeant grinned. "This Dai Yao is in worse shape than Ah Kim. He really had a load aboard—couldn't walk—couldn't even talk right. He kept making noises like a sick frog. Burke thought he was trying to say something, but all we could make out was 'eng eye—eng eye—'"

"Holy Cats!" O'Hara exploded. "Where in hell was Burke's brains! Dai Yao isn't drunk—he's been poisoned! Poisoned! He was trying to call out for *Meng Tai*—*Meng Tai* the Chinese doctor! Quick! What's the cell number?"

"We didn't put him in a cell," the desk sergeant explained hastily. "He passed out cold on us, so we carried him into the quad-room. Doc Stanage is in there now, working on him."

O'Hara strode down the corridor and burst into the squad-room. Dai Yao lay stretched out on a rattan settee, looking remarkably like a dead Chinaman, while Doc Stanage, the stocky, red-faced police surgeon, hovered over him, frowning and visibly perturbed.

"Sergeant!" Stanage barked, turning about at O'Hara's hasty entrance. "I'm afraid we've got a hospital case here. They told me this Chinaman was drunk—but it's more than that. Offhand, I'd say he was under the influence of some powerful drug—"

"He's been poisoned, Doc!" O'Hara cut in. "He's got a dose of a poison-powder called Blue Death."

"Blue Death!" Stanage echoed. "You mean that stuff you were telling me about—"

"Yes," O'Hara snapped. "The poison you said didn't exist. Better move fast, Doc. Meng Tai told me it causes death in about an hour."

Doc Stanage phoned the hospital for an ambulance, and while they were waiting, Officer Burke reported to the squad-room.

"Look here, Burke," O'Hara stormed angrily, "I warned you to watch out for the Blue Death. I described all the symptoms to you. So what happens? You bring Dai Yao in here and enter him on the blotter as a drunk!"

Burke's rugged face reddened. "I'm sorry, Sarge. I didn't forget. I was watchin' out for that Chink poison, but Dai Yao fooled me. I figured he was just liquored up—you could smell it on him strong enough."

"Well, what happened?" O'Hara snapped. "Why'd you run him in?"

"He came staggerin' along Pagoda Street," Burke explained, "wobblin' all over the pavement. So I stopped him. 'Better go on back home and take a sleep,' I told him. I tried to turn him around, but he kept pushin' and shovin' to get past me—"

"Naturally!" O'Hara cut in. "Dai Yao

knew he was poisoned. He was trying to get to Meng Tai in Lantern Court."

"Well, I couldn't make out what he was mumblin'," Burke declared. "Then he started swingin' at me. By that time a bunch of Chinks had gathered around to watch the fun, so I ran him in."

O'Hara stood frowning in thought. "All right, Burke. I think we'll take Dai Yao's keys and go have a look-see at his lodgings. Maybe we can find out how that poison was given to him."

Dai Yao lived in one of the little, toy-like brick houses which lined both sides of Pagoda Street. O'Hara unlocked the front door with Dai Yao's key, and they stepped into the dark, silent hallway.

"The light's still on in the back room," O'Hara remarked, and sniffed the air. "There's a queer smell, too—like hot metal."

They entered the lighted room. A chair lay overturned beside a table which held a clay flagon, a porcelain wine cup, and a dish of moon-cakes. The scorched smell came from the gas stove, where O'Hara hastily turned off the blue flames under a tea-kettle that had boiled dry, and was beginning to crackle and smoke.

O'Hara lifted the half-filled wine cup and smelled the liquor. "*Lung-shao*," he declared. "Chinese brandy."

"Lights on, gas stove going, drink half-finished," Burke said. "Dai Yao must've run out of here in a hell of a hurry."

"So would you, Burke, if you realized all of a sudden that you'd swallowed a dose of the Blue Death," O'Hara retorted. "The question is—was Dai Yao alone here at the time?"

"There's only one wine cup on the table," Burke pointed out.

"Yes, but there's the overturned chair," O'Hara replied. "Did Dai Yao just knock it over in his excitement, or did he have a fight with someone—someone who tried to prevent his running out for help?"

Burke glanced around the room. "Well, Sarge, if Dai Yao had a visitor, he must've

come in by the front door. There are bars on all these windows—good, thick bars."

"I know that," O'Hara nodded. "The bars were put up years ago. Mark Sin, the gambler, used to live in this house, before he got prosperous enough to move his fan-tan tables to Paradise Court. But poisoners usually enter by the front door, Burke. Poison is the weapon of treachery."

"But who'd want to knock off Dai Yao?" Burke argued. "He's a quiet, harmless Chink. He's got no relatives, and he's not a rich man, with a lot of cash lying around—"

O'Hara gave a grim smile. "Dai Yao is one of the Seven Mandarins."

"Oh-oh!" Burke exclaimed. "So Dai Yao belongs to the Graveyard Club, eh? It begins to add up, Sarge! One of the Mandarins gets to thinkin' it's about time that juicy cash-melon was cut up, so he pays a nice, friendly little call on Dai Yao—and puts poison in his liquor!"

"So far it's only guesswork," O'Hara replied, "but I'll string along on that theory until a better one turns up."

O'Hara sniffed again at the *lung-shao*, both in the clay flagon and in the half-emptied cup, but could detect no unusual odor. He broke up several of the moon-cakes, examining the pieces for traces of discoloration.

"All right, Burke," O'Hara said, "let's have a look at the other rooms."

They made a careful tour of the little house, but found nothing of special interest, and finally returned to the room from which Dai Yao had fled so hurriedly. O'Hara put the stopper back into the clay flagon, found an empty bottle for the *lung-shao* that remained in the wine cup, and wrapped up the moon-cakes.

"Take these back to the Precinct, Burke," he ordered. "We'll send 'em to the laboratory at Headquarters and have them analyzed."

"Okay, Sarge," Burke replied. "You're stayin' on here for a while?"

"No, I'll be leaving as soon as I lock

up," O'Hara declared. "But I've got another stop to make on the way back."

Burke left with the suspected evidence and O'Hara, having made sure that the rear door was locked and bolted, was walking back across the room when something crunched under his foot.

Looking down, he saw a little patch of crushed blue powder on the bare floor, and a name leaped into his mind. "Blue Death!" he thought. "This must be some of the stolen poison!"

Instantly he was down on his knees, brushing the powder onto a sheet of paper. And suddenly he caught sight of a similar blue patch, several feet away.

"I'll be damned!" O'Hara muttered. "I guess Burke stepped on that one, and never noticed. I wonder if there are any more around?"

Pushing the table and chair out of the way, O'Hara crouched down, running the flashlight beam across the worn floorboards. A moment later he picked up a round blue pellet about the size of a dried pea. So the poisoner had shaped the deadly powder into neat, round pills, to make it easier to handle!

O'Hara continued his search of the floor, and turned up still another pellet, lying close to the baseboard. He stood up, staring at the pair of lethal blue pills rolling about in his palm.

"Then Dai Yao *did* have a visitor tonight—the poisoner himself!" he said half-aloud. "And he was nervous about his job—so damned nervous that he spilled his blue pills all over the floor."

But at once a puzzling objection to this theory presented itself to his mind. Why, then, had Dai Yao not spoken the poisoner's name when he encountered Burke outside the house? Had the Blue Death taken so tight a grip of him by that time that he could only speak in a useless mumble?

"Well, that'll all be cleared up in jig-time if Dai Yao pulls through," O'Hara muttered. And with his dramatic new evi-

dence carefully wrapped away in an inner pocket, he left the house of Dai Yao in Pagoda Street.

Crossing Mulberry Lane, he plunged into a dark street of blank-windowed lodging houses until he arrived at the number where Ah Kim had his quarters.

O'Hara looked up with an ironic smile at the painted advertising banner dangling limply above the shabby doorway. "Probably calls itself by some fancy name, like the Priceless Haven of Heavenly Rest," he thought as he went up the brownstone steps.

The outer door was unlocked, and he stepped inside, moving quietly, but at once a slant-eyed face popped out from the depths of the hall, visibly startled at seeing a White Devil enter.

"Hai!" O'Hara called. "I'm Sergeant O'Hara of the Chinatown Squad. I want to see Ah Kim's room."

"Ah Kim not here, Sah-jin," the old Oriental answered. "He go out long time—his door is lock."

"That's all right," O'Hara said. "I've got the key."

A startled look came into the slant eyes. "Hola! Ah Kim made trouble with poh-liss?"

"Nothing to get excited about," O'Hara explained. "Ah Kim had a little too much to drink, that's all. Now show me his room—chop-chop."

"Can do," the yellow man replied, and led the way up the stairs to a room at the rear of the second floor. O'Hara turned Ah Kim's key in the lock and entered, motioning to the proprietor to remain outside.

At first glance there was no sign of disorder in Ah Kim's plainly furnished room, but O'Hara's keen glance came to a sudden stop at a large wire bird-cage hanging beside the window. He crossed to the cage, staring intently at the green-and-red-feathered parrot which lay inside, lifeless, its eyes filmed over, its sharp claws crisped, its beak stretched half open.

Poking his finger between the wires he prodded the dead bird. Then he turned around, slowly surveying every corner of the room. A stone bottle of rice wine attracted his eye, and he went over and picked it up. The bottle left a wet ring where it had been standing, but it was quite empty of liquor, yielding only a stray drop or two when O'Hara held it upside down.

Frowning, he set down the empty bottle and walked around the room, examining one thing and another. Then he went to the window, raised the sash, and circled his flashlight briefly over the back room that extended out over the kitchen of the first floor.

A dark patch of moisture on the red tin roof just under the windowsill drew his attention, and he focused the beam on it, leaning far out over the sill and sniffing until he caught the unmistakable odor of rice wine.

"Now why the devil did Ah Kim empty that bottle onto the roof?" O'Hara asked himself as he closed and locked the window. With a last look at the dead parrot, he left Ah Kim's room, locking the door behind him and pocketing the key.

The slant-eyed proprietor was waiting quietly in the hall. "You make finish, Sah-jin?" he inquired.

"Yes," O'Hara said, then asked abruptly "Did Ah Kim have any visitors tonight, either before or after he went out?"

"No, Sah-jin," was the prompt reply.

"All right," O'Hara said. "See to it that nobody gets into that room, unless I send a Blue Coat man with the key. And don't tell anyone about my visit. Savvy?"

"Me savvy," the old Chinaman answered.

SERGEANT O'HARA returned to the Precinct, where his first move was to phone Doctor Stanage at the hospital and inquire about Dai Yao's condition.

"Not much change, Sergeant," the police surgeon informed him. "He's still

unconscious, but at least he's not worse. I'm giving him a fifty-fifty chance to pull through."

Then O'Hara sent for Detective Faraday, his chief assistant, and showed him the evidence collected at Dai Yao's house—the suspected *lung-shao*, the moon-cakes and the Blue Death powder.

"Faraday, I want you to go to the hospital and stand by in Dai Yao's room in case he recovers consciousness. If he does, question him instantly. I think he must know who poisoned him—if he doesn't, he can certainly tell us who has visited him lately, and so had an opportunity to plant the poison."

After Faraday had gone O'Hara ticketed the Dai Yao evidence and made it into a package for the crime laboratory at Headquarters.

"Now for Ah Kim!" he said, opening a desk drawer and taking out the knife he had wrested from the berserk Oriental in the bar of the Singing Turtle.

Ah Kim was lying quietly on his cot in Cell 8 when the turnkey opened the cell-door for Sergeant O'Hara. The Chinaman sat up alertly, putting on a sullen scowl at sight of his visitor.

"Go away! Ah Kim not want make talk!" he shrilled. "If Rice Face Law say Ah Kim must pay money for broken window or stay thirty days in poh-liss *yamen*—Ah Kim still pay nothing!"

"Thirty days?" O'Hara repeated with a grim smile. "You tried to knife me, Kim. You can get a full year in jail for assaulting an officer."

Ah Kim's head jerked back. He blinked at O'Hara, running his tongue across dry lips. Then he braced himself, a smoldering gleam in his black eyes. "*Wah!*" he said defiantly.

For a few moments O'Hara studied him in silence. Then he reached into his pocket and held up the gleaming, double-edged knife.

"How long have you been carrying a knife, Ah Kim?"

"Carry knife long time," Ah Kim declared.

"Not this one," O'Hara contradicted. "This is a brand-new knife, with the original shine still on the blade. It's never been used, never been scoured or polished. When did you buy it, Kim—tonight?"

Ah Kim made no reply to the question, but O'Hara saw that his chance shot had struck home. Kim's black eyes had instantly turned wary, his face freezing into a blank yellow mask.

"You might just as well spill it, Kim," O'Hara said evenly. "You're not fooling me about what happened tonight at the Singing Turtle. You weren't drunk—you were just putting on an act. And why? Because you *wanted* to be arrested! You figured if you pulled a knife on me, I'd run you in. But I didn't—so you picked up a brick and smashed that window to make sure you'd be locked up!"

Ah Kim made a swift gesture. "*Tsai!* You make *gila* talk, Sah-jin."

"So I'm crazy?" O'Hara said. "All right, we'll just say you had too much to drink and it went to your head. It's your first offense, so we'll forget all about the knife and the broken window. You're free, Kim—all you have to do is walk out through that door and go on home."

But Ah Kim did not accept the invitation. He stood as though rooted to the spot, staring at O'Hara and drawing deep, hissing breaths.

"So you don't want to be a free man?" O'Hara taunted. "You're afraid, Kim—afraid the same thing'll happen to you as happened to Dai Yao tonight!"

"Dai Yao!" Ah Kim stared at him with concentrated intensity. "What happen to Dai Yao?"

"He drank a cup of *lung-shao* that had the Blue Death in it."

"Ai-ye!" Ah Kim quavered, and sank down upon the prison cot, trembling.

O'Hara grasped the front of the yellow man's *shaam*. "Listen, Kim—I know what's going on! It was one of your

brother-Mandarins who stole that bottle of poison from Meng Tai's house. You know it, too, or you wouldn't be trying to find safety in a police cell! So speak your piece chop-chop—or out you go, and take your chances of being next in line for the Blue Death!"

"Sah-jin, help me!" Ah Kim said shakily. "Already I am marked for the Number Two death! It is only by the mercy of Tao that I have escape from the same Long Sleep which sent Dai Yao to his ancestors!"

"I didn't say Dai Yao was dead," O'Hara cut in. "We rushed him off to a hospital—we may be able to save him."

"Dai Yao will surely die," Ah Kim predicted, shaking his head gloomily. "If not tonight, then tomorrow, or the day beyond. And Ah Kim also will be dead man if you send me from poh-liss *yamen*. The Blue Death will strike at me again!"

"Again?" O'Hara echoed. "You mean one attempt has already been made?"

"Aye!" Ah Kim replied with a shiver. "The Blue Death was put secretly into a bottle of rice wine that stands upon a shelf in my lodgings. Tonight I stood with one foot across the threshold of the Shadow-World, for I had poured myself a cup of this death-drink and had lifted it halfway to my lips when the Lords of Destiny whispered a warning to me."

"What happened?" O'Hara asked.

"A life was lost, to save mine," Ah Kim replied. "The life of my parrot, Shem. This feather-devil of mine has great liking for rice wine, so when I drink, it is my custom to pour a little of it into the water-cup that is fastened to the cage. Tonight, Sah-jin, Shem drank of the wine, then made strange sounds and fell down from his wooden bar. Almost at once Shem was dead!"

"What'd you do then?" O'Hara demanded.

"Sah-jin, I knew it must be the Blue Death, and I was stricken with Number One fear. With trembling hands I

snatched up the bottle and my filled cup and flung the death-wine from my window. Then I burned a packet of paper prayers to Father Tao, praying for wisdom in this hour of peril."

"And then you hit on the idea of getting yourself arrested?" O'Hara queried.

"Aye!" Ah Kim answered. "An inner voice spoke to me, saying: Go forth and seek a quarrel with a Blue Coat Man. He will be angered and carry you off to the poh-liss *yamen*, where you will be safe from all danger."

"Not a bad plan, Kim," O'Hara said with a dry smile. "But the question is—who put the poison in your rice wine?"

Ah Kim shook his head. "Who can say? Yesterday I take drink from same bottle, and nothing happen."

"Haven't you had any visitors since then?"

"No one!" Ah Kim replied, looking at O'Hara with haggard eyes. "Sah-jin, you will not send me away from this place of safety? I am marked for the Blue Death, even as the luckless Dai Yao! If you drive me forth upon the streets, how can I eat food, or take drink, knowing that each mouthful may contain the poison powder?"

"All right, Kim," O'Hara replied. "You can stay here—at least for the time being."

"*Hsieh! Hsieh! Kan hsieh!*" Ah Kim said fervently.

Returning to the Squad office, O'Hara found Cham Kee, the *tu-chun* of the Seven Mandarins, anxiously awaiting him.

"Sah-jin," Cham said excitedly, "is there truth in the tale that Ah Kim has broken forth this night with deeds of unseemly and foolish violence? It is said that in a drunken fever he destroyed the windows of the Singing Turtle and fought against you with drawn knife!"

"That's right," O'Hara answered. "Ah Kim is downstairs in a cell."

"*Ai-yah!*" Cham Kee wailed. "He has put a stain upon the honor of the Mandarins! Sah-jin, if it is question of damage money, I will pay for Ah Kim's release,

lest all of us who are his tong-brothers suffer loss of face before the Sons of Han."

"We'll take up that question later," O'Hara answered quietly. "There's something a great deal more serious to be dealt with first. I'm glad you're here, Cham. I was just about to send for you. Dai Yao is in the hospital—poisoned by the Blue Death."

"Dai Yao! Poisoned!" Cham Kee exclaimed, springing to his feet.

"Dai Yao drank some poisoned *lung-shao*," O'Hara explained. "Cham, I want you to call a special meeting of the Mandarins right away—chop-chop. I'll come over to the tong-room at the Little Shanghai in about an hour. I want to talk to them—warn them of the danger hanging over their heads."

Cham Kee stared at him, round-eyed, the long-stemmed bamboo pipe clutched in fingers that suddenly began to tremble. "Sah-jin!" he gasped. "You think it is one of the Mandarins who give Dai Yao the death powder?"

O'Hara nodded gravely. "I think so. Now get going, Cham, and round up the members. I'll give you the details about Dai Yao at the meeting."

"Sah-jin, I go with the speed of an arrow!" the *tu-chun* promised, hurrying from the Precinct.

A little later Detective Driscoll came back from his routine rounds, and O'Hara related the whole of the night's events to him. Driscoll listened to the strange story in thoughtful silence.

"Sarge," he said at the end, "do you think Ah Kim's story is on the level?"

"Yes, I do," O'Hara replied. "It checks with everything I saw when I looked over his room—and Kim didn't know I'd made that search."

"Well," Driscoll said slowly, "if Ah Kim's story is true, he certainly had a narrow escape. It just occurred to me that maybe he's the one who stole the bottle of Blue Death, and made up this yarn to serve as a sort of smoke-screen. Kim could

have poisoned that parrot himself, you know."

O'Hara nodded. "Suppose you go to work on that angle, Driscoll. Here are Ah Kim's keys. I want that dead parrot and the water-dish from its cage. While you're there, give the place a thorough going-over. But I'm pretty sure you won't find the rest of the stolen poison in Ah Kim's room."

"Why not?" Driscoll challenged.

"Because there are *seven* members left in the Mandarin Tong," O'Hara explained. "Two of them must die before that money can be split up. Dai Yao's death alone wouldn't turn the trick—one more Mandarin would have to be knocked off, and I don't see how Ah Kim could accomplish that while he's locked up in a cell."

And Sergeant O'Hara's prediction proved accurate, for when Driscoll returned from his mission he reported that his most painstaking search of Ah Kim's quarters had yielded nothing to support his suspicions.

"But I'm still not quite satisfied, Sarge," he added. "It strikes me as queer that Ah Kim should empty the poisoned wine out the back window."

"The instinct of panic," O'Hara suggested. "Look, Driscoll, if Ah Kim poisoned his own parrot, as you seem to think, wouldn't he naturally back up his own end of the story by showing us a bottle of poisoned wine?"

"Maybe he didn't want to waste that much of the poison," Driscoll countered.

"The poisoner has no need to economize," O'Hara said grimly. "According to Meng Tai, there was enough Blue Death in that stolen bottle to kill off fifty Mandarins. That reminds me, I'd better hurry over to the Little Shanghai, or I'll be late for the meeting."

Soon Yet, the moon-faced proprietor of the Little Shanghai, who also was one of the Seven Mandarins, was hovering anxiously near the front door as Sergeant O'Hara entered.

"Ala wah, Sah-jin," he greeted. "My

brothers of the Mandarin await your presence in our meeting place." He led the way up the half-hidden side staircase to the floor above, pausing at a locked door painted with the official insignia of the Mandarin Tong.

"I am Keeper of the Keys, Sah-jin," he explained, unlocking the door and beckoning his visitor to enter.

O'Hara threw a searching glance at the four slant-eyed tongsters who waited in that richly decorated meeting room—waited in an uneasy silence woven of mutual suspicion, doubt—and fear.

The sergeant knew them all by sight and by name. There was Bow Gat, with his sharp eyes and bristling gray hair—Ging Soo, lean and silent, with his deeply pockmarked face—pot-bellied Soon Yet—and the brothers Cham.

"Which one? Which one?" O'Hara muttered to himself, letting his probing glance slip from one to another. Bow Gat was watching him with a peculiarly intent stare, and Cham Loh was removing his dark glasses, putting on the thick-lensed spectacles that gave his eyes a bulging, owlish look.

Soon Yet locked the door from the inside, whereupon the blue-robed Cham Kee stepped forward, bowing. "Sah-jin, as *tzuchun* of the Mandarins I give you honorable welcome to our humble place of meeting. We await your words on the sorrowful fate of our brother Dai Yao."

Sergeant O'Hara faced the five Mandarins, his face and voice equally stern. "I won't waste time beating around the bush. All of you know why I am here. Dai Yao has been poisoned with the Blue Death powder stolen from Meng Tao's house, and now I know that the man who stole it was one of the Mandarins."

Cham Kee made a gesture of protest. "Have you proof of this, Sah-jin? True, Dai Yao is a brother Mandarin, but his death alone would not release the treasure money that is waiting to be divided. For that, two deaths would be necessary."

"And that second death was arranged for!" O'Hara countered grimly. "Some of this same death-powder was put into a bottle of rice wine belonging to Ah Kim. Luckily, he escaped the trap. Ah Kim is now in a police cell, by his own request, because that is the only safe place of refuge he could think of."

O'Hara lifted his hand to silence the storm of gasps and startled exclamations that followed his revelation of the attempt on Ah Kim's life.

"The poisoner's plan has failed," he continued. "All seven Mandarins are still alive, but he has plenty of the Blue Death powder left, and it's almost certain that he will try again!"

Those words brought a profound hush upon the room—the taut silence of sharply caught breaths. The five slant-eyed faces stared at him—blank, stolid masks now, except for their eyes, where a rising tide of panicky terror was plainly visible.

"I intend to find that bottle of Blue Death," O'Hara continued grimly, "and I'll find the man who stole it!"

Bow Gat was suddenly on his feet, his voice shrill. "Then you have not far to look, Sah-jin, for the cursed Master of the Blue Death is here in this room!"

"Who do you mean?" O'Hara exclaimed.

Bow Gat swung around and leveled an accusing finger. "It is you, Ging Soo!"

The pock-marked tongster sprang up, sputtering and stammering in the face of this sudden accusation. "By Tao—have you gone mad, Bow Gat?"

Bow Gat glared at him, then suddenly reached inside his *shaam* and produced a bottle with a red wax seal. "Do you not know this bottle, Ging Soo? Did I not receive it from your hands? *Hoya!* For Ah Kim it was poison in rice wine—for Dai Yao it was *lung-shao*—for Bow Gat it is *shao-hsing* wine!"

O'Hara grabbed the bottle. "You say Ging Soo gave you this bottle of *shao-hsing*? And you think it's poisoned?"

"*Wah!* Hearken to my words!" Bow Gat replied excitedly. "Today I had Ging Soo for visitor at my lodgings. As we sat over a game of *ching gong* did he not contrive to knock over a bottle of *shao-hsing* wine, so that it ran out upon the floor? And did he not return to my door at the first hour of darkness tonight and give me this bottle to replace the spilled wine? Aye! And did he not quickly refuse my offer to open this bottle at once and share a cup with him? Why was this, unless the wine was poisoned?"

"It is a lie, you son of a spotted dog!" Ging Soo yelped furiously, and leaping forward, he seized Bow Gat by the throat. The two yellow men grappled fiercely, twisting and turning until both went crashing to the floor, still locked together.

"Break it up! Break it up!" O'Hara commanded, trying to separate them, but Ging Soo clung to his death grip on Bow Gat's throat, and the latter began to make gurgling noises, his face growing dark with congested blood as he struggled for breath.

O'Hara finally managed to break Ging Soo's strangle-hold and dragged him back, while Cham Kee helped the gasping, wheezing Bow Gat to a chair, where he sat in a limp sprawl, breathing great gulps of air.

"One more move like that, Ging Soo," O'Hara warned, "and I'll run you in. Trying to choke Bow Gat to death won't prove there's no poison in this wine."

Ging Soo drew himself up proudly. "Sah-jin, I will make proof it is good wine!" And before anyone could stop him, the yellow man snatched up the sealed *shao-hsing*, knocked off the neck against the edge of the table, raised the jagged bottle to his lips and gulped down almost half the contents before O'Hara succeeded in wrenching the bottle from him.

With a derisive gesture toward the round-eyed Bow Gat, Ging Soo walked steadily over to a chair and seated himself, hands tucked in sleeves, his face a hard, scornful mask. Through a lengthening si-

lence every eye was fixed on him in a sort of hypnotized fascination, watching for the first sign of the Blue Death.

O'Hara glanced at his watch. "Well, five minutes have gone by, so it looks as if you've proved your point, Ging Soo. But just the same, I think Bow Gat spoke the truth—the poisoner is here in this room! I can't put my finger on him now, but I'll track him down, make no mistake about that!"

"I'll be working on this case day and night. In the meantime, each of you will have to protect himself against the Blue Death as best he can."

"Remember," O'Hara went on, "until this secret poisoner is caught, you're each carrying your life in your hands! The Blue Death has no taste—no odor. So be suspicious of everything you eat—be particularly suspicious of anything you drink. If Dai Yao lives, it will be because he sipped his *lung-shao* slowly, and so felt the first effects of the poison before he had emptied his cup. If he had gulped it down like rice wine, Dai Yao would now be with his ancestors."

"Gracious thanks, Sah-jin, for your words of warning," Cham Kee the *tu-chun* said, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Would it not be wise, Sah-jin, to make search of the tong brothers? Perhaps you find one with the stolen death powder hidden upon his person."

"That would only be a waste of time," O'Hara replied. "They all knew why this meeting was called. The poisoner wouldn't be fool enough to carry the powder around with him. You can bet he keeps it hidden away in some place that's safe from search."

"But how, then, will you set about finding it?" Cham Kee asked.

O'Hara gave a bleak smile. "The Blue Coat Men have their own way of going about things, Cham."

"*Wah!*" Cham Kee said. "If I can be of help, Sah-jin, by word or deed, you have but to knock upon my door, no matter what the hour."

AS O'HARA left the meeting-room he glanced back at the assembled Mandarins. Which of these five slant-eyed Sons of Han was the secret master of the Blue Death? He saw that each watched his fellows as from behind an armed wall, and that the same strained look was in every eye—stark, naked terror of the silent, invisible death that hung over each head.

"How'd you make out at the Mandarin meeting, Sarge?" Driscoll inquired when O'Hara returned to the Precinct.

"The worst scared bunch of Chinks you ever saw in your life," O'Hara replied. "They're really shaking in their shoes, and that's not just a figure of speech."

"Well, I still think I've got the right slant on it," Driscoll said. "Ah Kim's our man. That jail-cell business is just a damn smart alibi to leave us stymied while some secret pal of his carries out their poisoning plans."

"I don't think so," O'Hara replied. "I'd describe the Mandarin meeting this way—four of those five Chinks are really scared stiff, and the other one is a damned good actor! And I wish I knew which one it is!" he added grimly.

"So what happens next?" Driscoll queried.

"We check on them," O'Hara said. "I want those five Mandarins tailed. I'm very curious to find out how each one reacts to this Blue Death menace. That in itself might give us a hot tip."

The next day O'Hara had an encouraging report from the hospital—Dai Yao was still unconscious, but slowly and steadily gaining against the paralyzing grip of the Blue Death.

And in the afternoon the eagerly awaited analysis from the police laboratory arrived. It stated that Ah Kim's parrot had died of the Blue Death poison, strong traces of which remained in the mingled water and rice-wine contained in its drinking-dish. In Dai Yao's case the *lung-shao* taken from his wine-cup was heavily poisoned, but no

trace of the Blue Death could be found in the liquor within the clay flagon, nor in the moon-cakes.

"Then the poison must have been put into Dai Yao's wine *after* it had been poured into the cup," O'Hara mused. "And that's proof the poisoner was actually present while Dai Yao was drinking. A nice point!"

Detective Driscoll came into the squad office, and O'Hara looked up with a broad smile. "This is going to be a push-over, after all," he said confidently. "We'll be able to wind up this case, neat and pretty, in just about one minute after Dai Yao wakes up and is able to talk."

But Sergeant O'Hara's optimistic appraisal was soon destined to suffer a sharp revision. The telephone rang, and he heard Detective Faraday's voice, speaking from the hospital.

"Listen, Sarge," Faraday said, "Dai Yao regained consciousness a few minutes ago. I started right in asking him questions, but the Chink's still in pretty bad shape. He can't talk, not even in a whisper—"

"Well, he's able to nod his head, Yes or No, isn't he?" O'Hara cut in.

"That's how we've been working it," Faraday replied. "I asked him if anybody'd been with him last night, and he shook his head—"

"What's that!" O'Hara burst out. "Nobody with him? But that doesn't make sense, Faraday. I've just received the lab report. The liquor in the flagon has no trace of poison—it was dropped directly into his cup after it was poured. Are you sure he understood your question?"

"I asked him twice, and he shook his head both times," Faraday declared. "Then I asked him if anybody had called at the house to see him any time that day, and he shook his head again."

O'Hara was silent, puzzling over this unexpected setback to his hopes.

"Maybe you'd better come over here, Sarge, and have a crack at it yourself," Faraday suggested. "Dai Yao can move

his arms and hands a little. If you brought over some Chinese writing materials, he might be able to write out answers to our questions. We won't get very far if we have to stick to plain Yes or No."

"A good idea, Faraday," O'Hara replied. "I'll be right over."

Twenty minutes later Sergeant O'Hara arrived at the hospital, accompanied by John Lum, the official Chinatown interpreter. Dai Yao had been put into a separate little room, and his yellow face was startlingly gaunt and hollow-eyed against the white pillow.

O'Hara asked him if he felt able to answer questions in writing, and Dai Yao nodded his head. But when John Lum unpacked his ink-pots and writing brushes and fastened strips of rice-paper to a tilted board, Dai Yao's hand was so slow and shaky that the interpreter had considerable difficulty in following the jagged native script.

And Dai Yao's painfully scrawled answers failed to throw any additional light on the mysterious poisoning. Dai Yao wrote down that he had been absolutely alone in the house, and had had no callers there for several days previous.

"Well, it's obvious that somebody got into that room," O'Hara snapped, "and they must have come in *after* the wine was poured. Dai Yao, did you leave that room at any time, even for a few moments?"

The yellow man looked at him blankly, then a sudden startled gleam came into his eyes, and the inky writing brush moved waveringly over the paper.

John Lum leaned forward, translating slowly. "Dai Yao say he leave room one time when somebody knock on front door. But when he open door, nobody on steps, nobody in street. Then he lock door again and come back to room to finish *lung-shao* drink."

"There's our clue!" O'Hara exclaimed. "That knock at the door drew Dai Yao away just long enough for the poisoner to come out of hiding and drop his blue pel-

let into the wine-cup. He must have hidden himself there in the house before-hand."

"And he wasn't working alone, either," Faraday pointed out quickly. "He must have had a stooge waiting outside the house for his signal to go knock on Dai Yao's door and then run away. A damn smart piece of timing, if you ask me."

O'Hara looked gravely at the haggard-faced Oriental lying on the bed. "Dai Yao, we know this poisoner is one of the Seven Mandarins, because some of this same Blue Death powder was put into a bottle of wine belonging to Ah Kim. Luckily, he didn't drink any of it. But which one of the Mandarins, Dai Yao? Have you any suspicions?"

The yellow man stared at him with bleak, unwinking eyes, and his gaunt face seemed to grow even more hollow-cheeked, but he shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Can't you even make a guess?" O'Hara urged. "If you have the least suspicion, Dai Yao, even if it's only a hunch, it is your duty to write down the name. You know what his game is—to kill off two of the Mandarins so that the tong will be disbanded and the treasury money split up. This poisoner has a whole bottle of the Blue Death—he can strike again and again, unless we track him down quickly. Think hard, Dai Yao! Two lives are at stake!"

THE yellow man lay staring at the painted wall of the hospital room, then his uncertain fingers slowly guided the writing-brush and John Lum translated in his toneless voice. "Dai Yao say he know nothing more. He say he is very tired—he like make rest now."

Before leaving the hospital Sergeant O'Hara sought out Dai Yao's attending physician and discussed the yellow man's condition. Then he and Detective Faraday took their departure.

"We're going back to Dai Yao's place on Pagoda Street," O'Hara said. "I'd like

to find out how in hell that poisoner got into a house with locked doors and bars over all the windows."

So they went to Pagoda Street and made a careful inspection of all openings into Dai Yao's house, but found no trace anywhere of forcible entry.

"If Mark Sin the gambler used to live here," Faraday suggested, "maybe there's an old secret tunnel or something like that."

"I thought of that," O'Hara replied, "and I went over to Paradise Court and asked Mark Sin about it. But he just laughed and said 'Somebody tell you dragon-tale, Sah-jin.' If there's a secret opening anywhere in this house, I haven't spotted any sign of it. But go ahead, Faraday, check up for yourself."

Faraday tapped on walls and woodwork panels, he examined the inside of closets and rummaged about for a long while in the cellar, but came back shaking his head. "No dice, Sarge," he said, brushing dust and cobwebs from his clothing.

O'Hara was staring thoughtfully at Dai Yao's empty poison-cup, still standing on the table. "Faraday, there's a variation in the poisoner's procedure that's got me puzzled. I can't figure it out."

"What do you mean, Sarge?"

"Well, in Ah Kim's case it's pretty evident the poisoner climbed in by the back window while Kim was away and put his blue powder into the bottle of rice wine. But why didn't he do the same thing at Dai Yao's? Why did he hide and wait until the *lung-shao* had actually been poured into the cup?"

"Maybe he didn't have enough time," Faraday said. "It's still a mystery how he managed to get inside here, but it might have been just a minute or two before Dai Yao came home."

O'Hara shook his head. "In that case, how could he have made advance arrangements for that knocking at the front door to draw Dai Yao out of the room at precisely the right moment for his purpose?"

Faraday scratched his ear. "Well, at first glance that knocking at the door seems to prove it wasn't a single-handed job, but now I'm not so sure about it."

O'Hara's glance sharpened. "What's your angle, Faraday?"

"Well, a door has *two* sides, Sarge. Suppose the poisoner did the knocking himself from *inside*, then slipped into the dark front room before Dai Yao came through the hall? Then while Dai Yao was gawking out at the empty street, he could dash into the back room, drop his blue pill into the wine-cup, scram down the cellar steps and hide there until Dai Yao went staggering out of the house to find help."

O'Hara nodded and smiled. "A nice piece of reasoning, Faraday. You make out a good case."

"But what's our next move?" Faraday queried. "It's sure as shooting that the poisoner is one of the Seven Mandarins, but how can we head him off? He's got plenty of that Blue Death left. We can't hide all the other Mandarins behind bars, like Ah Kim."

"True," O'Hara admitted, "but I think we've got the poisoner pretty well checkmated. The surprise element is gone now, and the Mandarins are on guard every moment. It's going to be a pretty hard job to slip any of those blue pills into their food or drink."

How well the Seven Mandarins had taken Sergeant O'Hara's warning to heart was evidenced in the detailed reports of their activities that began to pile up on O'Hara's desk. And Chinatown buzzed from end to end with gossip and rumor.

It was whispered that the sharp-eyed Bow Gat stood in such fear of the deadly blue powder that he would trust no food except fresh fruit purchased at random and eaten on his way to the Plum Blossom Joss House, where he spent hours daily burning paper prayers and scented candles before the shrine of Kwan Yin.

As for the pock-marked Ging Soo, he was known to have hired a personal body-

guard who slept by day and kept watch all night, and who was said to receive an extra fee for tasting all food and drink before Ging Soo ventured to eat.

Only Soon Yet of the padded paunch and triple chins, being proprietor of the Little Shanghai Restaurant, boasted that he ate as freely and as heartily as usual. But it was told how Soon Yet had purchased a set of the Tiles of Fortune, and was forever casting the magic tiles for the Sign of Danger, whereupon he would lock himself up in a room for hours at a time.

And the brothers Cham also made preparations against the grim, silent terror that haunted the frightened Mandarins. Cham Kee the *tu-chun* prepared all food and drink with his own hands, and as a further precaution he and his half-blind brother ate at separate hours, so that if the worst happened, both would not be stricken by the Blue Death.

"Faraday, I don't see how long the Mandarins can keep going on this hair-trigger basis," O'Hara remarked one day. "The strain must be terrific. Except for Soon Yet, they're all scared to death of food and drink."

"Soon Yet's lucky, owning a restaurant," Faraday replied. "He can try out everything he eats on the customers first."

"But there aren't any customers," O'Hara declared. "Soon Yet was in to see me yesterday. It seems all the Chinks are afraid to eat at the Little Shanghai, now that they've heard about the Blue Death. Soon Yet has a pretty bad case of the jitters."

Faraday shook his head. "You can't blame him, Sarge. It's not much fun to know there's a poisoner on the loose, and that your name is on his list of prospects. I hear Mark Sin the gambler has opened a regular set of betting-books on which of the Seven Mandarins lose out in this Wooden Robe contest, as they call it."

O'Hara nodded. "Yes, a Chinaman'll bet on anything—the greatest gamblers in the world. I'd sure like to have a look at

Mark Sin's betting-book—to see what odds he's quoting against Dai Yao."

"Why Dai Yao?" Faraday asked.

"Because Dai Yao is coming home from the hospital tomorrow," O'Hara replied.

"He is!" Faraday exclaimed. "Why the devil doesn't he stay where he's safe? He's just inviting the poisoner to take another crack at him."

O'Hara shrugged. "I tried to talk him out of it, but you know how much Chinks distrust hospitals—and white Devil doctors.

"You can't convince 'em they won't have an arm or a leg sawed off, just for the practice. Dai Yao wants Meng Tai the apothecary to look after him, now that he's past the crisis."

"But Meng Tai can't be with him all the time," Faraday pointed out. "He'll be taking an awful chance, lying alone there in that house on Pagoda Street."

"He won't be alone," O'Hara replied. "I talked it over with Meng Tai, and we decided to get a sort of servant-bodyguard to look after him. We'll try to get Sang Lum for the job."

"Well, it's a good choice, Sarge," Faraday approved. "He's one Chink you can really trust all the way."

SO Dai Yao left the White Devil hospital and returned to his little house on Pagoda Street. He arrived in a police car, but he was still so weak and shaken from the effects of the Blue Death that O'Hara had to help him across the pavement.

Meng Tai the apothecary and Sang Lum the hired watcher were waiting in the house, and hurried to the front door to welcome Dai Yao's return.

"*Hsieb-hsieb!*" Dai Yao managed to gasp out in a strained whisper, then his eyeballs rolled upward and he would have fallen to the floor but for Sergeant O'Hara's quick support.

"Lift him by the feet, Sang Lum," O'Hara directed. "We'll carry him up to the bedroom."

They carried him upstairs and made him comfortable on a bamboo sleeping-*k'ang*, while Meng Tai prepared a restorative liquid and fed it to him patiently from a horn-spoon.

Presently they had a visitor—Cham Kee the *tu-chun* of the Mandarins, with his blue *shaam* and his silver-banded, jade-bowled bamboo pipe.

"*Ala wah*, Brother Dai," Cham Kee said heartily. "Have courage, for the Blue Death will not strike again. We are warned now, and the Sah-jin is a man of Number One cleverness. He will search out this thrice-accursed person of secret evil, and then we shall eat and drink once more without fear, and lie down to sleep without dread of waking in the Shadow-World."

Cham Kee turned to O'Hara. "Sah-jin, it is not good for Dai Yao to be alone in this house. I have spoken to my brother Cham Loh, and we are ready to share a night-watch while Dai Yao sleeps."

"Thanks, Cham," O'Hara said, "but we've already hired Sang Lum to look after Dai Yao, day and night."

"*Wah!* It is a worthy choice," Cham Kee replied. "And Sang Lum's wage shall be paid by the Mandarin Tong. It is but simple justice that Dai Yao should not be burdened with this extra expense."

Cham Kee turned to the sick man, tapping him lightly on the shoulder with the stem of the ornate bamboo pipe. "Sleep soundly, Brother Dai, for you will be well guarded. *Choy!* Happy good luck! I will burn paper prayers every night for your swift recovery to health and strength."

After the *tu-chun*'s departure, O'Hara beckoned to Sang Lum. "Have you arranged everything as I ordered, Sang?"

"Aye, Sah-jin," the wiry-muscled, alert-eyed young Oriental answered. "Come with me for look-see."

And Sang Lum took the sergeant on a tour of all the rooms, pointing out the result of O'Hara's uneasy suspicion of some secret entrance to Dai Yao's house—the door of every single closet was now nailed

shut, and a strong iron bolt added to the door and to the cellar.

"I don't think Dai Yao will have any more secret visitors," O'Hara remarked after he had made still another check-up of the iron grilles that covered the windows. "All right, Sang Lum, it's up to you now. If anybody comes to the door, you're not to open unless they give the special knock we've arranged with Meng Tai. I'll drop in again later tonight. *Choy!*"

"*Choy!*" Sang Lum repeated, and bolted the front door behind the departing Sergeant O'Hara.

Pagoda Street was dark and shadowy that night as O'Hara returned to the house of Dai Yao. As he approached, he saw Sang Lum's silhouette moving across the drawn yellow blinds of Dai Yao's bedroom.

Mounting the steps, he rapped out his signal—three sharp knocks, widely spaced. In a moment the door was hastily unlocked, and Sang Lum was looking at him with wide-eyed excitement.

"Sah-jin! The ghost-knock at the door! It came tonight—just like you warn me!"

O'Hara grabbed him by the arm. "You didn't open the door?" he demanded.

"No, Sah-jin. You say not do. When knocking come, I go with silent feet to door—I listen with ear pressed tight against wood. *Hoya!* Outside is nothing to hear, Sah-jin! No more knocks—no sound of departing footsteps! Nothing!"

O'HARA gave him a sharp look. "Is Dai Yao all right?"

"Aye, Sah-jin," Sang Lum declared. "He ask who knock at door. I tell him unknown person come to wrong house. Then he make sleep. I watch all time."

O'Hara gave a sign of relief. "For a minute you had me scared about that damned knocking. That's how the thing started before, only Dai Yao was alone that time."

They went up the stairs, and O'Hara looked at Dai Yao, stretched out on the

sleeping-*k'ang*, his eyes closed. A lacquer tray stood beside the *k'ang*, with an empty tea-cup and a dish of rice-cakes.

"Dai Yao tell me he make hungry," Sang Lum explained in a cautious whisper. "I go to kitchen to fix him tea and rice-cake. It is just when I have pour out his tea that the ghost-knocks come at door—"

"You're just poured! Jumpin' Cat-fish!" O'Hara exploded, and sprang to the bamboo couch. "Dai Yao!" he shouted, grasping the yellow man by both shoulders and shaking him vigorously. "Dai Yao—wake up!"

But Dai Yao's slanted eyes remained closed, his gaunt yellow head bobbed about as inertly as though his neck was broken, and his flesh was cold and clammy to the touch.

O'Hara forced open one of the closed eyelids, then his fingers groped about for a sign of the pulse—of heart action. The sergeant straightened up, his face stiffly set as he stared at Sang Lum.

"Poisoned!" he muttered with grim bitterness. "The Blue Death again! It got him, exactly as it did before! Not a single move is different, except this time the poison was in tea instead of *lung-shao!*"

"But Sah-jin," Sang Lum wailed, his eyes round as black jade buttons, "there was no one within the house, I swear by Tao—by Milo Fo! Every minute I watch—I listen. How then could this poison-devil enter? Can he bend the iron bars of a window? Can he walk through a locked door without sound?"

"The answer seems to be Yes!" O'Hara snapped. He pulled out his police whistle and tossed it to Sang Lum. "Move fast, Sang! Run down Pagoda Street toward Mulberry Lane and keep blowing this whistle till a Blue Coat Man answers. Tell him to send a car here chop-chop. We've got to rush Dai Yao back to the hospital!"

"Will do!" Sang Lum gasped, hurrying toward the stairs. Gun in hand, O'Hara flicked on the lights in the back room upstairs, but a single glance showed him it

offered no hiding place large enough to conceal a man.

He was on his way downstairs as Sang Lum unbolted the front door and went racing down the street, shrilling the police whistle. O'Hara re-bolted the front door and switched on the light in the front room. Then he went on into the back room, with its outer kitchen.

Everything there was just as Sang Lum had left it—the kettle on the stove, and on the kitchen table a canister of tea and a red-glazed teapot. He touched his hand to the kettle and the teapot—both were cold.

Then, almost without volition, O'Hara glanced down at the floor, remembering the scattered blue pellets he had found in this same room on the previous occasion. A startled exclamation was jerked from his lips. Another one! There was another blue pellet, in plain sight, lying on the floor close to the baseboard, in almost the exact spot where he had previously picked up one of the deadly pills!

O'Hara bent down and picked it up. Pushing the table and the kitchen chair out of the way, he went on a more intensive search, scanning every inch of the floor. He found one more pellet—

"Two this time—and four the other!" O'Hara muttered, looking at the pair of deadly blue pellets cradled in his palm. He strode over to the cellar door, scrutinizing the newly added bolt. Then he examined the fastenings of the back door and checked the solidity of the window bars.

"Two pills—four pills," he repeated softly, jiggling the newly found evidence in his hand. And suddenly he stood motionless, staring at the room as though he had never seen it before.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he breathed fervently, and hunted through his pockets for a piece of paper. He found an old envelope and tore it into small squares, placing one piece at each spot on the floor where he had found one of the blue pellets.

Then he moved across the room and

stood with his back to the window, staring at the six little squares of torn paper lying on the floor.

"Got it!" he breathed in mounting excitement. "Now I know how it was done!"

A CAR came whirling into Pagoda Street and stopped outside with a squealing of brakes. Footsteps crossed the pavement and mounted the outer steps as O'Hara hurried to open the door. It was Sang Lum with Officer Burke and two men from the red patrol car drawn up at the curb.

O'Hara snapped out his orders, wasting no time on explanations. The unconscious Dai Yao was carried down the stairs and placed in the police car. O'Hara detailed one of the men to stay there with Sang Lum.

"I'm riding along to the hospital," he announced. "Burke, I want you to round up all the other Mandarins, and do it on the run! Bow Gat—Ging Soo—the two Chams—Soon Yet—I want them all at the Precinct right away! Hold them there until I come."

Burke saluted and hurried off, while O'Hara climbed into the patrol car. "Give it the gun, Gallagher," he said to the driver. "Emergency Ward!"

At the hospital the luckless Dai Yao was quickly placed on a stretcher and wheeled off down the corridor. After a long wait, one of the staff doctors came to the ward office where O'Hara was impatiently pacing to and fro.

"It looks bad for your Chinaman, Sergeant," the doctor said. "But we'll know definitely in a little while, if you care to wait."

"Yes, I'll wait," O'Hara replied grimly. "All I'm hoping is that the ambulance doesn't roll in with a Number Two case. This poisoner works in pairs."

A few minutes later an outside telephone call came through for him. It was Officer Burke speaking from the Precinct.

"Sarge, I've got all the Mandarins here,

except one," Burke reported. "Cham Loh, the *tu-chun's* brother, is missing. Cham Kee seems to be plenty worried about it. He says he came back to the house about nine o'clock, and his brother wasn't there. He says it's very unusual for him to go out alone at night, on account of his bad eyesight."

"Damn!" O'Hara blurted angrily. "Too late again!"

"What do you mean?" Burke asked. "Who's too late?"

"Never mind!" O'Hara growled. "Keep looking for Cham Loh. Send out a general alarm. And hold on tight to those others. I'll be back there soon."

After another wait the staff doctor returned, and O'Hara knew the verdict before any words were spoken.

"Sorry, Sergeant—he's gone," the doctor said. "We didn't get him quick enough this time. You'll get the full details in the autopsy report."

O'Hara nodded, turned on his heel, and hurried from the hospital. His rugged face was grimly set as he climbed the Precinct steps and strode toward his office.

Burke met him in the corridor, excitement in his face. "We've found Cham Loh, Sarge—dead! Stabbed! His body was lying behind the steps of an empty house in Paradise Court—"

O'Hara followed Burke down the hall to the room where Doc Stanage the police surgeon and Detective Faraday were holding a consultation over the body of Cham Loh.

"Well, Cham Loh didn't go under without putting up a fight, Sarge," Faraday remarked, pointing to a bruise on Cham Loh's cheek and two torn places in the yellow *shaam*. The dark glasses were still on Cham's face, but on one side the metal frame was badly bent, as if from a headlong fall.

O'Hara bent over to examine the fatal wound—a deep knife-gash which had left a wide, wet circle of sticky blood on the bright yellow silk.

"Get this angle, Sarge," Faraday said eagerly, leaning forward. "Cham Loh was knifed, and that wound must have bled like hell. But there wasn't any blood on the pavement where I found him—only a faint smear! So Cham wasn't killed in Paradise Court—he was knifed somewhere else, and his body dumped there!"

O'Hara looked at him, aware that the detective had not finished his story. Faraday reached into his pocket and tossed a paper package of leechee nuts onto the table.

"We found these on Cham Loh, Sarge. Just bought, apparently—and notice the shop name rubber-stamped on the wrapper. Lee Wing. He's the Chink that has that little general store on the corner of Canton Street. I sent for him right away—"

"Get anything out of him?" O'Hara asked.

"Plenty!" Faraday turned and hurried out of the room, returning in a moment with a very scared-looking Oriental whose uneasy glance sought to avoid the stark, yellow-robed figure stretched out in death.

"Lee Wing," Faraday commanded, "tell your story over again for Sergeant O'Hara."

Lee Wing moistened his lips. "Sah-jin, Cham Loh come my shop tonight. He buy leechee nut. He tell me he going to Mandarin room at Little Shanghai to find other pair of glasses. He say he leave them behind at last tong meeting."

"What time was this?" O'Hara asked.

"Hour of Pig maybe one quarter gone," Lee Wing replied.

"That makes it about half past eight," O'Hara translated. He was silent for a moment. "Was Cham Loh one of your regular customers?"

The yellow man shrugged. "He come for buy little bit maybe one time in three-four weeks."

"There you are, Sarge," Faraday said. "The trail leads right to Soon Yet's door."

O'Hara nodded. "Where are the Mandarins?"

"In the squad room," Faraday replied.

"Okay. I'll break the news to them," O'Hara said.

Silence fell upon the four uneasy Mandarins as they watched O'Hara enter the squad room so briskly, with Burke and Faraday behind him. All four yellow men bore visible evidence in face and manner of the siege which the Blue Death terror had laid against them.

O'Hara's somber glance traveled from one to another—the shifty-eyed Bow Gat—the pock-marked Ging Soo—nervous Soon Yet with his flabby chins—tight-lipped Cham Kee, grasping his ornate bamboo pipe as though it were a sword.

"Dai Yao is dead—poisoned by the Blue Death!" O'Hara announced abruptly, then faced directly toward Cham Kee. "And I have additional bad news for you, *tu-chun*. Your brother's body has been found. He was stabbed to death!"

"Ai-yeel!" the *tu-chun* wailed, and his bamboo pipe clattered to the floor as he sprang to his feet, eyes blazing with black fire. "What thrice-accursed devil has stolen my brother's shadow? Speak his name to me, Sah-jin, and I will have no need of the Rice Face Law to avenge my brother's life!"

"Take it easy, Cham," O'Hara ordered sharply. Then he swung around to face the paunchy proprietor of the Little Shanghai.

"Soon Yet, did you see anything of Cham Loh tonight?"

"Not see Cham Loh," Soon Yet replied hastily.

"No? Didn't Cham Loh come to the Little Shanghai at about half past eight tonight for a pair of glasses he'd left behind in the Mandarin room?"

"Not so!" Soon Yet shouted, springing up in his turn. "It is Number One lie! Cham Loh not come to Little Shanghai. I will swear it on the blood of a white rooster!"

Cham Kee stared at the Blue Coat Sah-jin, then fixed his glittering gaze on the

trembling Soon Yet. "*Hoya!* Then it is you who have kill my brother! By Tao, you shall pay blood for blood—"

The raging *tu-chun* hurled himself at Soon Yet, murder in his eye, but O'Hara sprang between them, throwing Cham Kee aside.

"I'm running this show," he snapped. "Sit down and keep quiet, Cham, or I'll lock you up in a cell to cool off."

O'Hara turned to Soon Yet. "We'll soon find out the truth. You're coming with us to the Little Shanghai, and we'll see if Cham Loh's extra glasses are in the Mandarin room."

So they left the Precinct, with Soon Yet sandwiched between Sergeant O'Hara and Detective Faraday. When they arrived at the Little Shanghai, Soon Yet unlocked the restaurant door and flicked on a light, so they could find their way between the rows of stripped tables and shadowy booths. They went up the little side staircase and Soon Yet unlocked the Mandarin door.

ALL three of them began looking around the tong meeting room, and within a matter of seconds Soon Yet let out an excited "*Hai!*" and held up Cham Loh's extra pair of thick-lensed spectacles.

"It is Number One proof that Cham Loh did not come here tonight!" Soon Yet declared triumphantly.

"Yeah?" Faraday countered sharply. "Well, here's even better proof that Cham Loh *was* here!" The detective seized a carved teakwood table and dragged it to one side, pointing dramatically to the floor, where a dark red pool of half-dried blood stained the floor.

"Blood!" Faraday rapped out. "Cham Loh's blood! This is where he was knifed—right here in this room! You did it, Soon Yet. Cham Loh came here looking for his glasses, and you grabbed the unexpected opportunity. You knifed him—and dragged the body over to Paradise Court. You might have got away with it, too, if Cham Loh hadn't stopped at Lee

Wing's on the way, and bought a bag of leechee nuts—"

"Not so!" Soon Yet screamed frantically. "Cham Loh not come here! Not see him! It is lie!"

O'Hara's stern voice cut in. "Then how do you explain this blood on the floor?"

Soon Yet was silenced, staring at the sinister red stains as if hypnotized. Then he gave a sudden choking cry, turned, and darted for the doorway.

"Get back there!" Faraday warned, swiftly blocking him from the exit.

His face contorted with panicky rage, Soon Yet sprang to the wall and wrenched down the silver-hilted Long Sword which hung above the many-columned scroll of the Mandarins' honored dead.

"Make way!" he yelled, grasping the ponderous antique weapon that was taller than himself. "Make way—or I strike to kill!"

Faraday reached for his .38, but O'Hara yelled, "No shooting! I'll take him!"

Sergeant O'Hara moved warily along a quarter-circle that brought him closer and closer to the embattled Oriental. With sweating hands Soon Yet held the heavy sword poised for a chopping blow, eyes fixed on the advancing Sah-jin.

"Now!" O'Hara yelled, making a sudden feint that drew Soon Yet into desperate action. The great two-handed blade swished ominously through the air and buried its point a good six inches into the floor.

Before Soon Yet could wrest it loose, O'Hara sprang in close and grappled with him, holding fast to the struggling, snarling yellow man until Faraday succeeded in putting on the handcuffs.

Then O'Hara went downstairs to telephone for the wagon. It took their united efforts to drag Soon Yet into the patrol, and then to get him out again at the Precinct, raving and screaming in a berserk panic as he found himself hustled off toward the cells.

O'Hara returned to the four Mandarins

waiting in the squad-room, and told them what had been discovered in the tong meeting-room. Cham Kee listened with glittering eyes and an angry hissing of breath, the bamboo pipe jerking and quivering in his clenched hand.

"*Tsai kwei tzu!*" he spat out venomously. "Let the Rice Face Law deal hard and quick with Soon Yet, or I will send him headlong to his accursed ancestors with my own hand!"

"Don't worry, Cham—you'll get quick action," O'Hara promised grimly. "We'll need your brother's personal papers—his *chock-gee* and his *hu-chao*—to make out our official report on his death. Suppose we go over to your lodgings and get them right now? . . . Want to come along, Faraday?"

All the way to his quarters in Canton Street, Cham Kee continued his flow of bitter invective against the treacherous slaying of his brother.

"Sah-jin, Cham Loh was always man of honorable deeds," he wailed. "Never did he harm one man. And now he is stab to death, when he is half blind and unable to defend himself. *Ai-ye!* It is a deed of evil beyond reach of words."

Unlocking his door, Cham Kee bowed, inviting them to enter with the traditional Chinese guest-phrase. Inside, the two detectives looked about them with curiosity, for the lodgings of the two brothers was furnished entirely in Oriental style, a rarity even in Chinatown.

Cham Kee led the way to his brother's room, where he opened a red-painted Soochow chest and began rummaging among its contents.

O'Hara looked at the bamboo sleeping-*k'ang*, at the shelf of household joss with a statuette of Kwan Yin in flawless rose-quartz, and at the weird symbols on a *feng-shui* chart tacked to the wall. Then he glanced into Cham Loh's clothes-closet.

"Here are my brother's poh-liss papers, Sah-jin," Cham Kee said, handing over the official documents. O'Hara glanced at

the papers, folded them, and slipped them into his pocket.

"Sah-jin," Cham Kee said, "how many days must pass before the cursed Soon Yet is brought to judgment before the honorable masters of the Rice Face Law?"

SERGEANT O'HARA gave him a slow level look. "I don't know, Cham, because I doubt if Soon Yet ever comes to trial."

"*Hoya!*" Cham Kee exclaimed. "But you have made promise that Soon Yet pay quick for his deed of blood!"

O'Hara's voice tightened. "I promised that the Law would deal swiftly with the man who killed your brother—and so it will!"

"But Soon Yet is innocent—he did not kill Cham Loh. You are the man, Cham Kee, who will stand trial for murder! *You killed your own brother*—here in this very room!"

Cham Kee jerked backward, his slanted eyes staring as he gasped "Sah-jin make joke, yiss?"

"If I am, the joke will be on you, Cham!" O'Hara snapped.

"Look, Sarge—are you serious?" Faraday exclaimed in a startled voice. "If you're not kidding, you're way off the beam this time. Cham Kee—knocking off his own brother? It sounds completely screwy to me. Why—where's your evidence?"

"Unless I miss my guess, Faraday, you're standing on part of it this moment," O'Hara said dryly. "That strip of rice-straw matting under your feet—look at the color of it, against the other strips! It's been turned over recently, hasn't it? Well, turn it back again, and see what the other side looks like!"

Faraday bent down and turned over the thick straw matting, and a sharp whistle came from his pursed lips. The woven straw was spotted and smeared by a wide reddish stain which some one had evidently tried very hard to wash clean.

"Blood!" Faraday breathed.

"Not so!" Cham Kee cried hastily. "It is only the mark of red paint my brother spill three-four day ago."

"It's blood!" O'Hara countered sharply. "your brother's blood, Cham! This is where he fell, bleeding, after you stabbed him! And I know what you did afterwards!"

O'Hara strode to the closet and pulled out a bright yellow robe. Then he reached up on the joss shelf and brought down a pair of dark glasses. He flung both articles onto the *k'ang* and pointed an accusing finger at the shrinking *tu-chun*.

"You planted this crime of yours against Soon Yet!" O'Hara charged in level tones. "You wore one of your brother's yellow robes and his second pair of dark glasses, and stopped at Lee Wing's store to buy those leechees—and to tell him you were going to the Little Shanghai. You and your brother looked as much alike as twins, and with his yellow robe and dark glasses Lee Wing had no idea you were not Cham Loh. Fast work, Cham! You almost got away with it."

CHAM KEE shrank back against the wall, wordless, his face turning a ghastly shade of dusty yellow.

"But the pool of blood in the tong room, Sarge!" Faraday exclaimed. "How'd that get there?"

O'Hara kept his eyes fixed on the *tu-chun*. "Cham put it there himself. As *tu-chun*, no doubt he has his own set of keys to the tongroom. Maybe he carried some of Cham Loh's blood there—maybe it's his own blood, from a self-inflicted wound—"

A livid spark of fear shot through Cham Kee's eyes at O'Hara's last words, and the sergeant made a sudden lunge, gripping him from behind. We'll make sure, Faraday! O'Hara yelled. "Pull up his sleeves—let's have a look at his arms!"

"*Wang pu tau!*" Cham Kee cursed, writhing like a maniac in O'Hara's grip, but Faraday closed in and pinned his

flailing arms, pulling back the wide sleeves of his blue *shaam*.

"You're right, Sarge!" Faraday shouted, pulling loose a strip of cloth that bandaged a three-inch gash on Cham's naked yellow forearm. "It's his own blood he left at the tong room!"

"You sure believe in doing things right, don't you, Cham?" O'Hara asked bitterly. "Every detail worked out perfectly!"

Faraday was shaking his head in frank amazement. "You've pulled off a swell piece of work, Sarge, but I'll be damned if I see how you figured it out."

"It wasn't hard to figure, *after* I found out that Cham Kee was the Blue Death poisoner!" O'Hara replied.

Faraday stared at him. "You knew that beforehand?"

O'Hara shook his head regretfully. "Only tonight. If I'd only found it out an hour or two sooner, I could have saved Cham Loh's life."

Sergeant O'Hara turned suddenly and seized Cham Kee by the front of his *shaam*. "Why did you kill your brother? Why?"

CHAM KEE made hissing noises, glaring at him in sullen rage. O'Hara sent him spinning against the wall.

"So you won't talk, Cham? Well, I can make a pretty good guess. This wasn't one of your planned murders, like the Dai Yao job. You had a fight with your brother, and you had to kill him. Was it because you had to silence him? Was it because he had suddenly found out *why* you never smoked that fancy bamboo pipe of yours?"

Cham Kee shrank back against the wall, his teeth half bared in a vicious snarl. Faraday saw the *tu-chun*'s ornate pipe lying on the *k'ang* and picked it up curiously. "What's all this hocus-pocus, Sarge? It's just a Chinese pipe, isn't it?"

"Handle it with care, Faraday," O'Hara replied. "That bamboo pipe is going to be Exhibit A in this case! If you'll notice,

it's never been smoked—and for a very good reason. Watch!"

Grasping the long bamboo stem, O'Hara twisted it loose from the jade block with its silver bowl. He held up the stem so that Faraday could see the enlarged width of the hollow tube.

"Cham Kee used this bamboo pipe-stem just like a boy's pea-shooter," O'Hara explained. "Only Cham used poison pills instead of dried peas for his shooting! He did it all from outside Dai Yao's house—just pushed the long stem between the window bars and kept shooting until he got one of the Blue Death pills into Dai Yao's cup."

"Now I get it!" Faraday exclaimed. "That mysterious knocking at Dai Yao's front door! Cham watched at the back window for the right moment. Then he knocked at the door, and ran back to do his shooting while the room was empty. All he needed was half a minute clear."

O'Hara looked across to the sullen, glaring yellow man. "You put in a lot of secret practice for that trick, didn't you, Cham? The first time, you landed the fifth-pellet in Dai Yao's cup—the second time you only missed twice. That's damn good shooting."

Cham Kee made no reply, hunched against the wall, his slant eyes watching them with baleful venom.

Faraday grinned. "Remember, Sarge, when you found those extra pills scattered around on the floor, you figured the poisoner must've been nervous?"

"The first time, yes—but not the second," O'Hara answered. "I'd been wondering why the stolen powder had been made up into pellets. I placed pieces of paper wherever I'd picked up those extra pills. I saw they were all on the *farthest* side from the window, and all of a sudden the whole scheme dawned on me. I could see those blue pills hitting the table top, bouncing off and rolling—"

"Did you see the trick blow-pipe too?" Faraday asked.

"Yes," O'Hara nodded. "Funny part of it is, that it was Cham Loh himself who tipped me off about this pipe, without knowing it. He told me jokingly one day that his brother's new pipe was so extra-fine that Cham Kee never smoked it. That called my attention to the pipe—made it stick in my mind."

"Well, we've got to locate the rest of the Blue Death powder," Faraday said.

"We'll find it," O'Hara declared confidently. "It must be hidden around here."

"Say, I've got a hunch!" Faraday exclaimed. "Since the bamboo pipe is Cham's secret weapon, maybe he carries the ammunition for it in his tobacco pouch!"

"It's worth a look," O'Hara replied, picking up Cham Kee's soft leather tobacco pouch. He opened the draw-string and stirred the tobacco with his finger—strong Chinese tobacco smelling rankly of nut-oil. Then he emptied out the tobacco and crushed the pouch in his hand.

"Yeah—there's still something inside!" O'Hara declared, and turning the pouch inside out, began to cut away the lining. With a sudden rush, round blue pellets came spilling all over the floor.

WHILE Faraday scrambled about to recover this final evidence, O'Hara walked over to the savage-eyed Cham Kee, half-crouched like an animal at bay.

"Cham, there's only one thing missing now—the knife you used on your brother! You might as well hand it over to us. We'll find it anyway, if we have to tear the whole place apart."

Cham Kee looked at him, licking his lips. Then he shrugged. "It is useless to make struggle when the Lords of Destiny frown: *Wah!* I will give you knife."

The yellow man stalked out into the hall and kicked aside a strip of matting. Bending down, his fingers pressed expertly until a short length of floor-board tilted upward. He reached into the opening and pulled out a double-edged knife with a bone handle.

Suddenly he looked up, his face contorted with murderous rage. "I give you knife, Sah-jin—*so!*" he screeched, his half-crouch changing to a tigerish.

Sergeant O'Hara was borne backwards by the hurtled weight crashing headlong against him—searing pain like the touch of white-hot metal stabbed through his shoulder as the thin blade bit into his flesh.

Momentarily O'Hara beat back his berserk foe by a swift punch that sent Cham Kee reeling backwards. But the yellow man sprang up again and lunged once more as O'Hara scrambled to his feet. The sergeant's bare hand closed frantically over the driving steel, holding fast even as a razored edge sliced into the thick of his palm.

With Cham Kee tugging desperately to free the knife, O'Hara lashed out with a tremendous right hook that crashed squarely against the yellow jaw and sent him smashing into the wall. He bounced back with a spinning half-turn, swayed, then pitched forward on his face.

Faraday, gun in hand, had been waiting in vain for a clear chance to deal with Cham Kee. Now he sprang to O'Hara's side. "Where'd he knife you, Sarge? How bad is it?"

"Shoulder!" O'Hara gasped, steeling his face against the pain of motion. "I'm all right, Faraday—only a flesh wound." He raised his lacerated hand, dripping blood all over the floor, but still holding fast to the bone-handled knife.

"Well, I wanted this knife," he muttered. "I got it, all right—but the hard way! Seventeen years on the Chinatown Squad, and I fall for one of the oldest tricks in the bag!" He looked down at Cham Kee, lying on the floor, panting and gasping, but still glaring black hatred.

"That last stunt of yours wasn't very bright, Cham," Sergeant O'Hara said in a voice that had the steely coldness of a gun barrel. "If you'd been really smart, *tu-chun*, you'd have used this knife on yourself!"

PEA-SHOOTER



By LIEUT. (j.g.) W. W. ROBINSON, U. S. N. R.

THE truck from the Receiving Station rattled off down the pier and left Coxswain Johnson and Seaman Kelly standing by their sea-bags. Neither spoke for a moment as they scratched their heads. Kelly gave a low whistle and turned rounded eyes up to Johnson.

"Didn't I warn you, Kel?" Johnson murmured sadly.

"Yeah, but I sorta hoped—" Kelly's voice descended to a murmur, and the two men looked again at the object of their sorrowful comments. The U.S.S. SC 446, with Hampton Roads glittering in the sunshine behind her, was not a sight to bring sorrow to most men who have a feeling for ships, but to Kelly and Johnson the 110 foot subchaser was no cause for rejoicing.

"You could put the whole blamed thing on one wing of the *Lex*'s bridge and still have room for a couple of 50 foot launches," wailed Kelly in a sudden indignant outburst.

"Some ship we draw—ain't even got a name," Johnson mourned. He gazed across the Roads toward Newport News and pointed fiercely. "And that beautiful big flat-top over there just waitin' for us to take over when she's finished."

"Let's go over the hill!" Kelly reached impulsively for his sea bag, but Johnson's restraining hand on his shoulder halted him with his knees still bent. Slowly he straightened. "You're right, John. We're fixed for good. I never did trust Receivin' Ships. You never know when they'll pull your name out of a hat—and we was all set for that new queen—Aaah!" He spat in the water.

"At least they pulled us together, bud," Johnson said a bit gruffly.

"Yeah, that's something," Kelly agreed, then burst out again. "But we don't belong on these pea-shooters. We're flat-top sailors. We want to pay 'em back for the old *Lex*. Why can't they let the feather-merchants drop their ashcans from these here overgrown fishing smacks themselves?"

*Pea-Shooters, Feather-Merchants, Overgrown Fishing Smacks,
Ashcans—What a Comedown from the Mighty "Lexington"*

"The feather-merchants are doing some pretty good fishing these days, sailor," a deep voice burst in on their plaints, and their mouths clamped shut with the wise celerity of men trained to pipe down for authority. Chief Boatswain's Mate Mike McKee rose from his seat on a bollard by the bow of the 446, slipped a pocket edition of "Tale of Two Cities" into his khakis, took off his heavy horn-rim spectacles and stepped forward to shake their hands. "I'm McKee," he offered without smiling. "Guess you're our new men. Needed you in sort of a hurry. We're pulling out and we didn't have time to send to Miami for some regular subchaser men." He stopped and eyed them closely. "Don't think much of our little ship, eh?"

"Well—" The two men shifted their glances from him and moved uneasily.

McKee chuckled. "I know how you feel boys. What ship you from?"

"The *Lex*."

"Yeah, it's a big change all right. I been out twenty years, and my last duty was commissioning the old *West Virginia*. Never thought I'd end up on something this size, either, when they called me back." He paused and cast his glance along the SC's graceful sheer and rakish bow. "Give her a chance, though, boys. You could do a lot worse. She can give a sub hell." His keen eyes again turned full on them. "Good bunch of 'feather-merchants' too," he said, emphasizing the regular Navy's term for the ready-made ratings handed out to wartime Reserve enlistees. "Come on, get your gear on board. We won't be here long."

The two men shouldered their bags and stepped down the gangway to the gently heaving deck of the 446, saluting awkwardly. They halted, crowded against each other on the narrow deck, and Kelly bumped his sea bag into the engine-room hatch, throwing them both off balance. They teetered their bags, and finally dropped them to the deck in a heap. Kelly muttered under his breath.

"Look out for that Grumman taking off. Let's go down to the hangar deck where it's safe."

"Up forward for both of you," McKee directed. The two men threaded their way behind him, ducking the machine-gun mounts and leaning outboard to clear the pilothouse with their bags on their way forward. Just as he got to the hatch, Johnson knocked into the three-inch gun on his blind side, spun around once, and crashed to the deck. As Kelly hopped out of the way, the life line caught him just above his knees, but McKee stepped forward in time to prevent bag and Kelly from taking a header into the water.

"Easy, boys," he chuckled. "This ain't the *Lex*'s flight deck now. You mind where you step on an SC. Down the hatch with you. Johnson, you're number one bunk, Kelly four. Your lockers have the same numbers." Smiling to himself, McKee walked aft, drawing "Tale of Two Cities" from his pocket, and adjusting his horn rims across his bull nose.

The two sailors huffed and puffed their bags down the hatch and stood in the middle of the cabin, panting lightly. Without speaking, they gazed around the narrow cabin and at four men lying on the bunks. They introduced themselves curtly and began stowing their gear.

"You guys been through the Miami School?" a machinist asked from his bunk.

"Nope," Johnson grunted, struggling with a lashing on the bag.

"We're off the *Lex*," Kelly offered. "We was at the Receivin' Ship here waiting for a new flat-top at Newport News, but they snagged us for this here detail in one awful hurry. Why'd they need us so quick?"

"Supposed to be sailing today, and the cox and a seaman are in the hospital."

"Sick?"

"Nope. Got in a little mix-up on East Main Street last night. Seems they got arguing with a destroyer man about SC's, and first thing you know there was more tincan men than SC men."

"Oh—" Johnson and Kelly worked silently on their gear.

"All you guys been to that school in Miami?" Kelly broke the pause.

"Just about," the machinist answered. "Most SC men go through there."

"How long you been in?" Johnson asked, head down.

"About six months."

"Been to sea?"

"Only on this." He patted the bulkhead affectionately.

"Like it?" Johnson's head was still lowered.

"Can't be beat. Good ship, good officers. We're lucky."

The newcomers exchanged deprecatory glances and finished stowing their gear in silence.

"Let's look around, Kel." Johnson straightened up and the two men climbed to the deck and stood by the three inch, squinting at the scene around them.

"Three inch—huh!" Kelly muttered. "What kind of shooting do you call that?"

"A three inch and two twenties. Boy—what a battery! Oh well, I hope they got some good fishing tackle, Kel. This coastal cruising's going to have some points to it." His eyes wandered along the pier, where other SC's were nested, their square sterns slapping the harbor chop. "Sure got a lot of gear on these little babies," he added. "Look at all these food crates on deck."

"What do they need them for?" Kelly mused. "They only stay out a couple of days at a time." He poked Johnson's arm. "Maybe we'll get some good liberties, John."

"Not in Norfolk, we won't!"

"Well, they're bound to get around some, even if they are pretty small. Might hit New York and Philly."

Johnson murmured assent, but his gaze was centered out in the harbor. "Look at them lovely ships! Even them little tin cans look good to me now." He pointed to two destroyers anchored in the Roads,

and his sad eyes also rested on two cruisers, a battleship, and several large auxiliaries.

"Them's *ships*!" he cried. "That's the Navy. When are we ever gonna see any action on this here pea-shooting, ash-can-dropping yacht. And if we do see action—oh God!" For the second time that day they hastily clamped their mouths shut, as a young man in khaki pants and shirt, hatless and tieless, but with a junior grade lieutenant's bars on his collar, stepped out of the pilothouse and smiled at them.

"You the new men?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Rogers, the skipper—glad to see you; we've been waiting for you." He extended a browned hand, and they shook it awkwardly. "All stowed are you? Fine. We'll be underway in a couple of minutes." He turned from them and called to McKee. "Set the Special Sea Detail, Chief."

McKee bellowed out the order, and all hands came to their stations. There was an excitement in the air, and all up and down the pier the other SC's and a few larger PC's and minesweeps were getting underway, churning the water in the slip with their backing engines.

"Hey!" Kelly turned from his post at a fender to Johnson, handling the line next to him. "They're all pulling out, John; all these little pea-shooters at once."

"That's right, sailor." McKee smiled secretly. "You boys just got here in time for some fun. We're off for somewhere hot."

"In this little baby here?" Johnson's eyes were wide.

"All these little babies here," McKee chuckled. "All of these pea-shooters, fishing smacks, and feather-merchants; you're going to sea, boys."

"Where?" they chorused anxiously.

"Well—" the boatswain toyed with his words. "There's been lots of scuttlebutt. We got sixty days supplies on board—" he paused and watched the effect sink in on his slack-mouthed listeners. "Nobody

knows for sure. May be the Solomons—may be the Mediterranean—may be—who knows? We're all set for anything."

The two men stared at each other in amazement, their throats choking. Slowly they relaxed and turned aside with sheepish chuckles. "Okay, 'Boats.' Okay. You got us."

McKee's smile faded, and his eyes narrowed. "I ain't kiddin', boys. Look how low we're settin'. Look at all these stores on deck. It's no overnight cruise."

"Cast off all lines," the captain's clear voice ordered from the flying bridge atop the pilothouse. Johnson's line trailed in the water as he and Kelly stared at each other. "Smartly there, Coxswain!" called the captain. "Get your line aboard." Johnson suddenly came to and hauled in his line without looking around. He could feel the captain, McKee, and the crew looking at the crimson tops of his ears, as curse after curse whirled through his brain.

The 446 backed easily out of the slip and took her place in the line of SC's heading out between Old Point and Wilmoughby. The little ships, despite being low in the water, stepped out smartly, the short bay chop curling up at their bows. The sun reflected dully from their gray paint, and the air was filled with the fumes and rumble of their Diesels. Ahead were the larger 173 foot UC ships, and astern came the more cumbersome minesweeps. Off to port, a bulbous fleet oiler weighed anchor in the Roads and poked her flaring bows into the line of little ships like a fat old black lady breaking into a parade of street urchins.

McKee indicated her to Johnson. "The *Moodna*'s not coming along for an overnight trip, Cox. She's where baby gets milk for a long time to come."

The two bewildered newcomers were off watch, but with the rest of the crew they stayed on deck to watch the long line of little ships file by Cape Henry. As the afternoon sun set over the Lynnhaven dunes, the last of the ships cleared the

guard vessel, and the convoy began to form up. The *Moodna* moved serenely up to her place in the center of the formation, not showing any motion in the light swell. The PC's dashed about like pointers looking for a covey in the underbrush, while the SCs and sweeps formed in columns and lines around the *Moodna*'s bulk. The clean bows of the SC's lifted on each swell, showing their sleek red underbodies, and the men on deck began to feel the quick, jaunty motion an SC has in any kind of a head sea.

JOHNSON and Kelly stood apart from the rest of the men and watched the strange sight of so many little ships heading due East together into the wall of night building up on the horizon.

"If it's still East in the morning, I guess it's Africa," Johnson finally managed. "Gee, did we hit it! We wanted action, but not on one of these things. What's this pea-shooter going to do when it gets hot, Kel?"

"What can we do? Oh just gimme one battery from the *Lex*! Even one gun bigger than three inch. Who're we supposed to beat up with this?"

"I guess we go after the subs," Johnson muttered.

"Subs!" Kelly spat. "I like to see what I'm fighting. Maybe we do gotta go after the subs, but how about if we run into the *Tirpitz* or a Jap cruiser, or Stukas, or—oh hell!" He beat his forehead.

"Solomons!" Johnson wailed.

"Africa," Kelly moaned, shaking his head.

"What did you say about liberties in New York and Philly?"

"Get out your fishing tackle, buddy." They eyed each other sadly and went below.

The tight little group of ships plowed eastward through the blue welter of Gulf Stream seas, and above them at night the stars wheeled through a moonless sky. The *Moodna* loomed over them, moving se-

dately without pitch or roll, while the SC's had a pronounced motion, although the seas couldn't be called high.

Kelly and Johnson were kept busy standing watch, drilling with the crew, and getting used to life at sea on a 110 foot scale. They began to know the crew, among them Horton, the quartermaster, hardbitten from years on the George's banks out of New Bedford; Davis, a machinist who'd been a garage mechanic in Kansas; O'Mara, with an accent to suit his name and a great longing for Chicago; Kowalski, from a New Jersey factory, new to the sea but quick to learn; Groscziewski from Pittsburgh, who spent all his spare time washing and eating, and was proud of the life career the Navy offered him; Fleming, the slender, pale yeoman, who'd never seen the ocean before and was deathly seasick, but kept on faithfully with his duties—and above all McKee, who kept the crew in line with an iron tenderness, and was systematically reading pocket editions of all the books on a high school reading list he'd got from his son. "Wuthering Heights" had followed "Tale of Two Cities" in his dogged off watch perusal.

On the third day out, Kelly and Johnson were lounging off watch, taking in the afternoon sun behind the canvas screen on the machine-gun platform. Fleming lay across the deck from them. He'd kept his noon-day meal down for two hours and was trying to sleep through the rest of the crisis. From time to time he opened one eye and smiled warily at them.

"Maybe he'll make it," Kelly grinned, as Fleming closed his eyes and changed his position.

"You wasn't so chipper yourself yesterday, my boy," Johnson sneered at him.

"And I suppose you was Father Neptune in person," Kelly bristled.

"I didn't lose anything."

Kelly hung his head. "I don't understand it. I never been seasick in two years at sea, till I got on this here bouncing besie. The *Lex* never acted like this in a

hurricane even, and they keep saying how calm it is."

"Wish I'd brought my spurs. Thought I'd given up bronco bustin' when I left the ranch, but maybe we'll get used to it. I hate to think what it's like when they call it rough."

"Look at that old *Moodna*. I used to call her a little ship and she ain't even twitchin'!"

They were silent and gazed at the wave crests swishing by the top of the opposite rail.

"Say," Kelly broke in, "doesn't it make you feel funny eating with the officers? They're nice enough guys but it makes me uneasy."

"Me too, but you got to get used to it. They're awful young, too, to be going way out here. I hope they know their stuff."

"What difference does it make when that *Tirpitz* comes around. What're we going to do?"

"Or a whole squadron of Stukas comes diving at us—or one of them big new subs comes to the surface and starts potting at us."

THEY looked at each other in sad silence till Kelly began to get a preoccupied look in his eyes, as his throat worked and his face paled. With a convulsive effort he leaped to the lee rail and was sick once again. Between gasps and moans, he cursed every SC on the ocean, and everyone on the staff of the receiving ship that assigned him to this blank, blank, blanking duty, while Johnson became very interested in a seagull flying overhead, and Fleming woke up and after one glance was influenced to give up the struggle for his noon-day meal. Soon Johnson joined them, and when the worst was over, he sheepishly raised his eyes to Kelly and together they cursed aloud, as Fleming sank back to his lying position with a groan.

"It's a hell of a Navy, Kel," Johnson wailed. "You and me and a yeoman hanging on the lee rail."

THE weather stayed good for another two days, and suppertime passed on the fifth day with Kelly, Johnson and Fleming all having managed three meals a day. Climbing into their bunks after the 8 to 12 watch, they caught sight of Fleming rubbing his stomach tenderly, and for the first time since they'd seen the 446, both men burst out in a spontaneous laugh. Fleming looked up quickly as he saw why they were laughing and smiled back.

"Just wondering if it was still there," he said.

The morning watch brought driving rain and a heavier wind, and through the day the seas built up gradually. At nightfall the little fleet was plunging through good old Atlantic graybacks and for the first time the *Moodna* began to dip her stately bow. Spray flew across the 110's with every crest, and there wasn't a dry inch topsides on any of them. But all was secure, and each little ship held her station as she plunged along. The lookout watch on the flying bridge meant a constant shower of driving, icy spray, which, with the wind, cut through oilskins and heavy clothing, and the trick of the wheel was a steady fight to hold her on the course. Much to their surprise and relief the seasick sailors didn't lose their sea legs again, and they turned in from the mid-watch tired, but not unhappy, falling asleep at once, despite the crash of the seas against the bow. Each time she dipped into a sea it sounded as if the whole Atlantic Ocean was battling its way into the forward compartment.

Roused by the quartermaster for morning chow, Johnson opened one bleary eye at Kelly as he slid from his bunk, holding on against the pitching of the ship.

"Well, we're still here, Kel."

"Yeah," Kelly mumbled grudgingly. "we ought to get submarine pay, but she can take it all right."

They dashed for the after compartment, and found Pulaski, the cook, balancing cornbeef hash and coffee in the galley. Pulaski was an eighteen-year-old former

short order cook in a hamburger joint, and had never been to sea before, but he fought seasickness, and the clattering confusion of his upside down, half pint galley to get something hot for the crew at every meal. He grinned palely as he handed them their hash, and they stumbled to the mess table, balancing their plates and cups. The captain was there, staring into a half-empty cup of coffee. The fatigue of his all-night vigil showed around his young eyes, and a light stubble covered his jaw. He gave them a tired smile.

"Get any sleep, boys?"

"Yes, sir," Johnson answered, "we managed to."

"Guess I could sleep most anywhere," Kelly added. His last words were drowned in a startled grunt, as the motion of the ship threw him to his seat ahead of schedule.

"Everybody's doing pretty well," the captain said. "All the ships are just about in position still, but it's a miracle, with the visibility we had last night. Well, guess I'll hit my sack and see if I can get a little sleep myself." He heaved himself wearily to his feet and made for the ladder. An extra lurch of the ship threw him against a bulkhead, but he held on and laughed grimly. "I wouldn't mind getting seasick, but I hope I don't get beaten to death," he growled as he started up the ladder.

"Little different than the Long Island Sound yacht racing the skipper used to do, I guess," Johnson chuckled, as the captain's feet disappeared from view.

"Oh this is lovely yachtin' weather," Kelly cried, as most of his hash leaped into his lap.

"But we're getting there," Johnson shook his head, "even if I don't believe it."

THE seas stayed high for the rest of the trip and on watch, in the bunks, or eating, it was a constant clutching for support to keep from being thrown across the deck. Nobody shaved, and the meals were sketchy, but even Fleming stood up to it

and the 446 kept her position with the rest of the spray-covered fleet.

Several days later, just at dusk, as the wind dropped, and the sun sank redly into a moderating sea, the signal light of the leading PC leaped out at them across the dark water, blinking orders.

The captain stood on the bridge while the signalman flashed an acknowledgement to the senior ship, then he turned with a satisfied smile to the executive officer standing beside him.

"Here we are, Jim. Our voyaging's over and the fun begins. Let's get all hands together. You take the deck and bear off on the new course behind PC 340." He indicated a 173 footer wheeling to port up ahead. "He's our guide now."

As he descended the ladder to the machine-gun platform, he watched the *Moodna* and her brood veer away on a divergent course. The blood of the low sun glowed along her counter as she steamed into the darkening east, and the small vessels around her were already becoming indistinct against the shadow of night. The captain waved in informal salute and muttered to himself.

"Thanks for the nourishment, old girl, and good luck to all of you." He made sure of the 173 footer ahead and the other SC surging along in their wake as he waited for the crew to reassemble. The sides, decks and superstructure of all three little ships were streaked with ocean brine, and their paint along the waterline was chipped and scarred, but as they moved off on the new course they increased speed slightly.

The higher pitched drone of the engines, so evident because the steady hum of their cruising speed had become an almost unnoticed part of the noisy little world aboard ship, communicated an excitement to the crew as they gathered around the captain to hear him speak. He groped for words and began slowly.

"Well—that's the trip over with, men. We're headed for business now, and it's

a tough assignment after a passage like this one. You all should know your battle stations pretty thoroughly by now, and you're going to be at them soon. We've got a rendezvous with a landing force about dawn tomorrow and we're to provide anti-submarine and aircraft protection for the landing on the coast later in the morning. We can expect enemy subs, ships and planes from here on, so you know what kind of watch I want stood. Sleep in your clothes, have your helmets and life jackets handy, and be ready for general quarters. Anybody friendly we might run into will have a pretty itchy trigger finger, too, so keep your eyes open. And 'Flags,' his eyes searched out Kowalski, the signalman, who raised his head solemnly, "you have the challenge light ready all the time." Kowalski mumbled assent, his face serious, and the captain paused, passing his gaze across their tired faces, grotesquely intent through their stubbled beards. "And, ah—well, that's all, I guess," he finished lamely, his face suddenly showing its worried youthfulness.

KELLY and Johnson weren't on till the midwatch, and they made slowly for the forward compartment, as the 446 and the SC behind swung up in position abreast of the guide. The sound gear began to give out its familiar piercing ping.

They paused at the hatch and looked through what was left of the twilight at the little ships to port and starboard.

"I bet the *Tirpitz* is scared now," Johnson muttered.

"Maybe we'll get a sub, John—maybe," Kelly burst out hopefully. "I'd like to get one of those babies."

"I like to see what I'm blowing up," Johnson answered. He looked again at the sleek shape of the SC to starboard, barely visible against the eastern horizon, and shook his head, "but at least we got here on this bucking bronco."

When they stumbled out of the hatch for the midwatch, the 446 was coasting

along through the last of the swell. The night was a deep black calm, with only a few stars here and there in the overcast. Their sleep-filled eyes took several minutes to make out the white at the waterline of the ships on either side of them.

Johnson took the watch beside the starboard machine-gun, and Kelly climbed to the flying bridge, where the captain stood, keeping a ceaseless vigil from beam to beam. The tenseness of the night filled all of them, and as they stared into the black all sorts of shapes loomed up ahead. At each false alarm of his eyes, Kelly felt a quick piercing in the pit of his stomach, and was about to cry out a hundred times, but always the shape dissolved into nothing. His eyes ached with the strain of staring at nothing, but he couldn't relax.

They rotated the watch on the guns and the wheel, and the four hours finally dragged their interminable length. Still nothing had appeared out of the ominous black, and the watch was relieved.

It seemed as though they had hardly touched their bunks when the raucous beep-beep-beep of the general alarm wrenched them up in a staggering, sleep-ridden dash for the ladder. As the cool air on deck hit their faces, the first thing they heard was the captain's voice echoing through the darkness above the swish of the bow wave.

"Can you see it now, McKee?"

"Not sure, sir," came the gruff answer. "It was bearing about three-thirty."

The crew scrambled to their stations, and in less than a minute the 446 had all guns and depth charges manned and ready. Johnson stood by as plug man on the three-inch, and Kelly crouched behind him as first loader. All hands stared tensely ahead, ducking their heads under the occasional spatter of spray flying across the bow.

"There it is!" Kowalski's voice was urgent. "On the port bow. Shall I challenge, sir?"

"Not yet." The captain raised his glasses to the spot. The first faint lumi-

nescence of dawn spreading over the water, and his straining eyes finally picked up a shape against the indistinct horizon. "There is another ship behind that," he muttered, his glasses still up. "One—two—three—four—" The tenseness left his voice. "Must be the convoy. Give them the challenge, Kowalski."

The thin beam of the night signal light shot into the blackness and after a nervous interval, the correct answer blinked back. A faint cheer rose from the deck, and the atmosphere relaxed as the little ships surged toward the bigger ones, exchanging call signs and orders.

As the convoy approached, the visibility increased, till the silhouettes of all the ships could be seen stretching across the gray sea. The high superstructures of the transports and supply ships formed the center group with several old four-pipe destroyers and corvettes ranging on the beams, and out ahead was the businesslike bustle of a cruiser. Far to the rear, behind the low shape of the tankers, an auxiliary carrier sat on the horizon like a flat building. A formation of dive bombers from the carrier roared out of the gray and ranged on ahead, low over the water. The three subchasers broke their formation and began to take position ahead of the leading transport. They were close enough now to see the landing barges ready to launch.

SUDDENLY a dull report echoed from astern, and all eyes turned to see a column of smoke and spray rising on the starboard side of one of the transports. It was followed by a burst of orange flame, and a pillar of black smoke shot into the lightening sky, ever growing thicker at the base.

"Torpedo!" echoed the cry over the 446 and questioning eyes turned to the captain.

"Keep your lookout," he snapped. "There'll be more than one of them. That destroyer has a contact."

The fourpiper nearest the stricken ship

was making a radical course change, heeling as she turned, and astern of her, accompanied by an ominous thudding, rose the depth charge geysers.

"Periscope to starboard!" Johnson's battle-trained eye spotted the thin plume about a thousand yards off the bow, and he called out the information.

The captain jumped to the voice tube. "Full right rudder. Come right fifty degrees. Stand by for depth charge attack. All engines ahead full."

The 446 leaped ahead as the Diesels roared smoke, and the depth charge team under McKee stood by on the stern. The periscope disappeared at once, but the captain gauged the spot, and stood tensely, watch in hand. Spray splattered across the gun crew and beat on the pilothouse, as the 446 surged toward her prey. The captain dropped his upraised hand and cried:

"Roll one!"

The dirty gray cans rolled off the racks on the stern.

"Fire two."

WITH a deafening "*whoosh*" the K guns shot their hammers of death into the air on each side. After what seemed like a lifetime the keel of the 446 shivered to the crack of the explosions and the whole sea rose up to fill the sky astern. As the second explosion from the K gun cans rose up, they sighted the track of a torpedo further astern, headed for the leading transport. But the jarring of the 446's cans had done their job of spoiling the sub's aim, and the torpedo disappeared harmlessly.

On all sides of the convoy, depth charges thudded, and escort vessels veered to the attack. The subs had struck with their savage wolf-pack tactics, and every vessel had her hands full. The 446 described a wide circle away from the slick of the explosion, and all eyes watched the spot for signs of damage to the sub. The captain called down the voice tube to the

sound machine where the executive officer was coordinating the information.

"Can you pick him up yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Let me know."

"There he is, sir," Kowalski cried, as the black nose of the submarine poked sluggishly through the surface.

"We flushed him up!" the captain cried. "Head right for him, Horton," he ordered the helmsman.

The sharp blast of the three inch cracked over the foredeck, as the alert gun crew tried to put a shot in the low target, but it had already disappeared. Again the depth charges rolled and thudded, and this time the sub was forced all the way up. As soon as she cleared the surface the three inch cracked again, and this time the shell crashed home in the conning tower. The starboard machine-gun began spitting tracers at the sub's gun mount.

"Stand by to ram," cried the captain, and again the 446 headed in for the kill. The sub's machine-guns spurted back and pock-marked the 446's bow. Her heavy gun fired one shell, which whistled close overhead, and then O'Mara's machine-gun found its mark, and the sub ceased firing, her gun crew falling away from their positions like broken dolls. Seeing this, the sub's commander crash dived once more.

Full speed ahead the 446 bore down on the spot, as the stern of the sub went under the churned water. All hands braced themselves for the crash, which threw the bow into the air and off to one side. The little ship shuddered from stem to stern, and slewed wildly to starboard. The captain ordered the port K gun fired, and the can shot away from the careening hull, to burst under the sub.

The savage duel had not ended yet, for the sound machine picked up the crippled sub, and the 446 rounded in for a new attack, still able to keep underway despite the crash. This time the depth charges completed the work, and the ugly black hull of the submarine rose bubbling to the

surface, capsized sluggishly and began to sink, while the three inch punched shell after shell into the exposed bottom.

THE convoy had moved along its course, carrying on to the landing, in spite of the attack. The captain gave orders to close up on it, and sent McKee to inspect the damage to the bow.

Johnson, his clothes plastered to him with sweat, spray and grease, turned to look at Kelly, who was rubbing his oily hands on his dungarees. Johnson winked and Kelly grinned back.

"Bring on the *'Tirpitz'*, my boy."

"I don't think we've any bow on us, but we're still afloat." Johnson shook his head incredulously, and patted the hot gun. Kelly interrupted with a startled shout, as up ahead a plane swooped low over one of the transports and strafed the decks.

"Air attack, Captain!" he cried, and Johnson yelled to Davis to break out the AA shells.

McKee emerged from the fore peak and hurried to the captain. He reported breathlessly, "She's taking it, Captain. We glanced off—didn't hit square. She's pretty bad, and she's worked some but the pumps can handle it. I've shored it up. She'll be all right."

"Very well," the captain smiled. "We're lucky, because we're not through yet."

Slowly the 446 forged up on the convoy. Near a patch of burning oil one of the corvettes was taking survivors from the water, and the subchaser moved in to help. Suddenly the sky rained zooming death, as a swastika-ed wing swept down, flashing in the new light of the sun. The AA guns of the two ships spit back at the plane, whose bullets spattered through the struggling heads in the water. The depth charge crew began hauling oil-covered swimmers from the water, while the gunners tried vainly to bring down the tormenting plane, which made run after run. Bullets splintered into the pilothouse and along the deck, and Groscziewski fell from his post

at the three inch gun sights. Kelly jumped into his spot, and kept the gun firing into the sky. Fleming, streaked with oil, ran forward to Groscziewski, pulled him out of the way, made him comfortable, and then returned to care for the wounded, water-logged survivors.

As quickly as they'd come the planes disappeared into the distance, pursued by fighters from the carrier, and as he followed their flight to the horizon, the captain made out the rocky hills of the coast where already the first transports were launching their barges. Deep flashes of gunfire came from the east, and only two miles away the American cruiser could be seen belching steel at three ships further out.

"Enemy destroyers," the captain cried.

"Look at that cruiser," Johnson yelled, at his gun. "Listen to them guns. He got one!" he crowed, as a sheet of flame burst around one of the destroyers.

The drone of an airplane engine could be heard again between the gunfire's roar, and Johnson's sharp eyes picked up the plane skimming in low over the water from astern.

"He's after the cruiser," he cried.

"Torpedo plane," the captain added.

He turned the ship to bring the three inch and starboard machine-gun to bear on the plane, and already O'Mara's tracers were arching over the water. The three inch cracked rapidly. Just as it passed abeam, a stream of smoke burst out from the plane and a moment later it disintegrated in the air.

"That's his torpedo!" Johnson gave a bloodthirsty yell. "We stopped him. Keep on firing, you cruiser."

THE captain stretched luxuriously in his bunk and opened an eye at McKee.

"What's the matter, Chief?"

"Sorry to bother you, sir. It's a slip from the shore patrol. You've got to sign it."

"Shore patrol!" The captain sat up.

"You mean we made that landing just to put the shore patrol on the beach?"

"Well, they're functioning already, sir."

"Who is it?"

"It's Johnson, Kelly and Kowalski, sir. They've been in a little rumpus on the beach."

"Good Lord. What's their story?"

"Well, sir, it seems they was talking to a couple of sailors from our friend the

cruiser, and the cruiser lads asked them their ships. They told them the 446 and one of the cruiser men asked which transport brought us over on its deck. And, er, well, the shore patrol brought them in." McKee paused, his face a mask of solemnity.

The captain rose. "Bring them below, Chief." He winked broadly. "I'll—er—attend to the prisoners myself."

THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

(Concluded from page 6)

tending a case don't you let one of my patients get well instead of having them all fatalities?

You would not know Alaska at present. With war conditions, everything is changed. Now the International Highway runs very close to your mining location on your Halfaday Creek. If we get any more civilized, you will have pilgrims coming to view the scene of the activities of Black John Smith.

I have still not regained my sanity and am grubstaking old-timers to go out and hunt for new fields where we can get away from this too civilized spot and make some money out of a new mining camp. At present the indications are good that we have hit on something worth while, but it will take more work and prospecting to show what the real values are.

When the war is over, why don't you come up here for a visit and get more data for your tall tales, although to tell the truth we are pretty quiet and well-behaved at present. Our mails are very irregular, and in your last serial we got the first issue of the magazine, missed one, got the third issue, and now we wind up with your story still a blank to us, as that issue evidently has gotten lost in transportation. However, we enjoyed reading what we got of it.

Yours as ever,

J. A. Sutherland,
Fairbanks, Alaska

And Here's Old Cuss

Cushings Fort,
Halfaday Creek, Y. T.

Dear Hendryx,

I reckon the ink ain't dry as yet on my last letter, but things are happenin' so damn fast nowadays with the U. S. Army skyhootin' to hell and gone about the country that I wouldn't be surprised to see one of them big rubberneck bussin' a comin' high tailin' up the crick.

All comes like this. Me and John's been given a ride in one of them mechanical cockroaches the Army's using instead of a good honest dog team and we stops over at Shorty Chambers' place at Champaigne Landing. Shorty an' all of us is plum disgusted with so many pilgrims pestacating about. It's the desecration of national and historical sites and locations—John's responsible fer this. Bad enough to turn the old White Pass wagon road from White Horse to Lake Kalane into a boulevard and spoil the peace and sanity of the Upper White by contaminatin' the air with the stink of gasoline. But they are turnin' the Old Dalton Trail into another of them Military Highways. Yes, sir, so help me Bob. The Dalton boys along with Judge Irving and that half-breed Tom Savage, though that twan't his real name, done cut that trail from Haines Mission on the Childcat River clear over the hump into Champaigne Landing 140 miles of tough goin'.

That's how Shorty Chambers done took on that homestead at the Landing. He kinda looked out for the lame and sick stock Tom Dalton drew over the trail.

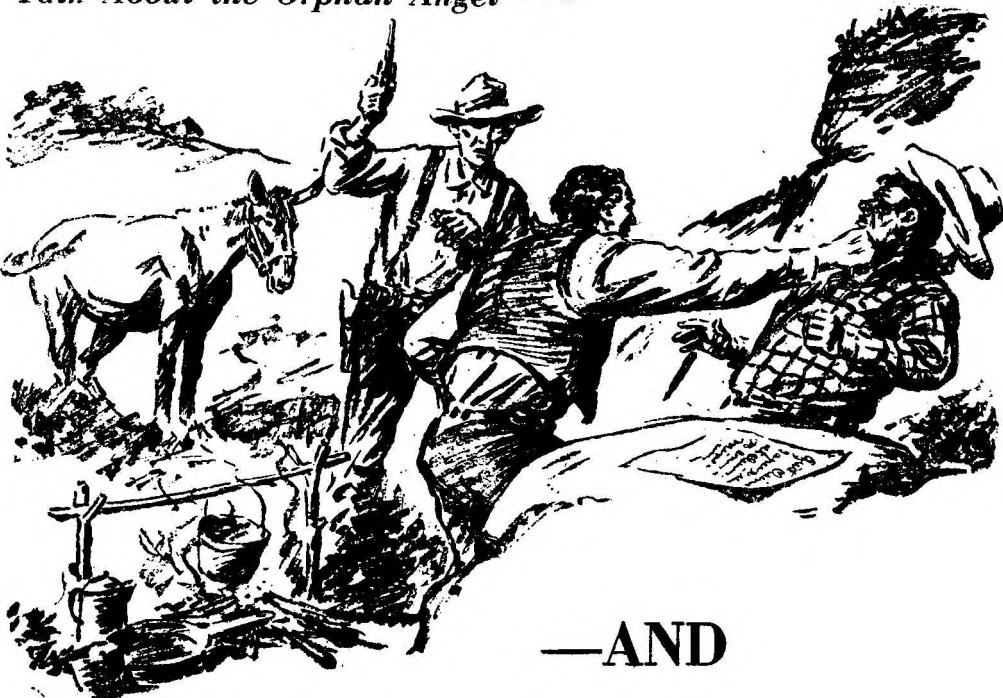
Now they ain't any more peace and quiet in Alaska. Me and John's going to clear out of Halfaday, and start a new place to hell and gone up on the old Crow River, an' I'll bet a worn-out Mukluk they ain't goin' to run no damn wagon road out there.

The boys send their regards, that is all but Pot-Gutted John. He took to the timber and ain't been seen since.

Best luck. They tell me that they's rationed to a quart of likker a week in Washington State. I was thinkin' of going outside fer a spell but when I heard of that I decided to stay in Alaska.

Cuss,

Talk About the Orphan Angel —



—AND

PASS THE AMMUNITION

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

Author of "Riddle in Store," etc.

THE telegram said: MC CLOUD SERIOUSLY ILL WITH PNEUMONIA COME AT ONCE. But when I got to the little mining camp of Aurora and went to old Doc Leviton's hospital, I found that it wasn't pneumonia that had Tim McCloud flat on his back and looking like a gaunted ghost of himself—it was a bullet through the lungs. And Tim wanted me because he had a tough job for me to do.

I was in the mood to take on a tough chore. You see, I'd gone out to the Coast to enlist in the Army. I ain't exactly a youngster any more, but I can still tramp thirty miles across Pahroc Desert behind a burro any summer day, and there's no gray in my red hair, and though I tip the scales at 'way over 200 it's all in bone and height, no fat. Hell, I figured a recruiting ser-

geant would rub his hands when I walked in. The sergeant did, too. But the examining doc wanted to know howcome I couldn't lift my left arm higher, and I had to tell about the bullet an ore thief put in my shoulder. Then the doc looked at my left foot and frowned, so I told him how lucky I'd been to come out of that Ophir Mine cave-in with nothing but a smashed ankle. *I don't even limp!* I assured him. Then he looked in my mouth. Damn it, you can't work in Mexican lead mines without losing some teeth. The doc stepped back and glared. *Gosh'd'mighty, man, there's a helluva big job you can do outside the Army!* he practically shouted at me. *With the experience you've got—Mike, don't you know how Uncle Sam needs copper and lead and tungsten and a thousand other scarce metals? You go back*

and turn out the ore. That's the biggest thing you can do!

So help me, after that Army turndown I'd have tried the Navy, though I get seasick looking at just a mirage, if that telegram about McCloud hadn't called me back to Aurora.

"All right, Tim," I snapped, sitting on the edge of his hospital bed, "what's this job you want me to do?"

He looked past me, to make sure the door of his room was closed. His faded old eyes were actually shining with excitement. Or was it fever, I asked myself.

He whispered, "Mike, I've got it. It's right there, all I have to do is reach out and grab it!"

"Grab what?" I demanded, suspecting that he was out of his head. "How in blazes did you go and get a bullet through you, Tim?"

"What I've been waiting to grab for fifteen years!"

It wasn't fever, I realized. And he wasn't merely excited, he was—ecstatic. Yeah. Happy.

"I got pneumonia—"

"Don't kid me. The Doc told me the truth. Who shot you?"

"Mike, jerk open the door and see if anybody's listening."

I DID it, feeling like a fool. Of course nobody had an ear to the keyhole. I came back to the bed, glaring at Tim.

He explained, "Mike, for fifteen years I've been wanting to buy the Orphan Angel gold mine. Bransom wouldn't sell. But now he will!"

"Yeah? And what'll you buy a gold mine with?"

"Five thousand cash."

Now I did think Tim was delirious.

"Good Lord, Tim, Jeff Bransom must take five thousand clear profit out of his mine in a single week!"

"Oh, no, he doesn't—"

"And besides, where in blazes will you get five thousand?"

"I've got it all saved up!"

That took my breath. I thought of how he must've saved it — penny by penny, through all these years, out of his stingy pay as night watchman at this mine, mucker at that one, swamper in a saloon when laid off, eating beans and wearing rags, and always looking so desperately hungry and lonely and half-sick. And I remembered how I thought that he'd lost his life savings when his sister back East had lost her husband and he'd sent her a thousand dollars that he never got back. But now I realized that all along he had been a man high-lifted by a dream, feeding his mind and heart to this damned obsession of a mine he wanted—

"Blast it, Tim, Bransom won't sell that mine to you for \$5,000!"

"Yes, he will."

"Then it isn't worth a damn!"

"Oh, yes, it is."

"You don't make sense!"

"Mike, you want to know how I got shot?"

"I've been asking you for twenty minutes."

"I went down into the Orphan Angel mine—"

"Good Lord!"

"Yeah. And a guard popped me when I was leaving."

"Why in blazes did you sneak into that mine?"

"I had to see, I—I mean, I wanted to know, and—by God, Mike, I found out!"

"Ain't that swell!" Yeah, I was feeling plenty sarcastic. "And just what did you find out?"

"The Orphan Angel is played out. The vein's lost. Bransom will have to sell. He's been putting his money back into the hole, trying to pick up the vein again, and he's about broke. So he's just got to sell!"

"But if it's just an empty hole in the ground," I practically shouted at Tim, "why do you want to squander your life's savings buying it?"

"For fifteen years I've been waiting—"

"For what?"

"For a bonanza, Mike. A bonanza!"

Now, Tim McCloud's no fool. He never spoke an idle word in his life. I gawked at him, my brain in a whirl.

"B-But if there's gold in that mine, Bransom must know it!"

Tim didn't hear me at all. He was looking at the ceiling and his eyes were shining.

"There's a big ranch east of Visalia I aim to buy, Mike. Orange groves. Grapes, too. I'll send for Minnie and the kids. I'll have a Packard to go into town, but on the ranch I'll ride a *palomino*. I'll raise my own beef, too. I'll buy my whiskey by the case . . . no more rotgut, but White Horse and Highland Cream. Yes-sir, boy, the life of Reilly for me!"

"Did you wire me to come here," I yelled, "just to tell me how you're going to live rich?"

He looked at me, his face suddenly worried and wary. The carefulness of fifteen years of waiting couldn't be shrugged off in an instant.

"Mike, I wanted you to know about the bonanza, so if something happens to me— Damn it, I mean if I croak, you buy the *Orphan Angel* property!"

"I got just four hundred dollars."

"With my money. All I want is that you give my sister ten per cent."

"Be smart, Tim, and give her your five thousand cash."

"No! I tell you, Mike, there's a bonanza—"

"Where?"

"The Hump—I'll tell you later, Mike," he said hastily, then, for the doorknob started turning.

Tim's nurse walked in and frowned at me.

"Please, no more talking. Mr. McCloud must rest."

"Okay, Tim," I said, "I'll be back this evening."

He nodded. I went out and went to the run-down little hotel, and bought some newspapers and tried to read. I noticed

that the stock of the *Orphan Angel* was quoted at an all-time high, and I wondered. Getting restless, I went outside and walked around the little mining camp and noticed that the place seemed to be busier than the last time I'd been here. Finally I ate steak and potatoes at the *Nugget Café*, and then I went back to the hospital to talk to Tim.

And they informed me that Tim McCloud was dead. Had died at six p. m. They let me in to see him; and I stood at the bedside, and old Tim's words echoed in my ears—"I'll send for Minnie and the kids. I'll have a Packard to ride into town. . . . I'll buy my whiskey by the case. . . . Yes-sir, boy, the life of Reilly for me!"

OLD DOC LEVITON handed me an old-fashioned leather wallet. In it was \$5,000 cash. Leviton said, "Tim wanted me to remind you that you promised to do something with this money of his."

I nodded.

"Yeah, he wanted me to throw it to the birds."

The old Doc stared and I didn't blame him.

Believe me, I didn't want to obey Tim's instructions. But I had promised. So I went to see Jeff Bransom.

A hard-bitten customer, this Bransom. Sixty, but big and brawny and not a gray hair in his thick black thatch, his sun-burnt face craggy and weathered, deep-set icy-blue eyes that looked at you with an impact that set you back on your heels.

"What do you want?" he snapped when I walked into his office.

"I want to buy your mine."

His jaw dropped—then he turned red as he got mad.

"You damned young— Not for sale!"

"I reckon it is. I'll pay you more than that hole in the ground is worth," I snapped. I don't turn the other cheek.

"You got \$750,000 on you?" he whipped back at me.

"I said I'd pay you more than the hole is worth," I repeated, leaning over his desk and talking through my teeth. "Five—thousand—dollars."

He actually went pale he was so mad—or startled, and scared? I wondered.

"You plumb loco?"

"Your vein's petered out," I said. "All I want is the machinery. Iron rails are worth a lot just now. Your hoist and locomotives—"

HEE ROCKETED out of his chair. He cursed me, he poured out vials of vitriol, the upshot of which was that I was a low ignoramus, a rat and fool and that five thousand dollars wasn't three days' returns from the mine and that I'd better get out before he skinned the hide off my carcass with a letter opener.

I got out.

I walked the streets a bit to cool off; Bransom's elocution had my hands knotting into fists. I'd leave town tomorrow, I decided. And Tim McCloud's \$5,000—I'd send it all to his sister. I wasn't failing Tim. I tried to buy the Orphan Angel mine!

I went back to my hotel room.

I was digging a bottle of Scotch out of my suitcase when knuckles rapped on the door. Before I could call out "Come in!" the door was pushed open.

Jeff Bransom stalked in.

He was looking mad and gloomy and cunning all at once. His icy-blue eyes turned on me with the effect of spiking me to the wall. He wasted no breath on being civil, just rapped, "You still want to buy my mine?"

"Oh, go to hell. I'm tired of you and your mine."

"Do you or don't you want to buy that mine?"

"And if I do?"

"The price is that \$5,000 you mentioned, and twenty thousand more in ninety days."

"The price," I snapped back at him, "is

\$5,000 and ten thousand more in six months. Take it or leave it."

He took it.

I felt kind of breathless and shaky when he left.

Obviously, old Tim had been right when he said that the Orphan Angel mine was petered out. Tim had given his life for that information—and I'd given his \$5,000 for a no-good hole in the ground. I swore. That money would've done Tim's sister a lot of good. I swore some more as I thought of the ten thousand dollars more I still had to pay Bransom.

"But that ten thousand will be small change when you find the bonanza old Tim waited fifteen years to get hold of," I reassured myself. "There's plenty more gold on that property. Old Tim was so sure of that bonanza that he staked his life on it."

And lost—

I gulped whiskey until the shudders quit.

NEXT morning, when I sat down to breakfast at the Nugget Café, there was a newspaper on the counter and I started skimming headlines. One item froze me. I sat there, staring, reading it and just not absorbing it, just not wanting to believe it—and then the meaning hit me like a mule kick to the chin.

The President had ordered that, for the duration, no more gold was to be mined. All gold mining had to stop at once. *All gold mining had to stop.*

I let out a yawn that made the Mexican waitress scream. Clutching that paper in my hand, I came out of my chair in a rush and sprang for the door. Down the street I went, to the office of the Orphan Angel mine.

In I barged, banging doors.

Jeff Bransom was sitting behind his desk. I slammed the paper down in front of him and yelled, "You blasted pirate, you knew about this!"

He gave me a thin grin.

"I sure as hell did."

"Yet you sold me the mine—"

"That's business, my friend. When a property goes sour—you rig up an auction or a fire sale. Some way, you unload."

"But, Good Lord, I still owe you ten thousand!" I spluttered. "And I can't pay it! Even if I find your lost gold vein, I couldn't work it, I can't mine gold at all, so I just naturally got no hope of taking out enough ore to pay you that ten thousand."

He nodded. "You got a head on you, friend. Yep, if you don't pay off that note in six months time, I take over the collateral."

"Damn you, you'll get your mine back and have my money, too!" I choked.

"That's business, friend. Just business as usual."

And he sat there grinning at me.

I had a wild impulse to pick a heavy paperweight of gold quartz off his desk and plant it right in the middle of that grin. Common sense made me turn and hurry out of there before I tied a homicide rap around my neck.

I WALKED the streets a while, hating myself. I'd been such a damn fool sucker.

I'd handed Jeff Bransom a gift of \$5,000! All he had to do now was take a six months' vacation on old Tim's money, then return and take back the Orphan Angel mine. Lord!

Finally I went back to the hotel. I finished that bottle of Scotch, but even then I couldn't sleep. Hell, I couldn't even get drunk! Sick with heartburn and self-blame, I tried to figure out what was the wise thing to do now.

Next morning, I stalked into Bransom's office again.

I said, "Look, Bransom. You got me over a barrel. I want my \$5,000 back—and I can earn it."

His blue eyes nailed me to the wall.

"All right, talk. Make it convincing." "You knew Tim McCloud?"

"The hair-brained old coot who died of pneumonia?"

"Pneumonia, hell! He was the prowler your mine guard shot at one night. McCloud died of a bullet through the lungs."

Bransom sat up, staring.

"Why was he prowling 'round the Orphan Angel?"

I said, "Bransom, for fifteen years old Tim saved up money to buy your property—*because he'd found a bonanza on it.*"

"Down in the mine?"

"It'll cost you my \$5,000 to find out where."

"You tryin' to tell me that Tim McCloud got down into my mine and found an extension of my gold vein?"

"No! Your mine's petered out. But old Tim found another bonanza on your property. Cripes, man, you'd pay an ordinary mining engineer five grand for as much information as I've told you now!"

He shrugged, but his eyes were damned thoughtful.

"What's the use of finding more gold? It's illegal to dig gold now."

"But the ban on gold mining will be lifted after the war. Give me back my \$5,000 and I'll tell you where to look for that bonanza."

He shook his head, and grinned his thin-lipped grin at me.

"Spend \$5,000 unnecessarily? No, sir. 'Tain't good business. But I will have a look over the property. If there's another vein cropping out on Orphan Angel land, I'll find it. In fact, I even got an idea where to look."

"Like hell you'll look," I yelled. "I own the Orphan Angel for the next six months, and I'm warnin' you! Any trespassin' prowler will get what your mine guard gave Tim McCloud. A bullet where it'll do the least good. In fact, on you I'd waste two bullets!"

And I whirled and stalked out—my ears burning to Bransom's raucous guffaws.

Of course, I cooled off finally; and I tried to do some smart thinking. Ob-

viously my job was to make Bransom take back his gold mine and return my money to me. But how?

Just one wild, slim hope did I see—

Stored at the Orphan Angel were some cases of dynamite. I sent the muckers away after loading the cage with explosives, and lowered the cage to the bottom of the shaft. Then I wrapped a half-dozen sticks of the dynamite together with some caps in a tight bundle, to make a package that would blow apart if you merely sneered at it, almost.

Then I sent a miner to Bransom's office —"Tell him to come a-runnin'. Tell him the shaft's caved in."

Bransom came arunnin', all right. He showed up so promptly that I was convinced a hunch I had was true. Bransom still valued his mine; Bransom still had hope of relocating a vein down below. I was standing at the shaft mouth, staring down into it—and he came alopinq to my side.

"What th' hell's happened?" he yawped.

"Nothin'—yet," I said softly. "Mr. Bransom, the way you figure, this mine will come back to you in six months when I fail to pay off that note I owe you."

"So what?"

"So it isn't going to be very much of a mine, when you get it," I said, and I picked up that packet I had ready. "This bundle holds dynamite, and I got cases of dynamite on the cage below. If I drop this bundle down the shaft—"

"You crazy damn fool, you'd blast the shaft down and cave in the workings!"

"Glad you see it so plain," I snapped—and held the packet of explosives out over the hole. "If I drop this, how much good will you get out of this mine when it comes back to you? Huh, Mr. Bransom?"

His hard, high-colored face went kind of sick-white.

"What is this—you cuttin' off your own nose to spite me?"

"I want my five thousand dollars back!"

"You ain't gettin' it."

"I *am* gettin' it—or I'll fix this mine so it'll cost you twenty thousand to put it into working shape again."

He stared at me, getting madder by the second.

I said, "I don't bluff, Mister! Make up your mind, fast. Either give me back my money and take back your mine, or—"

He swung at me, moving so quick and unexpectedly that I didn't get set for the smack. His fist knocked me staggering away from the shaft mouth—and he lunged to grab the dynamite bundle from my hands. But I twisted sideways, and he missed—and I jumped back to the pit mouth and lifted the explosives again.

"Talk fast!" I yelled. "Is it a deal? Or do I drop this stuff?"

"Drop it and be damned!"

"Wh-what?"

"Go on and drop it, you fourflushin' Mick!"

"All right, damn you!"

I dropped the stuff.

Seconds passed. Then came a dull, heavy roar—and a shock beneath my feet so sharp and heavy that first thing I knew I was flat on my back on the ground, my wits in a daze; and down below, the jarring rumble rolled on, stretched out, as the sides of the shaft caved in, and entries closed down, drifts collapsing and closing up out into the diggings, roofs falling and walls bursting into the passages, blocking them with wreckage.

Bransom was lurching unsteadily to his feet.

"You loco halfwit," he rasped at me. And he stared at me a long moment, then turned and walked off.

Me, I felt sick, and I felt licked. And what hurt so burning much—what left me baffled and swearing at myself—Bransom looked *sorry* for me!

I HAD to go out and find old Tim McCloud's bonanza myself.

That was what I finally decided. Either that—or just quit, and I don't quit easy.

Of course, actually finding old Tim's gold discovery wouldn't do me any good. I couldn't mine gold until the war would be over.

"But maybe if I do find it, I can sell it to some speculator willing to hang on to it until peace time," I reasoned. Naturally, I would have to take a gyping when—and if—I found Tim's strike and sold it. I'd get a measly fraction of what the discovery would be worth.

And I wasn't very hopeful of finding it, anyhow!

I'm a miner, not a prospector. I know ores I've mucked out of a stope, but I haven't got the over-all savvy a good rock hound needs. Just the same, I had to go look for Tim's lost bonanza. It was the last hope left.

I got an outfit, I bailed old Tim's burro out of a livery barn. And I headed into the desert badlands southwest of Aurora. The Orphan Angel property included a helluva big swatch of no-good sand hills, frozen lava flows and a jumbled maze of scotched, brushy canyons that made a range called the Hump. That was my one clue. Old Tim had mentioned "the Hump" as the spot where he'd struck his bonanza.

But my slim hope faded like a black cat in a barrel at midnight when I slogged under a brain-addling sun close enough to the Hump to get a good look at it. Lord, it was a badlands big enough for a band of marauding Apaches to hide from a regiment of cavalry—as indeed had happened plenty of times when this country opened up.

"Maybe Tim's burro will back-track to his strike," I reasoned.

So far, I'd followed a dim trail to the Hump—the *only* trail into this scorched, Godforsaken corner of the Orphan Angel property. The burro had trudged right along, as if he knew where he was going. At sundown, we followed the trail up an alluvial cone into a high, slanting canyon; and the burro stopped in a little side gulch. Here were ashes of old fires; and mourn-

ing doves flew up from a tiny seep of water at the back of the gulch.

"At least I've found old Tim's first camp spot," I reassured myself.

I don't know why I looked westward, after I'd fed the burro what was left of my supper of flapjacks and beans, as dessert to his browsing on screwbeans and scrawny grass—but I did look 'way out over my backtrail. And far off, against the tiny rim of sun still over the horizon, I saw a dust cloud lifting into the sky.

My pulse skipped a beat.

"Somebody following me? By God, I'll feed hot lead to anybody trespassin' on my property!"

But I couldn't actually see anybody at that distance in the dusk. It might have been a dust whirl I saw, I realized. That's all. But I put my six-gun where I could grab it quick when I stretched out in my blankets to sleep.

WHEN I got up next morning, I searched my back-trail again, and saw nobody on the road at all.

I traveled on up into the range. The burro moved on into a little box-canyon—and stopped. Here was Old Tim's final camp, I guessed. Somewhere around here I should find his gold strike.

I started looking.

Well, I know several kinds of quartz ore; I've worked in the copper-silver glance you find in the Panamints; and I've sweated in placer diggings. So I'm not a green hand at identifying gold-bearing rock. I worked in an ever-widening circle from Tim's camp—and I found cactus and chamiso and rock wrens and lizards and several rattlers and thickets of tornillo and greasewood. But no gold. *No gold at all!*

Something else I did find, evening of the second day when I walked back to that tiny seep for water.

Tracks. Boot tracks.

Somebody else had been there for water.

"Somebody's followed me out here!"

That was my immediate suspicion.

I swore at myself. I was jumpier than an old maid. Seeing things. I talked myself out of my first soreheaded alarm; but I *did* decide that, tonight, I'd move my blankets out into the brush where I'd be hidden from anybody coming into my camp.

So I did that. Moved my bedroll into a thick tornillo thicket before I ate supper at all.

It was dark by time I finished.

And then, as I was draining my third, and final, cup of coffee, I heard a faint stirring behind me.

Being spooked up anyhow, I jumped to my feet like a shot, grabbing for my pistol. But even so, I didn't move fast enough.

A gun butt must've crashed to the back of my head—everything went black.

WHEN I was aware of things again, my skull felt like a boulder had caromed off of it, and pain throbbed like a bell clapper inside of it. Then I realized that I was stretched out on the ground, hog-tied hand and foot, and something like a flour sack pulled over my head and tied. Helpless!

There was movement around me. Listening, not letting on that I had come to my senses, I waited. *Two men*, I decided, from the footsteps. But they never spoke. Never said a word.

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer."

"Who the hell are you?" I raved at them. "What d'you want? Did that so-and-so Bransom send you tailin' me?"

It was as if I was shouting into a hole in the ground. They never answered; never let on they heard me at all.

I swore at them, cussed them out till I was limp-weak.

I could tell when it was daybreak by the faint light that filtered through the sack over my head.

The two men stirred around camp. Fried bacon and heated beans and boiled coffee. But they never untied the sack over my

head, never fed me a mouthful—and never spoke a single word.

Then they left camp. So help me, they didn't even put the canteen to my lips!

I tried to squirm loose from the ropes holding me. I tried, when that failed, to roll over and over—but I was tied to a manzanita clump. So I had to lie there, just lie there, while the sun blazed down on me, and my stomach heaved and knotted with hunger and my throat got sick and raw from thirst.

Toward sundown, I heard voices of men approaching. I had a wild moment of hope. If they were *talking*, maybe they weren't the hellions who'd tied me up—

But they quit talking as they got near.

And not another word did they say as they cooked supper and ate and stretched out for sleep. They didn't talk—and they didn't feed me or give me a drink. I called them every vile word I could lay tongue to. But I was too gaunted to do halfway good a job.

Next morning it was the same thing.

I don't know how I endured that day. Guess I was out of my head part of the time. Evening coolness revived me some.

I heard the two men talking as they came back to camp again. Excited talking. But they cooked supper in silence.

And then—one of them squatted down beside me.

Hands worked at the ties of the sack about my head. The sack was lifted off. And there was big Jeff Bransom himself looking down at me, with an odd, excited, steely glint in his eyes—and behind him, holding a leveled gun at me, another man.

"Mike, here's some supper for you," Bransom said.

I started cussing him, I was so damned mad—but he held out a canteen, and I had to stop to drink. And when I'd had a long pull, he took the water and handed me a tin plate of food; and I was so starved I had to eat.

"All right, Mike," Bransom said when I'd had about enough. "Let's talk business.

I want to buy back this Orphan Angel property I've sold you. You paid me \$5,000—I'll give it back to you, every cent."

I stared, dumbfounded, flabbergasted.

"You'll wh-what?" I choked out.

"In fact, on account of—well, the treatment you've got last couple days, I'll add a bonus of \$500."

"Ain't you generous!" I yowped. "There ain't enough money in the world to pay for the grief you handed me."

"Ten thousand," he snapped. "Take double your money and keep a civil tongue in your fool head."

All of a sudden I came to my senses a bit. I was a fool. Just one thing could this about-face on his part mean.

Jeff Bransom has found Old Tim's bonanza, I told myself.

In hot-headed fury, I shouted, "I won't take *twenty* thousand dollars, you backstabbin' gyp!"

"You will," he whipped back at me. "You'll take twenty thousand dollars to sell this property back to me—or get a slug into your hide. I'm not foolin', Mike. If anybody ever does find your carcass out here, the coyotes'll have cleaned your bones so you won't even be identified. It's twenty thousand dollars—or one lead slug. Take your pick."

HE SQUATTED down and laid a paper on a rock and took a fountain pen from his pocket.

"I'm writing out a quit claim deed, Mike, for you to sign. Dan will sign it as witness."

"And you'll pay me the twenty grand with a check, I suppose!"

"That's right."

"How the hell do I know that the minute I sign the deed, you won't kill me anyhow and save the twenty thousand?" I yelled at him.

"I won't kill you."

"Anyway, if you're willing to pay that much money, you've found the gold strike—and it's worth ten times more."

"At least—" he said calmly. "Sign this."

Something streaked into my mind, then. Until I had signed that deed, they wouldn't kill me. *No matter what happened.* Because this bonanza belonged to me, or my next of kin, until they had my John Henry on that piece of paper.

"All right," I said thickly. "Give me the pen."

I REACHED my hand out for it; and as

Jeff Bransom held the pen for me to take with one hand and held that deed flat on the rock with the other—I closed my hand into a fist and smashed at his jaw with all the strength of my two hundred pounds behind it. Bransom went over backwards to the dirt.

His helper, Dan, lifted his gun and for one awful split-wink instant I looked into the muzzle and expected flame to spurt out of it. But swearing, Dan lifted the gun high and lunged at me, to bring the barrel crashing down onto my skull. I lunged, too. Right at him. Lunched out of a crouch, and lunged hard and fast—so fast that I got in under his swipe of the gun, and as it came down onto my back I was butting him with my head like I'd been projectile out of a cannon. He was a wiry, short man, and he went over backward, and I came down on top of him. But he was tough. He jerked his gun arm up, jammed the muzzle into my side. With my elbow I knocked it away—as it roared out. Deed or no deed, he was fighting for his life.

I got my big hand on the gun, and smashed his gun arm down across a rock, and the .45 flew out of his fist. I hit him then, square to the jaw; and he groaned out limp, senseless.

I scrambled to my feet, and stooped and snatched up the gun—as old Jeff Bransom made a lunge at it himself.

But I had it, and I told him, "Stand back and lift your hands. Damn you, I could kill the two of you now, and not a sheriff in the state would even hold me!"

"Look, Mike. I never intended to actually kill you—"

"I'll look, all right! I'm lookin' for that gold strike you tried to steal."

BUT first I tied them up securely.

Bransom said, "That bonanza won't do you much good without me. You won't find any gold. I'm tellin' you."

"Shut up!"

I looked for their tracks out of camp, then. I've got a good eye for trailing, and they'd made no attempt to hide their boot-prints. I followed their sign out of the box canyon and through a brushy saddleback into a wide basin that was gouged with water channels through a soft, dark earth. Against the far wall of the basin, where it rose sheer, I found a camp—an old camp. Tim's old camp, I realized.

And as I looked around, my heart sank.

No gold bearing quartz around here. And it wasn't a placer sand, either.

Against the bank stood a row of iron containers, like bottles, I realized suddenly. With tops. And a crude sort of furnace with an amazingly tall chimney of plastered stone—an amazingly careful contraption for a man to build out here. A big wheelbarrow, too, I saw. Full of this darkish-red soft earth. And then I realized that smoke was still lifting from the furnace, and that a retort stood on the furnace, and that the retort was connected to the chimney. Odd!

I walked over to the retort. Lifted a lid, and looked at it—and saw that it held a liquid, a fat gleaming silvery-dull liquid.

And all of a sudden I realized. I let out a shout of rage and hurrah. After all I knew about refining precious ores, it shouldn't have taken me this long to get wise.

"Quicksilver, by God! *Mercury!*"

That's what old Tim's bonanza find was. Not gold at all. Cinnabar—ore rich with quicksilver. That's why the furnace had such a tall careful stack to it; Old Tim had built it to boil the mercury out of

his cinnabar here, and the stack was to lift the dangerous fumes high into the air.

Then I thought of something else; Jeff Bransom had just offered me twenty thousand dollars to buy back this property. And that fat sum wasn't even a tenth of what this find of cinnabar was worth. Bransom had admitted it! I looked around—and saw that the high bank behind Tim's camp here seemed all darkish-red earth—and up and down the basin everywhere was this same kind of ground. A big find of cinnabar; damn big!

And then I really did let out a whoop.

"There's no ban on mining mercury now—good Lord, no! The government will fall on my neck with joy when I announce this find. The war effort needs all we can possibly get—and the price on it is plenty generous. I'm rich."

I went back to my camp, walking on clouds.

I SAT down real comfortably and took my time lighting my pipe. Jeff Bransom watched me narrow-eyed.

"So you know," he said.

"What I don't know," I said, "is why didn't you just wait six months? Then this property would've come back to you when I failed to pay the ten thousand I owe."

"But you might've found the cinnabar."

"Not a chance. I'd already crossed that wash. I was looking for gold, and I found neither quartz nor placer there."

"Also," he went on, as if I hadn't answered at all, an odd low pitch to his voice, "I was in a hurry. Y'see—my only son died in France in 1918. My only grandson is flyin' up in the Aleutians now, fightin' the Japs."

"So?"

"It wouldn't've taken six months, maybe two-three months more of legal proceedings if you fought it, for me to get this cinnabar and start shipping it. I—didn't want that much time wasted. I kept seein' my boy runnin' out of ammunition and—

What I mean is, mercury is scarce, awful scarce, and it's needed now. So—"

He shut up. I looked away, puffing hard on my pipe.

I had no capital to start developing this mine. Besides—damn it, I didn't want that boy running out of ammunition either!

"Look," I said. "You wanted to buy me out for twenty thousand. I'll sell you a half interest in this property for—the ten thousand I still owe you, and the five thousand I've actually paid you. On condition," I banged out then, glaring at him, "that you start working this ore with your

organization immediately—and that you admit you've treated me like a dirty rotten heel."

He kind of swallowed hard. But real solemn he said, "Yeah, I've been a rotten heel—" But then he blurted, "You don't actually mean it, man! You—you're actually handing me half of a fortune. Blast it, you shouldn't do it. It's no way to run things—"

"It is so," I butted in. "Even after I send Tim McCloud's sister her cut, it's a darn smart way. It's business," I said, "—but not as usual!"

IN the W. C. TUTTLE story in our next issue you visit Shell Valley and Jackass Canyon and make quite a few memorable new acquaintances:

BART COLTON—out of jail and full of ideas for revenge.

"ARIZONY" ANDERSON and **"WEARY WELLS,"** cowboys who did miraculous things and were seldom sober enough to know it.

JUD EADS—who tried to mix sheep, politics and cow country. The word was "tried."

• And don't forget the only cook on earth who could make beef stew out of mutton and make it taste like bear meat.

All in

"Law Rider"

in our next issue by

W. C. TUTTLE

Curioddities

BY Weill



HIS HAIR IS
THE MOST POWERFUL
WEAPON OF THE
RHINOCEROS-FOR
HIS "TUSKS" ARE
MADE OF NEITHER
BONE NOR HORN
BUT ARE COMPACTED
HAIR!



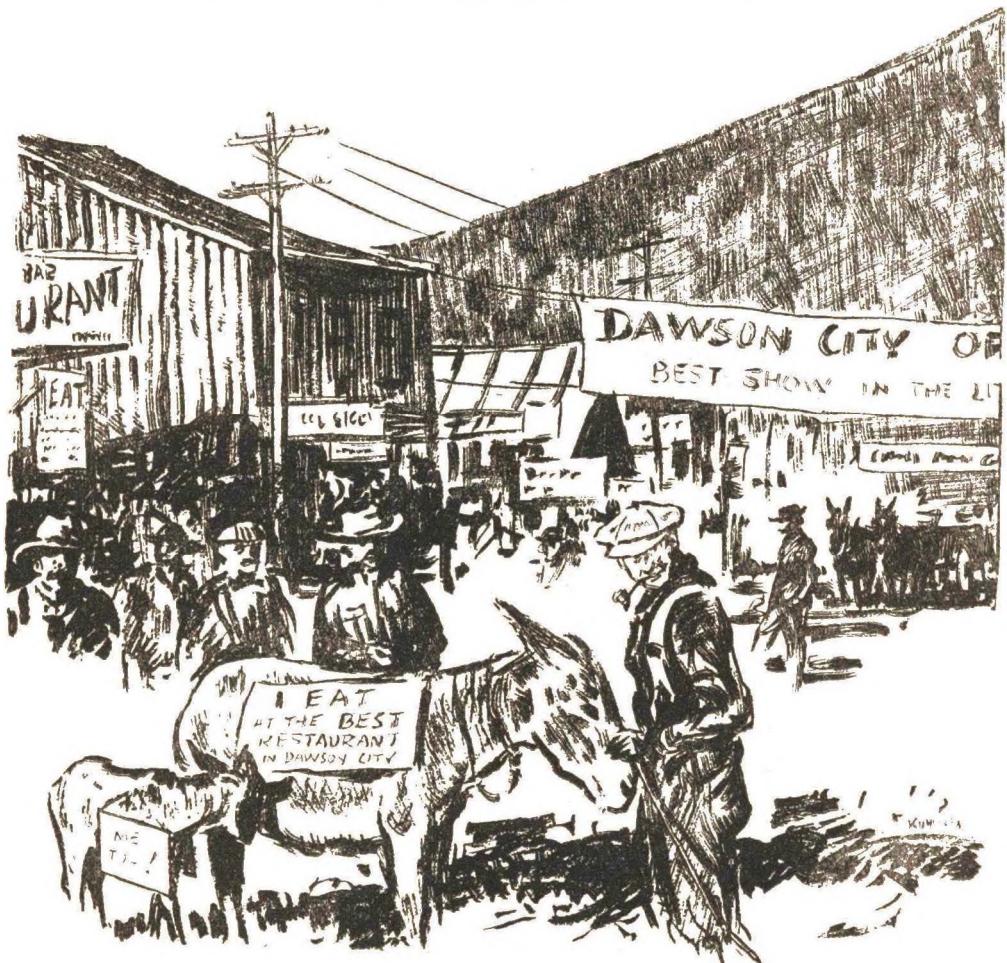
CHARLES VI,
KING OF FRANCE,
WAS GIVEN
POWDERED
PEARLS MIXED
WITH WATER AS
A CURE FOR
INSANITY!



IT IS ESTIMATED
THAT THERE ARE
ABOUT 1200 CRIMINALS
ARRESTED IN THE
UNITED STATES EVERY
24 HOURS!

WHAT PRESIDENT OF THE U. S. WAS THE FATHER OF ANOTHER PRESIDENT?
See Curioddities next time

"When All's Said and Done, It's a Hell of a Way from Moosehide and Halfaday Creek to Nirvana."



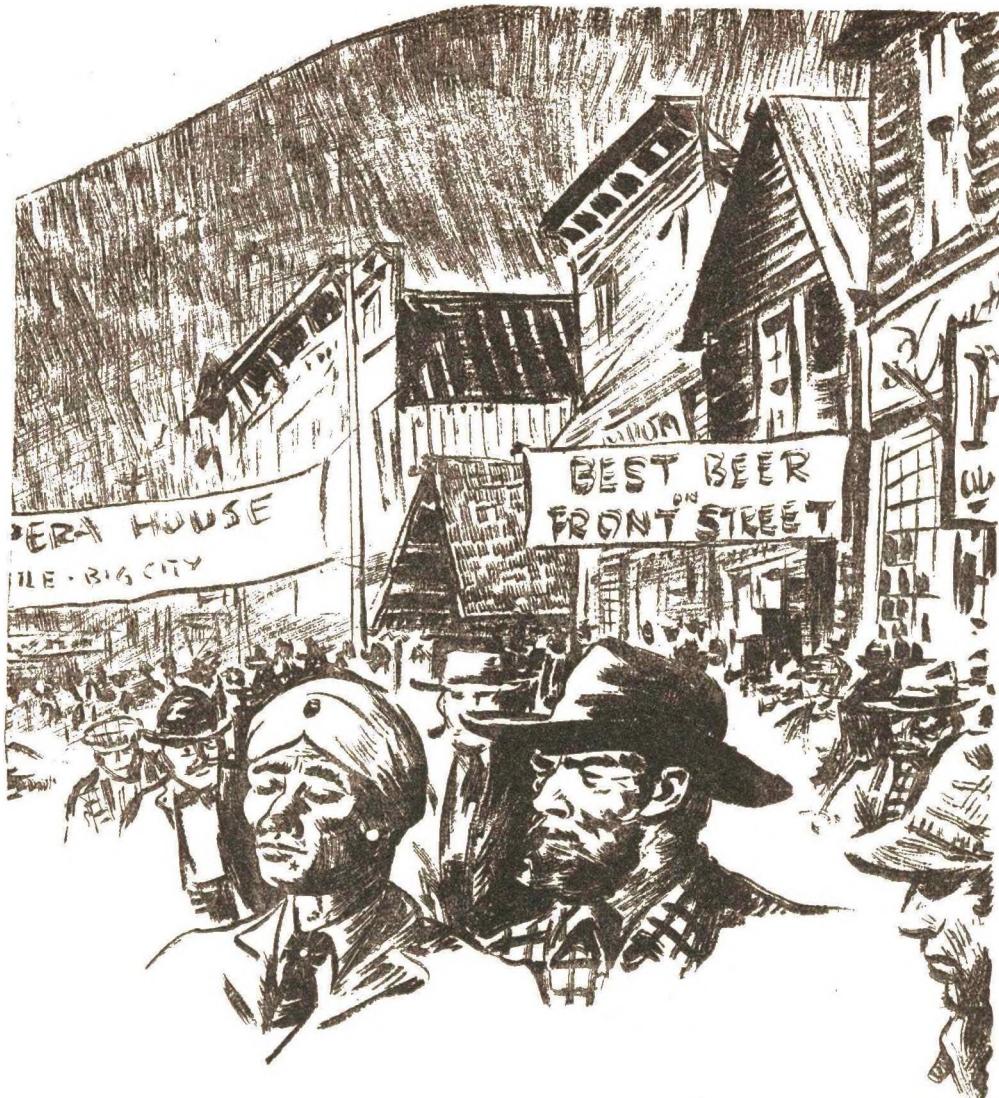
A SWAMI VISITS HALFADAY

I

BLACK JOHN SMITH paused in the doorway of the Tivoli Saloon in Dawson and eyed the man who was passing on the opposite side of the street. He was a tall man, slender and straight and dark. And he walked with a peculiar cat-like

smoothness, as though his feet scarcely touched the wooden sidewalk as he passed along. He wore a perfectly fitting suit of dark blue, and upon his head was a turban of snowy whiteness.

Moosehide Charlie turned a corner and joined the big man in the doorway. "Hello, John! When did you hit town? Figger on gittin' yer fortune told?"



By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of the Halfaday Creek Stories

"Jest got in," Black John replied. "Fetched down a batch of dust from Cush's. What do you mean—get my fortune told?"

"Well, I seen you lookin' Swormy over. Thought mebbe you was figgerin' on findin' out how yer luck would run tonight in the stud game. Bettles, an' Swiftwater Bill, an' Burr MacShane is in town. We'd ort to have a good session."

"Who is the gent with the rag hat?" Black John asked, with a glance toward the

man who was passing out of sight beyond the Klondike Palace.

"Name's Swormy. He's some kind of a nigger like. Tells fortunes, an' locates strikes, an' the like of that. An' if yer dead he kin fetch you back an' let someone talk to you. Lives in Bill McHale's cabin sence Bill kicked out."

"Bill dead?"

"Yeah. Died last fall. Went pretty quick, onct he got started. Claimed his belly was ailin' him, an' he run a fever. He

went to see Doc Southerland, an' Doc told him he had the appendeetis of the guts, an' he'd have to be took to the horspital an' operated on, right then. But Bill, he didn't have no faith in horspitals, an' he claimed how them young doctors jest wants to whittle on a man's guts fer practice, an' how it stands to reason an old doctor know'd more'n a young one. So he went an' seen old Doc Pettus. An' old Doc claimed it worn't nothin' but the bellyache, an' he give Bill a big dost of salts."

Black John grinned. "An' Bill found out Pettus was wrong, eh?"

"Well, old Doc might of be'n right, at that. Trouble is, Bill died before them salts got a chanct to work."

"I wouldn't let Pettus doctor a dog of mine. If Bill had let Doc Southerland go ahead an' operate he'd be alive now."

"I don't know," Moosehide said, only half convinced. "It don't stand to reason a man's got no more guts in him than what he needs. An' if they begin cuttin' out part of 'em you can't tell where they'd wind up at—not him neither."

"Swormy he hit town along about that time, an' he rented Bill's cabin off'n the public administrator. He's got it all fixed up with dim blue lights, an' curtains an' stuff in there. It's kinda spooky like. But by God, he's all right, at that! He kin fetch dead folks back to talk to you at five dollars a crack."

"He's nothin' but a damn fake."

"Like hell he is! Listen here—we all know'd Bill McHale didn't have no hell of a lot of dust. But we know'd he must of had some because that there claim of his'n on Squaw Crick was payin' better'n wages. So when Bill died the public administrator wanted to git holt of his property fer his heirs, if he could find any. So some of us went out to Bill's claim an' hunted all over hell fer his cache, but we couldn't find none. An' the police hunted all around Bill's cabin here in town, inside an' out, an' they didn't have no luck neither. The public administrator happened

to tell Swormy about it when he rented him the shack—an' by God, next day Swormy walks into his office an' lays three eighty-ounce sacks of dust on his desk. 'Here is Mister McHale's gold,' he says. An' when the public administrator asks him where he found it, he says he talked with Bill's spirit an' it told him where the dust was cached, an' he went an' got it. Don't you never read the papers? Cripes, there was a piece in both of 'em about it! An' some more pieces about Swormy—an' in the Whitehorse *Star*, too. You can't make no one in Dawson believe Swormy's a fake. If he wasn't honest, why would he turn that dust over to the public administrator? He could of kep' it an' no one would of know'd the difference. An' sence then damn near everyone in Dawson goes to him to find things out, er to talk to dead folks. You can't git to see him fer sometimes two, three days on account of so many waitin'. Fatima writes yer name down in a book, an' when yer turn comes she lets you know."

"Who's Fatima?"

"She's the one that works fer him. She's a damn good looker—kinda mysterious like. She don't wear no reg'lar dress—jest some kind of a long blue thing sort of looped around her like it might fall off, but it don't. When she first come quite a lot of the boys would foller her around hopin' it would, but when they seen it wouldn't, they give up. Some claims she's about as good as Swormy on them sperits. One fella claimed she used to be a chippy down to Frisco, an' her name is Kate Boggs. But he's prob'ly got her mixed up with someone else. It don't stand to reason no sperit would talk to that sort. Wish I know'd how to fetch them sperits back to talk to folks. It shore is easier work than shovellin' gravel."

BLACK JOHN'S grin widened. "Not a bad investment, at that," he said reflectively—them three sacks of dust."

"What do you mean—investment?"

"Why, two hundred an' forty ounces—that's thirty-eight hundred an' forty dollars to charge off as advertisin'. Looks like he's got quite a graft there."

"It ain't no graft. An' it wasn't no advertisin'. It was news—right there on the front page of both papers. Advertisin'—hell! No one would even looked at it if it was advertisin'."

"That's so," Black John chuckled, "I don't s'pose they would. Have you talked to any spirits?"

"Shore. I talked to my dad. An' he's be'n dead better'n twenty year."

"How's the old gentleman gettin' along, these days?"

"Well, he didn't say. I'm goin' back an' have another talk with him. Swormy claimed he was beyond the astral spear, an' harder to reach than them that ain't. But he claimed we'd keep on tryin' till we got him."

"At five bucks a throw, eh? But I thought you said you did get him?"

"Oh, shore—we got him, all right. But he didn't talk none, that we could make out."

"He jest come in the room, which it was dark in there. But I could hear him—kinda like a puff of wind. Seemed like he was tryin' to talk, but instead of that he rung a bell an' throw'd it over a curtain. An' then he played a couple of licks on a fiddle that was floatin' around in the air. It got me kinda scairt."

"Yeah—it must of be'n a comfortin' meetin'. Was the old man addicted to bell-ringin' an' fiddlin' before he stepped off beyond the astral sphere?"

"Hell no! He was a plumber."

"Plumber, eh? It would have be'n more convincin' if he'd of fetched a blow torch along instead of a bell an' a fiddle. But he prob'ly figured you might get a wrong impression of where he wound up at—what with hearin' a flame roarin' an' all. You shore it wasn't a harp he played on, instead of a fiddle?"

"Well, it might of be'n. I've never seen

no harps. Do they look like a fiddle, an' sound kinda squeaky?"

"They're about halfways between a fiddle an' a piano. It's claimed the angels favors 'em."

"This was a fiddle, then," Moosehide opined. "The old man wasn't no angel, by no means. Come on—I'll buy a drink."

As they poured their drinks Moosehide appealed to Curley, the bartender. "John, here, he claims Swormy ain't nothin' but a fake."

CURLEY'S brow drew into a frown as he slowly shook his head. "A lot of us thought that, at first. I've be'n around some—had a gaff-wheel concessh one summer with a carnival outfit that played the tanks through Ioway an' the Dakotas. We had one of them rag-head ghost jerkers along—Abou Ben Allah, he called himself—nigger from down Louisiana way, name of Mose Priestly—an' the way he ribbed them thistle-chins was a caution. Hell, every now an' then I'd give some jasper a break on the wheel—but not Abou. He was a grifter, right. He piled 'em in at a buck a throw, an' if they was sixty-year-old, er better he'd goggle into a big glass ball an' tell 'em their mother an' father was dead, in a voice that sounded like it come from the bottom of a grave. He'd g'arrantee them pumpkin rollers rain a week from next Tuesday, an' promise the other saperoos long journeys, visits from friends, profitable business deals, legacies, an' what have you—always far enough so we'd be in some other town when they was due. I hit plenty of squawks with my grift—but that guy never got a kick-back. It was a sweet racket, all right. But this Swami, he's different. He's really got somethin'."

"I'll say he has," Black John agreed.

"No, what I mean, he's on the up-an'-up. Hell, didn't he call up Bill McHale an' ask him where his cache was? An' when Bill told him, didn't he turn the dust over to the public administrator? Two

hundred an' forty ounces. By God, a man's got to be honest to do that."

"Honest er smart—one of the two."

"I wouldn't see nothin' so damn smart in handin' over thirty-eight hundred dollars that he could of shoved in his own pocket an' no one would of know'd the difference. That would be dumb, if a guy wasn't honest. No, sir—the Swami really gets hold of these dead guys. I talked to my brother that got killed four years ago in a train wreck."

"Hell, anybody could talk to a dead man without forkin' over five dollars to a Swami. The p'int is—did yer brother talk to you?"

"Sure he did. Claimed his spirit was livin' in a place called Nirvana which was free from all earthly evils an' worries. An what's more, he claimed he was happy. How Joe missed goin' to hell is more than I can figger. He was an onery cuss, even if he was my own brother. If Joe didn't get there, mebbe there ain't no hell."

"That's a comfortin' thought, at least," Black John grinned. "Did Joe's voice sound natural?"

"Well, not what you'd mebbe call natural. Fact is, I couldn't hear him very good on account it must of be'n windy where he's at. It was more of a whisper, like wind whistlin' around a corner. But it wasn't so bad when you come to figger it must of come a hell of a ways. What I claim—the Swami done damn well to git holt of Joe at all. You see, he went under four, five different names, on account of the police. I'll bet Joe's glad he's where them damn flatties can't bother him no more. No, sir—you got to admit the Swami's all right."

"**A**N' NOT only he can call up dead folks, he can see into the future, an' he knows where all the gold is that ain't dug yet. Look at that there young Griswold—a green chechako, if I ever seen one. Hit here last fall an' got a job cuttin' cordwood fer the steamboats. He figgered

on doin' some prospectin', so he goes to the Swami an' wants to know where he can make a strike. The Swami goes into a trance an' tells him to go up the Klondike till he comes to the eleventh crick an' foller that up two thousan' steps an' start to dig."

"An' charged him five dollars, I s'pose?"

"When the Swami dopes out locations like that he charges the reg'lar five dollars, an' on top of that you've got to sign a contract he got printed which gives him a twenty-five per cent cut on all the gold you take out of that claim. An' by God, when that chechako cleaned up his dump, this spring, the Swami's cut come to eighty thousan' dollars!"

"Some graft!" Black John chuckled. "Methinks the Swami is a man of parts."

"Yer damn right he is. An' it ain't no more'n right, at that. Cripes, take this here Griswold. He goes up an' digs where the Swami tells him to, an' damn if he don't hit one of the best locations in the country—an' him so green he didn't know a pan from a shovel. I'd be damn glad to give up twenty-five per cent if I could hit it that lucky. Hell, anyone would!"

"That's right," Black John agreed. "But suppose you wouldn't make a strike where he told you to dig?"

"Well, if a man didn't take out better'n wages he wouldn't need to work the claim. If you didn't git nothin' out of it, the Swami wouldn't neither. It's as fair fer one as it is fer the other. That's why I claim that contract's all right."

"Here comes Swiftwater Bill an' Bettles. I s'pose you fellas will be startin' a stud game."

II

THE two sourdoughs stepped to the bar and glasses were filled. Black John glanced at Bettles. "I don't s'pose yer hankerin' to set in no stud game sence that pair of kings of mine scairt out yer three tens the last time I was down?"

"Still braggin' about that whizzer you

run, eh?" Bettles grinned. "But you don't say nothin' about the time my four hearts an' a club made you lay down as pretty a pair of aces as a man would want to see."

"When it comes to makin' little ones beat big ones, the honors seem about even," Black John admitted. "How about a little game?"

Bettles tossed off his drink and refilled his glass. "There ain't no use rushin' matters. It ain't only four o'clock, an' there ain't only four of us here. Burr MacShane an' Camillo Bill will be driftin' along—an' with a game like that ahead of us it looks like a big night. What I mean, we'd better put in the time between now an' supper kind of fortifyin' ourselves. A man don't want to set in a game like that without he's organized to see it through."

"That's right," Moosehide agreed. "Me an' Curley's be'n tellin' John about Swormy. John claims he's a fake."

Swiftwater Bill frowned. "I ain't so sure about that," he said. "Most of them fortune tellers is, I guess—the ones that claim they can tell a man what's goin' to happen to him by readin' his hands, er feelin' the bumps on his head, er lookin' in a glass ball, er layin' out a deck of cards. But this guy's different."

"Don't tell me you've be'n conversin' with the ghosts, too!"

"Well—you remember Ike Boone, him that was killed in the ice jam a year ago this spring? I'd loant my Ross rifle to Ike about a month before he died, an' the rifle wasn't amongst his stuff when the public administrator took it over. I'd heard about how the Swami could call up dead folks, so I went to him an' told him about loanin' Ike the rifle, an' how I'd like to find out what he done with it. He told me to come back next day an' he'd summon Ike from the sperit world, so when Fatima told me he was ready I went there. 'You better try hell first,' I tells the Swami, 'because Ike never got to heaven onlest he snuck in.' He didn't say nothin', jest went into a trance, wallin' his eyes back into his head

till it looked like they was wrong side to. Pretty soon there was a kind of a wind like, an' a whisperin' voice says, 'I am Ike Boone. Who amongst the earth-bound wants to talk to me?' 'I do,' I says. 'Swiftwater Bill. What the hell did you do with my rifle?' 'A Siwash stole it a week before I died,' Ike says. 'What Siwash?' I asks him, an' he says some long Siwash name that neither me nor the Swami could make out."

"Hell—the Swami prob'ly told you that himself!"

"No, he didn't. It was dark in there, all but a kind of bluish light so dim I could jest make out the Swami's face where he laid back amongst them pillars. But I watched his lips an' they never moved. Even then I was a little doubtful, so when he come out of the trance I says to him, 'You shore that was Ike? I didn't recognize his voice.' An' he says, 'The earthly voice is a mechanical sound produced by the vocal chords, an' does not obtain in the sperit world. To convince you that this was the man you asked for, I will tell you that I conversed with him last night and asked him to stand by for a call at this hour. He mentioned that he had been killed a year ago this spring at the time of the break-up in an ice jam near the mouth of Indian River. 'That's him,' I says. So you kin see fer yerself that the Swami's on the up-an'-up, because Ike was killed a good four months before the Swami hit the country. He couldn't of know'd about that ice jam onlest Ike had told him."

"Ike—er somconc else," Black John said, and turned to Bettles. "How about you? You be'n prattlin' with the predestined, too?"

Bettles shook his head. "No. I was kind of like you—figgered he was a fake. But sence so many folks has talked to ones that's dead, an' that young Griswold makin' his strike where the Swami told him to dig—I ain't so shore. I'm sort of open-minded. The damn cuss must be honest

er he wouldn't have turned over damn near four thousan' dollars of Bill McHale's dust to the public administrator.

"Then, there's Bob Tail Saunders' widder. You rec'lect Bob Tail—cleaned up big fer them days down on Birch Crick. Used to hang around Bergman's at Forty Mile, an' talk about his lost strike on Bob Tail Crick. That's how folks got to callin' him Bob Tail. He claimed he got lost somewhere in them hills over back of Sixtymile, an' run onto this here crick where he panned out a few pans of dust that run twenty, thirty dollars to the pan. He named the crick Bob Tail on account he seen a bob-tailed wolf there. He staked a Discovery claim an' wandered around among the hills fer a couple of weeks before he found his way back to the Yukon. Then he spent the next five, six years tryin' to find Bob Tail Crick agin. But he never found it—er that's what we all figger, because on the last of them trips he never come back. That's seven year ago, come fall.

"After the Bonanza stampede his widder fetched their kid up here to Dawson, an' they've be'n livin' here ever sence. Bob Tail left her well fixed, an' fer quite a while she kep' on hopin' he'd show up. But fer the last couple of years she's kind of give him up."

"Shore, I know'd Bob Tail. But what's all that got to do with the Swami?"

"It's got plenty to do with him," Bettles replied. "That's why I was tellin' you I'm open-minded. I'm waitin' to see how it comes out. If the kid locates Bob Tail Crick, an' finds Bob Tail's claim, an' that quarter of a million dollar cache, then there can't no one claim the Swami's a fake."

"What kid? An' what cache?" Black John asked. "I rec'lect the time Bob Tail got lost in there back of Sixtymile, an' like you said, he wasn't gone more'n a month. Now how the hell could he have cached a quarter of a million in that month? I seen Bob Tail quite a few times after he

come back from there, an' heard him tell about makin' that strike. He prob'ly lied like hell about takin' out twenty, thirty dollars to the pan—but not even Bob Tail ever claimed he'd cached a quarter of a million."

"Course he didn't, because he hadn't cached it then. That's where the Swami comes in. You know the widder Bob Tail is a kind of a damn fool about some things—an' that kid's one of 'em. First off, she up an' named him Clarence, which ain't be'n no help to him. Bob Tail, he favored the name of Mike—but she won. An' I always figgered it served him right fer marryin' a woman that would name a kid Clarence, in the first place. An' on top of that, she's fetched this here Clarence up more like a girl than a boy. She claims she wants him to have culture—whatever that is. So, after school, instead of hellin' around with other kids, Clarence has got to go an' take a pyanner lesson off'n Dopey Joe, the perfesser down to the Klondike Palace. What I claim, I wouldn't want no kid of mine soakin' up the kind of culture he'd git at the Klondike Palace—even if his name was Clarence.

"Well, when the Swami hits town the widder she reads about him locatin' Bill McHale's dust an' turnin' it over to the public administrator, so she goes to him, hopin' to git holt of Bob Tail's sperit an' find out what become of him. The Swami locates Bob Tail without much trouble in some place called Nirvana. The widder talked to him, an' Bob Tail claimed this here Nirvana is a place where there ain't no earthly evils, nor no pain, nor worry. Accordin' to him it's a damn good place to be. But knowin' a lot of these fellas that's be'n talked to like I did, I've got a kind of a hunch that most of 'em's lyin' like hell about where they wound up at. Either that, er else the system of heaven an' hell that the preachers tells about has broke down completely.

"Anyways, that's where Bob Tail tells her he's at. She goes back the next day

an' has a chat with him, an' Bob Tail asks her a lot of questions about how she's gittin' along, an' how much money she's got left, an' he tells her he's got a big surprise to spring on her one of these days. So she keeps on goin' to the Swami every day, an' one day Bob Tail tells her that he found Bob Tail Crick on that last trip, an' the gravel was richer, even, than what he figgered it was. He says he stayed there an' worked it fer a hundred days, an' took out twenty-five hundred dollars a day, practically right on the surface with nothin' but a shovel an' a pan. He says the proposition was so good that he didn't want to leave it—jest kep' on shovelin' out the dust an' cachin' it. Then when the cold weather come on, he figgered on comin' back, an' then one day he fell in the crick an' ketched a hell of a cold an' it run into the lung fever, an' he died there in his tent, a-thinkin' of her an' the kid. Then he says that in a few days he'll tell her how to git to Bob Tail Crick, an' how to locate the claim an' the cache.

"So the widder hunts up me an' Camillo Bill, knowin' we was friends of Bob Tail's, an' tells us about the Swami, an' how she's be'n talkin' to Bob Tail, an' she asks us if we'll go up to Bob Tail Crick, come spring, an' re-stake Bob Tail's Discovery claim fer her, an' fetch down the dust out of his cache. In return fer which we was to file Number 1, above an' below, fer ourselves.

"Well, we know'd about that damn chechako, young Griswold, makin' his strike last fall where the Swami told him to dig, so me an' Camillo agrees to go, figgerin' we didn't have nothin' to lose on the deal except what time we put in, even if Bob Tail had give her a bum steer. An' if things turned out like he said, we'd be gittin' in on a damn good thing.

"So, a couple of days later she tells Bob Tail's sperit about us 'bein' ready to start as soon as the break-up come, if he'd give her the dope on how to find the crick. An' do you know what that damn Bob Tail

done? Why, the lyin' old coot told her we wasn't no friends of his, an' never had be'n—that we jest pretended to be. He said we was wolves in sheep's clothin', an' if she was to tell us where that location was, we'd go up there an' grab off that dust fer ourselves, an' file the claim in our name, an' she wouldn't git a damn ounce! He said that Clarence was to go to Bob Tail Crick—an' go alone. That if anyone else went he'd put a curse on that dust that both the ones that got it, an' her, too, would meet up with some horrible end. He shore throw'd the fear of God into her—an' kind of put her on the spot, too. You see, when she come to me an' Camillo she told us she wouldn't ask us to go if Clarence was fit to tackle the trip, but he hadn't never be'n in the bush, an' he'd prob'ly git lost before he got started.

Well, there wasn't nothin' else fer her to do but send Clarence. So when she promised, Bob Tail give her the directions, an' about ten days ago Clarence started. He didn't want to tackle it—but the widder ain't no woman to pass up a damn good claim an' a quarter of a million in dust, Clarence er no Clarence—so she made him go. An' now she's kind of worried. She owed up that she'd lied to Bob Tail when he asked her about the kid—tellin' him she'd fetched him up to be a real sourdough—an' him takin' pyanner lessons off'n Dopey Joe! So that's the way things stands, right now.

Black John nodded thoughtfully. "You say Bob Tail asked her how much money she had left—an' she told him?"

"Shore she did. Jest like she told him them other things he asked her—things any dead man would like to know about his widder—like how she was feelin', an' how the kid was comin' on, an' all. Only she lied about the kid, figgerin' Bob Tail would git mad if he know'd about them pyanner lessons—an' who the hell wouldn't!"

"An' of course the Swami was right there to hear it all?"

"Why, shore. He lays there in a trance, kinda r'ared back amongst a lot of blue silk fixin's, with his eyes walled back, an' that dim blue light on his face—looks more like a dead man than a live one, accordin' to what I hear."

"Bob Tail done pretty well on Birch Crick," Black John said. "He must of cleaned up right around a hundred thousan'—an' that was big fer them days. I s'pose the widder's got the heft of it left."

"Oh, shore. It don't cost her an' the kid a hell of a lot to live. I know she stuck it in the bank—prob'lly livin' off'n the interest. They've got plenty to last 'em from now on—even if Clarence never finds Bob Tail Crick."

"Mebbe," Black John admitted, "if she can hang onto it."

"What do you mean—hang onto it? Hell, it's in the bank!"

"That ain't sayin' it's got to stay there. S'pose Bob Tail was to advise her to draw it out?"

"Why the hell would he? Cripes, he can't use no money where he's at—even if she could git it to him!"

"Mebbe he couldn't—but the Swami could."

MOOSEHIDE CHARLIE scowled. "Damn it, John! Can't you git it through yer skull that Swormy's honest?"

"I ain't got it through there yet."

"Any damn fool would know that if a man turns back two hundred an' forty ounces that he could of kep' to a public administrator, he's bound to be honest. An' even if he worn't, why the hell would he bother with that there hundred thousan' of the widder's? Cripes, he was right there an' heard Bob Tail tell her where his cache is, an' jest how to git to it. If he was crooked all he'd had to done was to sneak out ahead of Clarence an' beat him to that location, an' move that quarter of a million out of the cache—an' no one would of know'd nothin' about it. They'd figger Bob Tail's ghost lied—er was jest

braggin', er somethin'. Everyone knows Bob Tail was hell to brag—an' lie, too, fer as that goes. What I claim—what a man would do, his ghost would do. Cripes, a man's ghost ain't nothin' but him—with the meat gone!"

Behind the bar Curley nodded solemn agreement. "That's right, John, when you come to think about it. I figger like Moosehide, that if the Swami was a crook he'd of snuck out there ahead of Clarence an' copped that quarter of a million before the little punk got there. There couldn't be no kick-back to that. But if he was to make a play fer that hundred thousan' that's in the bank an' try to clip her with a soft-song, she'd squawk, an' Corporal Downey would step in."

The door opened and Camillo Bill strode to the bar to be vociferously greeted by the sourdoughs. He poured a drink and regarded the others solemnly. "I jest be'n talkin' to Bob Tail Saunders's widder," he announced.

"Yeah?" Bettles said. "I s'pose she still talks to the old liar every day?"

"Yeah. Only now it's him an' the kid both."

"The kid! Is he back?"

"Back in the bush—at the bottom of some river. He's dead. Got drownded in a rapids. I could of told her she was a damn fool sendin' that kid off alone, like that—an' him never be'n out of sight of town before. She knows it, now he's dead. She's all broke up about it. Claims it's all her fault on account of lyin' to Bob Tail about the kid bein' a reg'lar sourdough."

"How does she know he'd dead?" Black John asked.

"Hell—she talked to his spirit! Day before yesterday it happened. She went to the Swami's fer her reg'lar pow-wow with Bob Tail, an' he told her he had bad news fer her. 'Clarence is here with me,' he says. 'He got drownded in a rapids before he got to Bob Tail Crick. An' then the kid chips in an' tells her how it happens. The widder says she expected Bob Tail to start

in an' give her particular hell fer lyin' about the kid bein' a sourdough. But he didn't. She claims he was nice about it—tellin' her 'twornt her fault, an' talkin' kinda soothin'. 'Which that ain't like Bob Tail, at all,' she says. 'Fore he died he'd of jumped all over me if he'd ketched me lyin' to him. It must be a fine place where he's at, to change a man like that. I ain't got nothin' to live fer, now,' she says. 'An' they tell me they're so happy there. I wish I could die an' be with 'em.'

"How does she know it was the kid she was talkin' to? Did she recognize his voice?"

"No. I ask her about that, an' she claimed she couldn't of told it was him by his voice on account of that there astral wind that's always a-blowin' up there. It makes a kind of a whistlin' sound swishin' amongst them sharp p'ints on the stars, the Swami says. But she knows it was him on account of things he told her. An' to clinch it the Swami told her he'd have the kid write a message to her next day in his own handwritin'. An' yesterday damn if he didn't show her a slate with a message wrote on it in the kid's own writin'! She claims she'd know that writin' anywhere, on account of the way he makes his Ps. It was a double slate, an' the writin' was on the inside. The Swami claims the sperits always use them kind of slates so the writin' can't git worshed off if it run through a rainstorm somewhere between here an' Nirvana where they're at. She says this here message was comfortin' as hell, tellin' how happy him an' the old man was there together, an' how they wished she was with 'em. An' the kid promised to send her a slate message every day."

"Well, what do you know about that?" Curley exclaimed.

"Not as much as I'd like to," Black John said dryly—"by a damn sight. Guess I'll slip down an' have a talk with the Swami. There's quite a few dead folks I'd like to talk to, myself."

Swiftwater Bill grinned. "Better not git holt of none of them birds you've hung, up there on Halfaday, John," he advised, "er you'll shore as hell git you an earful."

"I figgered you'd be wantin' to talk to someone, onct you'd found out fer shore that Swormy's okay," Moosehide said. "But you won't git no seance tonight. He's full-up. It might be a couple of days 'fore he'll git to you."

"All right. I'll go down an' git booked, though. You boys go ahead with the stud game. I'll be along later."

III

AS Black John approached the McHale cabin, located only a few doors from the notorious Klondike Palace, he met Mamie Hightower and Glass-Eyed Annie, two of Dawson's many entertainers. "Hi, gals!" he grinned. "Be'n down gittin' yer fortunes told?"

Mamie regarded him seriously. "Don't kid yourself, John," she said. "The Swami's not one of these cheap fortune tellers that will read your palm for a dollar, or read the tea leaves in the bottom of a cup, like Mrs. Lowe does, or spreads the cards out on a table."

"Four dollars better, eh?"

"He's the real thing," Glass-Eyed Annie said. "Why he told me all about myself."

"Must of be'n an earful," the big man laughed. "I'd shore liked to be'n in on that!"

"Honest, John—the Swami really has got something."

"I'll say he has, the way he's be'n topin' 'em in at five bucks a throw. Wouldn't mind havin' a racket like that, myself."

"But it isn't a racket," Mamie cut in. "I talked to my mother and my brother, and they've both been dead for years. Have you had a seance?"

"Not yet. Fact is I jest heard about the Swami today. Figured I'd go down an' pass the time of day with Eve. I never did get the straight of that Garden of

Eden story—about the snake, an' all. An' besides I've often wondered what she done fer clothes in the autumn, when the leaves begun to fall."

"You won't be joshin' about it after you've had a seance," the girl replied. "You'll know, then, he's the real thing."

As he neared the cabin the door opened and two men stepped out. "Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered, as he recognized them. "I can see how women might fall fer a racket like that—but sourdoughs like Curley an' Moosehide, an' Swiftwater Bill—an' now Al Mayo an' Bob Steel!"

"Hello, boys!" he greeted. "Be'n in consultin' Noah about when to look for high water?"

"No," Mayo said. "I was talkin' to Web-Foot Hertz the other day an' he claimed the Swami had put him onto a damn good location, upriver. So I figgered I'd try my luck with him."

Black John turned to the other. "How about you, Bob? You huntin' a location, too? Er did you jest stop in to pass a bit of banter with the departed?"

Steel grinned a bit sheepishly. "No, Swede Sam stopped in to Eagle the other day on his way back to Rampart, an' he told me about the Swami. You remember when Jack McQuestion an' the boys down to Circle hung Windy Smith an' a couple of others fer that murder on Birch Crick? Well, Sam was in on it, an' it's be'n kind of botherin' him ever since. He was here in Dawson an' heard about the Swami, so he went to see if there wasn't some way the Swami could find out if them three they hung was really guilty. The Swami called up the man that got murdered an' he told Sam that they was the ones, all right. Sam claims he's breathed easier since he heard that—claims the five dollars he give the Swami was the best five he ever spent.

"So I come up from Eagle to ask the Swami to get holt of a fella named Frank Manfred who used to live on Coal Crick. Some Siwashes found Frank froze to death, last winter, an' bein' as I'm deputy mar-

shal, it's up to me to try to locate his cache. He had a pretty good thing, up there. We hunted all over hell for his cache, but we couldn't find it. So, not to overlook any bets, I came up to have a talk with Frank."

"Did he tell you where the cache is?"

"Well, in a general kind of a way. I couldn't understand him very well on account of the whistlin' sound the wind made."

"Wind! Hell, the wind ain't blowin'."

"Not here it ain't. But it was shore blowin' where Frank was. I could hardly hear him. I got enough so I'm goin' back an' hunt again. The Swami wanted me to wait over for another try. But I've got to be gettin' back. You goin' to have a seance?"

"Yeah. Figured on callin' up George Washington an' findin' out fer shore if that spring contraption they've got there in Mount Vernon is really a set of false teeth, like they claim—er jest a patent mouse trap that Paul Revere made."

Steel grinned. "I don't know what you are talkin' about—but believe me, it's spooky as hell talkin' to a dead man."

A FEW minutes later Black John was admitted to the anteroom of the three-roomed cabin by Fatima.

"Your name, please," she asked, "and residence?"

"John Smith—Black John, jest in case I might get mixed up with some John Smith who's whiskers is some other color. An' at present I'm stoppin' at the Dominion Hotel, Room 21."

The girl made a notation. "Wait here," she said, indicating a chair. "The master will see you presently."

She disappeared into another room, and within a few minutes the door opened and a tall turbanned figure seemed to float into the dimly lit room. The man glanced at the slip of paper in his hand. "You are Black John Smith? And you desire a seance?"

"That's right."

"And with whom do you wish to communicate in the spirit world?"

"Well, there'll prob'ly be quite a few folks, if I have any luck the first time. If it's jest the same to you I'd like to talk to my Grandpa Smith—Diogenes K. Smith, his name was."

"Ah yes," the Swami said, making a note on the paper. "Did he become disassociated from the earthly sphere recently?"

"No. His disassociation come quite a while back. Along in 1862, or mebbe 3. It was durin' the Injun uprisin' back in Minnesota, where I come from. He was a circuit rider."

"A circus rider?"

"Hell — no! None of my folks was frivolous. He was a circuit rider—a sort of travelin' preacher. Rode horseback through the settlements, spreadin' the Word."

"Ah yes. Pardon my error. And can you tell me something of your revered ancestor?"

"Well, not much. You see he died quite a while before I was born. That's what I come here to find out."

"Do you know the manner of his departure from earth?"

"Only in a general way. Accordin' to what I heard pa say, his pa hit out one day on horseback from St. Cloud intendin' to hold church in the stockade at Sauk Centre, about forty er fifty miles away. The Injuns was on the rampage, so when several days had passed an' Diogenes hadn't got there, they sent out a searchin' party, an' located his body about halfways along the trail.

"The old gentleman had eight arrows stickin' out of his back, an' his scalp was missin', an' they figured that possibly the Injuns might of had somethin' to do with it. So you see, I'd like to have a talk with grandpa an' clear the matter up—sort of keep the family record straight, you know."

"Ah yes. I shall summon you tomorrow. I cannot give you the exact hour as my time is arranged by another. But Fatima

will notify you. You will be at your hotel?"

"Either there er the Tivoli Saloon. Us Smiths ain't no hands to let time hang idle on our hands. I guess we inherit it from old Diogenes. Pa's often told me that, come hell or high water, his father was always on his circuit. He abhored the wastin' of a moment—an' I'm jest like him. So rather than set around the hotel doin' nothin', I put in the time playin' stud at the Tivoli. So long, Swami—be seein' you later."

IV

BLACK JOHN went to the hotel, and after supper he proceeded by a round-about way and slipped into an unfinished shack from which he had an unobstructed view of the cabin occupied by the Swami.

One by one they came and went—chechakos, sourdoughs, girls from the dance halls—Lottie de Atley, Rena Fargo, the toe dancing Pickering sisters with their long sharp noses, the Drummond girls, Bertha the Adder, Nellie the Pig, Gene Laporte from Henderson Creek, Dave Gufetha, and many others.

Black John's eyes narrowed as he peered between the logs. "Fifteen, twenty minutes apiece," he muttered, "at five dollars a throw—fifteen, sixteen hours a day, seven days a week—an' be'n at it all winter. An' that ain't figurin' the eighty thousan' he got off young Griswold, an' prob'ly odd amounts from others. The sum total is well worth contemplatin'. Fer an honest man he ain't doin' so bad."

The late twilight was deepening when a figure detached itself from behind a lumber pile and slipped furtively to the back door of the McHale cabin. The door opened and Black John had a momentary glimpse of Fatima as she received a flat package wrapped in canvas from the man and passed him a similar one in return. Slipping the packet beneath his heavy sweater, the man turned and passing close

beside the cabin in which the big man was concealed, entered the Klondike Palace through the rear door.

Black John recognized him as one Claybank Berg, who in the early days of Forty Mile had located a rich pocket in a clay bank, worked it dry, and then through ill luck at cards and a fondness for red liquor, had become a hanger-on at the Palace, doing odd jobs for Cuter Malone, proprietor of the notorious dive, in return for drinks and the privilege of rolling an occasional drunk for the change he had left in his pockets.

Stepping from his place of concealment, Black John made his way to the street just in time to see Berg, the neck of a quart bottle protruding from his pocket, step from the Palace and head toward the river. Avoiding the landing, the man made his way down past the sawmill. Drawing a canoe from the old pump shed, he was about to slip it into the water when Black John stepped around a corner of the building.

"Hello, Claybank!" he said casually. "Where you headin'?"

The man started nervously and stared wide-eyed into the face of the speaker. "Oh, hello! That you, John? What the hell you doin' here?"

"Jest come down to see a fella."

Berg glanced swiftly about him. "But there ain't no one else here only me."

"You'll do. But you ain't answered my question. Where you headin'?"

"Who—me? Why I'm headin'—or, over acrost. Fact is, John, I located me a new claim. It's on a little crick over acrost the river. Yessir, right in another clay bank. You boys all claims the gold's in the gravel an' the sand. But gold's where you find it, I claim. I found her onct in the clay, an' damn if I didn't find her agin. You rec'lect that there strike I made on that feeder off'n Forty Mile—tuk twenty-two thousan' dollars in one summer right out of the clay. Yessir—tuk her out an' blow'd her in. Easy come, easy go.

"Tworn't my fault 'tworn't nothin' but a pocket."

Black John grinned. "Listen, Claybank," he said, "the only kind of pockets you've be'n prospectin' lately is the pockets in some drunk's pants. So don't try to hand me none of that bunk. Where you headin'? An' what's that you've got under yer sweater—that flat thing, there in front?"

"You mean this here thing?" the man asked, tapping the front of his sweater with a forefinger. "Why, damn if I know what it is. A fella in to Cuter's give it to me to give to a guy over acrost. Say, John, I got a bottle here. Wait till I find my corkscrew an' we'll have a little drink. Be like old times, eh—like down to Bergman's? You an' me ain't had a drink in a hell of a while. I was in the money, them days. Remember the time Bettles shot some of the chinkin' out from between the logs behind Bergman's bar, an' then told Bergman he better git busy an' patch it, er the next time high water come his saloon would sink?"

BLACK JOHN nodded slowly, his eyes on the man who was fumbling nervously in his pocket for the corkscrew. "Yeah, Claybank. I remember that time. I remember a lot of other good times we had, too. But that was when you was a man—an' not a damn no account, floor-moppin', spittoon-cleanin', drunk-rollin' bum."

The other's shoulders suddenly stiffened and he glanced angrily into the big man's face. "What's that yer sayin'? By God I—"

"You heard me. An' you know every damn word of it's true. You used to be a pretty good man, them days, Claybank—an' look at you now!"

The man's eyes dropped and his shoulders slumped as he drew the corkscrew from his pocket and fumbled at the neck of the bottle. Reaching out, Black John took the bottle from the trembling hands,

drew the cork, and handed the bottle to the man who was softly sobbing.

"Here—throw a drink into you. You need it." The man took a long pull at the bottle and handed it back. Black John held it up.

"Here's to them good times we used to have down to Bergman's," he said, taking a drink, and recorking the bottle. "Quit yer snivlin' an' set down. You an' me are goin' to have a little talk. You've be'n goin' down hill long enough. It's a time you got holt of yerself—before you hit the bottom."

"I ain't never rolled no sourdoughs, John—only chechakos, they'd blow their money anyway."

"That's ondoubtless a mitigatin' circumstance. But the ethics of drunk-rollin' is open to question, at best. Honesty is the best policy. That's an old sayin'—an' you'd do well to heed it."

"But hell, John—you're an outlaw."

"Who says so?" the big man scowled.

"Why—everyone. They claim yer all outlaws up there on Halfaday Crick—an' you're king of the bunch."

"If you'd stop to think you'd know better'n that. Hell, we've hung more damn criminals on Halfaday than all the police in the Yukon put together has hung. Does it stand to reason that if we was outlaws we'd hang these here miscreants? Hell, no! We'd welcome 'em. Ain't that so?"

"Well—yeah—it kinda looks that way."

"Shore. That's jest common sense. Listen, Claybank—the next time you hear anyone claim I'm an outlaw, you jest ask him to name one crooked move I've ever made. An' when he does, ask him to name another. An' keep on like that—an' you'll find out that it won't be no time at all till you've got him cornered. That proves it, don't it?"

"Yeah, I've heard how you hang folks, up there."

"You bet we hang 'em! Why, even drunk-rollin' would be hangable on Halfaday."

"Even if the drunk was a chechako?"

"W-e-e-l-l, it would be up to the boys. But I ain't got time to set here an' discuss the ethics of drunk-rollin' in all its aspects. You better wait an' take up them finer theological p'ints with St. Peter, when the time comes. Where you got that kid?"

The man's eyes suddenly widened. "What—what kid?" he stammered.

"Don't 'what kid' me! You come cleaner by God, you won't even be sayin' 'good mornin', Peter,' when you get to the pearly gates. It'll be 'good evenin''—an' this is the evenin'. Drunk-rollin's bad enough. But when you pile kidnappin' on top of that, an' then a murder, it ain't goin' to take old St. Peter long to give you the brush-off. He'll give you jest one look. 'To hell with you,' he'll say—an' the next minute the devil will be lickin' you on the ear with that long, red, forked tongue. But that won't make no difference to you, because by that time yer hangin' will be behind you."

"What do you mean—kidnappin'—murder—hangin'?" the man cried, his eyes staring. "Listen, John—you got me wrong! I ain't hurt that kid! I'm jest keepin' him there in the shack, like the Swami says, so he don't git lost. An' you got me wrong about moppin' floors an' cleanin' spittoons fer Cuter Malone. I usta do that. But I got me a real job, now. I'm workin' fer wages."

"Yeah? S'pose you tell me about it."

The man reached for the bottle, took a drink, and handed it back. "It's like this—last fall the Swami come an' rented Bill McHale's cabin, an' fixed it up kinda fancy, an' begun business. He kin fetch dead folks back to talk to ones that ain't. He didn't do much at first, on account of folks figgerin' he was a fake. But he ain't no fake. Hell, didn't he git holt of Bill McHale an' ask him where his cache was, an'—"

"Yeah, go on. I heard about that."

"He's damn partic'lar who he does business with. If you go there an' want to

talk to someone that's dead, the Swami won't jest go into one of them there trances an' let you talk to 'em. Nosser. He takes yer name an' where you live an' tells you he's full-up fer a day, er so, an' you kin come back later. It's got so now he's full-up all right. But that ain't the reason. He wants to make shore that the ones that talks to dead folks is responsible parties, an' not no crooks that might try to put somethin' over on 'em. So he investigates 'em.

"He got acquainted with Cuter Malone an' found out that Cuter knows damn near everyone in the country. So every night, 'long about one er two o'clock, he slips over to Cuter's back room, an' shows Cuter the list of names he got that day—an' Cuter tells him all he knows about 'em. He gives Cuter a dollar a name, an' if Cuter don't know about someone, he finds out an' then tells the Swami. There was half a dozen of us runnin' around fer Cuter findin' out about folks, an' Cuter give us fifty cents a head. Then a few days back, the Swami give me a full time job.

"You rec'lect Bob Tail Saunders—him that got lost huntin' fer Bob Tail Crick? Well, Bob Tail's widder has be'n comin' every day all winter an' chawin' the fat with Bob Tail, an' Bob Tail told her how he found the crick an' cached a hell of a lot of dust, an' then ketched the lung fever an' died.

"He told her how to git to the crick, an' she aimed to send Bettles an' Camillo Bill there to get the dust, but Bob Tail told her not to. He claimed them two would rob her out of the dust. An' that's damn funny, 'cause I allus figgered them two was square as hell. It jest goes to show that dead men knows more'n live ones. I bet you never figgered them two would pull a trick like that."

"I shore didn't."

"Well, Bob Tail told his woman that no one but Clarence should go after that dust. Clarence, he didn't want to go, but

the old lady made him. The Swami, he was afraid the kid might git lost, so he hires me to foller him an' tie him up in some shack where he'd be safe. I done so—got him in a shack about halfways betwixt here an' Moosehide. There won't no Siwash nor white man neither one go near that shack, which it's claimed to be ha'nted, on account of old man Freely hung hisself in it, couple years back."

"How long have you had him there?"

"Ten days—ever sence he hit out fer Bob Tail Crick."

"You feedin' him?"

"Why, shore! I'm feedin' him good. He had a month's grub along with him. It's a good thing he's where he's at. Jest between you an' me, this here Clarence ain't worth a damn, anyways you look at him. He'd of got lost shore—jest like the Swami figgered."

"You ain't told me what you've got under yer sweater."

"Oh, that's jest a slate. The Swami's a good-hearted guy, an' he figgered the kid's ma might worry about him whilst he was gone, so day before yesterday, when I slipped in to report, he gives me a slate an' a piece of paper with a message wrote out on it, an' he tells me to make the kid copy the message on the slate, an' then fetch it to him so he could show the widder that the kid was all right. He said the kid might not want to do it, first off. But it was all fer the best, so I should make him do it—like burnin' his feet with a candle. Well, I don't like to burn no kid's feet with no candle, so I jest slapped him a couple of times. Clarence ain't got no guts, so he copied the message on the slate, an' I fetched it in, an' Fatima give me another message an' another slate, an' tonight I fetched that one in, an' she give me this here slate. The Swami claims he's goin' to give the widder a message every day, so she won't worry about the kid bein' lost.

What I claim, a guy that'll go to all that trouble jest to keep a widder from worryin' is all right."

BLACK JOHN held out his hand. "Let's have a look at the message," he said. As he stripped off the cover, Claybank explained. "It's a double slate, so the message won't git rubbed off. The paper with the message is in between."

Black John opened the slate and read the message that dropped out:

We are so happy here. We wish you would come and be with us always. You can trust the Swami. Do as he advises without question. *Clarence.*

Black John eyed the other from between narrowed lids. "So you think these messages is to keep the widder from worryin', eh?"

"Why, shore. That's what the Swami said."

"Never stopped to think much about 'em, I s'pose?"

"Hell, no! The Swami don't hire me to do his thinkin' fer him. He tells me what to do, an' I do it."

"Take this here message—it says *we* are happy here. Who does he mean by *we*?"

"Why, me an' the kid. That's all there is of us in the shack. He's happy 'cause he ain't lost, an' is gittin' all he kin eat. An' I'm happy 'cause I've got a job with reg'lar wages, an' don't have to clean no spittoons."

"An' I s'pose you wish the widder was there with you—like this says?"

"Well, it wouldn't be so bad—I wouldn't have no cookin' to do, if she was."

"How much is the Swami payin' you?"

"Goin' wages—an ounce a day."

Black John nodded thoughtfully. "Cheap enough—fer a helper in a kidnapin', a murder, an' a robbery. Yes, sir—cheap enough."

"Hey—what the hell do you mean? That's twict you've spoke about murder an' kidnapin'! You know damn well I wouldn't kidnap no one, nor murder no

one, neither. An' I wouldn't steal a dime off'n no one but a chechako."

"I'm inclined to believe you, Claybank. But you've got to admit that you ain't very long on brains. The fact is that the Swami's a crook—an' a damn smart one. An' he's usin' you for a tool. When the show's over, you'll be left holdin' the bag. An' holdin' the bag, in this case, will mean that you'll either be knocked off by the Swami, er hung by the police."

"You've got him wrong, John! He's—"

"Shut up! I'm a friend of yours, ain't I?"

"Why, shore, John. I allus figgered you was."

"Did you ever hear of me double-crossin' a friend?"

"No."

"Then you listen to me. The Swami's makin' a play fer the hundred thousan' Bob Tail left his widder. The reason he goes to Cuter fer the dope on folks ain't because he wants to know whether they're responsible. It's so the fake spirits he calls up can refer to things these folks know about—things they think the Swami don't know. Hell, use yer head! Half the chippies in Dawson patronize him—an' what's responsible about them? An' if dead folks know so damn much more than live ones, like you claimed, why wouldn't Bob Tail know Clarence couldn't never find that crick? An' you know damn well neither Bettles nor Camillo Bill would have double-crossed the widder, even if there was a crick, an' they'd found it. Take it from me, there ain't no talkin' from the spirit world that the Swami don't do himself. He wants to get rid of Clarence so the widder won't have nothin' to live fer, an' would be more likely to turn over her money to him. That's why he told her that damn lie about Bettles an' Camillo—so she'd send the kid off in the bush where he could get rid of him."

"An' take these messages from the kid. It ain't you an' him he means is happy—it's him an' Bob Tail. The Swami has told the widder the kid is dead, an' his spirit

told her he got drowned in a rapids—an' these messages you're packin' around is s'posed to come from the spirit world. He's urgin' her to trust the Swami, an' do as he says. That means that before long he's goin' to have Bob Tail advise her to turn her money over to him, an' join 'em in the spirit world—which means that she might try to kill herself. After he gets hold of the money he'll order you to knock the kid off an' hide the body. If you refuse he'll knock you off an' the kid, too. If you should kill the kid the police would hang you shore as hell. You couldn't get away with it, Claybank. I'd know you done it—an' as everyone knows, I'm apt to get drunk now an' then—an' you can't never tell what a drunken man might say. I might even talk in my sleep where Downey might hear me—then where would you be?"

"I tell you I wouldn't kill that kid! I wouldn't kill no one—no matter who told me to."

"Shore you wouldn't. But if you don't kill him, what's goin' to happen to him? He's s'posed to be huntin' this Bob Tail Crick. You can't keep holdin' him in that shack from now on, can you? An' the Swami won't never dare to turn him loose—after the widder has be'n talkin' to his spirit."

THE man's eyes widened in horror. "By God, John, I believe yer right! What the hell will I do? I'm a-goin' to quit, right now! I ain't goin' to have nothin' more to do with it. I'll—"

"You'll keep on workin' fer the Swami, jest like yer doin'."

"Not by a damn sight! I ain't goin' to kill that kid, nor neither I ain't goin' to git knocked off, nor yet I ain't goin' to git hung."

"Quittin' would be the shorest way in the world fer you to get knocked off. The Swami wouldn't dare to let you live—knowin' what you do. Listen to me. The Swami's payin' you an ounce a day. Okay.

I'll lay another ounce on top of that. I'm goin' to gum his game. Damned if I'm goin' to see the widder of a sourdough robbed by any outsider!"

"Why not you an' me go an' tell Downey about it?"

"It wouldn't do no good. If we told him before he got the money, we couldn't prove nothin'. An' if we waited till he got it, it would be too late—an' you'd be held fer the kidnappin'. From now on you take yer orders from me. An' on top of that extra ounce a day I'm payin' you, when we get the Swami on the run, I'll grub-stake on a likely location I know, an' you can get away from Dawson an' Cuter Malone's. Hell, Claybank, a year from now you'll be a man again—instead of a damn bum!"

"God, John—would you do that?"

"It's a promise. You've got my word for it. But you've got to choose, right now, between me an' the Swami."

"I'm with you, John. If I could git a grubstake, an' git away from the booze fer a year, I know damn well I'd make good again. An' you bet, if I make another stake I won't blow it as fast as I git it!"

"Okay. But don't forget if you try to double-cross me, yer life won't be worth a plugged nickel. An' that's a promise, too."

"I won't double-cross you. What do you want me to do?"

"Jest keep me on takin' orders from the Swami. An' be shore to save them messages he writes out fer the kid to copy. I'm stoppin' at the Dominion Hotel, Room 21. I'll see a Siwash I know—name's Owl Man. I done him a favor, onct, an' he'll do as I say. When the Swami orders you to make away with the kid, you take him down to Owl Man's shack, in Moosehide, an' tell the Swami you knocked him off an' buried him. Then you report to me. In the meantime I'll have a seance er two with the Swami. There's quite a few dead folks I'd like to talk things over with, myself."

"But I thought you claimed he's a fake."

"Shore he is—but he don't know that I

know it. You can see he's a fake as well as I can if you use yer head. How could the widder be gettin' messages from Clarence's spirit—an' him alive an' well in that shack? You go ahead an' do as I said—an' be shore an' save them messages in the Swami's handwritin'. We might need 'em fer evidence. I've got to be gettin' along. I promised the boys I'd set in a stud game down to the Tivoli."

V

THE stud game lasted well into the small hours, and shortly after noon, as Black John stepped from his room in the hotel, he was accosted by Fatima. "The master will see you at three o'clock," she said, and disappeared down the stairs.

Stepping over to the Tivoli for an eye-opener, the big man was greeted by Swiftwater Bill who, with Bettles, had drifted in on a like errand. As they poured their drinks, Swiftwater, observed, "I jest met Edith Niele on the street, an' she told me—"

"Who's Edith Niele?" Black John asked.

"Why, the Oregon Mare—that's her right name. An' believe me, she's got more savvy than any gal in Dawson—bar none. An' she's got a heart in her, too. She's a friend of Bob Tail Saunders' widder, an' she told me she's worried about her. Ever sence this here Clarence got drownded she's be'n grievin' somethin' fierce, because it was her sent him out to find Bob Tail's cache. She's be'n goin' to the Swami reg'-lar an' talkin' to Bob Tail an' the kid, an' they keep tellin' her how happy they be in the spirit world, an' kinda urgin' her to jine 'em there, an' tellin' her to trust the Swami, an' do jest as he says. Fer the last few days Bob Tail has be'n advisin' her to turn over all her money to the Swami to be used to train a lot of young mediums so thousan's of unhappy earth-bound folks can talk with their friends an' their kin in the astral world.

"Edith, she figgers like you do, that the

Swami's a fake. She went an' seen Downey about it, an' Downey went to have a talk with the widder. But when she found out what he wanted, she slammed the door in his face, an' he claims that if she won't make no complaint agin the Swami there ain't nothin' he kin do about it."

Bettles downed his liquor and refilled his glass. "It would be a damn shame if the Swami was to swindle the widder out of her money. But if the police can't do nothin' about it, we shore as hell can't."

"We could go to him an' tell him if he made a play for the widder's pile we'd string him up to the nearest tree!" Swiftwater exclaimed. "Ain't that so, John?"

Black John shook his head. "Sech procedure would be onlawful in the extreme, besides bein' futile. There's no law says the widder can't turn her money over to anyone she wants to, provided she does it of her own free will."

"What I claim, it's a hell of a law that would let a damn cuss like him come in here an' rob a widder right under our nose!" Swiftwater retorted.

"Yeah, the law's got its drawbacks," Black John admitted. "An' onfortunately there's plenty of folks that don't hesitate to take advantage of its crudities."

"You'd ort to know," remarked Bettles.

"Edith was tellin' me the Swami's feedin' the widder a drink he calls nepenthe. She claims it makes her fergit all grief an' sorrow—makes everything seem all right, no matter what it is."

"Hell!" Bettles exclaimed. "Whiskey'll do that, if you drink enough of it! Ain't that so, John?"

"You'd ort to know," returned Black John. "Well, so long. I've got to go get somethin' to eat. See you tonight—an' mebbe you boys can get back some of yer money."

PROMPTLY at three o'clock the big man was admitted to the ante-room of the Swami's cottage, and a moment later was ushered into the presence of the master

by Fatima, who silently retired, leaving him alone with the Swami who reclined on a couch among many cushions of dark blue silk.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dim light Black John noted that the walls were hung with Oriental drapes wrought with weird patterns depicting many colored, many headed, and many armed gods. Upon a stand close beside the couch a tiny blue-shaded lamp burned at the foot of a small statue, or idol. From a pot beside the lamp issued the smoke of a heavy sweetish incense. Black John pointed to the idol representing a four-armed, crowned figure mounted upon an animal. The body was green, the clothing red, and in its two upraised hands it held a noose and a club.

"Looks like the guy on the calf, there is gettin' ready to do a little bulldoggin', eh?"

THE dark liquid eyes of the Swami frowned disapproval. "That is Yama, the first mortal to die. He is bestriding a buffalo—not a calf. He is the king and the judge of the dead, and lord of the infernal regions."

"Hum—accordin' to what I learnt, Abel was the first man to die. The story goes that him an' Cain got into a scrap—an' Cain knocked him off."

The Swami made a bored, deprecatory motion with a dark slender hand. "A mere four thousand years ago, when the earth was already old. Yama, the first mortal, died four billion years ago."

"Cripes—no wonder he's turned green! My pa was a preacher—till he got hungry an' went to farmin'. An' so was his pa before him, an' accordin' to the way they figgered, the devil is boss down there in hell. Prob'ly two schools of thought. Guess it don't make no difference. Damn if I know which one I'd ruther have comin' at me—this four-armed Yama guy, a-straddle of his calf, an' holdin' up a club an' a loop of rope; or the devil, with his hoofs, an' his horns, an' his pitchfork. Either one of

'em's enough to make a man want to live right."

"Ah yes. Soon we shall know. We live in the time of Kali Yuga, the last and the darkest of the four ages of the world. Soon will come Siva, the destroyer, and at the end of a thousand cycles of time Brahma will awaken and recreate the world."

"Yer gettin' too deep fer me. How soon do you look fer this Siva guy to show up?"

"After four hundred and thirty-two thousand years have passed he will come."

"Oh, hell — there's no hurry, then! When you said 'soon' I thought you meant next week—er mebby early this fall."

"The time is short, but the gods are old—Vishnu, the sun god; Brahma, the creator; Siva, the destroyer—and Krishna, the well beloved atavar of Vishnu," intoned the Swami, in a deep sepulchral tone. "Our fate lies in the lap of the gods."

"Yeah. But mebbe I come to the wrong place. I don't believe my old grandpa, Diogenes K. Smith, would have any truck with them gods you mentioned. He was a Methodist, an' he'd figger that they was heathens."

"It matters not. Hindu, Moslem, Christian, and all the others—they have alike attained Yoga, abstraction from all worldly objects, the union of the individual with the divine. They are free from all physical laws. They have attained occult knowledge of the past and of the future. Their astral bodies are far above the tangible—all are together in Nirvana."

"Must be a hell of a lot of 'em—if the world is as old as you claim. This here Nirvana must cover quite a swipe of territory."

"There are no boundaries to space, neither is there an end to time."

"Plenty of food fer thought, there. But gettin' down to cases—do you reckon you could get hold of my grandpa? You'll know him by them arrow holes in his back."

"Be seated and relax. And do not speak, except to the spirit of your ancestor."

"Okay. Kinda dark in here, though. What's the matter with turnin' up the light so I can see what the old fella looks like?"

"There can be no light. The vibrations of light rays serve to check the spirit vibrations. Even the blue light must now be extinguished. Relax, now, and I shall go into a trance and strive to contact him you seek."

As the man ceased speaking the light suddenly went out leaving the room in total darkness. After a few moments of utter silence a sound as of rushing wind grew steadily louder. Suddenly a voice sounded —a weird, whistling voice, indistinct and illusive. "I am Diogenes K. Smith."

"Hi, Grandpa! How they comin'?"

"I am happy and contented. Free from all earthly ills."

"Accordin' to pa, they figgered you was killed by Injuns—how about it?"

"Darkness approached in the forest. I heard the hooting of owls. Then came the arrows—and I died. Mend your ways, my son. You are an outlaw."

"Hey—who the hell you callin' an outlaw! Who's be'n—"

Black John's words were drowned in a shrill blast, and the next instant an object struck the floor at his feet, and the light came on as suddenly as it had gone out. Reaching down he picked up a trumpet and glanced toward the Swami, who was apparently coming out of his trance. The Swami's eyes were upon the trumpet.

"A manifestation," he uttered, in an awed voice. "A truly wonderful manifestation. And did you converse with your ancestor?"

"Yeah, he claimed it was Injuns knocked him off, all right. But the damned old goat accused me of bein' an outlaw—an' him supposed to be a preacher, but with a whiskey wheeze to his voice that would done credit to a Bowery bum!"

"The spirits are all-knowing. They have attained Yoga. I, together with a few others among the earth-bound, have also attained Yoga."

"The hell you have! Well then mebbe you can tell me what he meant? I tried to ask him, but all I got out of him was a hell of a blast, an' then he throw'd this horn at me—damn near hit me, too."

"Ah yes. A manifestation that the interview was at an end."

"A loud poop on a horn seems like a hell of a way to end a conversation—especially fer a preacher. The method somehow lacks dignity. But overlookin' this piece of astral boorishness, what did the old cuss mean by callin' me an outlaw?"

The Swami lay back upon his cushions, his eyes rolling upward until only the whites showed. Then slowly he began to speak. "I see a mighty river with another river running into it, and into this second river flows a creek. Upon the banks of this creek are scattered cabins, and a larger house of logs. There is a bar at which men are drinking, and cards are being played at a table within the room. Behind the bar is a huge safe filled with gold. In another room goods and supplies are stored. The name of this creek eludes me. It seems to be—Half—Half—of something. The man behind the bar is serving drinks. He is a lean, somber man with a yellow mustache, and square steel-framed spectacles. I sense that these men are all outlaws—yet there seems to be no crime upon the creek. There is no crime because the king of the outlaws, a huge black bearded man, will permit no crime. Here a criminal, or one who for any reason must flee from the law, is safe. For the police dare not venture upon this creek. The king allows no crime there lest it bring the police in force into his realm. Ah—the name of the creek comes to me—Halfaday Creek. And the name of the outlaw king is—it is—though you should kill me where I lie, I cannot utter a falsehood—it is Black John Smith—it is you, yourself, who are king of the outlaws."

"Hey—not so loud!" Black John exclaimed in an undertone. "Yer hired girl might hear you an' track it around."

"Fatima knows much; but tells nothing."

"You've got a damn sight more confidence in women than I have," Black John grinned. "How about another seance tomorrow? There's a couple of others I'd like to talk to. Here's yer five bucks. An' here's an extray ten to keep yer mouth shet—about me bein' an outlaw. If it should git around it would ruin my reputation. Hell, if I'd known you was a mind reader as well as a ghost juggler, I wouldn't have come here. There's some things I know that I wouldn't want other folks to find out—especially the police."

The Swami pocketed the five dollars, and waved aside the ten. "I scorn to accept a bribe. Your secrets are safe with me. Though your innermost thoughts are an open book to me, I would not reveal one of them, even upon pain of death. And I am no juggler. Among my people, the Hindus, there are jugglers—evil men who by means of trickery seek to deceive the people. But those of us who have attained Yoga despise these tricksters."

"It shore beats hell the depths of deception into which some folks can sink," Black John observed.

"Ah yes, they are a thorn in the side of the seekers after truth. Tell me—this Halfaday Creek—is it true that the police dare not venture there?"

The big man smiled and winked. "You have ondoubtless seen policemen on the street here. They all look well an' healthy, don't they? Look like men that know what side their bread is buttered on?"

"And this creek — should one from Dawson find it expedient to seek sanctuary there, how would he go?"

"Most of 'em goes hell-a-whoopin'."

"What?" The Swami looked puzzled. "I do not grasp your meaning."

BLACK JOHN laughed. "Jest another way of sayin' they go fast. Mostly they ain't only about four jumps ahead of the police."

"And should the police be following

them, would they turn back when they reached this creek?"

The big man scowled darkly. "They turn back—or else," he growled, menacingly.

"Ah yes. And the distance from here—is it great? And does one travel by canoe?"

"Most of 'em does. You go up the Yukon about eighty miles till you come to the White. Then up the White a hundred an' fifty miles till you come to a big crick runnin' in from the right. The buildin' you described is about fourteen miles up this crick. A man should make it in from ten days to two weeks, accordin' to how good he is in a canoe."

"And this safe full of gold? Is the business of this man so profitable that his safe is filled with gold?"

"No, Cush does a good business, all right—but that dust mostly belongs to us men that live on the crick. Some of the boys caches their wealth, but most of us deposits it fer safe keepin' with Cush. But —hold on, Swami! If yer so damn good at mind readin' an' the like of that, why didn't you know all this without askin'?"

"A fair question, my friend—and one that deserves an honest answer. In the first place you must know that of myself I know nothing save that far back among the cycles of time, in some remote incarnation, I must have been a prince of noble birth—for my control is a glamorous princess of Ind—a maiden of wonderous beauty, and one who is endowed with the wisdom of the ages."

"Hell—I wouldn't mind controllin' one of them, myself! D'you reckon she's got a girl friend?"

"This princess entered Nirvana a billion years ago."

"Oh—quite a while back, eh? But what do you mean—control?"

"I am but the medium through which speaks the soul of Bisera Seta, the princess of whom I spoke. She is my contact with the spirit world. In other words, my control. She is all-wise in matters concerning the past and the future. But there are,

at times, certain unimportant matters of the present which she—”

“Oh shore,” Black John interrupted. “I can see how she wouldn’t be exactly up to date on some of them trivial matters, like local geography, an’ business conditions on Halfaday Crick. But I wouldn’t hold that agin her, if I was you. After all, you’ve got to remember she’s be’n dead quite a while.

“Well, I must be movin’ along. Like to have you drop in on us sometime an’ meet the boys. You could prob’ly do quite a stroke of business on Halfaday, too. We’ve got plenty of dust, up there—an’ we ain’t afraid to spend it. Most likely a lot of the boys would like to have you call up some ghost er other. An’ I know damn well a few of ‘em wouldn’t mind pryin’ into the future.”

The Swami nodded. “It may be that I shall accept your invitation. Who knows? The fact is that owing to the machinations of some evil persons who profess occult powers, many people have been swindled. And others have been victimized by unprincipled mediums whose controls were themselves unprincipled.”

“Oh shore. I get you. A man might give the police quite a headache if he got Judas Iscariot, er Jesse James fer a control.”

“Exactly. And thus the police frequently molest even those who are honorable among us. In fact many cities have already passed certain laws that render it impossible for us to serve those who seek to communicate with the spirit world. Should Dawson pass such a law it might be expedient that I should move on.”

“Okay, Swami. When they get you on the run, you hit fer Halfaday. Besides bein’ a good business proposition fer you—it lays right up agin the line where, even if some policeman should show up, you could step over into Alaska an’ thumb yer nose at him. We ain’t got no laws, up there, agin honest occupations—an’ what’s more, we won’t have. A man can be shore

of gettin’ all that’s comin’ to him on Halfaday. I see to that myself. So long. I’ll be goin’ now. I’m afraid I’ve took up more’n five dollars worth of yer time, as it is. How about another seance tomorrow?”

“At the same hour,” the Swami replied. “Do not worry about taking up my time. Others can wait. I am the master.”

VI

AS Black John walked up Front Street he met Corporal Downey in front of the Tivoli Saloon. The officer greeted him with a broad grin. “Hello, John! Be’n talkin’ to the ghosts? Er jest tryin’ to hook onto a good location like young Griswold done?”

“What do you mean?”

“I was talkin’ to Moosehide Charlie an’ he told me he saw you go into the Swami’s about an hour ago.”

“Oh—him. Yeah, I went in an’ had a little chat with my Grandpa Smith. Kind of wanted to know how he’s gettin’ on wherever he was at.”

Downey chuckled. “Yer Grandpa Smith, eh? Was the interview successful?”

“Shore it was. The old gentleman told me he got killed by Injuns back there in Minnesota, claimed he was happy, called me an outlaw, give a hell of a loud toot, an’ throw’d a horn at me. What more could a man expect fer five bucks?”

“Minnesota, eh? Is that where you come from?”

“Yeah—Minnesota, or Florida—one of them states right in there. Bein’ away so long, I disremember which. Don’t make no difference. I ain’t goin’ back. Let’s step inside. I’m buyin’ a drink.”

At the bar, as they poured their drinks, Downey’s brow drew into a frown. “I’d shore like to get something on that Swami. He’s a damn fake.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I figured that way, at first. But sence I had that seance I ain’t so shore. Cripes, Downey, he might be quite a fella. Calls all them old Hindu

gods by their first name. An' his control is a damn good looker. She was a Hindu princess."

"You mean that gal he's got there? The one that wears a kind of a blue robe instead of a dress?"

"Hell, no! That's Fatima. She's jest the hired girl. This princess has be'n dead a million years—er I believe he said a billion. Them Swamis deals in big figures. Anyway, she's old enough to really have some sense."

"Don't tell me you fall for that damn crap! He's nothin' but a grafter—an' a damn dangerous one."

"Be'n givin' you a bad steer?"

"No. But he shore gave the widow Saunders one. You remember Bob Tail Saunders. He left his widow well fixed, an'—"

"Yeah, Camillo Bill was tellin' me how she's be'n goin' to the Swami an' talkin' to Bob Tail all winter. An' how she sent the kid out to hunt Bob Tail's cache an' he got drowned, so now she's talkin' to both of 'em. Camillo claims the Oregon Mare told him she's afraid the Swami's makin' a play fer the widder's pile."

"Not only makin' a play for it—he's got it. Edith Niele put me next to the racket a couple of days ago, an' I went to have a talk with the widow—to warn her to watch out for that damn chisler. But she wouldn't listen to me. Ordered me out of the house, an' slammed the door after me. An' just a few minutes ago Rumsey come over from the bank an' told me she's turned all her money over to the Swami—ninety-six thousan' dollars. They advised her against it at the bank. But she said the money was hers, she could do what she wanted with it—an' for 'em to mind their own business."

"Hum. Well, now you know he's got it, why don't you arrest him?"

"Arrest him! I wish to God I could arrest him. The hell of it is he hasn't done anything illegal."

"I ain't be'n to town fer quite a while.

They must of changed the law sence I was here. Last I heard it was illegal to rob widders, an' orphans, an' sech like folks."

"He robbed her all right. But if she won't file a complaint, we haven't got any evidence. She'd say she turned that money over to him of her own free will—which she's got a perfect right to do."

"Ain't the law wonderful?" Black John grinned. "Here's you, a policeman—shoes all shined up, an' everything—knowin' damn well a crook has beat a widder out of every cent she's got in the world—an' you can't do nothin' about it! It's jest like I've told you a dozen times—the law's a damn clumsy method of workin' out jestic."

Downey nodded somberly. "It's just too bad—but there's some cases where it don't work. An' the hell of it is, he's apt to add murder to robbery. Edith is afraid the widow will commit suicide, now that the kid is dead an' her money gone. She won't have nothin' to live for. She claims that both Bob Tail an' the kid are urgin' her to join 'em so they can all be happy together in the spirit world. If she does kill herself the Swami would be just as guilty of murder as though he had put a gun to her head an' pulled the trigger. An' we can't do a damn thing about it!"

"Well—the kind of fellas that makes the laws, it's a damn wonder they work as good as they do. But take this case now—if you could prove that the Swami advised the widder to turn her money over to him, an' then advised her, through Bob Tail an' the kid, to knock herself off—wouldn't that be enough to convict him?"

"Shore it would! But how the hell could we prove that? She would swear that it was Bob Tail an' the kid that give her the advice—an' so would the Swami."

"Bob Tail an' the kid are s'posed to be dead."

"That's all right—but no one can prove in a court that you can't talk back an' forth with dead folks—specially when half the damn fools in Dawson would be willin' to

get up on the stand an' swear they'd talked to folks they know are dead."

"But in this case no one knows they're dead. No one ever seen their bodies."

"Bob Tail's dead, all right, or he'd have turned up before this. An' as for the kid —she'd swear he was dead because she's talked to his spirit. It's a hell of a mess—just one of those cases where you can't get any evidence."

Again Black John grinned. "The law's hell fer evidence, ain't it, Downey? Common sense an' common jestice is completely ignored. Up on Halfaday, now, if some guy was to pull off a robbery with a murder er two throw'd in, we'd have him strung up so damn quick his spirit would enter the astral sphere right on the tail of his victims."

Downey returned the grin. "An' sometimes, John, I wish we could deal out your brand of justice."

VII

AFTER supper Black John struck out for Moosehide, the Indian village located on the bank of the Yukon some four miles below Dawson. Proceeding to a shack surrounded by a litter of drying reels, broken sleds, and odd bits of junk, he accosted an Indian seated on an empty fish box mending a net.

"Hi, Owl Man! Remember that time down on Forty Mile when I drug you out of the water an' saved you from drownin'? Well, now you've got a chanct to pay me back."

The Indian nodded, a slow grin widening his lips. "Sure—'bout wan hon dre tam I'm git de chance to pay you back."

The big man chuckled. "Yeah, you have paid quite a few installments, at that. But you never lost nothin' by it. Listen—do you know Claybank Berg?"

The Indian nodded.

"All right. You stick around here an' one of these nights Claybank will fetch a young fella here an' leave him. He'll

leave grub enough to feed him fer a spell, an' I'll give you some dust to buy more if you need it. You keep this kid in the shack here. Don't let him out, an' don't let no one see him. Keep him tied up, if you have to. You got that?"

"How long keep um?"

"I don't know—mebbe a week, mebbe a month. Keep him till either me or Corporal Downey comes after him."

At the name of the officer the Indian frowned. "Co'p'l Downey mebbe-so mak me arres'."

"No he won't. I'll tend to that. This here play is all open an' above board."

"Huh—mebbe-so Co'p'l Downey no t'ink open-'bove-board keep w'ite boy tie oop in shack."

"Say—who the hell's ethics do you think yer questionin'? I ain't never got you into no trouble yet, have I? You do like I say, an' keep yer mouth shet, er by God I'll drag you back down to Forty Mile an' shove you in the river right where I pulled you out that time! An' jest to make it worth yer while, I'm payin' you an ounce a day fer every day you keep the kid here. I've got to be goin', now. You savvy what you've got to do?"

The man nodded. "Uh-huh. I keep um—me."

An hour later, as Black John was walking along Front Street toward the Tivoli, a figure brushed past him in the dusk. It was Claybank Berg. "God, John, I be'n huntin' all over fer you! Go down to the pump shed. I got somethin' to tell you." Then he was gone. Pausing in the Tivoli only long enough for a drink, the big man made his way down past the sawmill and stepped into the pump shed where Claybank was waiting in the deep shadows. The man's face was pale and he wasted no time in preliminaries.

"It's come—jest like you said." He held out a small phial in a shaking hand. "The Swami—he give me this here, an' he says after the kid writes his message on his slate tonight I should feed him an' slip this here

stuff in his tea. An' then he says after dark I should bury him an' throw bresh an' stuff on the grave so no one would find it. Hell, John—it must be there's p'izen in that bottle!"

"So soon, eh?" Black John removed the cork and sniffed at the contents of the phial. "Prussic acid. Prob'ly the quickest actin', an' the most deadly p'izen there is."

"Why—that crooked louse would of made me feed it to that kid! By God, I'm goin' back there an'—"

"Yer goin' to do jest like he said."

"What! By God, I don't p'izen no kid fer you, ner the Swami, ner no one else."

BLACK JOHN grinned. "You couldn't p'izen him if you wanted to. I've got the bottle. What I mean—you go an' have him write his message, an' feed him. Then take him down to Owl Man's shack an' leave him. I fixed it with Owl Man to keep him. Does the Swami know where you've be'n holdin' him?"

"No, I jest told him it was in an empty shack out in the bush where no one ever goes."

"Okay. Go do like I said—an' then go back to the shack an' be shore to save all them messages. I'll slip down there before mornin' an' get 'em."

"But I've got to take that slate to the Swami tomorrow night."

"You ain't goin' to take no slate to the Swami tomorrow night. You couldn't. Yer goin' to be in jail."

"In jail!" The man's voice was shrill with terror, and his eyes stared wildly from his pasty face. "You mean, yer goin' to turn me in?"

"Yup."

"Oh my God, John — don't do that! When you show 'em that p'izen they'll give me life!"

"Yer jumpin' at conclusions, Claybank. I ain't goin' to show the police this p'izen. Along about noon tomorrow you slip into the Tivoli an' buy a couple of drinks an' hang around till Downey comes along an'

pinches you. Don't say a damn word about the Swami, or about the kid. Downey won't know you ever heard of either one of 'em."

"But—what would he pinch me fer?"

"Fer liftin' my wallet."

"Yer wallet! Well, John—I never lifted yer wallet! Cripes—I wouldn't steal nothin' from no one but a chechako!"

"Sech rectitude is commendable. But I'm goin' to tell Downey you did. Then later I'll spring you. I'll tell him I was wrong—that I found my wallet in my room."

"But what's the idee of gittin' me pinched?"

Black John grinned and winked. "When the Swami hears you're pinched—what's he goin' to do?"

"Why—he'll be scairt I'll spill my guts. He'll—he'll likely hit fer the bank an' draw out his money an' git to hell outa the country."

"An' where could he go? Where do most of the damn miscreants hit fer when they skip out of Dawson?"

"Why—Halfaday Crick. But does the Swami know about Halfaday?"

"He does. I know a short cut. An' when he gits there me an' you will be waitin' fer him."

The man's eyes lighted. "I git you! I heard how you hang folks, up there!"

"W-e-e-l-l—that would be accordin' to how a miners' meetin' would look at a kid p'izenin'. A man generally gets about what's comin' to him on Halfaday."

ALONG toward morning Black John cashed out of the stud game and proceeding to the shack described by Claybank, took over the slate, and the messages the lad had been forced to copy. These he carried to his room and placed them, along with the phial of poison, in his packsack.

Toward the middle of the forenoon he sauntered down the street and accosted Corporal Downey. "Hi, Downey! Say—what kind of a dump are you runnin' here?"

"What do you mean—dump?"

"Why, this whole damn camp of Dawson! Cripes, it's gettin' so an honest man can't come to town without gettin' robbed."

"Who got robbed?"

"Me."

"That's a good one, John! About the funniest thing I ever heard. Who took you—an' for how much?"

"The amount is trivial—but it's annoyin'. I stopped in to Cuter Malone's last night fer a drink, an' while I stood there at the bar, some damn sneak thief h'isted my wallet out of my hip pocket."

"Got any idea who done it?"

"Well, I sort of suspect Claybank Berg. He's about the only one that could have got it. I rec'lect he kind of crowded in clost behind me."

"It could have be'n him, all right. He's jest about hit the bottom. Hangs around the Palace doin' porter work fer the drinks. We've had squawks from drunken che-chakos about gettin' their pockets picked, an' we've arrested Claybank a couple of times, but we never got nothin' on him. Funny he'd pull a stunt like that on you, though. How much was in the wallet?"

"Oh, not a hell of a lot—couple hundred, mebbe, in bills."

"What did the wallet look like?"

"It was a brown leather one—about half wore out."

"Okay. I'll pick Claybank up an' give him a sweatin'. Chances are, though, he's got rid of the wallet an' we won't have nothin' on him."

Promptly at three o'clock Black John showed up at the Swami's and was admitted to the inner sanctum. The Swami went into a trance and Black John was put in touch with numerous spirits, who enhanced their communications by ringing bells, rapping on the wall, and tossing the trumpet about.

When the seance was over and the blue light flashed on, the big man grinned. "These here fellas I've be'n talkin' to—when they get to this here Nirvana they seem to develop a certain puckishness that

was entirely lackin' durin' their lifetime. Fer instance, I can't imagine fellas like Lyme Cushing, er Long Nosed John Smith bangin' on walls an' tossin' bells an' horns around by way of conversation. They were serious men."

"Those acts were not performed in a spirit of puckishness or of jest. They were manifestations—proof that they were here in this very room, and that although they have become disassociated with all things mundane, they retain control over physical objects."

"Well—lookin' at it that way, them acts might not be as frivolous as they seemed." A muttering of thunder sounded in the distance, and Black John reached for his hat. "So long, Swami. Sounds like it's comin' up a storm. I'll be movin' along before I get wet."

"The thunder is also a manifestation," the Swami intoned. "The manifestation of Indra, the golden god — wielder of thunderbolts."

"Accordin' to you," Black John said, "everything that happens is a manifestation of somethin' else. You'd of laughed to see a manifestation I seen when I was comin' down here a few minutes ago. Yes, sir, it was good! Corporal Downey arrested a fella name of Claybank Berg, a sort of no account cuss that hangs around the Klondike Palace, an' was draggin' him off to jail, an' Claybank was fightin' back—hollerin', an' hittin', an' bitin', an' kickin' somethin' fierce."

"Claybank Berg, did you say?" The words seemed to explode from the man's lips, and Black John noted that the dark eyes had suddenly lost their liquid, dreamy look, and were regarding him between narrowed lids.

"Yeah, Claybank's be'n picked up now an' then fer rollin' drunks, but this time Downey says it's different."

"Yes—yes—go on! What was he arrested for?"

"Oh, damn if I know—didn't stop to get the straight of it. Somethin' about some

young fella that's missin'—started out to hunt some place called Long Tail Crick, er somethin'—an' the police figure mebbe Claybank followed him an' knocked him off. Downey says Claybank denies knowin' anything about it, an' bein' a stubborn cuss, he says it might take a week to sweat the truth out of him. But Claybank will talk, all right, before Downey gets through with him. The police has got ways of makin' a man come clean. Well, so long, Swami. Drop in on us sometime, on Halfaday. Remember, the latchstring is always out at Cush's."

Ten minutes later the big man stepped into the little office at detachment headquarters as Corporal Downey looked up from his desk.

"No luck on that wallet of yours, John," the officer said. "I picked Claybank up in the Tivoli, but he denies takin' it. I gave him a good goin' over an' he didn't have it on him, nor no money, either, to speak of. I stuck him in a cell to think it over. But if he don't break by tomorrow, I'll have to turn him loose."

"You better turn him loose now. My mistake, Downey. Fact is I wasn't robbed. When I reached fer my wallet there in the Palace to pay fer a drink, an' found it missin', I figured Claybank must have got it because he was the only one near enough to. But when I got back to my room a few minutes ago, damn if it wasn't layin' there on the dresser where I must of left it. I done Claybank a wrong—fetch him out an' I'll take him down an' buy him a couple of drinks."

LEAVING the police station, Black John instructed Claybank to proceed at once to his shack by a roundabout way, throw his duffel into a packsack, and meet him at the pump shed.

Securing his own pack at the hotel, the big man checked out, stopped at Scougal's store and picked up a week's supply of grub. Half an hour later, the two were slanting across the Yukon in a canoe.

Black John forced the trail, proceeding toward Halfaday by way of the cut-off, and four days later as they finished their supper in the deep twilight on the bank of Miller Creek, Claybank glanced across the little fire as they filled their pipes.

"You know, John," he said, "I feel better a-ready. Them first three days damn near killed me. But today wasn't so bad."

The big man nodded. "You look better, too, Claybank, sence you've got some of the booze sweated out of you. Trouble is, you'd hung around Dawson till you'd got soft an' flabby."

"It's be'n a year er more sence I've be'n really hungry. But today I've et like a moose."

"Yeah, it don't seem to make much difference how much licker a man drinks as long as he keeps on eatin' hearty. But when he keeps throwin' in the whiskey an' begins to lay off on the grub, I've noticed he's headed fer hell a-horseback."

"Shore feels good to be out on the cricks agin. You won't go back on what you said, will you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why—about grub-stakin' me on some location you know'd. It wouldn't have to be no rich layout. Jest so I could take out wages. I don't give a damn if I never see Dawson again."

"Did you ever hear of me goin' back on my word? I'll locate you on a proposition. An' if it's anyways near as good as I figure it is, you'll take out a damn sight more than wages."

"God, John, that'll be great! Jest so it's back fer enough so I can't git holt of no licker. I want to git off'n the booze."

Black John scowled. "This here location is on a little crick only a couple of ridges off'n Halfaday. You can walk to Cush's from there in two hours, an' when you get there you can get all the licker you want, an' you'll have plenty of dust to pay fer it. You claim you want to get off the booze. Well, the way to get off'n it, is to get off'n it—not to run away from it. Any damn

fool can quit drinkin', if he can't get nothin' to drink. You used to be a man, Claybank—an' a damn good one. An' you'll be a man agin. You've got quite a ways to go—but you've got a good start. I've be'n watchin' you on this trip, an' I know'd the pace was damn near killin' you—so I kep' it up. You stuck to it with nary a squawk. You've got guts, an' from now on, you've got to use 'em. You've got to fight yer way back to bein' a man agin—you can't sneak back. You can't live back there in the bush like a damn wolf, afraid to show up where men are. You've got to come in to Cush's now an' then an' mix with the boys—take a few drinks—play a little stud. Mebbe, now an' then, when the boys are celebratin', you'll take on a little too much. But that ain't goin' to hurt you none if you keep on eatin', an' sleepin', an' workin'. This drinkin' business is all in a man's head. It ain't gettin' drunk that hurts a man—it's stayin' drunk. I've got faith in you, Claybank—but that won't do no good onless you've got faith in yerself."

Black John noted a gleam in the muddy eyes that the days of hard travel were beginning to clear, as the man exclaimed. "By God, John, yer right! I'm beginnin' to feel like a man, a-ready. Damn if I ain't almost sorry I rolled them chechakos!"

"It wasn't no sin to be proud of," the big man commented. "But that's water over the dam, now—an' I wouldn't worry about it, if I was you. Hell—there's prob'lly be'n times when I've deviated a hair er so from the path of strict rectitude, myself—none that I could lay a finger on, offhand—but there might of be'n times.

"Layin' all that aside, Claybank, we've got a job to do first. When we hit Halfaday, you lay up in my cabin till the Swami gets there. I'll want you to tell a miners' meetin' what you know. Then, after the boys has voted, an' we get him strung up an' buried, I'll take you over to that location.

"I'd advise you to stick on it fer mebbe a month before you come to Cush's's.

That'll give you the chanct to kind of harden up an' get holt of yerself."

"Okay, John. By God, you do more good than all the preachers an' police in the Yukon! I don't see why folks calls you an outlaw."

"Well, hell, Claybank—someone's got to be an outlaw, an' it might as well be me. An' besides, you've got to remember that there's a damn sight of difference in outlaws."

VIII

ONE morning, some ten days later, One Armed John burst into the barroom of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading Post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, as Black John and old Cush were shaking dice for the drinks.

"Hey!" the one armed one cried. "Who do you think is comin' up the crick?"

Black John grinned. "Jedgin' by the excitement you've worked up it couldn't be no one less than the king himself, comin' up to look us over."

"King—hell! It's a nigger! An' he musta be'n in a hell of a fight, the way his head's all bandaged up. An' besides that, he's crazy as a loon!"

Old Cush gathered the dice into the box, and glanced at Black John. "Them four deuces I jest shuck beats yer three fives. The drinks is on you." He slid a glass toward One Armed John. "What makes you think this here nigger is crazy?" he asked.

"'Cause he is! I was fishin' down along them willer flats by Olson's old shack, when this here canoe shoves around a bend. An' when I seen it was a nigger in it, I jest set there an' gawped at him, 'cause there ain't never be'n no nigger, nor neither no Chinee come to Halfaday before.

"He grabs holt of a willer branch an' draw'd the canoe in clost, an' he wants to know is this Halfaday Crick, an' where is the fort. I tells him 'yes,' an' then he

claims he knows Black John, an' is he here on the crick, an' I tells him 'yes' agin. An' then I ask him how he got hurt, an' he says he ain't. So I figgered anyone would be kinda screwy which he would bandage up his head if he worn't hurt. An' I ask him if he's on the run, er jest prospectin', an' he come out with more big words than even Black John would say, so I know'd damn well he was crazy. I kinda eased back from the bank so he couldn't brain me with his paddle, an' p'ints to Olson's old shack an' tells him how it's empty, an' mebbe he better throw his stuff in there—figgerin' to keep him down there till we figgered out what to do about him. I know'd damn well we don't want no crazy man up here to Cush's. But he claims he's goin' on to the fort. Says he aims to live here amongst us an' put us in communication with the sperit world. An' I says 'what the hell's that?' an' he says he kin see into the future—like what's goin' to happen to some guy ahead of when it does. An' I says how the hell could he do that, an' he claims the sperits tells him. I ask him if he means ghosts, an' he says 'yes.' An' then he ask me if there ain't no one that's died that I'd like to talk to? 'Not by a damn sight' I says, an' I grabs my fish-pole an' run like hell—an' I've be'n runnin' the hull four mile, except where I'd have to set down an' git my wind back."

OLD CUSH scowled as he tossed off his liquor and refilled his glass. "By God, One Arm," he said, "if you ain't findin' some corpse along the crick, which we've got to go an' bury it, yer findin' crazy men, which might be worst."

"This man's crazy—like a fox," Black John said. "He's a Hindu, an' a Swami, besides."

"What's them?" Cush asked, eyeing the big man over the top of his spectacles.

"He comes from India, around on the other side of the world. The Swami part—that's jest a title, like a duke, er an earl. He's be'n doin' business in Dawson all

winter, an' believe me, he's cleaned up a roll of important money."

Cush looked skeptical. "I run a saloon in Cincinnati, an' there's a lot of niggers there. But I never heard tell of no dukes er earls amongst 'em. Mostly they was porters, an' the like of that. What kind of business could this one do in Dawson to clean up a big roll in one winter?"

"He can communicate with the spirit world, jest like he told One Arm, an' half the folks in Dawson has be'n patronizin' him—talkin' to folks that's dead, at five dollars a throw. An' on top of that, he can tell a man where to go out an' make a strike."

"Hell—so kin anyone," Cush grunted.

"Yeah, but when they dig where the Swami tells 'em to they make a strike. He told a damn chechako, name of Griswold, where to locate—an' he struck it, jest like the Swami said. The Swami took a twenty-five per cent cut—an' his share, up to now, is better'n eighty thousan' dollars."

"You mean he kin really talk to dead folks?" Cush asked.

"Shore. Jest slip him five bucks an' name yer party. He'll git him fer you. Is there someone you'd like to talk to?"

"W-e-e-l-l—there's my second wife—her that skipped out with a B. & O. conductor. I'd shore like to give her a bawlin' out. An' my third wife—I walked out on her on account of a whiskey salesman I ketched her out with, one time. An' then, there was a woman I know'd in Seattle. But the hell of it is, I don't know if they're dead."

"The Swami could prob'ly check up on 'em," Black John grinned.

"It shore would be comfortin' to know the third one was dead. Her name was Minnie—an' I've allus be'n kinda scairt she might show up sometime an' start in raisin' hell."

"How about you, One Arm? Ain't there someone you'd like to talk to?"

"Not me! You wouldn't ketch me talkin' to no ghost!"

"But he can tell you everything you've done in the past, an' what yer goin' to do in the future."

"Yeah—an' that's the hell of it. I don't want to even be where the damn cuss is at! If he'd go to the police with what I've did in the past—it would be a cinch fer him to tell where I'd be in the future! That's prob'ly why his head's all bandaged up. He squawked on some guy, an' got beat up."

"No, the Swami claims to be honest."

"Hell—so do you!"

"What do you mean?" Black John glowered.

"Er—you got me wrong, John! What I mean—"

"Here he comes, now," Cush interrupted, glancing through the open doorway.

One Armed John gave one swift glance over his shoulder and made for the rear. "I'm gittin' the hell outa here!" he cried, and disappeared into the storeroom.

THE tall turbaned figure glided into the room, a light duffel bag slung over his shoulder. The dark, liquid eyes smiled into the face of Black John. "Ah, my friend, you perceive that I have accepted your invitation to visit you here on Halfaday Creek."

"Yeah. Glad to see you, Swami. Let me make you acquainted with Cush."

The man bowed. "I am honored to know you."

Cush bobbed his head. "Yeah. They use' to be a kind of a nigger song—'Way down upon the Swami River.' That's prob'ly where you come from. Have a drink. This un's on the house."

"Ah, no, my friend. I am an abstainer from alcohol in any form. Nor do I use tobacco."

"Huh—must be some kind of a preacher. Don't mind if me an' John h'ists one?"

"Not at all. I am not a preacher. I am merely an humble agent of the gods, striv-

ing to bring some mead of happiness into the souls of the earth-bound by placing them into communion with the spirits of the departed. It so transpired that a matter of expediency made it advisable that I come among you for a temporary sojourn."

"Damn if it ain't a mouthful, now you've got it said. You an' John had ort to git along fine. He prob'ly knows what most of them words means."

"Police begin pushin' you around, Swami?" Black John asked.

"No. I have had no difficulty with the police. But peering into the future I saw tribulation approaching. It will soon be in Dawson as in some other cities—those of us who are endowed with occult powers will be persecuted. Rather than endure humiliation, I departed from there."

Cush eyed the man across the bar. "You mean you kin look ahead an' tell what's goin' to happen before it does?"

"Ah, yes, my friend. Neither the dim past, nor the far distant future withhold any secrets from me."

"How about what's goin' to happen right soon? Kin you tell that, too?"

"Certainly."

"What'll you take to learn me the trick—like what cards you'd ketch if you draw'd to yer hand?"

"It is not a trick, my friend. Only those of us who are attuned to the astral world may foretell the future. Are you psychic?"

"No. Kinda rheumatic. In my j'ints in wet weather."

A shadow darkened the doorway and a huge figure approached the bar, its eyes fixed in undisguised astonishment at the stranger who stood beside Black John. Cush spun a glass across the bar and shoved the bottle toward the newcomer. "Fill up. This un's on the house. This here fella is Swami. Swami, that there's Pot Gutted John, on account he's pot gutted, like you kin see there in front."

"The Swami," Black John explained, "has got occult powers. He can peer into the future an' tell what's goin' to happen

to a man, an' he can talk with folks that's dead."

"Yeah? Pot Gutted John picked up his drink and stepped around to place Black John between himself and the Swami. "Well, who the hell would want to?"

"Is there no one," asked the Swami, "with whom you would like to converse—your father, for instance?"

"Cripes no! The old man never done nothin' but give me hell when he was alive, an' damn if I'm goin' to give him a chanct to start all over agin."

"How about it, Swami," Cush asked, "if there was someone which you don't know if she's dead, er not? S'pose she wouldn't be? Could you tell where she's at?"

"How long has this person been absent?"

"Which?"

"How long since you have seen this person, or have known of her whereabouts?"

"I never seen her sence I run out on her back in Cincinnati, it's twelve year ago come Thanksgivin'. Her name's Minnie."

A faraway look crept into the Swami's eyes, and he nodded, slowly, "Yes, beyond any doubt I can ascertain her present whereabouts if she is still among the earth-bound. I shall endeavor to procure suitable quarters and become established among you. Then I shall be able to hold regular seances."

"That's right," Black John cut in, "I figure the Swami can move into One Eyed John's cabin. It's right handy."

"But hold on!" Cush cried. "I don't want no kick-back on this here business! S'pose you was to git hold of her—would she know who was askin' about her—an' where I'm at?"

"No. I would merely obtain the information through my control. But is there no one in the spirit world with whom you would like to converse?"

"You mean do I want to talk to any ghosts?"

"The word 'ghost' is a most vulgar term, and jarring to the sensibilities. Let us say,

rather, the astral body, or the spirit dweller in Nirvana."

"Oh. Well, there's my fourth wife. She was religious—an' a damn good woman, to boot. I might call her up one of these times an' ask her what she done with that there silver cup I won in that pool tourna-mint over in Covington. She died back in Cincinnati, an' when I throw'd my stuff together to come away, damn if I could find it."

"I shall contact her in Nirvana."

"She wouldn't be in Urbana. She come from up around Dayton. Anyways, she's dead. An' like I says, she was a damn good woman. She'd be in heaven—er else there ain't none."

"Heaven, er hell, er Havana, I wouldn't want to talk to no ghost!" Pot Gutted John explained. "By God, if I seen one I'd be so damn scairt I couldn't say nothin', no-how! What I claim, if someone is dead, they better shet up, an' not be talkin' to ones that ain't. By cripes, if I've got to go to hell I don't want to know nothin' about what it's like till I git there."

Black John swallowed his drink. "I expect the Swami's kind of tired after his trip. I'll take him over to One Eyed John's cabin so he can get rested. How about it, Swami?"

"I should appreciate it. But—this One Eyed John? Will he not be using his cabin?"

"No, he ain't had no use fer it sence we hung him, a couple of years back."

"Why did you hang him?"

"Oh, I disremember. It was ondoubt-less fer somethin' he done."

"Say, Swami," Pot Gutted John cut in, "two, three fellas claim they seen One Eye's ghost hangin' around there. But they're like me—they ain't got no appetite fer ghosts, so they didn't stop to talk to it. If you see him I wisht you'd ask him where the hell his cache is at, so I kin git back that forty dollars I loant him in the stud game the night before we hung him."

"Have you got any dust er money you'd

like to deposit in the safe?" Black John asked, as the Swami picked up the light duffel bag from the floor between his feet. Jest count it out, an' Cush'll give you a receipt fer it."

"I thank you," the Swami replied, with a glance at the big iron safe. "What little I have with me I shall retain. I have other items in the canoe at the landing—some food, and blankets and clothing, together with a few other belongings. Much of my property I was forced to leave in Dawson for lack of transportation."

The two left the saloon and a half-hour later, when Black John returned, Pot Gutted John refilled his glass and shoved the bottle toward him. "Have one on me, John," he invited. "I an' Cush was talkin' about this here Swami. Do you figger he kin really do like he claims?"

Black John poured his drink. "He's the damndest charlatan this side of Seattle," he replied.

"Yeah, an' on top of that," Cush said, "me an' Pot Gut figgers he's a fake."

Black John grinned. "W-e-e-l-l, about half the folks in Dawson has be'n talkin' to the departed. I took a couple of whirls at it, myself. Had a nice little chat with my Grandpa Smith."

"Huh!" snorted Cush. "Yer Grandpa Smith! Now I know he's a fake!"

Black John nodded. "You've got him pegged right, Cush. An' that ain't the half of it. Not only he's a low-down skunk that preys on widders an' orphans, but he's a murderer besides." He turned to Pot Gutted John. "Quick as you throw that drink into you, you get holt of Red John, an' Long Nosed John an' the three of you scatter out along the crick an' tell the boys to show up here fer a miners' meetin' at nine o'clock tonight. If that son of the stars could have seen into the future even a couple of weeks ahead, he'd have cut a wide circle around Halfaday!"

When Pot Gutted John had departed Cush eyed Black John across the bar. "But hell, John—how be we goin' to hold a

miners' meetin' on him. He ain't done nothin' here on the crick except tell some lies—an' you claimed yerself that lyin' ain't hangable."

"God forbid!" grinned the big man. "But it's our duty to consider that these here crimes of which he will be convicted was committed within the corporate limits of Dawson, which *ab initio*, is a component part of the Yukon Territory, of which Halfaday Crick is also, *per se*, a component part, an' agin the peace an' dignity of which the crimes was committed. Also, our authority comprehends not only the crick itself, but sech contiguous territory as I deem advisable to include within our jurisdiction. An' on top of that, the Swami has fetched certain properties an' contraptions onto the crick with the avowed intention of practicin' a fraud amongst us, to wit, by dishonestly separatin' us from some of our dust. An' aside from all that, it is my firm belief that the onspakable scoundrel has had the effrontery to convey certain funds hither—which funds was obtained by fraud an' deceit. This act constitutes the crime of vicarious an' aggravated skullduggery in the first degree, an' as sech is pre-eminently hangable, *ora pro nobis*, accordin' to our onwritten code. This latter charge, however, upon second thought, had better be ignored as irrelevant, immaterial, an' highly controversial—in case the boys should get wind of how much he packed in."

"Huh," Cush grunted sourly. "Be you all through?"

"Yes, I believe that is a clear and succinct statement of the case, as it now stands."

"No matter what a man done, er where he done it, you'd hang him if you wanted to—an' then have a lot of big words to show you had a right to. An' it all b'iles down to you gittin' holt of them there certain funds—which is prob'ly that big roll you was tellin' about. I know damn well, John, you wouldn't hang no one onlest they had it comin'. But after he's hung jest

don't fergit that me an' you divides them certain funds up even. The wear an' tear of them miners' meetin's is hard as hell on a saloon. An' I figger that my half of that roll would jest about take care of the rent an' damages."

IX

SHORTLY after supper the men of Halfday began drifting in from their claims, and promptly at nine o'clock Black John rapped on the door of One Eyed John's cabin. "Come on over to Cush's," he invited, as the door swung open. "We're holdin' a miners' meetin'."

"A miners' meetin'? What is a miners' meetin'?"

"Jest what the term implies—a meetin' of miners."

"Ah, yes. That is indeed thoughtful. When a stranger comes among you—to make him acquainted, is it not?"

"That's right. An' it's be'n our experience that acquaintances so formed has frequently lasted right on through to the end of the stranger's life."

"Ah, yes. And the nature of this meetin—is it formally conducted?"

"Well, more er less formally. But come on. You'll get the gist of it before the evenin's over."

As the two entered the saloon the men gave passage and then crowded about in a close-packed semi-circle as Black John thumped on the bar for order.

"Miners' meetin' called to order!" He paused, allowing his glance to travel over the faces of the men who were staring in undisguised curiosity at the dark, turbaned figure. "Boys," he continued, "this gent is the Swami, a Hindu by birth, an' a fortune teller by occupation. Ain't that right, Swami?"

"Ah, no, my friend. Not a fortune teller. Not one of those cheap and vulgar persons who for twenty-five or fifty cents will gaze into a crystal ball, or stare into the bottom of a teacup, or read your palm,

or feel the bumps on your head, or spread cards upon the table, and pretend to predict what will befall you. Those persons are frauds and deceivers, and should be dealt with by the law. I am a medium through whom the earth-bound may converse with those who have passed on into Nirvana."

"Where the hell's that?" demanded a voice from the crowd.

Black John thumped the bar with his fist. "Silence!" he roared. "The Swami's tryin' to explain the difference between them cheap four-bit crooks, an' the high-class ones that charges five dollars a throw. So shet up an' listen." He turned to the man at his side. "Go ahead, Swami."

"It is that I have attained yoga, the union of the individual with the divine. I am possessed with occult knowledge of the past and of the future, and of all universal laws. And soon I shall have attained absolute abstraction from all worldly objects, and complete freedom from all physical laws."

"Listen to that, boys!" Black John exclaimed. "That there's a prophecy. 'An' take it from me—when the Swami says soon, he means damn soon."

"Ignoring the interruption, the Swami continued. "Through the countless cycles of time we have arrived at the age of kali yuga, the last and the darkest of the four ages of the world, and also the shortest."

BLACK JOHN nodded agreement. "He's givin' it to you straight, boys. He can see into the future, an' he knows. His kali yuga ain't got much longer to run."

"It is then that my astral body will attain complete disassociation from the physical body, and will become free to roam among the gods, Vishnu, and Brahma, and Silva, and Krishna, and to converse with Roma-chandra, who was the seventh incarnation of Vishnu."

"They was some Chandlers in Cincinnati," Cush observed. "Some of 'em lived

over in Kentucky. But I never know'd no Raymond Chandler."

Black John scowled. "Silence! An' yer fined a round of drinks fer contempt of a miners' meetin'!" He turned to the crowd. "You all heard the Swami give a sort of rough outline of his qualifications. But owing to his high regard fer the ethics of his profession, he won't come right out an advertise. So I'll tell you that fer five dollars a crack he'll call up his control, who by the way, is a swell lookin' gal that ain't be'n dead more'n a billion years, an' she'll skitter around up there in Nirvana an' put you in touch with anyone you want to talk to. You can all see that she's be'n there long enough to get acquainted, so you won't lose no time in gettin' yer connection.

"Or if you ain't got no hankerin' to chat with the dead, he'll peer into the future an' slip you the low-down on where you'll be, say ten years from now—an' that ain't goin' to be but damn little comfort to most of you.

"Or fer the same fee, plus a twenty-five per cent cut on the gross take, he'll tell you where to make a strike." He turned toward the Swami. "Ain't that right?"

"Ah, yes, my friend, you have conveyed the idea."

"The Swami's be'n doin' quite a business in Dawson sence he hit there last fall. In fact, I went there myself an' had a short chat with my Grandpa Smith, an' several others I'll mention later. Amongst other clients of the Swami's was Bob Tail Saunders's widder. Some of you boys know'd Bob Tail—him that struck it lucky on Forty Mile, an' agin on some crick he named Bob Tail, an' then lost this crick an' disappeared whilst tryin' to find it agin.

"Well, the widder goes to the Swami an' he puts her in touch with Bob Tail's spirit, an' Bob Tail tells her that he died of the lung fever after findin' this crick an' shovelin' a quarter of a million in dust into a cache. He tells her where the crick is an' she arranges fer Bettles an' Camillo

Bill to go there an' locate the cache. But Bob Tail tells her that them two sour-doughs is crooks who would double-cross her—"

"Bob Tail's a damn fool!" cried a voice from the crowd. "Bettles nor Camillo wouldn't double-cross no one!"

"If I know'd who hollered I'd fine him a round of drinks!" Black John roared. "But he's dead right, at that. Anyhow, Bob Tail insisted that his son, Clarence, was the only one who should go to this cache. Now this here Clarence lacks nine dollars of bein' worth a damn anywhere you put him. But the widder wants that quarter of a million, so she makes him go. An' he ain't be'n gone more'n a week er so till the widder's talkin' to his spirit along with Bob Tail's. The kid tells her he got drowned in a rapids." He paused and turned to the Swami. "That's right, ain't it?"

"Ah, yes, that is the truth. It is a sad case."

"You heard her talkin' to the kid's spirit?"

"Ah, yes, through my control I summoned the spirit of the boy."

"Then there ain't no question but what he's dead?"

"He is dead. His mother was at first skeptical. But through my control I induced the boy to send his mother several spirit messages written in his own handwriting upon a slate."

"Yeah, I heard about that." Black John turned to Cush. "Jest shove a pencil an' a piece of writin' paper out there on the bar an' I'll ask the Swami to write out one of them messages that kid wrote to his ma, so the boys here can see it. I claim that's a wonderful manifestation." He turned to the turbaned figure. "You can rec'lect one of 'em, can't you, Swami?"

The man picked up the pencil and drew the paper toward him. "Ah, yes. I shall write one of them upon this paper." A few moments later he handed the paper to Black John, who read aloud:

We are so happy here. We wish you would come and be with us always. You can trust the Swami. Do as he advises without question. *Clarence.*

"Now, Swami, when was the first time you saw this message?"

"When it appeared upon the slate, written there by the spirit hand of the boy, Clarence."

"You didn't tell this spirit what to write? Nor in any way try to influence it to tell its ma to trust you?"

"Most certainly not!"

"Okay. Now, subsequent to her gettin' this message, did you give her any advice?"

"Why—yes, I believe I did advise her upon certain matters when she appealed to me."

"You don't rec'lect, I s'pose, what the nature of this advice was?"

"I do. But I cannot honorably divulge it."

"Prob'ly not. But lookin' at it dishonorably—ain't it a fact that you advised her to turn over all her property to you? An' didn't she do so? An' immediately thereafter didn't you deposit in the bank in Dawson ninety-six thousan' dollars that she draw'd out an' turned over to you?"

The dark eyes suddenly narrowed, and the soft tone of the Swami's voice rasped harsh. "What is this?" he demanded. "Why do you ask these questions?"

"This," explained Black, "is a miners' meetin'. An' them questions was asked fer the purpose of convincin' the boys here that you're a low-down, ornery skunk that's be'n gyppin' folks in Dawson all winter because the law's hands is tied when it comes to dealin' with dirty scoundrels like you—an' to show 'em that you wound up yer campaign of swindlin' by robbin' Bob Tail Saunders's widder out of every damn cent she had in the world."

"That is a lie! I am a man of honor! She turned that money over to me of her own free will. It is not for me, personally. It is for the cause."

"An' you're shore this here Clarence is dead?"

"Of course, I am sure he is dead!"

"Because you ordered him p'izened?"

"No! I did not order him poisoned!"

"Okay. That's your story. Now let's hear the other side." He paused and then raised his voice: "Hey—Claybank, come on in!"

Claybank Berg stepped from the store-room and made his way to the bar as the men gave him passage. At sight of him the Swami's jaw dropped, and he leaned heavily against the bar, continuously moistening his lips with his tongue.

"All right, Claybank—tell your story," Black John said. "An' don't leave nothin' out, from the first time you seen the Swami till now."

WHEN the man had finished, Black John took the written messages from Berg.

"Anyone who's got a lingerin' doubt that these here messages purportin' to have come from the kid to his ma was wrote by the Swami an' sent out to the shack fer the kid to copy, can satisfy themselves by steppin' up an' comparin' 'em with the specimen the Swami jest furnished us." He paused and held up the bottle of poison. "So in spite of the fact that the Swami ordered him knocked off, Clarence is alive an' safe in Owl Man's shack, in Moosehide, as Claybank has jest told you."

"So you can see that the Swami summoned a spirit that wasn't dead yet—it's a hell of a ways from Moosehide to Nirvana. An' that ain't the only one. I myself talked to several spirits he claimed to have summoned from Nirvana. The first was my Grandpa Smith—an' most of you has got a damn good guess how many Grandpa Smiths I've got. The next was the spirit of Lyme Cushing." He turned to the Swami, whose skin seemed to have faded to the color of old parchment, and whose eyes stared straight before him in an unseeing glare. "An' Lyme Cushing stands

there behind the bar, not havin' yet attained Nirvana.

"Likewise, I talked with Red John an' Long Nosed John, both of whom is here in the flesh, though the Swami summoned their spirits from the astral sphere, which in their case is ondoubtless a euphonious nickname fer the nether world.

"So, considerin' the evidence, it's plain to see that the Swami, here, is one of the most detestable damn scoundrels it has ever be'n our privilege an' pleasure to hang.

"But even so, he's entitled to all the breaks he's got comin'."

"Them onsuccessful lies he told militates agin him, rather than in his favor. So the only break I can think of would be the matter of our jurisdiction. While our code of procedure, here on Halfaday, is onwritten, it is nevertheless, well defined—an' we don't want to overstep its bounds. The fact that these crimes was committed in Dawson might raise a question in the minds of some of you about our right to handle the case, it bein' a well established rule amongst us that what a man done before he come to Halfaday ain't none of our business.

"But I'll p'int out that when the Swami come to Halfaday he fetched with him certain contraptions an' gadgets that is the tools of his nefarious trade, to wit, a horn, a violin, a couple of bells, a pot of incense, an' a little green god a-straddle of a calf. This here last item, bein' a graven image, smashes one of the ten commandments, most of which we aim to uphold here on the crick. All these aforementioned objects was fetched in fer the purpose of defraudin' us citizens of Halfaday, an' thus his crimes is irrevocably linked with our locality, an' brings him, *a priori*, within' the jurisdiction of this meetin'. So we'll now take a vote. All in favor of hangin' signify in the usual manner."

A unanimous chorus of "Ayes" filled the room, and the next instant, with a lightning-like movement, the Swami reached out, snatched the little phial from Black

John's hand, jerked the cork from it, and swallowed its contents. Almost instantly he pitched forward upon his face and sprawled upon the floor, his legs and arms twitching. Then the twitching ceased.

Black John raised his eyes to the faces of the men who crowded about the inert form. "It looks," he said, "like the Swami has attained complete freedom from all physical laws."

X

THE body was carried into the store-room, and after the last of the men had departed for their claims, Black John stepped from the saloon to return a few minutes later carrying the Swami's light duffel bag which he tossed onto the bar. Together he and Cush removed packet after packet of bills of large denominations. Gravely Black John counted out ninety-six thousand dollars and shoved it toward Cush.

"Stick that in the safe," he said. "It's what the Swami got off'n Bob Tail's widder. Next time I go down to Dawson I'll take it along an' turn it over to Downey to give back to her. The rest of this here money you an' me might's well divide up among us. Chances is the Swami didn't have no available heirs, so there's no use botherin' the public administrator with it. The pore devil's got troubles enough as it is, what with the damn chechakos dyin' off the way they do. Anyways, we've got to bury him tomorrow, an' there ain't no reason he shouldn't pay his own funeral expenses."

Toward noon the following day, while two men were digging a grave in the little cemetery behind the fort, Black John and Cush stood at the bar shaking dice for the drinks. Both glanced toward the doorway at the sound of a voice.

"Busy as ever, I see! Don't you fellas ever get tired of workin'?"

Black John grinned. "Hello, Downey! Come on—belly up. Cush is buyin' one."

"This un's on you," Cush said. "You couldn't beat them three sixes in one."

"Not by a damn sight! The house always sets 'em up when a stranger comes along."

"Downey ain't no stranger," Cush growled, as he slid a glass toward the officer, and made an entry in his day book. "An' you can't beat me out of no round of drinks, cause they're charged agin you."

"There's a law agin makin' false entries in books."

"Yeah, an' if there was a law agin drink-moochin' you'd be in from now on."

Black John turned to Downey with a grin. "What's on yer mind?" he asked.

"It's that damn Swami. He's skipped out."

"With the Widder Saunders' money, eh?"

"Yeah. But it's a lot worse than that. It's murder. An' that damn Claybank Berg is mixed up in it, too."

"Who they be'n killin'?"

The Widow Saunders an' her son. The Swami disappeared a couple of weeks back, an' the next day Edith Niele stopped in to see the widow an' found her dead. She was sittin' there in a rockin' chair, an' on the floor beside her was a little bottle—empty. Edith notified me an' I got Doc Southerland an' went over there. Doc, he sniffs at the bottle an' says it's prussic acid, one of the deadliest an' quickest actin' poisons there is. Later he cut her open an' found enough of it in her stummick to poison fifty people.

"I found out the drug store didn't handle the stuff, so I went through everything the Swami left when he skipped out an' found a little empty bottle he'd throw'd away. The bottle smelt of this acid—like peach pits. So I took the girl, Fatima over to headquarters an' put her on the pan, an' she spilt her guts. She admitted her name is Kate Boggs, an' she came to Dawson with the Swami when the police run him out of Frisco. She told me all about how the Swami worked his fake seances—bell

ringin', an' wall rappin', an' trumpet blowin', an' all that stuff. She admitted he had be'n slippin' the widow drinks of some-thin' he called nepenthe to take her mind off her troubles. He'd slip it to her in them little bottles—an' it's easy to see how he could have filled this last bottle with prussic acid instead of the other. The spirits of Bob Tail an' the boy had be'n advisin' her to join 'em after she turned her money over to the Swami—an' the Swami kep' advisin' her to do as they said. An' she told Edith Niele that she intended to do it."

"Hum. In that case, you might have a hell of a time makin' a jury believe it wasn't a suicide, instead of a murder," Black John said.

"We might, at that," Downey admitted. "But with the girl's testimony, an' Doc Southerland's, an' me findin' that empty bottle he throw'd out, we'd have a fair chance of convictin' him."

"How's Claybank mixed up in it?"

"The girl told me that the Swami hired Claybank to follow the kid when he went to hunt for Bob Tail Crick, an' keep him in some shack, an' make him write slate messages to his mother, which the Swami told her come from the spirit world. An' Fatima swears she saw the Swami slip Claybank one of them little bottles the last time he fetched a slate, an' heard him tell him to slip the stuff into the kid's tea—an' then bury him where no one would find the grave."

"But," Black John argued, "even if you got holt of Claybank, an' he was to keep his mouth shut, you couldn't never convict him without no *corpus delicti*."

"That's true. We'd have to make Claybank tell where he hid the body."

"That's the trouble with the law—too damn many loopholes fer a murderer to crawl through."

"Has the Swami showed up here on Halfaday?"

"Yeah, he was here—but he passed on."

"You mean into Alaska?"

"Into Nirvana."

"Nirvana! Where the hell is Nirvana?"

Black John grinned. "If you was up on this here rama-yama-yoga-kali-yuga stuff you'd know without askin' that Nirvana's the abode of the astral body after becomin' disassociated from the temporary physical body of the earth-bound."

"What the hell you talkin' about? You mean—he's dead?"

"The Swami would never admit it. He'd claim he had merely attained union between the spiritual an' the divine, to say nothin' of abstraction from all worldly objects, an' complete freedom from all physical laws. But Cush claims he's dead—an' he's the coroner. You see, Downey, the Swami had the bad luck to get convicted by a miners' meetin'."

"An' you hung him?"

"No. We ondoubtless would of performed some sech service fer him, but he saved us the trouble by snatchin' one of them little bottles of prussic acid out of my hand an' swallerin' it, with what appears to us earth-bound, as fatal effects."

"But—where did you get prussic acid?"

"Oh, that was the bottle that the Swami give Claybank to slip into the kid's tea—like Fatima told you."

"You mean, Claybank didn't give it to the kid?"

"Of course he didn't! Claybank has got his faults—but he's no damn murderer. He handed the p'izen over to me, along with them messages the Swami wrote out fer the kid to copy—jest like I told him to."

"But if the kid ain't dead—where is he?"

"Down to Moosehide. Owl Man's lookin' after him till you call fer him. An' by the way, Downey, whilst rummagin' around amongst the Swami's effects, foller-

in' his transmigration, I run acrost that there ninety-six thousan' he got off'n the Widder Bob Tail. It's in big bills, an' you better take 'em along an' turn 'em over to the kid. I had Cush stick 'em in the safe, figurin' on takin' 'em down to you next time I hit Dawson.

"An' as fer Claybank, he's here. You ain't got nothin' on him. Better jest leave him here with me. There's a lot of good in him yet—if he's handled right."

Corporal Downey regarded the big man searchingly. "Do you mean to tell me that you were onto the Swami all the time. An' that you went ahead an' handled matters yer own way?"

"Well hell, Downey—you told me yerself that the law couldn't handle the case. An' I figured someone had to."

"I'd shore like to know how you worked it."

Black John made a deprecatory gesture. "Cripes, Downey—after all, it's results that counts—not methods. It was so simple the details would be borin'."

The officer fixed his gaze on the big man's face. "While you was rummagin' around amongst the Swami's effects, I don't suppose you run acrost a little item of a hundred an' eight thousan' dollars in bills, over an' above the ninety-six thousan' he got off'n the widow, did you? That's the amount the bank reported he draw'd out jest before he skipped."

"Fer God's sake, Downey! Funny I'd overlook a thing like that—ain't it? Come on—we'll hustle right over to One Eyed John's shack where the Swami stayed an' run through that stuff agin! But even if we didn't find what we're lookin' fer—there's a little green god a-straddle of a calf that would look swell on your desk fer a paper weight."



STRAYS

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Quest of the Golden Saddle," etc.

HE DID not tell us his name. We never knew where he was from, but his drawl and his cowboy clothes all ragged now —suggested Texas. He came hoofing it into the Thompson's Hole camp the coldest night of that cold Wyoming winter, dropped his trappings just inside the saloon doorway, and started running his keen blue eyes over the crowd of miners.

One by one they saw him and fell curiously silent.

"Kid," said the tall gambler that we called the Bishop because he wore black and was educated and a good talker, "kid, you've got plenty of sand in your craw. I mean, if you walked up from Hackberry with a load like that."

The load consisted of heavy grub pack and cooking utensils, blanketroll, pick and shovel. The kid was little, when you looked at the rest of us, not older than twenty. While he sized up the crowd he kept a hand near the butt of his belted six-shooter. We knew the sign only too well. This young stranger had been mixed in with trouble somewhere.

"I walked up from Hackberry," he told the Bishop. "Took me three days. Diggin's was playin' out down there, and I got to make some money. How is it up here, pardner?"

"Well," the Bishop said, "it's been good here. But, mostly, everywhere a man could dig has already been dug, except miles and miles out. That is, everywhere but in our boot hill. We fight over who's

to dig the hole there when one is necessary, since gold is found each time; the last man to cash in here was buried forty feet deep! I'm happy to say that, whatever else we are or aren't, we do have at least a modicum of respect for the dead. So there's no straight mining in boot hill. Get it?"

The newcomer smiled a queer smile. "Me," he said, "I got to make money." For a moment the silence was heavy. Then he half turned his head to say, "Come on in, Dick. I think it's goin' to be all right here for us."

He'd been holding the door open a crack with an elbow while he looked things over. An old sled dog nosed in and squatted stiffly, wearily at his feet. A dog of that kind was not a very unusual sight there in northern Wyoming. And yet, every man of us fastened his gaze on this one. A drinking miner rose from his bench and reeled toward him.

"Hiyah, mushalong. Hiyah—shake hands!"

The old dog growled. The kid said, "Stay back, pardner. Dick is afraid you wanna hurt me, and he'll bite you."

A big brute, the miner was. He halted, steadied, reached for hardware and bristled. "Yeah, and I'd shoot hell outa him."

"Before you do that, pardner," the youngster said, "I'll shoot hell outa you."

Afterward we didn't remember seeing him pull his gun. But there it was, level with his hip and pointed at the miner's belt buckle. His hand must have been half numb with the cold, too. The Bishop spoke quickly:

"Back to your table, you," and the big brute was glad to obey. The Bishop smiled for the youngster. "Son, you and the husky make an odd pair. Where'd you get him?"

"This dog?" The kid leathered his weapon and bent to touch the animal's head. "I woulda froze to death down in Hackberry hadn't been for Dick. Fust time anybody there had ever seen him. I'd drunk some hombres under the table, and

was goin' to my shack when I fell down and decided it was too much bother to get up and just went to sleep.

"And when I woke cold sober at day-break, there was Dick layin' with me, keepin' me warm—well, not warm, but it was enough to stave the frost off. He was a stray, and I was too, and somehow he knowed it and 'dopted me. On the rough trail up from Hackberry he petered out two-three times. I'd carry him then. But he ain't as heavy as he looks. I—"

"You need a drink, kid," the Bishop said thumbing toward the bar. "It's on me. Belly up."

"No. Thanks though. What I need right now," the youngster said, "is a shack, where I can fix up a bed for Dick here. Know o' any empty ones?"

"Maybe we can find one," the gambler told him.

THE gambler walked toward the door, picked up most of the cowboy's trappings. It was funny, I thought—the dog wagged his tail and licked Bishop's hand, and we heard the cowboy mutter: "You'll do to ride the river with, pardner. I sure am a heap obliged."

The Bishop took youngster and dog to his own shanty, and kindled a fire in the little sheetiron stove for them. He went back to the saloon then, rustled up a stud game, before midnight had won a better shanty for himself. The next morning he moved into it.

This entire day was so cold that scarcely anybody left the camp except to drag firewood down from the surrounding hillsides. Mostly the population of Thompson's Hole hung around the saloon, drinking, playing cards, and fighting for sheer love of it. The following day began in the same fashion.

The big brute miner who had almost locked horns with the stray cowboy came in at noon. He took his binge on fast. Always when he did this an exaggerated idea of his badness took possession of him,

and he became very funny to the rest of us. Some of his big talk then would have put tales of Paul Bunyan and the famous blue ox to shame.

After having refused a drink because—he said—there was no vinegaroon or sting-ing scorpion or tarantula in it, he turned from the bar with an ultra-serious mask on his thick face and addressed the house:

"Yeah, I'm mean. I was sired by a Bengal tiger and nussed by a grizzly bear. Raised on snake and wildcat meat, washed down with crocodile blood, with broken glass in carbolic acid fer dessert. When I was five years old I played with elephants and rhinoceroses, and leopards and lions which had the hyderphobia, and hippopotamuses. At ten I was totin' around a cliff in one hand and a Californy redwood in t'other to throw at jackrabbits. When I was fifteen I had a heap o' fun ketchin' up railroad tracks and tyin' 'em in bow-knots, and kickin' the tops offa mountains. At twenty I combed my hair with a giant cactus and shaved with a broadaxe—made a good livin' sellin' my day-old beard fer railroad spikes.

"Anybody here want to fight?"

Always he finished with that, and always we laughed at him. But this time there was somebody who didn't know. The stranger kid, it was, he had just stepped in. Until now, I hadn't seen him that day.

"Take him on!" the kid barked. "Why don't some of you take him on? If you don't, I will!"

He was queerly desperate. The big miner sobered rapidly, and his voice was low: "I didn't aim to be the one to tell it, young'un. Bishop here, he woulda fig-gered I was tellin' jest fer spite. But you've sorta called my hand. Listen, Bishop, you and everybody. You 'member this kid said he had to make money? He said that twicet, the fust night he come. Well, he's been minin' our boot hill, there amongst the graves o' the dead. I seen him!"

"I don't believe it," the tall, black-clad gambler said.

Every eye was on the ragged cowboy. He was white under his coppery tan. If he had denied it—but he didn't. There was a rumble of angry voices, for boot hill was all that they held even half sacred; not one of them but had a friend lying up there.

"Go see," the Bishop said to the man who stood nearest him. "We'll wait until you get back."

BUT the others weren't going to wait. Whiskey helped here, of course. A rope appeared, and there was a slip noose in one end. The kid ducked into a corner, his back to the logs, gun out and leveled at his hip.

"Come on," he invited, and he was gall bitter. "Come on. I'll not cross old dark river by myself."

"Hold the deal!" called the Bishop.

Ordinarily he was the law in Thompson's Hole. But not now. The mob spirit had those drinking miners. They began to move nearer and nearer to the ragged cowboy, not directly toward him but around the walls. He would get a couple of them. Three or four, maybe. Well, that'd be all right.

"Hold the deal!" the gambler kept saying.

They would stop for a minute or so, then go on inching toward that level and ready old range six-shooter. I'm telling the world, each man of us must have lived a week in the little time that had passed when the gambler's messenger came back.

"What about boot hill?" yelled the Bishop.

The place was so still that the falling of a pine needle would almost have made a noise. The messenger's words bared the heads of us all and broke every heart for the stray cowboy.

"The kid told us his old dog was in bad shape, Bish, remember? Well, it'd died, and he was only buryin' it up there with human folks. The wooden tombstone said: "Hear lays Dick he was A Dam good Dog."

"He's a Flash and He's Lucky. He's Not a Real End. " Not Much!



THE DUDE TURNS LEFT

By **WILLIAM R. COX**
Author of "One Set for Boot," etc.

I

DUDE ELLERBY wore a burgundy scarf arranged with meticulous carelessness, a sports jacket from the London Shop, slacks which were pleated to drape pleasingly about his long limbs and a suntan collected on tennis court and swimming pool purlieus. He lounged in the doorway to the dressing room of the Eastern University football squad, urbane, handsome, blond and bland.

Spike Everett, the other Varsity end, his face like a bulldog approaching a cat, snarled, "There he is! The too-good Dude!"

A hasty silence fell upon the hubbub. Husky Carter was talking to Captain Newell Chase, the giant fullback and star of stars. Husky Carter wore a tiny baseball cap, dirty sweat shirt and ancient football trousers. His sharp brown eyes went up and down the style ensemble of the Dude.

He said shortly:

"You're two days late reporting, Ellerby."

Dude's voice was loaded with sarcasm. "I was busy."

"We've been busy, too," snapped Husky. "Busy trying to find a new left end!"

"Interesting," nodded Dude Ellerby. "I hope you succeed."

He turned on his heel and walked down the corridor and out into the warmth of early September air. He left behind a hubbub of the greatest order.

Pooch Powell, sitting alone before the double locker which had been his and Dude's, waited through it all. Husky Carter had not said a word as yet. Big Pooch, a two hundred pound tackle, had played beside Dude for three years. Together they had worked on many an opposing line in the interests of the Blue and Gold of Eastern U.

SOME of the boys got pretty tough, laying it into the absent end. Husky Carter opened his mouth, then shut it again. But Pooch arose, towering, attired only in socks and silken football pants. His voice boomed like a foghorn, "All right! That's enough!"

They wheeled on him, but Pooch was launched. "We all joined the Navy in a group. Everyone agreed, when the season was over we'd go in together. Dude wouldn't do it."

"You're damned right he wouldn't. He's yellow!" said Spike fiercely.

Pooch laughed. "He'd bat your ears off if you called him yellow to his face—and he can do it. The Dude's got some reason for not joining up," said the big tackle flatly.

They hooted. They pointed out that Dude had not given any excuse, that he had reiterated that war was senseless, that he would have no part of it.

Pooch said, "All right, all right. This is our last year of football. Maybe this is our last year of living—some of us, anyway, won't get through. I'd like to beat

Southern Tech just once. Lemme see us do it without Dude!"

There was no answer to that. Southern Tech had never been defeated since these boys had played for Eastern U. The inter-sectional game had supplanted the Northern College contest as the big game of the year. They all glowered, then shifted their attention to Husky Carter.

The coach cleared his throat. He said, "Er—Pooch, you can talk to him. You might persuade him to at least give the team a break and come back."

Pooch took off his pants and re-dressed in civies. He went out silently and crossed the still green campus, past the red brick dinginess of ancient, sacred Eastern Hall, down Eastern Avenue and around the corner into College Place. He saw Professor Anthony Quinn in the garden of the pleasant white house and addressed him respectfully. The lengthy, lean scarecrow English prof said, "I believe I saw him. I was remembering a passage from Johnson . . . Jane was about. In the rear, perhaps . . ." He nodded without recognition of Pooch and strode along. He rarely got his head down from the clouds, but Anthony Quinn's courses were jammed with serious students each semester. He was a great scholar and a kindly man and the father of Jane Quinn.

JANE QUINN sat in a porch swing and looked like all the lovelies of stage and screen and radio to Pooch, whose taste ran to exhibitionist lines. The Dude lounged, graceful as always, facing her. Jane was saying, "It's not what you do—it's the way you do it, Dude. You're pretty offensive, sometimes."

She was not looking at the Dude, but over her shoulder Pooch could see the gray eyes of the young man and the hurt which grew in them. Pooch said loudly, "Hey! You're wanted, Dude!"

Jane whirled and said, "You big goon! This is a family conference!"

"Time and football waits for no man,

Beautiful!" said Pooch firmly. "Husky is screamin' his fool head off. He has got no left end."

Jane stared at Dude. She said, "Did you quit football, too?"

"Naw, he just taught the wise guys a lesson," said Pooch hastily. "They'll shut their bazoos from now, Dude. C'mon and play yourself a game of touch with the boys."

Dude said, "No!"

"Aw," remonstrated Pooch, "you know you can't stay off the game. You know how you are. Don't try to play tough in front of Jane and me. We know you too good."

Dude stood up. He said coldly, "I've been told off a couple of times today. That's enough. Thank you, Pooch, for sticking your neck out for me. But I'll be leaving here within a day or so. Count me out on anything you have in mind." He bowed stiffly, but still with the old grace. He stalked away.

Pooch stood open-mouthed, staring after him.

Jane went slightly pale, clutching at a strut of the swing for support. Pooch saw Dude run almost squarely into Anthony Quinn, saw them stop and exchange a word, saw the Professor grab Dude's arm and drag him into the house.

Pooch said, "Er—I'm sorry, Jane. The boys were a little rough on him."

"Rough?" she said. "Yes. Maybe we're all hard on him. His—you know his father died as a result of the last war. His cousin was killed in training last month. . . ."

"Don't give me that stuff!" said Pooch. "It's somethin' more than that. 'Scuse me, Beautiful. . . ."

The Dude was coming out of Professor Quinn's house almost as soon as he had entered it. He was striding toward the campus and Pooch had to run to catch up with him. They passed Eastern Hall and Dude headed for the dressing room of the practice field without a word.

II

IT WAS a mixed-up season, but Husky Carter had more tricks in his bag than four ordinary coaches. He had been around the football wars for many years, somehow keeping a step ahead of the procession. Eastern hired him at a big salary when Eastern football fortunes were lower than a snake's stomach. Husky had produced—except against Southern Tech.

And Husky brought this Eastern team to opening game with Midwest Aggies undermanned, split within its ranks, but sharp as eleven tacks on the field. It was, Dude supposed without enthusiasm, a minor miracle.

It was warm in Eastern Stadium, with a September sun beating down, but there was football in the air. Dude had to clench his hands and struggle with the poker face he had adopted and bury the thrill deep within him. It was there, and it was the wellspring from which his football ability sprang. Dude was slight-boned, tall, lean like a greyhound. His father had been built that way when he played for Eastern . . . he thrust the thought of his gallant, dead father from him, clenching his teeth.

Dude went down to the end of the line on the left and poised as Pooch got ready to kick. This was the moment of the season, and his belly contracted, tight as a drum.

This was the beginning. Nor war nor troubles nor hatred could spoil this for Dude Ellerby. The Aggie's captain raised his hand. Pooch glanced proudly up and down his line, nodded, stepped forward. There was the thrilling thump of toe on ball. Dude went off like a sprinter, down the newly whitened sideline.

He ticked off the direction of the kick, over to the far side. He had to run until he was blocked, or until the ball was even with his course, sticking to the sideline, lest he be reversed. Every end knows this. He sailed along, ahead of the other East-

erners. A husky Aggie came in with a smacking body check.

Except that Dude was not there, never having cared to be slammed around in an open field. Dude was inside, where he had no right to be, and was cutting the tangent, heading for the racing ball carrier in the dun-colored jersey of the visitors.

Husky was off the bench, his face white with rage. Three linemen, defenders of the funnel, threw themselves into Dude's path. The alert Aggie with the ball reversed ran for the opening left by Dude.

Out of the melee which Dude had instigated came a figure in Blue and Gold. Dude's legs churned as he backtracked. He was so swift that the Aggies seemed tied to the spot. He flew through the air with the greatest of ease. He laced into the Aggie halfback, wrapped loving arms about him, dragged him to earth. It was on the twenty yard line and Pooch was pounding Dude's back in glee before Husky could retreat, smoldering, to the bench.

Slim Dolan, only possible replacement for Dude, a sophomore with no experience, listened to the tirade. Husky said, "He's not a real end, y' see. He's a flash—and he's lucky. Never, never, never do what he just did!"

Dolan, a Celt with freckles and some impudence, said, affecting innocence, "Should I let 'em come down to the thirty or thirty-five, sir?"

HUSKY swelled like a toad, but this was a year when any kind of end was scarcer than hen's teeth. He said, "You learn to play right! That damned Dude gets by on breaking the rules. If the turn is right—the Dude goes left. He might get away with it—but it's not end play and never forget it!"

The Aggies were lining up. They used the Warner with modern switches. They threw the power over the left side. They had a big back called "Mule" who hit like

one. He roared behind blockers and Pooch got himself tossed out of the play.

Dude was playing wide—too wide. The blockers came hungrily through the hole after Pooch went down. The ball carrier started to criss-cross inside with a nice ten yard gain in prospect. Dude came in from behind and the trailer-back only woke up as Dude soared past him. The hind legs of the Mule got snatched up. Mule's face ploughed dirt after a gain of only two yards.

Dude laughed a little, going back. Pooch was shaking hands, growling, "You saved me that time. Watch that trailer."

Dude said, "I got him. Play your game, like always."

The Aggies had to try that play again because it had started so well. They just admonished the trailer this time and Mule, blood in his eye, came again.

The trailer set sail for the flashing, dashing Dude. He got him, too, because Dude ran right into him. They sprawled around and the back from Midwest sat up and peered to see where Mule had carried the ball. Then he scrambled like hell out of the way—because Pooch had the Mule on his hip and was hurling him back towards the Aggie goal.

Dude drawled, "Now ain't it funny how Pooch comes through?"

But the Aggie back knew. He glared and said, "Smart guys, ain't you?"

He sent the kicker back, glaring at Dude. Pooch and Dude had set up the play after one shot, merely by placing the blockers. Pooch had let them through that time, then clocked his man with ease, for a loss.

Aggies kicked and Lefty Livovitz brought it back to the thirty-five, a clear advantage for Eastern so far. Dude lined up—Eastern had discarded the huddle last year. They used the T a lot now, and the balanced line with a bit of Notre Dame. Lefty gave them the quick-thrust signal and Dude worked on the tackle with Pooch. They really smeared the poor Aggie and Otto came lumbering through for five.

Lefty was smart as a steel trap. He sent Otto at the other side. Dude clipped the wing and Otto got four.

With one yard to go Lefty, almost reluctantly, called the 90 and 1 play. The ball went back, Lefty took it, faked twice, then only five yards back he threw it over the left side.

Dude had gone a good ways, but he circled, losing the harried wing back. Lefty threw a pretty pass, loaded on the short ones like this, feathery on the longer ones. Dude accepted it with a diving leap, whirled and began running.

His swift, unorthodox maneuvers caught the Aggies leaning the wrong way. He was in the secondary, but so was Pooch, who bunted the distracted wing for a sacrifice as Dude hit the high spots going away.

They chased him, but he had wings on his heels. He ran over all alone, and on the bench the spellbound sophomore Dolan said, "Mebbe you're right, Coach. But he sure makes football look like an easy game to play!"

Husky gritted his teeth, torn between pride and anger. He knew football was not an easy game to play. He knew this early score decided nothing. But he also knew that Dude Ellerby had come to Eastern with all of this football genius which he possessed—that he had learned nothing of import from Husky Carter or his staff. It killed him. . . .

THE Dude had followed a set pattern of behavior. He was courteous, but he was alone. He roomed alone, stood alone. He brooked no familiarity, no insults. Husky remembered when Spike Everett had taken it upon himself to reduce what he called "Dude's big swelled head." That had been a two-blow fight. Dude hit Spike and Spike hit his skull on the hard floor.

Then lumbering, good-natured, amiable Pooch Powell had taken a fancy to Dude. Sophomore year they had worked together

like Damon and Pythias on the field. Husky woke up then, and found himself with a team within a team. He had a duo of remarkable performers who did not fit his system.

He had argued with them, but they had been too tough and too good. They didn't answer back—they just played their own little game. They had fun! Terrible thought—fun in big time football! But Husky had shrewdly let them alone after sophomore year. He could have killed them cheerfully, but he knew a good thing when he saw it.

Husky stared out at the field. The Aggies were angrily coming back, and that Mule was a terrific football player. The quarterback was shrewdly pounding the other side of the Eastern line, leaving Dude to follow the play around and not even trying to fool him with reverses. They made two first down and came over mid-field.

Then the Aggie signal caller pulled a really smart one. Dude was slashing, of course, on every play. Usually it was impossible to tell whether Dude would slash or check, but today he was over-eager and Husky almost sent Dolan in when he guessed what was coming: But it came too quickly.

The play went to the other side, all right. Dude came in like a hungry hound. They let him come.

Then the far back of the double wing took a quick pass behind the line and started back over Dude's end. He was clear as crystal. All the quarterback had to do was nudge Dude with his shoulder and keep him behind the play.

The Aggie turned to deliver the nudge. He launched a shoulder at nothing. Dude had checked himself in mid-stride, a step AHEAD of the fake play. He was nestling under, grabbing with those eager hands. He had the ball carrier and was throwing him for a four yard loss!

Pooch was roaring with laughter. Husky's chin dropped. Even after three

years he could never get used to this miraculous prescience of his star end. . . .

Somehow, that play finished the Aggies. The final score was Eastern 34, Aggies 0. Slim Dolan saw plenty of service in the game as Dude rested, grinning to himself, unheralded by his sulking teammates, but seething with an inner happiness which was never discerned by the people about him.

III

OVER at the coach's house, on the edge of the pretty campus, Spike Everett had finished getting straight his assignment on the 81 play and was saying boastfully, "Well, I moved in on Dude's gal tonight. Taking her Wednesday."

Husky Carter said, "Dangerous stuff, Spike. They are old family friends."

"What I can't get is why Dude visits Anthony Quinn Shakespeare every night?" said Spike. "That old fossil is only half alive, ain't he?"

"Quinn was in the war with Ellerby Sr.," said Husky. "I suppose they discuss affairs. . . . Say! . . . Every night, huh?"

"Jane says so," nodded Spike.

"And Dude refuses to enlist," said Husky. "I never liked that Quinn—he flunked Zebra Chancey right out of school last year. Best center I ever had. Coal mine boy—Quinn hated him because he spoke a little broken. . . . Now I wonder if Quinn influenced Dude, on account of the last war and Dude's father getting his. . . ."

In his own comfortable, big room, surrounded by his books and his pictures and his solid possessions, Dude was sunk into an armchair, feet straight out before him. There was a knock on the door, but he made no move to answer. His chin was sunk in his scarf and the lines about his mouth were too deep and bitter for such a young man to be wearing.

The knock became louder and Pooch's

voice pleaded, "Aw, I saw you come in, Dude. I wanna talk to you."

Dude said, "Come in, then. It's open."

Pooch stumbled into the warm light of the low-burning lamp and perched on a straight chair. "I wouldn't bust in on you without knockin', Dude. You're the kinda guy wouldn't appreciate it. I know you pretty good, pal."

Dude started to smile bitterly, then found it impossible. He stared at the big, tow-headed tackle and saw the kindness, the yearning for friendship in Pooch's eyes. He knew that the rest of the squad were taking it out on Pooch because he defended Dude. He made a terrific effort and said:

"I—want to talk—to someone. Someone besides Tony Quinn, I mean. . . ."

"Tony Quinn? You mean Shakespeare Quinn?" asked Pooch.

"Yes," said Dude. "He was my father's pal."

"Oh!" said Pooch. "I didn't know that. Your dad was a big guy here. . . . But then you're somethin' yourself. . . ."

DUDE said quietly, "Something that everyone loathes. Pooch, you're a simple, straight guy. I've got to tell you something—then maybe you won't like me any more. I've got to give you a chance to regain your standing around here. . . ."

"I never had any," said Pooch bluntly. "I'm a mine boy—came here with Zebra Chancey. Only I did go to high school and I don't mind studyin'. I'm not even a great tackle—unless you're in there workin' with me."

"Never believe that!" said Dude emphatically. "You're everything I wish I could be!"

Pooch stared. "Are you nuts, Dude?"

Dude said rapidly, in a high voice, "I had everything cut and dried for me. My father—he was sick before he died. He was—he had been a grand person. But the wounds—the gas—they did something to him."

"Hey—that's tough!" said Pooch quickly.

"Yes, that tough," said Dude. He stared at his hands, which would not be still. "I don't even know where she is. . . . Well, father was like that, at the end. He made me promise—I was to do everything he did at Eastern. He wanted to live again, you see. . . . The same rooms—this was his. The same fraternity, eating place, the clothing of latest cut. The same classes. . . . He was obsessed with the idea of reliving his happiest years—at Eastern."

Pooch said, "But that's—that's whacky, pal!"

"It was bred into me, pounded into me," said Dude. "He died hard—he wanted to live. He cursed the war, over and over. It's become a part of me, Pooch. I'm Dude Ellerby Jr. Except—except in one way."

Pooch said, "I know! Football!"

DUDE nodded. "That's my only escape. All year I live for it. I can't break through the shell my father built around me and make friends with people who would never be his friends. Dad was a snob, too. . . ."

Pooch said, "Hey! What about me?"

"Look, Pooch—I've got three rooms here. I know things are tough for you. I mean—well, you could ease off on the home folks. . . . Aw, I don't mean that at all. I'm asking you a huge favor. Would you—could you move in here?"

Pooch said, "In here? Me?" He stared around at the luxurious quarters. He said, "I'd be like a pig in a parlor!"

Dude said dispiritedly, "I didn't think you would. I don't blame you. Everyone has a right to live his own life. . . ."

"Hell," said Pooch roughly. "I'm a practical guy, Dude. I couldn't possibly get my few duds in here—before fifteen minutes from now! Certainly I'll move in!"

For a moment Dude didn't seem glad.

His face pinched in and he looked older than Adam. Then he got to his feet and wrung Pooch's hand, crying, "I'll help you and we'll make it in ten minutes!" It was as though he had shed a cloak and come into the sun. That was before the Navy game. . . .

Navy had a light team, but scrappy and well-coached. They rated even with Eastern. They stopped Newell Chase and Micky dead. They couldn't gain through the Eastern line, but they kept the play at midfield with a corking kicker, who bottled Eastern in their own play yard for three quarters.

Then Lefty called the end around and came the Dude, lightfooted, contemptuous, the ball under one arm, the other hand licking out to stab off a Navy tackler. He broke over the scrimmage line from his own thirty-five.

Pooch had got up there. Spike Everett missed a block he should have made with ease, falling over his own feet. It was fairly obvious that Spike wasn't trying too hard, and Husky Carter's face turned dark and wrathy.

The Navy lad hurtled in. Pooch took a giant stride and interposed his body. There was a flurry and then the greyhound legs of Dude were carrying him along and the Navy Blue dipped its color as the last white line went under Dude's flying feet.

That was the only score of the game.

IV

THE next day at practise Dude was playing a scrimmage with one side of the varsity line pitted against the other, a rugged idea of Husky Carter's to sharpen the assignments on the new plays. In two minutes he knew Spike was out to get him.

First Spike rolled over and gave him the foot as he tried to go by. Dude leaped and got clear. He went back and said mildly, "I'm on your team, whether you like me or not."

Spike growled, "Go 'way, you damn slacker!"

Dude said, "I'm trying hard to be agreeable."

"You couldn't be half-decent if you struggled all your life, you swell-headed snob!" said Spike.

On the next play Dude was slow, avoiding a clash. Opposing ends do not often come together, and this play did not call for switching of assignments. Yet Husky was silent when Spike wheeled inside and let Dude have it from the rear.

Spike's body clipped across the back of Dude's legs, a palpable foul play. Pooch roared, "I'll kill that so and so!"

Dude went down, his face striking the dirt, his left knee seared with pain. He did not get up at once. He had never been badly injured in football, probably because of his catlike quickness and instinctive knowledge of the game. But now he knew he had suffered serious hurt.

The trainer and Husky examined the knee. Spike was loudly asserting, "That was the only way to get him. My assignment's got to be changed on that play. He'd have got in if I didn't go for him as best I could."

The other players were strangely silent. Even Makowsky and Jeff Morrow and Lefty Livovitz and the others who had railed against Dude earlier in the season did not concur with Spike.

Dude waited for the doctor. His leg was swelling. The football field looked very green and gallant with its white stripes and slender crossbars at either end. This was the practise field, where the frosh played their games while the varsity toiled in the stadium. This was where Dude had started Eastern football. This, he supposed, was where it ended. . . .

The doctor was gentle, probing, twisting the tortured leg. Husky came back and Pooch walked away from the scrimmage to listen. The medico shook his head. "Bad. Yanked the ligament all over the lot. He's out for a long time—maybe all

season. Why—this might keep him out of service, you know!"

Pooch swore under his breath, but Husky Carter maintained a dead pan. The coach said, "Take him over to the hospital. See what you can do. . . . He's my key man, Doctor."

"He is a boy with a bad leg," fussed the doctor. "You'll get no further use of him. Get him undressed and bring him over to the baking machines."

It was Pooch who walked away with him. They had to use a sub tackle for Pooch all that afternoon. The big tackle tended Dude like a baby. At the hospital he stayed through the uncomfortable hours while the leg baked and Dude sweated.

"I'd kill Spike cheerfully," said Pooch. "But it would wreck the team. We need him to struggle through."

Dude shook his head. "No use of thinking about revenge. Spike was the agent, but maybe I earned what he gave me."

For a moment Pooch was silent.

Dude said, "Do me a favor, chum. Get Jane and ask her to visit me here."

Pooch said, "Yeah. That's the way to go in there! The hell with the games to come—don't worry and get well!"

He crushed Dude's hand and went away. Dude lay back and waited for the pain to go away. After awhile he slept, and when he awoke Jane was there, with her father.

Dude said, "Hello! I slipped, honest!"

Professor Quinn shook his head. "The legions of the damned close in. Young Spike is a dull English student."

Jane said, "It's all over the campus. Spike is in bad standing right now, Dude. Coach Carter is defending him."

"Spike's not to blame," said Dude hastily. "Carter is right."

"Spoken like your father!" said the professor. "All for one and one for all!" His elongated face twisted and wry humor peeped from his eyes. "I shall endeavor to aid the impression of Spike's complete innocence," said Quinn majestically. "Adieu! I go to whitewash the enemy!"

They were alone. Jane came close and held onto Dude's hand. She said, "I hate you!"

"You're a lousy jitterbug," said Dude judiciously.

"You're no gentleman!" she retorted. Dude sighed and gripped her hand. "Those are sweet words! If I could only get up out of here I'd go all over Eastern not being a gent!"

"You're snapping out of it," she said softly. "You're becoming human."

"On a hospital bed!" said Dude. "They had to take the last thing away from me—football. I learn the hard way!"

V

ON SUNDAY it was strange to walk around knowing no aches from Saturday's game. The leg was pretty helpless, but Dude hobbled over to Quinn's house and sat on the porch in the pleasant autumn sunshine. Jane fed him tea and along came Spike Everett.

The tough end's face darkened when he saw Dude. He spoke curtly and planted himself next to Jane. Conversation lagged. Spike began to talk of yesterday's game, enthusing over the team play and Micky's catches of the forward passes. Dude concurred heartily, and said, "He can take over that spot and the burden will be off Slim."

"Then the kid can gradually work into the game. Dolan is all right."

Spike said deliberately, "Sure, he's all right. We've still got a team, you know!"

"That's what I said," agreed Dude imperturbably.

"Everybody knows you won't be back," sneered Spike. "You quit us once—you were bound to do it again."

Jane said sharply, "Be careful, Spike! You put him here, you know!"

"A little sprain!" said Spike. "The doctor knows his business. He's got to play ball with an Ellerby."

Dude said wearily, "Let it go at that."

Jane was on her feet, vibrating with fury. She said, "You'd better leave, Spike. Father is liable to come out here. You know what he'll say to you."

"Your father doesn't scare me," said Spike. His ugly temper was past all bounds now. "This combination of Quinn and Ellerby and old school tie stinks to me anyway. Good-by!"

Anthony Quinn lounged out of the house. He said, "Methinks young Spike is looking for trouble which pursues him even now. He flunked his last English quiz."

Dude said, "Now wait, Tony! He's got to pass that test. Like him or not, he plays that end solidly."

Quinn said, "It seems to me that you are overly noble, young Dude. . . ."

"No!" said Dude. "But football—Eastern football—is a tradition dear to ME!" He faced the older man steadily. The professor bowed slightly, smiled gently and withdrew.

Dude gathered his crutches and said, "See you later, darling. I've got work to do."

She said, "Call me 'darling' again!"

"Darling, darling, darling," said Dude. He grinned and went limping away, swinging on the varnished crutches.

HE WENT straight across the campus, heading for the coach's house. He had not overlooked the change in Husky's attitude that day he had been hurt. If he was going to break loose from his former hidebound habits of thought and action he felt that he should consult Husky about team business. Only in this way, he thought, could he wrench himself from the course set out by his father. . . .

He went down a deserted, wooded walk on the edge of the campus and turned towards the white house traditional to the use of Eastern Head Coaches. Spike Everett stepped suddenly from behind a tree. The big end's face was twisted with rage.

"Comin' down to squeal to Husky!" he

accused. "I thought you would! Tryin' to put me in bad!"

Dude rested his weight on the crutches and said, "It's not that, Spike. I'm not sore at you."

"You're a damned liar!" said Spike. "Husky's already got it in for me since you fell down and hurt your miserable little self. You're not goin' in there, see?"

Dude said, "Have you gone nuts?"

"I'll show you how crazy I am!" snarled Spike. He leaped forward, kicking at Dude's lame leg. It was a vicious, insane act. Dude barely managed to wheel, awkwardly, pulling his leg out of reach. He thrust one crutch and forward, attempting to hold Spike off. The rubber cup caught the wildly charging youth in the middle, doubling him up.

With a yell of rage, Spike swung his fist. The tremendous blow looped around. Dude was off balance, helpless. Spike's fist caught him on the jaw and knocked him off the path into the trunk of an elm tree.

Dude's arms flailed, trying to keep him from falling on the bad leg. He got a grip on the bark, his head spinning. Spike was right behind him, winding up for another blow, his ugly, square face distorted with passion. Dude braced himself and tried to get one hand up, to defend himself on one leg.

Two men crashed through the hedge which bordered Husky Carter's house. Dude caught a couple of hefty wallops on his shoulder and cheek, and blood ran from a cut. Then Pooch's right fist flashed in a short punch. It landed on Spike's chin. The big end collapsed like an empty bag.

They dragged the unconscious youth into Husky's house, praying that they were unobserved. They stretched him on a couch and held a conference, while Husky tended Dude's cut. Dude said, "He didn't hurt the leg—that's all that matters. Now listen to why I came here." He told them

about Spike's failure in English. He ended, "Makowsky and Judd Lee are English sharks—real students. So is Lefty. You've got to get Spike into a decent mood and sic them on him. Professor Quinn is fair—and he loves football in his own way. If Spike can barely pass the test, he can play."

Husky threw up his hands. He said, "This is a great institution of learning! Even an old guy like me gets taught! You win, Dude. But watch out for Spike. He's tough all the way through."

"Let Spike watch out for me," said Dude grimly. "I'm beginning to believe I'm tough, too!"

That night Newell Chase and quiet Otto Cobb, the blocking back, stopped in to see how Dude's leg was coming. It was the first time any of the team had ever been present in Dude's rooms. . . .

On Friday Spike took the English test. He was scowling and belligerent as ever when he came out, but there was a triumphant glint in his eye. He had passed it, thanks to the tutoring of the men from the team. . . .

VI

DUDE was back in uniform. He was only walking and the doctors said he could positively not play and an order had gone out making it official. But Dude walked around, limping badly following the assignments on the new plays Husky was putting together for Central College, Northern U., Navy Air Corps and finally Tech.

Most significant of all, Dude thought, was the changed attitude of Husky Carter. The coach no longer huddled with Spike for discussion of team business. He began to frequent Dude's rooms, and soon the others were coming regularly to the large and comfortable quarters to eternally confer about tactics and fan over the games gone by.

Always the talk was of Southern Tech.

One night Husky said, "What about the leg, Dude? Will you be in there?"

"The doctors here say no," said Dude. "But I'm taking off next week a couple of days. I'll let you know after my vacation. . . ."

Husky said, "With you in there, we have a chance."

Chase was present, and Judd Lee and a couple of others. They all stopped talking and stared at Dude. He was aware that they were agreeing wholeheartedly with the coach. Something came into his throat and choked him. He said in a low voice:

"I'd say I would be in there—but for one thing. I can't discuss it now. But I want in!"

They did not smother him with words. But he knew they believed him and were with him. A great warmth pervaded him, filling him with such pleasure that he had to stifle tears. He had been untrue to his father's precepts, but he was gaining peace in his own way. Right or wrong, he had to have that peace of mind. . . .

The team went along stolidly. Dude did not get into a scrimmage, and he spent several days in New York. It became a bit of a mystery, but the football players were quiet and there was no stress upon them. They beat Northern by one point. They played a great Navy Air Corps club to a standstill and as the all-star pros and ex-college stars weakened in the last period, Pooch and Slim broke through and tackled a ball carrier behind his own goal line. Eastern won, 2 to 0.

There remained only Tech. The second string was posted on Tech plays and Monday the varsity would get a taste of what to expect from the brilliant Southerners. Tech was undefeated, heralded as the greatest team in the country. They had four probably All America backs in Zev Meade, Mac Lane, Lute McEdwards and Chubby Smith. They had a whale of a line, with Choppy Crane, giant tackle, indubitably the best lineman in America.

Monday morning early Dude got back to school. He went directly to Husky's house and found the coach pacing the floor. He produced a folded white document and said, "Here it is."

Husky said, "Praise be! I'll see the doc at once and get that order rescinded."

They shook hands and Husky rushed off. Dude went to bone up on some books, lest he get caught by a prof. That afternoon Dude donned his pads.

Spike Everett knew the significance of this, of course. He lingered in the club-house, watching Pooch and the others fuss over Dude as though he was a bled horse getting ready for the Derby. They had a brace on Dude's knee, a gadget built especially by the New York man. Spike eyed the contraption with hot eyes.

Dude fitted himself back into it with surprising ease. He had thought he would be rusty from his layoff, and indeed his muscles were sore until Thursday. But by that crucial day when scrimmage ceased he thought he was back in form.

Or, at least, in nearly good form. He quickly learned that his leg would not permit him to make many quick changes of pace which had been his former particular genius. During the week he experimented, testing himself, going just as far as he dared without aggravating the tender ligament. He was far from satisfied, but he knew he would be in there pitching when the day came.

VII

THE team had to ride coaches but it was comfortable enough, and they chinned with the soldiers and sailors who shared the space with them. A big, husky sailor looked them over approvingly.

"Any you fellows goin' in?" he asked.

Spike Everett, coming down the aisle, took it upon himself to answer and he gave it a loud-speaker voice.

"Sure; all of us, except—" he paused and he sneered at Dude—"one."

Dude smiled at the suddenly scowling faces of the service men and said nothing. Pooch, in the seat beside him, also said nothing but he started to rise, with one big hand bunched into a big fist, and Dude pulled him back.

"Forget it, Pooch," he said quietly. "We've got this war to settle first. . . ."

They were all taut. It was noticeable at the hotel, even with Dude when he spoke with Jane and Anthony Quinn who were numbered among the Eastern rooters journeying to the big game. It could be seen in the team's dry practise session, to keep limber and become familiar with the background of the field. Then it was game day and they were trooping into the dressing quarters under the big stadium.

Pooch was bent over, unlacing his shoes, sweat beading his sober face. He straightened abruptly at a sharp exclamation beside him.

"S'matter, Dude?" he muttered.

"My brace," Dude said in a puzzled tone. "It isn't here."

"Huh?"

Dude was throwing his equipment around with a carelessness that was rare with him. Husky came over and Dude explained to him. It attracted the attention of the other players. Pooch watched until Dude's whole equipment was strewn on the cement floor with the special brace nowhere to be seen; then he shuffled in his loosened shoes over to Spike Everett.

"If I was sure you had a hand in this, you rat," he said in low, even tone, "game or no game, I'd take your filthy carcass apart."

Spike glanced at the accusing faces turned toward him, and it was impossible for him to miss the quick readiness with which all of them suspected him. He moistened his lips once and his face twisted into a snarl.

"What the hell," he snapped. "He's a slacker for the big show and he could've hidden it himself to get out of this where he knows he'll get hurt."

Pooch swung at him. Spike jerked back quickly, tripped his heel and sat down. Then Dude had a hand on Pooch's big arm.

"Leave him alone, Pooch," he said. "He's mine. Spike's been waiting a long time for it and after the game he gets it."

"Suits me fine," Spike sneered. "Sissy."

Husky Carter pushed up to him, his face white. "You want to play today, Spike?" he demanded. "Then shut up that dirty mouth of yours."

"Look, Husky" Dude said. "I'm going to look around. You take the boys out and I'll be there for the lineup."

"You can't take a chance without that brace," Husky moaned. "You'd be out on the first play and ruined for life."

"Take 'em out," Dude told him and left the dressing room.

Husky held them until a Tech assistant manager came in. He asked if anything was wrong but his expression as he surveyed the fully dressed squad told his belief that they were purposely delaying the game. They went out then, as peaceful in mind as a bunch of hornets when a club has burst their nest. But on the field their anger, deep and smoldering, gave way to concern, not only for the game, which they considered as good as lost, but also for the Dude who had suddenly won his place with all of them, with the exception of the snarling-faced right end.

Newell Chase called the coin and lost. Southern Tech, smart as a team and disdainful, elected to kick off with Choppy Crane, the great tackle, doing the booting. The Tech men were taking their positions with smiling nonchalance and no nervous fumbling at headgear, but Husky held the Eastern squad in the coach's huddle, talking steadily and not knowing what he said, but with his eyes glued on the narrow, shadowy opening in the stadium.

HE STOPPED abruptly. A shout burst from the Eastern section and a tall, lithe figure broke from the shadows and

sped toward them and the playing field. Slim Dolan grinned happily and headed for the bench without waiting for word from the coach. Husky called to Dude as he passed him: "Did you find it?"

Dude glanced at the rest of the team, faces turned anxiously toward him as they moved out, and smiled without answering. Husky shook his head worriedly. Pooch looked toward him as Dude ranged past, the concern plain in his eyes. Dude grinned at him; and Pooch, too, shook his head while anger rippled through his great muscles as he set himself, then glared across at Spike Everett.

The whistle shrilled. The ball plunked off Choppy Crane's toe almost gently and soared down to the five where Lefty waited.

Dude went into action like a sprinter from the starting line. He flew down and chose Lute McEdwards, who was coming fast to make the tackle. Dude got to him about midfield and went to work.

McEdwards was shifty. Dude had to feint him, then hit him, then hit him again and again. It was downfield blocking, mostly blind, and difficult to figure. The whistle blew and McEdwards grinned and loped downfield. Lefty had been effectively squelched on the Eastern twenty-five by four fighting Techsters.

Not since the Southwestern game had they met such a line. Chase belted into it. Dude went through to get the wing back, but there was no play. Chase had been stopped cold for no gain.

Lefty was no dope. He immediately went back and kicked a long one. Dude went flying down and broke past McEdwards and nailed Zev Meade on the Tech thirty.

The Tech boys just lined up as though it was a tea party. They used the box formation and the ball went into it and then try to find it!

They had more tricks than a monkey on a stick, Dude thought desperately. He played upstream, not clashing, cautiously

following the precepts of sound end play. He was afraid to try to outguess the clever Southerners. He saw the ball carrier breaking inside him and made a sunfishing dive. He hit McEdwards, who had slid in for the block. Meade got five yards.

McEdwards winked. Dude shook his head and walked out to his position. This was not like facing the Eastern second string while they made believe they were Tech. This was the real goods, and mighty different.

They seemed to go to the other side on the next play. Dude started to follow around in the orthodox move. Someone blasted him off his feet and McEdwards was running stripped-around Dude's end, with Pooch blocked out of it. Lefty made the tackle away back at midfield.

Pooch muttered, "Now you see 'em—now you don't. Let's smack 'em a few, pal!"

Spike was raving on the other side of the line. Chase was pale, urging the line to get in. Dude danced a little, feinting Choppy Crane. The play ran off with the ball changing hands three times in a bewildering juggler's trick and then Zev Meade rode over Spike at the other end for a first down on Eastern's thirty.

The stands were rocking with the long Tech cheer. Dude felt helpless. The Southern boys were smiling, going along at their wizardry without fanfare or fuss. Dude had to admire them.

HE SLASHED next time, mixing up his play a little. He hit right into McEdwards, but Meade had the ball and was inside for five as Pooch swept all four blockers off their feet, but couldn't get hold of slippery Zev. It was amazing how many of the Tech men got ahead of the ball carrier, Dude thought numbly. There must be some answer to it—but Dude did not have it.

Chase took a time out. The Easterners stood around and talked to each other. They were a bewildered lot. Chase said,

"Play 'em upstream and low. Get under and in. The hell with the ball."

They went back to the fray. They got down low and submarine. They stopped Chubby Smith in his tracks and voices barked for the first time along the Eastern line, shouting defiance.

The Techsters came on. Dude waited for the play to unfold. Starting from close up it did not unfold at all. It went "blooie" into the center of the Eastern line. You could hear the impact over in Alabama.

But Dude was running in. He had seen the figure slip back from the melee, carrying the ball hidden in his hands. It was Zev Meade, and down on the goal line were two Tech receivers. Dude made a despairing leap, trying to block him off, but Zev wheeled and threw his spot pass without looking at the mark.

Eager Tech hands gathered in the yellow ball. Lefty slammed down the end, but the touchdown was made.

Meade kicked the goal with ease. Tech trotted back, not at all over-elated. Choppy Crane got ready to kick again.

Lefty carried back to the thirty, this time. Dude put a great block on McEdwards, and the tall Tech back looked unhappy about it. Lefty called from the T formation and the willing Judd Lee ploughed a hole for Chase, who got four.

Dude ached for a chance, but it was too dangerous for a delayed play or a pass, so Micky took it and scooted for right end. Dude went in and picked out Meade and put the blast on him. But it was no dice. They stopped Micky after two.

It was kick again. Lefty threw himself into it and slanted the ball out of bounds on the Tech twenty, a good effort. Dude trotted down the field with the awful feeling that now Tech would take over again.

It was not so easy this time. The Eastern line was low and charged like a gang of maniacs. Spike began to get in and play in the ball-tossing Tech backfield. The gains were smaller.

But they were never checked. Tech

scored again in that quarter and once in the second period and it began to look like a track meet. The score stood 20 to 0, Meade having kicked Pooch in the face with the third attempt at goal.

The Eastern men went into the dressing room hanging their heads, some muttering dismally, the majority silent. Dude followed them slowly and Husky Carter was waiting for him.

"You got that brace or haven't you?" Husky demanded.

"Sure, I have it," Dude said, but refused to give further information. He hurried to the shower, took his time dressing, then lay down and waved everyone away from him.

Husky said something to the rest of them and it was time to go out again.

VIII

TECH came roaring as usual. Dude picked himself from under a play and instinctively tried his leg. It was in one piece. It hurt, but so did all his other limbs. That Choppy Crane was a real All America . . .

Still, it was second and eight. Pooch had helped block off that double reverse by sheer strength. And by constant association, Dude was getting on to the Tech magic.

After all, Tech had retained the ball all during the first half. There had been plenty of opportunities for a football brain to assimilate some of their tricks. Like when Zev faked to McEdwards first, he generally carried himself. But if Smith was the key man, then McEdwards carried with Lane blocking.

"Every team has to have a pattern—they call it a 'system.' A good end learns it as the game goes on."

Who had said that? Dude Ellerby! The first Dude! Long ago, to a spindly youngster who was soaking up football lore from his illustrious, gaunt, ill father.

Dude muttered, "If Lane is out, then

Smith blocks for Meade. It's *got* to be that way."

He watched Meade. The great quarterback handled the ball on every play. It revolved around his handling of the apple, each time they came. Dude shifted wide, standing up in his old attitude, hands on hips. He carefully rolled up his sleeves, unconscious of the significance of the gesture.

Signals barked, Meade bent, took the ball. McEdwards swept right. Crane was throwing a block at Dude.

Choppy was wonderful, but Dude's feet were like Astaire's, carrying him away. He drifted like a chip on the ocean. Then he was going back in, although the play seemed the other way. He was chunking himself at Zev, who ran low behind his line.

They collided and Zev's face was a study. Dude said, "Nice afternoon, Meade, old boy!"

Zev called time out. They were staring at Dude, discussing him. There would be hell to pay on the left end now, Dude chuckled to Pooch. He was hurriedly explaining to Spike and the others just what he thought he had learned.

Time came in again and Tech rambled. This time Smith was the faker. Pooch slammed in and got Lane. Dude did a head-on job with McEdwards, throwing him for a two yard loss.

Meade kicked hard. Lefty caught it on his forty and ran back to midfield. It was the farthest Eastern had held the ball that day.

Dude could feel it in the boys as they lined up. Lefty's voice was calm, but it rang with a clarion note. It was Micky Riley on Husky's new, pet, slow reverse. Chase was faking right where Spike and Makowsky were mopping up. Pooch and Dude held. Then Micky, doubled low, took the ball from Lefty and came with his ghost stride.

The suspense of the play broke open the field. Pooch and Dude ran neck and neck.

Micky picked his way behind them. They slapped Lute McEdwards and somehow Pooch kept his feet, blocking inside as Dude ran for the sidelines with the swift Micky. Twice Riley tried to get by, but each time Dude warned him:

"No, Mick! There's Meade!"

There was a time when Dude could have raced step for step with the fleet Micky, but his leg wouldn't let him now. He had to go along as best he could, watching Meade, knowing that Pooch was faithful to the rear. Techsters were coming from all angles, but they had been reversed neatly and Meade was the dangerous man.

They were down to the twenty when Meade came charging. He had to bull his way in, force Dude into Micky, knock the scat back out of bounds. He was big enough and tough enough to do it if he gauged it right.

DUDE had to take off first. It was a prayer, but he used his good leg for propulsion. He lowered his shoulder, braced his neck and aimed at Meade's hips.

At the last moment Meade tried to sidestep. But Dude had his eye on Meade's feet and his torso swerved. His knee buckled a little, but he put on the pressure, walking crab fashion, keeping contact, making it sure.

Micky breezed by. He scored standing up. Dude sighed and bent down and held on the line while Lefty booted. The scoreboard changed its tune to 20 to 7.

It was a question of stopping them cold and dead. If Tech ever got going again, the rout would be on. Probably no Eastern adherent in South City, upon that field, or the thousands who listened to blaring radios had thought of other than the staving off of disgrace. And if honor was to be won, Dude knew, it must be now.

Yet Tech was great. They came and somehow they slipped through. They put two men on Dude and ran him crazy before he could get into the play.

They came to midfield, steadily, inexor-

ably. They switched to Spike's side and went at him.

A raging maniac with the strength of giants met them. Spike was playing himself off his feet, but he stopped them dead, with Fritz Makowsky aiding. Tech reformed and Zev gave a signal and the formation was a new one, Dude thought.

Immediately the pattern unfolded in his mind. He had been checking, watching. The ball went to Zev in the short punt. The end dashed downfield.

Pooch was going in. Good old Pooch, playing like two men. Dude promptly deserted his position. He ran backwards, trailing that end. He heard Micky shout. He turned and took a quick look.

Zev was already firing. It was a hot pass, right down the alley to that pesky end. Micky would be too late, having pulled over for the feint. Dude raced, letting out all his speed and to hell with the leg.

He jumped at last, without sighting on the ball. He saw the excited face of the Tech end and put up his hands, reaching blindly. He felt the ball tip his fingers and groaned as he thought it was lost. He regained his feet and jumped forward to make the tackle when the pass was completed.

And there was Mister Ball, falling gently to earth. Dude had topped it vigorously, and it was short of the diving attempt of the Tech end.

But Dude bent and snatched and the cool leather came into his grateful hands. He wheeled, expecting nothing better than to be slammed to earth by disgusted Tech tacklers.

Then he saw that Tech had pulled over pretty far for complete deception on the pass play. He had a small alley in which to run. He shouted for blockers and got into it.

Micky was there, having been closest. Micky dropped a big Tech lineman. Choppy Crane came roaring, though. Choppy was not a man to be denied.

Dude scrambled along, getting his bearings. He saw a Blue and Gold jersey and fell over sharply right. In a second he recognized Spike Everett. He followed, and Spike took off at Choppy Crane.

Spike had never met Choppy, being on the other side of things. But this time there was no doubt about it. The great Tech tackle was under full steam ahead and Spike was not exactly creeping. Dude flinched at the crash of the two big bodies. But Dude had to go on.

There was room. He got into it and Pooch came as always and Lefty had used his speed to get into it. They ran a ways and then Lefty was gone and Pooch was screen blocking on a couple of men. There were more Techsters ahead in a demoralized field. The thing to do was stick with Pooch until he went down.

BUT Dude turned left. He did it sharply, upon a dime. They could have given him a nickel change. His leg was on fire, now, but he didn't give a hoot. He was running for a corner of that goal line, on a sharp angle, with the field strewn around him and tacklers wheeling off balance trying to get a shot at him.

He made the five and heard Meade coming.

He took off in a header, aiming for that fat line. Meade hit him and the earth shook and he had to shake his head to clear his eyes.

Meade said, "Damn you! It's a score!"

"Thanks, pal," said Dude. "I'm a bit dizzy."

"Dizzy like a fox!" said Meade unhappily.

So Lefty had to kick that one and he did.

Then Tech, aroused, played the game. They ceased making those remarkable basketball passes behind the line. They used their strength and their reserves and crashed, crashed. Spike, never fully recovered from his clash with Choppy, began to reel about and talk wildly.

Time was out for Eastern. Dude took

Spike by the elbow and said, "Who's ahead and by how much?"

Spike said, "I'll lick the whole Tech squad, one at a time!"

Newell Chase, blood on his face, nodded and waved a hand. Dude led Spike gently away. The big end whirled, trying to strike at Dude. Husky gathered him in and said, "It was a great block he put on that inhuman giant, Crane!"

"It saved the day," said Dude gravely. "Let's see what Slim can do."

Slim came in, all grins. The kid had worn off his nervousness on the bench. Tech tried him with a play or two. Slim went in and did himself proud.

At the forty Tech opened up again. The third quarter ended and for a few moments of the fourth it was hectic. They got past midfield for a first down.

They were working a quick reverse, with McEdwards carrying one time and Meade the next. It was a new play and Dude couldn't solve it. They went to the thirty.

Meade was openly gleeful. Tech lined up in the box. Dude couldn't tell who had the ball, now. He was slashing, then checking, and he was taking a whale of a trimming from first McEdwards then Meade.

It started the same way. The ball went back and forth. Dude gave up and simply slashed. He got past Choppy with a fast breakaway step. He found himself in the Tech backfield.

McEdwards was passing to Zev. Dude should have played Zev right then. He did not do it. He put on speed and shot in between the two backfield wizards.

The ball stuck right in his hands. He was tackled so hard they nearly killed him. But he had stolen the ball from the miracle men of Tech, right in their own backyard.

The gallant Tech stands, stunned for a moment, arose in a roar of sound. Never before had they seen their mighty jugglers lose the ball in that manner.

Dude was only half aware of his surroundings. If there had been another end

on the bench, he would have told Chase that it was time. His leg was swelling, pressing against the brace, alarmingly hot and inflamed. He knelt on the scrimmage line and listened to Lefty's signal.

Lefty was playing it Husky's way. There was no dizzy attempt to snatch a wild victory from a desperation pass. Lefty was calling on Newell Chase to soften up that Tech line. Newell hit in there like a ton of lead. The Tech line gave and the captain got five yards.

It was a bit of rest for Dude, going through after the elusive McEdwards. It was easy to what he had been doing. Micky slanted behind him on second down and went for four. That left one yard.

EASTERN formed close, balanced for the T. Dude pulled in, crouched, listening. Lefty intoned the signals in his clear voice, ". . . 43, 54, 81. . . ."

Dude kept his eyes ahead and hoped his hands did not tremble. He could not run that ball. He was bushed—but Lefty had called the right play. He had to hand it to Lefty. They would be braced for the sudden shot at the line. . . .

The ball went back. Dude pulled back and out of the line, making his legs obey. He raced, bent double. Lefty had the pig-skin and was waiting. Judd was pulled out too and ahead of the play. Choppy was roaring, "Watch that damn end!" but Choppy was being cared for by Pooch.

Lefty gave him the ball. Dude ran around Slim. Three of them got in, but Slim charged them recklessly and they went scattering about. Dude cut, got over the scrimmage line.

He made the yard they needed. Then there was Meade and Chubby Smith, pinching up on him. He threw himself as far forward as he could.

They pinched up. But they were behind him. His sudden gallant charge had thrown off their timing. He was running on leaden legs, bewildered. He knew he couldn't make it.

He saw Micky, then, riding along, trying to get up there and do some good. He chunked a little lateral at Micky and said, "I'm all through, kid!" He fell down in front of a raging, roaring Choppy Crane. He gave him the leg roll and tangled the big tackle into a knot. They rolled together on the grass.

When they got up Choppy was actually pale. Micky had scored.

The two teams lined up. The score was deadlocked. Dude could feel the desperation of the Tech line as they made ready to charge Lefty's kick for point. There was little he could do. He was ready to drop from exhaustion and the pain in his leg.

There was an expectant hush. Then the ball sailed gently back for Micky to hold.

But Micky had just made a long, hard run. Somehow he bobbled the ball. Tech men flew in.

Lefty bent like a flash, recovering the pigskin. He did not even straighten up. He pitched underhand, like an infielder throwing to first base. He shouted: "G'wan, you Dude! Put a pin on them!"

The ball almost tore Dude's head off. He caught it high against his face, ducking and diving as it came to him. He threw himself past Zev Meade. He rolled over and lay there, knowing he would never get up again that day.

THEY came and got him. They put him on a stretcher and a subdued and solemn Spike Everett went into the game. It really didn't matter about the game. The gun went off before anything else could happen. Eastern had the victory, 21 to 20 . . .

In his hotel room, Dude was propped in a big chair, his leg out straight where the taped bandages held it. Jane was seated beside him, one hand resting on his arm as they watched the squad filing in. Pooch led them with Husky close behind, and Jane's eyes opened wide when she saw Spike Everett bring up the rear.

"Come on over here, Spike," Dude called to him, and added with his old smile, "seeing I can't come to you."

Spike hesitated, then swaggered nearer. "You still say I stole that brace?" he blustered.

"No, Spike," Dude answered quietly. "And I owe you one to the boys. One of the Tech rubbers stuck it away. Had a bet on the game and crazily figured that would better his chances. I didn't tell the boys, because they fight better when they're mad. Thought you had done it, at first, Spike. Sorry."

"Well," Spike said slowly, "guess I owe you one. Figured you were yellow until I thought you were in there without the brace." But Spike wasn't backing down all the way. "Maybe you still are, keeping out of the big scrap."

Dude held up a hand against the rising growls of protest from the packed in squad. He drew a paper from his pocket, then turned to Jane.

"I've broken a solemn promise," he said to her, but the rest were listening. "To my father. In his illness, he soured on war. Didn't want me ever to go into one." Dude sighed. "Well, I broke other promises I'd made him. Figured a fellow has a right to live his own life, and if he'd been his old self he would have wanted me to do just that." He gave the paper to Jane.

"Navy Air Corps!" she cried. "Dude!" And both arms went around him.

"How about that leg?" her father asked. Dude grinned.

"Talked with both services when I was in New York. If it isn't the navy, it's the army. So, what?"

The squad crowded even closer, gripping his hands, one after the other. Then was the sound of a door closing.

"Spike," Pooch said and didn't look too sad about it. "Couldn't stand the news and the way Jane took it."

"I owe Spike another one," Dude said. "Fighting his hatred taught me a lot—about myself."

★ ADVENTURES EVERYWHERE ★

In the West

"Law Rider"—a
novelette



W. C. TUTTLE

Inside the Fortress
of Europe

"Night Ends at Dawn"
JAMES NORMAN

In a Boss-ridden Town

"Coffin House"
LAWRENCE TREAT

As the Coast Guard
Took the War

"Dawn of Treachery"
G. A. SHAFTEL

According to the Law
of the Far North

"Wolf Medicine"
C. F. KEARNS

On the Mississippi

"Under the Fleet"
C. T. JACKSON

*All in our next issue—***SHORT STORIES**, Sept. 25th

We did have fun on my first ship, that old four-piper destroyer of last war in-tagae. I certainly learned what they meant about rolling down to Rio. That trip we made up the Surinam River was hot stuff. I will never forget the astonished look on our Negro pilot's face when a cannibal bush bit a piece out of his backside one day while we were in swimming. We all roared when he remarked in his Trinidad accent, "By God he play too damaged to be one of them. One of our boats are the best in the world and I am sure men love them. The ladies in the pig stable are animad boiled boilers that makes fairly sane men. I often wonder just what there is about these men who just transfer to submarines?"

accompeted as a matter of daily routine; perhaps, some day when this mess is over, I will glamourize my experiences and sub-mit it to my waiting public. As Grandma used to say, "If the truth sounds like a lie don't tell it."

Was I proud when after much sweat, that one stripe of an esign adorned my sleeve! In retrospect I can see how juvenile I was, to be sure. I now have two stripes and feel my age. Ah, youth! Have you departed to that limbo from which no

UNDER this heading in each issue of **SHORT STORIES** we plan to publish letters from men in our armed forces overseas. For each one we use its sender's name and address. We cannot guarantee to receive a \$25.00 war bond. Won't you send us one? We will receive a \$25.00 war bond. Won't you send us one? We cannot guarantee to return unused ones, but we want representative letters showing what is happening to our young men in their greatest adventure. Address the Editor, **SHORT STORIES**, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20. N.Y. Do not send original letters; have them copied.

Overseas Mail

Dear Ancestors:

Who dates his letter? Pacific Ocean.

Here I am hat on my dirty box, com-
pletely surrounded by odd birds, one of
whom appears to have taken a fancy to
me. If the party in question is a lady, I
may select her as my pin-up girl. It's great
to be idle for a change with nothing on
my mind but my thinning hair after days
submerged and nights full of activity. So
here I recline with nothing but idle
thoughts to amuse an idle fellow in the
sun, on a sand spit.

Small frog I am to be sure in this great big
puddle named the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps
I am fulfilling my destiny, which is a sub-
ject not worth discussing. However, I do
know that thousands of regular run-of-the-
mill guys like myself are chasing around
nate a flock of sub-human vermin who
have delusions of grandeur. In this doing,
we hope to have a better world to live in,
which I doubt.

This old war certainly has changed one's
mode of living. In my salad days, I had
literary aspirations but lacked the back-
ground of experience to further my ambi-
tions. That which I lacked is now

to the waist with a cleaver in his hand, he is something out of this world. The crew always knows when he has the duty as the ship resounds with noise of cans being opened. Censorship prevents my passing on remarks made by the crew in an endeavor to get the poor bloke's goat. As a matter of interest, they always do to the tune of a swinging cleaver and much original language.

I will never forget the night we surfaced off Martinique on the old S_____, and scared hell out of a British cargo vessel, who saw us against the moon. She certainly tried her best to score off us with her pop-gun, squalling for help like a good fellow. We finally had to submerge before they had a fit. Of course the planes that came out to investigate had nothing to do with it. After putting in so many months on active duty, it seemed rather strange to once more assume the role of not too bright student at the Sub-school at New London. They certainly lost no time giving us the works, but the outstanding stunt on our first day was our introduction to that one-hundred-foot tower of water known as the Tank. They marched us into a pressure chamber in our Adam suits and built us up to 50 pounds, which represents a depth of 113 feet, which I may remark, makes things terrifically hot, but quick. Under such treatment, one's voice resembles the quack of Donald Duck. After this build-up, the jockey in charge slowly released the pressure and the sweat on our carcase encased us in a film of ice. Veeddy enjoyable. I got quite a kick out of clinging to that line and coming up through that tank to the surface.

Well, pals, it has done me no end of good to have had this little chat with you. I actually believe that coy bird is a female. She reminds me of a girl I once met in Panama. Keep the home fires burning and we will try our best along those lines for our erring yellow chums.

As ever,

L_____.

From Pvt. Emmett Walker, 17044622,
Parachute Corps, A.P.O. 704,
San Francisco, Calif.
Sent us by his sister, Mrs. John R. Hall.

Dear Folks:

We have been informed that letters could be sent again so here are a few lines to let you know that I am well and happy.

Here it is fall of the year, according to the calendar; at least in the States, it is. Hunting time, a gun often in my hands, but the game is not *white* quail meat. When one usually thinks of fall the thoughts come to mind of harvest, beautiful weather, crispy morning air, change of color and falling of the leaves, and the contentment that comes from having experienced a good year. Then comes the time of thankfulness and I am ashamed to remember how unthankful I have been in the past for the God-given gifts. We enjoyed them in a free country, won for us by our fathers for which they paid a great price, and it behooves us to maintain at an equal cost if necessary. How great should be our thankfulness for knowing that we have a way whereby we can be assured of being all together in heaven if not again on earth, a joy even greater than the joy of being together for a big family dinner at this time of year.

Now don't consider that I am bemoaning my lot and getting sentimental, for I have learned to say (maybe in a small way) with the great writer Paul, to be content in whatever state that I am in. I do enjoy my lot in the army, and find my joy expressed in laughter to the extent that some of the boys call me a laughing hyena.

Recently I had a peculiar experience like that experienced by Little Abner and the other dog catcher last year. I went to bed on Friday and woke up Sunday morning. As you may have guessed, we crossed the international date line. Of course, losing or gaining a day doesn't matter much here, so one hardly notices it.

It may be of special interest to you folks to know that we still get sufficient sugar and food, so your sacrifices are not in vain and we appreciate what all of you home folks are doing for us. Just remember that a hungry soldier with no equipment is of no help in an effort to keep America free and unoppressed. Here is a poem telling why I don't explain my travellings and experience like my previous letters did:

THE OVERSEAS LAMENT

Can't write a thing
 The censor's to blame
 Just say I am well
 And sign my name
 Can't tell where we sailed from
 Can't mention the date
 And can't even number
 The meals I've ate.
 Can't say where we'll land
 Couldn't inform you if we went by land
 Can't mention the weather
 Can't say if there's rain
 All military secrets must secrets remain
 Can't have a flashlight
 To guide me at night
 Can't smoke a cig
 Except out of sight
 Can't keep a diary
 For such is a sin
 Can't keep the envelope
 Your letters came in
 Can't say for sure, folks,

Just what I can write
 So I'll call this my letter
 And close with goodnight.

Maybe I can say a bit about Australia without putting in any information that the censors will cut out for fear of being of value to our misguided yellow oppressors. Everybody rides a bicycle here, both old and young, also instead of carrying a trunk around as American women do, for their cosmetics, etc., many carry a leather case on their back with a strap going under the armpits. All school children wear them.

You folks are starting winter and we are starting summer here. Australia is a lot like the U. S. I don't think we could have gone to any other country and felt so near like being in our home states. Of course, I haven't a chance to see all of Australia, but it seems inviting enough for one to stay, as there are plenty of opportunities here. Some of the country—very much like the old West of U. S.—is not settled yet.

We were on the boat more than a month and traveled about 13,000 miles on the water. Funny thing, I always thought crossing the equator was extremely hot, but I was wearing a sweater, and it was really hot just off the southwest corner of U. S. In fact, that has been our hottest weather.

Love, EMMET.

NEW SUCCESS OVER ATHLETE'S FOOT

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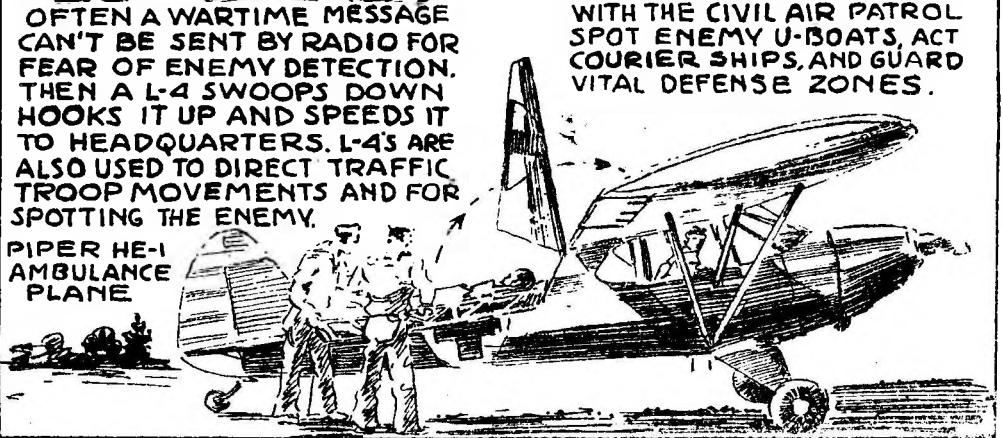
Wings for Victory

by Jim Tamm

PIPER L-4 "GRASSHOPPER"



THE "FLIVER" PLANE HAS GONE TO WAR, TOO. ACTING AS THE "EYES OF THE ARTILLERY" THE PIPER L-4 IS ON ACTIVE DUTY ON ALL FIGHTING FRONTS. THEY ARE ALSO SERVING THE TANK CORPS, CAVALRY AND INFANTRY.



OFTEN A WARTIME MESSAGE CAN'T BE SENT BY RADIO FOR FEAR OF ENEMY DETECTION. THEN A L-4 SWOOPS DOWN, HOOKS IT UP AND SPEEDS IT TO HEADQUARTERS. L-4'S ARE ALSO USED TO DIRECT TRAFFIC, TROOP MOVEMENTS AND FOR SPOTTING THE ENEMY.

PIPER HE-1
AMBULANCE
PLANE



PIPER PLANES SERVING WITH THE CIVIL AIR PATROL SPOT ENEMY U-BOATS, ACT COURIER SHIPS, AND GUARD VITAL DEFENSE ZONES.

was a little over 43 grains and the weight of the gun including the rod bayonet, which was also the cleaning rod was about 9½ pounds.

A few changes were made and lo and behold we see a gun the appearance of which is about the same as the Service Springfield we have today and known as The New Springfield Magazine Rifle Model 1903. This gun also handled the 220 grain bullet which was a round-nosed affair of about the same build as the Krag bullet.

Then the French got busy and evidently should receive credit for the development of the Sharp-pointed or Spitzer as we know it, and the boat-tail bullet. They didn't say a word until the appearance of their Balle D, and then in 1904 the Germans came out with the first patents on the Sharp point. But regardless of this patent business I again say, the French were first to develop the Spitzer and boat-tail and did it some time between 1894 and 1898, and furthermore were the first to apply the two in one bullet. (We didn't get around to the boat-tail until after World War I, and shortly before World War II we went back to the 150 grain Spitzer bullet without the boat-tail.)

The virtues of the sharp point bullet were easily seen, so the 1906 cartridge, using the 150 grain Spitzer flat base bullet at around 2,700 feet per second was adopted and the Springfield adapted to the new cartridge. This necessitated a slight rechambering job which shortened the barrel a bit.

This gun was shortly to become not only the most accurate military and target rifle in the world, but the most popular rifle that ever fell into the hands of the civilian rifleman. As a military rifle it established new standards of accuracy. As a sporting arm it became the rifle by which other arms were judged.

In 1908 and 1912 American riflemen, using the Springfield, won the Olympic shoots over such opponents as England,



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Canada, France, Sweden, Norway, Greece, Denmark, South Africa, Russia and Austria-Hungary. Also in 1912 Yankee marks-men won the Pan American match at Buenos Aires, etc., etc. In all these matches the Springfield never failed to defeat the German Mauser.

Then along came World War 1. At this point you would naturally think that we would have been in a position to manufacture great numbers of this splendid gun. 'Twasn't so! The Springfield was manufactured in only two factories—the Springfield Armory at Springfield, Mass., and the Rock Island Arsenal at Rock Island, Illinois. Our government for several years prior to 1917 had cut down its expenditures for the manufacture of small arms and ammunition. The result was that the Rock Island Arsenal had ceased its production of Springfields altogether, while the output of rifles from the Springfield Armory had been greatly reduced.



This meant that the skilled artisans once employed in the manufacture of Springfield rifles had been scattered to the four winds. So, when it became necessary to speed up production in 1917 only a few of the old trained employees could be recovered. Yet when these two factories were finally restaffed and production was at top speed, not nearly enough rifles were being produced to supply the quantities needed by our growing army. Therefore private factories had to be lined up.

It's a long story—but in a few words, Winchester and Remington were tooled for producing the British Enfield rifle, which our ordnance officers didn't think much of, but a few changes were made and

production was started on the gun we know as the U. S. Modified Enfield Rifle, Caliber .30, Model 1917. It turned out to be a fine fighting rifle and was the two-handed gun that most of our World War I troops were armed with.

After the war, through the efforts of the National Rifle Association, the National Board for the promotion of Rifle Practice, and many progressive and broad-minded ordnance officers a number of unusual rifles commenced to issue from the Springfield Armory.

First of all it was decided to make and assemble each year a supply of specially built Springfield rifles for the National Matches, about 2,000 per year. This really started something.

Besides the Style "S" (regular service rifle) and the National Match job, a few of the many Style rifles made up for sale to National Rifle Association members and for use by army teams are as follows:

Style N.R.A.—This is a sporting model rifle which could be used for hunting as well as target shooting.

Style N.B.A.—This rifle is the same as the N.R.A. except it was mounted on a full length stock.

Style T.—This is a heavy barrel target rifle cal. .30 on style N.R.A. stock. It was furnished with 26, 28 or 30-inch barrel. It was equipped with a Lyman No. 48 receiver sight, and globe front sight, headless firing pin, reversed safety lock assembly and scope blocks. The weight of this rifle is 12 lbs. 4 ozs., and is some gun, believe me!

And then there was the International Match Type or "Free" rifle which is a heavy barreled job, fitted with a Swiss type adjustable butt plate, and in some cases with a palm rest.

These were, or rather are very fine rifles and I sincerely hope they will again be available after the Axis is put on ice!



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He claims, "The power to get what you want revealed at last, for the first time since the dawn of creation. The very same power which the ancient Chaldeans, Cuthic, Priests, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Sumerians used is at our disposal today."

He says, "Follow the simple directions, and you can do anything you desire. No one can tell how these Master Forces are used without knowing about this book, but with it you can mold anyone to your will."

From this book, He says, "You can learn the arts of an old Science as practiced by the Ancient Priestly Orders. Their

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

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

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