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APRIL

# Top Notch

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## THE DRAGON OF ISKANDER

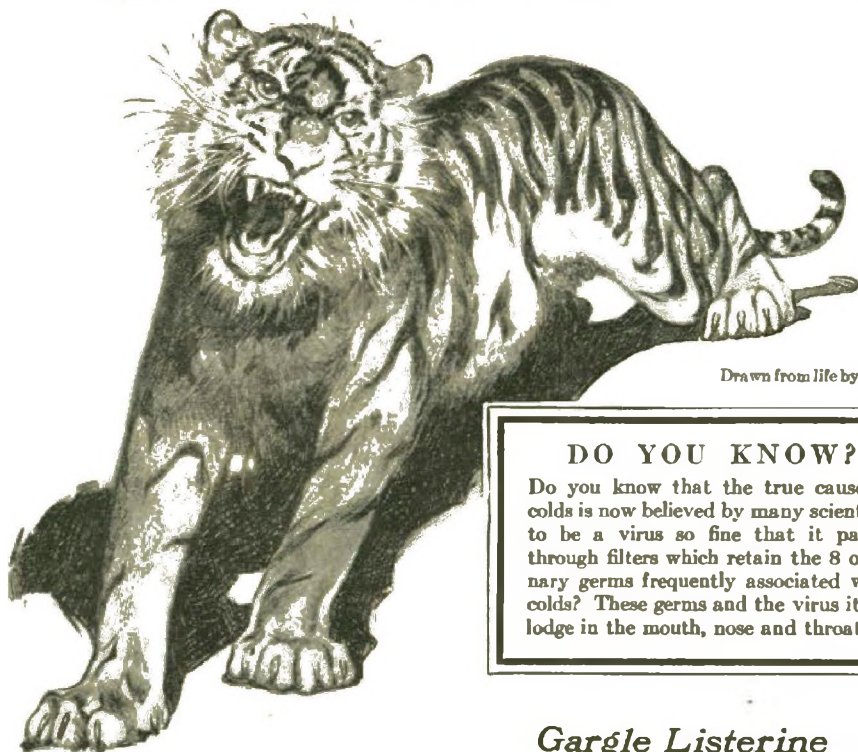
By NAT SCHACHNER

## VALOR AT BITTER FORKS

BY  
T.T. FLYNN



# The TIGER in the House



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# Talking to Mars

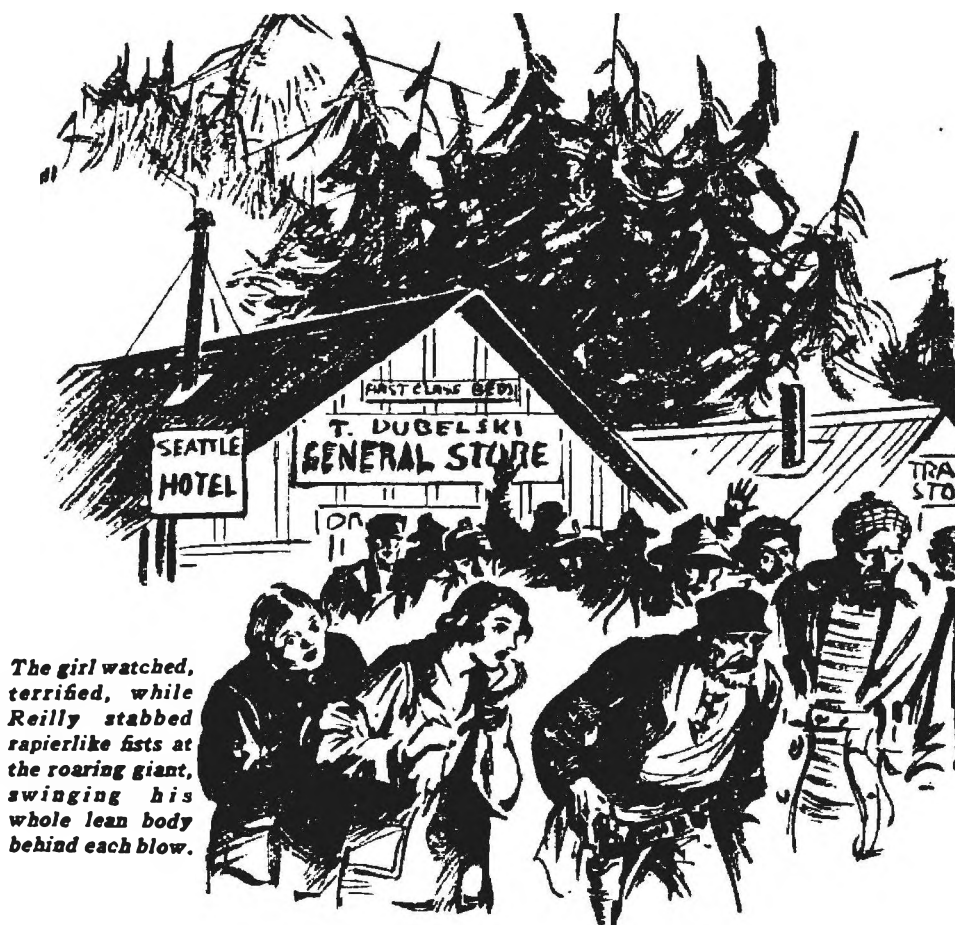
by James A. Sanaker

*I never found it any task  
At all to talk to Mars;  
I often look above and ask  
Some questions of the stars.*

*I say like this: "Now, Mr. Mars,  
Do you hoard gold up there?  
And have they good five-cent cigars  
And cures for falling hair?"*

*"Do they have movie stars on Mars?  
Or rye bread, cheese and beer?  
And when the bride gets married there  
Does mother shed a tear?"*

*"And do men sing Sweet Adeline  
With every round of drinks?"  
Of course Mars doesn't shout right out,  
He only nods and winks.*



*The girl watched, terrified, while Reilly stabbed rapierlike fists at the roaring giant, swinging his whole lean body behind each blow.*

**B**LACK" PARDEE was afoot, staggering under the weight of his heavy pack. All day he had been plodding into the north, cursing the pack horse that had gone over the falls with his outfit and the saddle horse that had broken its leg shortly after. But now, suddenly, as the scent of smoke drifted to his nostrils, he stopped short.

The stiff black hairs in the end of his crooked nose stirred as he sniffed deeply—wood smoke, a camp fire, men.

All day the shod prints of horses had marked the trail he followed. Three sets of hoof marks; two saddle horses

and a pack mule by the looks of them. And more than once Pardee had cursed those fortunate riders, able to travel at their ease while he stumbled on, bent beneath the weight of the crude, heavy pack he had made from the remains of his outfit.

Back in the bush his saddle was cached. He had his repeater rifle and his belt gun. Pardee stepped off the trail and shrugged out of the pack ropes. Stealthily he went forward, slipping from bush to bush, from tree to tree with catlike cunning, rifle held ready in his hand. Stalking like this was nothing new to Pardee. If there were too many

# Valor at Bitter Forks



*Illustrated by Don Hewitt*

***A gripping, crashing action novel***

**by T. T. FLYNN**

men he would walk in and ask for food. If there was only one, or two, he would see—

Pardee's lips in his short, ragged black beard drew over his teeth in a smile of anticipation. He needed horses, cartridges for his rifle, food. Up here in the northern bush a man was on his own. It was a vast land, a lonely land, where a small thing like murder could be easily hidden. Pardee knew. He had done this sort of thing before.

True, there were the Mounties, the redcoated law of the North, swift and efficient when they struck; tenacious in following down crimes they knew about. But in a district like this where most men were strangers, where thousands of square miles brooded in primeval silence, and the gold fever filled all minds, Mounty law could be ignored. Probably only one or two of them in the whole Bitter Forks district. Pardee knew their habits, their way of working. He had brushed with them before, and now gave little thought to that angle as he crept forward.

The sun was setting, evening chill coming on. Dark shadows were creeping through the heavy undergrowth. A red fire crackled and leaped in the small clearing ahead, beside the banks of the tumbling stream the trail had followed for miles. Pardee heard the burst of blazing pine knots as he drew nearer. The rich smell of meat sizzling in a pan came stealing through the trees with the wood smoke. Pardee licked his lips; he was hungry.

Through the screening underbrush he saw a man pass before the fire, heard him say to another: "We ought to hit Thief River by to-morrow night."

"Yeah! It's about a day's ride yet."

Two of them.

Pardee slipped the safety off his rifle, crouched lower, glided forward. And a dead stick snapped under his foot as he reached the edge of the clearing and raised the rifle.

THE MAN squatting before the fire leaped up, snatching out his revolver. The second one, at the opposite edge of the clearing, grabbed a rifle lying over a pile of blankets. Two shots roared at the spot where he was standing. One smacked hard into the trunk of the tree beside him. A second clipped off a bough from an adjoining bush.

Pardee leaped behind the tree, smothering an oath. No tenderfeet, these. They had gone into action with the speed of veteran woodsmen. Pardee changed his plan on the spot. "Don't shoot!" he yelled.

"Come outa there, you skunk! An' h'ist your mitts when you do!"

Pardee set his rifle behind the tree out of sight, walked forward, hands in the air. The two men waited, guns ready. As Pardee came into the open one of them uttered an oath.

"It's Black Pardee!" he exclaimed.

Until this moment Pardee had not seen their faces. Now, grinning, he started to lower his hands.

"Turkeyneck Evans!" he said loudly. "I didn't know it was you, Turkeyneck."

"Turkeyneck's" companion, a long, lean, angular fellow with a scowling, stubble-covered face under a drooping slouch hat, jerked his rifle menacingly.

"Keep them paws up, mister!" he ordered gruffly. "I got a tender trigger finger. Who'n hell is he, Turkeyneck?"

Turkeyneck held his revolver ready, too. He was a short fellow, lean and hard, with an extraordinarily long neck in which a prominent Adam's apple moved convulsively up and down as he spoke. His face was covered with bristling, reddish stubble, and his eyes were narrow, shifty, hard. No great friendliness entered his voice.

"He's Black Pardee, one of the hardest eggs north of the border. We'd be

doing the district a favor to fill'm full of lead."

Pardee heard that uneasily. Turkeyneck himself had small scruples about killing.

Pardee forced an ingratiating smile. "Now that ain't no way to talk to an old friend, Turkeyneck," he protested. "Here I slog in fer a friendly visit an' you start talkin' shootin'."

"Friendly visit, nuthin'!" Turkeyneck snorted. "I know you, Pardee! You was slippin' up to bush us!"

The fact was only too evident. Pardee and Turkeyneck spoke the same language.

"I didn't know who you was," Pardee explained. "I lost my horses, an' I been packin' along the trail. Smelled a fire an' thought I'd sashay up an' look things over. If I'd knowed it was you, Turkeyneck——"

That was an explanation Turkeyneck could understand. Slowly he lowered his gun.

"Well, maybe you didn't know who it was," he admitted. "What you doin' in these parts, anyway?"

"Headin' in for Bitter Forks an' Thief River. I hear they're lively. That where you two are aimin' for?"

"Yep!"

A glance passed between them.

"Ought to be pretty nice for everybody," Pardee said. Again he tried lowering his hands slowly. This time there was no protest, although Turkeyneck's partner kept hawklike watch on him.

"You're aimin' to scratch what you can out o' them two camps," Turkeyneck said.

"What are you here for?" Pardee countered.

An unwilling grin broke across Turkeyneck's face. "I guess we're all in the same boat," he agreed.

"Three heads are better'n one, or two," Pardee pointed out shrewdly.

Turkeyneck considered that, nodded.

"Maybe you're right. You always was a smart one, Pardee. Got any money?"

"Just a little grub money," Pardee lied. "Enough to last me till I look things over. What's left of my outfit is in a pack there in the trail."

"Go get it," said Turkeyneck. "Supper'll be ready in a few minutes. This here is Slim Picketts. He's a hairy ranny from down Montana way. Things got a little too hot for him, an' he lit out for new range."

"Never mind the family history," "Slim" Picketts grunted. "I'll finish supper. You go back with him while he gets his pack."

Pardee made no objection to that. He was suddenly good-natured. Things were breaking better than he had expected. Three heads working together were far better than one. He and Turkeyneck settled the matter definitely as they walked back to the pack.

"We'll drift in like we never saw each other before," Pardee suggested. "We can look over Thief River and Bitter Forks an' get the lay of the land."

"Suits me," Turkeyneck agreed.

## II.

TURKEYNECK and Slim Picketts rode into Bitter Forks a few hours apart. Pardee packed off afoot on a tangent that brought him into Thief River. In a day or so the three of them were to get together again and compare notes.

Bitter Forks and Thief River were the latest gold-mining towns. Eight miles of forested hogback separated them. Thief River lay in a small valley between rugged wooded hills, one street straggling down the floor of the valley beside small, tumbling Thief River. It was new, rough, crude, frame-and-canvas stores and saloons lining the one straggling street. Cabins straggled back up the hillside on either side of the narrow river. There were

tents, too, shelters half log and half canvas. At the upper end of the valley in a pocket of the hill was the shaft head, small stamp mill, the concentrators, and other buildings of the Thief River Queen Mine.

Here was everything a man could want. Miners working hard, prospectors, claim buyers, men of the woods drifting in. Saloons, dance hall, gamblers; a rough and roaring spot of life in the vastness of the north country.

A year before, Thief River and Bitter Forks had started to boom. This year, after the spring thaw, they had grown like vegetation beneath the twenty-four-hour arctic sun.

Pardee bought himself a drink, went next to the Red Moose Hotel and rented a room upstairs for a day—a six-by-eight cubicle whose walls were canvas, whose furnishings were a bare cot and a packing box for a chair. And then Pardee went down to look the town over thoroughly.

Two days later Pardee paid out of the Red Moose Hotel, slung his pack on his back, and tramped over to Bitter Forks. There, after a little trouble, he found Turkeyneck and his partner living in a small cabin up on the hillside above the town.

"The fellow who lived here got shot in a card game las' night," Turkeyneck explained. "Slim an' I moved in an' become his heirs."

"You guys shoot him?" Pardee asked.

"Naw," Slim denied. "Turkeyneck wanted to. He had his eye on this cabin, but another fellow saved him the trouble."

"How's things?" Pardee asked. "I hear there's a coupla Mounties set up a post here."

"Yeah!" Turkeyneck agreed. "There's a sergeant; McVeigh, I think his name is, an' a constable, name of Blake. Blake's off on patrol up north. McVeigh is sittin' on the lid as well as he can an' not doin' much about it."

"Horses all right?"

"Yeah! Why?"

"We're ridin' over to Thief River to-night. Day after to-morrow the weekly shipment of gold starts south. We'll save 'em the trouble." Pardee chuckled in his stubbly beard and spat expressively.

"You goin' to lay for 'em an' hold 'em up?" Slim Picketts demanded. "If you are, count me out. It's startin' off too wild an' woolly for me."

The ugly streak that won Black Pardee his first name broke out. "Yella?" he sneered roughly.

"Careful!" Slim Picketts snapped. "I came here to make money, not to run my head into a noose right off."

"He's right," Turkeyneck agreed. "We don't wanna pull anything like that soon as we show up. They'll spot us sure, an' we'll have a Mounty patrol nippin' our heels."

There was a half-empty whisky bottle sitting on a crude table nailed together out of packing-case boards. Pardee stepped over to it, jerked the cork out and tilted the bottle. Choking a little he slammed the bottle back and wheeled around on them.

"Who said anything about a holdup?" he growled. "I got more brains than that. Don't I know a holdup ain't the thing right now? Who's lookin' for a Mounty patrol after him? I got things figured out."

"Yeah? How?" Slim Picketts demanded.

"The gold is kept in the safe in the mine office over at Thief River. It's an old-fashioned box about forty years old."

"An' I suppose you're figurin' on takin' some dynamite an' blowin' it all to hell? An' then lightin' out with half the camp on your heels?" Slim Picketts sneered.

"Damn it, wait till I get through before you start tellin' me what we're gonna do! There's people around the

safe all day, but the night shift ain't in the office. There's an armed watchman there at night. He lives in the back room. Dad Carmody, they call him. He's hell with a six-gun an' has been places an' done things. But he likes his liquor. I warned up to him, got him real mellow, an' took him down to the river bank with a quart of whisky an' finished the job."

"You mean you laid him out?" Turkeyneck demanded uneasily.

"No!" denied Pardee disgustedly. "I got him so drunk he didn't know where he was or what he was doin'. An' I got the safe combination out of him. Seems they trust him enough to let him know it. I got it wrote down here."

Pardee fumbled in a pocket of his drill coat and brought out a folded sheet of paper.

Even Slim Picketts warmed to that. "You got a head on you," he applauded.

FOR AN HOUR the three men sat about the whisky bottle, planning in low tones. The horses were hobbled back of the cabin, grazing among the trees. Pardee went down into Bitter Forks and bargained for a second-hand bridle. He came back, put it on the pack mule, and rode away bareback, heading south.

At ten o'clock that evening he met Turkeyneck and Slim on the bank of Thief River, several miles south of the mine. They made a detour around through the hills, swung back toward town, and dismounted among the trees on the ridge above town.

Below them a few scattered lights marked the mine buildings. There were more lights down along the main street. The pounding stamps were quiet. The mine was not opened up enough yet to run the clock around. Down underground a slim night shift was toiling. Pardee stepped to the edge of the trees, pointed down the steep slope to a small frame building below.

"That's the main mine office," he said.

"There ain't no one there at night but old Carmody. Maybe he ain't there now. Things has been peaceful here all year. Come on!"

Rifles in hands, they crept down the hillside.

A bird cheeped in the trees behind them. Turkeyneck slapped at a mosquito on his neck—one of the big Northland mosquitoes with a bite like the touch of white-hot iron. Turkeyneck whispered a curse, and fell silent as Pardee turned his head and hissed in a warning undertone.

Now and then a small dry stick snapped under their feet, but for the most part their furtive progress was silent. They came to the side of the small, unpainted mine office. Through a side window near the front, a dim yellow glow of light seeped. There was no shade or curtain at the window. Pardee's head and shoulders reached above the sill. He looked in cautiously.

The interior was as crude as the outside. An old-fashioned desk stood against the back wall, littered with papers. Other papers were filed on wire hooks on the wall beside it. There was a crude, wooden, record file, several gaudy lithographed calendars nailed on the walls. A low wooden railing divided the room front and back. In front of the railing, in the middle of the room, stood a rusty, pot-bellied iron stove, and a wooden bench was placed against the wall beside the door. The faint dim glow of light showed the office to be empty.

Pardee turned away from the window, breathed: "Old Carmody must have stepped out for a while! Watch sharp now!"

Pardee placed his hands against the window and pushed. The window went up with a light creaking sound. The front door was locked at night, but the windows were neglected. Up, an inch at a time, the window moved.

Slim Picketts stooped, cupped his

hands. Pardee put a booted foot in them, heaved himself up. His gun holster clinked once against the window sill. That was all the sound he made as he wriggled into the office.

Turkeyneck followed.

Pardee tiptoed through a gate in the wooden railing to an old-fashioned iron safe in the corner. He knelt before it, fished a slip of paper from his pocket and, peering at it, slowly worked the knurled combination knob. Turkeyneck hovered behind him.

Tense moments of that—and with a grunt of satisfaction Pardee pulled the safe door open. Inside, ten small canvas-covered bars were stacked. Pardee took them out one at a time, straining at their weight, and piled them on the floor. Turkeyneck picked them up, lugged them to the window. The seventh bar slipped from his fingers and hit the floor.

"Look out, you fool!" Pardee snarled under his breath.

"It slipped," Turkeyneck mumbled.

He hastily recovered the bar and started to the window with it, only to stop suddenly as a door in the back of the room opened. A stooped, white-haired man stood there, blinking sleepy eyes in startled surprise. Angry alertness quickly replaced his drowsiness.

"Hey, what're you fellows doin' in here?" he burst out. His hand went to a belt gun at his hip as Pardee leaped up. Startled recognition flashed across the old man's face.

"You're the skunk who likkered me up the other day!" he said in a voice that trembled with rage. "So this is what you was after! Hands up, both of you! I'll learn you to try thievin' like this!"

Pardee's gun was already out. It barked once—twice—

Old Carmody reeled back into the open doorway. His anger changed to pained surprise. His gun sagged down to his side. He choked, coughed.

"You shouldn't 'a' done that!" he gasped.

He braced himself for a moment against the door jamb, trying to raise his gun. But the effort was too great. He couldn't do it. His knees bent. His left hand clutched at the door jamb in futile effort for support. Slowly, like a wilted reed, old Carmody crumpled to the floor. He shuddered there, gasped. Then lay still.

"I reckon that'll learn him a thing or two!" Pardee growled, shoving his gun back in its holster. He wheeled on Turkeyneck. "Hurry up! Get the rest of this gold out! That shot's liable to bring half the camp up here!"

They carried the last bars to the window, dumped them outside and tumbled after. The three of them staggered up toward the trees with the heavy gold.

Below them Thief River lay quiet. Shots were nothing unusual. Men were tired, busy, unheeding. Panting heavily, they reached the horses, slid the bars into leather saddlebags. They swung up and spurred into the deeper blackness of the trees.

Behind them dim yellow light seeped from the open office window. Stillness gripped the interior—the stillness of death.

### III.

THE STAFF divisional office of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was housed in a small, whitewashed frame building. Back of it were the horse stables, and across a bare parade ground were the whitewashed quarters of the men. Neat, plain, orderly, and efficient was the post. Inspector Wilson was no different. He sat erect behind his flat-topped desk, a spare, military-looking man, wearing the uniform of his rank. His face was drawn, weary, the mouth grim and tight. Inspector Wilson drove himself harder than he did his men.

His glance was level and steady now,

and his words were crisp. "Corporal Reilly, you're due for leave to-morrow, I understand."

"Yes, sir. Ten days' leave. I was thinking of going to Alberta."

"I'm sorry," Inspector Wilson said, laying down a paper he had been studying. "I'll have to cancel your leave, Reilly. I'm detaching you to the Thief River district. They are apparently having more trouble there than Sergeant McVeigh and his constable can handle. It's a big district. A lot of drifters have come in since the mines have expanded this year."

"I have just received a report of a killing and robbery at Thief River. The watchman in the mine office was killed and the safe opened and robbed. A sizable lot of bar bullion was taken. Bennett, who owns the Thief River Queen, the discovery mine, and also the discovery mine at Bitter Forks near there, is dissatisfied with the way things are going. He has sent in a written request that the men who robbed his safe be apprehended."

"Bennett says he believes the thieves are still around, and that if they're not rounded up at once, they'll try something else. Also, if this killing isn't solved, the word will get around that such things aren't very dangerous. They're walking a thin line up there. It's a toss-up whether order is kept, or things get out of hand."

Standing stiff at attention Corporal Reilly listened to the end. He was a tall young man, straight as a spruce sapling, suggesting the hard-fibered tenacity of spruce. Winter blizzards and hot summer suns had given his face the texture of leather. His blue eyes were steady, thoughtful; he looked like a man who thought much and said little. And yet there were tiny humor wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. His wide mouth looked as if it smiled often and readily.

But now as Inspector Wilson spoke,

Reilly's face showed disappointment. His mouth tightened a bit at some inner thought.

The inspector surveyed him thoughtfully. "That covers everything, I think," he finished.

"Yes, sir," Reilly agreed slowly. "But may I remind the inspector that I have missed my last two leaves, and was counting on this one?"

Inspector Wilson's face showed his regret. He had been through the mill himself, knew what it was to spend weeks and months in the hard grind of the service, to look forward to leave and have it suddenly snatched away. He disliked giving such orders more than the men did receiving them. But in the inspector's code all things gave way before duty.

"This patrol must be made," he said flatly.

"Very well, sir," Reilly assented woodenly.

Wilson held out an envelope. "Here are your instructions. Present them to Sergeant McVeigh at Bitter Forks. You are nominally under McVeigh's orders, but you have full authority to go ahead and clear up this matter of the mine robbery. McVeigh has instructions to give you every possible help."

Fewer words had sent men away into the Northland for years. Reilly slipped the envelope in his tunic, saluted, turned smartly on his heel and walked out of the office.

But as he headed across the bare parade ground there was no pleasure on his face.

It was forenoon then. Three hours later Corporal Reilly was heading north in the saddle, leading a pack horse.

PARDEE carried a bottle under one arm as he strode up the winding path to the log cabin on the outskirts of Bitter Forks. A broad grin was on his face; he was singing a ribald barroom

song. Any one who could see him could have told that Pardee was in high spirits.

Certainly he was not wary, suspicious, as he kicked open the unlatched door of the cabin and swaggered in. That might have been the reason he failed to see the scarlet-coated figure sitting on a box in one corner.

Pardee strode across the room, tossed his hat on a chair, thumped the bottle down on the packing-box table, and started to draw the cork from it.

The scarlet-coated figure of Sergeant McVeigh stood up, gun in hand. McVeigh was a tall, thin, bitter-looking man, with a hint of underlying weakness in the loose set of his jaw, if one looked close enough. But now his voice was harsh enough as he spoke to Pardee's back.

"Put your hands up! You are under arrest for the murder of the watchman at the Thief River mine office!"

Pardee whirled around, the bottle still in his hand. His short black beard hid the startled expression on his face. A vicious oath spilled from his lips.

"Put 'em up!" McVeigh rasped.

Slowly Pardee's arms started to rise, and then, head hunched forward, he stared intently at McVeigh. His arms paused, went down. A rasping chuckle burst from him.

"Well, if it ain't Dude McGregor!" he exclaimed loudly. "So you've joined the Mounties, Dude, an' snuck in to arrest your old buddy!"

The effect on McVeigh was startling. His eyes widened. He stared rigidly. His mouth dropped open. Slowly his trim, erect shoulders sagged.

"Collins!" he said hoarsely.

Pardee nodded, his bearded lips grinning broadly. He was entirely at his ease now, enjoying himself.

"Put that gun up!" he waved. "You ain't gonna need it now. So you're in the Mounties, eh? I never thought I'd see the Dude all dolled up nice an' per-

lite an' handsome in a red tunic. An' them gloves at your belt. You never wore 'em that swell in Montreal, McGregor."

McVeigh's face was a mixture of fear and agonized indecision. Slowly he lowered his gun.

Pardee grinned again. "That's sense!" He nodded approvingly. "You got more brains than I thought you had, Dude. Who'd ever think to look in the Mounties for a killer? Safest place in the world for you to hide."

"Be quiet!" McVeigh begged him hoarsely.

"Sure, I'll be quiet!" Pardee chuckled. "You know me. Always ready to help an old pal all I can."

"You wouldn't help your mother unless there was something in it for you," McVeigh said thickly.

"Now, ain't that too bad?" Pardee protested. "Here I am, wantin' to be friends, an' you go talkin' like that. Let's leave my mother out of it. I never knew the old lady anyway. So you've come here to arrest me for a killing? Old Dude McGregor, runnin' from a killing himself!" Pardee threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Please! Don't say things like that aloud!" McVeigh begged desperately. "Some one may hear you. I'm Sergeant McVeigh now."

"And what if they did hear?" Pardee sneered.

"It would mean the end for me, damn you!"

"Sure it would!" Pardee agreed roughly. "It'd mean a rope around your neck; that rope you've been runnin' away from all these years. Don't get high an' mighty with me, McGregor. We know where we stand an' we can talk turkey now."

A spasm of hatred flashed across McVeigh's face. "It might settle everything to take you in dead," he said through tight white lips.

Pardee pulled the packing box to the

side of the table and sat down, putting the bottle on the table with a thump. "Like to do that, wouldn't you?" he sneered.

"I may have to," McVeigh whispered unsteadily.

"Don't!" Pardee advised. He leaned forward, jabbed a thick, soiled finger at the trim officer. "You see, it wouldn't get you anywhere, Dude. I haven't got a gun on me. They'd ask right away why you had to shoot me. It ain't Mountie way to go around killin' unarmed men."

"I can risk that, explain it away."

"Wouldn't do you any good," Pardee leered. "I spotted you downtown yesterday, an' I told my pals all about you. If anything happens to me, they'll get word into headquarters fast. An' you won't get away this time, Dude. They'll get you sure; an' they'll stretch that purty neck like it's on a Christmas turkey. Guess you've thought about that knot under your ear plenty times, eh, Dude? Think about it now."

A spasm contorted McVeigh's face. His eyes half closed for an instant. He swallowed, made an involuntary gesture toward his neck with one hand. It was easy to see the black horror of the rope had never left him.

"You devil!" he groaned.

Pardee's shoulders shook with laughter. "Have a drink," he offered. "It'll buck you up."

"I don't drink."

"Changed into a lily awful quick, didn't you?" Pardee sneered. "You used to be able to tuck a quart away without battin' an eye. Well, I ain't pokin' good likker at you. Let's get down to business. What's all this about arrestin' me for murder?"

"No need to tell you," McVeigh declared bitterly. "Now I see who you are, I know I was right. You had a hand in the killing of that mine watchman over at Thief River the other night."

Unworried, Pardee grinned. "Got any proof?"

"Plenty! One of the horses had a twisted shoe. We've got a print isolated there by the mine office where you tied your horses. I've found prints to match it here at Bitter Forks, traced them to this cabin. That horse is outside there!"

PARDEE uncorked the bottle, upended it, drank deep. Choking a little on the fiery draft, he sneered at McVeigh. Plainly Pardee considered himself master of the situation now; felt he knew his man well.

"What of it?" he countered. "I'm not the only killer your men are lookin' for."

McVeigh wet his lips, stood silent.

"Come to think of it," said Pardee virtuously, "it's my duty as a citizen to tell my information to the Mounties. I ain't doin' right by the Dominion to keep shut about it."

"For God's sake," McVeigh begged, breaking, "talk sense! You can't do that!"

"Oh, can't I?"

"No!"

"An' that's where you're mistaken. I can!" Pardee said in an ugly tone. "An' mebbe I'll do it!"

"You wouldn't!" McVeigh begged hurriedly, completely unnerved now. "I made a mistake once, but I've been living it down for years. I've gone straight, given my best to the Force. I have a right to keep on."

"Well, mebbe there's something in that," Pardee agreed judiciously. "I'm willin' to keep my mouth shut long as you keep yours."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, don't act so dumb," Pardee sneered. "Long as you ain't peachin' on me I ain't peachin' on you. Forget about this Thief River business an' we'll be friends."

"I can't. I've sworn to do my duty," McVeigh groaned.

"Your duty's to go back an' let yourself be hanged," Pardee reminded him, grinning.

Great drops of sweat stood out on McVeigh's forehead. He moistened his lips again and again. The thing had hit him hard. He was like a man adrift on the sea of fate, helpless, despairing, caught between two hells.

"You're the only Mountie here," Pardee argued persuasively. "The only one who knows about this, ain't you?"

"Yes," McVeigh admitted reluctantly.

"Hell, then! Who'll know any different? You do me a favor an' I do you a favor, an' everything's sweet as honey."

McVeigh struggled bitterly and visibly with his conscience. It was a decision few men ever had to face. To keep his oath of duty meant putting a rope around his own neck. It would have taken a much stronger chin than McVeigh's to have held to that oath of duty.

"If I forget about this," McVeigh asked in a low voice, his face crimson with shame, "will you and your friends leave? Get out of the district, out of the province?"

Pardee grinned furtively as he saw that he had his man. "We will not," he refused flatly. "We like this place, an' we stay. An' just what are you goin' to do about it, Mr. Killer McGregor?"

McVeigh wet his lips again, mute, helpless.

Pardee got up. "That's that. I'll have the damn horse reshod, an' there won't be any more trouble there. Run along an' forget about it. I won't see you, an' you never saw me before. Don't know nothin' about me. An' if anything more turns up about us, you just remember the rope that's waitin' for you. Feel the knot crackin' you under the ear, an' get a little sense."

Slowly McVeigh holstered his gun. His hand was trembling. His face was white, drawn, suffering. He heaved a

great sigh. And then, with his shoulders slumped into the attitude of a beaten man, he turned to the door, walked out with dragging steps.

And Pardee watched him go, grinning malevolently to himself.

"I guess that fixes everything up sweet and purty." He chuckled. "Here's where the boys an' me kiss good-by to work an' get rich in a hurry."

#### IV.

IT WAS late afternoon when Corporal Reilly rode out of the trees and got his first glimpse of Bitter Forks. He reined in his horse and sat for a few minutes in the saddle, eying the scene before him.

The two forks of Bitter Creek came together to form the larger stream. Close-built shacks and stores lined the main street. Cabins scattered back from them to the river bank, and up the side of the hill beyond. The mine buildings were on beyond. It was a typical Canadian mining camp of the bush. Reilly had seen its like before and would again.

He was not especially interested in the town. To be precise, Corporal Reilly was wondering how long he was to be at Bitter Forks, how long it would be before he solved the Thief River robbery. Was he going to have the bad luck, Reilly wondered, of a long-drawn-out chase, of no clues to work on, long weeks around these two mining camps, with all the chance of a long pursuit on the trail afterward? It wasn't a pleasant picture, to Reilly's way of thinking. The leave that had been snatched out from under his nose was still rankling.

He rolled a cigarette, lighted it, puffed slowly for a few minutes, and then lifted the reins and rode on into Bitter Forks. Reilly had never met Sergeant McVeigh. He hoped the sergeant would be a decent chap to know and work with.

PARDEE nudged Turkeyneck Evans in the ribs. "If that ain't a sweet an' purty brace of bush birds, I'll eat your whiskers," he leered under his breath.

"There you go!" Turkeyneck grinned. "Ain't a lady can pass within a Cree mile but what you throw up your ears an' start pawin' dirt."

Slim Picketts chuckled idly. "You sure take all prizes for bein' a ladies' man, Pardee. I'd like to see you turned loose in one o' these here Turkish harems. I'll bet you'd make the fur fly."

Pardee threw out his chest. "I don't need no harem," he boasted. "Watch this."

The three were part of a small group of idlers lounging in front of the Trail's End Bar and Rooms. Two young women were coming toward them, talking to each other, oblivious of the men standing there. Pardee stepped forward and removed his hat with a mock bow, partially blocking their way.

"Beg pardon, ladies," he simpered. "Ain't this a nice afternoon?"

Both ignored him. They stepped aside to pass. Grinning, Pardee moved over, too, caught the arm of the nearest girl.

"Now that ain't the way to act when a gentleman speaks to you," he chided.

The other idlers had straightened out of their listless attitudes, were watching the scene with mixed enjoyment.

The two girls were flushed, embarrassed, angry. The one whom Pardee held said icily: "Let go of my arm!"

"He's goin' to get his face slapped," Turkeyneck Evans said virtuously. "An' it'll dang well serve him right."

Pardee went on with elephantine humor. "Ain't we met before somewhere? Your face looks mighty familiar, sister."

The girl's small white hand flashed up, smacked loudly against Pardee's bearded cheek.

"Let me go!" she ordered, her voice shaking with anger.

"I knowed he'd get his face slapped!" Turkeyneck chortled.

Pardee lost his head then. "Just for that," he said loudly, "you don't get by without payin' a kiss fer toll money." He pulled her toward him.

RIDING down the street Corporal Reilly idly noticed the little group in front of the saloon, but not until he got almost opposite did he notice the two girls blocked by Pardee's hulking figure. Reilly saw the girl slap Pardee, saw Pardee pull her toward him. He realized then what was going on.

Those two girls were not dance hall habitués. They bore all the marks of breeding, respectability. A softly explosive remark passed Reilly's lips. He left the saddle in one motion, hit the ground running.

He burst on the scene like a small cyclone. His hand slapped against Pardee's neck. With a hard wrench he tore Pardee away from the girl, swung him around. And Reilly's fist smashed hard into the bearded face.

Pardee reeled, went down heavily, gasping an oath.

The two girls hurried on. Reilly caught a sidewise glance of thankful gratitude from the girl he had freed. Her face was flushed, angry, contemptuous. And Reilly thought in that one brief instant he had never seen a girl who quite measured up to this one.

That was all the time he had to think about her.

Pardee struggled to his feet, swiping at his jaw. Turkeyneck, Slim Picketts, and the other idlers had fallen back. The two men had the board sidewalk to themselves. Pardee towered two inches over Reilly. His bulking shoulders and massive figure made the slim, trim, tunic-clad figure of Reilly look almost useless.

Pardee glared around at his com-

panions. They were all eying him expectantly. Pardee clenched a big fist, and then hesitated. Too well he knew the consequences that might follow an attack on a uniformed officer.

"Damn you!" Pardee swore thickly, pointing to Reilly's red tunic. "You can get by with that as long as you're wearing that uniform with the whole Force back of you. If I had you out of it on your own I'd break you in two, you meddling fool!"

Nothing in Reilly's instructions covered this. He was in McVeigh's territory. But Reilly knew as he looked at the faces around him, at other men hurrying up, that he was on trial. If he backed down now, walked away, let the matter drop, the word would go out that he could be bluffed, that a Mountie had come in who didn't amount to much. He would draw scant respect from any man in the district; and he had to have that respect.

Reilly told himself that, refusing to admit that down underneath he was itching to bury his fist again in the surly bearded face. Thought of the scene he had interrupted decided him. He unbuckled his belt and gun, passed them to the nearest man, stripped off his red coat and threw it after.

"Now," he said icily, "there's no uniform and no Force behind me. Come on, you cowardly swine! I'm going to give you a beating that will last! Next time a woman comes along you'll bow and scrape and respect her!"

"Damn you!" Pardee swore, and rushed at him, slashing a massive fist at Reilly's head.

Reilly side-stepped it, drove his fist to the wrist into Pardee's middle.

A mighty grunt exploded through Pardee's teeth. He swayed, gasped for air, uttered a choked roar and hurled himself at Reilly again, both fists battering furiously. One slipped by Reilly's guard, caught his shoulder, knocking

him back. A second blow grazed the top of his head.

Reilly thought for a moment some one had clubbed him. The fellow was strong as an ox, uncannily swift for his size. Easy to see now why he had not hesitated to accept the challenge.

REILLY rode the storm of blows back a dozen feet, tossed and swirled like a chip before a tidal wave. He ducked, blocked as well as he could, made sure Pardee did not get close enough to catch him in a bearlike hug.

Through each opening Pardee offered, Reilly's left flashed in with the punishing accuracy of a rapier. Again and again he smashed Pardee's mouth and nose. Blood dripping from Pardee's nose infuriated the big man more. Roaring angrily, he redoubled his attack.

And Reilly came back again and again, not ashamed to give ground before such superior weight and reach. He was waiting his chance.

Out of the corner of his eye, Reilly saw other men running up, a crowd quickly gathering around them. Shouts of encouragement reached his ears.

"Tie him up, Mounty!"

"Get him, slim feller! One bust on the belt an' he's through!"

"Come on, Pardee, here's your chance to start cleanin' up on the Mounties! This one first an' the rest later!"

"He won't leave a grease spot of the slim feller!"

Pardee was panting and blowing from his strenuous efforts. His speed was slowing somewhat. Reilly was breathing easily. Confident, wary, watchful, he dodged back from a round-house swing that threw Pardee partially off balance. Reilly stepped in close, hooked a clean blow to Pardee's jaw that carried every ounce of his weight behind it. The shock of the impact traveled clear up his arm.

And Pardee tottered around on his

heels. His guard dropped. His face muscles went slack for an instant. This was the chance Reilly had been waiting for. He drove in blow after blow, leaning with them, adding the weight of his whole body to each smashing impact.

Pardee's head rocked and twisted. He sagged back, back. He tried to lift his arms, and the strength was suddenly gone from them. His eyes glazed. His jaw went loose. And suddenly he went down and lay where he fell.

Reilly stirred him with a foot. "Get up!" he panted.

Pardee only groaned.

Slim Picketts grabbed the gun from his belt. "Stand back!" he ordered Reilly furiously. "Give him a chance to get up and catch his wind! He'll put hobbles on you yet!"

A little man on the opposite side of the circle reached down in the front of his baggy trousers and drew out an ancient pistol. Slim Picketts didn't catch the move. His first warning was a shrill falsetto, trembling with anger:

"Drop dot gun, you *schweinhund*! Drop it, I say, or I gif you plenty!"

It was an elderly little man, clad in baggy trousers, and a coat patched and worn. A ragged brown stubble covered his sagging cheeks. Blazing eyes glared from under bushy brows. A lop-brimmed old hat, canted at a rakish angle on long tangled hair, fairly vibrated with the anger of its wearer.

Slim Picketts took one look at the big pistol covering him, saw there was death for some one if he accepted the challenge. Silently he let his pistol thud to the boards at his feet.

Reilly picked it up. "I'll remember this, my friend," he said curtly.

The man who held his coat and belt handed them to him silently. Reilly donned the coat and buckled on his belt.

Pardee's companions lifted him to his feet. Pardee stood there unsteadily, feeling his jaw, looking at Reilly with glazing eyes, dull with hate.

Reilly stepped in front of him. "If I ever see you bothering a woman again," he said slowly, "I'll give you a licking you'll remember to the day you die. Don't forget it!"

And he turned his back on Pardee, went to the little man who had intervened on his behalf.

"Thanks," said Reilly, smiling slightly. "I seem to have needed a friend right then."

"Ja! With *schweinhunds* like dem," the other answered contemptuously. He removed his hat with a flourish. "Permid me the honor to introduce myself. I am Baron von Haussman, at your service, my friend."

Startled, Reilly looked to see if it was a joke. But beneath the ragged stubble, the shaggy clothes, the marks of dissipation, he saw a certain dignity that could have come only from past breeding. The Baron von Haussman was in earnest.

A guffaw of laughter showed what the others thought about it. And Baron von Haussman ignored them.

Reilly smiled again. "Baron von Haussman," he said formally, "I am honored. A favor like that deserves a drink. Will you do me the honor to step inside and allow me to buy it?"

Reilly had read this queer character aright. Whatever his past history, liquor had helped to bring the baron to his present state. The baron's formality relaxed, in spite of an obvious effort to keep it. He moistened his lips, brightened visibly.

"Ja!" he accepted eagerly. "It will be a pleasure, my friend."

And in a voice that was plainly pitched so that all those standing near might hear, the Baron von Haussman said: "And I would appreciate the loan of a cartridge. My gun is empty. I may need one now." The last with a bland look at Slim Picketts, whose gun Corporal Reilly still held.

Reilly tossed Picketts' gun to him.

"Certainly!" he told the baron. "But I hardly think you'll need it now."

They entered the saloon together, amid laughter at Slim Picketts who had been so easily bluffed. And Slim Picketts watched them go with lowering anger.

In the saloon Reilly gave the baron several cartridges from his belt. The baron dropped them in his pocket, and edged close and lowered his voice.

"My friend," he said, "watch dot man, dot Pardee."

"Who?"

"Pardee. Dot man you fight. He iss a bad one."

"I gathered something like that." Reilly grinned. "I think he'll behave after this."

The baron nodded. "I know, I know," he said dubiously. "But he iss bad. Watch him."

Reilly tossed a dollar on the bar, said to the bartender who was watching with amazement his respectful treatment of this woozy old barfly:

"Give my friend, Baron von Haussman, a drink."

And to the baron, Reilly said: "Sorry, but I don't drink when I'm in uniform. And I haven't time to stay. Thanks again!" He shook the baron's wrinkled hand and went out.

And as he passed through the door the baron turned to the barkeep haughtily.

"Dot iss a chentleman, the first I haf met in this place. And now, my drink—quick!"

WHEN HE slipped on his tunic, Corporal Reilly had noticed that the two girls had stopped down the walk a short distance, looking back at the fight. As he went into the saloon he saw them walking slowly on their way. Now, coming out, Reilly swung up into the saddle, caught the lead rope of his pack horse and followed after them. As he

came abreast and turned in to the walk, the girls stopped.

Reilly got down smiling. "I hope," he said to the girl Pardee had been holding, "everything is all right now. That chap won't bother you again. May I introduce myself? Corporal Reilly is my name."

"I am Molly Bennett," she told him. "This is Miss Morrison. We both want to thank you."

"It was a pleasure." Reilly grinned, dabbing at a cut on his cheek with a handkerchief.

And as he said that, Reilly was thinking that Molly Bennett was even prettier than at first sight. She would come about to his shoulder. Her hair was black, caught low at her neck in a bunch of curls. Her face was thin, but not too thin. Her mouth small, her cheek bones fairly high, and the soft skin of her cheeks was mildly tanned.

Molly Bennett looked like a girl who spent most of her time out of doors, who was healthy and young and brimming with the joy of life. A girl whose long-lashed gray eyes were honest and friendly, whose smile was quick to come, whose company would probably be pleasant.

Both the girls were smiling at him.

Reilly smiled back at them. "I'm going to be stationed here for a time," he said hurriedly. "It will be a pleasure to—to——"

Reilly hesitated there, reddening a bit, unable to get out what he wanted to say.

Miss Morrison giggled. She was a small, round girl, younger than Molly Bennett, and plainly following her friend's lead in most things.

Molly Bennett smiled heartlessly at him. "To have your face cut?" she prompted demurely.

Reilly chuckled then. And suddenly they were friends.

Reilly slid into the saddle, saluted them, and rode back down the street.

Thought of his lost vacation was not rankling nearly so hard in his mind as it had a short while before.

## V.

THE POST of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was a small, two-story frame building standing flush with the sidewalk. A little front office and several cells in the back room occupied the lower floor. Living quarters, Reilly judged as he left his outfit in front and went to the door, were upstairs. He entered. A tall, thin, meticulously dressed sergeant of the police looked up from the table where he was writing. At sight of Reilly's uniform he got to his feet quickly.

"Hello!" he said. "Quite a surprise, this. I wasn't expecting any one."

Reilly saluted punctiliously. "Corporal Reilly reporting with orders from Inspector Wilson, sir."

And then when McVeigh had returned his salute carelessly, Reilly relaxed and handed over the sealed envelope Inspector Wilson had given him.

"Sit down," McVeigh invited, indicating a chair. He sat down again also, tore open the envelope, began to read its contents.

Reilly had never met Sergeant McVeigh. He looked at the sergeant curiously now as the other read, frowning a bit with concentration. McVeigh's face was lined and drawn. His eyes had circles under them. His mouth was a tight, bitter line. The words of his greeting had been cordial enough, but the spirit of welcome was lacking in them.

Reilly was conscious of a slight feeling of disappointment. McVeigh looked like a frustrated man, made bitter by some hidden thing. There was no trace of good humor about him, no free and easy cordiality.

Reilly had seen men like him before in the service. They came in, silent,

stern, taciturn, like souls going into exile and bondage. Sometimes they forgot whatever it was that had sent them into the service, became good comrades; other times they remained as they had entered, performing their duties punctiliously, making fine records, but always keeping their lives and their confidences to themselves. McVeigh looked like such a man.

But after he had reached that decision, Reilly put it aside, leaned back in the chair and half closed his eyes, smiling reminiscently. That leave he had missed didn't matter so much after all, and it would be possible to get along without McVeigh's companionship.

McVeigh looked up from the papers. There were two vertical wrinkles between his eyes. He seemed irritated.

"I suppose you know why you're here?" he said shortly.

Reilly nodded. "Inspector Wilson sketched the situation to me."

McVeigh slammed the papers down on the table. "We're getting along all right," he declared testily. "There wasn't any sense in detaching another man out here."

Reilly was mildly surprised at Sergeant McVeigh's attitude. After all, what difference did it make? Another man would simply make the job easier for McVeigh. Of course he might have the feeling that Inspector Wilson thought he was falling down on the job. It wasn't, however, one of those things one could take up with a superior officer who showed as little friendliness as Sergeant McVeigh was doing.

"How does that murder over at Thief River stand?" Reilly asked casually.

McVeigh hesitated. His eyes flickered over Reilly's face, dropped to the floor, went back to the papers. He picked them up, arranged them neatly, laid them down carefully. He seemed to be thinking about something, trying to choose his words.

"I've been working on it," he said

slowly. "Not much luck. There were no clues. We have many new men in this district. A great many of them are transients. It's impossible to check closely on all of them. My constable is away most of the time, covering the rest of the district. I have been doing the best I could with the limited facilities at my disposal."

"The Force is pretty short-handed," Reilly agreed. "It's a wonder the man in charge of a district like this gets anywhere at all."

"Yes, yes," McVeigh agreed shortly. "That's the situation exactly. Well, your orders are plain, corporal. I'll assist you in every way I can. There's an extra bunk upstairs. Make yourself at home. Constable Blake is patrolling the north end of the district and won't be in for two or three weeks. We'll carry on here alone. I'll have plenty for you to do."

Reilly got up from the chair, hesitated, said slowly: "I understand my orders are to concentrate on solving this Thief River case. I suppose I'll start in at once on it and continue until the file is closed?"

Sergeant McVeigh gave him a quick frown. A shadow darkened his face, troubled, uncertain. "I've read the orders," he remarked shortly. "I'll see that they are carried out. You can patrol over there to-morrow."

For a moment Reilly wondered vaguely whether he could have been mistaken. He had gathered the impression before he spoke that McVeigh was going to ignore the orders, assign him to other duties. Was discord, jealousy, going to hamper his movements?

And then before leaving the room Reilly said casually: "On my way in I had a little trouble with a man named Pardee. He was annoying two girls."

"What?" McVeigh asked in a startled tone. "Pardee? What happened?"

"I found it necessary to give him a good thrashing."

Some of the color drained out of McVeigh's face. "You did, eh? Tell me everything!" he ordered sharply.

Reilly did. McVeigh heard him out, including the comments that Baron von Haussman had made about Pardee.

"Von Haussman is a worthless sot!" McVeigh told him harshly. "Several times I've about warned him out of the district. You shouldn't have given him any cartridges. He's not responsible. I know of this Pardee. He's not so bad as your first impression might indicate. He must have been drinking. It won't happen again. I'll see him and warn him personally."

"It won't do him any harm," Reilly agreed coolly. And he went out to remove his pack.

McVeigh stared after him, his lined face pale and troubled. The sergeant had the look of a man who balances on the edge of an abyss, never knowing when he will plunge to his ruin. He shook his head slowly, wet his lips, sighed deeply.

And outside, Reilly, removing his outfit to take upstairs, wondered about McVeigh's last words. Pardee was a man who needed no extenuation. What he was, was plain to see. He had not been drunk. And yet McVeigh had been defending him, in a way. McVeigh had also been startled, disturbed by the news that Reilly had had trouble with Pardee. Why, Reilly wondered to himself, should that be? What connection was there between McVeigh and Pardee?

He filed that question away in his mind to be answered later if possible.

NEXT MORNING McVeigh was curt, uncommunicative. Reilly had to remind him that he was supposed to go to Thief River that day. Only then did McVeigh come to the matter, outlining what little he knew about the case, telling Reilly what trail to take.

"I'd go with you," he said at the

end, "but I've got other things to do to-day."

There were moments when McVeigh's manner seemed to thaw slightly, show a consciousness that he was not quite measuring up in his relations.

Perhaps McVeigh wasn't a bad sort after all, Reilly thought to himself as he rode out of Bitter Forks on the Thief River trail.

Pardee saw him go, and a little later he slouched into the Mounty post, closed the door behind him and scowled at McVeigh, who gave him no welcome.

"I just seen that new feller headin' over toward Thief River," Pardee growled. "What's he got over there to interest him?"

McVeigh sighed. "Corporal Reilly," he said, "is one of the smartest men in the Force, according to Inspector Wilson, who sent him here. He's been assigned to handle the Thief River killing."

Heavy silence filled the room as the two men looked at each other. Pardee's scowl deepened. He spat on the floor.

"He better not solve it," he said meaningly.

"The chances are that he will," McVeigh said tonelessly.

"He better not!"

"And suppose he does?"

Pardee leaned forward, dropped his voice, and threatened. "It's up to you to see he don't."

"What can I do?" McVeigh asked hopelessly.

Pardee shrugged. "Up to you, Dude. You know what'll happen if he makes trouble."

McVeigh ran his hand wearily over his eyes. He had passed a sleepless night. "Pardee," he said lifelessly, "I don't know why I don't kill you."

An ugly laugh answered that.

"You ain't got the guts," Pardee informed him callously. "You ain't foolin' me a bit, McVeigh. You're thinkin' heavy about that noose, an' you'll treat

me nice an' like it. Ain't that right?"

McVeigh did not bother to reply. "You were a fool to get into trouble with Reilly." He sighed. "It didn't do you any good. Reilly can't be bluffed. He has the Force behind him. To him you're simply a bad case to be put in your place and kept there. If you try to make trouble he'll lock you up."

Pardee's tobacco-stained teeth showed as he smiled unpleasantly. "He won't lock me up while you're here, Dude."

"Watch your step, Pardee! I can't do all this alone, you know."

"Some sense in that," Pardee admitted. "Mebbe it's gonna take both of us. We'll see."

Pardee left that thinly veiled warning for McVeigh to digest.

## VI.

THE MORNING was sunny, warm. Reilly rode slowly, drinking in the spruce-scented air. Tumbletoes, his bay horse, had been well rested, was skittish and lively. A jay screamed raucously at them from a spruce top. A hawk sailed slowly overhead on wide, motionless pinions. The trail he followed was a short cut to Thief River. It wound through thick spruce, skirting the side of low hills, dipping down in the small depressions. A mile out from Bitter Forks much of the timber had been cut away; beyond that was the untouched forest, thick, tangled, wild.

Reilly rode carefree, too, humming aloud. Tumbletoes broke into a sharp canter, and Reilly gave him his head. They swept around a sharp curve in the trail, and Reilly saw Molly Bennett riding ahead of him on a long-legged black.

She was bareheaded, clad in tan riding trousers and a gay sweater. She looked around as Tumbletoes cantered up, smiled as Reilly reined in beside her.

"Good morning, Corporal Reilly,"

she said demurely. "Were you following me, by any chance?"

"Sorry, I wasn't," Reilly grinned. "Not but what I wouldn't have if I had known you were riding this way."

Molly laughed. "At least you are holding up the traditions of the service. Gallant officer, and all that."

"I wasn't thinking about the service." Reilly grinned feebly. "I meant it."

"Pray, sir," Molly inquired meekly, "what takes you to Thief River this morning? Curiosity?"

"More or less," Reilly admitted. "Official curiosity."

"Oh!" Molly was silent a moment. She gave him a sideward look. "It doesn't by any chance concern the death of old Dad Carmody, does it?"

"Yes."

Molly nodded. "I thought so. Dad wasn't satisfied with the way things were going and sent in a complaint to Alberta. I—I hope you can get the men who did it. Dad Carmody was a perfectly inoffensive and lovable old man. It was cold-blooded, brutal murder."

"We always do the best we can," Reilly said absently. "It was your father who wrote in?"

"Yes. He's Matthew Bennett; he owns the Thief River Queen and the Bitter Forks Mine. Dad and my brother Jimmy are over at Thief River now."

"Gosh! Somehow it didn't occur to me that you were Matthew Bennett's daughter."

Molly laughed merrily. "And does that make any difference?"

"That," Reilly grinned at her, "is something I'll have to think over."

But inwardly he knew already. Matthew Bennett was several times a millionaire. His daughter, if one cared to look at it that way, was an heiress, probably had young men running after her all the time. A corporal in the Mounties was pretty small potatoes.

There was, of course, no reason why he should give it a second thought one way or the other. They were simply casual acquaintances. When his patrol was over and he moved out of the district they would probably never hear of each other again.

So they rode into Thief River side by side, talking and laughing. Molly sketched the details of the crime, pointed up the hillside where the horses of the killers had been tethered, showed him the side window through which they had entered.

"There's dad now," she said as they dismounted in front of the mine office.

The man who stood in the doorway was tall, spare, grim, and grizzled. And though Matthew Bennett wore corduroy trousers and coat, and high boots, he could not escape that intangible appearance of an efficient, prosperous, and successful man.

Bennett engulfed Reilly's hand in a hard grip when Molly introduced them, explaining his errand.

"My son, Jimmy," he introduced Reilly, turning to a young man in the doorway behind him.

Jimmy Bennett wore riding breeches and coat. His thin, aristocratic face was vaguely like Matthew Bennett's, but the strength, the character, the hard-bitten efficiency were missing. He looked exactly like what he was, the young son of a millionaire, accustomed to the best things of life, to having his own way, rather spoiled, with a hint of sulkiness underneath it all.

Jimmy Bennett nodded, did not offer to shake hands.

"I hope you're going to solve this matter," Matthew Bennett said to Reilly. "It isn't the gold so much. We can mine plenty more of that, but old Carmody, the watchman, was a good man. Worked for me for years. They shot him down like a dog. They must not get away with it, Reilly."

Jimmy Bennett said unpleasantly:

"They probably will, if Sergeant McVeigh's work is a sample. He came over here and looked around, asked a lot of fool questions, and then left. That seems to be about all that has been done about it. He makes the police seem like a lot of muddleheads." All that was said with the impatient rashness of youth, a haughty detachment.

Reilly sobered, for Matthew Bennett in a way seemed to agree with his son's opinion.

Molly, quick to avert coolness, said brightly: "Suppose I show Corporal Reilly around and answer any questions he wants to ask? I know as much about this as the rest of you do. I was here when Sergeant McVeigh made his investigation."

Jimmy shrugged, turned back into the office without saying anything.

Matthew Bennett nodded. "Good idea," he agreed. "I've got to drop down in the mine shaft for a couple of hours. Be glad to answer any questions later, corporal."

And so they were left alone without much ceremony. Molly smiled apologetically. "Shall we start at the window?"

THEY WENT around to the side of the building. Reilly inspected the window carefully, the ground underneath, looked back at the hillside where Molly said the horses had been tied. Many feet had trampled about here since then. There were no clues as far as he could see.

They went inside, and as they came through the doorway Jimmy Bennett quickly slipped a bottle in the bottom drawer of the desk. He had a half-guilty air about him, tinged with defiance as he glanced at his sister. She frowned, looked hurt, shook her head the merest bit.

Reilly read the story without difficulty. That bottle and other bottles

were a hidden factor between brother and sister. Young Bennett was probably drinking too much. His sister was trying to stop him. But nothing was said. Reilly looked the office over thoroughly, studied the back room.

"The safe was locked?" he asked Molly.

"Yes. It's always locked at night."

"They had the combination, then. It's not damaged in any way."

"We've tried to figure that out," Molly returned. "Three people knew the combination, my father, the book-keeper, and Dad Carmody. The book-keeper is above suspicion."

"And Carmody?"

"He would have cut off his arm rather than steal anything from dad," Molly assured him. "Dad Carmody was the soul of honesty. He had worked for dad for years, and he could have had a much better job for the asking. He preferred to take it easy, without loafing or accepting outright charity. He couldn't have had anything to do with it."

And so certain was Molly Bennett of that, that Reilly was convinced himself. If Carmody had been mixed up in the robbery he would hardly have been killed. He might have been tied up for the sake of appearance, left helpless, but not murdered.

"Let's have a look at the spot where they tied their horses," Reilly said.

Up on the hillside he studied the spot carefully, and as he had expected, found nothing there to help him other than the crooked hoof print McVeigh had noticed and pointed out to Molly. McVeigh had said nothing about it to Reilly. Reilly wondered why, as he went back in the trees some distance, using it as an excuse to walk with Molly as much as anything else. It was hardly possible there would be anything pertinent back here. The men had ridden up, dismounted, tied their horses, looted

the office, gone back up the hill, mounted and ridden off.

As he walked, Reilly searched the ground on both sides of the trail keenly. His vigilance was rewarded unexpectedly. A small glint of metal half buried in the conifer needles beyond a low bush caught his eye. Reilly stepped over, found it to be an empty .44-caliber cartridge shell.

How long it had lain there Reilly couldn't say as he examined it. But there was no regular trail along there. They had simply been following up the faintly visible marks of horses' hoofs through the trees. It was possible that the empty shell had been there for a year or more—but not probable.

"The bullet that killed the watchman may have come from this," Reilly said thoughtfully, turning the shell over in his fingers.

"Of course it did!" Molly said with amateurish assurance. Her eyes were sparkling with interest. "Is—is it going to help?" she asked.

Reilly smiled at her. "Never can tell. In the first place we've got to prove that the bullet which killed the watchman came from this shell. It was a .44, too. That oughtn't to be hard to settle. But look—this cartridge was fired by a damaged firing pin. It left its mark as plain as a cattle brand."

Reilly showed Molly the little moon-shaped depression left in the soft metal by the firing pin.

Molly touched it with the tip of a small finger.

"And if you find a gun that has a damaged firing pin that fits this, then you'll know it's the gun that killed Dad Carmody?" she asked breathlessly.

"We'll know it after we compare the marks on the bullet that killed him with marks on other bullets fired from the same gun," Reilly agreed.

He put the empty shell in his pocket.

"All we have to do," he said lightly, "is to find the gun that has that defec-

tive firing pin. Just as simple as that—and as hard!"

"You will!" Molly assured him confidently. "I know you will!"

## VII.

IN THE DAYS that followed, Reilly went about his business methodically. For some reason which he could not quite define he said nothing about the empty shell to Sergeant McVeigh. It was becoming more and more plain to him that McVeigh resented his presence, was determined to give him no assistance.

Why that should be, Reilly could not guess. A hundred times he approached the matter from different angles and got nowhere. He had never known McVeigh before. There should be no enmity between them. In the very nature of things McVeigh should welcome his presence here, for an unsolved killing in the territory would do the sergeant no good.

Theoretically and reasonably he should be welcomed, assisted. Actually he was not; hampered, if anything. It would have irritated Reilly more than it did if there hadn't been other things to think about—Molly Bennett, for instance. He had ridden back from Thief River with her that day, seen her often since; even got to the point of dropping around to her house.

It helped to compensate for the growing tension between him and McVeigh, for there was tension. McVeigh's invisible opposition could have no other result. McVeigh told Reilly nothing, and Reilly gave the sergeant no details of what he was doing. Now and then he found that McVeigh was trying to pump him, and he remained oblivious and noncommittal.

McVeigh at last came out flatly and asked him what progress he was making.

"Not much," Reilly told him coolly.

And he could have sworn that McVeigh looked relieved.

"I didn't think you would," McVeigh remarked shortly. "The reason I got nowhere was because there was so little to go on. If you'll take my advice, you'll close up the case, report it insoluble, and forget about it."

"Is that an order, sir?" Reilly asked coolly.

McVeigh flushed. "Of course not!" he snapped. "Stay here as long as you want to. You're really not under my orders in this matter. If you waste your time around here you'll have to answer for it, not me."

"I understand that," Reilly assured him.

"You're seeing a lot of the Bennett girl, I notice," McVeigh went on.

"Indeed!" Reilly retorted stiffly. He knew he shouldn't notice the remark. No reason why McVeigh shouldn't make it, but that was the way he felt.

And as Reilly went about his business he was conscious of the covert, sullen watchfulness of Pardee and his companions. Their enmity was a thing visible and tangible. Pardee, Reilly decided, would never forgive him for that licking. And the first chance he got he would even the score.

But Reilly gave that little thought. Many men had threatened to get him. No one ever had. The breed who made threats like that were always too cowardly to put them into execution.

IT WAS the baron to whom Reilly turned at last for assistance.

He had canvassed in his mind every one he had met in Bitter Forks and Thief River who might help him. The baron seemed to be the answer. He had been around since the camp had been started. He knew every one. He was harmless. Men paid no attention to him, tolerated his presence with indifference when they would have looked with suspicion on Reilly. The baron

could ask questions, make moves, go places, and do things where Reilly could not.

After he made the decision it was evening before Reilly found his man; and then it was the baron who found him. The little man buttonholed him with comic dignity in the dark shadows beside a pile of lumber near the end of the street.

"It would be nice to stop in and have a drink," the baron said wistfully.

"I was thinking the same thing myself just before you came along," Reilly returned with a chuckle.

"Dot's fine!" The baron beamed, rubbing his hands together. "I am ashamed to say it, corporal, my friend, but I do not have much money these days. I cannot mix with the men and buy them drinks, so I grow lonely alone."

The baron made a move toward the nearest saloon.

Reilly laid a hand on his arm. "Just a minute," he said. "There's something I want to talk over with you first."

"Can we not talk it over while we are having our drink?" the baron suggested reluctantly. "Dot is the place to talk things over, my friend. Out here in the night one cannot think."

"We can think well enough to attend to this matter," Reilly told him. "Look here, baron."

Reilly scratched a match, held it by the end of the empty shell. "Notice this was fired by a defective firing pin," he pointed out.

"I see it. Ja."

The match burned close to Reilly's fingers and he dropped it, put the shell back in his pocket:

"Do you happen to know of any man in town who has a gun with a defective firing pin like that?" he asked.

The baron sighed. "No, no! When I see guns, my friend, I see only their muzzles."

"It's important to find that gun."

The baron scratched his jaw, shifted his frayed old hat to a more rakish angle. "I will watch," he promised. "These fools, they pay no attention to the old baron. They say he is a drunkard, he doesn't matter. So the old baron—does what he pleases. Let me see dot shell again."

Reilly struck another match.

The baron bent his head close, inspected the end of the shell carefully. "Good!" he said, straightening up. "I will remember. And now, my friend, tell me, why is it important?"

Reilly had made up his mind about the baron by now, had decided to trust him. "This will go no further?" he asked.

The baron drew himself up with dignity. "On my honor as a gentleman," he promised. "I, the Baron von Haussman, assure you dot what iss told me is like into the grave. It comes not out."

"This shell," said Reilly impressively, "is going to hang a man; perhaps several."

The baron swore gently in German. "Dot iss hardly believable," he said. "But if you say it iss so I believe it. I will look as I promised. Shall we go now?"

"We shall," Reilly said good-naturedly. They walked off together.

And neither of them saw the dark shadow move from the end of the lumber pile and slowly follow them. It was Slim Picketts. He had been standing behind the pile of lumber, silent, motionless, while they talked. He had heard their words. And now Slim Picketts' face was not pleasant to see as he followed them.

### VIII.

THE TWO MEN turned into Bill's Antler House, a large, frame building, deep, wide, two stories high. A long bar ran down one side. Tables were

scattered at the back and along the opposite wall. A big oil chandelier gave light.

The room was crowded, bar and tables. There was no piano. A small swarthy Italian was lustily playing an accordion at one end of the room. House girls were dancing with the customers.

As Reilly stepped in with the baron he saw Jim Bennett before the bar, talking loudly with Pardee. The boy's face was flushed, his eyes wide and wandering. The glass he raised to his lips shook as he drained the contents.

Pardee slapped him on the shoulder, said something to the bartender. Jim Bennett put his empty glass on the bar and poured himself another drink.

Reilly walked up behind Pardee, heard the big man say: "Have another, Bennett. An' then I reckon we better get that little game going."

"Thass right. Feel lucky to-night." Jim Bennett nodded. Looking past Pardee's shoulder he saw Reilly standing there. He staggered as he turned his back to the bar.

"Hello!" he greeted expansively. "Look, Pardee! The law's goin' hell with the rest of us. Have a drink, Mounty."

Pardee swung around, scowling as he saw who it was. "Don't waste liquor on him," he said in a gruff aside to Jim Bennett.

"Naw, sir; want 'im to drink!" Jim insisted stubbornly. "Always wanted t' see a Mounty drunk. Thish my chance! Here's bottle, Mounty. Forgot your name."

Pardee was not drunk. His eyes were coldly baleful.

"C'mon, drink up!" Jim Bennett insisted, thrusting out the bottle.

"Thanks!" Reilly replied. "I'm not drinking to-night. How about a little stroll down the street with me, Bennett? Got something to talk over."

The baron was standing behind

Reilly, no one else paying any attention to them. Over the syncopated rhythm of the accordion, the scuffle of feet, the noise of talk and laughter, their voices hardly carried.

Pardee scowled blackly, said roughly: "Who asked you to come buttin' in, Mounty? We're gettin' along all right. If you're runnin' an antiliquor platform take it outside."

"Tha's right," Jim Bennett seconded severely. "Don' want killjoys around. Run out, Mounty, an' handle your job. Find out who killed Carmody. Tha's what you're here for, not to spoil other people's evenings."

The baron plucked at Reilly's sleeve. "Mebbe we better have dot drink," he suggested.

Reilly shook off his hand. He was concerned about Jim Bennett. The boy was hardly responsible for anything he did now. And Pardee was urging him on, had mentioned a card game. Jimmy did not stand a chance in a game.

Reilly laid a hand on Jim's arm. "Let's go outside," he urged with a grin. "I've got something to talk over with you."

"Na-aw, leave me alone," Jim refused sulkily. "Don' wanna go outside. Don' wanna talk."

"Mounty, this ain't none of your business, an' I won't stand for it!" Pardee said in an ugly tone. "We're be-havin' ourselves an' we want to be left alone. Get out!"

Reilly looked at Jim Bennett, wondering what to do. He could arrest him, but he had no real reason to do so. The boy wasn't making trouble. If he tried to take him out forcibly there would be a nasty scene. If he arrested him, Molly Bennett and her father were apt to have plenty to say about it. After all, Jim Bennett was twenty-one, master of himself and his actions.

And while that went through Reilly's mind Jim Bennett said resentfully: "Pity you can't stay with your job,

'stead of butting in other people's private affairs. Why don't you find who killed old Carmody? Huh? Why don't you?"

"I'm making progress," Reilly said calmly.

Pardee gave him a startled look, sneered: "What progress, Mounty?"

"When the case is finished the public will get the details," Reilly told him shortly.

"Just because you're rushin' Molly you can't run me!" Jim Bennett said loudly, pounding the edge of the bar for emphasis. "C'mon, Pardee, let's start that game."

GRINNING, Pardee shoved past Reilly, walked to the rear of the room with Jim Bennett.

Reilly watched them go, saw Slim Picketts step up to Pardee, draw him aside, talk rapidly.

Pardee listened intently. One of his big fists clenched in fury. Reilly wondered what they were talking about as he turned to the bar with the baron and ordered the drink he had promised. Then ordered a second one, watching Jim Bennett at the rear of the room.

Turkeyneck Evans had been sitting at a table back there. Pardee, Jim, and Slim Picketts sat down there also. Turkeyneck Evans was shuffling a deck of cards. Pardee was passing out stacks of chips.

Pardee got up as one of the house girls passed, a willowy redhead, somewhat shopworn. Pardee caught her arm, led her aside, talked with her. The girl nodded, went on. Pardee sat down at the table again. The game began.

The baron smacked his lips over the second drink, hinted delicately: "Dot tastes like more, I tell you."

Reilly ordered a third drink, paid as it was served. He had come to a sudden decision.

"I'll see you later," he said to the baron. And he walked back to the table

where Jim Bennett sat, pulled up a fifth chair and sat down.

Pardee riffled a stack of chips between his fingers and glared across the table. "Who asked you to sit in on this?" he demanded insultingly.

Reilly drew out a thin packet of bills, laid them on the table before him. He smiled at Pardee. "Don't get excited," he advised calmly. "No objection to my sitting in, is there? All nice and friendly?"

"Four's enough," Pardee growled.

"Hunt yourself another game if you wanna play," Turkeyneck Evans told him with a blank, unfriendly stare.

Slim Picketts said nothing, but his eyes were venomous.

Reilly smiled good-naturedly. "I feel like sitting in here—if there's going to be a game."

"Let him stay," Jim Bennett said with a wave of his hand. "His money's good. Like to see him go broke."

"I'll not play with him!" Pardee growled.

"He plays or I don't," Jimmy insisted with the perversity of a drunken man. "C'mon, cut the cards." He slapped the deck down, for he had first deal.

Pardee gave in suddenly with a shrug and cut the cards. And by that action accepted Reilly into the game. Turkeyneck Evans sold him chips. There were several large stacks of chips in front of Jim Bennett. He evidently had plenty of money.

Reilly won the first pot, Jim Bennett the second, Slim Picketts the third. Reilly watched closely for signs of smooth dealing. He knew most of the dodges. As far as he could see none of them was being tried now.

Pardee struck a winning streak. The chips piled up before him. About that time Reilly noticed the baron tacking to the stairway leading up to the balcony overhead and the rooms spaced along it. He smiled slightly to himself. For once

it looked as if the baron had got enough to drink.

Cards were dealt swiftly, hands played out quickly. Reilly was down to his last stack of white chips when his luck turned. He began to win, Pardee to lose.

Pardee at last got up. "Be back in a few minutes," he said shortly. He walked to the balcony stairs and went up.

He was back in a few minutes, continuing his silent, surly play.

Reilly's winning streak continued.

Pardee at last slapped down his cards. "I'm dropping out," he announced gruffly.

Slim Picketts followed suit after the next hand.

Jim Bennett was losing steadily now to Reilly. He bought more chips, swearing at his run of bad luck.

"Want to call it quits?" Reilly asked hopefully.

"I'll quit when one of us goes broke!" Jimmy said angrily. "Don' run out on me when you're winning!" He was in an ugly mood now, face flushed, set, lines of irritated concentration etched into his forehead.

One of the dance-hall girls, the willowy redhead, came to the table and watched them. She leaned over Reilly's shoulder, her arm sliding about his neck.

"I'm bringing you luck, Mounty," she whispered archly.

Reilly pushed her arm away. "I'll handle my own luck, sister. Take it over to Bennett there; he needs it."

"I'll keep it," she pouted, and drifted away.

Jimmy continued to lose steadily. His chips melted away. He bought until his money ran low also. Jim drew two cards, bet wildly, recklessly, called Reilly.

The hand Reilly laid down was four deuces to Jimmy's three aces. Reilly raked in the chips silently.

Jimmy swore angrily, lighted a cigarette unsteadily. "Never saw such damn luck!" he swore.

"It happens," Reilly said good-naturedly. "Ready to call it quits and take that walk with me?"

Reilly pulled out his handkerchief, glanced down as something flicked from his pocket to the floor. And he sat rigid, paling at what he saw.

An ace lay there on the floor. An ace that had come from his pocket.

Slim Picketts saw it, too. He snatched it up before Reilly's fingers reached it, held it out so all could see.

"I thought there was somethin' funny about him winnin' all the time!" Slim Picketts said loudly. "Look what fell outa his pocket!"

Jim Bennett leaned across the table and grabbed the card. His face grew crimson with anger. He kicked back his chair, lurched to his feet. His voice rose in a shout.

"Damn you, no wonder you've been winning! I thought it was funny! You cheat! You can't get by with this, even if you do wear a red coat!"

And Jim Bennett hurled the table over at Reilly.

Through scattering cards and chips Reilly saw with amazement the thing he had never expected to happen. From under his coat Jim Bennett was pulling a gun.

## IX.

PARDEE and Slim Picketts had leaped back, too. Slim Picketts swung up his chair, hurled it at the chandelier. Glass splintered and crashed. Girls screamed. Men shouted as blank darkness fell over the room.

A shot roared out in front of Reilly—a second, a third.

One bullet grazed his shoulder as he ducked aside into a crouch. Two guns were in action. One of them was to his left; the other in front, where Jim Bennett had been standing. Reilly shot

once, purposely high, and then crouched with his back against the wall and waited.

The shooting ceased. A girl was sobbing and moaning up near the front of the hall. The shuffle of retreating feet backing out of the line of fire rose over gasping breaths, frantic murmurs.

A groan, a hoarse, gasping, rattling breath sounded on the floor by the overturned table. Some one there was badly wounded.

Reilly stood up, gun ready. His voice rang through the room in a mighty shout.

"In the king's name, quiet! Bartender, get a light! Every one stand just where he is! The first person caught trying to run out will be arrested!"

Reilly's voice with its note of authority brought order where nothing else could have. A match flared behind the bar. A lantern glowed out, driving back the blackness with its pale, yellow gleam.

"Bring it here!" Reilly commanded.

One of the miners at the bar brought the light over. While the bartender lighted more lanterns, Reilly stepped to the overturned table. A startled exclamation burst from him.

Lying on the floor, his pale face staring up at the ceiling, one hand gripping his chest, was Jim Bennett. He was breathing with shuddering gasps that shook his entire body. A glance showed he was badly wounded.

Pardee was standing by the back door of the room. He came forward as Reilly dropped to a knee beside Jim Bennett.

Jimmy lifted the hand from his chest. The fingers were stained bright crimson with fresh blood. And with those bloody fingers Jimmy pointed at Reilly. His hoarse voice came weak but vindictive. "You did it, damn you! You s-shot me!"

"No!" Reilly denied vehemently. "I

didn't shoot you, Jim! You know I wouldn't do a thing like that!"

Jim Bennett's eyes rolled up at the roughly dressed crowd pressing close around him. His bloody fingers fumbled at his breast where the bullet had entered below the heart. He drew several long gasping breaths, shaking with the effort. And then Jimmy looked at his bloody fingers wondering.

"He shot me!" he wrenched out weakly. "Don't listen to anything else, boys. He cheated me with crooked cards, and when I found him out he shot me!"

Pardee had shoved through to Jimmy's head. Now his voice rang out:

"That's the truth, fellers! I was sittin' in the game! This skunk Mounty was winnin' crooked right straight through! An' then he forgot and jerked an ace outen his pocket! Here 'tis."

Pardee held the card up for all to see. "I didn't put that card in my pocket!" Reilly snapped.

"That's what *you* say!" Pardee sneered at him.

And from behind Pardee's massive shoulders Turkeyneck Evans shouted excitedly: "Lynch 'im, boys! Ef that's the kind of Mounty law we're gettin', we don't want no more of it!"

A dozen other voices took up the shout.

"Lynch him!"

"Shoot the dirty crook!"

"His uniform don't count now!"

Reilly knew mob psychology; knew how the red wave of insane passion once started was almost impossible to stop. He jerked out his gun, shouted: "Stand back, men! Don't do anything you'll regret!"

Strong hands grabbed his elbows, caught his wrists. An arm circled his neck as he tried to fight free, jerked him back. The pistol was wrenched from his fingers. A savage blow from behind left him weak, dazed.

At his shoulder the man who had his

gun shouted: "His gun's been fired! He shot the kid all right!"

And then another man came elbowing through, holding up a small pellet in his fingers. "Here's the bullet! It's a .44!"

"Lemme see it!"

Pardee snatched it from him, pulled a cartridge out of Reilly's belt, compared the slightly misshapen pellet that had bored Jim Bennett with the lead in the end of the cartridge.

"They match!" Pardee said with satisfaction. "Guess there ain't no doubt now, boys! The Mounty cheated him an' then tried to kill him!" Pardee's bushy black beard parted and his red lips turned out in a malevolent grin at Reilly.

THE CRIES increased in number and volume. The man holding Reilly dragged him toward the front door. They were almost there when the tall, spare figure of Sergeant McVeigh stepped in and faced them.

Reilly's progress toward the noose was abruptly stopped. The men crowded up behind him, forming a semicircle whose ends reached almost to the door.

McVeigh's face was pale and set. "What's this?" his voice demanded sharply in the sudden silence that fell.

Reilly gave him a twisted smile. "You walked in on a little hanging the boys were counting on."

"Hanging who?"

"Me."

McVeigh's eyes swept coldly around the circle. His thumbs hooked carelessly in the front of his polished belt.

"I don't know what it's all about," he said to the men, "but there won't be any hanging to-night, boys."

"You don't understand, sergeant," the man at Reilly's left elbow said angrily. "This skunk sat in a card game and won all the money crooked. He dropped an ace outa his pocket, an' when he saw he was caught he shot

young Jim Bennett. The kid's lyin' back there on the floor now. Gonna die, I guess."

The tension in the air could have been sliced with a knife. Every eye there was riveted on Sergeant McVeigh to see what he would do about it.

"Reilly, did you do that?" McVeigh asked woodenly.

"No," said Reilly. "I sat in the game, and I won, but I didn't cheat. Jim Bennett kicked the table over on me and went for his gun. Somebody knocked the light out. There was shooting. Some one else besides the boy was shooting, too, and I let fly at whoever it was, high. Why—why——"

Reilly stopped there. He couldn't tell them that he'd never shoot Molly Bennett's brother. He didn't want her in this at all.

"You had an ace card in your pocket?" McVeigh asked.

"One fell out of my pocket." Reilly nodded unwillingly. "But I didn't put it there. Some one must have framed me, McVeigh."

"Aw, don't listen to his lies!" Pardee burst out roughly. "He's just tryin' to save his hide! Here's the bullet that came out of the kid. A .44. Matches the bullets in his belt."

Sergeant McVeigh extended his hand, took the cartridge and the misshapen lead pellet, compared them. His face was bleak, emotionless. There was no mercy in his manner, no especial enmity either now.

"This looks bad for you," he said casually to Reilly.

"I know it does," Reilly agreed. "But try to get at the truth and you'll find it's something different. Some one else in here has got a gun that's been fired once or twice. Find it, compare his cartridges."

"Aw, don't argue! Let's lynch him!" some one called.

McVeigh raised his hand. "There will be no lynching to-night," he bit out.

TN-3

"I'll place this man under arrest and let the law take care of him."

"No!" Pardee exclaimed violently. "There ain't but one way to handle snakes like him; that's the noose!"

McVeigh's gaze locked with Pardee's gaze for a long moment, and then McVeigh looked at the rest of the men.

"There will be no hanging to-night," he said decisively. "I am placing Corporal Reilly under arrest. Release him."

A deep silence greeted those words. Reilly could fairly feel the invisible pull of murderous rage in the air. For long seconds it was a toss-up whether McVeigh's authority would be swept aside.

But so great was the prestige of that scarlet uniform, so calm and cold and authoritative was McVeigh, that the scales invisibly tipped his way. Reilly was released.

One of the men holding him said disgustedly: "Aw, hell, let the law have 'im. If the kid dies he'll hang for murder, anyway; an' if we string him up there's liable to be a big stink."

"That's right," some one else agreed.

And so McVeigh won out.

## X.

IN THE detachment office McVeigh closed the door and shot the bolt against a dozen or so murmuring men who had followed them. McVeigh's manner was cold and forbidding as he swung around impassively and motioned Reilly to a chair.

"You are a disgrace to the uniform, Corporal Reilly," he uttered scathingly.

Reilly sat down in the chair, pale, sick. It wasn't fear. Even with the threat of the noose before him he hadn't given much thought to fear. But realization of the cold-blooded crime that had been pinned on him was a load almost too heavy for any man to bear.

The disgrace of it, the circumstantial evidence which seemed conclusive and impregnable, was unnerving.

Again and again as he walked here to the post with McVeigh he had gone back over those frantic moments. Some one else had shot Jim Bennett. But who was it? And why had he shot? Had it been deliberately attempted murder? An accident, or a plot to throw guilt on him?

Reilly could only believe that the last was true. That ace which had come out of his pocket had not been in there before he entered the game. It had been planted there.

No one had been near enough to do it but—that girl. That was it! The one who had leaned over his shoulder, offered him her luck. She had done it! Reilly smiled bitterly at the thought of the luck she had brought him.

"It's no laughing matter," McVeigh told him coldly.

"I know. Wasn't laughing at that. I just happened to remember who must have put that card in my pocket. One of the girls bent over my shoulder, offered me her luck. She did it."

"Can you prove that?"

"No. But Jim Bennett is the last man I'd ever think of shooting."

McVeigh looked steadily at him, his thin lower lip caught between his teeth. He looked like a bitter judge. But he nodded at last.

"Something in that. You've been seeing his sister a lot. It doesn't seem reasonable——"

Reilly winced at mention of Molly Bennett. How would she take it? Would she believe him?

The barred front windows were open to the street. Reilly got up heavily, stood in front of the nearest window, looking through the iron bars. Most of the men who had followed them there had gone away. But approaching voices, the tramp of heavy boots on the

wooden walk, heralded the coming of others.

They passed without stopping, some of the men hurling oaths at him as they went. And in the center of the group, on an improvised stretcher made of two boards, they carried the limp, lax form of Jim Bennett.

Following after them came Molly Bennett and her father. Molly's eyes were red. She dabbed at them with a small handkerchief, as Reilly saw her. Matthew Bennett's face was set, stern, forbidding.

Reilly forced himself to stand there. Molly did not look at the window, did not see him. Reilly said: "Molly Bennett."

"Here!" McVeigh protested violently. "What are you doing?"

Reilly ignored him. For Molly had stopped, turned to the window. She looked small, helpless, broken by grief. Revulsion showed plain on her face as she stared at Reilly pressing against the bars. A strangled sob shook her slim shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Reilly said huskily. "It's all a misunderstanding."

Molly pointed after the stretcher, cried accusingly: "You did *that* to—my brother!"

"No! I didn't do it!" Reilly protested desperately. If there were only something stronger than words that would make her believe him. But there was not.

As Molly spoke, her grief gave way before her anger. With blazing eyes she cried: "Don't lie about it! You cheated Jimmy out of his money and then shot him when he found you out!"

"Listen to me!" Reilly begged, gripping the bars tightly. "I'm telling you the truth, Molly Bennett! I wouldn't lie to you! Your brother was drunk and insisted on going into a crooked card game. I saw they would win his money, so I got into the game, too. I

won, but I was going to give you his money to return to him when he sobered up. But I won straight, and I didn't shoot him!"

With white-hot scorn Molly choked: "You cheat! You liar!"

Matthew Bennett, pale with fury, shook a clenched fist in Reilly's face. "I'll see that you pay for this—if the men don't take it out of the law's hands yet!" he promised wildly. "Come on, Molly!"

And as her father took her arm and led her away, Reilly stared through the bars after them; stared until he could see them no more. And still his clenched fingers gripped the bars.

"I'll have to lock you up now," McVeigh said shortly. His hand gripped Reilly's elbow, as he had held many another lawbreaker.

Reilly swung around, shook off the grip. "Let me out of here, McVeigh!" he begged passionately. "Can't you see the man who shot Jim Bennett is escaping? If he's not caught at once it will be too late! I won't have a chance then!"

McVeigh shrugged. His thin lips curled. "I'm going to lock you up," he repeated. "If there's any investigating to do, I'll do it."

Reilly took a blind step toward him.

McVeigh whipped out his pistol. "Don't try it!" he warned sharply. "I'll have to shoot you, Reilly. Besides, you don't know what you're facing. Those men out there want your life for this. I stopped them temporarily. It may not all be over yet. Get back in the cells. They are the safest place for you."

Reilly saw he didn't have a chance. McVeigh could drop him with a shot; he would if he tried to make a break for it. He walked heavily back to the three iron-barred cells at the rear. The door shut heavily behind him; the lock clicked; the keys rattled as McVeigh dropped them in his pocket and turned away.

TWO HOURS later Reilly was still sitting on the bare stool in the corner of his cell, his head in his hands. His shoulders were slumped like those of a beaten man.

For two hours he had been thinking, trying to find a crack in the ring of circumstantial evidence that had closed about him. Again and again he came back to one point. Pardee had engineered it.

But the trap could not have been planned earlier. Reilly himself hadn't known he was going to sit in that card game. The girl who had leaned over his shoulder was a stranger to him. Could Pardee have got to her? And then Reilly remembered Pardee's brief absence from the game. Shortly after that the girl had shown up, had put her arm about his neck. Reilly suddenly saw it all. Pardee had planned quickly, led him on, let him win. The trap had sprung with uncanny success. Pardee or his friends had shot Jim Bennett. They were the men he wanted.

Meanwhile he had to sit caged, to look forward to trial, disgrace, sentence, perhaps hanging.

"Shhhhhh!"

Reilly looked up quickly as the soft, sibilant noise came through the barred window. A hand reached up into the faint light. It beckoned to him.

## XI.

REILLY jumped up, looked out. The upturned, stubble-covered face of the baron met his eyes. The baron seemed half drunk, he swayed unsteadily, but his words tumbled out fast enough.

And it was a strange story the baron told, as he looked fearfully to right and left to see if he was observed. The baron had staggered out of a balcony room at the bar and collapsed for a time in the back yard while his head cleared.

Pardee and his companions had come

out while the baron lay there, stopped near him, spoken furtively.

"Are you sure you heard right?" Reilly asked, amazed.

"Dot's what they planned!" the baron swore.

Reilly considered this new twist, wondering what to do about it. Would McVeigh take action again? Could he handle it?

"Get out of dot cell!" the baron warned excitedly. "Here, take this!"

The baron pushed his ancient pistol up through the bars.

Reilly was not greatly surprised at the baron's warning. He had expected more trouble. It found him cooler than he had been during the last two hours. This was something concrete, tangible, to face quickly. He broke the pistol to see if it was loaded. There were three cartridges in the cylinder; probably enough. Reilly took one of the cartridges out and examined it.

"Baron," he asked sharply through the window, "what did you do with those three cartridges I gave you?"

"In dot gun."

"Not the same make," said Reilly.

The baron was bewildered. He scratched his head, shrugged helplessly.

"I dunno," he said stubbornly. "Dot gun I keep always on me. No one has used it."

"Any one had a chance to tamper with it?"

The baron thought, snapped his fingers suddenly. "I bet you I know how dot happened," he said excitedly. "Tonight I drink with Pardee's girl, dot red-headed Helen. She buy me drinks while Pardee was playing cards. She wink and said I could go up to her room and have a sleep. So I went up. And I go to sleep quickly. Maybe she put something in my drink. I sleep so quick. And after while she shakes me awake and puts me out. So I went out back for fresh air."

The baron looked up hopefully. "Dot Helen, maybe she got to my gun?"

"Probably so," Reilly agreed. "She and Pardee got the cartridges out of your gun and put in others. And those cartridges I gave you, baron, were used to shoot Jim Bennett!"

"*Tck-tck-tck!*" said the baron. "Dot is terrible business! But listen. Dot Pardee is working fast."

Reilly heard it then. Several shots; a distant rumble of shouts, loud voices.

The front door slammed as McVeigh entered hurriedly.

"Go back to the stable and wait for me," Reilly ordered under his breath.

He turned away from the window, was leaning against the bars of the cell door in dejection when McVeigh stamped in. The sergeant's face was white and strained.

"The men are coming!" McVeigh said harshly. "I can't hold them. I may as well warn you now that if they persist they'll probably get you, Reilly. There's no one in town I can count on. I'll hold them off as long as I can, but—you'd better prepare yourself."

"Let me out and give me a gun," Reilly begged.

McVeigh shook his head. "Impossible! You're under arrest. I won't risk putting a gun in your hand. You'll have to take your chance."

"It'll be murder!"

"You should have thought of that before you shot Jim Bennett," McVeigh snapped.

Reilly's hand leaped from behind his back, leveling the baron's pistol through the bars. "Don't move, sergeant!" Reilly warned softly.

"Some one slipped you a gun!" McVeigh exclaimed.

"It seems so," Reilly grinned. "You should have thought of that. Turn around and back over here to the bars. And be careful! I don't want to shoot you!"

McVeigh obeyed silently. Reilly

reached through, took his gun and slipped it in his belt. Then searched the sergeant's pocket. The keys were still there. Holding the gun at McVeigh's back, Reilly reached through the bars and unlocked the door.

"Come in!" he ordered, stepping out.

"You'll be sorry for this!" McVeigh choked.

"I'm not running away," Reilly assured him. "And I'm not staying in here to be shot down like a dog, either. I've got work to do outside."

"Escape, you mean!" McVeigh raged.

A gunshot cracked loudly near by. Excited shouts, the murmur of voices, the heavy tramp of feet, drifted in through the open windows.

A voice bellowed: "Break the door in if the sergeant won't give him up!"

"Wish me luck," Reilly said calmly. And he stepped to the right. There was a door there in the side of the building, locked and barred on the inside.

MCVEIGH'S keys yielded one to open the lock. Reilly lifted the bar, opened the door cautiously, and peered out. There was no one at the side of the building yet; but as he stepped out into the darkness, fists hammered against the front door.

"Open up, sergeant! We mean business!"

Reilly turned back to the low stable that held their horses. The baron was waiting there in the darkness.

Reilly returned the baron's gun.

"Get out quick!" he advised. "Better not be found around here. They might say you helped me."

Reilly found Tumbletoes' bridle on the nail where he had left it. The horse nickered as Reilly slapped him in the flank and stepped to his head. For once Tumbletoes took the bit without protest. Reilly led him out of the door.

While he was doing that the din in front of the post had increased. Wood crashed, and the door was broken in.

Reilly could see the fringes of the crowd milling on the sidewalk. Several men jumped off the walk and ran back along the side of the building. Reilly swung on Tumbletoes' bare back and slashed with the reins.

"Hey! Stop! Who's that?"

"There he goes, boys! Get him!"

Gunshots split the night behind him. Bullets whanged close as Reilly leaned over on Tumbletoes' neck and rode hard. With lead singing close around them they swung into the lane at the rear of the street and raced for the Thief River trail at the end of town.

There were saddled horses in the street. Quick pursuit followed. It was pitch dark on the trail. Tumbletoes ran as if it were broad daylight, swinging unerringly around the turns, taking the inequalities at full gallop.

Reilly ran him half a mile and then reined up sharply. He could hear the pound of pursuing hoofs not far behind. Reilly reined Tumbletoes off the trail, walked him a hundred yards back into the trees.

The pursuit swept up to the spot where he had turned off, rushed by. Reilly heaved a sigh of relief. They had accepted the fact that he had headed for Thief River, and viewing him as a fugitive from lynching did not expect a move like this. When the last horse had pounded on, Reilly rode back to the trail and turned toward Bitter Forks.

Twice more he had to ride off the trail to let later riders pass. After that he had the trail to himself to the very edge of the trees skirting Bitter Forks.

THE BENNETTS' house was brightly lighted as Tumbletoes came stepping out of the trees behind the house and stopped at the side fence. Reilly dismounted, dropped the reins. Tumbletoes would stand there until he returned. Following the fence, Reilly ran at a crouch to the back of the house.

He didn't dare risk the front. A chance passer-by might see him and spread the alarm.

The back porch door was unlocked. Reilly stepped quietly inside the kitchen, lighted and empty now. But as he closed the door behind him, the inner door of the kitchen opened and Molly's friend, Miss Morrison, stepped in.

A smothered gasp escaped her. She stopped short, staring wide-eyed; slowly began to back toward the door.

"Stand still!" said Reilly crisply. "I came here to do Mr. Bennett a favor. Where is Molly?"

"Wh-what do you want with her?" Miss Morrison gulped.

"Got something to tell her. Stop looking like a frightened little idiot."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Molly Bennett stepped into the kitchen. She, too, stopped short as she saw Reilly standing there.

"I—I didn't think you'd dare come here!" Molly choked. "Go 'way before my father sees you. He'll kill you!"

"There's going to be trouble at your mine," Reilly said sharply. "I'm not here to argue personal grudges. Where's your father?"

"You can't see him!" Molly said stubbornly. "He'll shoot you. D'you hear me? He'll shoot you!"

"I hear you," Reilly said, walking across the room. "And we'll see about that. Where is he?"

Molly stood in the doorway as if she intended to dispute his passage. But after a long look at Reilly's face she turned abruptly and led him to the front of the house.

Matthew Bennett was in the front room, pacing back and forth. He looked up as Molly entered the room; saw Reilly behind her and rushed to the corner. His hand was on the rifle leaning there when Reilly snapped:

"Hands up, Bennett! I'll shoot if you move!"

"You lied to me again!" Molly cried scornfully.

Matthew Bennett turned around, his hands in the air. His face was bitter and terrible to look at. "I'll see that you're killed like a mad dog!" he promised thickly.

"Get over in the middle of the room!" Reilly ordered curtly.

Matthew Bennett obeyed.

And Reilly slipped his gun in the holster.

"Now stand there and listen to me," he ordered. "There's going to be trouble at your mine. I want you to go over there with me. I didn't shoot your boy. I'm going to have my chance to prove it."

"It's a trick!" Matthew Bennett said angrily.

"I'm being hunted like a mad dog," Reilly told him coldly. "I wouldn't risk my life to come back here and trick you."

Matthew Bennett had lowered his arms as they talked. His eyes searched Reilly's face. He made up his mind suddenly. "I'll take a chance on you."

"Dad, you may get hurt," Molly begged.

"I'll risk it. Go up with the doctor and do what you can to help your brother."

Matthew Bennett caught up his rifle, took a box of cartridges from a table drawer. "Come on," he said briefly.

## XII.

TOGETHER they left the house, turning toward the mine office. Behind them in the dimly lighted street, men were milling around. Bitter Forks was still seething, waiting for the spark of Reilly's discovery to set off the explosion of their wrath.

"We'd better get some men up here," Matthew Bennett decided brusquely.

"Can't risk it," Reilly told him. "As soon as they get sight of me they'll for-

get everything else. This is my show. I've got a big stake in it. Can't risk having it bungled. Come this way off the road."

Matthew Bennett hesitated. For a moment Reilly thought the mine owner was going to overrule him and appeal for help. He tensed himself, ready to stop that if it meant rendering Bennett helpless. But Bennett silently stepped off the road with him and crept through the night.

The mine office was at the edge of the property, nearest of the mine buildings to the town. The road ran before it, a branch cutting off on the other side along the base of the hillside. Scattered trees on this side were all that was left of the once heavy timber growth. Saplings and bushes grew between, almost up to the building.

Through them Reilly led the way, walking quietly, crouching whenever he crossed a spot of open ground. He was taking no chances, despite the black shadows through which they moved.

A blacker shadow suddenly stepped out from a tree. The muzzle of a pistol shoved into Reilly's side. "Who's dot?" a quavering voice asked.

Reilly exhaled a breath of relief. "Baron, blast you! Take that gun out of my ribs!"

The baron sighed with relief, too. "I thought dot you were gone," he whispered. "Now we fix this business."

"What business?" Matthew Bennett whispered angrily. "What's going on here?"

Reilly hadn't told him, not being sure what Bennett would do. Now he said under his breath: "Keep quiet! Let me handle this!" And to the baron: "Anything yet?"

"I chust come here a few minutes ago," the baron whispered. "I see nothing yet."

"I'm going into the office there and wait," Matthew Bennett muttered irrit-

ably. "I've had enough of this hocus-pocus."

Reilly's fingers bit deep into the mine owner's arm, held him to the spot. "Don't!" said Reilly, and there was that in his tone that stayed Bennett for a moment.

But then Bennett muttered something under his breath, shook off Reilly's grasp, started toward the office.

And at that moment the night seemed to expand and contract with a low, almost inaudible, puff of sound. It might have been an explosion deep in the mine shaft, or the faint, far-off echo of a distant report. They felt it, rather than heard it. And of the three Reilly was the only one who guessed correctly what it was. He was at Bennett's side an instant later. The cold timbre of authority was in his voice.

"Go back and get help if you want to now, Bennett! Your office safe has just been blown. I'll stop them."

Startled, Bennett uttered: "Safe, eh? So that's what that was! Why didn't you tell me?" He had to stride fast to get the last words in. Reilly was already running toward the office.

The window shades were down. So quiet had the men inside been, so little light had they used, that no sign of their activities had shown. Now as Reilly ran forward he saw a thin thread of light flash around the edge of the window and vanish.

A horse nickered softly in the darkness at the rear of the building. Reilly crouched, expecting a shot from a lookout posted there; but none came; and he reached the office porch running hard. His flying shoulder struck the door with the full drive of his weight behind it. The lock ripped out. The door flew in.

"In the name of the king, surrender!" Reilly yelled, using the time-honored formula of the Force, which always gave a lawbreaker a chance to lay down his arms and surrender peaceably. The

formula had also robbed the law of every element of hard-earned surprise. Men of the Force had died because of the tradition that said they must hold their fire.

Reilly did not intend to die. As he complied with custom he dropped to a knee in the doorway, ducking against the side. The act probably saved his life. A light inside had blinked out as the door burst in. And as Reilly ducked, revolvers spat inside, their explosions crashing against the peace of the night, dotting the pitch blackness inside with tiny, livid jets of flame.

Splinters drove against the top of Reilly's head as a bullet smashed into the door frame just above. He shot at a lick of flame, heard a startled oath of pain just as he shot a second time at a different spot. A chair clattered over, a body fell heavily to the floor.

And one gun over in the corner was emptied as fast as the hammer could be worked. Reilly felt an icy stab of pain at the edge of his ear; he knew death had brushed him close; but he barely thought it as he shot at the source of the bullet. And he had time to fire only once when he was knocked back, spun around by a terrific blow on his right shoulder. It numbed his whole side, took life and strength out of his arm, rendering it useless. The gun dangled in his numbed fingers. Reilly snatched it with his other hand.

One—two bullets left; he had lost count. Would they be enough, he wondered, as he forced himself around in the doorway again, raising the gun awkwardly?

ALL THAT blazing interchange of shots had happened while a man might draw a half dozen quick breaths, in short seconds. Matthew Bennett leaped on the end of the porch as Reilly faced the black interior of the office again.

"Coming. Reilly!" Bennett shouted.

Window glass splintered out. The

in-swinging door shielded the spot. Reilly lurched to his feet painfully, made for the side of the building.

"They're going out of the window!" he threw at Bennett. "Watch the door!"

But as Reilly went off the edge of the porch, running steps dodged around the back of the building. He followed, and as he reached the back heard a volley of oaths, the slash of rein ends, the stamp of fast-starting hoofs.

Almost immediately a wild oath of dismay followed. Something struck the ground heavily. The horse galloped away. And the baron's shrill voice cried:

"Don't move, or I shoot your dirty head off! Oh, you don't, eh? Take dot!"

"Baron! What's the matter?" Reilly demanded as he reached the spot.

The baron's voice was charged with high satisfaction as it answered. "I guess dot *schweinhund* is good now. I slapped him with my gun. Undt now I sit on him!" Ferociousness replaced the satisfaction. "Undt I fix you again if you try to get up! Py golly, I take no foolishness from you!"

"For Heaven's sake, hold that cannon of yours!" Reilly warned, remembering the size and weight of the baron's ancient old pistol. "We don't want his head caved in."

The baron snorted. "I hit chust so hard as I need to." A match scratched, flared. The baron was sitting on Turkeyneck Evans' back. And Turkeyneck was groaning faintly.

"Take him off!" Turkeyneck pleaded fearfully. "He like to busted my head open. Stop the old fool before he kills me!"

"I hear dot horse nicker," the baron said with satisfaction. "So I run over to him. There was only one. I cut his saddle cinch and waited. And when this fellow jumped on his back, dot cinch let

go and threw him to the ground. And I was waiting."

"Baron," Reilly chuckled weakly, "you're a better man than a lot around here. Now help me get him up and back in the office. The whole town's coming. Where's his gun?"

"Here," said the baron. "I got dot first off."

Turkeyneck Evans went meekly. The vanguard of the crowd that had dashed toward the spot at the rapid burst of gunfire was close as Reilly shoved Turkeyneck into the office.

Matthew Bennett was standing there, covering with his rifle a glowering and groaning Slim Picketts, who hunched over in a chair and swore weakly and dully. Bennett had lighted a lamp on the desk. Its rays showed Pardee lying full length on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. He was breathing hoarsely. A red froth tinged his lips.

"He's done for," Bennett said briefly, nodding at Pardee. "This fellow on the chair tried to stagger out of the door and get away. I disarmed him. They blew the safe all right."

The door of the iron safe in the corner sagged drunkenly out, torn bodily from its fastenings by the muffled explosion they had heard. And as they looked at it, heavy feet tramped on the porch. Panting figures filled the doorway, burst into the office. The first man in demanded excitedly:

"What's goin' on here?"

And the miner behind him suddenly shouted: "Here's the MOUNTY, fellows! He never left town! Now we got him!"

Matthew Bennett faced them, grimlipped. "Stay out!" he barked. "Corporal Reilly is handling this. He caught these men who blew the safe!"

The first man blurted excitedly: "Hell he's the man who shot your son! Are you standing up for him?"

BEFORE Bennett could reply there was a commotion on the porch. Ser-

geant McVeigh pushed through and entered the office. And coming behind him was Molly Bennett, pale, agitated.

"Dad!" she cried at sight of her father. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing the matter with me," Bennett assured her. "Reilly stopped an attempt to rob the safe."

Molly stared at Reilly, and her voice wobbled a little. "He's wounded," she said weakly. "There's blood all over his shoulder."

"Nothing serious," Reilly said absently. "I can use the arm."

He was using the arm as he spoke. He had reached down, taken Pardee's gun, had broken it and was holding the weapon near the lamp as he inspected it closely. Reilly reached into his pocket and brought out an empty shell. He compared it with the gun he held, then swung around to McVeigh. There was no triumph, little more than satisfaction in Reilly's manner as he said to McVeigh:

"I think this settles everything. Pardee's gun has a broken firing pin, and the marks on his shells match the mark on the shell picked up beside the trail the Thief River killers left. Miss Bennett can back that up. It won't be hard to show Pardee killed the mine watchman over there. This same bunch we caught here to-night did that job."

On the floor Pardee's eyes were wide, feverish. He was breathing with an effort. "Smart, ain't you, MOUNTY?" he wrenched out.

"No," said Reilly. "Just lucky. The baron heard you and your friends planning to stir the men up to get me, so you could blow this safe in the excitement. You'd probably have done it, if the baron hadn't thought fast."

Pardee's eyes rolled to McVeigh. And there was such savage vindictiveness and hate in them that McVeigh caught his breath.

"So you—let—him—out?" Pardee coughed, fresh red showing on his lips.

"He broke out," McVeigh denied hurriedly. "Man, you're dying! Don't do anything you'll be sorry for!"

Pardee choked, strangled, sneered. "Sorry!" he gasped. "I won't be sorry, damn you! For when I go I'll know I done it right. I warned you. Bennett, I'm dying, eh?" A laugh rattled thickly in Pardee's throat. "A dying man don't lie. Here's proof. I had that ace card planted in the MOUNTY's pocket. I plugged that fool whelp of yours, Bennett. Never did like him, an' used him to get the MOUNTY. That's a sample of the truth—I'm tellin'. You—believe—me?"

"I believe you," Bennett nodded.

A hush had fallen over the room. Every eye was on Pardee's head as he turned with a visible effort and looked at McVeigh again.

"Lied to you," Pardee said hoarsely. "Didn't tell the others. Just let 'em see I could handle things. But I'm tellin' now. Need company in hell, damn you! Listen, every one. McVeigh, there——"

A sudden spasm of coughing shook Pardee's burly body. It grew worse. He tried to speak through it, and could not. With a terrible effort he raised his head, brought his hand up to point. But suddenly the racking spasm ceased. Pardee dropped back inertly, half rolled over, went limp. He stayed that way.

"He—he's dead!" McVeigh said.

"Yes," Matthew Bennett agreed. "Do you know what he was trying to say?"

Sergeant McVeigh drew out a handkerchief and wiped his face. And his hand was unsteady.

"No!" McVeigh denied hoarsely. "I don't know! And it's too late now. He'll never tell it." There was almost a sob of thankfulness in McVeigh's voice.

And Sergeant McVeigh straightened. His shoulders went back. He stood before them every inch the officer that he was.

"Corporal Reilly," said McVeigh humbly, "I made a mistake in believing the evidence. I am ashamed, and I say so publicly. Will you help me to take these prisoners?"

"He can't!" Molly Bennett protested quickly. "He's wounded! He'll have to come to the house and see the doctor!"

"She's right," Matthew Bennett backed her up.

McVeigh smiled slightly. "Ay, I had forgotten that. Take him along, Miss Bennett."

And McVeigh was still smiling wanly as Reilly pushed through the men at the door with Molly Bennett; still smiling as the baron plucked at his arm.

"I help you," offered the baron hopefully. "Undt maybe we have a drink then, now dot everything is all right?"

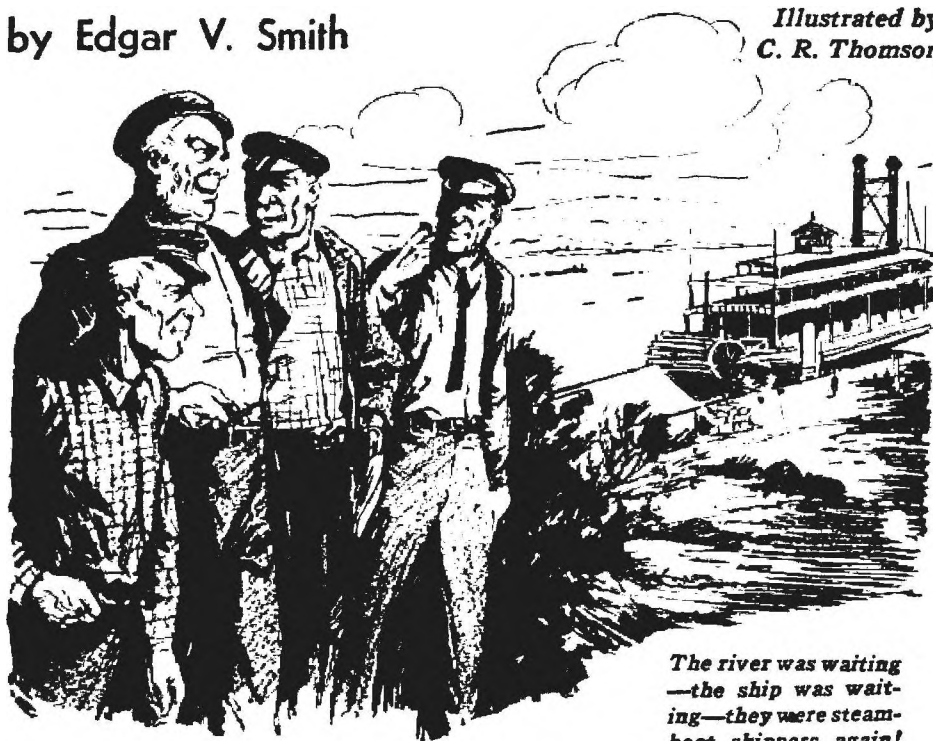
"Ay!" agreed McVeigh, his eyes going after Reilly, and then to Pardee. "A big drink for you, now that everything is all right—for everybody."



# Four in Command

by Edgar V. Smith

Illustrated by  
C. R. Thomson



*The river was waiting  
—the ship was wait-  
ing—they were steam-  
boat skippers again!*

## *A story of the old river and of a ship with four captains*

**O**F COURSE all steamboatmen know that a river has moods and the faculty of perception. They know, too, that it has voices; that always and always and always it is talking. Even young steamboatmen can hear a river speaking; they can distinguish the words, but they cannot translate their meaning. It is as though they listened to something that was spoken in a foreign tongue. But old steamboatmen—particularly very old steamboatmen—understand every word that a

river utters. This is because long association has brought them into kinship with it. Such men, the Fates have especially favored. They have become the river's half brothers.

FROM behind the nickeled urn that bubbled on one corner of the lunch counter, "Coffee Jack" peered at the group which sat at a white-enamel-topped table in his river-front café.

"They say," he mused, "that after many years a steamboatman's heart

turns to a paddle wheel that pumps river water, instead o' blood, through his arteries. Still an' all, you c'n hardly imagine them four gettin' together on anything—an' buyin' the *Maynard*."

Coffee Jack was squat of stature; his square face and low forehead bespoke an unimaginative temperament. But his gaze dwelt with something of speculation in it on the quartet of men at the table. They were all old—the youngest nearing seventy. A casual glance would have revealed that their manner toward one another was one of frigid politeness, and had one been particularly observant, he would have noticed that they sat so that their elbows were not touching.

One of them now addressed the others: "We all understand the agreement, gentlemen?"

It was Cap'n Matt O'Quinn, bald and bulky, forty years a steamboatman, who had put the question.

Cap'n Dannie Byrd, a wisp of a man, but Cap'n Matt's equal in years of river service—as were the two others—blinked his blue eyes rapidly and bobbed his white-thatched head vigorously up and down in token that he understood.

In the "blustery kind of voice that most persons associate with rivermen, Cap'n Jerry Slade shot out a practical question: "Who'll be master the *Maynard's* first trip?"

"Let us draw lots." Cap'n Pete Durant, a precise-spoken man, with noticeably Gallic features, made the suggestion. "Number them one—two—three—four. We command, in turn, as we draw."

"And the other positions—mate, chief pilot, and clerk?" Cap'n O'Quinn asked.

"Could we not," Cap'n Durant suggested, "follow the same procedure with those?"

In the drawing, the master's berth fell to Cap'n Slade. That of mate went to Cap'n O'Quinn. Cap'n Byrd drew the

chief pilot's post, and that of clerk went to Cap'n Durant.

With the matter fully understood, the four men rose, almost simultaneously, from the table. Each man's slight inclination of the head included the group. Almost as one, they spoke:

"Good evening to you, gentlemen!"

Then each went, separately, his way.

Coffee Jack wagged his head in the manner of one who gives up a problem as the last one passed through the doorway.

"An' I recall the time," he muttered, "when they were actually gunnin' for one 'nother!"

THEIR FEUD was a classic in steamboating annals. Years ago, each man had been master of his boat on the Nahkancee River, which emptied into the Big River several miles north of The City. From the beginning there had been competition between them for cargoes. Then, keen rivalry. Later, a bitter struggle. Still later, conflict—often personal. And toward the end—as the railroads encroached and freights grew scarcer and scarcer—how they had fought one another! Not openly and aboveboard. Not according to rules, for they had known no rules, no ethics. Anything was permissible.

But steamboating on the Nahkancee seemed eventually to play out. One by one the boats were forced to give up. There were still craft running the Big River, but no berths were to be had on these. The four old men—who had been masters—were retired to life ashore in The City. Here—almost literally—they began to rot.

Thirty years their feud had lasted, and its thirtieth year found it more bitter than it had been in its first or its fifth or its fifteenth year. No forgiving; apparently, there would always be no forgiving. For in thirty years a man can do and say so many things that are beyond forgiving. And these old men

remembered—their minds were heavy with memories.

Yet so potent is the magic which a river weaves about those who have become her half brothers that, at the end of eight years, these four found it impossible longer to abide life ashore. They laid aside their feud—superficially—and they pooled the savings they had accumulated during forty years and bought and repaired the *Phil Maynard*. Once she had been pride of two rivers. More recently, she had been waiting for the junkman. Now, for the first time in nearly a decade, a steamboat, in charge of these men, was going to navigate the Nahkanee.

AS SHE made ready to back from the wharf at the foot of Davon Street in The City, a jet of white spurted from the *Maynard's* whistle. The accompanying sound was, at first, uncertain, asthmatic. But as soon as good live steam had blown the last bit of sediment from the valve, her voice returned—the deep-throated note which in other years had marked her journeying on the Nahkanee.

In looks, the *Maynard* belied her years and her infirmities. Painters had wrought a miracle. The white purity of her hull and upper works would have shamed a virgin snowbank. Her twin funnels, glistening black, and red-banded near the tops, would have given the lie to any man who might have said that three weeks ago they were nearly eaten through with rust. Her decks, their scars almost hidden beneath several thick coats of brown, seemed to have just been laid. The outside doors had been varnished to imitate curly walnut. Exposed brasswork had been polished and polished again to a sheen that hurt the eyes.

Altogether, she made a stately and beautiful and convincing picture. She appeared to be just what she had been in a long-gone day—queen of all the craft on two rivers.

But she groaned audibly, when, having backed out and turned upstream, her engine thrust her rounded nose against the current of the Big River.

Cap'n Slade, in command, strode the upper forward deck. At the feel of a live steamboat throbbing again beneath his feet, he felt, too, the years drop from him. For one wild moment, he almost forgot the dignity expected of a master in a sudden urge to do something youthful—like attempting a buck-and-wing dance.

Cap'n O'Quinn, despite his seventy years, was bustling about, exceptionally happy in his choice of phraseology—even for a steamboat mate—as he berated the roustabouts. Not that they needed berating, especially. But they were roustabouts, and Cap'n O'Quinn had started steamboating again. In the pilot house, little Cap'n Dannie Byrd hugged the wheel close to him and scanned the river with an affectionate eye.

Down in the passenger saloon—which was also the office—Cap'n Durant, as clerk, stood before his desk, whistling softly as he sorted a thick sheaf of bills of lading.

A passenger, lounging near by, who knew him intimately, smiled and inquired: "What's that tune, cap'n?"

"That tune?" Cap'n Durant's Gallic eyebrows arched in surprise. "That is 'Happy days are here again.' You do not recognize it?"

The passenger did not. No one could have recognized it. But Cap'n Durant, unperturbed, turned again to his desk and resumed his happy—and tuneless—whistling.

BEFORE she came to where she would enter the Nahkanee, the *Maynard* had to labor ten miles up the Big River from The City. As she neared the familiar mouth, Cap'n Byrd, high in the pilot house, felt his heart leap at a thing that he witnessed.

"By George!" he said softly. "She's coming to meet us!"

Then for a few minutes, no man who did not possess the heart of a steamboatman could have seen and heard the things that Cap'n Dannie Byrd heard and saw.

The Nahkanee was rushing out to mid-channel of the Big River in her eagerness to welcome the boat that had been playing truant so long. Even before her waters touched the *Maynard*, she called out:

*Where have you been all these years, you big scamp—you and your masters?*

Least there remain a doubt as to just what she meant, she rushed straight up and slapped the boat's blunt nose playfully. And the *Maynard*—in the same spirit—lunged at her. Then the Nahkanee split into a thousand little whirlpools that spun and capered around and around about the boat, laughing and dancing.

After a moment, she spoke again:

*You come right here to me—you and your masters!*

With that, she rushed out and drew the *Maynard* to her and gathered all about her close, hugging her tight.

Cap'n Byrd sounded a long-drawn-out blast from the whistle in answer to the greeting.

Cap'n Slade, on the forward deck, cocked an ear at that note. He knew that it had sounded more than a greeting to the Nahkanee. He knew that the *Maynard*—having a spirit like that of her masters—was booming defiance at a robber, a robber that clanked over a man-laid runway and hiccuped foul-smelling coal smoke, instead of breathing on the air the incense of burning, resinous pine wood; a thief that stole from river craft a heritage that had always been theirs.

"But we'll show 'em!" he whispered exultantly. "They've forgotten; man built the railroads, but the Almighty created rivers!"

And then—for he possessed the same gift of understanding as did Cap'n Dannie Byrd—Cap'n Slade heard from somewhere within the *Maynard* a wheezing "A-men!"

EVERYWHERE there burst the beauty of young spring. Freshly green willows along the Nahkanee's banks dipped in greeting until the tips of their slender boughs dragged in the water as the *Maynard* coughed past. Tops of tall cypresses caught the breeze and soughed a welcome. A kingfisher, motionless on a tree limb, watched this visitor suspiciously for a moment, but his beady eyes lighted presently with approval.

Much later in the day—at dusk—even the raucous *Who-who-who ar-r-re you?* of hoot owls in the swamps lost some of its harshness and became less a challenge to an interloper than a hail of gruff encouragement to a steamboat that was trying to stage a come-back.

The spirit of friendliness, though, that ruled along the Nahkanee drew the owners of the *Maynard* no closer to the intimacy of comrades. A feud of thirty years' standing cannot be forgotten easily—if forgotten at all.

But life for them was beginning to take on again a delicious indolence, a soothing indifference to the passage of time—the chief charm of steamboating. No hurry—ever. The *Maynard*, riding a lazy river, nosed the bank gently at landings. She seemed to feel that a river bank had sensibilities which should be respected. Maybe, since she knew a thing or two, she was shrewdly favoring her none-too-stanch old hull. Loading cordwood. An hour—two hours. And her owners swapping talk with Negro tenant farmers whom they recognized after their eight years' absence:

"Hello, Enoch! Still 'round here?"

"Still heah, cap'n. Lawdee, suh, hit's jus' lak ole times to git you all back!"

"We're mighty glad to get back"

"Yassuh! Us been sayin' a rivuh mought as well not be a rivuh as to be widout a steamboat."

"Right you are, Enoch! The good Lord made rivers to bear boats on their bosoms!"

Farther up the river, welcomes were general. Negro women stopped their hoeing in riverside fields, removed their sunbonnets and waved them about their heads in greeting. Mules, hitched to plows, stopped, flattened their ears backward, straightened their necks forward, and *hee-hawed* long and apparently heartfelt salutations.

The countryside flocked to landings. Hospitality was unstinted. In actuality, it flowed—from bottle, jug, and keg. Everybody was happy. *Hooray!* So good to see a steamboat again! And the old *Maynard*—at that! Dog-gone!

In the exuberance of the moment, planters promised rashly: "Certainly, cap'n, you all can haul my cotton this fall!" Crossroads storekeepers, melowered by their own liquid good cheer, gave reckless assurances: "Sure, cap'n, I'll notify the wholesalers to ship all my stuff by the *Maynard*!"

HEADED back down the river from Cosmopolis, upper terminus of her run, the *Maynard* picked up miscellaneous cargo and white-oak staves. These last, rived by hand in the swamps for export, promised to provide—until cotton-shipment time should come—the boat's chief source of revenue from freights for The City.

The *Maynard*, though, was strangely sluggish, now. She did not make the speed that even a boat of her antiquated type should have made, with the current favoring her. Cap'n Slade noticed, too, that she handled awkwardly. She did not want to keep to mid-stream; she wallowed about and dillydallied, and she seemed to be always grunting: *Oh, what's the big hurry?* As she neared

the place where she must go again into the Big River, Cap'n Slade would have sworn that she backed grudgingly away from landings after she had loaded freight.

But after a while he understood. "I'll be dag-goned!" he chuckled. "She knows that she'll soon be out of the Nahkanee, and she just naturally hates to leave! She's a Nahkanee boat!"

FREIGHT and passenger traffic for upriver points from The City on the *Maynard*'s next trip were somewhat disappointing. But the Nahkanee's greeting was as warm as before. Cap'n Byrd, who was in command, leaning over the rail, listening for something of the kind, heard the river saying:

*It sure is good to have you back, Big Boat—you and your masters! All about the Maynard, the Nahkanee's soft, pleased laughter gurgled. We old-timers have fun together, don't we?*

On their downstream trip, Cap'n Byrd strolled ashore at the landing where they were loading staves. The prospect spread out was distinctly pleasing. Great piles of the hand-rived bolts were beside the river bank and were being hustled aboard by the roustabouts.

Cap'n Byrd saw the man who was in charge of the stove-getters and introduced himself. "You folks seem to be doing pretty well," he offered smilingly.

"Not so good," was the rather disappointing answer.

"But you're shipping lots of staves!"

"Just cleaning up old stuff. Fact is, I'm expecting orders almost any day to lay my men off."

"As bad as that?" Cap'n Byrd's smile died. "We—we had been hoping to do a nice business with you."

"W-well—we're hoping, too. But the big boss writes me that business is rotten."

During the remainder of spring, though, the man had crews in the

swamp; not in as large numbers as at first, but he was getting out enough staves to keep alive the hopes of the *Maynard's* owners.

In the early summer, shipments from merchants in The City for up the river began to dwindle noticeably. The margin between revenues and operating expenses of the four partners narrowed. They visited among the merchants, inquiring the reason for the falling off in patronage. The explanation given them was invariably the same:

"Our customers are realizing, at last, that it costs more to haul freight over mucky swamp roads from river landings than over paved highways, from railroad stations."

Yet, week in and week out, the *Maynard* thrust her blunt nose against the Big River, to come presently to the Nahkanee, where the current, less swift than in the main stream, made her laboring less strenuous.

By midsummer the partners were just about breaking even.

But they were heartened by the sight of cotton-whitening lowlands along the river in late August. They looked forward to autumn and painted mental pictures: Tang of slightly cooler weather. The *Maynard*, hugging the bank at a landing—that steamboat knew what was expected of her! Pickaninnies, each clad in a single garment, grouped high on a bluff, sucking their thumbs, looking on, wide-eyed. Slipshod feet, slapping shoreward—and return—along a gangplank. Voices, moaning low, at first, then a chorus swelling upward, hanging a moment on a high note, fading once more. Bared, kinky heads bobbing, brown faces sweating, overall-clad bodies swaying to the rhythm.

And whoever might be mate yelling: "Roll them bales—roll 'em!"

Then—

A steamboat, piled so high with cotton fore and aft that her boiler deck was almost awash, lunging downstream.

THE FIRST disillusionment of the partners came as a distinct shock. On an upriver trip, the *Maynard* stopped to unload a few parcels at the landing where she had been accustomed to take on staves. There was a stark nakedness to the place. The usual high piles of rived bolts were missing. No teams and wagons were anywhere about. No workmen were there. The place was deserted, save for an old Negro who was in charge of the ramshackle little warehouse.

Cap'n O'Quinn came forward on the boiler deck and hailed the old man almost before the *Maynard* stopped, sensing even as he put his question what the answer would be.

"What's wrong?" he called out.

"Cap'n, suh," the man explained briefly, "de stave-gittuhs is all done th'ough. Eben de boss man has lef' out."

But the *Maynard's* owners had the hearts of steamboatmen. Grimly they backed their boat into the Nahkanee and headed upstream for Cosmopolis.

ONE EVENING in The City, after they had unloaded an unusually small cargo from upriver points, the partners met in the saloon of the steamer. Their faces were serious.

Cap'n Byrd, as clerk, made an announcement: "I regret to state, gentlemen, that our last trip fails to show a profit. In fact, there's a small loss."

There followed a moment of dead silence. Since, even in time of stress, not one of them could lean spiritually on either of the others, each man's gaze rested on the floor at his feet. But they were of the breed whose hearts, after many years, turn to paddle wheels that pump river water, instead of blood, through their arteries.

Cap'n Slade, forgetting his bluster, broke the silence hesitantly: "I—I'd like to say, gentlemen, that I have a little

funds that I'm not needing especially, right now."

"So have I," Cap'n Durant chimed in promptly.

"Me, too," Cap'n O'Quinn was quick to say.

"Then we'll chip in," Cap'n Byrd announced relievedly, "and each pay his pro rata of the deficit."

But paying deficits came quickly to be a matter that had to be attended to regularly. They began slashing expenses—saving nickels wherever this was possible. They cut the personnel of the *Maynard's* loading crew until there was left only a handful of old, half-worn-out roustabouts who were unable longer to work on the Big River. They told themselves they would get a real crew when cotton shipping began. They bargained shrewdly yet—shamed that they had been brought to such a pass—with men who got out cordwood for the *Maynard*. They even economized on their table fare. They offered tariffs so ridiculously low that they almost got into trouble with the State rate-making body. Nothing availed.

The severest blow fell early in September. On one of their stops at the main way landing between The City and Cosmopolis, the landing warehouse keeper met the *Maynard* with a long face.

Cap'n O'Quinn, whose spirit was, as yet, undaunted, was standing on the boiler deck. He went ashore, hailing jovially: "What's the trouble? Missed your morning's toddy?"

The warehouseman wagged his head dolorously from side to side. "It's no joking matter, cap'n," he said. "There's not going to be any cotton—none to speak of."

Cap'n O'Quinn sobered. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

At the mention of cotton, Cap'n Byrd and Cap'n Durant and Cap'n Slade had come hurrying up.

"That new motor freight line," the

man explained, "is going to send trucks right to the gin doors, load cotton and haul it to town without the owners even having to touch it."

"But," Cap'n Byrd broke in, "the planters promised us——"

"Sure they promised!" the warehouseman interrupted. "And they meant it—then. But they couldn't see the price of cotton was going to hit bottom. And with the motor line making everything cheaper for 'em, you can't blame the planters, can you?"

Five minutes further conversation served only to make the outlook more gloomy. A recently charted highway—the ultimate in convenience for the motor freight trucks—paralleled the river for miles. The owners of the *Maynard* knew that they would hear a repetition of the warehouseman's story all the way to Cosmopolis.

But they set their faces, clamped their jaws grimly, and went back on board their boat.

YET THAT ancient feud still reared itself between them. Not that they ever forgot themselves—in remembering old animosities—and stepped beyond cold propriety. Never that! No digging up old quarrels. Never a thing like that! They merely maintained their distantly polite manner of intercourse with one another.

Each might have felt at times something that urged him to a closer intimacy with the others. But if he experienced such a feeling, memory was always present to rise up and bite deeply, checking whatever impulse he may have had toward making overtures of friendliness. So many things can happen in thirty years that a man cannot forgive, it seemed beyond possibility that they could ever be joined in a common bond.

There was still left them the *Maynard*, the Nahkanee—and their steamboatmen's hearts. The *Maynard* did all she

could to help in an impossible situation. The freshness had worn from her paint, and her snub bow, from continual scraping against the river bank at landings, had taken on a dingy red-clay-colored tinge. Rust streaks were beginning to show through the paint on her funnels. Her brasswork had lost its sheen. But her spirit was unconquered. She continued to cough up and down the river, wheezing, grunting, and groaning, almost thumping her heart out, doing everything that was asked of her—and more.

The Nahkanee, of course, could do little else than show her spirit of ancient comradeship. Once, as the boat, bound downstream, slid out into the Big River—her paddle wheel dipping in for a final helping of the Nahkanee's water, which she dropped back thoughtfully after it had been used—the Nahkanee followed her out farther than she had ever done. She rushed, hurrying, away out after the *Maynard*. Cap'n Durant was standing on the after deck, his eyes caressing the fringe of willows at the river's mouth which they were leaving. And, as the Nahkanee continued to follow them, he heard her coaxing:

*Why can't you stay here with me, Big Boat—you and your masters?*

He leaned low over the rail to answer for the *Maynard*.

"We are compelled to get some freight, Old River," he confided softly. "It is not possible to operate a steamboat without freight, you know."

*But, you're coming back?* Cap'n Durant heard the question as distinctly as he had heard his own voice a moment earlier. *We old-timers must stick together!*

FOR WEEKS there had been no rains, and streams were dropping out rapidly, but there was still sufficient water in the Nahkanee for the shallow-draft *Maynard*. On a day in late September, she was plowing upstream.

Cap'n Dannie Byrd, frailest of the four men who owned her, was in command. Standing on the lower deck, he glanced at the scattered array of packages that made up the cargo—and turned his head away quickly.

"Hardly enough to pay her cordwood bill!" he whispered. "I could lug it all ashore, myself, at one landing—and not be breathing hard when I finished."

One thing, though, puzzled him—the *Maynard*. She was acting like a brand-new boat. The way she forged through the water in response to the *dip—dip—dipping* of her stern-wheel paddles was almost beyond belief. Cap'n Dannie estimated that she was making—and upstream, at that!—a good mile and a half an hour faster than he had ever known her to travel. It was astounding.

The day was perfect. There was more than seasonal warmth in the air. The sky was a flawless blue. Cypressess along the river bank soughed more softly than usual. And the Nahkanee was smiling; not laughing, smiling. A smile of utter contentment that spread up and down the length of her and across the breadth of her. There was not a breath of wind to stir the slightest ripple on her surface.

But there was one ripple—a meaningful ripple—in mid-stream four miles below Given's Bluff. It was above a dead-head a—pine log which had dropped out of a raft. The butt end of the log, leaden-heavy with pitch, had sunk to the bottom of the stream and had become embedded. The small end, sticking upward at an acute angle to the bed of the river, but covered with a foot of water, pointed downstream.

The *Maynard* struck it squarely, head-on, at full speed.

Cap'n Jerry Slade was the pilot. By the time he had rushed downstairs, the three other old men had gathered in the saloon.

Cap'n Jerry spoke first, and in his face and in his manner there was some-

thing that was neither fear nor even anxiety for his personal fate.

"I saw it plainly, gentlemen," he said in an awed voice, "and tried to miss it. But she refused absolutely to answer the rudder. She drove straight onto that deadhead."

Cap'n Matt O'Quinn, who was mate, spoke up. "The crew can get ashore all right, Cap'n Byrd," he announced calmly.

It was all quite simple; no heroics. Properly, this was no place for such a thing. No heaving Atlantic, no modern liner, no blue-white iceberg. No commander in gold braid high on a bridge, who, keeping the tradition of the sea, would go down with his ship.

This was only the Nahkanee River—as placid as a small pond; a stream which, measured by any modern standard, should have been ashamed of itself for even wanting to bear traffic.

And a steamboat which, by all comparisons, was behind the mode, even for a craft of her type.

And four men with the hearts of steamboatmen.

Cap'n Dannie Byrd faced his three partners. His brown flannel shirt was open at the throat and his cap sat slightly awry on his mop of white hair. But before he spoke to them, he buttoned his shirt and adjusted his cap squarely on his head.

"She'll be going down in a few minutes, gentlemen," he said quietly. "And then——"

The patter of bare feet on the stairway interrupted him.

Black Juba, the cook, appeared in the doorway. His face was ashen; he was quaking—but he was loyal. "Hurry, cap'n—you-all, suh!" he panted. "I done got you a boat ready!"

Cap'n Dannie looked at the three men whose partner he was. And his eyes asked a question as plainly as though his lips had spoken the words.

Their eyes answered it.

He turned to the cook. "Thank you, Juba," he said gently. "You can use the boat, yourself."

"Good Lawd, Cap'n Dannie—'scuse me, suh—but whut you-all gwine do?"

"We have some business—here."

"But, cap'n—please, suh!" Juba pleaded in desperation. "She gwine down! You ain't got no time——"

"Plenty of time, Juba."

NAHKANEE is smiling; not laughing, smiling. A smile of dreamy contentment. She remembers that there are men to whom her speech is their own. And her moods. Particularly when she is lonely. They forgive a thing that her loneliness has caused her to do. It is of these men that a saying was coined: After many years a steamboatman's heart turns to a paddle wheel that pumps river water, instead of blood, through his arteries. Such men, the Fates have especially favored. They have become the river's half brothers.

Nahkanee is smiling.



# The Dragon of Iskander

*Illustrated by  
Tom Lovell*

*An echo of the conquest of Alexander*

by Nat Schachner

**I**T WAS LONG past midnight. The expedition lay encamped in a gigantic hollow of moving sand. A blood-red moon drooped over the mountains. The Kazak guards drowsed.

Ambar Khan grunted, muttered fearfully to himself. He did not like the Gobi. It was a place bewitched. He paced steadily back and forth, his rifle thudding softly before him.

To the west stretched the fabulous T'ien Shan, the Heavenly Mountains, the Snow Mountains, the Ten-Thousand li East-by-South Mountains, grim ramparts of Chinese Turkestan. The expiring moon impaled itself on a splintered peak. Something moved across its face swiftly.

Ambar Khan groaned, called on Allah, and stared again. The moon plunged into darkness, but the thing glowed by its own light. Down from the mountains it swooped, breathing fire and flame. Soft, roaring sounds sped before the monster. Ambar Khan caught a glimpse of lashing tail, gigantic claws, and elongated neck, and shrieked. He knew now what it was. A rifle shot hushed the murmurings of the Gobi. The next instant Ambar Khan groveled in the sand, blinded with terror.

Owen Crawford sprang out of the

deep sleep of exhaustion, every sense alert. The camp was in an uproar. Camels grunted and squealed and kicked at their hobblings, dogs yelped in short, excited barks; the Chinese camel drivers and pack porters wailed in unison.

"Bandits!" thought Crawford, and flung himself out of the tent, gun in hand.

Behind him padded his personal servant, Aaron, man of Tientsin, fat and over forty. His feet were bare, his breathing asthmatic, his walk a waddle, but his heart was valiant, and the gun in his pudgy fingers did not waver.

Outside, the blackness of the night was hideous with noise and movement. The singsong wail of the Chinese clamored high above the deeper gutturals of the Kazaks. Crawford raised his voice in a shout, to bring swift order, to organize against the invisible enemy.

A tall figure loomed to one side. "This is no attack," said Andros Thera-  
menes, Greek by race, assistant archaeologist.

Another figure rose to the left.

"Nay, it is worse," Kang Chou, Chinese governor of Turkestan, agreed.

"Then what——" Crawford began, and gasped into silence. He, too, had seen it!



*"Prostrate yourself, stranger!" said that majestic figure on the throne.  
"For I am divine!"*

The monster was dropping fast. A bullet would have lagged behind. Down it came upon the camp with a terrifying *swoosh*. Crawford staggered back and swore involuntarily; his gun hung loose from nerveless fingers. It was hideous, impossible, a myth out of the fabulous past!

Down, down it came, a thing of sinuous, scaly body, with a glittering metallic tail that lashed the air into little whirlwinds. The huge reptilian head glared balefully out of two, round, unwinking orbs; great claws, affixed to short, extended legs, were like steel hooks ready to rend and slash. Fire vomited forth from red-pitted nostrils, from yawning bloody mouth, from leathern wings and tail. The frightful din of its passage muted the clamor of the camp.

Then it struck.

The great claws curved around the canvas of the tent Crawford had just quitted, swept it under the hideous bosom, and the beast was up again, a meteoric monster of fire, homing for the Heavenly Mountains.

CRAWFORD shot once, but the bullet was futile. Already the winged anachronism was a rapidly diminishing swath in the blackness, hurtling over the gloom-shrouded peaks. In seconds it was gone, quenched, as though it had never been.

The camel drivers cried out together in one loud voice, "The Holy Dragon," and rose tremblingly to care for the plunging, snorting animals.

"Lights!" called Crawford.

An electric torch was thrust into his hand. He flicked it into an oval of white radiance. Aaron, his servant, showed ghastly white, muttering inaudible prayers to his ancestors; Theramenes, tall and reddish-haired like the northern Greeks, betrayed no change in his ordinarily reserved and calm de-

meanor. Only his eyes glittered strangely.

"It was your tent the Dragon struck at," he said slowly. "Had you not fortunately run out——" He stopped and shrugged his shoulders suggestively.

"There would have been a new leader to this expedition," Crawford said grimly. He flashed the torch suddenly full on the Chinese governor. "Kang Chou, what do you know about this?"

The habitual mask of centuries overlaid the Oriental features, in which there was no trace of fright. "You have heard the camel drivers," he remarked courteously. "It was the Holy Dragon, the guardian spirit of the T'ien Shan. Beyond the memory of our ancestors has it dwelt in the inaccessible mountains; so runs the childish patter of the people. It swoops from its nest on occasion; its prey always a vigorous, comely woman, a female child, a young camel, a sheep. The natives worship it."

Crawford stared. "Never by chance a man or man child?"

"Never."

The American archaeologist looked at the bland governor thoughtfully. It was passing strange; this untoward interest of the Chinese in his excavations; the unheralded visit of the governor to his camp; the weird visitation of the Dragon. What was the connection; what did the fiery monster portend? The blow, as Theramenes had pointed out, had manifestly been struck at him.

"Andros," he ordered, "keep an eye on the tents. I want to see what damage's been done."

His assistant said quietly: "I shall watch in the proper places." That meant he had understood. The Chinese governor and his retinue were to bear close supervision.

Crawford toured the encampment quickly, efficiently. Already lanterns were bobbing back and forth, throwing flickering yellow blobs of light on the

confusion. The damage, aside from the complete loss of his tent, was not great. Two camels had broken their hobbles and were gone to the desert. A man had fallen flat over a peg and broken a leg. But Ambar Khan, who had first seen the Dragon and raised the alarm, was dead. His arms were outstretched, his face hidden in the sand. Crawford turned him over and swore fiercely. The man's throat was slit neatly from ear to ear. The blood was not yet congealed. He had been murdered.

OWEN CRAWFORD strode back and forth with quick, nervous strides in the narrow confines of Theramenes' tent. His lean, weathered jaw was out-thrust, his gray eyes snapped with belligerent fires past a bold aquiline nose. He talked rapidly to the Greek archaeologist, while Aaron, placid once more, brewed fragrant tea over an alcohol lamp.

"The expedition must go on," Crawford declared. "Some one, something, is trying to stop us. Poor Ambar Khan paid the penalty for warning us in time."

Theramenes shrugged. "Why?" he asked in his perfect, yet slightly slurred, English. "You have permission from the Canton authorities for your excavations. We've already found a buried city on the edge of the desert, showing Hellenistic influences, but the Chinese never bother about relics alien to themselves."

Crawford spun around. "Exactly! That's what makes Kang Chou's interest the more strange. There's been a leak. He knows my real plans."

There was a slight sneer to the Greek. "Still harping on that theme? Alexander never marched this far north. He never saw the Heavenly Mountains."

"So say the history books. But I've traced his passage step by step. Somewhere in the T'ien Shan I'll find the

evidence." Crawford paused, looked a moment curiously at his assistant. "You are a Macedonian yourself, aren't you?"

Theramenes' laugh was a bit forced. "Why, yes. Why do you ask?"

"No particular reason," Crawford answered.

He had never quite warmed up to the Greek. All his plans had been for a solo exploration, but wires had been pulled at the last minute, and Theramenes was attached to the expedition. It had been merely a polite request, of course, but the request of the American Museum had all the force of a command. They footed the bills. Theramenes knew his work thoroughly, Crawford was compelled to admit. His intuitive flashes concerning the early Greek civilization in Central Asia were sometimes little short of marvelous. But Crawford felt something was held back; some queer, outlandish strain in the man not attributable alone to difference in race.

The Greek seemed anxious to change the subject. "What do you make of that Dragon?" he asked.

Crawford's face went sober. "I don't know," he admitted. "We saw it, all of us. It took my tent; that couldn't have been dreamed. A Dragon in the twentieth century! It sounds impossible."

"It isn't." There was a deadly seriousness in the Greek's voice that the American had never noted before. "There have been legends for centuries about that Dragon, about far more horrible things in the T'ien Shan. We've seen the one; let us credit the others. Let us turn back before it is too late. Once in the Heavenly Mountains, we shall never return."

"You are at liberty to resign from the expedition," Crawford said coldly. "I intend going on."

His assistant's eyes flashed dangerously. They were not the eyes of a

coward. "Very well, then. I do not intend to resign. You are the leader, and I obey."

Crawford said: "We start in an hour."

## II.

THE EVENING shadows were lengthening as the little party toiled over Dead Mongol Pass. The snow lay many feet deep on the treacherous road. On the other side was Chinese Turkestan, but Crawford was looking for a certain narrow gorge that led to the north, deeper into the Heavenly Mountains. No one had ever ventured far in that direction; Chinese and Kazaks both had frightful tales of what lay beyond. The Dragon had disappeared to the north.

The expedition was encamped at the foot of Dead Mongol Pass, waiting for their return. With Crawford on this last exploration were Theramenes and Aaron; then another, an unwelcomed, unbidden member, Kang Chou, governor of Turkestan, had blandly announced his intention of proceeding with them. Crawford fumed and stormed, and gave in. The governor had powers; if he wished, he could tear up the Canton documents. He came alone; threats of death could not force his soldiers to accompany him into the dreaded mountains.

Up to the very top of the bleak, wind-swept pass they toiled, with two weeks' provisions on their backs, and rifles on their shoulders. There they found the little gorge they had been told of. It was but a rift in the rock, barely six feet wide, and angling to the north.

Crawford plunged in without hesitation. The path zigzagged, but always to the north, and always upward. Night found them still in its narrow confines, its walls a thousand feet high. Shivering with cold, they managed to make a fire of gnarled roots and rotted boughs that the storms had swept over the

cliffs, and went to sleep. All night long the wind howled and bit with northern fury; and ghosts gibbered and shrieked.

In the morning they started again. Theramenes was even more silent than his wont, but his stride was tireless and his swing that of a born mountaineer. Aaron struggled and puffed, and the fat loosened on him great beads of sweat. Kang Chou walked easily, which was strange for a pampered Chinese lord, and the bland smile never left his face. All that day they went on and on, the gorge never widening, never narrowing, the high walls towering in shivering gloom.

Then, as the slanting rays across the narrow sky above proved evening almost at hand, the gorge suddenly tightened. Five feet, four, three, barely room for a rotund body like Aaron's to squeeze through; then closure and jagged granite to interminable heights. Pitchy blackness slowly infolded them; a mocking star beamed faintly in the inverted depths above.

Theramenes broke the stunned silence. They could not see his face, but to Crawford's supersensitive ears there was faint mockery, triumph, in the slurred accents.

"We have reached the end of a mad venture. The gorge has no outlet. Let us turn back."

"Yes, master, now, at once!" cried Aaron. "The demons will be coming out soon."

Kang Chou's voice floated suavely. Was there regret in it? "I had thought—I was mistaken. It must be another road. We must start again—from Dead Mongol Pass."

Crawford bit his lips at the collapse of his plans, looked up at the black, forbidding mass. Had the dying Kazak lied, or wandered in delirium?

"We will camp here," he assented dully, "and go back in the morning."

"We would but waste time," said Kang Chou. "The road is safe, and it

is early. We can travel several li before making camp."

"No," said Crawford positively. "We stop here."

He tripped the trigger of the flash. As the white light sprang forth, something thrust at him violently. The torch clattered stonily to the ground, and a hard, unyielding substance smashed against the side of his head.

Crawford dropped, stunned from the blow. There was a dull roaring in his ears, and dim echoes of shuffling feet and startled cries. His hand flung out to protect himself, and came in contact with the smooth, round cylinder of the flash. His fingers closed convulsively, seeking the trigger.

The confusion increased, the cries redoubled. Some one caught at his hand, tried to bend it back. Just at that moment the trigger clicked, and the opposite rock glowed into being. The invisible hand abruptly let go.

Aaron caught at the flash, turned it anxiously on his master.

"You all right? A rock he almost kill you."

Crawford's gaze slid past the frightened fatness of his servant, saw both Kang and Theramenes bending over him with equal anxiety on their countenances.

"A close shave!" said the Greek. "Lucky it was a glancing blow. The side of your head is bruised. A bit higher, and the rock would have hit square."

Kang Chou said: "Praise to your ancestors! A dislodged stone is a terrible thing in the mountains."

Crawford rose unsteadily to his feet. He was a bit dizzy. He felt his head. There was a lump on his right temple; it was sore to the touch, but there was no blood.

"I'm all right," he said. It was no rock that had grappled with him for the torch. What was behind all this? Who was ready to commit murder to

prevent him from continuing his search? Kang Chou? Theramenes? Aaron? Some one else, who had preceded him, hidden in the clefts in waiting?

He took the flash from his servant, swung its wide beam carefully over the ground. There was dead silence behind him. Nothing showed, only the rubble-strewn floor of the gorge, the gigantic walls hemming him in on three sides. Not a break in the rough, hewn surfaces, not a recess in which an assailant could hide.

THE SILENCE tensed. Some instinct made Crawford swing the light upward. The white radiance traveled up the blockading cliff, jerked to a sudden halt. The American sucked in his breath sharply. Some ten feet up the smooth surface, a black hole yawned.

"Stand against the rock, you fat crow," he said to Aaron.

The servant's face was tragic, but he obeyed. The American vaulted lightly to his shoulders, swayed a moment, and caught at the lip of the recess. Theramenes held the light steady.

Crawford pulled himself up and disappeared. They waited anxiously below. In some seconds his head and shoulders appeared.

"It's a cave, all right!" he shouted down. "How far back it goes, I don't know. The torch will show that. Come on, you fellows; I'll give you a hand."

Crawford played the flash around. They were in a cavern; the ceiling some dozen feet up, the width not over twenty, but the long stream of the light did not show any termination to the corridor.

"We will explore it at dawn," said Theramenes. His voice was excited; his usual calm was gone.

"We'll explore now," Crawford told him. "Daylight won't make any difference in here."

"But——"

"Come on," said his chief.

And the four of them moved cautiously forward, rifles ready for instant action. The subterranean corridor wound on interminably, the questing beam disclosing only dripping, icy walls.

Then suddenly it opened up—a vast, vaulted chamber in which the puny gleam lost itself in the immensities. Crawford called a halt. Which way now?

Theramenes pointed to the left, Kang Chou was equally positive the road was to the right, so Crawford forged straight ahead. There was no talk; each had an uneasy feeling of presences in the great chamber, of mocking figures watching their slow progress. The thin light but accentuated the threatening darkness.

Aaron clutched at his master, uttering a little strangled cry. "Look, look ahead! The big devil himself!"

The party came to a quick halt. There, before them, was the end of the vast cavern—a perpendicular straight wall of rock. But the steady beam disclosed legs, gigantic Cyclopean legs, straddled at a wide angle, braced against the granite. Up went the light, and a huge torso sprang into view, massive, powerfully muscular. Up and up, until at the extreme limits of illumination, a face stared down at the startled explorers; calm, majestic in its majesty, a giant of ancient times, amused at the puny mortals who had dared penetrate his secrets.

Crawford's eager laugh broke the spell. "A statue!" he cried out, half in relief, half in excitement. Awe crept into his voice as he examined the great figure. "Theramenes, do you recognize it?"

The Greek shook his head. He was beyond words.

"Man, it's a replica of the Colossus of Rhodes. Exact in every detail, as the dimensions have come down to us. Now do you believe my theory? Alex-

ander and his troops were in this cavern, sculptured that form."

Theramenes examined the Colossus. "You are right," he said at last. "It is authentic. Greeks only could have done that."

"There is an opening between the legs," remarked Kang Chou, unimpressed by the looming giant. He had other matters in mind.

It was narrow; barely room for a man of Aaron's girth, and the stars shone dimly in the depths.

Some urge made Aaron dart forward. He thrust his head and shoulders through, drank in the cool night air. A whistle resounded in the cavern, a peculiar shrill piping that sent echoes reverberating.

"What is that?" Crawford asked, startled.

There was no answer. The next instant Aaron screamed; there was a muted roaring, and his body was jerked violently through the opening.

CRAWFORD rushed forward, too late. A quick lunge just missed the last disappearing foot, and he caught at the jutting side only in time to save himself from plunging into tremendous depths. Far away, blazing a cometary path through the black night, was the Holy Dragon. Long streamers of fire trailed rearward. Then it was swallowed up, gone. Of Aaron there was no trace.

"What happened?" Kang Chou's soft unemotional voice sounded unpleasantly in the American's ears.

Crawford did not answer. Instead his gaze shifted downward. His body stiffened, an ejaculation of surprise tore itself out of his throat. The two men crowded eagerly over his shoulder, but there was nothing to see. A white mist swirled and billowed in great leaps, filling the great depression in the twinkling of an eye—a sea of smoke that disclosed nothing.

Gone was Kang Chou's Chinese impassivity. He literally clawed at Crawford's shoulder. "What was it you saw?" he screamed. "Tell me—tell me what——"

Theramenes glowered in silence. His brow was black in the electric flash, his lips compressed.

Crawford turned. His face was like granite, grimly hard. He shook off the grasping hand. "I? I saw nothing, Kang Chou."

"You lie, foreign devil!" screeched the Chinese governor, dancing in rage. "You saw, and you think to keep the secret. Tell me, or——"

An automatic appeared in the yellow hand, slipped out of the ample sleeve. Theramenes moved with silent speed. A wrist of steel grasped the well-fleshed hand, wrenched. A howl of pain, and the gun made a clangor on the stony floor.

Crawford said, "Thanks!" and did not move. He had disdained to duck, or switch off the steady flash in his hand.

Kang Chou glared at the two archaeologists, holding his arm. Then the mask slipped back into place. He bowed low.

"I was hasty," he said suavely. "You have seen—nothing."

It was Theramenes who asked: "What happened to Aaron? Did he fall?"

Crawford grimaced with pain. The fat, asthmatic servant had been dear to him. "The Holy Dragon took him."

The Greek made a gesture of commiseration. "What now?"

"We wait until morning, and then start——"

Sleep was fitful in the black, damp cave. Watches were divided, but there was little slumber. Once Crawford thought he heard stealthy movement, but quick illumination of the torch showed nothing except Theramenes leaning on his rifle on guard, and Kang,

a little to one side, snoring uneasily. After that, there was no further noise.

AT THE FIRST hint of dawn, the trio crowded between the great sculptured legs. They looked out on a long, deep valley, hemmed in on all four sides by towering, precipitous mountains, tumbling range on range as far as the eye could see. The Heavenly Mountains, the Ten-Thousand li East-by-South Mountains, had guarded their secret well. And downward—it was the Greek who grunted. For the heavy clouds lay like a waveless ocean. The bottom of the valley was invisible.

Crawford wrinkled his brows. There was black bitterness in his heart. Aaron was dead, and must be avenged.

"We are going down," he said.

"How?" asked the governor. His eagerness was carefully restrained. No mention was made of his outburst of the night.

"There is a ledge," Crawford explained. "It slants down into the mist. Room enough for one man at a time, if we are careful."

"Shall we wait for the mist to clear?" asked Theramenes.

"No. I know these valley clouds. They last for days at a time."

Without further ado they prepared for the perilous descent. Packs were tightened, rifles lashed to keep both hands free. A mouthful of tinned food, a swig of warmish water from canteens, and they were ready.

Crawford led the way, lowering himself carefully from the orifice. It was less than five feet to the ledge. On one side was a perpendicular wall, lost in the immensities above; on the other a sheer precipice, lost in the immensities below. The slant of the path was steep, but negotiable.

The American spoke in low tones to his assistant. He did not want Kang to hear.

"This path is artificial. See how

smooth it is, how the stone is hewn."

"I've already noticed it," the Greek answered quietly.

Slowly, cautiously, they edged their way downward. Two thousand feet, and the white mist enveloped them. They were ghosts flitting noiselessly on insubstantial air. Even their voices sounded hollow. On and on—for hours it seemed—edging their way along, grasping the solid wall for safety, avoiding the unseen outer edge. A world of smoke, of writhing forms, of lost souls. No sign of an ending, no sign of a break in the clammy clouds. Down, and down, until to the bewildered explorers it seemed as if earth's center itself should have been reached.

Momentarily the mist parted, and closed as swiftly. Crawford swerved, but not fast enough. The cry of warning smothered in his throat. A clinging heavy cloth enveloped his head, sinewy arms held him immovable. He tried to struggle, but a cloying exudence from the bag stole into his brain, drowsed him into numbing calm. Behind him he heard a choked-off yell and then white silence.

### III.

CRAWFORD awoke with a dark, furry taste in his mouth and a drugged throbbing in his head. For a moment he had difficulty in focusing his thoughts—then he remembered. The second vision he had had at the bottom of the valley, the swift noiseless attack. He opened his eyes. He was in a huge chamber, hewn with infinite pains out of solid rock. Damp dripped slimily from incrustated walls, and a dim light filtered through from a tiny opening high on one side.

A dungeon, thought Crawford, and tried to rise. Something retarded his movements, made metallic sounds. He looked down. There were chains encircling his legs, holding him hobbled.

He examined them with interest. The metal was bronze, exquisitely worked, and chased in a running design that caused Crawford to forget his predicament in an involuntary whistle of astonishment.

As if his low-pursed whistle were a signal, a door opened silently at the farther end of the dungeon, and a girl entered. The archæologist forgot his chains in the greater astonishment. She was dressed in pure white; a single garment caught at the waist with a bronze pin and falling in graceful folds around small, sandaled feet.

In her hands she held a tray of bronze, with heaped food and a goblet of dark-red wine. But it was her face that held Crawford's attention. Those classic features, that straight, chiseled nose, the harmonious brow with the thick plaits of warm brown hair low on the forehead, the firm, full lips—how strangely familiar! Where had he seen this girl, or some one like her, before?

Then she smiled as she moved noiselessly forward, and the red lips parted slightly. That was it—he remembered now. A small, Greek figurine of white marble, representing Artemis the Huntress, that he had discovered near Antioch on a former expedition.

The girl placed the tray in front of him, straightened, beckoned to him to eat, and was gliding away. Crawford came out of his semi-stupor to call quickly:

"Wait a minute! I want to talk to you."

She turned at the sound of his voice. She shook her head with a puzzled air and said nothing.

He tried again; this time in Chinese. It worked no better. Mongol, Kazak—to no effect. The girl was frowning now and moved away again.

In desperation, afraid almost of its effect, knowing it to be impossible, Crawford spoke rapidly—in Greek. The girl paused irresolutely, turned half a

classic profile in his direction. Her brow was furrowed with perplexity. It was obvious that the sounds awoke some echo in her, and it was also obvious that they were unintelligible.

Crawford fell back exhausted. He was almost glad she had not understood. It would have been too bizarre, too fantastic for a hard-working, practical archæologist of the sober twentieth century.

She was going now, the door was open; when the blinding answer burst like a time bomb in his mind. He shouted to catch her swift attention, in unaccustomed syllables that resounded like the surge of the open ocean.

"Mistress, do not go. You must tell me where I am and who you are."

This time it was not modern Greek, the clipped, degraded speech of a fallen race, but the pure, ancient tongue, briny with Attic salt, the speech of Homer and Sophocles, of Sappho and Pindar.

The effect was startling. The girl whirled around, her eyes wide open, a little liquid cry in her throat. Her rounded bosom rose and fell with the vehemence of her feelings. She started to speak, and checked herself forcibly.

Crawford felt he was dreaming, that the effects of the drug had not yet worn off. The attempt at Greek had been sheer insanity, an intuitive, unreasoning flash. What was a girl, dressed in the ancient Greek mode, wearing the ancient Greek costume, and responding to the sound of the pure Greek tongue, doing in the T'ien Shan ramparts between Turkestan and the Black Gobi? What connection did she have with the Holy Dragon? Questions that clamored for immediate answer.

"You understand me?" he queried haltingly. Hardly ever had he used the Attic Greek for speech.

She nodded, gazing at him with a queer compound of fear and curiosity.

"Why, then, do you not answer?"

She shook her head in a decided negative.

"You are not permitted?"

To that she smiled again.

Crawford considered. "Your name at least," he implored.

The smile widened to a little tinkling laugh. "Aspasia!" she cried in a ripple of sound, and fled.

The door closed silently behind her, and the archæologist was alone with his chains and his food.

The meat was roast mutton, prepared with spices; the bread of a curious oaten compound; there was a handful of figs, and the wine was sweet and heady.

When he had eaten and drunk his fill, he threw himself back against the straw-covered, stone pallet to which he was chained. He must think this thing out. From the first appearance of the Holy Dragon, the glimpse of the white temple withheld from his companions, to the appearance of Aspasia, each adventure seemed more astounding, more incredible than the preceding one. His companions! Poor Aaron was dead, a victim to the terrible Dragon; Tharamenes and Kang Chou—what had happened to them? Dead, perhaps, even as he would be soon. Crawford had no illusions about his fate; whoever it was who inhabited this incredible valley would never let him return alive to inform the outside world of what he had seen.

He examined his bonds. They were strongly linked, and so skillfully wound; it was impossible to wriggle out. A curiously intricate lock held them fast to a bronze ring imbedded in the rock. Escape just now was out of the question.

HOURS PASSED. He must have slept, for the tramp of metal-shod feet thudded down upon him unawares. Two men stood over him; tall, large-limbed men, sheathed in bronze armor, helmeted, with spears taller than them-

selves resting with the butt ends on the ground. The fairer-haired of the two bent over and placed a key in the lock of the American's chains. A grinding noise, and the bands fell away.

The darker warrior upended his spear, pricked Crawford roughly with the point. The archaeologist staggered to his feet, irritation at the brutal treatment lost in the amazement of seeing two exact replicas of ancient *hoplites* in the flesh.

The fair man made pantomime for him to go forward; the dark and crueler one urged him on with prods of the spear. Through the open door they marched, into a long corridor, rock-hewn, and illuminated with a yellowish glow from no visible source. The metal sandals of the guards clattered as they walked. On either side Crawford could see solid, timbered doors, leading to other chambers, no doubt. But the guards urged him on.

At the end of the corridor was a door. The fair one opened it. They stepped out into sunshine and warmth; from the position of the sun over the mile-high mountain walls, it was not much past noon.

The archaeologist cast eager glances to right and left as he was pushed stumbling along. There was no mist in the valley now. At the farther end stood the temple he had first glimpsed from the mouth of the cave before the swirling mist hid it from view. It was a noble structure, in the Doric manner. White gleaming columns, unornamented, evenly spaced to uphold a flat marble roof. But there was more, far more.

The valley was approximately five miles long and three miles wide. A stream meandered down the middle, terminating in a lake at the opposite end from the temple. In between were fertile fields with waving corn, cattle peacefully grazing, and sheep. Hundreds of people were at work in the fields; men, women, and children. They straight-

ened up to stare curiously as Crawford was marched past.

All were dressed in the flowing graceful Greek garments; their features ranged from purest classic Greek to a mongrel mixture with slanted eyes and high, yellowish cheek bones. Here and there stood a woman, of unmixed Mongol blood, still with the terror of her capture in her fathomless eyes.

The archaeologist walked as in a dream; it was too much to digest at once. Their destination was obviously the temple. As they clanged over the marble approach, he managed to cast a hasty glance backward.

Two things caught his eye before the dark guard turned him roughly forward. One was the abode of his imprisonment. Purely Buddhist this. A rock settlement hewn out of living rock in terraces on the almost-perpendicular flank of the mountain. A *ming-ōi* or House of a Thousand Rooms. The other was a strange-looking monster floating quietly on the waters of the far-distant lake.

Then he found himself walking through a forest of columns, past a great, sculptured figure, bearded, majestic, that Crawford immediately recognized as Jupiter Ammon, and out into an open court, before a throne.

The guards raised their spears high. As one they cried in ringing Greek:

"Hail, Alexander! Hail, Ammon's son!"

Crawford stood stock-still. A man sat on the throne, a man out of the past. Alexander the Great himself, grown old, if the medaled representations did not lie. The same commanding brow, the same stern expression and chiseled nose, the flowing locks, snow-white by now, peeping out of a plume-surmounted helmet; burnished armor on the still brawny chest, a gem-tipped spear grasped in the right hand. On either side were ranged soldiers, in full panoply of war, Macedonians, the front

rank kneeling, spears extended, the second rank standing, longer spears bristling through. The ancient Macedonian phalanx!

The great temple rang with an antiphonic response: "Hail, Alexander! Hail, Ammon's son!"

The figure on the throne spoke. His voice was harsh, commanding:

"Know, stranger, I am Alexander, he who conquered Tyre and Sidon, Darius and Porus. The world was at my feet, and shall be so again. Prostrate yourself, stranger, for I am divine."

Silence crept through the marble columns, yet Crawford remained erect.

Slowly he spoke, shattering the quiet, fumbling for the Greek:

"I know now what took place. Alexander led his troops to Samarkand. Thence he turned south, but a phalanx, raiders or deserters, wandered northward and were lost. Hostile tribes hemmed them in. Day and night they fought, until they found refuge in this valley. With them were captive native women; thus they lived and flourished through the ages, cut off from all mankind. You," he pointed to the seated warrior, "are not Alexander. He died in Babylon. You are the son of an obscure captain of a phalanx."

For a moment there was a stunned lull. Not in two thousand years had Alexander been thus defied.

A voice carried unexpectedly from behind the throne. The voice was English, the tones amused, mocking: "You are right as usual, Owen Crawford. The man is an impostor, but his power is great. The doctrine is Pythagorean; one Alexander dies, his soul inhabits another."

Andros Theramenes, Greek archæologist, assistant to the expedition of the American Museum, stepped out into full view.

The storm had already burst—a low growl from a hundred throats that sprang into a roar of beating sound,

mingled with the clash of arms.

"Death! Death to the sacrilegious animal!"

The two guards held their spears pointed at the American's breast. Alexander had half risen from his seat, the corded veins knotting on his temples. The gem-tipped spear rose slowly. At the peak of the arc, the spears of the guards would plunge.

Crawford held himself balanced, ready to move with lightning speed. His plan of action was mapped. At the first drawing back of the spear held by the dark guard, he would lunge to one side, twist in a demi-volt, wrest it out of his hands, and be through the entrance of the temple in a flash. After that—

It was not to prove necessary, however. Theramenes leaned familiarly over to the outraged Alexander, said something in his ear. The old Macedonian sank back in his throne, lowered the fateful spear.

"Let the stranger wait," he said. "We shall decide his destiny later. Ho! Bring in the man with the yellow face."

Crawford relaxed, exhaling with some effort. Death had stared him in the face, and passed him by—for the present. There was drama here, drama that required careful reading.

#### IV.

A LITTLE ripple of movement took place at the rear of the throne, that widened as Kang Chou was thrust forward, under guard. His silken jacket was torn, but his impassive smile was bland as ever. He stood before Alexander, betraying no astonishment at the strangeness of the scene. Nor did he betray by a flicker his recognition of Theramenes.

"Speak, yellow face! It is the divine Alexander who commands you to speak. For what reason did you dare penetrate

our fastnesses? Fear you not the Holy Dragon?"

The Chinese governor moved not a muscle. He had not understood. Theramenes, himself with the slant eyes of an impure blood, hastened to translate.

Kang Chou heard him out and answered in his own tongue. Once more Theramenes translated.

"I had heard rumors of your august, all-powerful presence in the Tien Shan," said the governor. "Your Holy Dragon is as a god to our folk in the outer land. I come to pay honor and tribute to the divine Iskander, and to offer an alliance. I am Kang Chou, governor and war lord of Turkestan. I, too, have many soldiers and fear not the government of Canton." His glittering eyes roved over the sturdy Macedonian warriors. "Together we can go far."

Alexander thrust back his head and laughed, a full-throated laugh.

"Ha! That is good! This yellow man from the outlands proposes alliance to me, Alexander, son of Jupiter Ammon, conqueror of the world!" His eye flashed with fanatic fires. "Know, yellow face, Alexander spurns all alliances; once more the world will tremble at the rush of his armies. The Macedonian phalanx is ready; ready to conquer as of old."

To Crawford, almost forgotten in the new turn of events, it seemed as if a flicker of annoyance passed rapidly over Theramenes' countenance as he turned to translate.

Kang Chou listened attentively. This time his speech was vigorous, direct, without the customary Oriental circumlocutions.

"Tell the old fool," he said, "together we can conquer, if not the world, at least all China. It is the Holy Dragon that I need. My plans are made. Without me he is helpless. Tell him if I do not return to Turfan, my generals have instructions. Five planes

will bomb this valley out of existence."

There was no perceptible pause as Theramenes turned and began his translation. Crawford strained his ears suddenly; was he hearing aright? For he had overheard the Chinese, and this was the Greek. Theramenes was saying smoothly:

"The yellow man professes himself overwhelmed at your magnificence. He wishes to apologize for his presumption and begs only that a humble place be made for him in your retinue so that he may serve divinity itself."

"That is better!" Alexander nodded with a self-satisfied air. "Perhaps we shall permit his worship. Take him out and see that he is guarded well."

The pseudo-archæologist turned rapidly to Kang.

"Obey in all respects," he said in Chinese. "Myself shall come to talk with you later."

His face a mask, as though he had not heard, the governor was led out of the temple.

Theramenes swung around to Crawford. His eyes mocked the American, his voice hinted at a sneer. "This, divine Alexander, is the stranger I warned you of."

"Ah, yes, the man from beyond the western gates of Hercules. He who had surmised our secret."

"Yes. I learned of his plans in time. I managed to join his foolhardy expedition. Not for nothing have I made frequent journeys into the outland on the back of the Holy Dragon. He suspected nothing. Now he is delivered into your hands."

"You have done well, Theramenes. Alexander is pleased. Aspasia shall marry you; my command will be sufficient."

A crafty look crept into the assistant's face.

Crawford judged it time to intervene, before his mouth was stopped forever. He had been silently piecing the parts

of the puzzle together; now the picture was tolerably clear.

"Beware, Alexander!" he cried out suddenly in a loud voice. "This man Theramenes meditates evil——"

Fast as he was, the pseudo-archæologist was even faster. "Shut his sacrilegious mouth, guards!" he shouted in stentorian tones.

Brawny hands choked off further utterance. Crawford did not struggle.

"Take him to his dungeon," Theramenes ordered, "to await the commands of the divine Alexander."

The American was whirled roughly around, and dragged, rather than permitted to walk, through the valley. Back into the rock cell, locked into the chains, and the final bolting of the outer door, brought chilling realization that Theramenes would never now permit his freedom.

Crawford lay in the dim light on the moldy straw, cursing himself for a thick-witted, blundering fool. A few minutes of whole-hearted self-excoriation brought some measure of comfort, and he sat up. If only he could unlock or saw through the chains! He examined them once more, stared at the edge of the stone pallet. Given time and infinite patience the bronze might wear through by rubbing back and forth. But it meant days, and Crawford felt his fate would be decided within the day.

SUDDENLY his sharpened senses heard something; the soft, slow opening of the dungeon door. He crouched against the pallet, his chained legs dragging, determined to meet death fighting.

The door swung wider, and a figure glided in. Crawford barely choked off an exclamation. It was Aspasia, and her finger was to her lips in the ancient gesture for silence.

"Do not make a noise, if you wish to live," she said in low, urgent tones. "I trust you, stranger, more than I do Theramenes." Her features darkened.

TN-5

"My father commands me to marry him; I hate him; I fear his ways. The olive is not more bland, nor the serpent swifter to strike. I heard all in the audience chamber; I heard your accusation. Tell me more."

Crawford stared at the eager girl, her classic repose flushed into warm tints. Something stirred queerly within him; something more than the faint possibility of escape.

"There is not much more to tell," he stated quietly. "Theramenes deliberately mistranslated Kang Chou's threats when the proffered alliance was refused by your father; he whispered to the yellow man to wait for his talk. I am certain he meditates treachery."

Aspasia nodded vehemently. "I am sure of it. He is high in the councils of my father; there is no one he trusts more. It is he who was alone permitted to spy the outlands over years; it is he who has fed divine Alexander with thoughts of conquest. The outlands, he reports, are weak and ripe for the thunder of the phalanx."

Crawford laughed shortly. "Therein he lies," he told the girl. "Mighty as the Macedonians are, they are but a drop in the ocean of humanity. There is some other reason for his urging."

Aspasia flushed. "He is ambitious," she said unwillingly. "Often has he promised me a throne were I but his mate."

"Find some way to loose my chains," Crawford urged. "There is no time to be lost."

"I brought a key with me," the girl acknowledged, and bent over.

So intent were they that the opening of the door roused no suspicion.

"Hold!" commanded a cold voice. "Move once, and die."

Aspasia started to her feet with a little cry; Crawford jerked at his chains fruitlessly.

Theramenes stood in the doorway, a spear poised for throwing. Next him

stood Kang Chou, the snout of a revolver steady in his yellow hand.

The pseudo-archæologist smiled unpleasantly. "Your Oriental wisdom is most subtle, Kang Chou. I foresee great deeds for our alliance. We are just in time."

The Chinese governor smiled softly. "Drop the key—over here." He pointed with the gun.

The words were not understood, but the gesture was. Aspasia threw over the key and straightened up, her eyes flashing with ancient hauteur.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

Theramenes grinned. "The very question I would ask you. Think what your father, divine Alexander, would say to his daughter freeing a prisoner."

A wild hope flashed through her.

"Take me to him, then. He shall be judge."

"Not so fast!" he warned, and shut the door. His easy mockery changed to cold, wintry fury. "I heard your speech with this outlander. You will be given no chance to betray us. You remain my prisoner until——"

"Until what?" she asked.

"Until we are through," he ended cryptically.

Crawford said in deadly tones. "Listen to me, Theramenes. You harm Aspasia the least bit, and you sign your death warrant."

The Greek raised his eyebrows mockingly. "Threats?" he sneered. "From a prisoner, whose fate is already decided! Pray, Owen Crawford, to whatever gods you sacrifice to, for you have not long to live."

He raised the spear by the middle, hefted it once to test its balance. Aspasia gave a cry and threw herself forward. Theramenes brushed her aside with a quick heave of a powerful arm, into the close grasp of Kang Chou. Crawford ground his teeth in silence and strained at his bonds.

The spear was raised again. There was death in the backward movement of the hand. The muscles tensed for the quick heave. Aspasia screamed once.

The door banged violently open. Theramenes whirled, the spear darting for the thrust.

"Hold, mighty Theramenes!"

AN ARMORED warrior plunged into the room, his face suffused with fast running, his breath whistling in stertorous pants. It was the dark-haired guard, the brutal one.

The Greek stayed his arm. "What is it, Nicias?" he demanded, thunder-browed.

Nicias leaned a moment against the damp rock. "We are discovered," he gasped at last.

Theramenes took a step forward, shook the bearer of the ill news furiously. "You lie! Who has betrayed us?"

Nicias cowered away from him. "I do not know," he cried. "But Alexander is even now gathering the phalanges. I received orders; I am thought loyal. At the first opportunity I fled, to warn you. Master, what shall we do?"

Terror was written large on the face of the wretch. Alexander's vengeance was apt to be lightning swift.

"Peace, fool!" commanded Theramenes. "If only——"

Aspasia said exultingly. "My father is still the divine Alexander. He overheard your speech with the yellow man. He learned the barbarous language secretly from a captive woman. His vengeance will be terrible."

Theramenes' furrowed brows cleared instantly.

"Thanks, Aspasia, for your explanation," he mocked. "Then Alexander knows very little; knows nothing of the Dragon. Quick, Kang Chou, we have not a moment to lose. The time is but hastened, that is all. You, Nicias, bind

Aspasia, bolt the door, and follow us. We need every man. Your life depends on strict obedience."

With that he darted out of the door, the Chinese governor at his heels.

Nicias drew out from his tunic thin, flexible bronze links, and fastened the unresisting girl with the skill of long experience to a firmly imbedded ring on the opposite wall from Crawford. At the door he grinned cruelly at his two captives, slammed it shut. Their straining ears heard the sound of bolts being shot, the retreating clatter of the metal sandals; then there was silence.

Crawford gave another ineffectual heave and stared across at Aspasia. "What," he asked, "is the Holy Dragon?"

The girl shuddered against the dampness of the wall. "I do not know," she admitted, "except that it is a terrible monster. Only Alexander himself and Theramenes knows the secret of governing it—and a few men sworn to silence on penalty of death."

"How strong is your father?" Crawford inquired irrelevantly.

The girl straightened proudly. "He is the mighty, the divine Alexander. He has lived two thousand years; the wisdom of the Greeks is his; he will crush the revolt as though it were a fly under a catapult."

"Does she really believe that nonsense?" the American wondered, and carefully avoided pursuing it further.

"But his phalanges are honeycombed with treachery," he argued aloud. "And the Dragon."

All Aspasia's pride collapsed. "That is true," she said weakly. "Theramenes will use the Dragon. If only we were free!"

"If we're not free in the next several hours," he told her, "it will be too late."

Already outside the thickness of their door they could hear muted shoutings, the clang of running feet. The *ming-öi*, the House of a Thousand Rooms, was

emptying its occupants; whether as loyal men or as rebels, the captives had no means of determining.

The revolt had begun.

Crawford groaned and strained fruitlessly. The bronze links bit painfully into his flesh. He tried rubbing against the stone edge, and succeeded only in rasping his legs into raw sores. There was fighting outside, and he was trussed up like a fowl for the slaughter, he and Aspasia.

The uproar grew; there was the faint noise of spear on shield. The opposing forces were locked in battle. Within the *ming-öi* was silence.

The two captives stared hopelessly at each other.

It was Aspasia, as nearer to the door, who first heard the faint fumbling.

"What is that?" she cried.

The fumbling continued, as of some one inexperienced with locks. Then the door swung open, slowly, an inch at a time. Crawford tensed; what new horror was coming through now?

THE GIRL saw it first, cried out in fright. She shrank back against the wall.

A figure inched slowly around the barricade; a tattered, torn, bleeding figure. Grime and blood were mingled in equal proportions on the paunchy form, great raking gashes showed on flesh through slashed clothes.

The intruder turned slowly, and Crawford cried out:

"Aaron!"

The torn, broken figure thrust up its head, and grinned. "Master, my ancestors are good. I have found you."

The American gaped at his servant, returned from the dead. "I thought the Dragon——"

Aaron shuddered. "The Dragon, he terrible! He dropped me in a pit." The man of Tientsin swayed and groped to the wall for support. He was weary and pain-stricken. "That pit, I never

forget. Bones and rotting bodies, of others he dropped. It was deep I fell, but I was not killed. All night and day it took, I climbed out. I met a woman, woman of the Gobi. She took pity, hid me, told me where you prisoner."

Crawford flamed into action.

"The key, Aaron!" He pointed to the flung bit of bronze unregarded on the floor. "Open our chains; we have work to do."

The servant lumbered weakly to the key, picked it up, and with many a groan, unlocked his master. At the girl he looked doubtfully, but unloosed her, too, while Crawford stamped to bring circulation back into his veins.

There was the old exultant ring to his voice. To Aspasia, in Greek, he said: "We shall fight for your father."

To Aaron, in English: "Have you still your gun?"

Aaron searched through the voluminous folds of his slashed fragments of clothes. Crawford watched with growing fear. His own gun had been taken away. At last the yellow hand emerged, bringing with it an automatic.

The American reached for it with a cry of joy, broke it open, spun the cylinders. It was fully loaded. He felt better now.

"The Dragon, Aaron! What was it?"

Fear clouded the paunchy servant's eyes. "I did not see. Its claws caught me, held me tight in the long journey. I hung face downward; I could hear the noise of its nostrils, the flames of its breath were hot around me, but I saw it not."

Crawford made a gesture of annoyance. "Then we'll have to find out for ourselves. Come!"

Out of the door they went, into freedom, into deserted corridors. The ming-öi was empty. A door stood open to one side. Crawford glanced in. The next instant he was inside, and out again in a moment, with a spear.

He hefted it lovingly, thrust the automatic back to Aaron.

"Now we're both armed."

Then they were in the valley. It was a bloody, yet stirring picture that presented itself to them.

## V.

THE PLEASANT green fields were trampled down as if an army had beaten them with flails. The meandering stream was choked with corpses, through whose sprawling forms the water trickled and spread. Farther up, near the temple, a battle was in furious progress—opposing armies, almost equal in numbers, on whose bronze armor and gleaming shields the warm sun sparkled with almost unendurable brilliance.

The formation of the phalanges had been broken; it was confused, man-to-man fighting now. Spears thrust home, dipped, and rose again, reddened at the tip. Short, heavy swords hacked furiously down, cutting through helmets and shields and breastplates with shearing force. Shouts and ancient Greek battle cries mingled with the groans of the dying. No one yielded; the tide of battle ebbed and flowed; men died as they stood.

Grim war as only the Greeks once fought! Platea and Marathon and Thermopylae. It was thrilling; it was magnificent!

Aspasia cried suddenly: "My father!"

A tall figure, on whose shield a huge ruby gathered the rays of the sun and thrust them out again in blood-red waves, was in the very thick of the battle, laying about him with a short sword that cleared men out of his path like grain before the reaper.

"We must help him," she said, and started forward.

Crawford held her with a restraining arm. He was looking the other way, where the stream ended in the lake, on

which the monster had floated earlier in the day.

It was still there, quiescent, its claws concealed, its long tail no longer lashing, the sun reflected from the metallic scales of its body, breathing no fire or smoke.

"That is where we are needed," Crawford said grimly. "Your father will have to take care of himself a while longer."

Spear swinging in hand, he started on the run. They had gone a hundred yards, when Crawford stopped short with a groan.

"Too late!" he said. "The Dragon has started."

The trio stared in silence.

The great beast was belching flame from every pore, its tail lashed into venomous life. The waters of the lake were tossed into foaming spume. The Dragon started to move, slowly at first, as the flames from its tail lengthened, and red-pitted eyes and widespread nostrils spewed smoky glares; then faster and faster, until with a bound it was in the air.

Higher and higher it fled, the great claws distended beneath as though seeking its prey; then it swerved, and like the wind was careering down the narrow valley, belching and roaring, straight for the tangled, locked armies.

Crawford jerked the girl suddenly toward him, thrust her behind the concealment of an overhang of the *ming-öi*.

"Down, Aaron!" he shouted, throwing himself flat. "It must not see us."

Crouching in their precarious shelter, they watched with growing horror the tragedy that followed.

The fighting troops had seen by this time the swift approach of the monster. They were brave, these descendants of the Macedonians, as brave as any men of any age in the world, but they had been brought up to fear the mysterious Dragon. It had roared on occasion out of the valley and brought back terrified,

tongue-tied captives; it had swooped on condemned criminals and dropped them from heights into the terrible pit of the dead, but never had any except the few initiates seen the monster at close hand.

Now it was coming to attack—whom?

Neither side knew; few of the rebels, chiefly of blood filtered through Kazak captives, were in the closest counsels of Theramenes.

So it was that at the sight of the plunging, fiery serpent of the air, the contending armies broke. Loyal troops and rebels alike threw away their arms in a wild stampede for safety.

The great Dragon swooped with the noise of a thousand thunderbolts. Straight down to within fifty feet of the plain, then it straightened out and fled parallel in huge concentric circles. Its belly opened into a veritable fountain of detonating flame that seared the ground to blackened stone and crisped the running men to char and ash.

Suddenly the belching ceased, and once more the Dragon swooped. Aspasia cried out in helpless horror. For the great claws extended and caught on a man—a man who remained on the field of battle, proudly erect, disdaining to run, a man whose shield was centered with a blood-red ruby.

The claws retracted and Alexander disappeared. The Dragon swept upward in its headlong flight, back in the direction of the lake.

"My father!" moaned Aspasia.

Crawford held her in a steely grip. His brow was furrowed, puzzled. Suddenly it cleared. "Of course!" he almost shouted.

"What, master?" Aaron asked. He was trembling uncontrollably.

Crawford disregarded the question. "Give me your revolver; take the spear," he said urgently. "Whatever happens, whatever you see, guard Aspasia. If I fail, hide, and run for the mountain during the night. Good-by."

He stood up, stepped from behind his

shelter, exposed to full view of the swiftly flying Dragon.

"Don't!" Aspasia screamed. "It will kill you as it killed my father. I, too, shall die then."

She struggled to rise, but Aaron held her by force. His master was mad, but he had given orders, and they must be obeyed.

AT FIRST Crawford thought the Dragon had not seen him; that it was continuing to the lake of its sojourn. But in mid-flight it swerved, circled once to check its tremendous speed, dropped perpendicularly with steely claws hideously outspread. For a moment Crawford was shaken; would the monster sear him with fire and flame? But the great scaly belly remained cold; only from tail and nostrils gushed streamers of blazing smoke. The monster wished to capture him, even as it had Alexander.

Crawford stood relaxed, steeling himself against the ripping thrust. His gun was pocketed, out of sight.

The Dragon came on with a rush. The wicked, razor-sharpened claws reached down, bit ruthlessly into his naked flesh, whirled him aloft into the air with a screaming of wind and snorting roars. Below, Aspasia promptly fainted, and Aaron invoked all his ancestors on behalf of his doomed master.

Crawford felt the blood dripping steadily from his sides, every movement exquisite anguish, but he squirmed around until he was staring up at the belly of the fabulous beast. It was scaly, unbroken, and rippled with the similitude of life. Behind, he could see the huge tail lashing through the atmosphere.

In all his life Crawford had never experienced the sinking sensation he now felt in the pit of his stomach. Had he been mistaken? If so, he was as good as dead. A revolver bullet would be but a flung pebble to this fiery

Dragon; he would be dashed to splintered bones in the pit of the dead.

Then it happened!

The great belly yawned open like a gaping mouth; the claws that held Crawford retracted, thrust him into the darkness inside. The steely prongs released their cruel bite, withdrew, and the belly closed around him—like Jonah in the whale.

The pain of his wounds dizzied Crawford. He staggered, fell. Then there was light. The semi-darkness sprang into illumination. All around him was a soft, steady roaring.

The archaeologist came to his feet again, unsteadily. He was in a small, ovoid chamber, metal-sheathed; at either end were strange instruments of a type he had never seen before. There were voices, too, of men; the sound of Chinese diphthongs, of the rolling Greek of Homer.

Theramenes regarded him with a thin-lipped smile. "You are a hard man to keep put." The American idiom sounded incongruous in his slurred English. "What do you think of our Dragon?"

"I've known its secret for some time," Crawford lied quietly. "It's a rocket plane."

"You are indeed intelligent."

"The Chinese have reported the worship of the Holy Dragon for centuries. Who invented it?"

"My ancestor, twelve times removed. He found bitumen in the lake, refined it for fuel. His descendants are the hereditary captains of the Dragon."

He might have been lying, but it didn't matter. Crawford's head had cleared, but he swayed in pretense of faintness. His wounds ached horribly; the blood went drip, drip, down his sides.

"What do you intend doing with me?" he asked faintly. He had not been searched; no one knew that Aaron had escaped with a weapon.

"Do?" Theramenes said. "Throw you into the pit of the dead. This time you will stay put. You and the Alexander who thought he was divine."

For the first time Crawford saw the old man, lying in a pool of blood to one side. His breathing was labored, stertorous. If Crawford read the signs aright, he was dying. No help could be expected from him. The American half closed his eyes, to simulate exhaustion; from beneath locked lashes he warily surveyed the scene.

There were three men in the crew, besides Theramenes and Kang Chou. All armed, no doubt, the latter two with guns. Five against one! It would be a chance that he must take.

Theramenes said: "The devil! Aspasia, I had almost forgotten her. We shall turn back. She must be where we found the American."

Now was the time to act, if ever. Crawford felt real nausea at the thought of those cruel claws gashing that tender flesh. His hand stole unobtrusively to the pocket where the automatic rested.

But Kang Chou, with the guile of the Oriental, had not been deceived by his play acting. "He is shamming!" he cried in warning. "Look out!"

CRAWFORD completed his move in split seconds. His hand tore at the pocket, leaped out, gun muzzle in front, finger pressing against trigger.

A shot rang reverberating in the narrow confines. Kang Chou had fired first. Something burned across Crawford's arm; then his pistol spoke. It smashed the pointing gun out of the Chinese governor's hand, then the bullet deflected and plowed through the wrist, breaking it. Kang Chou cursed horribly and sat down.

Crawford whirled, balancing lightly. Just in time, for the Greek renegade was pressing home the trigger, a light of insane hatred in his slanted eyes.

Two shots rang out, almost simultane-

ous in their report. The wind of it tugged at the American's ear; but Theramenes stared in wide surprise, then slid slowly to the floor, a bluish round hole in his forehead.

Once more Crawford whirled to meet the rush of a Macedonian, spear drawn back for the fatal lunge. Just then the Dragon took a sickening plunge; the steersman had left the controls. The spear whizzed harmlessly past, to clang metallically against the concave wall. Crawford braced himself, and shot. The man screamed and fell.

"Back to your posts!" the American shouted at the remaining pair.

With a wild rush they obeyed. The fight was gone out of them. They had never seen a gun before, nor known of its terrible execution. Theramenes had kept the secrets he had learned in the outer world to himself.

The Dragon was plunging and swinging erratically, its rocket jets, cleverly concealed in nostrils, eyes, mouth, and tail, roaring and sputtering. The steersman swung swiftly on a series of rudders; the great beast shuddered and steadied into smooth, slanting flight.

"Land her!" Crawford ordered, and gave directions.

The cowed Macedonians obeyed. Kang had stopped cursing salty Chinese oaths; he sat holding his shattered wrist, his face philosophically calm.

Aspasia and Aaron came running in through the opened belly, eyes wide with astonishment. Then the girl saw her father. With a cry she dropped to his side.

The old Alexander's stern, pain-wracked face softened into a smile. He was only a weary old man, about to die.

"Do not cry, my daughter," he whispered with evident effort. "It was my mad ambition that was responsible for the tragedy to my peaceful land. Theramenes, the traitor, urged me on. He is dead; so am I."

Aspasia flung herself upon him, sob-

bing. "No, no! You shall live, you must."

His smile held rare quality. "It is too late! The gods are calling me; the ancient gods."

He half rose. His voice was loud: "Jupiter Ammon; your son comes!" He fell back, dead. To the last he was Alexander, Iskander, the divine!

ASPASIA cried quietly, while Aaron patted her hand clumsily. Crawford looked out of the tiny porthole. The scattered remnants of the rebels had reformed, were advancing on the Dragon, five phalanges strong. Brave men, thought the American admiringly.

He turned to give orders to take off, when something else caught his attention. He stiffened incredulously. The air was full with droning noise. Five airplanes, bombers of an American make, were winging in battle formation over the inaccessible valley of the Heavenly Mountains.

The placid calm of Kang Chou wreathed into a smile. "It is my turn now," he remarked. "Those planes are mine, from Turfan. I left instructions. The pilots are foreigners, reckless fools who fear neither man nor devil. They come ahead of time, to seize the Dragon. It will be useful to convince my countrymen I am a good ruler."

But Crawford was not listening. Already the airplanes had deployed over the armed forces. Bombs dropped with deadly precision. The valley lifted and heaved. The temple was shattered into wind-borne fragments, the *ming-öi*, House of a Thousand Rooms, was blasted from the side of the mountain. The strange, anachronistic civilization of two thousand years was being effectually wiped out.

Then a pilot saw the resting Dragon. The planes wheeled, came in a long, slanting rush. Crawford jumped into action, roaring orders. The terrified Macedonians saw the oncoming death,

sprang frantically to the rudders.

The great monster shuddered throughout its sinuous length; jerked forward as the rocket tubes burst into roaring flame. Along the ground it bumped interminably, while the combat planes whistled with the speed of their flight.

The leader was almost upon them. Crawford could see the helmeted face of the pilot reaching for the bomb trip, when the Dragon gave a great lurch and left the ground. It was up in the air, gathering speed.

The bombers whirled around, darted headlong for the fleeing prey. Machine-gun bullets whined and zipped; a pellet of steel ripped through the outer shell, ripped out again through the opposite side.

The Macedonians needed no urging now. The rudders controlling the rocket jets swung wide. The acceleration fairly hurled the great beast through the air. No plane could hope to keep pace with the hurtling Dragon.

Four of the bombers were dropping fast behind; one, the leader, held to the pace for a grim half minute. Kang Chou half rose, his mask ripped off.

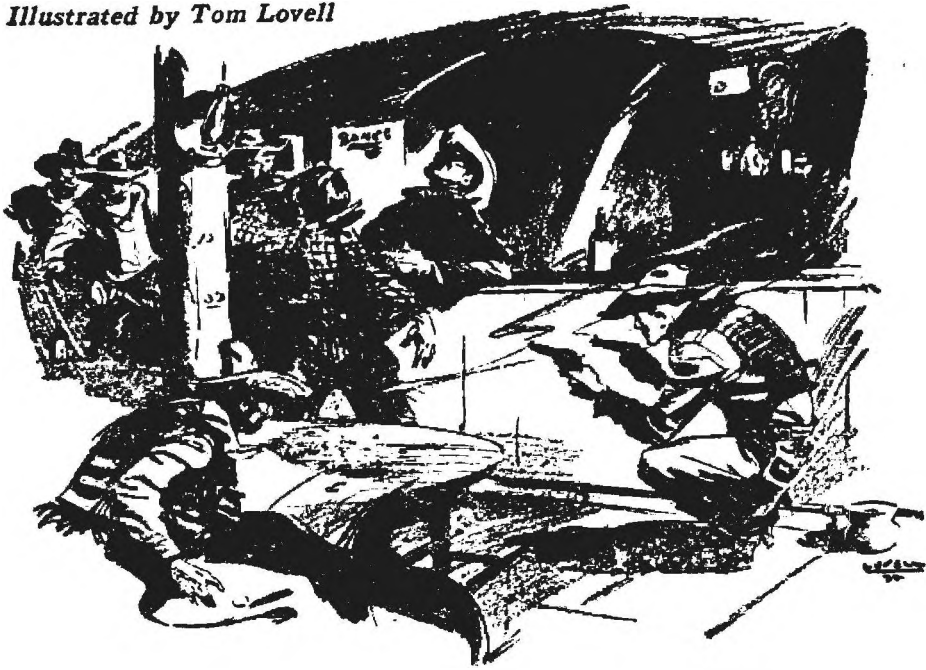
The pursuing pilot saw that he was losing ground; in desperation he sent a last wild fusillade toward the fleeing monster. One bullet found its mark. It crashed through the belly, caught Kang Chou in the chest.

He spun around once, mouth half open, sprawled forward, arms outspread.

The Dragon lifted high over the encircling peaks, flaming and snorting at every pore; over the accustomed trail to Dead Mongol Pass, toward the encampment of the expedition in the hollow of the Black Gobi.

For some reason Crawford felt curiously happy as Aspasia nestled against his shoulder. No words were spoken; there was silence except for the curious throbbing of the unknowing Dragon.

*Illustrated by Tom Lovell*



# Outlaw

by Phillip L.  
Ketchum

*Here is the old West as it really was,  
hard, adventurous, bitter, strange*

**T**HE SHORT, brown-faced man, who called himself Jed Malm, drifted into Cottonwood after the boom was over and after most of the people who had lived there had moved away. He was not a man to attract attention. His clothing was neither new nor old. His horse could have been matched several times in any dozen horses selected. He visited Mike Closky's saloon, the El Dorado, only a few times each week, and on those occasions drank moderately if at all. And the few people in Cottonwood who came to know him in all probability considered Jed Malm as a nice, harmless individual who smoked an evil-smelling pipe.

For the first three weeks of his resi-

dence in Cottonwood, he lived in Mrs. Bell's boarding house. Mrs. Bell was a huge, florid widow, with a loud voice, a sharp tongue, and an unmanageable nine-year-old son called Billy.

During Cottonwood's boom days her boarding house had been very popular, and she had coined money hand over fist. Then, as the gold fields petered out, and as the men began to move on, she fell madly in love with a curly-haired gambler, who "borrowed" all her money and disappeared. Mrs. Bell was in the process of recovering, but she didn't have, and it is doubtful if she would ever have, enough to move on to greener fields.

Besides Jed Malm, she had only one

other boarder, Hugh Wilson, Cottonwood's mayor.

Wilson was middle-aged. He was fat and lazy. He had been elected mayor at the height of the boom when the town amounted to something. Those had been trying days for him. A lawless element had overrun everything, and the mayor had been busy selecting one marshal after another and attending funerals in between. He could not realize now that the glory that had been Cottonwood's was gone. And he spent most of each day following the shade around Mrs. Bell's house and dreaming of the past.

Whenever possible, he would corner Malm for a long session of reminiscences, and Jed Malm stood it for three weeks before he moved into one of the many vacant shacks, as far away as possible. But even this did not end things, for Wilson took to visiting Malm almost every day.

If the people in Cottonwood had stopped to consider, they would have decided that Jed Malm was trying to hide things, for he very studiously avoided giving any information about his earlier life. But he was really only a small element in the community. He might have gone away and never been missed by any one except Hugh Wilson.

In fact, he was planning on leaving, on taking a job up in the hills with Bert Kendall, when the Tillotson band rode into town and decided to make Cottonwood their headquarters.

The Tillotson band was well-known throughout the West. It was headed by two red-faced brothers, Bill and Frank, twins. Of the two, Bill was reputed to be the more dangerous and Frank the more troublesome, but even Frank was no slouch with his guns and had never yet met his equal. They were both large men, and the eight men in the band were all of huge stature. Together, the ten presented an imposing array.

For their purpose, Cottonwood was an ideal location. They would not be tolerated in the larger towns, and Cottonwood offered them shelter, a saloon, and a place where they could gratify their egos. It was a town that they could run. In the larger places there was too much competition that was often costly. Cottonwood offered no competition. It submitted meekly.

For the first few days after the arrival of the Tillotsons, Hugh Wilson bubbled over with excitement. He saw in the advent of the Tillotson band an indication of the return of Cottonwood's boom days, and he spent his time running from the El Dorado, where the band hung out, over to the marshal's office, and then out to see Jed Malm.

"We gotta be strict," he would say to Malm. "We gotta uphold the law. But so far these Tillotsons has been perty nice. They ain't done nothin' outa the way."

Malm would nod and grunt. The arrival of the Tillotsons didn't seem to have interested him. Usually he would turn the discussion to a consideration of his plans for the future.

"Bert Kendall says we'll git goin' perty soon. He's got a great place up there in the hills."

"What do you wanta go up there for?" Wilson would ask. "That's clear out to the end of the world."

And invariably Malm would reply: "Oh, I'll sorta like it."

HOWEVER, Bert Kendall and Jed Malm were unable to complete their plans as soon as they had expected. Kendall had purchased a large herd of cattle that was being driven up from Texas, and the herd was late. There really wasn't any reason for Malm to go up into the hills until they arrived, and so he remained in town.

No influx of citizens followed the arrival of the Tillotsons, and Hugh Wilson's hopes for the future of Cotton-

wood gave way to a grave concern for the present. The Tillotsons began to act up.

There were two shooting frays in the El Dorado, unprovoked and inexcusable. Two of the few citizens of the town were killed and planted in Boot Hill. And those remaining demanded that the mayor and marshal clean things up.

They went about it in a very cautious manner, for the Tillotsons were easy to take offense. They called on the mayor out at Jed Malm's. In no uncertain manner they presented their demands, and Hugh Wilson had reason to recall more vividly than ever Cottonwood's former days.

Wilson promised action and passed the order on to the marshal. The marshal resigned.

AND THEN the unexpected happened. Overnight, the boom came again to Cottonwood. But not in the guise of new gold fields; this time it was as a result of the building of a railroad. Engineers, laborers, surveyors, all manner of men connected with such construction, began to move in. And on their heels came those others, gamblers, saloon keepers, camp hangers on, and all the types of the usual scum that followed the building of a railroad across the continent.

Within a week, things were humming. Mrs. Bell's boarding house filled. The empty shacks acquired tenants. Tents, new houses, sprang up overnight, and the Tillotson band lorded it over them all.

In the midst of this sudden growth, Jed Malm paid one of his usual visits to the El Dorado saloon. It happened to be on a Sunday just after noon. Sunday was no different from any other day, but on this occasion there seemed to be more people than usual loitering around the one business block Cottonwood boasted.

Malm looked them over, his lips twist-

ing into a rather cynical smile. It might have been that the scene was an old one to him; that the types were all familiar; that he was more than a little scornful.

Strolling into the El Dorado, his ears caught phrases and sentences, boasting, profane, bitter, or businesslike. Inside the saloon he came face to face with the two Tillotsons and casually stepped out of their way. They didn't even notice him, nor did many of the other men.

He made his purchase of a sack of tobacco and followed the twins out into the street. They turned in the same direction he was going, and he followed them.

Suddenly, the two Tillotsons stopped dead still. Almost as soon as they did, Malm saw the man who had attracted their attention. He was a tall man, slender, unshaven. Like the two brothers, he wore two guns strapped around his waist, and he walked on the balls of his feet with an easy, springy step.

Frank Tillotson clutched his brother's arm. "Harris!" he gasped.

Bill nodded and cursed. But Frank started across the street with a hurried stride. Something in his attitude caught the attention of some of the near-by men, and all eyes followed him as he approached Harris.

Half a dozen paces away, he stopped. "Lo, Harris," he snarled.

The man he hailed turned to face him. No surprise was visible in his face. Instead he looked puzzled.

"My name's Wilkinson," he drawled. "Mistaken, ain't you, partner?"

Frank Tillotson laughed shortly. He made no answer, but his left arm whipped to his side, his gun snapped up, barked three times, and was reholstered.

A fleeting expression of astonishment crossed Wilkinson's face, to give way to a blank, impersonal look. He slumped to the ground and lay motionless, except for the twitching of one arm.

Frank Tillotson stepped forward. With his foot he rolled the man over on his back, looked at him intently, and then broke into a hearty laugh.

"Can you beat that!" he cried, looking around at his brother who had followed him across the street. "It ain't Harris after all. Damned if I ever saw this man before!"

Jed Malm, watching, saw Bill laugh with his brother, heard Bill suggest another drink, and saw the two start back toward the El Dorado. Then he looked around at the men who had witnessed the killing. They looked rather disgusted, but no one made any move toward the dead man lying in the road.

Malm, however, was more than disgusted. He shed no tears over Wilkinson, for the man had had an even break. He could have gone for his gun, for the intention in Tillotson's face was plain. But the attitude of the Tillotsons after the killing was what sickened Malm. And the indifference of the men who had witnessed it was worse.

Hugh Wilson came running up to him. Wilson, though no fighter, was not at all cowed by the Tillotsons. "Did you see that?" he demanded.

Malm nodded.

"Jed!" the mayor cried. "The Tillotson band's gotta go. We gotta get rid of 'em."

"How you gonna do it?" Malm asked.

The mayor shook his head. He was worried and showed it.

"I don't know." He sighed. "I got ten men lined up as a vigilance committee who are ready to enforce the law here in Cottonwood, see that guns are checked or left home, and run things right. But they won't go after the Tillotsons."

"Why not?"

"They don't wanna die."

Jed Malm nodded grimly. He helped Wilson carry Wilkinson's body into one of the houses, and after the mayor had gone to arrange for the burial, he filled

his pipe and sat down for a smoke.

He waved at Mrs. Bell when she passed down the street, called "Hello!" to Billy, her boy, and nodded to two casual acquaintances. He seemed to be deep in thought, but he was not thinking of Cottonwood or Cottonwood's problems. His mind was up in the hills with Bert Kendall.

There was a sudden flurry of shots from the El Dorado and several men hurried over that way, but Malm went on smoking and dreaming of the future.

QUITE SUDDENLY the mayor returned. He was a different man from the one who had gone away half an hour ago. He looked older. His eyes were sunken; his face was redder. He was extremely nervous.

"Jed," he gasped, "Jed! Have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"He's killed another one. Frank Tillotson just shot another man."

"Oh, is that all?"

Wilson shook his head. "He plugged Billy Bell, too. You know, Mrs. Bell's little boy."

"Huh?" Malm sat up.

"Nothin' bad, got him through the leg, but it mighta killed him. The old lady's raisin' hell."

Malm nodded. He said nothing.

Wilson went on raving. "If I only had a man like Bat Masterson or Wyatt Earp—even for a day—after that we'd git along. If I only had some one with enough nerve to go up agin' the Tillotsons! I'm almost tempted—"

The mayor looked around for a weapon.

Other men came along. They were getting angry. They growled and cursed and whispered. Jed Malm sized them up. He decided that they were getting to the place where they would do something. It would mean that some of them would be killed, and they knew

it. But they couldn't stand things much longer.

The ten-man rule of the Tillotson band was doomed, but blood would be spilled before they were run out of town. Their hold was too strong. The men themselves were too strong to submit, even to a mob.

Jed Malm sighed and stood up. He sucked swiftly on his pipe, and as he puffed out great clouds of smoke his dreams of the ranch up in the hills faded.

After a moment he knocked out his pipe, put it in his pocket, and approached the mayor. "You ain't got your marshal, yet, have you?"

Hugh Wilson shook his head. "Hell, no!"

Jed Malm nodded and held up his right hand. "Swear me in," he suggested.

"Huh?" Wilson stared his astonishment.

"Swear me in!" Malm snapped. His tone of voice was sharp. It was a tone that Wilson had never heard before.

Several of the men gathered around them. One man protested, and Malm whirled on him. His eyes were not those that the man had seen before. They were cold and hard and seemed to look right through him.

"You keep outta this," Malm instructed. "I'm takin' on a job." He turned on the mayor. "Go ahead!"

Hugh Wilson's voice stuttered over the familiar words. He pulled out a dirty handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

Malm turned around and faced the men. "I want two guns."

It was an order. The men unbuckled their belts and proffered them. Jed Malm had never been seen in Cottonwood wearing a gun. The thought of it would have been funny. But after he had selected two of the holsters and guns and had strapped them around his

waist, they looked as if they belonged there.

But they changed his entire appearance. He was no longer Jed Malm. He was a stranger.

The men followed him out of the house and, outside, waited in a group. Jed Malm started toward the El Dorado. He walked down the center of the road, the guns hanging at his hips, and his long arms swinging. As he moved away, he appeared hopelessly inadequate, foolhardy.

Near the saloon he hailed a man. "Go inside and tell the Tillotsons that the new marshal wants to see 'em out here," he instructed.

The man gasped, started to laugh, then changed his mind and went inside.

Almost at once a great shout went up in the saloon, and a loud voice bawled: "Come on in."

JED MALM shrugged his shoulders. He pushed open the door and stepped inside. No shots rang out. The Tillotsons were not frightened by a marshal. They undoubtedly intended to use him as the brunt for some huge joke.

The El Dorado was quite large. Its bar was long, and Mike Closky and two helpers stood behind it. Frank and Bill Tillotson were at the far end, and others of the Tillotson band were seated in chairs near them. Three men were near the door, and they hurried out as the new marshal entered, so, except for the bartenders, Jed Malm faced the Tillotson band alone.

He didn't wait for them to act, nor did he pull his guns, but he spoke up in a voice that was curiously flat: "You Tillotsons, Frank an' Bill, you're leavin' Cottonwood and you're leavin' right now. There's a door back of you. Open it and git out."

The two leaders were at first too astonished to speak, and the others of the band stood up, tense and ready, but awaiting orders.

Bill Tillotson was the first to recover from his surprise. He turned to his men. "Let me handle this," he ordered. "Marshals is my meat."

He stepped away from the bar, his puffy face twisted into a sneer. "Say, who are you, anyhow?" he demanded.

Jed Malm did not answer. He stepped forward two paces to where the light from one of the windows fell across his tanned and expressionless face. His arms hung at his sides, and his eyes burned into the face of Bill Tillotson.

"Bill," he said. "I know you, know you well. And I'm tellin' you to open that door behind you an' git out."

Frank Tillotson stood beside his brother. "Come on!" he sneered. "Take just one step forward."

Jed Malm nodded. He was about eight paces from the two men. Others of the band were behind them and to one side, but had shown no inclination to enter the dispute. Malm counted them out of things, at least for the present. His gaze didn't shift from the two brothers.

"I'll take one step," he said. "I'll take three. If you ain't on your way by then, I'll kill you—both of you. You, Frank, and you, Bill."

His voice was still flat, emotionless, almost conversational in tone; but there was something deadly about it, something terrifying. And his eyes, burning into the eyes of those two men, were unblinking and steady.

For perhaps half a minute he did not move, just looked at them, his lips in a straight, thin line. Then he spoke: "I'm comin'," he said, and stepped forward.

Steadily and without hesitation he took those three steps. And then he stopped.

The two Tillotsons snapped into action, their hands streaking for their guns. And Jed Malm moved, too, so swiftly that the men watching could not

follow the motions of his arms, hands, and wrists. Shots crashed out, so closely together that they could not be counted. And, as swiftly, the shooting was over.

Jed Malm was squatting on his heels, each hand holding a smoking gun, and those guns were trained on the others of the Tillotson band. He did not even glance at the two forms that lay stretched out on the saloon floor—the motionless forms of Frank and Bill Tillotson.

JED MALM stood up slowly. He spoke again, and Mike Closky, the saloon keeper, listening, was surprised that the tone of his voice had not changed.

"That door," Jed Malm said. "It's still there. Git!"

He had the drop on them, and there was little question as to what they should do. They could have got him, surely, but at a terrible price. And in a rather orderly fashion they filed out.

Jed Malm followed them, watched them climb their horses, watched them ride off. Then he turned back, hurried through town, speaking to no one, and sought out his shack. He was packing when the mayor arrived, completely out of breath, and so confused that he was scarcely able to talk.

"You're not leavin' us, Jed?" he cried. "We—we want you to keep yuhr job. We want you to go on bein' marshal. It pays sixty per. It's—it's—the job's yours."

Jed Malm said: "Pay me two dollars. I'm resignin'." He went on throwing his stuff into his saddlebags. He finished, took off his borrowed gun belts and replaced them with two of his own.

"Give these back to the men I got 'em from," he suggested, passing them to the mayor.

Still protesting, the mayor followed him out of the shack and stood by while he saddled his horse. Other men came

up. Their congratulations and comments might as well have been made to a tree for all the attention Malm paid to them.

Finishing, he climbed on his horse and looked down at Hugh Wilson. "Sorry I can't take the job," he said. "Gimme my two dollars, one day's pay."

Wilson dug two dollars out of his pocket and passed them over.

Malm took them, jingled them, and looked toward the hills, sighing.

Hugh Wilson wondered what that sigh meant. He didn't connect it with anything so ethereal as a shattered dream.

Then, without speaking again, Jed Malm whirled his horse and rode away. He headed north, leaving the hills of Bert Kendall behind him and to the left. And leaving a very puzzled mayor and group of citizens.

EVEN AS Jed Malm left, Mike Closky joined the group. He had been busy telling people about the fight in the El Dorado saloon, and wondering with them over one of the inexplicable events so common in the histories of Western men.

How had Jed Malm been able to do it? The odds against him were so great. What was the answer? But, for that matter, how did Hicock, Earp, Halliday, or any of the master frontiersmen, get away with the things they actually did?

Hugh Wilson wasn't much concerned

with things like that, however. He was wondering why he hadn't been able to keep a good marshal after he had found one.

Mike Closky told him. "Jed Malm wasn't that man's name," the saloon keeper said. "At least, I don't think it was. I recognized him in that battle in the El Dorado. Just think, I'd seen him at least a hundred times, an' I never connected the two."

"Hub? What two?" Wilson wanted to know.

"Why, Malm an' King Crisman. That's what I heard him called once. But maybe that ain't his name. I knew him by the way he was all crouched down after the fight. He sorta squats as he throws his gun. It was a dead give-away."

"But—but who's King Crisman?"

"Well, down Texas way where he comes from, they calls him 'The Rattler.' I guess it's 'cause he always warns afore he strikes, an' 'cause his strike is so deadly. He's a outlaw hisself, but I guess he was a plannin' on goin' straight, settlin' down with Bert Kendall. He wasn't known up this way. But after that fight there wasn't any way to keep from bein' known. An' there's a big reward on his head. He had to ride away."

Hugh Wilson, mayor of Cottonwood, cursed feelingly. "Malm, Crisman, or Rattler, that man wasn't any outlaw. He was a man, an' I hope good luck rides with him."





*Like a great stallion the clipper ran—and Captain Christopher Davys  
watched the savage Horn roll past.*

# The Flaming Wave

by Roi Auckland

*An adventure which came to a man  
who could not go to adventure!*

**T**HAT MORNING, Christopher Davys paused for more than his usual two seconds in front of the Davys Building, giving himself completely to the spell.

The habit had been born on the day when his father first took him to the old office building. "Here, I hope," that magnificent man had said, "is your career—your life. But I will not urge you to it. I want you to come to this work feeling that it is the only work for you, as I felt, and your grandfather. Without that feeling—" The sentence had gone unfinished, and Christopher Davys, a thin boy of eighteen, had looked up at the building made by his fathers.

The wonderful spell had come then. It was as if for seconds apart from time the crowds of men and women vanished, the early-morning business stream of downtown New York washed away and golden silence left. The building was there. But suddenly it was new. The four-story façade was fresh-carved, the marble doorway shone, and over it in new gilt gleamed the lettering: C. C. Davys & Company. From the flagpole draped the orange-and-black houseflag of the Davys ships, and directly below its folds stood a man in tight boot-strap trousers and square-cut coat and rich fur top hat. His brown face was raised to the building and his black eyes were alight, and he was saying: "It's fine,

fine—fine as the ships that fly its flag!"

There was nothing else in the vision but this man and the building; nothing heard but the words that he spoke.

Then he was gone, and the Christopher Davys who thought of him as grandfather was standing where he had stood and saying: "I want to work here!"

Through the fifteen years that followed, the early-morning vision had held true. To a young man who as the years passed did not lose much of the boy's slender body and smooth, clear face, there was nothing extraordinary about it; it was simply a natural and unquestioned part of his life. And his alone, for he did not speak of it to his widowed mother. She would have said: "Always you've been a dreamer, Christopher. I never did think you were meant for that work. I've asked you often to leave it—I'm going to insist, soon."

It was not the work. There was little of it for him to do: president of the Davys Line, a figurehead, nothing more. But the morning vision of the man with the weather-browned face and shining black eyes, and the gray office building of the house of Davys: these things, he knew, he would never leave. He could not have expressed it, but his thoughts were: The first Christopher Davys, and I, the last Christopher—we are very close, but there is something else. It is missing now, but some day I will see

it; and when I do, the three of us will no longer be separate things, but one.

Nor is this mad, a dark cavern in his mind told him. It is meant to be; it will be.

THIS MORNING, he knew it more strongly than he had known it ever before. He felt that he stood on the threshold of the mystery. He stood lost in this knowledge, and the seconds passed him by, he unaware of their flight.

Street noises came slowly to his ears. A man hurrying by jostled him. He breathed deeply and walked into the building under the faded letters that said: C. C. Davys & Company.

"Morning, Mr. Davys," old Ranny, the elevator man, said. "Nice weather, sir?"

"Morning, Ranny. Yes, very nice weather."

"Well, you never know," Ranny said. "I ain't so sure of it, at that."

The last word always brought the cage to the fourth floor.

Christopher Davys walked down a long wood-paneled corridor. He opened a door, and the clacking of a typewriter was suddenly loud and then stopped as its operator looked up, smiling.

"Good morning, Mr. Davys," she said. She was not pretty, but her brown eyes had a clear friendliness and understanding.

"Hello, Helen."

He crossed the room to the door of his office. There he paused and faced around to her again, hesitantly.

She knew his thought before he could voice it.

"There aren't many." She glanced at a sheet of paper. "At ten thirty, there's Mr. Burroughs. An hour later, Mr. Ronald is to see you. You've a luncheon appointment at one with Mr. Conochie of International Compositions. Then——"

"Could you put them off, Helen?"

"I put two of them off yesterday," she said reprovingly.

"Yes, I know, but this morning—I want it to myself. I'm having a couple of things brought in, and I don't want to be interrupted."

"Well——"

"Fine!"

The girl laughed, and he was smiling with relief as he went into the great room beyond.

This was the room of the Davys men, but more particularly the room of the first Christopher Davys. He had done more than work in this room; here he had dreamed and shaped his visions into the rounded hulls of proud ships and golden venture; and perhaps in this room he had dreamed of one more beautiful than the tallest clipper. Therefore the room was stamped with the personality of that tall, dark, vibrant man.

None of the bustle of the outside world could enter. The solid, age-mellowed wood of the walls and floor stood as a bulwark against what change the years had brought to other things. The one vast rug, woven by Persian hands, caught and muffled the footsteps as surely as it had done fifty years ago. The heartbeat of the great clock was slow and sober and timeless as Time itself. There were vessels of rare jade, and a tapestry of dulled gold and green and crimson. At the far end of the room was a model of the clipper ship *Flaming Wave*.

But the desk struck a note that was harsh and out of key.

It was wide and flat-topped. It had been installed by Jonathan Davys, son of the first Christopher. It belonged to the year 1910, when he had bought it. In the old room it was nothing less than ugly.

But this morning was the last of the flat-topped desk. Soon it was no more, for movers had come and carried it away. In its place was an object which

had taxed the movers' strength to the limit.

This, too, was a desk, yet more than that. It was a mammoth out of the days when men built for permanence and built for beauty too. Its sides were walls of dark deep wood, lustrous with a secret glow that answered in perfect key the paneled walls of the room. It was longer by a half than the board of a full-scaled piano; and its broad upper shelf from which the roll-top came down stood a full five feet from the floor.

But there was something else about it that thoughts and words cannot track down. It was a feeling, a sense almost of a living thing, that clung auralike around the desk and partook of the shifting mellow light that came from the smoothly grained surfaces. The nostrils caught this imponderable something, yet it was not a perfume, for the mind knew it more surely.

Christopher Davys pursued this something and strove to prison it, for he sensed that there was the answer to the old mystery. But it was vain. Though veiled, strange instincts within him were awake and trembling through his blood and bringing a beat of certainty into his mind, yet he could not snare the phantom. The mystery would not flower for him—not yet; but it was close, and the fact of the old desk's presence in the room had brought it close.

He went to the door. Opening it, he looked in at the girl and said:

"Helen—tell Ranny I want to see him, will you?"

Afterward, the girl was to tell how Christopher Davys had looked as he said those words.

"I'd never seen him like that before. Almost—another person, though his features and his voice were unchanged. But he seemed older, somehow, and darker, and somehow very assured and strong—very *certain* of what he was doing. But I can't make you understand. I can't myself."

THE OLD elevator man came into the office as if he was afraid to learn why he had been called.

"You wanted me, sir?"

But there his breath caught in his throat.

"Why," he said, "you've got Captain Christopher's desk! It's back in here! And me thinking all the time it was sold or lost!"

"No," the other man said. "I thought it was lost, too. But the other day I went through the old storage rooms and I came across it, hidden back in a corner."

"Why, that desk," Ranny said; "Lordy! It takes me back, it does. Let's see, now—I was twenty, I remember, yes, just twenty, when I saw that desk first. Captain Christopher, your grandfather, sir, he had it built that year. It was just after he'd got back from that trip he took to China on the *Flaming Wave*—the clipper you've a model of over there. Well, he come back, and the first thing he did was to have that there desk built for him. The very best of everything, it was made of, and—— But I'm talking too much."

"You're not talking too much," Christopher Davys said. "That's why I called you in here. I want you to talk and tell me of my grandfather."

"Tell you of him? Why, I—don't know that I——"

"Here is something else that I found and had brought in this morning," Christopher Davys said.

It lay face down on the desk. He took from off the wall behind a framed picture of New York harbor of the '60s, and adjusted the other object on the hanger left exposed. He turned around slowly.

It was a portrait, a somber-hued presentation in oils of the head and shoulders of a man arrayed in the finery of the last century. The face was keen, vigorously alive, with something of the feeling of a naked rapier about it, yet

softened by a touch almost of mysticism in the black deep eyes and the sharp line of cheek bones and the high narrow forehead under the V of black hair. The man of the portrait had dug into life with both hands—but also he had dreamed and known the splendid madness of a romantic. Women would follow that man, and probably all but one of them would be passed by. Perhaps there had not been even one.

Old Ranny whispered:

"Captain Christopher!"

His eyes fell to the present Christopher Davys, made as if to go past—returned.

"Well?"

"But you—why, you look like him! Not exactly, but—yes, you do! I see it now, with that picture right over your head. Yet—there's something a little—a little different about you to-day. I don't know, I can't rightly understand—but you're older-looking, and darker—— But shuh! I'm imagining——"

"You think I look like him?"

"But why I never saw it before——"

Ranny muttered. His gaze went from the man to the portrait, and returned. He said at last:

"Yes, sir. Just like him in that picture, as he was before he made that trip to China on the *Flaming Wave*. Kind of thin, but strong and dark and full of fire—a proper man he was! And then he goes down with his long step to the sea. 'I'm going to make a trip,' he says. 'I'm getting stale and rusty, and I need the sea to wash me clean.' Just like that he told me, on the morning he left, for he used to like me. So down he goes to the *Flaming Wave*, and she slides away, her white sails falling for the wind; and I watched her go and saw him standing up on the poop, his hands on his hips, staring out into the horizon——"

"Yes?" Christopher Davys said. "And when she returned——"

"When she returned," Ranny said.

The light of remembered beauty left his face; it was old and weary again.

"That was it," he said slowly. "When she returned, he was different. No more life and spirit to him. Something had happened to him. But what it was, no one ever did know, for he never told. But he was older, and there wasn't the light in his eyes. Save for once or twice when I saw him; once or twice I saw him when he was like—well, like a man who'd seen something—I don't know what; unearthly, maybe you'd call it. But that was only once or twice, after he'd been sitting here all alone behind that desk. For that was when he had the desk made."

"Just after he returned from China?"

"Yes," Ranny said. "Right after. And he took a mighty lot of trouble about that desk. He worked out the design himself, and only the cabinet-maker who built it knew the design besides himself. I always figured there was some trick to it, but just what——"

"I'm going to try to find out what it is," the grandson of the dead man said.

The old man looked at the portrait.

"If any one finds out what it is," he said, "I reckon you ought to be the one. I reckon he'd want you to be the one; maybe—maybe even expects you to. For you and him—don't know why I've never seen it before——"

RANNY WAS GONE. The great room was silent. Christopher Davys was alone.

He sat behind the desk, his elbows on it, leaning forward with his chin cupped in his hands. Behind him on the wall was the portrait. Near by was the model of the clipper ship *Flaming Wave*, rakish, proud, lean bow set toward the harbor and the mighty waters beyond.

Through the wide window could be seen the sweep of New York's harbor. A veil of mist had come in from the sea, filtering the sunlight to a strange soft glow that owned the magic of a

cosmic alchemy. It touched the wharves and the tugboats and the freight-laden lighters; and the spires of the buildings between fell back into spectral grayness, so that the city might not have been, but only the harbor and the sea.

He had gone down the harbor, the dark man of the portrait, and away beyond into the mystery. And the months had passed, and finally he had returned. And he was changed. And he had built this desk.

His grandson looked down at the desk.

There were rows of small drawers and cupboards, each one with its door and lock and key. Nor was the surface plain, though it was smooth. The fine-grained wood had been inlaid with lines of other wood, darker in color, arranged into an ornate design. It seemed almost as if they were movable, so boldly did they stand out.

He uncupped his hands, let his fingers rove absently over the desk's surface. How it happened, he did not know; but suddenly one of his fingers pushed inward, and what had seemed solid wood yielded: a small, square section, revealing a little cubbyhole.

He looked at it for a moment without realizing what he saw. Then he reached his hand inside and drew out what had been lying there. His heart was beating faster as he read on the dusty leather cover the word "Diary."

It was very old. It made a little crackling sound as he opened it and gazed at the thin sheets of paper inside, on which a blunt pen had written with bold, dark strokes.

He began to read, knowing as he did that at last the old mystery was opening before him. Here, inscribed by the hand of the first Christopher Davys, was the day-by-day record of what had passed between the time he left New York harbor on the *Flaming Wave*, and returned.

And, reading, his grandson could see

the great clipper as if she were in reality before him—see her moving down the harbor, with white wings of sails spreading free, and the ropes cracking, and the water whorling under her bow and the wind whipping back the spray into the eyes of the tall dark man who stood on her poop and looked out into the horizon, hands on hips and lips wide over his white teeth.

China lay ahead—and time was but a veil—and the pages of the old diary had parted the veil. . . .

## II.

THE POOP DECK of the *Flaming Wave*, rising and falling with the surge of the sea, with the wind cracking like pistol shots in the straining sails, the salt stinging into the cheeks, and somewhere forward a chanty shouted out by the toiling men: "Good-by, fare ye well—ha!—good-by, fare ye well——"

"Mister, mark my words: some day that little island of Manhattan'll be built up to the clouds. She's growing like a greedy kid, and they're building higher and higher——"

"More than now, Captain Davys?" said the mate. "Nah, I doubt it. I reckon they've about reached the limit. Or if they do build more and higher, I hope I'll not be here to see it."

"You won't, maybe, mister, but some son or grandson of mine will, I hope, and be sitting up in that fine building of mine looking out over it all. And I hope he won't want to tear the building down and make a higher one. For he won't get one any better."

"He won't that, captain."

"But I'm glad to be away from it, mister, I'm telling you straight. I come from seafaring men, and I don't feel right till I'm back on the water. Good to see Manhattan sinking into the gray and to know China's ahead."

"Strange land, China," said the mate. "Lot o' things we don't know nothing

of there. Old as the devil, and secret."

"I guess so, mister. But I've got a feeling I'm going to—— Ah, I don't know! Here—have a nip of rum with me to a quick voyage."

"I will that, captain!" the mate said warmly.

DRIVEN by the trade winds, like a great stallion the clipper ran, hooving the thunderous seas behind, with lathered chest and foam on lips, and flanks gleaming under the crusted salt. She logged two hundred and fifty one day, her canvas towers full and groaning under the wind; and the next day two hundred and forty miles passed into the creamy wake; and the third day topped two hundred and ten.

"She's a mighty ship!" Captain Christopher Davys said.

Then panting she swam into the tropics.

The sails flapped empty and the pitch oozed in the seams of the deck and the sea was a mirror of burnished steel. The men gasped for breath and the drinking water was lukewarm. Sharks lolled around the ship on sleek white bellies, and the bos'n caught one and drove a stake through its mouth and flung it out to be ripped by its cannibal brothers. The sun rose and sank in veils of heat, and at night the stars were spikes of icy flame riveted through the dome of heaven. The nigger cook growled voodoo charms and lopped off the ear of a man who teased him and was put in irons for two days.

At last the wind came again, and the *Flaming Wave* rolled southward. She drove through the seas like a thing possessed of devils. And one day Christopher Davys stood in the wheel shelter and watched the savage Horn go past and dreamed of China far ahead.

Days of good weather; days of pouring wind and rain; days of calm; days of a breeze as delicate as the patter

of cat's feet; days, weeks, months—— China.

THE BUSINESS AGENT for the Davys Line was rowed out to the clipper—a wizened little man with sharp eyes and nose, a stick of dry wood dressed in starched white.

"Pleasure to see you, Captain Davys," he said. "Well! Hm-m-m—not much like your father, if I may say so, sir—your mother's well, I trust? And so you've come to look us over. Well—— Thank you, sir; a tot of Jamaica rum would sit very well indeed."

The tall ship lay encalmed in the harbor. Bumboats clustered around her and the yellow men's screechy voices besought the crew to buy. A great somnolent junk drifted past on sails of tattered mats. And there was the land of mystery, veiled in fog, heavy and languid under the hot smell of the East.

The two men sat in the saloon. They drank and drank again. The agent mellowed. He leaned forward and said softly:

"And what really brought you, captain?"

"I needed the sea, and wanted to see China——"

"Adventure? A taste of something new?"

The tall, dark man with the shining eyes and jet-black hair stretched back, white teeth showing in a wide grin.

"Adventure?" he said. "Yes, Mr. Agent, I reckon so."

The agent drank again. He wiped his lips.

"I can give you some adventure, captain. I can give you something that might be damned new, if you're willing."

"Well? Drink up, man, and let's have it."

The agent gasped from the raw rum. He bit off a cheroot, blew out smoke.

"It's a rumor," he said, "but there's the smell of truth to it. I heard it just

the other day—— This is a big land, captain. You hear lots of stories; tall yarns, mostly—but this one—— Yes, if I were your age, I'd go after it."

He paused, and then said soberly:

"Up in the Shan Hai Kwan province—six weeks' travel—no roads; you'd want porters—but up there in the mountains there's a lump of jade as wide across as this room, waiting for some one to come along and take it out—— Rare, precious jade, sticking out of the side of a mountain, and no one there to say no, save maybe a few measly priests and suchlike——"

THEY HAD CLIMBED for weeks, and still the mountains stretched ahead. They had gone on and on until Christopher Davys thought it would be impossible to find the way back. The harbor, the teeming Chinese city to which the *Flaming Wave* had brought him, the clipper herself, the wiry little agent—these things blurred into unreality. Unthinkable was the sober life of New York; America did not exist.

All that existed were the gaunt mountains, peaked with snow and blue-shadowed ice; the forests of birch and cedar and pine; the clear tumbling streams of frosty water; the sharp winds that keened through the mountain gorges, knifing their chill through fur and skin into the very marrow of the bone—and the winding, endless trail ahead. These made up reality. These, and the sparse and fugitive people; the bowed figures of toil in their claptrap villages of sticks and mud; peasants who dug from the flinty ground a barren living, who fled at sight of a white man and his guides and porters, and who sank into sullen resistance when finally brought face to face.

But of people there had been none for the last week. The caravan had gone beyond the zone of meager life. They had come full into the mystery, the land of the great unknown. Entombed in

silence, barred from the outside by range upon range of titan peaks, they were nearing, Christopher Davys knew, the end of the trail.

The chief guide plucked at his arm. The two-score porters had halted and gathered into a whispering group.

"Well?" the white man said.

"Ahead," the guide said in his good English. "This is what the old man in the last village told of. I did not believe him—but there it is."

Christopher Davys followed the pointing arm. He squinted his eyes, and the distant object swam into focus. A smile came to his nut-brown face.

Far ahead, through a cleft in the haunch of the mountain he could make out a spot of gleaming white. It was a building that clung as if by magic to a steep slope.

"What is it?"

"A monastery and a temple, I think," the guide said. "Probably an independent order of monks, with their own religion and worship."

"Will they have seen us?"

"Who can tell? Yet I do not think so. They meditate and pray, and do not look upon the outside world. And they know that no one comes this far by five hundred miles and more."

"Well, then?"

"Perhaps," the guide said, "this jade that we seek is inside the temple."

"Come on, then. We'll go and see."

"I do not think so."

"You mean, we should turn back?"

"No," the guide said. "Have you not promised us a share in what we bring out? But, see, the porters—they are telling each other that devils live in that temple. They would refuse to go farther—now, at least. And the monks might not be friendly; indeed, they might try to harm us. We should find out before we venture on. Who is in the temple—if they are friendly—if the jade is there——"

"Good," Christopher Davys said. "I'll

go. That monks's robe we brought—I'll put it on and go, to-night."

"Were your identity discovered, it might mean——"

"I'll go."

So he went away into the frosty night, given light by a melon slice of moon that stood tiptoe on the crown of a mountain. A brown robe of rough cloth was folded about him, the cowl pulled down over his forehead, a rope serving as belt around his waist, and sandals on his feet.

He laughed at himself as he went. He, Christopher Davys, business man; a good solid man, a "sound" man, looked up to and respected, a man with untold responsibilities—swinging off here by himself in the wildest country under the sky, a thousand miles from nowhere, and with God knew what ahead! Fantastic! But—*good*.

He slipped, fell once or twice, skinned a knee, went on with more care. It was far. It was an hour, he thought, before the great, looming shape of the building he was to investigate formed out of the velvet night before him.

He saw no living figure, and heard no sound. But he paused, sharpened his eyes, and stared at it, trying to reckon out exact shape, size, possibilities.

Temple, monastery, whatever it was, it seemed huge. The side he faced was smooth and tall. He could not make out any slits that would serve as windows. The roof was curved slightly; a Chinese treatment, but not altogether so.

Then he heard the sound.

Voices made it; many voices, coördinated into a definite pulsing rhythm, though very faint. There were humans there somewhere, at least, and not demons. He had almost been expecting some incredible nightmare shape to come weaving out at him, the intruder. But these were humans, chanting, and they were inside.

His eyes picked out the entrance. Then he saw that there was light within. It was ghostly and like no light he had ever seen, but it gave substance to the mystery and oriented him to his surroundings.

As yet, he sensed no alien eyes upon him. Therefore, in utter silence he crossed what was a tiny yard and came to the very wall of the building, and then finally to the edge of the high entrance.

His heart was beating. He flattened against the wall. The chant wove around him. He craned his head around and looked inside.

HE HAD KNOWN that it would not be jade.

It seemed now that he had known that this thing of supreme and wonderful beauty would be here, this perfect thing that brought the blood to his temples, the haze before his eyes, the ache of pain to his heart!

Before him was the very essence of the beauty of women captured on earth.

She stood aloft. She was mounted on a high slim dais at the far end of the great hall that made the temple. Light streamed over her. Her face was lifted and her eyes were closed. Fine-spun stuff of silver robed her, and imprisoning her hair was a filigree of dark jade. But the beautiful figure was revealed through the sheen of the robe, save where the thick dark-amber torrent of hair fell across it.

The white skin, the ambrous hair, the green of the jade and the silver robe—that was the picture.

To her, a thing to worship, the monks chanted. There were scores of them, bowed on the earthen floor, dim shapes in the faint solitary light. Christopher Davys was no more than vaguely conscious of their presence. Drugged, forgetful of time, place, peril, he stood motionless and silent, drinking it in.

It was only when the chant ceased

and the wonderful figure turned and seemed to disappear that he came back to sanity.

He was not confused or at all muddled as to what to do. He acted as if by instinct, as if all his moves now had been planned and set for him long ago. And he knew what the rest of the night would bring.

He skirted round and behind the temple. There he stretched out on the slope of the mountain. He watched. Very soon he saw a sliver of light gleam from a slit high in the temple wall.

He waited an hour.

By then the one light had gone. All was solidly dark. The monks, he knew, had gone to their cells.

He had marked the slit in the wall.

How he scaled to it, he could not tell. It all happened naturally. He was there, clinging to it.

It was large enough by an inch.

He pulled himself through and dropped inside.

A MINUTE, an hour; Christopher Davys did not know. Finally there was a sputter, and the oil in a little vessel flamed into light.

It showed the place to be a bare, rough-plastered cell. There was no furnishing of any kind, save for the one low couch.

She poised as if frozen on the couch. Her body was turned slightly, one arm stretched out. She did not clutch around her the creamy woolen robes that were there for warmth, though only the mass of hair gave her covering. She might have been a Venus rising from the foam; she was unashamed, and quite calm, quite natural, and, though knowing her beauty, utterly without fear.

They looked at each other, and no sound disturbed the silence.

The man slipped the cowl back from his head. Her eyes widened.

"A white man. You are—a white man?"

His lips were parted, and there was a glow on his dark face. That she spoke his own language did not, somehow, surprise him.

"Yes," he said.

"How did you come here?"

"I came from the outside," he said, "searching for jade. I have forgotten that. I have found you."

Her eyes clung solemnly to his face.

"I have not seen a white man for a long time. I cannot remember when it was."

"You are white, too," he said. "You are of my race."

She glanced at her milky skin.

"I know," she said. "That is why I am here. Had I not been white, and my hair this color, the priests would not have kept me when they found me. They would have sent me back to where I came from."

"Where is that?"

She shook her head a little and her eyes returned to his.

"I do not know. I was very small, and my father and mother were dead. The priests found me and kept me. I do not know any more."

"I want you to come with me away from here," the man said.

She looked at him for a long time.

"Yes."

"You will come?"

"Yes. I want to go with you."

He did not approach her. It was not needed. It was as if both had known of this through all their lives; and so it was all natural and unquestioned.

He glanced at the dark entrance to the cell.

"Through there?"

"No," she said. "It cannot be now. One of the priests would hear. I do not know what they would do to you, but they would kill me. They want me to be here forever, you see. They have told me that if ever I try to leave, they

will kill me, and so be able to keep me. I do not know how, if I were dead; but they have told me that often during the years. I am a symbol to them, and they worship me—yet I cannot command."

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I will not lose you, after having found you."

"I am not afraid. But I cannot go with you now, this way."

"How, then?" he asked. "And when?"

She thought.

"To-morrow night," she said. "It is when the priests meditate, alone in their cells. When the period of meditation comes, I go to the temple and am alone there; that is the rule. No one else is near."

"I will come to the temple, then," he said, "and take you away with me."

"Yes."

And then, at the last, he came close to her and touched her. He held her to him for a little while; and her fragrance and beauty enfolded him. And then he went to the slit in the wall and went through it away into the night; and the light was gone, and all was silence and darkness again.

HE KNEW nothing of the next day. He was deaf to the guide's protests and warnings and reminders of the fact that they had come for jade and that he was cheating them. He did not explain, beyond the fact that they were starting their return that night and that some one was going with them. Beyond that he did not talk, after he had seen to it that they were in a place safe from discovery. One thing held sway in his mind: the night, the moment, the woman in his arms—and flight.

Yet at intervals there was something else.

There was a change. Wholly indefinite and elusive, still it was revealed to him by the undeniable difference of—

feeling, instinct; he could not name it—in his mind.

It was this. The night before—standing hushed in the temple entrance, climbing to where she lay, facing her, talking to her, hearing her voice, holding her close—all that had been so clear, so sure, so known in advance and unquestioned. Now it was no longer clear. He was not so profoundly certain of what was to come.

The great passion was still on him, and stronger. The almost mystical devotion and subjection to the beauty he had seen and clasped to him still ran its intoxicating riot through his blood. But, instead of clarity, there was confusion as to the future.

So much knowledge he had: she would always be near him. Why, then, should he feel fear?

The hours went past. The sun's bronze disk climbed down to a mountain's peak and slipped behind. The shadows rose and lengthened and melted together. The chill streamed up from the ground and a ghostly wind came into being in the dim gorges and wailed through the land.

And he was donning the monk's robe and sticking his gun into the belt of his breeches beneath and wrapping the cowl around his head. And then he was stepping out into the somber and whispering night; and the porters were staring at him, and the guide's last words were dying out of hearing:

"You will regret! You will regret! Take warning! You—will—regret—regret——"

HE WAS SOON running. His progress of the night before had been calm and sober in comparison with this. Within minutes, he had lost all moderation.

He did not know why, for the beat of his heart drowned out all thought. It hammered a quickening tempo. It became a drum—a score of drums. It

engulfed him, sounding thunderously through the night, pouring over the world. And he could feel his body quiver from every beat, and the blood within him rushing up to his head. The thunderclaps of his racing heart controlled him, and he could not fight back. And then a fever would flame over him, and leave him drenched in cold sweat, and burn again; and there was a red haze over everything, pulsing with his driving heart—driving—driving——

The temple!

It loomed suddenly before him, a black mass, silent. He did not pause; any caution was lost now in the madness of fear and terror, and he ran on. All the confusion and unease of the day had become a sword that was turning cunningly in his vitals, and the thunder of his heart was an overwhelming thing.

He fell, dragged himself up, saw the entrance and stumbled to it. Its pall immersed him; a wind cold as the ice of the mountains came out of the dark and he shuddered through the sweat and looked around.

Then he was crying out something and staring at the far end of the great hall where years before he had seen a dais and on it a goddess of gold and white—green jade on her hair, shimmer of silver flowing over the body——

*She was there.*

The same faint light played over her. She seemed the same in every way as when he had first seen her. The jade—the silver robe—and the closed eyes and the lifted head——

He ran like a madman to the dais. His foot caught; he fell blindly. He toppled face down on the dais.

He lay so for a second, hearing nothing but the roar of blood and heart. Then his arms reached out, and found something, and held.

His hands wrapped around the smooth bare legs. They crawled upward, he rising, too. And he stared up at her out of bloody eyes.

He shrieked.

His arms circled her. He strained her to him. He shook her. His arms fell down.

She did not move.

*Cold, she was, and hard, and frozen, like the marble of a statue.*

"No! They've killed you!—as they said, as you told me—and with their deviltry they've made you into this—and they'll keep you, will they, they'll keep you——"

"No! They'll not! They won't keep you! You're mine! You've always been mine—and you'll stay mine—you'll stay——"

The thunder of his heart could not be withstood. Beating, beating—*beating, beating——*

### III.

BEATING, BEATING—his own heart——

The diary dropped from his fingers. There was a haze before his eyes, and a whirling madness in his brain—and, without knowing that he did so, he reached blindly, seeking for something—something that would be the final unfolding, the final answer——

Then one hand grasped a projecting corner, tightened, pulled—the whole front of the massive desk moved and slid inward. There was a yawning dark space within—an oblong space that had been cleverly built, and lined with musty old velvet.

And the last Christopher Davys stared down at the cold, marblelike woman's figure that lay there, a thing of such perfect and enduring beauty that the haze went suddenly from his eyes and the thundering beat from his head—and he smiled.

For the mystery was ended, and he and the tall dark man and the wondrous thing that he had found and brought home with him from China—all were at peace.



*Moffatti cackled suddenly.  
"Lord," he said, "look be-  
hind you!"*

**T**HE GOVERNOR of the Rivers leaned back in his office chair, facing a fat man sitting across the desk from him, and spoke one decisive word. "No!" he said.

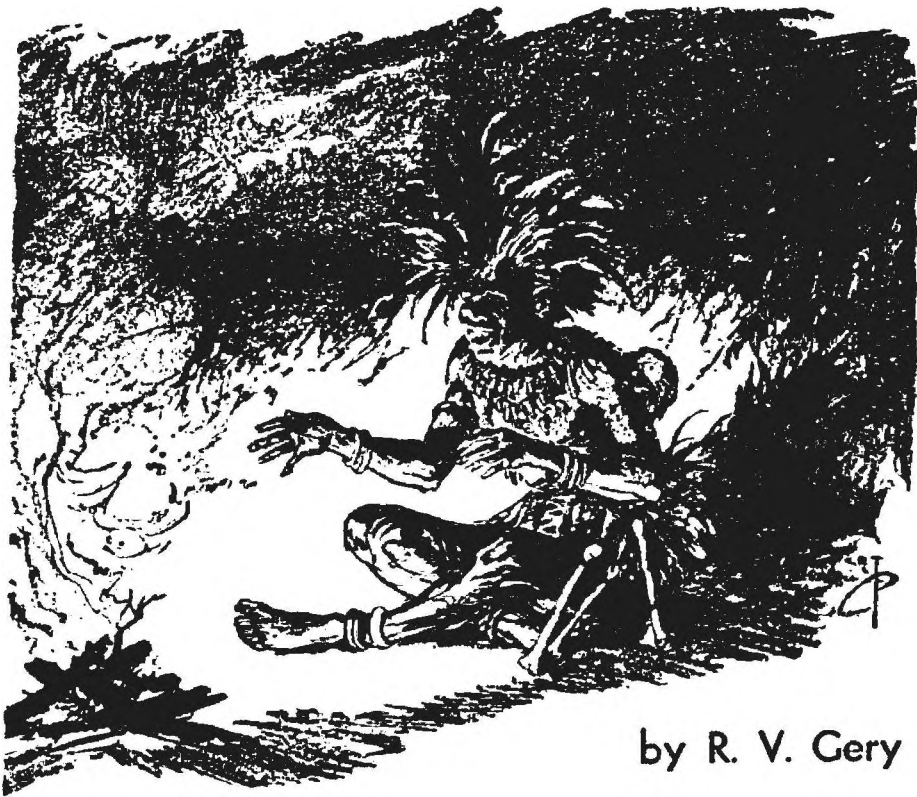
The fat man—a man by the name of Lethbridge—flushed crimson at the laconic negative. "What's that?" he demanded.

Ronald Quayle, C.M.G., put his slim finger tips together and regarded him with a delusively gentle smile. "I said no," he repeated. "Application refused, I'm afraid, Mr. Lethbridge. I'm sorry, but I can't and won't have outsiders mooning around up there in the Charaka

country. Matter of fact, no permits are being issued for any one at all——"

"But—but look here, governor!" Lethbridge spluttered importantly. "I've just handed you a letter from—a letter from the colonial secretary himself, sir! Dammit, you're ordered to give me a permit!"

"Oh, no, I'm not, Mr. Lethbridge!" said Quayle good-humoredly. "Not a bit of it! All I'm told to do," he glanced down at the letter, "is to see you've facilities for—what is it?—exploration in the interior here. That's fine! Go right ahead, Mr. Lethbridge—delighted to assist in any way possible. Except



by R. V. Gery

# Mofatti the Wise

in the Charaka. Stay out of that, please!"

"But it's the Charaka I want!" Lethbridge's crimson deepened. "Your instructions say 'interior,' don't they? That covers the Charaka. You going to disregard them?"

"Certainly!" said the governor amiably. "Any comments, Mr. Lethbridge?"

Mr. Lethbridge had, it appeared—plenty of them. He began to unburden himself, but half a minute was the limit permitted him. The governor glanced at his personal assistant, Tarleton, a lean, dry man, tanned saddle-color by half a lifetime of African suns.

"I think you'd better show Mr. Lethbridge out," he suggested quietly.

Tarleton tapped the fat man on the shoulder. "This way, please!" he said with studied politeness.

"You—you—you——" Lethbridge tore himself free and swung on Quayle. "This is an outrage, sir—a damned outrage! You'll hear more of it, by gad! Yes, you will, my friend! My word for it!"

Quayle was still looking at him out of expressionless brown eyes. "Good afternoon, Mr. Lethbridge!" he said. "I really wouldn't work myself up into that state, if I were you. It's far too hot out here. And just as a last word," a

dangerous edge appeared in the cool voice. "don't try and get into the Charaka without a permit, or I'll make it extremely uncomfortable for you. Good afternoon!"

Tarleton *shepherded—hustled* is perhaps the better word—the fuming Lethbridge toward the door. The black sentry outside clicked up to attention; and for a few minutes Ronald Quayle was alone.

He picked up the official letter Lethbridge had brought and studied it again, a faint frown appearing on his small, highly intelligent features. After a moment he put it down and lighted a cigarette thoughtfully; he was still smoking it when Tarleton returned.

"Well?" Quayle cocked a speculative glance at him.

Tarleton grinned. "Gone off breathing blue fire and brimstone, sir! Swears he'll have——"

"Yes—I know, Tarleton," said the governor a little wearily. "My head on a charger, and all that sort of thing. Seems to me I've heard it before, somehow. But the question is, what's his little game? What's he after here?"

"I think I could tell you what he's *not* after, sir," said Tarleton.

Quayle nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "Probably! I can't exactly see Mr. Lethbridge as an explorer, even if the colonial secretary could. Wonder how he got that letter, by the way."

Tarleton pulled a grimace. "Backstairs work, sir, I should think," he said. "If I might say so, he looks like it."

"Undoubtedly he does, Tarleton. Backstairs work fits him very well. Too well to please me. I'm just wondering whether we aren't going to hear some more of him in that connection!"

"You mean, sir——"

"I mean, Tarleton, that I don't mind laying you a little wager——"

The governor's sporting offer was interrupted by a tap on the door.

"Come in!" he called.

A BIG man entered, clad in the drill uniform of a colonel of the King's Houssas—the black regiment that garrisoned and policed the Rivers. He looked considerably perturbed and carried a small parcel in his hand.

"Well, Mobbs?" said the governor. "What's the trouble now? Mutiny? Riot? Conduct calculated to cause alarm and despondency?"

The colonel set down his tiny bundle on the table, demonstrating it to be a folded package of untanned hide. He unrolled it under Quayle's eyes. "What are those, sir?" he asked.

They were a dozen dull pebbles, looking something like water-worn glass. The governor's brown eyes opened wide, and he whistled softly.

"Damn!" he said.

"They're diamonds, aren't they, sir?" Mobbs inquired.

"They are, Mobbs," said the governor. "Very much so. And where did these cursed things come from?"

"Saud sent them down, sir," said Mobbs. "He got 'em up in the——"

Quayle groaned aloud. "Yes!" he said. "That had to happen! You needn't go on, Mobbs—Saud got them in the Charaka, of course! Confound that place, anyway!"

The three men looked at one another. This was serious—just as serious as the governor's face implied. There were very urgent reasons why diamonds anywhere in the Rivers should be bad medicine, with their almost inevitable consequences—a rush of undesirable whites. But diamonds in the Charaka, that dim, savage borderland between the forest and the desert—even yet only one quarter tamed and full of all manner of queer things—diamonds there were another thing altogether.

"What's Saud say?" Quayle asked. "Where did he get them?"

Colonel Mobbs produced a flimsy piece of tissue paper with a scrawl of crabbed Arabic on it.

"He says," he read, "that he got 'em from a little chief up there—M'fua, the name is. M'fua didn't know what they were, except that he seemed to think they were *ju-ju* of some sort; but Saud spotted them all right, so he sent them down here by runner."

Quayle nodded. "Good man, that Saud!" he commented. "Well, what about this M'fua? Any line on him?"

"Not a word, sir," said Mobbs. "He's a little one-village chief—that's all we've got."

"I see." Quayle turned to Tarleton, who was looking out of the window over the wise estuary upon which administration headquarters stood. "Well?" he asked. "What do you think?"

The secretary shrugged. "Pity, sir!" he said. "We're twenty minutes late. There goes Lethbridge now—back to the steamer!"

It was true enough. There was a launch outside the surf, and beyond it one of the regular coasting vessels wallowed, pausing on her way northward.

The governor rose and joined Tarleton. "Precisely!" he said. "There goes Lethbridge. And I'll double the odds on that little wager of mine, Tarleton. I'll give you ten to one it's diamonds he's after—these diamonds; and I'll give you twenty to one he'll be in the Charaka inside a month—by the backstairs route! Con-found him!"

He stood scratching his chin for a long time. Then he sighed resignedly. "Oh, yes!" he said. "I suppose so. I suppose so! Well, sit down, gentlemen, and let's get some action on this infernal business!"

## II.

UP IN French Dakar, in a frowzy hotel, Lethbridge faced another man. He was still fuming over Quayle. "The little biter!" he said furiously. "Turned me down cold—letter and all! I'll—I'll have his job for this!"

His companion, a stringy fellow with

a red mustache and broken teeth, laughed sarcastically. "Talk a lot, don't you, Tom?" he said. "Think you're no end of a lad, eh? How about a little less gab and a little more action, my boy?"

"What d'ye mean?" Lethbridge growled.

The other man, whose name was Barr, continued to register scornful amusement. "Well," he said, "what's next? You've been to the front door, and got yourself thrown out pretty convincingly, by the look of it. What are you going to do—take it, or come in the back way with me?"

Lethbridge jumped. "The back way?" he asked. "With you? Why, what the——"

"You make me tired, Tom!" Barr returned. "What d'you suppose I've been doing here, while you've been off on that fool job of yours with Quayle? Twiddling my thumbs? Well, I haven't!"

"You seem damned pleased with yourself, anyway," said Lethbridge testily. "What have you been doing—let's hear!"

Barr gave his harsh bark of a laugh again. "Yes; I'm pleased with myself, Tom," he said. "I've got a right to be. When I go after a thing, I generally get it—which is more than some people can say, eh?"

"Shut up!" said the fat man. "I don't want any more of that from you, George Barr. You can't do anything without me, anyway. I found out about these stones, remember—back in London there—and I'm putting up the cash for——"

"Oh, I'm not forgetting!" said Barr airily. "Fair divvy—your cash and my brains, eh?"

"Oh, for the Lord's sake shut up, will you?" Lethbridge was losing his temper. "Let's hear what you have been doing—after all that!"

Barr sucked at his pipe for a moment, as if deliberately tantalizing his man. Then he pulled a paper out of his pocket.

"Take a look at that!" he said, tossing it across with a grin.

Lethbridge unfolded it—a missive written on thin paper. He stared at it a moment, and then cursed. "What's all this tommy rot?" he asked. "Arabic, isn't it? Well, I can't read it—you know that well enough."

"Certainly I do," said Barr. "That's only another of the hundred or so ways you're the most useless thing in Africa this minute, Tom."

"Well, what is it? Where's it come from?"

"If you want to know," said Barr, "it's an invitation."

"Invitation? What d'ye mean?"

Barr laughed. "What I say," he announced. "It's an invitation from a friend of mine to pay him a visit—and maybe do a little business as well."

"Talk sense!" from Lethbridge.

"I am," said Barr. "Mighty good sense, even if you don't recognize it. Listen—d'you want to make your friend Quayle sit up?"

"Of course," said Lethbridge, flushing. "I'd give a mighty deal to see that little swine in trouble."

Barr chuckled again unpleasantly. "You would, eh?" he said. "Well, here's your chance. If you're ready to put up, say, two hundred pounds or so right away, we'll have him in trouble right enough. Soon, too. And get those stones as well! How about it?"

"Let's hear?" said Lethbridge. "What's the scheme?"

"War!" said Barr shortly.

The fat man scowled. "Talk sense, will you?" he insisted. "War, indeed? What poppycock's all that?"

"Just what I say," said Barr. "War. We'll have your Mr. Quayle mixed up in the sweetest mess you ever heard of, if you'll come across with the cash. Get into the Charaka, too!"

LETHBRIDGE appeared to wake up at the name. "What's that?" he asked.

"The Charaka? See here, George, just what is all this? Who's this letter from, and what's it about?"

"Aha!" said Barr, picking it up. "Thought that'd get you! Well, it's from an old friend of mine, if you want to know—a trader up there in the desert. You know what it's like, back of the Rivers—forest, then hills and swamp, then park country, and then the sand. Well, this bird's been pretty much of a fixture up there for years—I met him south of the Tchad long ago. So while you were off moving in that high society of yours down there, I got into touch with him from here."

"How'd you manage it?" Lethbridge asked. "The Charaka's the deuce of a way from Dakar."

Barr winked. "Don't know everything, do you, Tom?" he asked. "There are plenty of ways of getting things done in Africa—if you know how. I know how—that's all!"

"Yes, yes!" Lethbridge chafed impatiently. "I know you're a genius all right, George. Now get on and let's hear what this pal of yours says. What's he want two hundred pounds for?"

"Buying rifles," said Barr coolly.

"Buying rifles! Whew!" Lethbridge whistled. "Gun running, eh? That's pretty hot! Damned risky business, isn't it?"

"Risky!" Barr snarled. "Yes—risky! That's all you think about, Tom Lethbridge—your precious skin. Of course it's risky, you lily-livered, putty-faced specimen! This is Africa—not London!"

"Drop it!" said Lethbridge, again in a fury. "I'm only being careful, that's all. I don't see this gun-running business. What's it got to do with the stones?"

"Everything," said Barr.

Lethbridge dropped on the bed. "Oh, all right—go ahead!" he said. "Spit it out! Let's hear all about it!"

"Certainly," said Barr with mock

politeness. "Anything to oblige. As a matter of fact, the chap that wrote this letter doesn't mention diamonds in so many words. He hints at 'em strongly enough, though. The man who'll buy our rifles is somewhere inside the Charaka there now, trying to stir up hell for Quayle's administration, by the look of things; and this letter says he'll pay and pay well—but not in gold. Something more precious than gold! Does that convey anything to your great mind, Tom—on top of what we know already, eh?"

Lethbridge was sitting up now. "Oh-h!" he said. "I see! That's a different thing, of course. You think——"

"Don't think there's any thinking about it!" Barr said curtly. "If you want to know what I think, I think we've struck lucky—very lucky. This trader here's just the kind we want; he's been mixed up in all kinds of funny rackets in that area for years, I know. A bit of gun running will be just pie for him. He'll get his rake-off, of course—but we'll do the actual work; and if we can't get plenty close to where those stones came from, under cover of helping queer the governor, we're bigger fools than I give us credit for."

"But I don't see how you're going to get the stuff up there," objected Lethbridge feebly. "It's a hell of a way!"

"You don't say so!" said Barr savagely. "Tell me something I don't know! Why, you big cheese, d'you think I haven't been looking after that end of it with these Frenchmen here? It's all fixed—transport and all; and you needn't worry about the risk, because I've been doing a lot of friendly drinking with half a dozen of these fellows, and a Frenchman can wink the other eye as well as anybody. You cough up the cash, and we'll do the rest."

It took twenty minutes more argument to convince Lethbridge, but at last he capitulated, grumbling.

TN—7

"Oh, all right," he said. "Have it your own way! I'll get a draft cashed here, and then I'll leave the rest to you."

"Yes, you'd better!" said Barr sarcastically. "Run on and see about the money, then—and when you're ready with it let me know. I'll drop another little note to my friend, and tell him we're on our way."

"Very good," said Lethbridge. "By the way, what's this chap's name?"

"Saud's his name," said Barr.

### III.

SAUD the trader—a dignified old man with a white beard and flowing *burnous*—sat before his tent at evening.

The scene was a clump of gigantic ironwoods, ten miles or so outside the Charaka's shadowy boundary. To the north, one could already see the failing of vegetation, and a shimmer in the sky betokening a wide expanse of sun-flailed sand; southward, the ragged hills of the Charaka stood out purple against the blue.

Saud was in grave conversation with Barr and Lethbridge, sprawled in the shade at his side, drinking cool sherbet that Saud had made haste to serve them. They had arrived but an hour previously, after a two weeks' trek from railhead that had told a visible tale upon the flabby Londoner. He was pounds lighter, drawn lines appeared deeply etched on his cheeks, and there were great purple discolorations beneath his eyes. Nevertheless, he went on—the kind of hunger consuming him overpowers mere physical discomfort.

Barr himself was unchanged—still his hard, stringy, mocking self. No amount of sun or hard slogging seemed to affect him; lean, sweat-stained, and wary, he smoked his eternal pipe and listened to Saud's flowery compliments. Business was not yet under discussion, although the rifle boxes lay in a pile twenty yards away, their black carriers squatted about

them. In Arab tradition nothing is so cheap as time.

Lethbridge, however, was brought up in another school. "Tell him to hurry up, George!" he said irritably to Barr. "The sooner we're in and out again, the better I'll be pleased."

"I'm quite sure of that," said Barr. "Well, here goes!" He turned to the Arab and shot a guttural question.

Saud's white eyebrows registered faint surprise. "*Sidi*," he protested, "where is the haste? Rest now, and to-morrow——"

"Not so, Saud!" said Barr in Arabic. "To-night. There are the rifles. Who buys?"

Saud blinked, scandalized at the directness of the interrogation. "In a little while, *sidi*——" he said.

Barr, however, was insistent. "Now!" he said. "Or not at all!"

The trader shrugged. "As you will," he said. "The buyer is yonder, *sidi*." He waved a hand toward the hills.

"His name?"

"Nay, *sidi*—himself he shall tell you. To this place he is the Wise One."

Barr frowned, and something of his puzzle communicated itself to Lethbridge. "What's it all about?" he asked. "Is he stalling?"

"No," said Barr. "But there's a little funny stuff here, all the same."

"Funny stuff?"

"He won't tell me this chap's name in there—except that he's called the Wise One."

"Well? Where's the odds what his name is, so long as he pays us? When do we get to see him? That's the point."

Barr put another question to Saud, and the trader smiled gently.

"A little *bakhsheesh*, O *sidi*——" he hinted delicately.

"Oho!" Barr laughed. "That's it, eh? Well, we'll see. Tom, this fellow wants his rake-off——"

"What? In advance? See him in blazes first!"

Barr frowned. "Look here," he said, "do you know these chaps, Tom, or do I? You can't do things on credit here. Saud here's got to be squared, if we're going to get across that border the way we want to. And you'll have to do the squaring—— Hey, what the devil's that?"

He was looking with protruding eyes at something Saud had extracted from the folds of his robe. It was a gray, water-worn pebble, and at sight of it Lethbridge almost shrieked.

"Give it here!" he cried, stretching out a trembling hand. "Let's have a look at that!"

But Saud continued to smile in his gentle, thoughtful fashion, rubbing the stone between his finger tips. Lethbridge snatched at it, but Barr knocked his hand down.

"That'll do, you fool!" he muttered angrily. "Want to frighten him off altogether?" Then he said to Saud in Arabic again: "What is this, O man?"

The trader's smile became a chuckle. "*W'allah*, a question!" he said. "For such as these, *sidi*, men sell their souls to Eblis—and with such as this the Wise One yonder pays for rifles."

"Where—where do they come from?" Lethbridge gulped. "Ask him if he'll let me have a look at it!"

Saud shook his head at the questions. "For whence they come, *sidi*," he said, "I do not know. And as for this," he thrust the stone out of sight with a meaning twinkle, "that Wise One has many such. Pay me now *bakhsheesh*, and this night it may be, you see him."

"Hear that?" said Barr, translating. "Come on, fork it over, Tom. It'll be the last bit of coughing up you'll have to do!"

"Ask him—ask him how much he wants," said Lethbridge unsteadily. The idea of paying a commission for services

yet to be rendered seemed to cause him acute pain.

"Fifty pounds English," said Barr after a moment.

"Fifty—good gad!" spluttered Lethbridge. "I won't pay it—I'll see him damned first! Why, it's robbery!"

"Ssh! Be careful, you ass!" Barr jerked out, as Saud turned an inquiring eye on Lethbridge. "You'll spoil the whole thing! What's fifty quid, anyway? Why, that stone he's got there's worth ten times the money—and there's lots more where that came from. Come on—out with it!"

LETHBRIDGE subsided, muttering; at Barr's repeated invitation he finally dragged out a bundle of English five-pound notes, and peeled off ten of them. Barr handed them to Saud, who took them with an inscrutable nod and stowed them away under his cloak; then he rose, with a glance at the slowly darkening sky.

"Eat now, *sidis*," he said. "In three hours there comes a guide."

He stalked away toward his own caravan, leaving Barr and Lethbridge alone.

Barr looked at his companion with much contempt. "Well," he said, "you're a sweet, useful kind of an animal to have along on a show like this, Tom, I will say! Why can't you be half agreeable with this chap?"

"Agreeable!" Lethbridge's temper flared again. "Why should I be agreeable to a heathen who's got the damned nerve to stick me up for a fifty-pound rake-off—and then want it in advance? How am I to know he won't just walk out on us, anyway?"

"Because I'm telling you he won't," said Barr. "I know this chap, and he'll do what he says he will."

"Humph!" Lethbridge snorted. "Are you by any chance asking me to trust you, George? Because I'd sooner have the Arab—a lot!"

Barr had been sitting on the ground, elbows on knees, staring at Lethbridge quizzically. At this last sarcastic outburst, however, he broke into a laugh. "Well, I'm damned!" he said. "Spit-fire, aren't you, Tom? Must be the heat, I suppose. Here, come on and let's eat—there's no sense in going on this way. I'm not going to quarrel with you, naturally. Only put a stopper on that gab of yours—it runs away with you now and again."

He rose and with Lethbridge sulkily at his heels went across to where their blacks had begun to prepare a meal. The campaigning tent they shared between them had been erected, and a case of gin stood invitingly just within it.

Barr opened a bottle. "Come on!" he said. "Have a tot of this and forget friend Saud for the time being. He's all right, I tell you. If you really want something to think about, how about Quayle? If half what I think's true is true, he's going to get hell over this business!"

"Let's hope so!" Lethbridge drained his tin cup. "I want to see that little jack-in-office catch it hot, I don't mind telling you. Stuck-up swine!"

Barr nodded amusedly. He was getting much entertainment out of his partner's tantrums.

They fed together behind the heavy mosquito curtain, and turned to tobacco and more gin. Darkness had fallen long since, and there were only the camp fires and a couple of lanterns to dim the luster of the African stars. Across the glade among the ironwood trunks they could see Saud, patiently sitting in his own tent, a giant water pipe in full blast. Lethbridge suggested visiting him to see if any more information could be extracted, but Barr shook his head.

"Let him alone!" he said. "He'll tell us when he's ready for us to kick off!"

"H'm!" Lethbridge grunted doubtfully. "Hope he's not going to keep us

sitting here all night, that's all!"

"He won't," said Barr. "Look—he's got somebody with him now."

A shadowy figure had approached Saud's tent, and now stood talking to him in the faint lamplight. It was a tall, gawky black, naked save for a loin cloth, and some kind of a skin cape swinging over his shoulders. He carried a couple of short spears; even at this distance Lethbridge could see the firelight glint on them.

"That'll be our guide," said Barr. "Looks like a small chief. That's a chief's cape he's wearing, anyway. You'd better be getting yourself in shape for a long tramp, Tom. He'll make you sweat!"

Lethbridge grunted. "Trying to scare me off again, eh, George?" he asked. "Well, don't. I wouldn't leave you alone now for a million!"

"And that's deuced kind of you!" said Barr dryly. "Look, here's Saud!"

The Arab came across to them with the black trailing after him.

"M'fua, *sidi*!" he announced. "He will lead you to That One!"

#### IV.

BARR and Lethbridge followed the lanky black southward across a wide, shallow valley, now beginning to be lighted by a great yellow moon.

For the best part of an hour no one spoke—M'fua in all probability because he was nervous, Barr because he was occupied with his own reflections, and Lethbridge from sheer lack of breath. The pace was killing, even for the athletic Barr.

Finally he pulled up. "How far, O man?" he asked in the Rivers dialect of the Bantu.

"Lord," said M'fua, "an hour and the half of an hour, maybe."

Barr glanced at his watch in the moonlight. "Makes it after midnight," he

said, half to himself. "Well, all right. Tired, Tom?"

"Just about played out!" Lethbridge gasped. "What kind of a steeplechase is this, anyway?"

"Better ask this chap!" said Barr with a chuckle. "He knows."

"Wonder if he knows this other fellow's name," said Lethbridge. "Try asking him that."

"Inquisitive, eh?" said Barr. "Well, all right—but if Saud wouldn't tell us, this fellow won't. M'fua," he dropped into dialect again, "now declare the wonderful name of that Wise One!"

M'fua stiffened all over and clapped a fist to his mouth in the black man's gesture of shocked surprise. "Lord!" he quavered. "None speaks his name but he!"

"Told you so!" said Barr to Lethbridge. "And whence comes he?" to M'fua.

"Lord," said the chief, "none knows—save his own great devil!"

"Devil, eh?" Barr muttered. "Sounds like witch-doctor stuff. And the manner of this devil, M'fua?"

But M'fua had had enough. Barr failed entirely to get any more out of him, except that this Wise One was a celebrity wherever wizards and magicians were discussed, and that the Charaka was honored by his presence.

"He's not been in here long, anyway," said Barr. "Come up from the south, by what this chap says. They drift about, these conjurers!"

"Well, let's get on!" said Lethbridge. "And tell him not to make such a hell of a pace!"

Barr laughed, and did so. It might well be, he reflected, one of the last favors he would be conferring on Mr. Lethbridge.

It was going on toward one o'clock, and a bright moon had risen, when M'fua stopped at last. They had been traveling uphill for some time, and among the jumbled rocks and forest

clumps at the edge of the Charaka's hills. There was neither sign nor sound of life, nor of human movement; but M'fua pointed with his spear at a solitary hut, beehive-shaped, and half hidden by a gigantic tree.

"Lords," he said, halting them, "you shall wait!"

He slipped across to the mysterious place, and Barr stood with Lethbridge, waiting. He was wondering in his own mind whether now was after all not a suitable occasion for the removal of this partner of his—here in the wild hills, with only this other and M'fua for witnesses. A single shot from his automatic would suffice—and it would be easy enough to explain to Saud, later, that the thing had been an accident.

He put his hand in his pocket and moved quietly around behind Lethbridge. The fat Londoner was panting and dripping with sweat, while curses flowed from him in an equally steady stream. Barr half drew his pistol—and at that instant M'fua returned, wraith-like across the blocks of light and shade that splashed the ground.

Barr dropped his hand. "Well?" he said in English.

"Lord," M'fua said to him, "this is the word of that Wise One. For your lordship's self, you shall come with me, to speak many fine words to that Wise One; but for this other lord, he shall remain here, fearing nothing."

Barr ruminated. "Oh, all right!" he said, half to himself. "Hear that, Tom—I'm going in to see this What's-his-name, and they want you to stay here. Better do what we're told, I guess."

"Stay here? Alone!" Lethbridge was worried at the idea. "Not I! I'm coming in with you."

"Don't be an ass, Tom!" said Barr. "Where's the sense in offending these chaps? You'll be all right here—and I'm only going into the hut." He laughed shortly. "I can't run away

from you, if that's what you're thinking about!"

Lethbridge subsided again with a groan. "Oh, go on!" he said. "I suppose it's all right. Only tell that chap in there to hurry up—I want to close the deal and get away."

"Yes, I've no doubt you do!" Barr murmured, and then aloud: "Well, I'll see what we can do with him. So long, Tom! Sit there and be a good little boy!"

He went across the glade at M'fua's heels. At the hut door the chief stopped again.

"Enter, lord!" he said, and thrust Barr within.

At first the place was far too dark, even after the background of the night, for Barr to be able to do more than rub his eyes and peer. There was a faint radiance at one end of the hut, however, and after a time he distinguished that it came from a tiny charcoal brazier on the floor, and that there was a man crouched behind it.

"I see you!" Barr gave the conventional Bantu greeting, and sat down fronting the stranger in the darkness.

FOR A LONG minute there was complete silence. "That Wise One"—if this was indeed he—seemed to be examining his guest carefully before making any reply, and Barr found his flickering, half-seen glances distinctly uncomfortable. At last the black—he was a wizened little fellow, Barr now saw—spoke in a thin high voice.

"I see you, lord!"

There was a hint of a cackle of amusement in the title of honor, and Barr's hand went automatically to his pistol butt. Then he jumped slightly, for the hunched little figure snickered aloud.

"Nay, lord!" it said. "Between us there is no need for little guns that say *ho-ho-ho*! Moreover, such little guns do not harm me, for I have a *ju-ju* stronger than they."

Barr was familiar with the rant of witch doctors and played up to it.

"O ko!" he said in polite astonishment. "Now you shall tell me of this ju-ju of yours, and also by what wonderful name you are known."

The ancient man laughed outright, so that an unsavory string of objects about his neck clicked and rattled.

"I am Mofatti the Wise," he proclaimed shrilly. "And I have a devil that sits in my ear, singing me songs against my enemies. From the south am I come to stir up strife against the white lord and his soldiers!"

Barr said "O ko!" again as an inducement to him to continue. Mofatti—he was very clearly a witch doctor of parts—glowered formidably across the brazier.

"Now I think," he said, "that you come to me, lord, bringing guns such as white men use. For a price I will buy those guns——"

He paused dramatically, to allow the information to sink in, and drew a skin bag toward him with one hooked claw.

Barr watched that bag avidly. "And the price?" he said in a half whisper of eagerness.

Mofatti cackled once more. "Neither in rods nor salt do I pay, lord, but in the smooth stones white men love——"

He undid a string about the mouth of the bag and tilted a handful of rough diamonds before Barr's startled eyes.

"He, he, he!" he croaked. "The smooth stones such as white men love. These I will pay against the guns, a stone against a gun——"

"Two stones!" said Barr instantly, the bargaining habit strong on him.

Mofatti put the stones back in his bag and closed it before he spoke again. "Lord," he said with dignity, "first I will see the guns."

"To-morrow," Barr said, and rose.

Mofatti remained crouching over his tiny fire, its glow lighting up his wrin-

kled features and shining on his bright, watchful brown eyes.

Suddenly a strange, excited expression came over his little face, and he cocked his head on one side, as if listening.

Barr, about to turn to the door, checked and stood looking down at him curiously. "What's up?" he asked in English.

Mofatti said nothing for a moment, but his intentness increased. "Lord!" he whispered. "My devil speaks to me!"

Barr was sufficiently on his guard not to register amusement at this. "O ko!" he said. "And what does this devil say, Mofatti?"

The witch doctor squinted abominably, as if in astonishment. "Lord," he said, still in a hushed voice, "now this is a marvelous thing, for my devil speaks of that white one yonder and his soldiers——"

"Eh?" Barr's curiosity got the better of him. "The governor?"

"My devil sings to me," Mofatti proceeded, "that the white one departs for a space to his own land, leaving the fat man over the soldiers in his place!"

"What's that?" Barr pricked up his ears.

Mofatti did not seem to hear him. He was listening again, his mouth wide with astonishment.

"Lord," he said, "my devil sings that your lordship's self comes here to lead us, and free this land——"

"Not on your life, my friend!" said Barr to the universe in general. "No native risings for me——"

"——taking for reward the smooth stones," Mofatti continued, "and the pit whence they come!"

There was a dead silence for a minute, while Barr stood chewing his moustache savagely. "Pit?" he said. "I wonder! Diamond pipe, eh? H'm! That's different, of course!"

Mofatti proceeded, and his next words nearly finished Barr.

"And for the other white lord that sits without, your lordship shall not slay him as is in your mind, but he shall live."

Barr glared like a maniac.

"What the—where——" he began.

Mofatti, however, had fallen into a trancelike stupor, his head on his chest, and the bag of diamonds clutched in one skinny brown fist.

Barr stood perfectly still for a moment, looking at him. Then he turned and went hastily out of the hut, without a glance behind him.

V.

"I DON'T believe a damned word of it!" said Lethbridge. "He's just spoofing you! How's he know anything of Quayle?"

He and Barr were sitting on a rock outside Mofatti's hut, and it was nearly dawn. Barr had just concluded the recital of his interview with the witch doctor, or so much of it as he could tell to Lethbridge, and was being laughed at for his pains. The fat man had no acquaintance with wizardry, except maybe of the financial order.

Barr sucked on his pipe. "Mighty cocksure, aren't you, Tom?" he asked.

"Cocksure! Over this business? Well, why not?" Lethbridge demanded. "Just you tell me how a dirty old ruffian like this would know whether Quayle was on leave or not. The thing's absurd!"

"It is, eh?" Barr chuckled. "When you know as much as I do about Africa, Tom, you won't be quite so quick about saying anything's absurd. There's one thing sure enough—if this business is true, and Quayle has gone, it'll make a mighty difference to Mofatti and his rising. One'd be almost tempted to stay here and lend a hand——"

"What!" Lethbridge almost screamed. "Get mixed up in a show like that? No fear! It's—it's treason, or something

of the sort. We'd be hung, sure as a gun!"

"Yes, you would have to think of that cursed neck of yours, wouldn't you, Tom?" Barr sneered. "But look here—did you ever hear of Kimberley? And the way all that started? The men who made that, Barnato and Beit and Rhodes and the rest of them, didn't do it by sticking at trifles. Yes, and they made millions, too. D'you know what old Mofatti's got here?"

"No!"

"Well, he's got a diamond pipe by the sound of it, and that means a diamond field. And he's offering us—you and me—ground-floor seats at the beginning of it!"

"What d'ye mean?"

"What I say. He's asked me to lead the show—says his devil told him to."

"Lead the show? Yes, and get hung in a month. Even if Quayle's on leave, the Houssas'll mop up this silly business, and then where'll you be?"

"Dining with your friend Colonel Whatever-his-name-is, and getting a medal, probably," said Barr with much complacency. "You're an ass, Tom!"

Lethbridge stared at him. "You mean—you mean you'd double cross Mofatti and these natives?" he asked incredulously.

"Call it that if you like," Barr said. "I mean I'd make myself of so much use to Quayle and his outfit, I'd get whatever I wanted out of 'em, that's all!"

"Whew!" said Lethbridge. "Well, you're a dirtier dog than I gave you credit for, George——"

"You won't come in, then?" Barr asked with a curl of the lip. "Developing a conscience, eh?"

"No; but I'm not shoving my head into any crazy thing like this—not while Quayle's about, anyhow. He's a puffed-up little swine, but I don't fancy crossing him on this sort of game."

"Quayle's away, I tell you!" Barr

was beginning savagely, when he stopped abruptly, listening. Faint and far off, but perfectly clear, there was a buzzing mutter, spaced into long and short rolls and rattles; it sounded like the beating of an artery somewhere inside the brain.

"Hear that?" Barr asked.

"What is it?"

"The drum—the *lokali*! Something's up."

"But what is it?" Lethbridge had risen, nervously.

"Never heard one of them before?" Barr queried. "No; you wouldn't have. That's a signal drum, my boy—the African telegraph, and there are some mighty funny things about that, too."

"What's it say?"

Barr shook his head. "Lord knows! No white man can read that stuff—and not so many natives, either. Wait, though! I wonder if M'fua can."

He called the lanky chief, who had been dutifully waiting to conduct them to Saud. "What news, O man?" he asked.

M'fua put his head on one side for a minute, picking up the rolls and reverberations. "Lord," he said after a time, "the white ruler by the sea departs to his home, leaving behind him a fat man over the soldiers."

Barr leaped to his feet. "Now!" he cried. "What about your witch-doctor stuff now, Tom? Does he know things or doesn't he?"

Lethbridge was staring into the dark. "That is damned funny, all the same!" he admitted. "D'you suppose this Mofatti fellow had a private message earlier?"

"Private message be blowed! He knew!" snapped Barr. "I tell you these witch doctors are a funny crowd. Well, there's Quayle gone, anyway—and that colonel of yours is in charge. Now what about it? What's to prevent us going ahead here with Mofatti? Tell me that!"

"Don't see what difference Quayle's going makes to your pretty little scheme," said Lethbridge. "You'll have that colonel to deal with instead, that's all."

"Then you don't know soldiers as I do," returned Barr acidly. "They're a simple lot—and that's more than Quayle is."

Lethbridge laughed. "Well, I'll tell you one thing, George," he said. "I've had enough of sitting here talking rot at five in the morning. I'm going back to Saud's with M'fua here, and get some sleep. You'd better do the same—you'll be emperor of Africa in twenty minutes if you go on like this. Coming?"

He went off to M'fua, and after a moment Barr followed him, deep in thought.

IT WAS late afternoon when Lethbridge woke, to find Barr sitting considering him.

"Humph!" the wiry man said. "You woke up, then?"

Lethbridge reached out for the gin bottle. "Any objection?" he asked humorously.

"No," Barr said. "I'm glad you woke, as a matter of fact. You're not pretty asleep, Tom, and that's a fact."

"You leave my looks alone, damn you," said Lethbridge. "Are you still mooning round over that lunatic scheme of yours? I want to get those rifles sold and out of this. You see Saud and Mofatti, and take whatever price you can get for 'em, or I'll be wanting to know the reason why, see? There's no rhyme or reason monkeying round here an hour longer than we've got to."

"Think so?" said Barr, and laughed.

Lethbridge started a little at the laugh. "What's the joke?" he asked.

"It's on you," said Barr coolly. "You're going to stay up here with me, Tom Lethbridge, for just as long as I want you——"

"I am like blazes!" the fat man growled.

Barr suddenly took his pistol from his pocket and jammed it in Lethbridge's face.

"Now," he said venomously, "keep your mouth shut, Tom, or this'll go off, see? No; it's not a bit of good howling for Saud, because he went out an hour ago and won't be back for quite a while. You do as you're told, like a good little boy, and maybe I'll let you live—maybe. But you even think of arguing about it, and I'll blow your useless head off!"

Lethbridge's face was a picture. It was his first encounter with human nature in the red raw, and it was a shocking surprise to one of his soft and civilized habits. He stared fascinated down the pistol barrel, and his lips moved; but no words came.

Barr laughed again. "You're a beauty, Tom, aren't you?" he asked. "Devil's own amount of fine talk who you are and what you are, and what you're going to do—but when it comes down to it you're just a lily-livered cur that'd run away from its own shadow. Well, it's lucky for you I can find a use for you up here, or I'd plug you just for the fun of seeing you kick! Yes, I mean it, Tom, so don't you run away with the notion I'm fooling!"

"Wh-what d'you want me to do?" Lethbridge stammered.

"You heard what I said," replied Barr. "What you're told, my boy—just that. Here, take another tot—you want it, by the look of you!"

Lethbridge obeyed, the bottle neck rattling on the cup in his shaking fingers.

Barr watched him until he had steadied a little; then he spoke, almost conversationally. "Now, Tom," he said, "pull yourself together! Are you on?"

For a long minute Lethbridge tried to meet his stare. Barr fingered his pistol pensively, however, and the fat man

could not take his eyes off it.

"I—I'm on!" he managed to get out at last.

## VI.

BARR stood in his shirt sleeves, high up in a valley among the Charaka's hills.

It was three weeks later, and he had just dismissed a motley crowd of blacks, whom he had been industriously instructing in the use of firearms. Lethbridge, fat, perspiring, and more uneasy than ever, was talking to him in plaintive tones.

"We'll all get hung over this show!" he was saying for the fiftieth time. "Let's take what we've got, George, and skip out!"

Barr laughed. He was a grim figure with his hook nose and tanned-leather features, and there was still a suggestive bulge at his hip upon which Lethbridge cast fascinated eyes.

"You're a lovely kind of an animal, Tom!" he said. "Think I'm going to skip out now? Why, we'll clean up millions here, with this little scheme of mine. These animals here," he gestured at the blacks, "aren't worth a sick headache, of course; they'll run like hares when the Houssas get after 'em. And then trust me to fix things up with this Colonel Mobbs. I'll give him Mofatti to do what he likes with—and if that isn't worth sole concession in here, call me a Dutchman, that's all. Skip out! Nothing doing!"

Lethbridge did not respond to his enthusiasm. "You don't know what you're playing with," he insisted. "Quayle'll be back—and he's a killer!" His attitude toward the little governor had undergone a remarkable change since Dakar.

"Killer?" Barr grinned. "There's only one killer you need worry about, Tom Lethbridge! You know where he is. It wouldn't take much, Tom—not much! Just remember that, and you'll get along a lot better. Now, out o' this!"

*Footsack!* There's plenty for you to do over there in camp—go cook my dinner, for instance, and just you make a better job of it than you did yesterday. I'm going down to Mofatti, if I'm wanted, see!"

He strode away, leaving Lethbridge gaping helplessly after him. His present situation was unbearable, which did not say it could be remedied. Barr had confiscated his pistol long since, and every round of the rifle ammunition was carefully hidden. Seemingly, there was nothing for him to do but go on, being hounded forward into an enterprise certain to end in a hanging.

The fat man was nearly weeping as he plodded back to their camp and set to work on the menial tasks Barr seemed to take a pleasure in assigning him.

He was cleaning cooking pots, and clumsily preparing buck meat for the evening meal, when M'fua came out of the trees and approached him with long, loose-jointed strides. He was carrying something in his hand, and at sight of it Lethbridge stared. It was an automatic pistol—and not Barr's.

M'fua was holding it gingerly, as if it might be expected to bite him any minute. Rifles the natives could understand up to a point; they had seen the desert Arabs with such things for years. But these little guns that said *ho-ho-ho*, as they put it, inspired them with almost as much dread as Quayle's own Vickers machine guns.

"What's that?" Lethbridge asked. "L-let's have it!"

M'fua put it in his outstretched hand without a word, and Lethbridge clutched it hungrily. It was loaded with a full clip.

"Where you get um?" he asked, in what he conceived to be Coast English.

M'fua gaped at him, shook his head, and pointed behind him into the forest. Then he stooped, and went through the gestures of picking an object off the

ground. After a moment his meaning filtered through to Lethbridge.

"Picked it up, eh?" he said. "Now I wonder who the devil's going about here dropping loaded automatics all over the shop!"

There did not seem to be any very adequate answer to this one, and M'fua had no explanation. He gesticulated again, said a few sentences in gabbling, clucking dialect—totally incomprehensible to Lethbridge—and stalked off without looking back.

Lethbridge watched him go, completely puzzled; then he glanced down at the thing in his hand. A faint, sheepish grin came over his face, and he thrust the pistol deep into the bosom of his shirt. He was still smiling as he went on with his work, humming to himself.

Barr strode down to Mofatti's mysterious hut among the trees. The wizard had been surrounding himself with much secrecy in these weeks. Only the most select of the blacks were—after fitting ceremonies—permitted entry to his abode, to emerge with rolling eyes and chattering teeth, as tributes to Mofatti's showmanship.

Oddly, the witch doctor refused to see Lethbridge on any account. Barr asked why, amusedly enough, and was treated to a lengthy rigmarole of Mofatti's devil and its likes and dislikes. Apparently Lethbridge was not pleasing to that finicky spirit. Barr, skilled in the oddities of the African mind, laughed good-humoredly and let it go at that.

AS A BARGAINER, however, he found Mofatti very little to laugh at. One stone to one gun had been the wizard's original proposition, and he had not yet budged from it. It was with the idea of increasing this price, and at the same time finding out Mofatti's mind on the subject of the rising, that Barr was there now.

He found the wizened little man hunkered as usual over his fire.

"I see you, lord Mofatti!" he said heartily.

Mofatti grinned. "I see you, lord!" he returned. "Now you shall sit, and tell me of your lordship's fine health!"

There was, as usual, the faintest spice of mockery in his greeting, and Barr felt a trifle nettled. He sat down and cast his eye over a miscellaneous collection of objects in front of the witch doctor. There were a couple of slain chickens, bits and fragments of other things, organic in odor and of nameless origin; and in Mofatti's hands was a dead monkey with which he was busily engaged in toying. By all appearances, some magic rite or other was in process.

"And what be these, Mofatti?" Barr asked.

The wizard glanced up at him, and an expression of much complacency crossed his wrinkled face.

"Lord," he said pompously, "I sacrifice to my devil, who sits in my ear singing many marvellous things——"

He went on with his research into the monkey, something in the manner of one counting a rest in music. As an exciter of curiosity, Mofatti knew his job.

"And what does your devil sing, Mofatti?" Barr rose to the bait.

Mofatti put the corpse down and stared straight at him. "My devil sings," he said deliberately, "that the fat man ruling the soldiers by the sea is dead of a great sickness, and the time is here to free this land!"

"What's that?" Barr jumped as if he had been stung.

Mofatti quietly repeated his assertion. "Now it is in my stomach," he said, "that we arise this night, with the guns and spears, and slay, none staying us!"

Barr had got to his feet; he was shaking with excitement in spite of him-

self. "And how know you this of the fat soldier?" he asked hoarsely.

"My devil sings to me!" Mofatti gave the explanation as if it were the simplest matter in the world, and Barr—remembering a certain previous occasion upon which Mofatti's "devil" had outrun the *lokali* by hours—felt a swift surge of excitement.

"If this be true, Mofatti——" he began.

By way of answer Mofatti raised his hand. There was a contortion of his face that in a white man might have been taken for an impudent wink. "Hear, lord!" he said coolly.

Once again, faint and far away, came the drum's boom and rattle. Barr's jaw dropped, and in spite of himself he felt the hair prickle on the nape of his neck. There was no need to get this message interpreted; Barr knew its tenor already. He pulled himself together.

"To-night we strike, lord Mofatti!" he said.

The wizard chuckled. "So I think!" he said, and went on with his monkey.

## VII.

BARR went charging back to camp. "Hear the drum?" he called to Lethbridge excitedly.

The fat man looked up from the fire. "Why, yes!" he said easily. "What's the fuss now? Mofatti been doing some more prophesying?"

There was a highly unfamiliar note in his voice, of confidence and something like defiance, but Barr was too full of things to notice it.

"That colonel of yours is dead!" he proclaimed. "Mofatti's going to move to-night."

Lethbridge put his cooking fork down. "What's that?" he asked. "Mobbs dead? Who said so?"

"Mofatti first, as usual—then the

*lokali*. It's true, all right—get hold of M'fua and see."

Lethbridge whistled up the black, and Barr with a few questions confirmed his news.

"Humph!" said Lethbridge. "That rather makes a mess of your little double-crossing scheme, doesn't it, George?"

"Makes a mess of it!" Barr laughed. "Makes it a sure thing, you mean! They'll be sending some nincompoop up who'll believe anything you tell him. Man, we're made! Can't you see?"

"No; I can't!" said Lethbridge curtly.

Barr looked at him. "What's all this?" he said with sudden venom. "You trying to be funny, Tom Lethbridge—because if you are, just say so, and we'll see who can be the funniest. You're not by any chance thinking of backing out, are you?"

For a moment the fat man hesitated. Then he temporized. "Depends on what you mean," he said.

"Oh, it does, eh?" said Barr. "Well, I mean this, Tom. We're kicking off to-night with Mofatti—starting at the diamond pipe. He's got some kind of a song and dance on there, wishing us luck and all that. You're coming up there with me—and you're going to stay with me, what's more, until this thing's through. I want you for evidence, among other things. Now, have you got anything to say about it?"

Their glances fenced, and Barr thrust his hand behind him in his old suggestive fashion.

Lethbridge's eyes dropped. "Why, no, George," he said softly. "I've got nothing to say, after all!"

"You'd better not have!" said Barr, and went into the tent.

### VIII.

IT WAS nearly midnight, and dark—so far moonless.

In a forest clearing Barr's blacks were

gathered. They lay sprawled on the ground, jabbering in low, excited tones, the unfamiliar rifles held anyway, their stupid faces cloven by wide, ivory grins.

Barr himself was pacing up and down, awaiting word from Mofatti to bring his force to the rendezvous. There had been an incredible amount of mystery once more about the wizard's movements, but his hut was now empty, and Barr knew he was off in the bush, preparing some *ju-ju* palaver or other as a send-off. He grinned in the darkness, thinking of the ultimate fate of the unfortunate sorcerer.

Lethbridge had been in camp, packing kit. He now came up to Barr. "Ready!" he said with a nervous giggle.

Barr glanced at him in the darkness. "What's the matter with you?" he said. "Seen a joke, eh?"

"Joke?" said Lethbridge. "Why, no—no joke, George!"

"It won't be any joke for you, Tom, if you try any funny tricks with me," Barr told him. "You stick right here, close to me, and don't you move away, you understand, or it'll be bad for you!"

"I won't l-leave you, George!" said Lethbridge meekly.

Barr rumbled in his throat as M'fua came out of the murk.

"Lord," said he, "Mofatti waits!"

Barr pulled a whistle out of his pocket and blew it. There was a surge of movement and a jabber as the blacks heaved themselves to their feet.

"Lead on, O man!" said Barr to M'fua. "Tom, you there?"

"I'm here, George!" said Lethbridge close behind him.

It was an hour's stealthy walking, and the moon was beginning to rise, when M'fua halted. Ahead, faintly visible through the tree stems, was the flicker of a fire.

"It is here, lord," he said to Barr. "The lord Mofatti's word is that ye two go forward, leaving us lesser folk here——"

Barr reflected a moment. "Well, all right!" he said, half to himself. "Come on, you Tom—his reverence wants us."

"I'm with you," said Lethbridge at his elbow.

Together they moved up the forest path, guided by the steady gleam of the fire. Barr walked cautiously, but Lethbridge's breath was coming in thick, choking pants, and his teeth chattered audibly.

Once Barr stopped. "What's the matter now?" he asked viciously. "Scared?"

"N-no, I'm—I'm not scared, George!" said Lethbridge, the pistol behind him. He had long since made up his mind on his course of action, but the approach of the crisis found him shaking all over.

"You're a liar, Tom!" Barr told him with cheerful insolence. "Come on—Mofatti won't eat you, I daresay!"

The fire was burning in a tiny depression—it was not fifty feet across—itsself set in a hollow of the ground, clear of trees. Barr checked at sight of it.

"Here it is!" he said. "That's a diamond pipe all right, by the look of it. There'll be blue clay down there. And there's Mofatti!"

He indicated the witch doctor, still squatted in his awkward attitude behind the flame. He was streaked and smeared with white clay into the semblance of nothing human and staring raptly at the fire.

"Come on, Tom!" said Barr. "Let's go!"

From behind him in the trees came the sound of a scuffle, and the threshing of feet as if some one was struggling violently.

Barr sprang round, his pistol out at once. "Who's that?" he asked sharply. "Tom! Tom! Come here or I'll drill you!"

There was no answer; nothing, but complete silence. Down in the hollow Mofatti raised his head.

"Lord," he called, "you shall come hither to me!"

ONCE AGAIN Barr whipped about. Mofatti was still sitting there, immobile and ghastly. There was an uncanny fascination about the man, and Barr found himself walking toward him.

"Well?" he said in English. "What's the meaning of all this?"

Mofatti rose slowly, and the horrid bracelets and necklaces of human bone clattered as he did so.

"Lord," he said mildly, "is all prepared?"

Barr was recovering himself a little. With a curse for Lethbridge, he said it was.

Mofatti nodded. "And you go with us, lord," he said, "to free this land!"

Barr lost his temper again. "Of course!" he said in English. "Come on—let's move!"

Mofatti cackled suddenly. "Lord," he squeaked, "look behind you!"

Barr did so—straight down the muzzle of a service pistol presented at his head by a tall man in uniform. Behind him were a dozen Houssas, in mustard-colored kit, with gleaming bayonets and grinning teeth.

"Throw up your hands, Barr!" said the big man. "Quick! That's it! No—drop that pistol! Drop it!"

The weapon fell from Barr's fingers, and he spluttered with incoherent rage. "Wh-what's all this? What the devil's the meaning——"

"Hold out your wrists, please!" said the officer, beckoning to a black sergeant. "You're under arrest, Barr!"

"Arrest? What for? Who are you?"

Colonel Mobbs smiled as the steel clicked home. "You'd better ask the governor that!" he said.

"The governor? The governor's on leave!" Barr choked with fury. "What's your name?"

"Mobbs!" said the colonel, and Mofatti cackled again.

Barr swung around, his eyes starting out of his head. "Take that man!" he cried. "He's responsible for all this. I—I give him in charge for——"

"Oh, I think not," said Mobbs. "You'll be the responsible party, I'm afraid, Barr."

"I'm not—I'm not!" Barr was in an agony now. "Take him—arrest him—I'll report you to the governor if you don't!"

Mofatti laughed—an English laugh. "I am the governor!" he said quietly.

## IX.

QUAYLE sat behind his desk at administration headquarters again, with Tarleton and Mobbs in attendance, and a closely guarded Barr before him.

"I'm not wasting any words on you," he said. "You'll go down coast for trial, Barr. Gun running and furthering sedition will be about the charges, and I'll give evidence against you myself. You'll have counsel, of course, but I don't imagine he'll be able to save you. You're lucky we don't hang white men. Sometimes I wish we did. That's all!"

He cocked an eye at Mobbs, and Barr was marched out in silence. Another escort clanked in with a fat and exceedingly deflated figure.

Quayle grinned at it. "I think I told you once," he said, "that if you tried to get in the Charaka without a permit, I'd make it infernally unpleasant for you, Lethbridge. It looks to me, somehow, as if I've succeeded. Eh?"

There was that in his tone which seemed to restore a little—a very little of Lethbridge's confidence. He muttered something that might have been construed as an agreement. Quayle continued to inspect him with amusement.

"You're a couple of clever donkeys,

aren't you?" he asked amiably. "Walked straight into the trap we'd laid for you—the Saud business and all. Saud, by the way, Lethbridge, is a most reliable spy of mine. Just as soon as your friend Barr started sounding him out, we realized how the land lay, and made up our minds to lay for him for something a bit stiffer than mere I.D.B. Crime being always a matter of opportunity, we provided the opportunity—rather successfully I fancy." He set his finger tips together, studying Lethbridge. "The only question is, what am I going to do with you?"

There was a short silence, while Quayle appeared to consider. His lips twitched slightly.

"Well," he said finally, "you've got something in you at any rate, Lethbridge. If it hadn't been for Mobbs here, I believe you'd have plucked up courage to send Barr where he really belongs—perhaps I wish you had. By the way, you've to thank me for that pistol. I couldn't very well let you be assassinated—which was what friend Barr had up his sleeve for you, I fancy. Are you grateful?"

Lethbridge said he was.

Quayle cocked an eye at the window. "There's a boat due this afternoon," he said. "If I let you go, will you take that boat, Lethbridge, and keep on going until you see London again?"

Lethbridge breathed heavily and nodded.

"Very well," said the governor. "Colonel Mobbs, release this—er—gentleman, will you? Tarleton, see he's embarked as arranged, and report to me. Now, Mr. Lethbridge, take my advice, won't you, on just two points? Don't visit Africa again—ever. It's not healthy for a man of your make-up. And don't run away with the idea that because a man's a servant of the crown, he's necessarily a bally fool! That's all—good afternoon!"

*They pulled at him like  
wolves—but he fought  
clear—fought over the  
wires!*

*Illustrated by  
Harry Kirchner*



# Hot Wires

by Arthur J. Burks

**O**UTSIDE, the night was only slightly less black than the darkness which shrouded the blockhouse inside the *aiyu-sen*. Corporal Studdy, of the United States marines, stood in the darkness and looked out. Rain slanted against the roof of the blockhouse like hail. It rattled against the trees beyond the hot wires like volleys of musketry. Water cascaded from Studdy's poncho, for he had just arrived from the coast, after hours spent along unknown trails, drenched eternally by the rain which made a living hell of forbidden Formosa.

He had discovered the blockhouse

quite by accident, noting its ebon outline just before he would have blundered into the wires. He had known it was here somewhere—it and many others like it, Japan's frontier to hold back the hunters of heads who infested the jungle beyond the wires.

"You seek some one?" The words were in clipped English, preceded by the hissing intake of breath which is the custom of polite Japan.

"Yes," said Studdy grimly. "I seek a murderer. He is Private Olsen of the marine corps. He killed a man this morning aboard the *Matson*. It is believed that he managed to swim ashore.

I am his keeper. I come to take him back to punishment."

"And the punishment?"

"Who can say what a court-martial may adjudge? It is possible, even probable, that he will be hanged by the neck from the vessel's yardarm."

"And why should he come here?"

"Where else is there for a murderer to go?"

"But the Formosans will take his head to dry in their shacks."

"That may be. Have you seen him?"

Captain Nichi Moto considered for a moment. Studdy could see his squat figure through the gloom. Drops of water struck the floor with a dead sound. Strange odors came into the blockhouse from the jungles. Peering through a porthole, Studdy fancied he could see slinking figures out there. His duty was plain. If Olsen went out there, through the wires, it was his task to find him, to bring him back, even though he risked his life to do it. The man had worked a miracle to come so far—if he had.

"He is a tall man with blond hair?" asked Nichi Moto.

"Yes."

"He is here, then—two blockhouses down."

Studdy drew his poncho more tightly around him. His eyes were bleak in the darkness. He dreaded the long trek back with a man who must face death to expiate a crime for which there had been no real excuse. Just a card game beside a cot where an automatic hung—a swift hand shot forth, a stunning explosion, and Private Murtha had died on the deck with a bullet in his head. And Olsen had been missing.

The *Matson* had heaved to, dropped anchor, well offshore because Formosa was forbidden; the Japanese did not allow foreigners to set foot on their land. Even Uncle Sam's dogs of war were searched from stem to stern if they touched land, even when storm-driven.

It had been a concession even to allow Studdy to go ashore—without arms. Olsen hadn't asked for concessions, and every man's hands were against him. Even now, if Nichi Moto spoke truly, he was in the hands of the Japanese, who would turn him over to Studdy—and the matter would be closed. It seemed very simple.

But here, he knew, anything might happen. Hourly, every second even, the Japanese expected something to happen, for the true Formosans had never been brought into the fold as friends. Outside the wires which marked Japan's frontier, and which were charged with electricity because even Japanese soldiers did not care to have their heads drying in some odorous shack of stones in the jungle beyond, the brown men of the grim island stalked silently, always watching their chance to attack, to breach the wire, to take fresh heads to their huts in the woods.

Always the Japanese were on the qui vive.

"I'll go for Olsen and not bother you further."

"Not now," said Nichi Moto softly.

"Why not?"

"It is dark. It is raining, and the head-hunters are abroad in the darkness. All living things must remain under cover."

As though to emphasize his words, from far down the line came the chattering and stuttering, sounding eerie, strange, and alien in the night, of a machine gun.

Nichi Moto hissed a deep breath. "They never learn," he said. "Always they fight the wire. At first it was only the wire, and the guns, which held them back. Then we charged the wires. Now they build movable bridges to throw across the wires when they attack. One needs the eyes of owls to watch them. And often they crawl through unseen. If you were to encounter them in the blackness on the way to the second

blockhouse down, I should be desolate—and your head might never be found. Not until morning would we even know they had taken it. However, now that you know——”

Studdy shuddered a little. Nichi Moto had painted an evil picture. He could see himself out there, walking in the pouring, steaming rain, through the ebon murk. He could see a form move out of the blackness at his side, invisible until too late. Then, a blow, and a headless body lying in the mud.

No; it wouldn't do. And Olsen, too, would be anchored to the spot where he now was until morning. Then it would be time enough. And the Japanese would have taken his automatic, if he had managed to get ashore with it. He was on equal terms with the murderer. He would never cease to resent Olsen.

MARINES didn't commit murder, yet Olsen had. If a man committed a crime, he remembered the corps' traditions and stood up to his punishment like a man. But Olsen hadn't. He had run away. He had run as far as he could. The rain, the hot wires, and the Formosans none could see, had stopped him. In planning to take him back, Studdy was ashamed for the whole marine corps, ashamed that these brown men, like Nichi Moto, should know that a leatherneck was guilty of murder and—over and beyond that—running away from punishment.

He shifted uneasily as the machine gun farther along became two guns—two that clattered with a rising crescendo of sound. He knew that calm-eyed Japanese played the guns' muzzles across the dark, probing beyond the hot wires, like twin hoses to drench the creeping enemy with lead. They didn't seem to mind dying, if by so doing some of their number got back through the wires with the coveted heads of their enemies—and all the peoples of the

world, who happened to wander into the jungles beyond the wires, were their enemies.

No screams answered the chattering barrage of the guns. The silence was horrible, suggestive of creeping things, of dead men in the dark and the mud. And there was Olsen, two blockhouses down, with his back to the wall. Behind him he knew that his own waited to take him and hang him to the yard-arm; while ahead of him stretched the limitless expanse of the jungles, inhabited by natives whose mania was heads.

Louder and louder crackled the guns as others joined in the fusillade.

Nichi Moto stood at the loophole and looked out. "They're coming this way," he said. Then he turned and spoke to other shadows in the blockhouse.

Studdy, a soldier who knew guns and how they were manned and worked, knew that yellow men were preparing at this place to hose the creeping terrors of the land beyond the hot wires.

Studdy pressed close against the wall of the blockhouse, watching. He could see nothing in the murk beyond, no glows of light in the darkness, though there were times when the slanting sheets of rain seemed visible. But Nichi Moto had said "they" were coming, and Nichi Moto had been guarding the wires for many months. He knew. He was a taut figure, utterly moveless, his little eyes staring out, as Studdy watched.

He snapped a command at the gunners. Studdy stared closer. He saw a huge shadow rise at the edge of the jungle. He knew it as a movable drawbridge, manned by many of the jungle terrors. They were rushing the wire, to drop the bridge over its current of death, to break through and, if possible, get back with trophies of their success.

Nichi Moto watched them come on. The gunners laid their guns. They began to chatter as Nichi Moto gave the command to fire. Streaks of flame spat out toward the jungle edge. Sounds of

the other guns could still be heard to the right.

Studdy wondered what Olsen must be thinking. He thought he could see faces now. He was sure he saw shadows release their grips on the drawbridge and tumble aside as though they dodged from the hail of lead. But some came on. The bridge was thrown across the wire. Studdy held his breath as silent men raced onto the bridge. The guns boomed them. They toppled and fell. Others took their places.

"Either they have plenty of courage," thought Studdy, "or they do not realize what it all means. They'd be hard babies to handle in a fight. If Olsen got in among them, he wouldn't have a chance. And if he had, it would have been my duty to go in after him. Thank the Lord I won't have to do that."

He shivered a little, picturing himself beyond the wire, slipping through the night, with the constant dread in his mind of attack by the head-hunters. It would have been terrible. This blockhouse was a haven of refuge. If Olsen had gone, the hunters would have got him, but Studdy's superiors would have expected him to go on anyhow, to make sure that Olsen hadn't somehow managed to escape justice.

Nichi Moto and his men were like automatons, like robots. This was all in the day's work to them. They shot and slew, and shot again, and men went down. They didn't worry about the dead, for the living took them back with them when they fled.

For a long moment it seemed they wouldn't flee, for they were reluctant to give back, to leave their improvised bridge. But Nichi Moto kept his guns going, and nothing living could advance against them and keep on living. The natives finally gave back to the woods, carrying their dead, and the drawbridge, from which feet had just departed, bobbed up and down on the hot wires.

And there were other things on the

wire, the dead bodies of men who had almost crossed it. Studdy fancied he could smell the odor of burning flesh. Bodies swung in the breeze. Nichi Moto gave the order to cease firing. He continued to stare out. Studdy looked with him. After a while the bodies on the wire were no longer there, and Nichi Moto sucked in his hissing breath.

"It's better to let them take them," he said softly, calmly. "It saves us much trouble."

Studdy shrugged, silently agreeing.

Now the guns to the right became silent. Nichi Moto managed a sigh of relief. Studdy could see his little eyes, or thought he could, in the darkness of the blockhouse. They were alight with satisfaction. For a few minutes, an hour, the rest of the night, the natives might stay back. And they might attack again instantly. It didn't matter to Nichi Moto. Some night, maybe, the Formosans would be successful—they had been in the past—and the head of Nichi Moto and those of his men would stare sightlessly from some hideous shelf in a native shack as a consequence.

THERE came a knocking on the door. Nichi Moto turned a flashlight on the face which showed dully there when he opened cautiously—a face streaked with blood. A Japanese lieutenant who had been severely wounded, perhaps with knives.

"They got past," he told Nichi Moto. Studdy could not understand Japanese, but there was no mistaking the gestures. "They got past. They got three men, carried them away. And they got the blond American."

Nichi Moto gave Studdy this information.

Studdy became a statue. He wasn't sure he had heard aright. This couldn't be possible. A marine, even though a murderer, simply couldn't fall into the hands of these people.

Nichi Moto sucked in his breath. His

head turned in the darkness. He spoke: "There is nothing to be done. The three of ours they took will be dead by now, and the living can give no help to the dead. It is life. But you?"

"I have to go, of course," said Studdy, and his voice did not sound as though it belonged to him. It seemed to come from a vast distance.

"You understand that we can give you no help? That we cannot come to your rescue or avenge you?"

No; he couldn't expect that, if they made no move to help their own. Olsen, he devoutly hoped, was dead even now, but his superiors would wish to know for sure. Studdy moved past Nichi Moto—who so far forgot rules and regulations as to slip an automatic into his hand. He would have to explain what had become of it if Studdy didn't bring it back, but he didn't give that a thought, apparently.

Studdy grasped his hand. "You're sort of regular," he said.

Nichi Moto did not answer. Studdy slipped into the darkness, and the door closed behind him. He moved to the left along the wire, toward a blockhouse whose guns had remained silent. Somewhere along here he must breach the wire. Funny, he thought, if he got through and found himself face to face with a head-hunter. He'd shoot, of course, and ask questions afterward.

No; he couldn't go this way. The wire would kill him if he touched it, and it was dangerous to try to crawl under it even when one could see. And when one couldn't— No; he daren't try it. He came back to where the improvised drawbridge hung over the wire. The Japanese might make a mistake and fire on him, but it was the only way over the wire, and the bridge, off balance, had tilted so that it touched the ground inside the wire.

He raced for it, went up, past the center. The drawbridge sagged down, touched outside the wire, and Studdy

was running, heading for the jungle. The Japanese guns did not speak. Would Olsen know of his presence? Would he, under torture, tell of a white man on his trail? Studdy didn't know. It didn't seem to matter. He reached, to his surprise, the jungle edge without being attacked.

Now he must go by guess. The whole jungle seemed alive with moving forms. The rain hammered at the leaves like hail. Water dripped from his poncho, the brim of his hat, the end of his nose. He flicked it off with his cupped hand, moved on. Under his poncho, where it kept reasonably dry, his right hand grasped his automatic, and he had difficulty to keep from firing at shadows. Now and again he stopped to listen. No sound but the rain. Men could be all around him, within touching distance, and he would not know. How, then, was he to find what he sought? He must actually see Olsen dead, or alive, before going back.

Studdy pressed on.

He caught the odor, at last, of wood smoke, and shuddered a little as he automatically changed his direction to move toward the stronger smell, and his mind visioned four heads, one of them covered with blond hair, swaying in the smoke—into it, out, back and forth, being cured to the glory of some hunter who would boast about his trophies.

His feet squashed in the mud, coming up over his ankles. Limbs of trees lashed at his face, cut his cheeks, slapped him mercilessly. But he held to his direction. His hand was so tightly gripped on the butt of the automatic that it was a wonder it did not fire. But it didn't.

Knowing he could hear nothing, he no longer stopped to listen, but now he walked with his left arm across his face and his throat, as some sort of protection against a heavy knife which might decapitate him. He had the feeling that the enemy knew every step he took, were

but waiting to take him at their leisure—when sure that he was far enough beyond the hot wires that the Japanese would not succor him.

IT WAS like being a rat caught in a trap, and running around and around, trying to find a way out. But Studdy wasn't trying to find a way out, until he had found the man he was after. That man had been carried away by Formosans, and until he had come in contact with Formosans he could not find him.

He flirted with the idea of lifting his voice and shouting into the night—anything to break this feeling of suspense, as though the very jungle waited and chuckled at his fears. He didn't believe he was really afraid. One never thought of that, until afterward. But he wouldn't have given much for his life.

And then several bodies bumped into him, as though by accident. He could smell an acrid odor. Strange voices spoke, queer whispers that were hoarse as with horrid excitement. Hands reached for him, and his automatic spat bullets into the night. Men fell. He stumbled over them as he went forward—stumbled, gathered himself together, automatically counting. He hadn't many bullets left. He had been crude. Should have used more finesse and saved his bullets, but it was too late now for regrets. And all the jungle had heard the shots, would know that some alien was abroad. And Olsen? Would he hear also? Or was Olsen dead?

Studdy heard the murmurs of voices again, the protesting voice of one man, answering gutturals of other men whose tongues he did not understand. His lips were a firm straight line as he turned in the new direction and pressed forward. The sounds came through the battering of the rain against the trees, down through the whispering leaves. He wished he had more bullets, but what

he had must serve. He entertained the thought, again, of shouting. After all, the shots had advised the enemy of his presence.

He stopped and shouted: "Olsen! Olsen!"

He could hear, thereafter, only the sound of the rain. Voices were no longer audible. He wondered again if Olsen had heard, and what Olsen was thinking if he had heard. Two marines, and one a murderer, were in the midst of the head-hunters. A time to stick together. If he found Olsen alive it was his duty to stick by him, no matter what he had done. But what if Olsen had known into what he was coming, was a friend of these people? Marines had strange pasts, and white men had, on occasion, made friends with the head-hunters. If Olsen were friendly with these people, he would be a fool to allow Studdy to get back alive.

"Olsen! Olsen!" Studdy shouted again, but there was no answer. He felt that if Olsen had been alive he would have answered. Off to his right he heard a heavy body crashing through the woods—then silence, as though some one who ran blindly had stopped to listen. He turned toward the new sound—and men came from every direction, like a sudden rush of a hurricane, to overwhelm him from all sides.

He began to fire into the thick of them, trying to make each bullet do the work of several.

They pressed him close, these men who dared to defy the guns of the Japanese. Studdy knew that his bullets could not miss; that men fell every time he fired; but it didn't seem to matter to the enemy. They came on. Knives burned into his flesh as hands shot out, striking, and he felt his own blood, freshly drawn, run hotly down his sides. It was as though he had been doused with hot water.

His automatic ceased functioning. It was useless, save as a club. He gripped

the butt more tightly. His left hand shot forth, feeling for faces. His fingers touched greasy flesh that made him shiver. He struck with his automatic. Bone and flesh gave sickeningly before the down-smashing muzzle of his automatic. The face fell away before him, was gone. He heard the body strike the mud with a squashing sound, heard a sigh which might well be some man's last. But he scarcely thought of these people as men. Men who cured human heads! Ugh!

And now there was every chance that his own would be cured among them. Strange odors came to his nostrils, acrid odors of limitless significance. Maybe the odors of other heads that dried. It drove him frantic. He knew that his automatic muzzle drank deeply. He struck swiftly, as rapidly as he could lift his automatic and smash down with it.

His left hand went out now, not to feel for faces and measure the distance for his clubbing automatic, but to smash into soft faces—soft, brutish faces with flat noses. Men gasped and gave way, then came back again. The knives came oftener now.

Hands clawed at Studdy's clothing. His poncho was torn off, ripped to shreds. The men chattered, as though, just outside the center of the mêlée, they fought over this strange trophy. He lost his automatic when there was no head under it as he struck—and he almost lost his balance. He didn't know it, but his sagging forward carried him out of the way of a knife that might have slain him. He staggered a little. His shirt went next, prey to the clutching hands which seemed bent on ripping him apart—then his undershirt. And the rain drenched his body, cold, like ice. And he knew that it washed away some of his dripping blood. He fought on. The underbrush all around was trampled, and he knew that some of it was stained with crimson.

His fists now were his **only weapons**, and they seemed to puzzle the men he could hear and feel but could not see. His fists smashed into faces, cheeks, bare torsos, and men gasped with amazement, wondering, doubtless, what manner of weapons this stranger carried.

ONCE OR TWICE, in the thick of the mêlée, Studdy thought he heard that floundering body again, off to his right. No native would flounder like that through the jungle. They knew the jungle, moved through it as silently as cats. Who else would be abroad? Who else but Olsen?

He shouted again, forgetting that Olsen was a murderer: "Olsen! Olsen!"

His voice was a gurgle, and he spat in spite of himself after he had shouted—his lips tasted salty. He had been struck more deeply than, up to now, he had imagined. Pin points of light flashed before his eyes. The jungle spun. The rain wheeled around him, walls of water that revolved. But he kept on fighting. He was gasping with pain and fatigue, but his head was still on his shoulders. Once his enemies laughed as though they enjoyed it all. And Olsen hadn't answered, though again Studdy heard that crashing through the underbrush.

And now the enemy had brought a new weapon to the attack. It was a bludgeon, he decided, maybe studded with nails, bolts, or pieces of iron. It struck him, and his left arm went numb, hung all but useless at his side. He fought to gather his scattered wits, for now he must use his wits if he were to live. He had but one hand.

Studdy dodged blows he fancied he could feel, coming at him out of the thick of the mêlée. The bludgeon struck again, missing his skull and his shoulder, but striking him on the hip. It was as though his whole body went numb at once. But, miraculously, his hands

were both working again, and his arms—and he was fighting as furiously as he had fought before. Men gave back before him, fell, and he stumbled over them.

And then the bludgeon struck—a glancing blow else he would not have known what happened afterward. His knees became as water. The ground came up to meet him. His face went into the mud. He could feel his skull swelling where the bludgeon had struck him. And now the crashing sound again, this time very close—and the mêlée became a savage, brutal thing. A man was swearing in a low, bitter, brutal voice. Men were giving back before a blond giant. Studdy knew it was a blond giant, because lightning came then, or perhaps it was the fires which danced before his own starting eyes—and he saw the tall fugitive, striding into the middle of the men armed with knives.

Yes; it was Olsen. He stood astride Studdy when the head-hunters would have closed on him and slain him, and Olsen was indeed a giant of action. His great arms shot out. His hands fastened in the necks of two men, whose skulls he brought together with crushing force. One man the great Swede gathered up, lifted high—and hurled into the faces of the others.

Olsen, while Studdy watched dully, wondering how big a man's head could become before it burst with a loud explosion, like the explosions which were already going on inside his skull, proved himself. He was a primitive man, a savage, protecting something that belonged to him. He was all around Studdy, darting away for a moment, smashing a man down, but always coming back to stand over Studdy to fight off attackers.

Strange way for a murderer to behave! Once a marine, always a marine, was a marine-corps saying. A marine couldn't deny his heritage, even though he was a murderer. And Olsen was pro-

tecting his own—the man who had come to take him back to punishment.

"Olsen!" Studdy turned on his back to look up.

"Yeah?" said Olsen, never stopping his work.

"I've got to take you back, you know, on account of Murtha."

It seemed silly to speak of the obvious, and Studdy's own voice seemed to come from a far distance and to sound like something bursting inside a rain barrel or a steel drum.

"Yeah; I know," said Olsen, "but you have to get back first, see? And the chances are slim."

"Why not run for it, Olsen? I couldn't do anything now."

Olsen grunted, slashed out. Studdy remembered that Olsen was heavyweight champion of the Asiatic fleet, a man who could pommel even the best scrapers into the resin with a single blow. And he was as fast on his feet as a lightweight.

Olsen drove the enemy back.

He stood over Studdy, panting a little, surveying the surrounding jungle. Then he gathered Studdy up, draped him across his broad back, and started back toward the hot wires. He was softly, savagely, swearing.

"You're a lot of trouble to me, Studdy," he said. "Leave me alone for a week with these babies, and I'd teach 'em respect for white heads."

"Where you going, Olsen?"

"How can you take me back unless you get back yourself?"

THAT was a poser Studdy could not answer. Olsen was taking Studdy back, which didn't seem right when it should have been the other way around. Olsen was taking Studdy back so that Olsen should hang from the yardarm. But of course they'd never make it.

The head-hunters did not molest them until they had all but reached the cleared space before the hot wires. Then they

came again. Olsen took time to prop Studdy with his back to a tree—and then sailed into the head-hunters.

He was magnificent. He took a knife out of the limp hands of a head-hunter—who had just gone limp from a savage right-hander to the jaw—and cut his way through the cordon of attackers, then swung back through them again to Studdy's side, where he stood with his back to Studdy, fighting as though he liked it.

Warm blood—which he knew was not Olsen's—caressed Studdy's face as Olsen fought like a Trojan, battering the head-hunters down and back, clearing the way. Then at last there was a lull again, and Olsen gathered Studdy up onto his back and started a loping run for the wire, heading for the drawbridge which was still in place, as though the Japanese had known they were coming back and had left it for them.

Now Olsen, the great fighter, carried Studdy with one hand, while he fought with the other. He pulled men toward him, almost snapping their spines, then released them as they kept coming in, and met them with savage rights, which scarcely altered the stride he kept toward the wires. He zigzagged. Nichi Moto shouted from the blockhouse in English, and Olsen answered:

"I'll have plenty on my tail, fella, but hold fire until I get inside the wire! Then let me at one of the guns!"

They pulled at him as though they had been wolves and Olsen a stag, as he set foot on the drawbridge, started up. At the top he didn't stop for the bridge to balance, but ran out onto it, and when it sagged down and touched the ground the jarring of it shook Studdy to his marrow. He had been hurt more than he had believed.

Across, Olsen did an odd thing. He dumped Studdy in the mud.

"It can't hurt you any more than you've already been hurt," he said.

He whirled on the drawbridge,

grasped it by the end, ran with it toward the wires, pushing on its bottom with his hands, as though he were walking on those great hands. Head-hunters part way up the bridge overbalanced and fell back, screaming, as Olsen, with his chest almost against the wire, heaved the bridge back upon the heads of his enemies.

Then he darted back, and yelled: "All right, you Japanese, let 'em have it!"

And from Nichi Moto's blockhouse the guns began to chatter, and Studdy's world went darker than the deepest midnight. When he regained consciousness it was to find that it was dawn, and that Nichi Moto had revived him with some drug or other. Standing against one wall was Olsen, his face grave.

STUDDY looked at him, disappointed. Olsen should have made the break, and he had stayed. Studdy was sorry. In his mind's eye he could see the court-martial, and himself a witness, offering evidence in mitigation, trying to save Olsen's life because Olsen had saved his. He managed to stagger to his feet. He could, of course, go back and say that Olsen was dead, but it wouldn't be true.

He could let him go—but a marine did his duty, no matter what happened, and his own was clear. His voice was a raucous croak as he staggered toward Olsen.

"I've got to take you back, of course, Olsen," he said. "But I'm curious. Why didn't you let them kill me? You said yourself that you could have held your own among them."

"Yeah," said Olsen. "Yeah; I did say that. But I discovered that I'd rather be dead and swinging from the *Matson's* yardarm than to be a king among these people."

It didn't sound like the real reason. Studdy couldn't accept that. "And was that the only reason?" he asked.

Nichi Moto was listening to every word. There was wonder on his face as he looked at Olsen, the first man in his experience to go among the head-hunters and come back alive—not only that, but to bring back another man alive, and that the man who would take him out to sea to be hanged by the neck until he died. Nichi Moto shook his head. The ways of the foreigner were strange.

"Well, it sounds sort of silly, I guess," said Olsen. "But I couldn't let these babies scrag a marine—and it was fun battering in their bloomin' skulls. When do we start?"

"I could faint again," said Studdy, "and you could make a break for it——"

But Olsen shook his head. He knew, and Studdy knew, that it wouldn't do. No leatherneck lost a prisoner. It wasn't done. Especially was it true that no leatherneck ever deliberately allowed a prisoner to escape. It was a quandary for Studdy. And his plea before the court might not help, and even if it did, a man had been slain, and a murderer must be punished.

Olsen grinned. His grin was tight, strained. His eyes roved over the defenders of the blockhouse, met the interested gaze of Nichi Moto.

"You know you can't do that, don't you?" said Olsen.

Studdy nodded his head miserably.

Olsen hitched up his trousers, headed for the door. Studdy tried to overtake him, wondering what he intended. Olsen ran for the wire, both hands extended—and Studdy knew what he intended doing. He was preparing to vault the wire. Great heavens, didn't the man know?

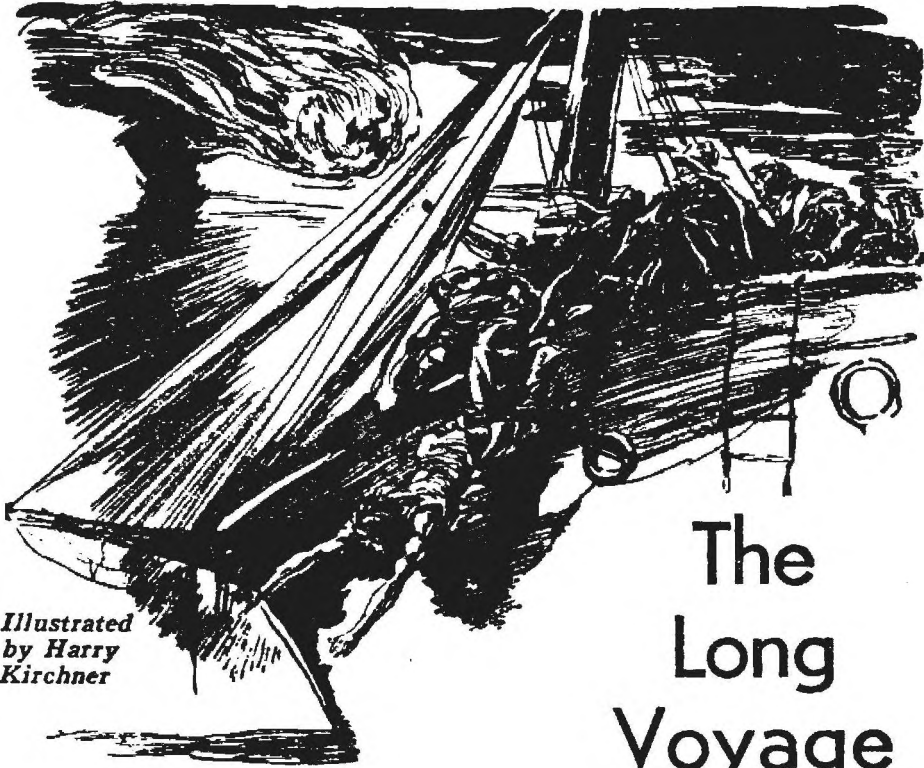
STUDDY screamed a warning, but Olsen's hands had touched the wire. But he didn't vault over. He couldn't. For a time Studdy stared. Sweat broke forth on his cheeks. He looked at Nichi Moto, who shrugged—a strangely French gesture.

"He didn't know," whispered Studdy, "he didn't know—and I couldn't have stopped him."

"No," said Nichi Moto judiciously, "you couldn't have stopped him, and I had no authority—but as to his knowledge, well, my friend, no stranger ever comes here that we do not tell him that the wires are hot. This Olsen knew, all right——"

Nichi Moto did not need to go on, for Studdy knew that in the final analysis, murderer or not, Olsen had helped a fellow marine out of a dilemma—and that in some higher court, beyond the reach of head-hunters, yardarms, and military tribunals, Olsen would make his proper payment to justice.





Illustrated  
by Harry  
Kirchner

# The Long Voyage

*Through the mast, like a knife it  
cut its way. The heat was awful!*

by Captain William Outerson

**T**HE BARQUE *Caroline* sailed across the wake of the moon on a magic night in the South Seas, the happy wind singing in her rigging, the little crested waves slapping softly against her hull, all her whitely gleaming sails spread wide to the friendly breeze, and a curl of rumbling foam rolling along under her bows.

High on the starboard beam, where the moon hung between heaven and earth, the color of the sky was a bright greenish-blue, and no stars were visible, their twinkling points outshone by her

greater radiance; but lower down they sparkled in the deep-blue vault, and on the sky line their white light was dimmed by a thin haze of dust or moisture, so that they looked like the masthead lights of steamers driving up from the east.

Duncan Gray leaned on the taffrail above the break of the poop on the lee side and considered the sky, the sea, and the ship, two immensities with a moving speck between, and all three seemed to him to express the perfection of beauty. Because he enjoyed communion with the strong, clean spirit of the sea, he loved

the lovely decks of the *Caroline* on moonlit and starry nights on the wide Pacific, and in windy dawns when the gray light broke slow and sullen, and the white-crested seas ran stormily.

From one point of view the sea looked like nothing but a dreary sheet of water, placid or turbulent according to the wind, and some people saw it like that, as so much empty and tiresome waste to be crossed as quickly as possible, the quicker the better. To Duncan, the born sailor, it meant much more than that, not only in itself but by reason of its eternal promise, fulfilled from time to time, to reveal beyond the ever-receding sky line something of mystery and wonder, of beauty or terror.

Over on the starboard quarter, which by compass bearing was almost due northwest, a black cloud no bigger than a man's hand loomed above the horizon and grew slowly larger, creeping up the sky like a strange, dark world, blotting out the stars with its sinister, ragged shape and casting a gloomy shadow over the laughing sea. Duncan watched it with interest, shaken for one fugitive moment by a shiver of foreboding that puzzled and surprised him.

There was no lightning, and it was probably only a rain cloud, of which during his nearly four years of seafaring he had seen thousands, so he impatiently dismissed the premonition from his mind.

Glancing over the weather side of the poop, he observed that the mate was paying only casual attention to it, and did not seem inclined to strike any of the lighter sails, merely assuring himself that his oilskin coat and sou'wester were hanging on their customary hook inside the chart-room door; and from this Duncan inferred that the approaching cloud contained more rain than wind, or that the mate thought it did.

Duncan did not therefore go to the half deck for his oilskins, for he wore

only a short-sleeved singlet and a pair of thin, danglee pants, and rain held no threat for him. The weather was warm, and if he got wet, his light cotton garments would soon dry again.

The man on lookout reported a light, dead ahead, and Duncan forgot all about the cloud in the interest of this later event, the sudden appearance of a light possessing such unusual features that he stared at it in mounting wonder.

At the back of his mind he was dimly aware that the mate was growling out muttered curses, which seemed to imply a state of utmost bewilderment, a unique experience for him. He had never seen a light like that before, on land or sea, from the day when he had first set foot on the deck of a ship, to the present moment.

The light first hove in sight in the same way as the day dawns on a clear morning, a thin arc of comparative brightness showing above the horizon, directly ahead of the ship and rapidly increasing in size and brilliance, and for a second or two it looked almost like a star of the first magnitude, or a new star, lifting above the rim of the sea. But as stars do not rise in the south in those latitudes, the mate refrained from making unpleasant remarks to the man on lookout, casting aspersions on his eyesight, his brains, and his seamanship.

Instead of doing that he rushed headlong down the companionway and awoke the slumbering skipper, who leaped from his bunk and came up on the poop close at the mate's heels, halted at the taffrail and gazed ahead.

Against the portentous light in the southern sky he saw the men of the watch gathered on the fo'c's'le head, staring in awed silence, broken by occasional shouts of growing consternation at the swiftly increasing glow, which now showed as a brightly illumined arc covering a large section of the sky. Its center, the source and origin of this

unearthly brilliance, had not yet come in sight above the horizon.

DUNCAN kept his eyes fixed on this new marvel of the sea, which seemed likely to gratify his craving for wonders and mysteries.

It spread up the sky with prodigious speed, lighting up the intervening sea and the ship with a bright yellow glare, that grew swiftly whiter until the source of the strange radiance shot above the sky line and rushed toward the *Caroline* at a speed of some miles per second.

It was an incandescent mass of iron and nickel, flung off from some far disrupted star in boundless space, perhaps millions of years ago, and flaring on its solitary way until the pull of earth dragged it down to partial destruction and immobility.

Duncan saw the scene entire—the white blaze of a meteorite, the sea glittering weirdly in the rays of this diminutive sun, the ship a glare of white light, uncanny and terrifying, and almost directly overhead and slightly behind him the ragged edge of the dense black cloud.

On the fo'c's'le head, the watch below had joined the men on duty, roused by their excited cries, the second mate had come up and stood beside the skipper and the mate on the poop, and the other apprentice was with Duncan, so that the entire ship's company was now on deck staring at the rushing meteorite.

It was near the end of its long journey, descending toward the sea, and its passage from the horizon to the ship was inconceivably swift. Still holding it in his rapt gaze, Duncan was aware of its rapid expansion from a small white ball to a blinding hot mass six or eight feet in diameter, its surface incandescent from friction with the atmosphere.

It struck the foremast above the top with such violence that the sound of the blow resembled the report of a heavy

gun, yet the shock did not seem to check its terrific speed. Flashing aft it smashed through the mainmast and mizzenmasts as if they had been sticks of candy, the three lethal strokes following so closely one upon the other that the clamor of their separate destruction struck upon the ear as the impact of one crunching blow.

Shattering the mizzenmast close to the deck, it drove through the steel bulkhead under the break of the poop, went through the cabin deck and the floor of the lazaret and broke a piece clean out of the stern post, smashing the bottom plates under the counter and protruding part of its white-hot surface into the sea, which boiled around it and sent up a burst of steam.

During its immeasurable span of existence this may have been the first time the meteorite had ever encountered water, bland antidote to the fierce beat of suns and other fires inimical to life, and it soon cooled down, encompassed on all sides by the gently insistent sea.

Inside the ship the intense heat caused the crates and boxes and the woodwork of the cabin paneling to burst into a crackling blaze, and flames began to belch out of the hole punched in the decks. Immediately after this the black cloud overhead, which now covered three quarters of the sky, spilled out its water in a tropical deluge, the rain sluicing down in sheets and drops as large as golf balls; and those two ancient enemies, fire and water, fought stubbornly for a while.

In the moment when he first sighted this visitant from the uncharted deeps of space, Duncan became unaware of sea and ship and sky, except as scenery skillfully disposed to enhance the appearance of the central figure, the star of the performance, for here was the sort of thing his self most deeply craved, a marvel of beauty and terror coming up over the rim of the sea without warning, an act of God that could not

possibly have been foreseen or guarded against. During the ninety or a hundred seconds that elapsed between the first sighting of the gleam along the horizon and the wrecking of the ship, he stood entranced, inwardly glowing with the joy of realization. For that short space of time, self and the sea were in perfect accord. But in the instant before the meteorite made its tremendous assault against the foremast, this harmony was destroyed by a swift change of mood, a sudden realization of stark danger projected on his mind by the instinct of self-preservation, which seems at times to dethrone reason and result in self-destruction.

The flash of panic caused him to whirl round, heedless of the boy beside him, and leap to the broad teakwood top of the taffrail. In the fleeting moment of his pause there, as he threw up his arms to plunge into the sea, his flying figure seeming to be arrested in that attitude only because the movements of the scene was incomparably swift. Something long and rounded like a fragment of spar, moving at twice the speed of a well-pitched baseball, struck against his entire length and hurled him far out from the side of the ship.

He felt the blow on the back of his head, between his shoulder blades, and against his buttocks and heels; and as the explosion of pain from the stroke racked his body, a shutter seemed to close with a snap inside his head, and he went down into darkness.

The butt of the fore topmast, the stout steel spar that bore the brunt of that flaming assault from the sky, was driven aft, and all its upper length of spars and yards fell forward, crashing down on the fo'c's'le head with a noise like the end of the world, which it actually proved to be for most of the men gathered there, the falling wreckage killing or maiming fourteen out of twenty-three on board before it rolled over the side.

The mainmast was struck below the top, where the spar was much heavier and offered greater resistance to the blow, and the broken end came almost straight down on the main deck, like a gigantic pile driver with all the weight of gear above it, pierced through the planking and drove ten feet into the hold, where the 'tween-deck halted it. Then the whole mast fell aft, clashing with the mizzen as it fell forward, and in a pandemonium of crashing and banging they scraped past each other, swayed crazily and tumbled over the side in the midst of fountains and volleys of exploding spray.

THE RAIN continued to come down in torrents, almost as solid as a waterfall and of much greater dimensions, and the flames roared through the gash in the cabin bulkhead, the way of the meteorite, but the sea was pouring in through the hole in the bottom and keeping things cool in those parts.

When the mate threw the cabin sky light wide open, the fire did not have quite so much of its own way, since the deluge continued to descend as from a cloud-burst for half an hour longer, and by then, with the aid of the sea working from below, the fire had been completely extinguished, the boy and the cook throwing buckets of water on the panels where the rain did not reach.

After the cloud had passed and the meteorite cooled, the moon came out and lighted the sea now lying as smooth as glass, the heavy rain having beaten it flat and the wind gone down. The moonbeams fell softly on the wrecked and desolated ship, whose decks were silent now except for the hushed voices of men.

The captain, second mate, and nine seamen were dead, Duncan was missing and reported lost overboard, three men were seriously hurt, and the remainder of the crew, the mate, the boy, the car-

penter, the cook, and four men, were uninjured.

Making his worried way aft from an inspection of the main deck, the mate heard the steersman, who had stood at his post throughout the debacle, shouting that the wheel was jammed and could not be budged an inch, but he put the thought of the disabled wheel aside for the moment, worked his way into the charred and splintered cabin, where the atmosphere was close and steamy, broke out some axes from the rack and gave them to the uninjured men to cut away the shrouds and backstays that held the masts alongside.

The foresail was whole and undamaged, without even a mark on its wide surface, a bland white survivor in the midst of wreck and disaster, and the foreyard hung evenly on the stump of the mast, making the figure of a cross with a shattered head. Observing this, the mate thankfully concluded that things were not as bad as they might be, since with the foresail they could contrive to drift along to the nearest port, which happened to be Papeete. But he was sadly compelled to change his opinion when "Chips" reported that the sea was rushing into the hold like a mill race, through the spaces between the meteorite and the broken plates.

Having inspected the leak, which was nearly as bad as Chips had reported, the mate decided to abandon ship.

The unhurt survivors put into two boats generous quantities of food which they acquired by opening the main hatch and broaching the cargo, a maritime offense slightly less heinous than piracy, barratry, and other high-sounding crimes committed on the high seas.

No law, however, runs on occasions like these, when the ship's proper food supply has been destroyed by an act of God, annihilated by a meteorite, and the vessel was sinking in any case; thus they were committing no robbery in taking all the food they wanted, instead of let-

ting it go down with the ship to rot at the bottom of the sea.

When they had laid in extra quantities of water, bandages, and medical supplies for the injured men, and everything had been properly stowed in ship-shape fashion, they carried the casualties aboard and made them as easy as possible on their restless beds, lowered the boats and pulled away to a distance of forty fathoms to view in silence the last act of the barque, *Caroline*, leaving the dead on her decks to go down with the ship, a fitting burial for seamen.

All of the men who were not injured witnessed the foundering of the *Caroline*. They sat in the boats with heads slightly lowered, motionless and gravely silent, and watched her sink, a scene of tragic significance to be realized by none but seamen, and the broken stump of the foremast was the last they saw of her. When the small whirlpool that marked her grave had subsided, no memorials of death and defeat being preserved by the sea, which was calm again except for the little ripples raised by a breeze sprung up from the west, they set sail for Tahiti, four hundred miles to the south and east.

DUNCAN awoke at dawn and became slowly conscious of himself in a dim and uncertain way, his present position being unique in his experience and his surroundings so entirely novel that he could not feel quite sure of anything. After some minutes of serene inward contemplation, such as all men experience, at times, in the delectable state between sleep and waking, he stirred and touched something, thus becoming aware of the objective world and his own physical existence.

Slowly raising his head he took note of his surroundings, an apparently simple proceeding, but in his present state a matter of some difficulty, and discovering that he was lying half submerged on a large fragment of wooden spar he

glanced about him at the sea in his immediate vicinity.

For the first few minutes he did not seem able to focus his gaze, and this inability surprised him because he had never experienced the least trouble with his eyes and could not explain it, having no recollection of the blow that had fractured his skull and brought him to the border line between life and death. Since the part of his brain now active possessed no faculty of curiosity or explanation and simply took things for granted, he soon forgot his surprise and rather enjoyed the quaint tricks his eyes played on him.

They showed him the sky and the sea, at first in their proper places, then turned upside down and with color schemes different from any he had formerly observed, chiefly blacks and yellows. There were also several blurred images of ships which appeared to be sailing down to him, dismasted except for the stump of the foremast, and he watched them perform the most curious and diverting evolutions—spreading apart and sweeping together, diving under and jumping over each other with admirable ease and agility, whirling round in circles very close together, and, when at last his eyes began to resume their normal function, contracting into a single ship, which he dimly recognized after long and leisured scrutiny as the barque *Caroline*, no longer three-masted, but the same vessel notwithstanding.

A certain element of unreality, of which he was only indistinctly aware, seemed to hover over everything—himself, the sea, the ship, and the sky—a sensation that he had felt on many former occasions, or ones extremely like it, as if the world and himself were part of his own dream. This feeling did not disturb him. On the contrary, he enjoyed and welcomed its presence, because in such a mood he could imagine strange and entrancing conditions, the sort of events he was always hoping

might happen to him some day.

As the *Caroline* bore down on him and he got a clearer view of her, he saw the skipper and the second mate on the poop. Both seemed to be looking at him but made no sign until the wheel had been put down and the ship brought into the wind, when he could hear the booming of the shaking foresail. Then the skipper came slowly over to the near fo'c's'le, the second mate remaining where he stood, and bestowed on Duncan a long and speculative stare as if wondering whether to bring him aboard or leave him adrift on the spar.

After a few minutes, time being apparently of no importance to the skipper, he turned away from the rail and paced slowly back and forth along the poop, pondering deeply, and when Duncan began to suspect he might be left on his lonely perch forever, he dropped his head on the spar and wondered what would happen to him. This action seemed to decide the skipper, and he stopped pacing and hailed:

"Ahoy, Duncan! I'm sending a boat to pick you up."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Duncan replied, feeling happy at the prospect of being aboard his old ship again, though he had not until this moment given a thought to the utter hopelessness of his position.

There was something peculiar in the skipper's voice, he reflected, as he saw him turn and give orders to some men who had come to the main rail and were staring at Duncan in grave and aloof silence. He watched them hoist the boat in the davits and swing her outboard, noticing the same strange quality in their voices as in the skipper's, and a difference that he could not define in the way they sang out as sailors do when they are hauling on ropes.

He was also aware, but with no other feeling than a placid acceptance of things as they were, that the tackle blocks did not make such a pleasant clicking noise, though it sounded agree-

ably in his ears, when the boat was lowered into the water, and the boat itself did not seem quite normal. There came to him only a faint replica of the musical slapping of little waves against her bottom, and the rattle of the oars in the rowlocks, but he admired the easy motion of the four men, who seemed to drive their heavy craft along without effort.

When the boat drew alongside the spar on which he was floating, he tried to raise himself and lay his hands on the gunwale to help himself aboard, but found he could not move his arms or body, which were stiff from long remaining in the same position, and he lay staring at the men, all of whom were familiar to him but looked somewhat different, reserved and silent and chiefly doubtful as if they did not know how to treat him. The strange look in their eyes puzzled and repulsed him.

"You're neither dead nor alive, young Duncan," said the bos'n, who sat in the stern sheets with the tiller in his hand. "The skipper wasn't right sure what to do with you, whether to bring you aboard or let you go back to the others."

"What others?" Duncan inquired.

"The mate an' the carpenter an' the cook an' the other boy, an' seven of the men have gone back to the shore," the bos'n informed him.

While Duncan considered this information, one of the men caught him under the armpits with icy hands, lifted him without effort and set him down beside the bos'n, and Duncan felt relieved when his singlet and pants became suddenly dry and the water in them did not trickle down and wet the seat, which might have annoyed that crusty old mariner the bos'n.

"Why did the others go back to the shore, bos'n?" he asked diffidently.

"They thought the ship was sinkin', I reckon," the bos'n replied, turning that strange glance on him again.

THE MEN pulled silently back to the ship, no other words being spoken during the short trip, and when they had lifted Duncan aboard he discovered that he was regaining the use of his limbs and wondered at the same time why the men's hands were so cold on this warm and sunny sea.

As soon as he could rise from the deck where they had laid him, which he did slowly and with difficulty, they turned away and left him to his own resources, and this puzzled him, too, because some of them had been good friends of his previously and always willing to stay and yarn for a while.

Looking about the deck he observed the jagged steel stumps of the mainmast and mizzenmasts and many other broken ends and fragments, and he stood for a long time surveying the huge hole made by the meteorite in the cabin bulkhead, going below later to sit on the strange sky wanderer, now jammed tight in the stern of a ship floating on the seas of earth, the most impossible event, he thought with pleasure, that had ever happened in the world.

He went up to the main deck again and mounted the poop ladder on the lee side, the captain pacing tirelessly back and forth on the other, his quick, striding steps making no sound. Duncan leaned on the forward taffrail, his favorite and customary position during the voyage, and looked at the mainsail, the one piece of canvas left to the ship. It bellied out before a strong wind, and he could feel the breeze buffeting his body and worrying the legs of his pants, which fluttered out in front of his legs and made a faint flapping sound, to which he listened with the enjoyment he usually derived from small natural activities. Over the side the water was rushing past the ship with surprising speed, and staring downward he reckoned they were making ten knots an hour.

Passing across to the weather side he respectfully intercepted the captain, who laid on him the strange secret look he was becoming used to, speculative and doubtful, as if he did not know what sort of being he was and whether he belonged there.

"Why are we going so fast, sir, with only the foresail set?" Duncan inquired.

"Because," the skipper answered slowly, appearing to choose his words with care, "in the region we are now traversing, the air is much heavier, comparatively, than the ship, which therefore requires less weight of wind to drive it forward."

Having made this cryptic reply, he allowed his eyes to rest a moment longer on Duncan as if wondering whether he understood, and resumed his noiseless pacing, while Duncan returned to the other side quite satisfied with the explanation of the captain, an infallible authority on everything that happened in sky or sea or aboard a ship.

During the entire day these were the only words spoken to him by any member of the ship's company. The second mate came on deck and kept his watch from eight to twelve midnight without once looking in his direction, and the men who came to the wheel every two hours stood as if in a dream during their trick, motionless and silent, and he supposed that with only the foresail set the ship steered herself, since the men never moved the spokes of the wheel.

The silence of the men, however, did not affect him in the least, though he had formerly been on happy terms with most of them, and late in the night his thoughts were diverted elsewhere, for they sighted land. This occurred at four bells in the middle watch.

IT WAS a mountainous country, dimly illumined by the rays of a dying moon, and as they drew nearer Duncan heard the roar of the surf on the reef,

a faint and almost ghostly sound at first. He could see the foam and spray of the breakers flung high in the weak moonlight as they struck against the coral barrier, and the sight charmed him. Never before had he been so deeply impressed by the magic beauty of the world, and he stared ahead eagerly watching for the passage into the harbor whose name he did not know.

There was a smother of white water as they went through, a leaping of the ship and a boiling of surf and rattling of spray on the decks, and in a few minutes they slid into smooth water, gliding swiftly toward a distant beach that glimmered pale gray in the faint light.

When they drew near it, the order was given to put the wheel down, and Duncan noticed that the steersman whirled the spokes round at this order, the ship swung silently into the wind, and the foresail flapped gently for a minute before it flattened aback. As soon as she lost headway there was movement among the men on the fore-deck, a number of whom came aft to the davits and began to lower the boat.

The captain spoke to Duncan again. "Come, Duncan," he commanded. "We're putting you ashore here."

The men held the boat level with the rail until Duncan had stepped aboard, then four men followed and took their places at the oars while those on deck lowered the boat to the water. This time instead of the bos'n the captain sat in the stern sheets and handled the tiller, and under the easy but powerful strokes of the oars the boat drew swiftly to the beach where the skipper stepped ashore, Duncan following and walking across the sands close behind him.

"Here, Duncan!" the captain said, stopping and turning toward him. "This is the best I can do for you. Lie face down on the beach, and at dawn they'll come for you."

Duncan obeyed the order promptly

and thought he had never felt anything more pleasant than the touch of the cool sand on his cheek.

"Good-by, young Duncan!" The captain's voice seemed to be coming from far away and growing fainter. "We're outward bound on the long voyage, and I am overdue."

THE SKY lightened above the hills to the eastward, and a Tahitian girl came briskly along the beach on the way to her fishing boat, but seeing a strange shape lying on the sand she approached and discovered the form of a young man. Standing a foot or two away she surveyed him steadily until her intuition told her he was hurt. Swiftly sinking to her knees and moving close beside him all in one motion, she stooped down and peered into his face, touched him gently on the shoulder and moved her hand to his head, withdrew it and saw it stained with partly clotted blood.

"He is nearly dead," she murmured, barely able to perceive his faint breathing and the weak beating of his heart. "He is beautiful, too."

She leaped up suddenly as if on springs, fled along the beach and through the sleeping streets of Papeete to the hospital, where she roused the night doctor and told him what the sea had cast up on the beach.

The doctor sent the ambulance, and Duncan Gray was taken to the hospital, where the surgeon frowned in consternation after examining the terrible wound on the back of his head. For two weeks they fought to save his life, and only at the end of that time did they allow themselves to hope for success.

Fourteen days after Duncan's arrival, two boats blew into Papeete harbor with the survivors of the *Caroline*, and the wounded who had endured the trip were taken to the hospital, where they immediately recognized Duncan in spite of his emaciation. Since they could not put

the question to him, unconscious, they addressed it to each other:

"How the name of everything, did young Duncan get here?"

"Ask Scotty Macgregor," said one. "He knows everything."

"Yeah?" Scotty's tone was sarcastic, but he was not displeased. "If you boneheads would only use your brains you'd know how he got here. He didn't walk or swim or fly, so he must 'a' been picked up by a steamer. That's easy enough, ain't it?"

"How come nobody saw the steamer? They found Duncan lyin' on the beach one mornin' at dawn. Put yer giant's brains to work on that one."

"That's easy, too. The steamer wasn't bound for this port, an' they dumped Duncan on the beach just before dawn when there wasn't nobody around, knowin' he'd be found. Bein' overdue on account of bringin' him here, an' mebbe with a long voyage ahead of 'im, the skipper hadn't time to hunt up a doctor. He just cleared out."

Ten days later Duncan came back to the world and smiled at the nurse who was feeding him from a baby's bottle, the only means of giving him nourishment, and in a few days he was strong enough to talk in whispers. He remembered every detail of his voyage on the dismantled *Caroline* with its silent company, but when his shipmates had told him the story of her foundering, witnessed by eight men including the mate, he knew he could never tell the true tale of this rescue, and when they asked him how he came to Papeete he merely raised his eyebrows.

The doctor saved him from further questioning: "Duncan knows nothing of what happened from the time he was hit on the head until a few days ago. He couldn't possibly have been conscious, as we understand the meaning of the term, for a single moment during that period. It's a wonder he's alive."

# THE SHORT SHORT STORY CORNER

*\$50.00 will be paid each month for the best short-short story, not over 2,000 words, published.*

*All stories are considered for three issues of TOP-NOTCH.*

*We are seeking new writers through this department.*

*All other short-shorts published will be paid for at the regular rates.*



## *\$50<sup>00</sup> Prize* *Story for April* **The Champ** by O. B. Collier

*"I think," he said softly,  
"next time I'll lick that  
guy."*

NICK" LOGAN fought Benny Palmer the first time in Indianapolis. Nick lost. They fought again a year later in St. Louis. Nick lost again. In the dressing room after the fight, he was affable about it with Bill Fulton, his manager.

"Well, Bill, am I a champ or a chump?" Nick wrinkled his bushy eyebrows, creased with scars, in an attempt to convey a smile; his lips were too bruised to cooperate.

"You're a chump," Bill replied shortly. "He bent the socks off you, and you know it."

"I made a better showing to-night

than I did in Indianapolis, didn't I?"

"Yeah," was the answer, grudgingly.

"Well, fix up a return bout. Keep on fixing up return bouts. I'm going to beat Benny Palmer."

"I tell you, Nick, you better lay off that boy. He's poison to you."

"Nope! I'm gonna keep on fighting him till I beat him."

The return bout was fought three weeks later. Nick had trained himself into perfect physical condition. His stocky body, its chest thick-ribbed, its stomach corded with muscles, could absorb much punishment. When taut, any muscle was hard as a knot.

His face was passive. Gray eyes neither concealed nor revealed. Heavy features indicated that the lips should be thick, but countless cuts had whittled away the inside flesh, giving a hollowed-out appearance. His ears looked like sausage.

Benny Palmer had long, supple muscles that snapped a blow with the speed of a snake striking. His keen eyes missed nothing. His slender legs whisked him about magically.

Nick went in slowly, sturdily, unmindful of the blows that rained on him. The first five rounds were even, but the next two were, decidedly, Benny's. When the gong rang to close the eighth, Nick's senses ignored it. The referee tried to halt him, and he began fighting the referee. His seconds had to climb in the ring and hold him.

The referee awarded Benny Palmer a technical knock-out.

Nick could not appreciate that; he wanted to go on fighting. In the dressing room he had recovered somewhat, but he still was disturbed.

"They made a chump outa me," he growled to Bill. "I coulda finished that guy off in two more rounds. What'd you let 'em stop the fight for?"

Bill's face was serious as he turned to Nick. "Listen, boy; I'm your friend, and I'm going to talk straight. You've been in the fight racket long enough. It'll get you."

"I know what you think. Everybody thinks I'm punch drunk. Well, they're wrong. I know what I'm doing."

"Of course you do, kid. But that's the point; quit while you still know what you're doing. This game is tough."

"I'm tough, too. I can stand it."

"You can, but what's the use? I can land you a soft job any day. You must quit sometime. Do it now."

"We went over all this a year ago,

I'm not quitting till I beat Benny Palmer."

"Don't be a fool, Nick. You know Benny is too good for you."

"Here's my idea: I'll make the rounds for a year. Take on tough boys. Get so I can take plenty of punishment."

"But, Nick——"

"That's what I'm gonna do. Wanta stick with me?"

"Sure, if you're set on it. I hate to see you do it, though."

"I'll quit, soon as I lick Benny Palmer—but not before."

THEY MADE the rounds, and Nick barred no one. In fact, he took on the hardest hitters he could find. He took their hardest blows; took them without a murmur; took them without going down. In his own way, he put down some good boys.

As the year closed, they worked toward St. Louis.

"Bill, I'm in pretty good condition now," Nick said, after a particularly hard fight. "Pretty soon I'll be in shape to lick Benny Palmer."

He said that again after the next fight.

He said it after the following fight.

Then they were in St. Louis. Benny Palmer was in St. Louis. The bout was arranged.

The fight was harder than any previous one between Nick and Benny. They stood, toe to toe, slugging, from bell to bell. By the end of the eighth round, Benny Palmer was tired; badly tired. He had hit Nick with everything he had, and Nick had taken it—standing up.

By the end of the eighth round, Nick's lips were in ribbons, but they were so thin they did not bleed profusely. His eyebrows were so full of scars that they did not cut easily; the scars were tougher than the skin had been.

But Nick did not hear the bell for the

end of the eighth, or, if he heard it, he did not heed it. The referee had to lead him to his corner. But Nick was strangely docile; he did not try to resist the referee. He went to his corner and sat on the low stool.

From beneath his shaggy brows, his gray eyes, deeply tranquil, stared at Benny. He did not seem to hear the bell for the ninth; he appeared to be lost in placid reverie. The seconds had to prompt him to go out and fight.

He went out and fought. He appeared to feel no pain, no fatigue. He fought deliberately.

The minute rest seemed to help Benny, but still he was tired when he went out for the ninth. He almost exhausted himself. Nick did not pretend to guard, and Benny wore himself out hitting Nick; hitting a placid, implacable Nick, who trudged in upon steady feet. When he went to his corner after the

ninth, Benny almost collapsed upon his stool.

The referee again had to lead Nick to his corner. Again, the seconds had to prompt him to go out at the bell.

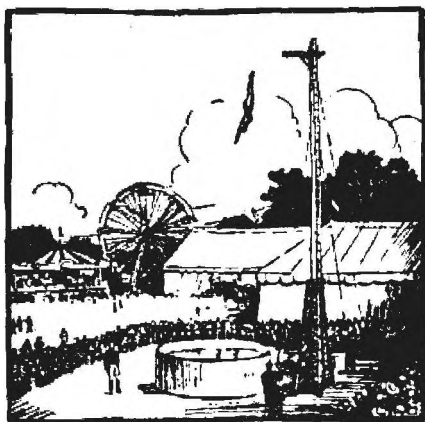
In the tenth, Nick floored his opponent. He offered no protest when the referee shoved him into a neutral corner while Benny was counted out. Nick stood there, a placid look on his face, his eyes tranquil.

In the dressing room, Nick was sluggishly affable. With his taped hand he slapped Bill clumsily on the back.

"Well, old man," he mumbled, "am I a champ or a chump?"

"You're a champ, you chump." Bill was happy. "You beat the socks off that guy."

"Sure I did! You know, Bill, I'm in pretty good shape. Get me a bout with Benny Palmer. I believe I can lick that guy now."



## Death's Photographer

by E. V. Gleason

*"I'll cure you of this thing  
that's killing you," she'd  
said. And now—she was  
plunging down—*

**H**E PRAYED as she climbed the ladder; prayed that the gears of his mind would not start to turn, prayed that if they did they would clash so they could not produce a title for a picture of death. For this was one of those spots, and the girl he loved was on it.

It was a spot similar to those others

that had made him famous as a photographer and feared as a man whose camera presence was an omen of death.

It all started the day he was sent to the Longacre Speedway to get some shots of Gus Scheer who was about to attempt to lower various records for racing cars. As he pulled into a parking space outside the track, he had

thought of the caption, "When it comes to speed, Death holds all the records," and immediately visioned Gus in his car hurtling over the brink at one of the turns.

He had had an uncanny feeling that such an event would happen. So dominant, indeed, was that intuitive sense, he had not gone inside, but had waited with his camera beneath the sharp south turn; and a roaring, flaming meteor had come crashing through the rail, through the air, plunging Gus to his death.

The picture was a sensation.

There seemed to be magic in Brooks' camera after that, for it continued to record equally sensational events. And, strangely, each photographic gem portrayed the same phase of life, the end of it—death.

Fellow photographers envied him. Brooks' luck, they called it.

He had thought it luck, too, for a time. Then he realized that it was something else. He was cursed. He was like some dreadful plague, the germs of which emanated from his brain. He was an agent of death.

IT WAS HORRIBLE! His mind was like a motion-picture projecting machine. First came the title, then the visual, real-life presentation—a man, sometimes a woman, meeting death in some terrible fashion.

He tried to stop his brain from clicking out these prophetic phrases, but he could not. Whatever the scene, though death was only a remote possibility, if he were present and his mind mirrored one of these flashes, disaster visited some one in range of his camera.

To himself, after "The Wings that Failed" had sent Ritti, the human fly, to oblivion, he began to term his titles death sentences. To others he never mentioned a word of the horror that haunted his every waking hour and made sleep a nightmare of spectral

visions of persons his brain had condemned to death.

At last Helen, this girl who was climbing the long ladder that led to the diving platform a hundred feet in the air, seeking a solution for the ghostly mask that had become his face, had wormed it out of him.

"Coincidence, darling, that's all it is. You can't help it. Stop thinking of yourself as an executioner."

That's what she had said, and she had dissuaded him from carrying through his plan to give up his profession.

That was before the public had begun to suspect; before men who risked their lives for sport or gold had begun to look upon him with dread; before Gartland in his syndicated column had referred to him as "Death's Photographer."

Helen whom he loved! Helen who loved him! They were to be married to-morrow if—

Helen entertained no if's. She had made that plain. She was going to make her last appearance in her high-diving act at the park to-day, and to-morrow—well, to-morrow, they were going to be married. Nothing was going to happen. She had even insisted that he should be present to witness her final performance.

"Bring your camera along," she had said. He had protested, but she wouldn't listen. "Stand out there and watch me perform. Think up one of your death sentences. Then I'll prove to you how wrong you are. I'll cure you of this thing that's slowly killing you. Please, darling, come! I won't die. I won't even get hurt."

He was here. He hadn't meant to come. But her words had echoed in his ears all the previous night and this morning: "I'll cure you of this thing that's slowly killing you." He wasn't afraid to die, but he couldn't go on living like this. And if it were his

imagination, what a relief it would be to have it proved!

He had kissed her ten minutes ago in the dressing room, and he was waiting beside the tank wherein, he hoped, her supple body would plunge in another minute.

His hands clenched and unclenched. Sweat stood on his brow. He pushed back his hat, and it fell to the ground unnoticed.

He wanted to run away, but his feet were anchored. He was afraid, yet could do nought to allay his fears, except fight his mind. For suddenly he knew that he couldn't believe as she did. The Brooks' curse was not a myth. He felt that as certainly as his pulse raced; he had but to think of a caption and that life which he held more dear than his own would go the way of the others.

THE CROWD about him was hushed. All eyes were on the tiny figure poised on the platform high overhead.

He must not think. He must not——

A voice behind him whispered, "It's her last dive," and the words took life

in his brain. "Her Last Dive." No! No!

"Her Last Dive." How well it fitted! The termination of her contract. The end of her life. No! No! Brain, stop thinking!

Why had he let her do it? This performance wouldn't mean anything. What if she had broken her contract? Better that than her—— O Lord, help me!

"Her Last Dive." He must stop her. He must stop her! It would happen if he didn't. He knew! He knew!

His voice rang out in a panic-stricken cry.

The girl high above stirred, wavered, then began waving her arms in a frantic effort to regain a balance suddenly lost.

Her whirling body plunged downward toward the sharp edge of the small circular tank.

They found Stephen Brooks in his rooms the next morning. He had synchronized the trigger action of his gun with that of his camera to snap a picture of his own suicide.

The caption found pinned to the coat he wore, read: "Death's Photographer Meets his Boss."



*Suddenly, with a cracking roar, the side of the cliff belched out!*

## Contrary to Nature

by J. Anderson Bush

IF OLD "Gang-a-long" Brett hadn't been so damned human he wouldn't have found himself in his present predicament. If, on the other hand, he had been less human, he wouldn't have found the place in the hearts of his friends, up and down the length of the desert, that he occupied.

Brett was a tradition. He was just as firmly a fixture of the desert as any cactus ever dared to be. The old gold hog—figuratively speaking—had rooted practically half the broad expanse of the mountainous Funeral range with his blunt old prospector's pick, and he claimed he was going to live long enough to finish the other half if need be.

By dint of much picking and scratching around, Brett managed to scratch and rustle enough pay dirt to pay back his friend Tomkins for small loans and advances. If old Gang-a-long was broke he never had any trouble getting a loan or grubstake from his old friend, the owner of Costa Vega's only thirst emporium. Tomkins had staked Brett many times and was perfectly willing to go on doing the same thing.

Old Gang-a-long awoke with the feeling that the whole earth had tumbled upon him. He tried to move and found that the excruciating pain that almost smothered him in darkness was because of his head. Gingerly he passed an exploring hand through his thin white hair, discovering that it was matted with thick blood and that the blood was his own. In the middle of the sticky mass his hand felt an object that was obviously a bump. This almost caused him to faint.

Slowly Brett's senses cleared and incredulity marked his leathery countenance.

"Well, the gol-dinged sidewinder!" old Brett exploded wrathfully, as remembrance dawned slowly upon him. "Why, the sneakin' pup, after I done thought he was a white man and took him in to cure his coughing sickness."

Gang-a-long lurched unsteadily to his feet and teetered a moment before he could find strength enough to take a step forward. While resting he began to take stock of his surroundings. He was behind the shack the two men had built for shelter, and under an old bluff that

rose perpendicularly from the floor of the desert to upward of three hundred feet. Along the side of the bluff, about seventy feet from the floor, ran an old ledge, wide enough to be used as a trail. This ledge would have continued on around the bluff had not a slide at some time or other cut the trail in two.

As his eyes roved up the side of the cliff, he started. He rubbed his eyes thinking he might still be befuddled by the blow he had received. He stared at the spot again. He was sure of it this time. He had seen a small wisp of smoke trailing up the cliff side, and it was coming from the level of the old trail.

Could an enemy be lying in wait up there to shoot him down if he stirred, he wondered? No, hardly. An enemy wouldn't advertise his presence by smoking a cigarette. If it wasn't cigarette smoke, then what was it?

Old Gang-a-long backed unsteadily away from the ledge to get his eyes on a more level plane with the ledge trail. His eyes were glued in a fascinated stare at the thin smoke that persistently trailed up the wall. As he backed away from the cliff, Brett was now sure that no one could be hiding on the ledge.

A few more feet backward he stumbled. The smoke was still coming from the same spot.

Brett moaned as his eyes had at last caught the source of the smoke. "The dirty fiend! He was goin' to make sure of me with dynamite. Drilled a hole in the cliff and was goin' to blow the hull mountain down on me to cover up his dirty work."

As he looked, Brett thought he saw the burning end of the fuse as it lay belching smoke, a scant two inches from the hole wherein he suspected lay a dangerous charge.

With a cry of despair Gang-a-long turned to run, staggered, and fell, overcome from faintness and pain.

A DARK shape in the air, a feathered scavenger, paused in flight and then soared higher to wheel in mid-air above the prostrate man—and to wait.

Slowly the huddled shape on the ground stirred. Brett raised himself weakly on one elbow to stare with bloodshot eyes at that awful wisp of smoke curling maddeningly up the side of the cliff. He reckoned if he had seen correctly he hadn't many minutes to live. That fuse had about two inches to go when he had fallen to the ground. How much time had elapsed in the meanwhile he did not know. Neither did he know how deep into the wall the charge was buried.

Brett attempted to raise himself from the ground again. Finding it too difficult to rise to his knees, Brett tried to crawl. After two weak attempts to move, he dropped his face in the hot sand and lay still.

Suddenly the side of the cliff belched desertward. Brett felt the explosion rather than heard it. He wrapped his arms around his head and buried his face in the warm sand to protect himself as much as possible, the preservation instinct uppermost in his mind.

Black smoke hovered over the gap made in the wall. Small rocks and bits of debris peppered the old man as he lay there. He heard a low rumble as a large chunk of the cliff face peeled off and slid to the desert floor. Some of the rubble rolled down the slide and touched the old man's boots.

Old Gang-a-long shuddered as a second slide peeled off and covered him to the waist. Now, he thought, it would be all over. The next avalanche of dirt would be sure to go on over him. It was impossible for him to move in his present condition and to expect help was out of the question. The nearest habitation was at least thirty miles away.

Old Brett twisted his body a little to loosen the dirt and rock packed around

him. Suddenly he remembered he hadn't heard anything from the slide for a while. Not daring to voice the thought he had in mind, he cautiously unwrapped his arms from around his head. Slowly he twisted until he could see the slide. Little spumes of dust and smoke floated lazily skyward. Outside of a small chunk of rock now and then rolling down the broad bosom of the avalanche, all was quiet.

It was true. The slide was over. Hope welled in the old man's breast. Tears brimmed his eyes until he could scarcely see. He hadn't wanted to go out this way. Now he had a chance. As his eyes looked skyward, he shook his fist at the circling dot overhead. "Go git yuhr dinner elsewhere. You ain't feedin' offn this carcass yet a while."

AS THE young stranger entered the Costa Vega bar, Charley Tomkins glanced up from his task of bar polishing. "Howdy stranger!" he greeted professionally.

The greeting was not returned. "Whisky," said the stranger.

Tomkins complied with the order and covertly studied the man as he drank his liquor. The result of his survey was an instant dislike for the man. The close-set black eyes, low forehead, and the pinched, elongated nose, advertised him for what he was to the veteran barman.

"Hmm," mused Tomkins, "seems like I've seen this hombre before. Say," he exclaimed, slapping the bar with his hand, "ain't you old Gang-a-long's partner, Brack? Seems like I seen you with him when he come in last trip."

The slap on the bar had caused the stranger to start. Now he had gained his composure as he straightened around to face the bartender.

"Well, I'll tell you, I was his partner, but I ain't no more."

"How's that?" asked Tomkins, mildly curious.

"We couldn't agree on the gold division," the man replied; "he wanted better than half. I just up and left him."

"That don't sound like Gang-a-long," mused Tomkins, as the man turned on his heel and left the barroom. "It would more likely be the other way."

THE DOUBLE swing doors swung inward, and "Tex" Moore, the sheriff, holding the doors open, squinted into the darkened interior.

"Think of the devil and in you come," commented Tomkins.

"Complimentin', ain't you?" The sheriff grinned.

"You're one hombre I want to talk to, sheriff. Come on in."

Thirty minutes later a lone deputy hustled two dirty and swearing men into the sheriff's office.

The sheriff showed no surprise as he asked: "What's the charge?"

"Drunk and disorderly, attempted mayhem on each other's persons, and swearing somethin' fierce," said the deputy with a wink at the solemn-faced sheriff.

In fact one of the prisoners was swearing something fierce. "You can't do this to me!" he raged.

"We're a doin' it, though," calmly replied the sheriff.

"I'm entitled to a lawyer," argued the man heatedly.

"Only one in the hull county and he's sick abed. Now if you only had old Gang-a-long Brett here," said the sheriff consolingly, he might help you. He's right smart at helpin' other folks in trouble."

At the mention of Brett, the fellow's face hardened. His darting eyes searched the face of the sheriff for some hidden meaning and, finding none, he turned resignedly toward the cell doors.

"We'll just have a little friskin' bee

before we lock you up, gents," said the sheriff.

"Hmm, quite a pokeful of dust there, stranger," remarked the sheriff. "Miner?" The buckskin bag was carefully hefted by Tex as he waited for his answer.

"Yeh," the man replied; "been workin' with Brett. We cleaned up our dust and separated. I aim to go back East again."

"I see," was all the sheriff said as he eyed the other speculatively. Maybe there was something to Tomkins' idea at that, he thought. The more he watched the stranger, the more he was becoming convinced that the man had something to hide.

TWO indistinct blurs that were gradually becoming more than mere blobs on the desert, rode toward Costa Vega. One, with an old battered desert sombrero, that rode on top of a white bandage-swathed head, seemed to look as happy as he did ridiculous.

"You're back with the corpse, I see," said Tex Moore to Tomkins as he wrung old Gang-a-long's hand. "Well, so long as everything's all right I'll just turn that hombre loose. Ten days for drunk and disorderly is just about the limit, anyway." Moore winked at Tomkins as he said that.

"Not so fast," interposed Tomkins; "that fella is almost a murderer. Almost! Look at the bean he gave Pop."

Brett had said nothing, but now he asked the sheriff if he might see the prisoner.

"Sure thing!" replied Moore, "and I'll bet he'll be as tickled as a long-lost son to see you, too. Leave your shootin' iron on my desk, not that I'd blame you much at that."

WHEN Brack became aware that some one was looking through the bars at him he glanced up. When his eyes

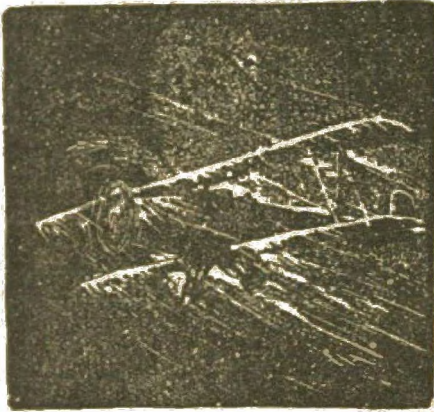
fell on Brett, his mouth popped open, and he shrank back against the cold stone of his cell.

"Take him away!" he screamed. "Take him away!"

"I ain't dead," Gang-a-long assured him. "I'm live enough to tell you a few things. First, you're the first man I ever partnered in all my time on the desert that ever done me such a dirty trick. Second, although you didn't intend to, you done me the biggest favor any man ever done. So I'm callin' it square. Look!"

Old Brett pulled a pouch from his pocket and dumped the contents on the stone floor. At the metallic sound, Brack rose shakily from his bunk and peered through the bars. As Brett's fingers fondled and caressed the richly veined gold-bearing quartz, Brack's face took on a sickly pallor. He could barely hear what Brett was saying as his senses reeled.

"And that's from the cliff you tried to bury me under. I been searchin' forty-odd year for that, and you were my partner."



*Ice was creeping over her, weighing her down, down——.*

**S**OFISK, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Kamchatkan Peninsula lay far behind. The *Spirit of Victory* flew into the murkiness of fog and sleet. It was cold. Tom Kingsland hunched over the instruments, shaking his head to clear away the fumes of the gasoline, and the vertigo. He was tired, but he was winning. Papers in a hundred cities charted his course, headlined every item they could get. "Kingsland Solos Around World. Ten Hours Ahead of Record. Takes Off From Siberia."

Kingsland smoothed out a weather report on his knee. "That weather-

## The Perfect Landing

by Charles S. Ingraham

bureau johnny with the long beard was right. Lousy weather!" The plane would not climb any more. Too much of a load. It could not fly any lower without bouncing into a wave. The fog made long, glistening streaks across the silk and dripped off the wings. Curious gusts of wind slapped the machine about.

"I'll sleep a month when I land this crate back in New York." Kingsland was profane. He kept talking to himself, swearing to himself, to keep from going to sleep to the lullaby of the motor out in front.

"Damned fool business! What do I get out of it?"

A spurt of air lifted one wing, rattled it for a moment until Kingsland jerked it back to level. He looked at the empty place beside him. "Should have taken some one with me." His choppy sentences had an uncertain sequence. "Wouldn't have been a solo then, mutt. Could have taken a dog, though." He squinted again at the altimeter, the gas gauge, and the oil gauge. "Dirty trick to play on a dog."

The *Spirit of Victory* rocked in the uneven currents of air, rocked and rocked. Kingsland slapped his face. "Four hours' sleep at Sofisk. Wanted more." He had forgotten that he was a great hero; that thousands of people were reading about him, talking about him, hoping and praying for him. The solo flight around the world had suddenly become a senseless thing to Kingsland. The instruments spun on the dash. It was cold, in spite of the heavy, fleece-lined coat and the fleece-lined gauntlets.

"Need toothpicks to keep my eyes open," Kingsland murmured.

The fog kept oozing from the heavens. A sheet of ice was creeping along the wings, over the fabric. The ship tossed and dipped, struggling against the night, the storm, and the sleepy aviator. Something touched Kingsland's shoulder.

HE WAS surprised, but too tired to wonder much about it. He turned. A tall, lean chap was sitting beside him. Nice-looking fellow, with a long, keen face. His hand was still on Kingsland's shoulder.

"Name's Redfern," he said. "Paul. Thought I'd fly the rest of it with you. Mind a stowaway?"

Kingsland vaguely recalled the face, and the name. But he was too tired for puzzles. Only terribly glad to have

company. "Glad you came. Talk to me. Keep me awake."

"Sure!" Redfern said. "Tired, eh?"

"I'll say."

"Why don't you land?"

"Are you nuts, man?" Kingsland growled. "We're in the middle of the Bering Sea."

"Do I look like a guy who would lie to a pal?" Redfern asked. "Do I?"

Kingsland looked into the honest eyes. "No; you don't. Where is it?"

"Bank left and drop five hundred feet."

Kingsland jammed the rudder bar and circled down. The fog got thinner. Then suddenly they burst into the sunlight.

"See?" Redfern said, pointing over the gunwale.

Kingsland looked down. They were over land, a smooth, green land, where the sun caressed the earth, and fields of grain rippled. To the south stretched the level green turf of a perfect landing field.

"Make port," Redfern said.

"You don't have to tell me," Kingsland answered with a grin. He glided the *Spirit of Victory* toward the field. The wind sock showed him that he was going to have an easy landing. A crowd of people edged the field.

"Good, eh?" Redfern grinned. "Folks, too."

"I'll say!" Kingsland answered. "Who are they all?" The wheels touched with the skid—a perfect landing, easy.

"The folks?" Redfern repeated. "You'll like them. Hamilton and Minchin. Tully, Medcalf, Payne. Bertaud, Hill, Omdal. Princess Lowenstein-Wertheim. Mrs. Frances Grayson. Goldsborough, Koehler, Anderson. Hitchcock, Cramer, Coli, Parquette, Nungesser. All of us, Kingsland. All of us who made port."



# The Old Swimming Hole

by Erle Johnston

*The pup was twitching in a spasm!*

**I** NEED a thousand dollars—and I need it now. I'm in a jam."

"Did you have to get into the jam? Another woman scrape, I suppose."

"Being a medical student by day and a manservant at night gets monotonous. When I stepped out to let off a little steam, I was just unlucky."

Doctor Eugene Dalton, clad in pajamas and an old blue lounging robe, stared up at his six-foot stepson. The doctor, paralyzed from the hips down, sat wearily in his wheel chair. His dangling right hand caressed the ears of an appreciative Boston bull pup. The puppy had been given him by an old friend, who was now chief of the city police.

"Max, it's impossible for me to give you any more money. You know I took all the money I had, with the insurance after your mother's death, and invested it for income. This little home is our own. I'm paying for you through medical school. We live comfortably. I can't believe I'll live many years confined to a chair. When I go, you should have plenty to live on and get established as a practicing physician."

The red, overfull mouth of Max slowly lost its desperate, snarlish look. His black eyes narrowed, closed, then slowly opened. He swallowed, as if his

Adam's apple had become too large for comfort. His gaze shifted from the clear gray eyes in the doctor's white, intellectual face.

Max glanced at his watch, switched on the lights in the invalid's room, drew down the curtains, and went downstairs. When he returned he carried the doctor's evening meal on a tray—broiled lamb chops, toast, and tea. Rolling a tea table from one corner, Max transferred things to it from the tray. He spilled some hot tea on the toast and on one lamb chop, but made no apology. He sat down in a rocker and rustled open a newspaper in front of his face.

The pup's black nose twitched and its travesty of a tail wriggled. It danced ecstatically when the doctor placed a saucer on the rug, cut small bits from the tea-stained chop, and placed them in the saucer. The pup ate slowly, thoughtfully, until— Something was wrong. The pup was twitching in a spasm.

"Max." The doctor spoke quietly, but he wiped moisture from his eyes and forehead. "My dog has been poisoned. And the poison was intended for me."

"What?" The newspaper dropped. Max leaped up, staring. "Why the pup—the pup is dead!"

"Yes." The doctor leaned back in his roller chair, his food untasted. "I

thought you were intelligent. If I died by poison, you would immediately be accused of murder." His voice was choky. "I loved your mother, boy. I've done all I could for you. I've lectured you about your faults, but—I was fond of you and wanted to make you into a man. It's awful to realize that you would——"

"What are you talking about? The pup was subject to fits. Why are you thinking about poison? And I'd certainly be an ungrateful dog and a consummate fool if I should try to——"

"Get Jim Ruston here, Max. He can easily have the pup's body and this tea and food checked for poison. Bring me some writing paper and my pen. I'm wondering now if it was a matter of economy that made you have our telephone removed."

"L-listen here," Max stammered, his face whitening, "I don't like your attitude. If I wanted to, I could—do what I pleased to you—and keep Chief Ruston from f-finding anything here." He placed writing materials on the tea table. "Here! Write to him. I'll take the letter to him myself."

While the doctor wrote, Max went out to his own bedroom, taking time, thinking, muttering under his breath. When, ready for the street, he returned to the doctor's room, the letter was written, addressed, and sealed. Dr. Dalton was poring over an old photograph album he had taken from a magazine stand kept within his reach. He loved to study the pictures in this old chronicle—photographs of incidents of his youth.

IN LEAVING the room, Max left the door slightly open. He snapped out the light in the little upper hall. Noisily, he descended the stairs, then opened and slammed the front door. But he did not go out. Instead, he took the letter to a shaded reading lamp, tore open the envelope, then read it, and read it again,

studying, calculating, analyzing. Not a word in the letter intimated a thought against Max. It was more like the farewell note of a suicide than a request for a visit.

"I'll deliver it and get Ruston here," he decided. "It's a perfect alibi for me."

Again he studied the letter.

DEAR JIM: I'm blue as your right eye turned after one of our boyhood scraps. The accident that deprived me of my wife and made me a permanent invalid just about broke up my little world. And the pup you gave me is dead. Apparently, the little fellow was poisoned. I wish you'd drive out and visit with me a while.

I'm no good and never will be again. Often feel like shuffling off the coil. But if I should decide to kick off, it won't be by the poison route. That might get Max into trouble. And Max is a good lad, very kind and patient. When life gets too tiresome, I think I'll just stick the old .32 against my head, so the powder burns will show, and make the exit quick and painless.

About my only remaining pleasure, Jim, is mulling over that old album we filled when we were boys. The old memories are pleasant. That shot I made of you, when you stood, naked as a new-hatched jay bird, on the springboard over the old swimming hole, is always good for a grin. It has something oddly poignant back of it. And when I do flicker out, I want you to have the album. EUGENE.

Max slipped his shoes off, went silently up the stairs, through the dark hall, and into his room. Dr. Dalton had evidently forgotten that, long ago, he gave the old .32 to his stepson. Max loaded the old single-action revolver, crept to the doorway of the doctor's room, and, from the shadows, peered inside. Dr. Dalton, with the album on his lap, was leaning back. His eyes were closed. He was breathing in the regular, audible rhythm of sleep. Silently, Max slipped within the room.

WHEN, nearly an hour later, Chief of Police James Ruston entered the still, hushed room, he found the body of his boyhood chum partly in the wheel chair

and the upper part slumped down across the top of the tea table. The high white forehead was marred by powder and a bullet hole. The dead fingers gripped the black revolver handle, the forefinger curling about the trigger. No look of terror distorted the fine features; the lips were curled in a satisfied smile.

"Gene, old son!" Ruston gasped huskily. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

Max gasped, then sobbed aloud. He ran to the still figure, but Ruston gently shoved him away. And while Ruston stood there, looking down, fumbling with the last words he had had from Eugene, Max stumbled over to a window and looked out, turning his back to the police chief.

Max was smiling as he gazed into the vacant lots of this suburban street. The shot had attracted no attention. The letter Ruston held established the thing as suicide. He had cleaned up and destroyed all the evidence of poison, even to the dog. Before placing the weapon in the doctor's dead hand, Max had carefully wiped off his own finger prints. His days of grind and nights of slavery were over. He would have plenty of money, now.

"Turn around, you!" Ruston's voice grated and something hard was jammed into Max's back. "Hold out your hands!"

"But what—why—I d-don't understand."

Jaws of bright steel clicked about Max's wrists. Ruston was jerking them, brutal with wrath.

"You'll hang for this, you murdering spawn of a devil! I read that letter you brought me over again. And I noticed a light mark scored under the words 'back of it,' when he mentioned that picture of me at the old swimmin' hole. So I picked up the album and took out that picture. I found a note to me back of it. Listen—I'll read it to you."

Max collapsed, quaking with terror, as Ruston read the note, which was written in the doctor's cramped, crowded, unmistakable hand.

"Jim: Max was all I had to live for. He just tried to poison me. He would have succeeded if I had not given the pup some bits of the poisoned food. I am helpless—no phone—no way of getting any message outside without his knowledge and consent. I have no intention of committing suicide. If you should find me dead, I can trust you to take proper care of Max.  
EUGENE."

## Escape from the Chair

by Wilton E. Matthews



"The doctors were baffled—"

EVER hear of Dan the Wizard?" Jeff tapped cigar ashes into a tray.

"No, you wouldn't have," he answered my shake of the head. "The newspapers didn't call him that, because they didn't know he was a wizard; only two or three of us knew. He was the most fiendish devil I ever knew. And he prepared for the death house years before he got there. I guess he knew they'd get him some time. And when

they did, it was for a job that'd make goose flesh for you. He kidnaped a little girl, daughter of a judge. The old man wouldn't kick in with ransom; so Dan killed her. But they caught him."

"He sure rated the chair, then," I said.

Jeff nodded. "Yeh! The tabloids were mad because they sent him up for the hot seat so fast. They could have played the story out another two months. But——

"He'd always planned for the day when they'd get him. I asked him once what he'd do if they ever gave him the works. He said: 'I'd die before they killed me.' And then he added: 'I'd come alive later.' He showed us, and that's why we called him Dan the Wizard."

He looked at me queerly as though hesitating to go on. "Maybe you'll think this is a lot of hokum," said Jeff, "about dying and then coming alive. But did you ever hear of suspended animation?"

"You mean this stuff you hear about in India? Fakirs getting buried and then reviving?"

"Yes. I suppose you think that's all a lot of boloney, but it's not. It's done. They do it other places, too. Ever hear of the *zombie* in Haiti? Dan said it was the same there. Some hypnotist will throw a poor native into a trance so you can't tell he's not dead. Then when they bury him, the hypnotist digs him up, revives him partially, and makes the poor devil slave away in the sugar mills.

"WELL, Dan was a hypnotist. I never saw him put anybody out cold like that, but he could do it to himself. He showed us once. He went into a trance and got as cold as a stiff; no pulse or anything. I saw a doctor pronounce him dead. And I saw him come out of it and eat dinner half an hour later. So whether you believe it or

not, it can be done. Dan always had that in reserve; he knew they wouldn't shoot the juice through a dead man, and he could always be dug up later by some one in the know.

"So when they finally got him up in the little dance hall, dated to get the works in about a week, he called me in; they let me talk to him alone, but they searched me to the skin first. Dan said: 'Listen, Jeff, I'm gonna die day after to-morrow; I'll be pronounced dead, don't worry about that—you've seen me do it. You bring Mayme up to-morrow and ask for the body in advance; get some glycerin tears on it if you have to. They'll kick in. Then you come tell me about it.'"

"Did it work?" I asked.

"Work? Listen, an old mother crying for her only son's body couldn't have done better. Mayme was his girl. I went in to tell him afterward, and he told me where the vault was he'd bought. It'd be easier than digging him up, he said.

"The day after that he went into the trance—was out cold. About ten different doctors pronounced him dead; so of course the execution was off. They never got onto his trick at all. They don't know about it yet, as far as I know—and you won't tell."

"No," I said hastily. "I won't." It seemed to me that Jeff thought he'd been talking too much. "But—— I don't know this Dan the Wizard like you do; no personal interest." I know my voice betrayed loathing. "After something like that—killing that little girl—it seems a shame that he didn't get his."

Jeff stared at the end of his cigar a moment before saying softly: "He did."

"But I thought you said they didn't get onto his trick."

"They didn't," said Jeff. "All the doctors pronounced him dead, but none of them knew why. I guess that's what made them hold an autopsy."

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