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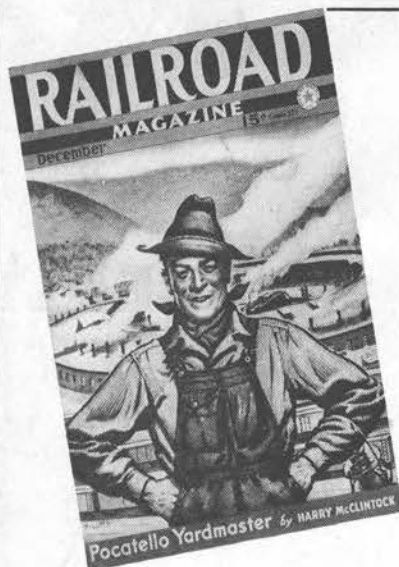
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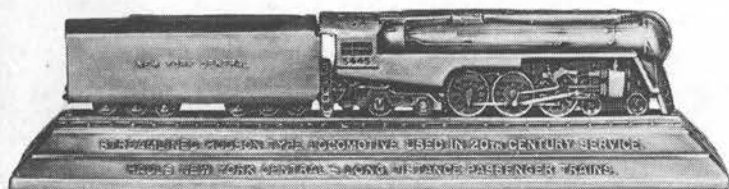


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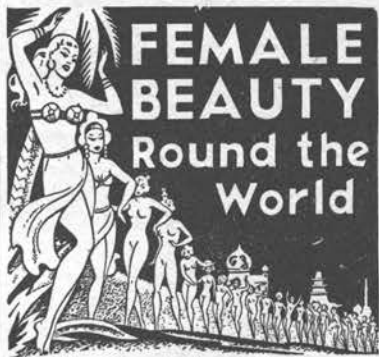
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Murder Goes to Sea

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Deep Sea Dugan," "Moon over Montezuma," etc.

LOS ANGELES, January 10—*Sit tight—we're coming!* That terse message, flashed to the bottom of the storm-tossed Pacific early today by oscillator signals from the salvage tug *Algonquin*, spelled the difference between life and death for thirty-three men.

They were the captain and surviving crew members of the new submarine *Starfish*, which sank mysteriously off the California coast yesterday afternoon.

Twenty-two men are known to have lost their lives in the Navy's latest submarine disaster and meager reports from the ill-fated undersea craft indicated that several others were injured.

Grim-lipped naval authorities, battling time and weather to rescue the survivors, refused to comment on the possibility that the new six-million-dollar warship may have been sabotaged.

They pointed out that nothing definite regarding the sinking is likely to be known until the *Algonquin's* nine-

ton rescue bell has brought its first load to the surface.

The *Starfish* was commanded by Lieut. Everett Brill II, and was the first of twenty similar ships to be constructed by Westco Iron Works.

Two civilian employes of Westco—Victor Melhorne, chief engineer of the firm, and Foster Bedell, naval architect—are among those trapped in the ship they helped design and build.

Lieutenant Brill, member of an old Navy family, has seen his own career dogged by misfortune for several years.

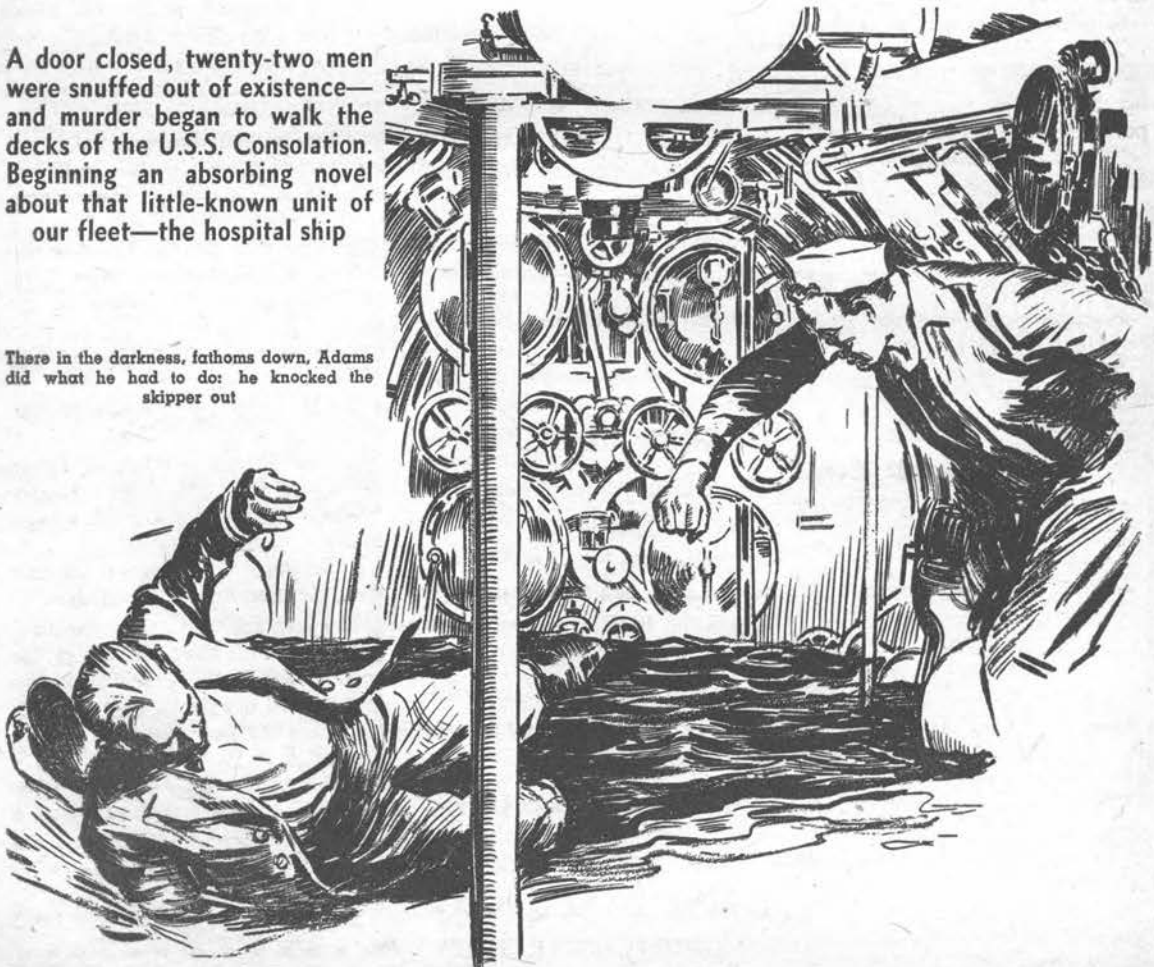
While executive officer of the destroyer *Bolton*, three years ago, he was court-martialed and cleared of charges of intoxication after the *Bolton* had rammed another ship in maneuvers.

Brill's next post was command of a Yangtze river gunboat, which was beached and wrecked in a typhoon.

Brill is a "mustang" officer in Navy parlance, having

A door closed, twenty-two men were snuffed out of existence—and murder began to walk the decks of the U.S.S. *Consolation*. Beginning an absorbing novel about that little-known unit of our fleet—the hospital ship

There in the darkness, fathoms down, Adams did what he had to do: he knocked the skipper out



come up from enlisted ranks after being dismissed from the Naval Academy because of a boyish prank, officers who know him said.

He is a widower, and his 22-year-old daughter, Evelyn, is a nurse in the Navy hospital to which her father and other survivors of the *Starfish* probably will be taken. . . .

CHAPTER I

FORTY FATHOMS DOWN

IT HAPPENED with an incredible, stunning swiftness, and nobody could say how. After the first numbing shock had worn off and there was no longer anything to be done but wait and hope, Mike Way began remembering.

He lay on a bunk in the crowded torpedo room and became conscious of ribs that pained him with every breath; he didn't want to think about those twenty-two men who couldn't get out of the after compartments in time nor to remember anything that had happened.

But there was no helping himself.

It was like a jumbled nightmare, and the fragments of its horror were spilled across a man's memory in jigsaw puzzle fashion. The mind subconsciously groped for a piece at a time, holding it up to examine its fantastic shape and violent colors, and trying to fit it into a pattern of the whole.

But this nightmare was not entirely over, and many pieces were missing. . . .

Mike Way was a big man, so rugged as to be almost ugly, with twelve years in the Navy. He was a chief torpedoman, and a master diver.

There was no responsibility for him, now—all of it had fallen on the shoulders of the skipper, yonder—and he could lie and taste the growing staleness of the air; he could watch the beams of the hand lanterns and flashlights that were used after the emergency circuit was cut off.

He could study one taut, pale face after another, and feel the slow, agonizing crawl of the hours.

He tried to pull his thoughts back to the present, and to project them into the future. It had not occurred to him that a man under these conditions was entitled to know a sweating fear.

The haunted look in the eyes of that kid standing near the skipper—John Thorpe, his name was—came to Mike Way as a shock. The boy wasn't a day over seventeen.

Mike looked around him. Lieutenant James, the executive officer, a small and imperturbable man, sat on the deck forward. Lieutenant McQuaid—he was a junior grade, and the engineer officer—lay in the opposite bunk, seldom stirring, breathing loudly.

He had managed to get out of the flooding after compartments, with only two other men; and after coming through the galley door, he had desperately pulled it shut and dogged it down.

That, Mike Way thought, took courage of a kind. It was a move necessary to save the ship and the men forward; it meant death for some of those who still were battling the slanting deck and the intruding water, aft.

McQuaid had dogged down the door, and heard two or three who reached it too late beating against the door with their fists. . . .

Mike Way's mind picked up one of those jigsaw pieces.

It fitted in immediately after this scene. It was Cardoni, the dark-faced machinist's mate second class who sat yonder with grief and a sullen hate in his bloodshot eyes:

Cardoni grabbing at McQuaid as he fought the door; Cardoni screaming that his brother was back there. And taking a swing at McQuaid while the slant of the deck turned so steep a man could scarcely keep his footing.

The two of them had fallen together, and other men came sprawling and sliding on top of them. McQuaid's skull was very likely fractured. Cardoni had broken his arm.

John Thorpe, the kid, asked in a scared voice: "Do—you think it will be long, sir?"

"Not long, son," said Lieutenant Brill. "Stevens, try tapping again."

"Aye, aye, sir!" said the radioman. The electricity had been cut off to prevent an explosion caused by short-circuiting. To signal, now, Stevens had to swing a heavy sledge against the hull.

He tapped, and Mike Way studied Lieutenant Brill. He felt more sympathy for the skipper than for anybody else in this pigboat that lay forty fathoms down.

And that went for the twenty-two men aft: they had died quickly, and Lieutenant Brill had died a thousand times, since.

HE WAS a stocky, graying man of forty-three who sat handy to the precious oxygen flasks. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes too bright. He coughed steadily.

It would have been a hollow cough anywhere else, but there was pressure in the boat, and the pressure made all sounds flat.

Mike Way had done duty in the *Bolton* with Brill. And once, after a shifting sea had given him the bends in a dive, he had been a patient at the hospital where Evelyn Brill was stationed. He liked them both.

There was a chance, Mike Way thought, that this pigboat disaster would wash up the skipper's naval career and put him on the beach for life. He knew what the Navy meant to Brill. . . .

Thorpe said, "What time is it? How long have we been here?"

"Steady, son!" Brill drew his hand across his eyes. "It's half past three."

Eleven hours, Mike Way thought. They ought to be hearing the *Algonquin's* oscillator, soon; the electricity didn't have to be on to hear it if she was near enough.

The eastern sky would be paling up there.

Eleven hours since the skipper, keeping on schedule to the minute, had given the order for a full crash dive.

Mike remembered something else. Just before the dive; McQuaid, coming into the control room and asking the skipper if Brill was sure he was all right. Sniffing the air as he asked. Mike remembered how the skipper had stiffened and told McQuaid to get to his station.

Looking at Brill's flushed face, now, he wondered a little.

Another man relieved Stevens at the hull tapping. They stopped a while to listen. And everybody heard the squeal of the tug's oscillator, all at once. Foster Bedell exclaimed, "Listen!"

"She's sighted our marker buoy!" Stevens said.

Men smiled. Brill opened the valve of an oxygen flask. New life poured into the thrice-breathed air.

"We ought to hear a diver on deck by daylight," Brill said.

MIKE WAY turned to ease the hurt in his ribs, and studied the two civilians: Bedell and Victor Melhorne.

You expected courage on the part of Navy men; discipline had been hammered into them. It was gratifying to see civilians keep their nerve, too.

Melhorne was stocky, with pale eyes and a tight mouth.

Bedell would have been a few years younger, perhaps. He was obviously of a more nervous type, slender and dark; he hadn't shaved for more than twenty-four hours, and strain lined his face under its stubble.

But he kept himself well in hand; if he was afraid, nobody would have guessed it.

Lieutenant McQuaid turned as if in the restlessness of a delirium, lifting his bandaged head. He sank back, sighing, and mumbled through colorless lips.

It was a meaningless babble at first, and then a few words became coherent:

"... Brill . . . something. I know! I could smell it! Tell. . ."

The voice trailed into a babble and died. "Wop" Cardoni was straining forward, his eyes burning into McQuaid's face.

"I hope he dies!" Cardoni exclaimed. "I hope the so-and-so never wakes."

"Cardoni!" snapped Mike Way. "Pipe down!"

"He killed my brother," Cardoni said, and stared at the water-tight door beyond which the tragedy lay. "He killed him just as sure as—"

"Break it up, there!" Brill called wearily. All the strength seemed to have gone out of the skipper's stocky frame. He coughed again, and his shoulders sagged; his eyes were still too bright, but there was a desperation in them, too.

"I could smell it," muttered Lieutenant McQuaid.

Victor Melhorne met Mike Way's eyes. "He must be getting better," Melhorne said. "Think so, Chief?"

Mike Way nodded. He had put that bandage on the gash in McQuaid's head, while Melhorne did his best to set and splint Cardoni's arm. There were several others suffering from cuts and bruises incurred when the *Starfish* slanted so steeply by the stern.

And the pharmacist's mate was one of the twenty-two, back yonder. . . .

"What time is it, now?" young Thorpe wanted to know.

His face was drawn and desperate, and his voice quivered a little.

Four o'clock. Thorpe ought to be home, in high school, Mike Way told himself. A kid like that had no business in the pigboats; it wasn't right for a kid like that to know the horror Thorpe had gone through.

He was one of the three who had managed to get out of that engine room: McQuaid, Cardoni and Thorpe, running up a slanting deck with the black, rushing water closing over their frantic feet before they could make it—the water spilling over the storm step, threatening to fill the entire ship.

MIKE WAY closed his eyes against the nightmare, but his mind would not stop picking up the fragments of its horror. The pieces didn't fit: there was nothing here to show what had happened to send the *Starfish* down so suddenly.

She had dived before, keeping her trim and performing

well. She had held close to the schedule Lieutenant Brill had laid out for her more than a week before the acceptance trials began.

Mike remembered the morning orders on the bulletin board. *1530 Full Crash Dive. 1600 Surface and Proceed to Port.*

It was 0400 now, by the Navy's twenty-four hour clock. Dawn would be stealing over the sea.

In Navy ships along the coast the watch would be changing, and the ships' cooks were starting breakfast. In a little while reveille would sound, and the deck force would turn out to coffee and its job of washing down.

The *Algonquin* was only a few miles away, and hope rode with her over the black, rolling swells.

There was nothing to do but wait. Rescue was paramount, now, and Mike Way knew the skipper was wise in speaking only of rescue, and not of the mystery of what had happened.

They had reserve oxygen and water and food, and the skipper had seen to it that soda lime was spread in the torpedo room to absorb carbon dioxide.

Time enough after they were out and up to consider the sinking.

The hand lights were fewer and weaker. Mike Way's ribs stabbed him as he breathed the cold, thick air. He pulled a blanket closer around him, and grew drowsy.

A shout woke him and he sat up in quick alarm. But the shout had been one of joy. Overhead, he heard the slow clump-clump of a diver's weighted shoes.

CHAPTER II

EIGHT WERE LUCKY

THERE was an eternity, after this. It passed for the most part in darkness; the skipper, between fits of coughing, ordered that the lights be carefully hoarded.

Men huddled where they were, cramped and cold, because to move around or otherwise exert themselves meant to use more of the precious air supply.

Mike Way needed no light to see things just as they had been: Brill, sitting yonder, haggard and weary and feeling twenty odd years of Navy service caving out from under him.

Cardoni's brooding eyes turned on the unconscious McQuaid.

John Thorpe's frightened look, and the two civilians bearing up well under the strain.

Foster Bedell became talkative, now. It was a release from the anxiety that lined his stubbled face, Mike guessed.

"How many men can the bell take up at a time?" he wanted to know.

"Eight," Brill said, and coughed. "You two men will make the first trip."

Melhorne said, "That's not necessary, Captain," and there was a quiet courage in his voice. "I think Bedell and I could wait."

"Sure!" Bedell declared. "I'm perfectly willing to stay until the last. As a matter of fact, I wish there were some way we could get at the straight of this thing—how it happened, I mean. The more I think of it the more incredible it seems."

Mike Way understood. It took time for the full force of it to hit a man. Melhorne and Bedell knew every rivet,

every bolt in the ship. They had had confidence in her; in a large measure, everybody aboard had felt that confidence. It went with a new ship, proud and sleek and powerful.

"Staying down won't solve what's behind that door, aft," Brill sighed. Another fit of coughing shook him. "That's going to wait until she's raised, I'm afraid. If they can raise her at all."

"Don't you think salvage can be accomplished, Captain?" Bedell asked. "It surely wouldn't be more difficult than the raising of the S-4 and the S-5."

"Oh, it can be done," said the skipper. "I'm only afraid it will be delayed a long while. It's a long and tedious process at this depth and in these shifting currents. And the Navy may be needed elsewhere, in times like these."

THE diver moved around on the *Starfish's* hull, groping for the escape hatch. Brill swung his flashlight beam to the overhead, and Stevens hammered the hatch cover with a wrench.

They could hear the man outside working at the difficult task of securing the downhaul cable on which the huge bell would be operated.

Mike Way began to feel fidgety for the first time; he knew every move that was necessary on the diver's part—he had felt the pressure that man was fighting at forty fathoms under a rolling sea.

And he wished he could be in a diving suit now, helping.

"I wonder if Lieutenant McQuaid will be able to tell us anything?" Melhorne asked, as if speaking to himself.

"That's rather hard to say," Brill said coldly.

Something had passed between those two, Mike Way decided. Something more than the incident in the control room, just before the full crash dive. Whatever it was, he told himself, it was no business of an enlisted man.

But he wondered if McQuaid would live to tell anything at all. His head had struck an angle iron by the watertight door, and nobody needed to be a surgeon to see that the injury was bad.

Besides, it was unlikely that McQuaid had had an opportunity to observe any more than Thorpe and Cardoni had seen.

These two had not been questioned, but in his earlier hysteria, Thorpe had cried: "The water! It came in—it came in from everywhere, all at once!"

That, it seemed, was it. The water had suddenly rushed in.

THE oscillator squealed, and men stirred restlessly and took a new animated interest in conversation. The *Algonquin* said the downhaul cable had been secured, and the bell would soon be on its way down.

There was a destroyer—the *Meade*—standing by, and others were coming to the scene. The *Meade* was waiting to rush the injured to port for hospitalization.

"Boy!" muttered a sailor in the dark, after this intelligence had been imparted. "Why didn't I bust a leg, or something?"

"They can leave me off at the dock," another said. "I don't need any castor oil or iodine; I need about six straight shots of liquor. Am I going to make a speed run when I hit the beach!"

It was rough, up there, the *Algonquin* added, and a new tenseness stifled the conversation almost as soon as it had

begun. The men sat silent and motionless in the dark.

"What if they can't make it?" Thorpe's voice quavered. "I want out of here! I can't stand it. It's like a—like a coffin!"

"Take it easy, kid," somebody said gruffly.

Nobody blamed him. The truth was, Mike Way thought, that everybody was really scared to death. An older man just knew how to tie down his fear and keep it in check.

Brill coughed, and said, "The injured will go first. That means Lieutenant McQuaid, Cardoni, Way—and who's that with a cut on his cheek? Kowalski. And Thorpe, and Melhorne and Mr. Bedell. That's seven. Then in alphabetical order. You, Adams."

Adams, a salty first-class torpedoman, was holding a three-inch brass cartridge case. It was weighted with babbit, and wired for a table lamp, with anchors and other decorations hammered into it.

He growled, "Hell, Captain, sir, I can wait," and hugged the lamp to him.

"You ought to go, Captain," James said. The executive officer was calm, and assured. "Let me take over, sir. That cough—"

"It's my privilege to stay until the last," Brill said. He spoke simply, in a voice too tired to carry any note of heroics.

Mike Way raised on an elbow. "Captain," he pleaded, "you may not be hurt, but you're sick. Do what Lieutenant James says, sir!"

"That'll do, Chief," the skipper called back, recognizing Way's voice. "You heard what I said. It's an order."

Adams chuckled dryly. "I'd hate to get a general court for mutiny on the bottom of the high seas. But, Captain, you ought to go!"

IT WAS a long while before the nine-ton rescue chamber came to a jarring rest on the hull of the *Starfish*. And it seemed even longer, after that, before the ballast tanks had been filled and the water was blown out of the bell's lower compartment.

The men in the torpedo room grew restive, hearing the rescue bell crew working to secure the tie rods and open the hatch.

Then, quite suddenly, those below heard the hatch break its seal. There was a crack of light. It widened into a glow, and the air which flowed into the submarine was fresh and sweet by comparison. The hatch was open.

Men moved forward, not in any stampede toward escape, but impelled by the desire to look into the light—to see beyond the curving steel that imprisoned them, and to breathe the compressed air that came from the surface.

"Hi, men!" yelled the dungareed sailor who peered down at them. "Who's going for the first ride?"

Lieutenant James exclaimed: "What happened to the captain? Bear a hand here, you men!"

Mike Way looked. Lieutenant Brill was slumped against the oxygen tank. And his chin was skinned.

"What the hell are you looking at me for, Chief?" demanded Adams guiltily. "I guess the captain must have fallen over something in the dark!"

James grunted. "I guess he did, Adams," he said dryly. "Especially since he's sitting right where he was. Well, he goes up; he's a casualty, now. Bring McQuaid forward."

Mike Way swung his feet into the dirty water that covered the after portion of the deck. "Help me here, Cardoni," he said. "And you, Kowalski."

"I got a busted arm," Cardoni reminded him sullenly. "And I wouldn't help lift him out of Hell."

"Stow that sort of talk!" Lieutenant James warned sharply. "Give the chief a hand, there, Stevens."

They carried McQuaid forward, and hoisted him up the ladder. Mike Way couldn't lift much, because of his injured ribs. He turned his attention to the skipper.

When he put his good arm around Everett Brill's inert body, he felt something hard. A bottle. It was in the pocket of the skipper's dungaree jumper, and now that fresh air had diluted the mixture of smells in this compartment where men sweated despite the cold, he could distinguish the odor of alcohol.

Mike Way slipped the bottle from Brill's pocket without anyone's seeing, and dropped it behind the rack of torpedoes at his side. He was remembering that time in the *Bolton*, when Brill faced a court martial accused of being drunk aboard ship.

They carried the skipper up the ladder. He was one of the first, and not the last to leave the ship he had commanded and lost.

Mike Way was the eighth man. He was on the ladder when the chief yeoman handed him the log of the *Starfish*—a new book, and already closed.

"Better take this with the skipper," the yeoman said.

Mike Way found a seat on the circular bench under the dome of the rescue bell. One of its two-man crew was down in the lower compartment; he closed the hatch cover on men who looked longingly on the light and still managed to smile.

"Shake it up, you guys!" somebody yelled from below. "Make your regular trip and return, cox'n!"

THEN compressed air rumbled the water out of the ballast tanks and into the lower compartment. The rescue bell broke its seal on the *Starfish's* hull; it lurched, and started upward. The compressed air motor was put in reverse to act as a brake against the bell's buoyancy.

Lieutenant McQuaid, held propped on the seat between Foster Bedell and Victor Melhorne, muttered: "... smell it plain ... I know that smell! My head ... oh, don't—don't!"

They were nearly to the heaving surface when it happened.

None of the rescued men knew exactly what had occurred, but there was a sickening, sidewise lurch as the swells took hold, and a thumping, rattling noise began under the wheel-locked hatch that covered the water-filled lower compartment where the downhaul cable was unwinding from its winch.

The sailor operating the compressed air engine yelled sharply, "Watch your heads!" and everybody lifted off the seat a few inches, and fell back, feeling the bell rocking slightly.

It was like riding an express elevator until it strikes the safety cushion at the top of the shaft.

Mike Way realized they had stopped. They were on the surface.

"Jeez!" the engineer exclaimed. "Lucky—you eight guys are sure lucky! That downhaul cable's carried away. It's a good thing we didn't come up under the ship."

Mike Way said, "Somebody will have to make that dive again!" and wished his ribs had not been hurt. The sailor nodded.

The bell swayed as the hoisting cable attached to the

Algonquin's boom took up the slack, and there was the welcome sound of feet on the topside of the rescue chamber.

The upper hatch opened.

Nobody in the bell had ever seen a sky half so blue, or tasted air so heavenly sweet as this. When a man climbed out, the wide horizons looked limitless after those crowding steel bulkheads.

There was room here. Room to move in, room to live in.

CHAPTER III

STAND BY FOR SURGERY

ADMIRAL WETHERBEE fidgeted in his bed in Sick Officers' Quarters at the naval hospital. This was like being in drydock; it was no place for a man who had spent more than forty years at sea.

He was getting damned tired of being cooped up.

The admiral was an old man, and gaunt, but there were evidences that his age was mostly external—except for a brittleness of bones—just as a ship shows the years by a wearing of decks and companionways, and a mellowness of her woodwork.

The admiral's eyes were as blue as the sea that had been his life, and they could be as dark as storm clouds or as bright as sun-sparkled swells.

He still had a voice meant to be lifted against a gale.

His eyes were dark, now, as he morosely regarded his starboard leg. It was bulkily encased in plaster, and hoisted by a complicated arrangement of tackle and pulleys at an angle the admiral estimated was just short of forty-five degrees.

No seaman, the admiral swore, could have devised such gear. Irish pennants stuck out like sore thumbs in places where the line had been knotted. Not spliced, damn their lubberly ways, but *knotted!*

The admiral would have liked to give this modern, soda-fountain Navy a few lessons in marlinspike seamanship.

He wanted something to read. Particularly, he wanted the afternoon papers, which should contain something new about the rescue of the men in the *Starfish*.

But he disliked appearing to be testy; the nurse or a hospital corpsman would bring him the papers, he thought, as soon as they had arrived.

He picked up Mahan's *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, and sighed because he knew it by heart and because he'd probably never go to sea again.

He dropped Mahan on the deck by his bed, and followed it with the latest issue of *U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings*.

There was a third book on his bedside table. He opened it and scanned its pages.

It was a Navy deck log, and fairly new, with only a score of its pages filled. The writing was a neat and precise script which neither hesitated nor grew bold.

It was typical of the man. Nobody needed be a chirographer to see that Admiral Wetherbee's penmanship denoted an alert and orderly mind, with a passion for detail and method where they were required.

The writing was small, like the ship models he made at home. Of all the ships the admiral had sailed in, only his last—the flagship of the submarine force—was not yet represented on his mantel.

And the flagship itself had been half done when the admiral slipped at the top of his cellar workshop steps.

That mishap was duly recorded here in the log, but Admiral Wetherbee would not have been guilty of referring to the cellar steps as such. The manner in which he adhered to nautical nomenclature may be gauged by a perusal of the full entry for that day:

Anchored as before. 0915 Mustered crew on stations. No absentees. Made daily inspection of galley. LANIGAN, Bridget, ship's cook, warned to keep supply of turkey legs in icebox.

1100 Made all preparations for getting under way via automobile for provisions. 1100 Got under way. Standard speed (30 knots) on course 170 True.

At 1114, changed course to avoid heavy truck crossing bow. 1121 Moored port side of Main Street.

1150 Got under way for return to base. . .

1314 Admiral J. K. WETHERBEE, U.S.N., Ret'd., (Commanding) suffered a fracture of the right leg when he fell down the after hatch. . .

1430 Pursuant to the recommendation of Comdr. L. M. PHELPS (M.C.) U.S.N., Admiral Wetherbee was transferred to the naval hospital.

THE admiral's shaggy brows pulled together in a fierce quarterdeck frown as he noted the date on that entry. More than twenty days. Bones knit slowly, at seventy.

And twenty days in drydock was a long time—especially to a man who never slept more than three or four hours at night.

It was time for those afternoon papers. The admiral reached for his buzzer.

The nurse who answered was tall, and no costume would have been severe enough to conceal entirely the fact that she was pretty. He glared at her with mock severity.

"Yes, Admiral?" she said in a soft, well-controlled voice. There was no hint of strain in it, or in her face, but the admiral knew she hadn't slept the night before.

His glare was tempered by a light of pride: Evelyn Brill was Navy, clear through.

"What the devil are you doing on duty?" he demanded. "Didn't I tell you to get some rest? What good does your being on watch do?"

"I feel better, carrying on. This is my last day in S.O.Q., though; I'm assigned to surgery, starting tomorrow. Unsterile nurse, at first."

"Humph!" grunted the admiral, and regarded her for a space. "Then I'll have to quarrel with somebody else. Unless I go to sea—Oh, you needn't look at me like that! I may fool you. And don't twist those newspapers to pieces Evelyn. Any news?"

"He's safe," said the daughter of Lieutenant Brill. "They brought him up on the bell's first trip."

Admiral Wetherbee's shaggy brows lifted slightly, but he tried to cover his thoughts. He said, "Well, thank God for that!" and smoothed out the papers.

A big headline shouted:

FIRST EIGHT RESCUED FROM SUB; SALVAGE CABLE BREAKS!

"That means," the girl said calmly enough, "that he's hurt."

"Not necessarily," the admiral put in hastily. "There could be other reasons."

"To make him leave his ship? No. But I'm not afraid of the injuries. I have a feeling he may be blamed—officially—for the loss of the *Starfish*."

Admiral Wetherbee rustled the newspaper, and hid behind it. "Nonsense!" he growled. "Nothing to blame on him. I know submarines. They can be treacherous craft in more ways than one."

But he understood what the loss of his command could do to Everett Brill II. He had known Captain Everett Brill I, and he had dandled this girl on his knee when she was a baby.

He could remember when he was commandant of the Academy, and young Everett Brill II was bilged out of the school.

Twenty years, now, the admiral had been interested in Brill's naval career. Telling himself that if a man were really Navy, he'd wind up with plenty gold on his sleeves, whether he wore an Academy ring or not. . . .

"The *Meade* is standing in," Evelyn said. "They'll be here, pretty soon."

THE door opened. It was Dr. Vincent Ayres—he was a medical corps lieutenant—who respectfully awaited the admiral's acknowledgment of his presence.

He was young and blond, with a long face that was both serious and sensitive and made him look older.

He wore gold-rimmed glasses that somehow managed always to stay crystal clear, and his eyes were cool blue crystal beyond them.

Eyes and glasses summed up the man's clear-headed, alert dependability.

He smiled at Evelyn. Just three nights before, they'd gone dancing. Off duty, it was "Evelyn" and "Vince", and more than once in the past few weeks, she had had to remind herself that a Navy nurse had no business falling in love.

You couldn't get married and stay in the Navy nurse corps.

"Well, doctor?" Admiral Wetherbee grumbled. "I suppose you've come to tell me my request has been disapproved. I have a friend or two in the Bureau, and damn them—"

"No, sir," Vince Ayres said. "I don't believe it's been heard from. I came here after Miss Brill. I happen to have the duty tonight, and there's to be an emergency surgical case."

Evelyn looked up with quick intuition. "From the *Starfish*?"

He nodded. "We don't know who it is. Cranial injuries. Miss Welton's ashore. Could you—"

"I'll stand by, of course."

"Good girl! It'll be a few minutes, yet. I wouldn't worry."

He left to get ready for the operation. It was fortunate, Evelyn thought, that Vince Ayres had the watch; he was accounted the best surgeon on the station in cranial cases.

The admiral knew this. "Good thing he's here," he grunted. "Keep your chin up, young lady."

Neither the admiral nor Evelyn Brill could know any inkling of what was to happen that night. When the girl had gone, the old sea dog reached for his fountain pen and made an entry in his log.

Long habit ruled him; wherever he might be, the log was written as if he were in command:

1630 Word passed for surgery crew to lay to their station. BRILL, Evelyn, N.N.C., standing by despite anxiety.

CHAPTER IV

IN THIS LIFE IS DEATH

THE ambulances had not arrived. There was a minute before the emergency; before the surgery lights hammered a cruel glitter from scalpels and haemostats and retractors.

Evelyn Brill leaned on the balcony railing, trying not to think.

She looked down over the drop of the rolling hills with their tall eucalyptus trees, down over the sun-gleamed stucco of the quiet town, and out to the blue Pacific.

A wind was blowing, and she knew the sea ran high; but from this distance it looked soft and kind with islands far out yonder like storm clouds melting into the water's rim.

The silver sliver of a destroyer moved along the bay. The sun was low but its red glint caught Navy wings high aloft, and a drone came to Evelyn's ears as if riding that flash of light.

She could hear a radio playing softly in one of the wards.

She prayed silently. *Dear God, don't let it be Dad who is hurt! Don't let them blame him, this time. . . .*

And she remembered with a sudden shame that there were still men on the sea's bottom, out yonder.

She saw a heavy, important-looking man in civilian clothes pacing the sidewalk before the administration building, which was centered on the west side of the garden quadrangle; there was nervousness in each of his jerky, indecisive strides.

Then the first ambulance growled into the driveway at the quadrangle's far end, and glided swiftly around toward the surgery building with a short, warning roll of its siren.

The other was close behind. Men wearing dungarees climbed out. One had his arm in a sling; another was limping. She saw a slender, dark-faced man in a gray suit—one of the two civilians who had been in the *Starfish* and then white-clad hospital corpsmen came on the run to lift out a stretcher.

Panic seized the girl briefly. She couldn't bear to look on this: it might be her father. She turned her back on the green-lawned beauty of the quadrangle, on sunshine and fresh air.

She went slowly into the hall of the surgery.

If Evelyn Brill had not been born a girl, Navy records would have contained the name of Ensign Everett Brill III, by now. Or, failing Annapolis as her father and many another good man had failed it, Seaman Everett Brill, working up from the ranks.

She knew little of that civilian world the Navy pityingly calls the Outside.

Her earliest remembering had been of gray ships standing in and standing out; of a jumbled never-ending succession of greetings and goodbyes on Navy landings, where mist swirled and foghorns blatted and sailors wearing leg-gins and duty belts shouted a ship's name every time a boat bell clanged.

Transfers: the tropics to Boston, San Pedro to Norfolk, Seattle to Pearl Harbor. Catch a transport. Sell the furniture. Drive to Philadelphia—and don't forget to change the oil in Kansas City. . . .

That was the Navy, and the Blue and Gold, so far as a woman was concerned. That was why, perhaps, Evelyn Brill was wary of falling in love with a Navy man.

A Navy doctor stood by when she was born. Everett Brill I—a commander, then—paced the deck of the hospital waiting room. His son paced the deck of a warship half a world away.

And the commander assured Myra Brill that her husband's presence was entirely unnecessary.

"Hell, Myra," he told her bluffly, "just because a man's needed when a keel is laid is no sign he has to be on hand at the launching. I'll send him a radio the minute the boy's born."

THERE is only one way in which a girl who has betrayed several generations—by being born a girl—can join the Navy. That is to become a Navy nurse.

Which is why Evelyn Brill was here, one of three hundred and twenty picked women, scattered from Portsmouth to the Philippines.

Some of them were young and pretty, like Evelyn; but the Navy didn't tell them so. The Navy told them things like: "The waist, at the neck, must open not lower than two and a half inches from the interclavicular notch. . . . Sachet powder, perfume, . . . any unguent having noticeable odor . . . are prohibited. . . ."

Evelyn Brill was loveliness wrapped in plain white drill.

There was seldom anyone to exclaim over the discovery that her cool, impersonally efficient gray eyes could be strangely soft and warm; there were few opportunities for anybody to marvel at the shimmer of candlelight imprisoned by the changing copper tints of her hair.

But over in S.O.Q., the old man whose sea-blue eyes seldom missed anything was indulging in one of his rare lapses when he permitted purely personal speculations to enter into his log. He frowned at the door for a while, and then wrote:

BRILL, Evelyn, deserves citation at meritorious mast. Romance? 1630, while word for surgery detail was being passed, sighted flashing light in eyes of Lieut. Vincent AYRES (M.C.) U.S.N. What's holding him back?

It might be stated that there were some who considered that the admiral who kept a log had missed too many transports on the China station, which was the Navy way of intimating that his mind was not sound.

But Vince Ayres, who was somewhat of a brain specialist and knew psychiatry, would have disputed this.

VINCE AYRES shucked his uniform, and appeared in the hallway of the surgery in white cotton pajamas. He saw Evelyn opening the linen locker to get her cap and gown, and started her way, taking a last few drags on a cigarette.

A stout, white-haired man puffed in from the stairway, perspiring and twisting a felt hat in his soft, well-kept hands. He halted, blinking in the dimness.

"Is this—will they be brought here? *Him*, I mean?"

Evelyn glanced at Vince Ayres. "One, I believe," she said. "The—the one with the skull injury."

"That's the one!" the man said. "McQuaid. The engineer officer. I've got to talk to him—I've got to find out what happened! I'm Martin West. I built that submarine!"

The elevator was whining up. Vince Ayres saw the girl close her eyes for a thankful space, and he moved quickly to her side. But she wasn't the fainting kind.

He turned to Martin West; but before he could address the shipbuilder, a girl in a fur coat appeared from the balcony door.

She was dark and attractive; Vince got the immediate impression that no expense had been spared in smart shops and beauty parlors to make her so.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "You can't stay here. They've asked us to wait in the reception room at Sick Officers' Quarters. The men are being brought there."

West said, hoarsely: "I've got to find out, before Pacific Maritime gets that contract away from me." But he went with the girl; and the elevator reached the floor, opening with a clatter.

Vince Ayres and Evelyn stood against the wall to let the stretcher pass into the anesthetizing room. Vince looked thoughtfully after the girl.

"Barbara West," he said. "I've seen her photo in the society sections. Going to be married, isn't she?"

"I don't know," Evelyn said, and the doctor turned to face her.

"Evelyn, I should have called on somebody else; I thought you'd be under less strain, working. They'll probably put those men to bed at once, and allow nobody to see them, unless they got some rest on the destroyer. And—well, I wanted to work with you."

"I'm all right," Evelyn said, and managed a smile. "You'd better run along and get scrubbed up."

Dr. Brown, an older man and a lieutenant commander, hurried in to be Vince's assistant. A clatter of basins came from the surgery, where Miss Snyder had taken over as sterile nurse. And Mike Way came up the stairs.

HE WAS in dungarees, his chief petty officer's cap set rakishly over a smudged forehead. Evelyn exclaimed, "Chief Way! I'm glad to see you again!"

The big diver grinned. "I'm glad to be here, Miss Brill. Your—the skipper sent me up to report. He—"

Evelyn drew a quick breath. "Is he badly hurt? Where is he?"

"They're turning us all in at S.O.Q. for tonight, and he's not hurt. He's got a bad cough, and looks to me like maybe he had some fever, though. Of course the skipper is kind of dazed, and shocked. You know."

He gestured, and Evelyn knew. But there was something else she had to find out, as quickly as possible.

"Was it anybody's fault, Chief? Will they try to blame Dad, this time?"

The big man's eyes flicked away for a fraction of a second, then met hers honestly. "I don't think so, Miss Brill. It wasn't his fault; I'd swear to that. Somebody may try to lay it onto him, but if they do, it won't stick.

"You see, nobody knows yet exactly what happened. Unless it's the lieutenant in there—McQuaid."

He jerked his chin toward the anesthetizing room, and she thought his eyes hardened. She noticed he was holding one hand across his ribs after climbing the stairs.

"You're hurt!" she said.

"Just a bruise." He grinned. "The ship went down

mightily fast by the stern. Some loose gear carried away, and men were sliding all over the control room.

"I brought up against something, and there was a whole pile of us at the galley door—the door leading aft to the engine room.

"Water started coming through there, and three men got out. McQuaid was one of them. He's the one who had the—nerve—to shut that door and dog it down."

His grin was gone, and remembered horror twisted his mouth. Evelyn laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't talk about it, now," she begged. "You go and turn in. Tell Dad I'll see him after he catches up on some rest."

The hospital corpsmen wheeled McQuaid past; it didn't take much ether to anesthetize a man who was already unconscious. Evelyn Brill went in the wake of the wheeled stretcher, remembering what Mike Way had said.

Only McQuaid might know what had happened to send the *Starfish* so quickly to her doom.

SHE opened a swinging door, and the breath of the operating room struck her sharply, like a blow across the face with an ether-saturated sponge.

Moisture clung to the tiled walls as if they sweated in agony; the walls imprisoned a remoteness from all things natural: sunshine and laughter, the wind's whisper and the perfume of flowers, the feel of turf underfoot and the music in the sea's rolling.

The operating room was a little world in itself, where science took over when nature failed. It was a world of travail and hope, of mercy and tragedy, of drugged slumber and pain.

Steam feathered from the bright chrome sterilizers and mushroomed against the drab leaded skylight. Incandescents beat down with inflexible brilliance; there were no shadows anywhere, and no coolness.

Over all, the smells lay heavily: a miasma of carbolic acid, ether and iodine, steam-burned muslin, steam-baked rubber, alcohol's sharpness and tincture of green soap.

Hospital corpsmen were lifting McQuaid to the table. He was under the anesthetic, his blue lips fluttering with each labored exhalation. The anesthetist lifted his ether cone and pinched the lobe of McQuaid's ear, watching how quickly the color returned.

"That pigboat must have hit something hard," he said. "Hard enough to throw a man down and fracture his skull."

Another corpsman grunted. "It didn't happen that way. I talked to a couple of them guys.

"You see that one with a busted arm? They said he took a poke at this officer. The lieutenant dogged down that door, and this sailor's brother was behind it.

"I'd hate to be that pigboat sailor. You take a poke at any officer in this man's Navy, you're asking for a general court if he wants to make something of it."

EVELYN moved a basin nearer the table, and busied herself with the sheet that covered McQuaid. Her cheeks were burning; there was a hint of trouble here. Trouble for Everett Brill.

And the garrulous corpsman's next words were worse. He went on: "What's more, one of them guys told me that this lieutenant called the skipper down about drinking. There'll sure be a stink raised if this officer pulls through, all—"

"Hey, pipe down!" the anesthetist growled, with a quick glance toward Evelyn. Vince Ayres and Dr. Brown came in just then; and Miss Snyder, her apple-cheeked face half covered by the gauze mask, lifted a tray of instruments to the sterile table.

Vince Ayres' eyes smiled at Evelyn. "First case in surgery, eh, Miss Brill?" he asked, and chuckled. "The admiral will miss you. Do you know what he meant when he spoke of that request?"

Evelyn shook her head. "No. But he's an old darling. I'll miss him, too."

"We all may," said Vince Ayres. "He's such a confirmed old sea dog he's requested—demanded would be a better word—transfer to the *Consolation*. He says if he's got to be laid up, he might as well be laid up on a hospital ship—at sea, where a man belongs."

The doctor chuckled again, and then bent to his task. In an instant he seemed transformed into a stranger to Evelyn Brill; a cool, efficient stranger with marvelously skillful hands.

And watching him, remembering the look in Mike Way's eyes and the thing the hospital corpsman had just said, she knew, for an instant, a guilty feeling.

It was almost a wish that Lieutenant McQuaid would never recover consciousness.

CHAPTER V

MIDWATCH MURDER

IT was an hour before the doors swung open again. McQuaid, wrapped in white blankets, was wheeled toward S.O.Q.

Vince Ayres peeled off his gloves and threw them on the sponge-littered deck. He went into the hall with Evelyn, breathing deeply of the purer air, and they saw Martin West pacing the corridor.

The other two civilians were with him, now. West, still perspiring, caught at Vince Ayres' arm.

"He'll live," Vince said.

"Thank God!" West cried. "You hear that, Victor? Thank God for one more saved! Oh, doctor—this is Mr. Melhorne, my chief engineer. And Mr. Bedell, the designer of our submarines."

"You were both aboard the *Starfish*, weren't you?" Vince Ayres asked in surprise. "You certainly ought to be in bed!"

The stocky Melhorne's mouth tightened. "I couldn't sleep," he said, and his pale eyes seemed to see things beyond the white plaster wall. "Not—not while those boys are still down there."

"They aren't out yet?" Evelyn asked.

"No, not yet," Melhorne answered. And Foster Bedell pushed his shoulders wearily away from the wall. The lines in his unshaven face seemed growing deeper.

"The divers are still having trouble," he said. "Heavy seas. But they'll all be saved. When could we talk to McQuaid, doctor?"

"I don't know that," Vince Ayres replied. "But not soon. He may not regain consciousness the minute the anesthetic wears off. There was pressure on the brain. It may take time."

Martin West turned jerkily. "Let's wait in the reception room, then. I want some more coffee."

Evelyn Brill got her uniform cape from the locker. It

was blue, and lined with scarlet, and she didn't know how well it went with her coloring.

Vince Ayres studied her while he got a cigarette and lighted it.

"It'd take more than coffee for me!" he said slowly. "I'd hate to feel responsible for having built that ship. And I'd hate to be worrying about a contract before those boys have been rescued. . . . Evelyn, you must be fagged. You'd better turn in. Doctor's orders!"

She smiled faintly. The sun was down, and a chill had come in from the sea. She threw the cape around her shoulders, and shook her head.

"But I haven't seen Dad, yet, Vince. And if I might, I'd like to stand by Lieutenant McQuaid's quiet room. Please, Vince—there's a reason! I'd like to hear anything he says, conscious or not."

Vince's clear eyes studied her for a moment, then he patted her arm.

"I understand," he said. "I'll wait there with you. You run on over, and I'll be along just as soon as I shower and dress and make the rounds of the wards."

DARKNESS had fallen, but only a couple of table lamps burned in the big lounge that opened on the corridor of Sick Officers' Quarters.

Evelyn Brill entered the dimness, and heard Mike Way say, "Here she is, sir!" And there was a stir, then, of men leaving to give her and Lieutenant Brill a moment alone.

She saw that rank had been forgotten temporarily, and that restrictions on visiting hours had been let down. All seven of the survivors who were able to walk had been billeted here, and Martin West was going out the door with his daughter.

Evelyn could look around the room and sense the loneliness that had filled it; the men had been sitting in a tight little group around coffee tables that were littered with cups and ash trays.

For the time being, she knew, all others—even Navy people—were outsiders. And it came to her quickly that there might be something significant in the fact that these men all had been kept together.

The Navy wanted no false rumors to get out concerning sabotage—or anything else . . .

Her father rose from a leather-upholstered davenport. He wore pajamas and a dressing gown, like the rest; she could see the strain in his face, and his eyes were too bright. Fever as Mike Way had said.

They stood for a space, wordless. Brill's eyes were those of a man looking on something which is beautiful—something he had never expected to see again.

Admiral Wetherbee's booming voice drifted down the corridor to break the silence. "But damn it all, that's what hospital ships are for! And the sea's good for a man—"

A DOOR closed, smothering the voice. Lieutenant Brill caught his daughter fiercely in his arms, but she could feel, in that close moment, that he was stunned and bewildered, with all the strength gone out of him.

He held her at arm's length, and his palms were hot to her shoulders. She thought, *He's aged ten years!*

"Sit down, Dad." She wanted to cry, but the Navy doesn't do that. "You ought to be in bed. Mike Way is right. You're ill!"

He coughed. "I've got a little bronchitis. Nothing to

worry about. Had it before we went out, but the schedule was all laid out, and—Evelyn, I ought to be out there now!

"Damn them, I belong with my ship! If I ever find the man who hit me in the dark, I'll have him court-martialed."

"Sit down," she said, and pushed him to the davenport. "Nobody will blame you for coming up, Dad. And if a man hit you, it was because he loved you. The whole crew loved you."

"Loved me?" Brill's voice mocked the words. "Not all of them, Evelyn. Not McQuaid, in yonder. If McQuaid goes before the inquiry, he'll testify that I was drunk."

"He *couldn't!*"

He stared into her tense face, and his eyes were bleak, as if he did not see her.

"Oh, yes, he could! I read rocks and shoals to him last week, and he's been nursing a grudge. Once in a while, you find an Academy man who resents a mustang's being in command. Oh, they're very few, but there are some."

"McQuaid will make a good officer, in time. He just got his jaygee rank, and he's been a battleship sailor; he's been used to more military ways."

"You know as well as I that those things don't go on a pigboat, where you live so close to your men. You—"

"You hadn't been drinking," Evelyn said.

It wasn't a question, but a simple statement of faith. Brill recognized it as such.

"No, of course not. I wouldn't be so big a fool."

The others were coming back, driven by their lonely unrest. Evelyn patted her father's hand. "Don't worry," she whispered. "McQuaid will probably have forgotten the incident. It seems everybody's depending on him to tell them what happened."

"Maybe he can," Brill said. "Those other two men were in the galley, and McQuaid was the only one out of the engineroom itself. Otherwise, we won't know until the ship's raised."

"All I can say is, it was quick and violent. Water must have come in by tons."

MIKE WAY approached the davenport, standing respectfully and looking down at his skipper. "Still too rough, sir," he said savagely. "I wish I was out there; I wish I could dive!"

The little group sat down. The silence was a brooding, prowling thing that taxed the nerves. A pharmacist's mate came from the hall, carrying an ice cap. McQuaid's ice cap. All eyes turned to him.

Martin West pulled himself from the edge of his chair. "Is he conscious? Can he talk?"

His voice was excited.

"He's delirious," the corpsman said. "Now and then he mumbles something about a smell. The ether, I guess."

West sank back, and the corpsman went into the diet kitchen. They heard him pounding ice for the ice cap. The blows echoed hollowly in the silence, and then Cardoni's bitter voice said, "I hope he never comes to! He could have let my brother out of there. He—"

"Pipe down!" snapped Mike Way. Everett Brill drew a deep breath, and went into a fit of coughing.

"I won't get over the tragedy of those men," West said shakily. "But I've got the contract to worry about, too. Six ships on the ways right now, and thirteen to lay down."

"If the *Starfish* had a structural weakness, I've got to

know what it was. The government might cancel that contract, and my competitor—"

"Oh, the hell with your damned contract!" Brill shouted. "There are still men down in that ship!"

"I'm sorry, Captain," West muttered. "I haven't forgotten them."

Evelyn looked down the long hall and saw Vince Ayres come in from the balcony, making his rounds. He stopped to consult Miss Wilkins—she was the S.O.Q. night nurse—in her little office at the far end, and then he came to the reception room.

"This won't do, men," he said quietly. "You're all patients, except Mr. West. Turn in, now. I promise to relay you any news as quickly as it comes. Mr. West, you and Miss West are at liberty to remain here, under the circumstances. But I'd advise a hotel."

"I'd rather stay," West said. Everett Brill rose heavily. "All right, men," he said. "Break it up." He kissed Evelyn's cheek, and Mike Way grinned at her as he passed, pushing his square jaw upward in a gesture that meant for her to keep her chin high.

It also meant, she reflected, that he understood her father's worries.

The men followed their skipper out. Their faces were weary, and they talked in murmurs.

Vince drew Evelyn aside. "I'll have to back down on that permission for you to sit out a watch or two over McQuaid," he said grimly. "You've got things to do. You're shoving off for sea at dawn."

"For sea?" she echoed. "You're joking!"

"No, I'm not. The *Consolation* has been ordered to the scene, with some extra nurses and doctors and corpsmen. It's going to be a tough rescue job; we'll probably have a ward full of divers with the bends, and when those other men are brought up, they'll need immediate hospitalization."

Evelyn put hands to her temples to press out a thought. Just when her father needed her most . . .

"I'm going too," Vince Ayres smiled, squeezing her arm. "You'd better pack a bag, and get some sleep."

IT was midnight before she had done with packing crisp white uniforms into the bag at her room in nurses' quarters. Across the hall, Mae Kennedy was doing the same thing. Four nurses were going, Mae had said.

This was the Navy. Here today and gone tomorrow. As her father had been gone when Myra Brill needed him. Under any other circumstances, Evelyn would have welcomed sea duty.

The telephone startled her. She thought, *Another Emergency!* and then knew that Vince Ayres would have called on somebody else in that event. Perhaps it was good news, instead; perhaps Vince had word that the rest of the *Starfish's* crew had been rescued, and that the *Consolation's* orders had been revoked.

She lifted the receiver. It was Vince, all right, but his usually cool voice sounded tense.

"Evelyn? Don't be alarmed. Your father is quite all right. It's McQuaid."

Evelyn caught her breath. "He's dead!" she said with a sudden prescience. "Vince—he's dead!"

"Come over to S.O.Q. at once," Vince Ayres said. "He didn't just—just die, Evelyn. He was murdered; clubbed to death in his bed!"

His Honor Is Missing

Over a floodtide darker and more terrible than the River Styx, ferried by a babbling broken-down Charon, two young people sought a fabulous diamond—and the key to a seventy-year-old mystery. What they found was the gateway to madness

By Theodore Roscoe

Author of "The Little Doll Died," "Speak for Yourself, John Quincy," etc.

CHAPTER I

LONG LIVE THE CORPSE!

THIS is the mystery story of a mayor who committed suicide and then, after he was buried and the gravediggers went home, the insurance companies said it wasn't the mayor at all; that some stooge had been buried in the mayor's place.

And the question then, naturally, was where *was* the mayor? Whose funeral was it? Good citizens wondered if His Honor was so honorable after all.

How could the mayor of an American city disappear? Why? Was it kidnaping—a traction scandal—politics—an insurance gag—a case of *cherchez la femme*?

Politicians usually go to their own funerals. Did the foul hand of murder clutch shadowy fingers around City Hall?

Folks are still asking those questions about this famous case and if you want to know the answers you must look for them, as Edith Johnwell did, in Binghamton, New York.

Yes, it happened in Binghamton, where the Susquehanna flows with deceptive placidity through verdant hills and fertile farmlands.

But then if things happened in places where you expected them to, why there wouldn't be any mystery stories like this one. Pretty girls like Edith Johnwell wouldn't be going to towns like Binghamton asking questions about the strange case of Colonel Dwight.

"**E**DITH!" I cried. "What in the world are you doing here?" . . . She was sitting in one of those traveling-salesman leather lounge chairs in the lobby of that Binghamton hotel that looks like a railway station, searching for something in her handbag.

I was delighted to see her there. Edith Johnwell was always decorative, and it had otherwise looked like a dull evening—nine o'clock and pouring rain. In contrast to the hotel lobby she looked as smart as a new car.

Edith was a large girl, but streamlined and very nice.

She looked up, frowning quizzically. "I'm looking for the mayor of Binghamton."

"I didn't know he was missing," I said.

"He's very much missing. And his disappearance is causing me a lot of worry."

"Well, why don't you call up at City Hall?" I asked. "Maybe he's still in his office, or down at the Fifth Ward Club playing dominoes with some of the boys."

Edith smiled. "I don't mean the present mayor, silly.

I mean the mayor who vanished around here about 1879."

"Tell me about him," I said for an excuse to stay.

Edith waved me into a neighboring chair, and told me.

She was, it seemed, writing a series of feature articles for the New York *Sun*. Sensational disappearances—you know. Elizabeth Canning—Charlie Ross—what happened to Ambrose Bierce.

One of the great historic American mysteries was this disappearance of the former Mayor of Binghamton; it was shrouded in the dark cloak of a vanishing act and had more weird angles than the trick box of Harry Houdini.

Edith sketched me the history of the case as anyone can read it who cares to look it up in the records.

SHORTLY after the Civil War there arrived in Binghamton a gentleman who might, from his appearance, have put down the Rebellion single handed.

He weighed well over two hundred pounds and stood six feet three in his stocking feet. He had a chest like a cider barrel, the voice of a blacksmith's anvil, a magnificent blond beard, a lion's-mane head of hair and a personality about as shy and retiring as a circus ringmaster.

Everything he did with a flourish, from taking off his hat to a lady to signing his name in three-inch letters to a check. You could imagine him stepping off the train at Binghamton like a monument about to set itself up on Public Square.

"Binghamton, here I am. I am Colonel Walton Dwight."

He wasn't any Kentucky colonel, either; he had fought at Gettysburg and he could comb aside his beard and show some genuine medals. Binghamton was flattered to be chosen as the address of so distinguished an officer and gentleman.

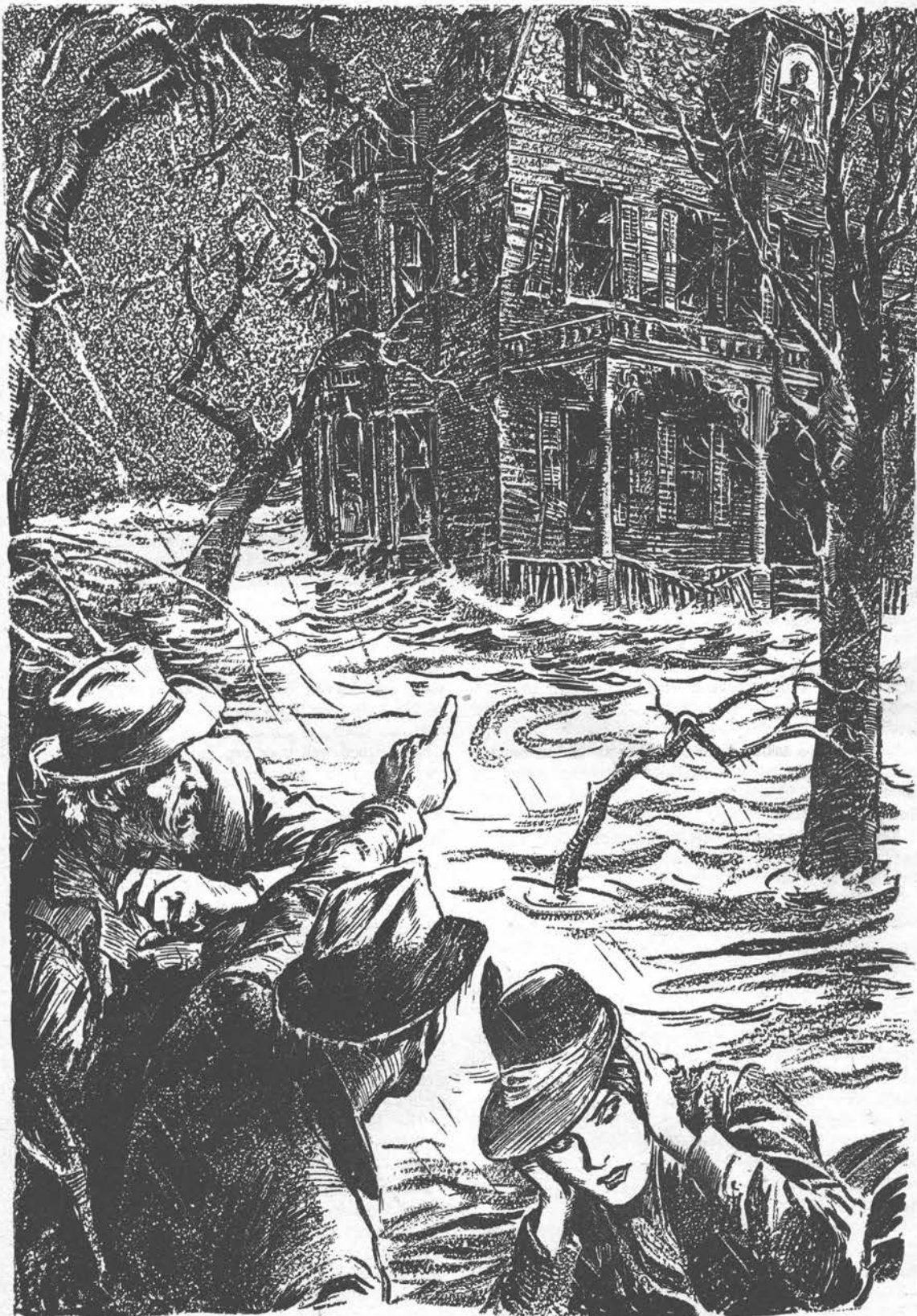
The colonel put a large brass plate on the door of his business office, married a wealthy young lady, bought a rig and a pair of fast horses and set out to enjoy life after a close brush with death in the Civil War.

The colonel had a considerable capacity for enjoyment, too. He was as robust as an ox, as gallant as a cavalier, and he could crack a joke with the next man in the mahogany grandeur of the Mighty Dollar Bar.

When he slapped someone on the back that person felt it "if he wasn't permanently injured"; and it wasn't long before he was sauntering down Main Street passing out fat black cigars.

Binghamton knew a political power when it saw one,

Complete Short Novel



I saw it and Burlap saw it—the face beyond the sagging shutters. A pale specter, black-robed; and there, throwing out a handful of moonbeams from the phantom chest, was the diamond!

even as big Colonel Dwight knew a voting community.

He was hardly settled in one of the imposing local mansions before he was up on a street-corner platform announcing himself as a candidate for municipal reform, pointing to the grafters in City Hall and calling upon all good voters to "throw the rascals out."

The rascals were thrown out. There was a great torch-light parade led by the Firemen's Band, and Colonel Dwight in shiny top hat and glossy beard was installed as the mayor of Binghamton. The year was somewhere around 1871.

The record has it that Colonel Dwight was prospering. By American standards, as well as European standards, the Colonel was a great success.

He owned a big, many-roomed house with lots of gingerbread and a cupola. There was an iron jockey in the driveway, iron stags on the lawn, a duck pond and a fountain. The house had gaslights and one of those new-fangled zinc-lined bathtubs, amply proportioned for the colonel.

Behind this splendor and opulence was a long series of business successes. The colonel was no pinch-penny operator. Stalking into a local bank with as much confidence as Jove calling on a cluster of small-time gods, he borrowed three hundred thousand dollars.

It was as hard to borrow money after the Civil War as it is today. That was only a small example of the colonel's powers of persuasion.

With the three hundred thousand he purchased a huge tract of timber in Canada and set out to make clothes pins or something. But clothes pins were too picayune an industry for the mayor of Binghamton. Pretty soon he was buying into Pennsylvania coal.

Then Chicago real estate took his eye; and along with the forests of Canada, the mines of Pennsylvania and the stockyards of Chicago, he built a suburb of Binghamton and put up a hotel called the Dwight House.

Those were just a few side investments indulged in by the former mayor of Binghamton.

AT THIS point in the recital of His Honor's biography, Edith sniffed. "Do you know what he used to say of himself? His favorite expression was that he liked to 'bore with a big auger'."

"He seems to have done all right," I said. "I didn't know there were ever such opportunities in Binghamton." My remark disturbed a fat man in a nearby lounge chair. Lowering a newspaper, he scowled around a potted fern at Edith and me.

I supposed he was the president of the local Go-Getters Association and resented us as New York slickers until I saw him expectorate a cud of tobacco into a convenient brass gaboon.

Only the hotel detective could've hit the spitton with such accuracy.

Edith ignored him and went on with the story about the colonel. It seems he bored so industriously and on such a grandiose scale that pretty soon his bank balance looked like a Swiss cheese.

The colonel never did anything in a small way, and the resulting financial crash must have sounded like the collapse of an iron foundry. He went magnificently bankrupt to the tune of four hundred thousand dollars.

Perhaps suspecting that he had bored a bigger hole than he could handle, he had meantime doffed the robes of

the lord mayor's office and striven mightily to keep his sieve-like business solvent.

When one's business is tottering, it hardly seems the time to take out life insurance, but the colonel seems to have welcomed with open arms every insurance salesman who came along.

The record has it that he bought twenty-one policies from twenty-one different companies; and when the crash arrived the colonel was still assured—or, rather, life-insured—for four hundred twenty thousand dollars.

LIFE insurance companies today would probably hesitate to insure a man with so many separate policies, but back in the 1870's they weren't as cautious.

The colonel didn't seem like a bad risk. Just over forty, he was as healthy, hearty and exuberant as an Elk's Club clam-bake. His eyes shone with vim, and his whiskers flourished like the green bay tree.

Bankruptcy didn't seem to dampen him. Despite the loss of his property, his house and grounds, his pair of matched grays and his iron stag, his spirits appeared to be excellent.

He went in for winter sports. Downhearted creditors were surprised to see him swimming the Susquehanna River on days when the water was like ice. Just the sight would have given an ordinary mortal—an insurance agent, say—double pneumonia.

Then he was seen tramping the woods in blizzards, plowing through the snow without hat or rubbers. He was likely to leave his bedroom window open at night and wake up with icicles in his whiskers. He refused to put on his long flannel underwear.

People began to say the colonel was deliberately trying to catch a bad cold. That his rosy-cheeked smile masked a broken heart. That, owing four hundred thousand dollars, he was out to cash in on his four hundred twenty thousand dollar life insurance by sending himself to the undertaker so that his creditors could be paid.

It was a noble gesture, but apparently the colonel's physique was better than his good intentions. These exercises merely improved his appetite. So it got around among his friends that he was taking overdoses of a drug called gelsemium.

Despite these reported efforts at self-destruction, the colonel's health stubbornly improved.

After some months of these unusual goings-on, the colonel must have decided to waste no more time. He checked into a downtown hotel, invited in numerous friends and went over his papers. He left his insurance policies in plain sight and told people where they could find his will.

Then he did a very curious thing.

Calling for the barber, he had his hair and beard shorn away. When at last he was bald as a melon and as clean-shaven as a whistle, he bid farewell to a last lingering friend and shut the door.

The record has it that his friend, returning in the morning, was shocked to find the colonel dead as a torpick, hanging by his neck from a bedpost.

That a two-hundred-and-fifty-pounder with the beefy proportions of the colonel might have difficulty hanging himself on a bedpost is a fact apparently missed by the investigators of the time. Supposedly it was one of those big old-fashioned Eighteen-seventy beds with posts like telegraph poles.

At any rate the body was cut down by his friend and

laid out in state. Funeral arrangements were made, the ceremony to be in keeping with the colonel's grandiloquent career.

While the body went to the cemetery amid floral horse-shoes and "Gates Ajar," folks wiped their eyes and blew their noses and said what a noble man the colonel was, to have taken his own life to pay off his debts.

Of course, having gone through bankruptcy he didn't have any legal debts and the insurance money went to his wife's heirs, but the tailor and contractor probably hoped for a few cents on the dollar.

BUT the colonel didn't rest in peace very long. One of the twenty-one insurance companies seemed to doubt the validity of the bedpost hanging. It telegraphed to several of the others, and two or three more decided they wouldn't pay the insurance until they had an autopsy.

Meantime the will was read, and some more peculiarities were noticed. The colonel had never been stingy, but when he willed generous sums of money to the boys around City Hall, the legacy began to look queer.

Especially queer was a bequest of five thousand dollars to the coroner who examined his remains and ten thousand dollars to the surrogate who handled the will.

While lawyers were staring in surprise at this largesse, a medical examiner of State-wide reputation was called in from Albany. This doctor hurried to look at the body which had now been returned to the morgue.

After a brief but exciting autopsy, he declared that he could not swear it was the body of Colonel Dwight.

The colonel's heirs insisted it was the colonel's body, and the Albany doctor was equally insistent that it wasn't. People said, "Well sir, can you beat that?"

The insurance companies said, "If it isn't the colonel's body then he isn't dead and we'll be darned if we'll come across with four hundred twenty thousand dollars worth of life insurance."

Binghamton was in a stew. Some said it was the colonel, all right, but he didn't look familiar because he'd harvested his gorgeous whiskers.

Others said it wasn't the colonel at all, but some bogus colonel that had been supplied by the city morgue. These doubters suggested that the colonel had clipped his whiskers to facilitate a getaway; that his friends had substituted a ringer and staged a phoney funeral.

While all this wrangling was going on, a report came that the ex-mayor of Binghamton had been seen on his way to Mexico. Those contesting the insurance companies answered with a claim that the colonel had been taking a peculiar drug which altered his appearance after death.

So there were those who said the colonel was dead, and there were those who said he wasn't. In the end, the insurance companies said he wasn't and they won the case.

The colonel's estate didn't collect the four hundred twenty thousand dollars.

BUT if the colonel wasn't dead, where was he? Who was the poor devil found hanging to the bedpost? From that day to this, nobody seems to know.

Reports came in for a long time afterward that the colonel with a fresh growth of whiskers had been seen around Mexico, Cuba and the hot spots of South America; but no one could establish these reports as true.

It was never proved whether the colonel went to Mexico or the Beyond.

Such are the historical facts concerning the one-time mayor of Binghamton—history as Edith told it to me that night in the hotel lobby—as you, yourself, can read it if you care to look up the records.

Then she told me some angles that aren't in the records.

"That happened about seventy years ago," she whispered, "and the colonel has been missing from that day to this."

She paused; and as if timed to a cue the night was shaken by a wooden rumble of thunder. Electricity fluttered in the rain-swept street, and a spate of wind-blown water whipped against the lobby windows.

"Charlie," Edith's voice was low—"what would you say if I told you that I'm going to see this ex-mayor of Binghamton?"

From here on, this story—as the novelists say—bears no resemblance to anyone living or dead.

CHAPTER II

MAN OUT OF DARKNESS

I DON'T know why Edith's voice put a creep through my hair, but it sort of went with the rain-gust and the Shakespearean accompaniment of thunder.

Binghamton was blacked out with one of those summer night thunderstorms that short-circuited the street lamps and clear the square of traffic and drive pedestrians indoors. It was the sort of night to meet a mayor who had disappeared mysteriously seventy years ago.

Edith had lowered her head to light a cigarette. Our corner seemed remote from the rest of the lobby where cigar smoke stagnated over the usual chairs and business men hobnobbed with the desk clerk.

In a taproom at the back a juke box was playing, and a bellhop came through paging somebody named Mr. Dinglehooper.

Edith said, leaning toward me, "By the way, Charlie, if all this is boring you—"

"I haven't got a thing to do," I protested. "How about finishing it in the bar where we can get a drink?"

"I can't. I'm waiting here for somebody."

Her voice underlined the "somebody" and there was another crash of thunder outside and I had another creep. Edith's eyes went past me, dilated, and I looked around half expecting to see the missing mayor.

Of course he wasn't there. And of course it was just Edith's way of telling a story; she loved mysteries and she had a knack at spinning words, which was why the newspaper had assigned her to this sort of stuff.

I could see someone else who wasn't bored by the story, too: that fat goop in the chair around the corner of the potted plant. Ever so often he'd lower his paper and sneak a sidewise look.

I decided he was the house dick, and I supposed he thought I was trying to pick Edith up.

In which case, incidentally, he was right. I'd spent four years trying to pick up Edith. That she was still on a newspaper while I was a bachelor advertising salesman shows how much magnetism I didn't have.

"Well," Edith's manner was confidential—"I've spent a week here in Binghamton going over the records, and I've found some interesting things about this old mayor of Binghamton."

"What kind of things?"

"Nothing in the records. The city historian of the period seems to've edited a lot of the case. I fancy they felt a little hoaxed, and the consensus was that he pulled a vanishing act and made a getaway."

"So it sounds from the evidence."

"Yes," Edith agreed. "If he weren't up to flimflam why would he've barbered his beautiful beard? I think the colonel parted with his whiskers because the substitute corpse didn't have any; besides, it would account for the substitute's face looking different."

"Also, a man about to commit suicide doesn't spend money for a shave and a haircut. And without his whiskers it would've been easier to slip out of town."

"That's the way folks reasoned at the time. I've met some old-timers who claim to remember the colonel, and they agree that that whisker business was mighty queer."

"The colonel's vanishment has become a sort of legend around here, and according to the legend, that beard was one of the three things he prized most in the world."

"What were the other two?" I asked.

ACCORDING to the legend—"Edith emphasized the phrase—"the second thing he prized was an oil painting. A portrait, naturally of himself. Being a man who liked to bore with a big auger, the colonel was just the sort to have his portrait painted. Full length."

"And the third thing he's supposed to have prized"—her voice dropped to alto—"was a diamond."

I echoed, "A diamond?"

Edith said, "Shhhhh!" and looked around. Then she leaned toward me, big-eyed. "A regular bonanza," she whispered in one of those woman's whispers that carry louder than ordinary conversation.

"Bigger than a peach pit. There's nothing about it in the records, you know. It's just one of the legendary tales about the colonel: that he disappeared with this enormous diamond."

"The kind of sparkler any sensible girl would accept in an engagement ring," I suggested. The remark was supposed to remind Edith of a diamond, not quite as mammoth but twice as well-intended, which I had been frustratedly offering her.

She frowned, then ignored the suggestion.

"The story is that this diamond was worth all of thirty thousand dollars. I can't find anybody who ever saw it on the colonel, but some of the old men hereabouts say they heard about it on the colonel. I'd say it fitted with his character, though."

"If a man were going bankrupt and planning a vanishing act, a diamond would be a handy thing to vanish with. You can't cash worthless checks in Mexico, but a diamond—"

Edith drew a long breath; stared out of the lobby window at the black rain. "A diamond is good anywhere."

I nodded vigorously.

"If you know where," I reminded, thinking of her finger.

Edith gave me another dilated look. "Charlie," she said (alto again), "I think I'm going to see it tonight."

I gulped, "What?"

She whispered, "I told you I was going to see the ex-mayor."

I said, "You mean he's come back?"

"Perhaps," she said in a low voice, "he never went away."

THUNDER fell down a staircase in the night outside and crashed as if on some nearby church steeple. The lobby lights dimmed and flickered, and the street disappeared in black cloudburst.

Edith's voice came in, *mysterioso*, "I've heard a story that the colonel never left town; that he vanished no farther than an old house near Binghamton—an old, deserted house on an island in the middle of the Susquehanna River."

The story goes that he lived there as a recluse with the windows shuttered and the blinds down and a big black dog to keep unwanted visitors away. They say a boat used to put out from shore—a veiled woman in a black cape who took him food.

"They say he lived there, Charlie, and died there. But the house is still haunted by the colonel and his dog, they say, and he's been seen at the window in his lord mayor's robes with his curly yellow beard and his diamond. His living ghost."

"His ghost!" At that I wanted to laugh. Of course there'd be a ghost. Men like that in towns surrounded by rural countryside always leave a ghost. I grinned: "The old gray mayor!"

Edith rebuked my levity by tightening the corners of her mouth. "Listen." She leaned toward me. "It isn't funny. From the history of the case I think he pulled a stunt. It seems plausible enough; why else would he have parted with his beloved whiskers?"

"He might easily have sneaked off in the night to this desolate river-island hide-out. The woman in black seems plausible, too."

"I've talked with three old farmers who say they saw her. They say the colonel planned to go to foreign parts when the insurance money was settled, but when the fake corpse was exposed he didn't dare risk going any farther."

"Not only that; I talked with one farmer who says his father saw the substituted corpse and knows it wasn't the colonel. This farmer claims his father was one of the grave-diggers, see?"

She waited for another thunder-crack to calm down.

I protested, "Edith, there were probably all kinds of rumors—legends bigger with every telling—"

"I believe them," she said throatily. "That's not all. Some men went out to that haunted house, Charlie. The story says there were five in all. They rowed out to the island after that diamond. You can bet there'd be plenty of men who'd give their souls for a diamond like that."

"They gave their souls for it, too. The legend says they never came back. Every one of the five was found drowned in the river below the island."

"Sure," I jibed. "Haunted house. Ghost at the window. Treasure-hunt after a diamond. Anybody unfortunate enough to drown in the river near the haunted island, and he was murdered by the spook."

"Are you going to tell me," I demanded, "that you believe in ghosts?"

Edith gave me a steady, caustic look. "Did I say I believed in ghosts?" She shook her head. "I said the farmers around here claimed they'd seen a ghost. The man who's coming here tonight claims he saw it just a week ago. I believe he saw something."

Edith lowered her voice tensely. "I believe the colonel is still *alive*."

There was a loud interruption of thunder, and every lamp in the lobby went out. Blue lightning flickered

around in the street, glaring into the windows weirdly.

Edith's face was bleak and queer in the lightning flares. She was saying, "I believe the ghost they see is the colonel himself. He was forty when he disappeared. He'd be now about a hundred and ten years old."

The lobby lights came on as suddenly as they'd been extinguished. The room hopped back into view, people blinking at each other from their chairs and at the lobby desk; the fat man behind the fern adjusting his glasses and lifting his newspaper.

But there was a man standing at the side of Edith's chair: a creature who might have been conjured by the momentary darkness or swept in on the wings of the rainstorm from outside.

He had ears like wings and a long, bony face above a long, bony neck with a big Adam's apple. Eyes like holes full of rainwater peered weakly under a dripping hatbrim.

His clothes hung drenched and gaunt as the garb on a scarecrow; his storm-rubbers were caked with mud; he carried a weeping umbrella. But it wasn't Chamberlain. "Miss Johnwell?"

Edith jumped up. "Good! I was afraid you weren't coming."

"Wasn't sure you'd want to go. It's a-rainin' powerful hard, an' I reckon th' river may be close to flooded."

"I'll get my waterproof," Edith said. "Goodbye, Charlie." she turned to me. "This is the gentleman going to escort me to the place I told you about."

"Goodbye, nothing," I said. Looking at this soaked and dripping rustic, I was thinking of five men mysteriously drowned in the spectre-haunted river. "Wait till I get my hat. I'm going, too."

CHAPTER III

CHARON'S FERRY

LOOKING back now, I wonder whether I wasn't, in a way, shanghaied. Edith said she didn't want me to go. She wouldn't wait for me to go around to the garage and fetch my car; she insisted that I'd crowd her escort's flivver, and she said she didn't want me interfering with her business.

But of course she knew I'd go.

"I have an idea she was a little scared about this mayor-hunt on such a stormy night, that she'd deliberately stirred up my masculine protective instinct with her story, and was darned glad I'd happened along for company.

That diamond angle was a good piece of luring, too. I'm as much a sucker for a treasure hunt as the next man, and Edith didn't neglect to put that on the hook.

Anyway and willy-nilly, the next thing I knew I was out of the hotel and across a long bridge and driving out along a country road out of Binghamton in the worst rainstorm I'd ever experienced, and in the worst car.

Three was a crowd in that jalopy. The body was a Saxon, but the gear-shift and engine were from a Ford, Model T; the lamps and wheels were from a Maxwell, and the other spare parts went back to prehistoric days of the automotive industry.

Our chauffeur, like his car, seemed made of assorted spare parts. These were distributed over half the passenger space. His head was bowed to the roof; his shoulders were hunched over the steering wheel, knees jockeyed up on either side of the wheel, and elbows splayed.

What with his ears, his umbrella, his feet, a peck of potatoes loose on the floorboards and various farm implements stowed behind the seat, the coupe was already cramped when Edith and I squeezed in.

Nobody ever said Edith didn't have hips, so she sat on me.

"I told you not to come," she complained.

"It's all right with me," I assured her. I'd never been able to entice her on my knee in more comfortable circumstances, and I'll admit it was another reason for my joining the expedition.

Before starting, she introduced me to our guide. Clyde Burlap. He shook hands gravely and prepared himself against the journey with a great chaw of chewing tobacco—Iron Horse.

I don't think either Edith or I knew what we were getting into when we got into that car. For my own part, I didn't think we would get very far. But at that, the rattletrap went at a remarkable pace.

Thirty-five miles an hour in that hazardous hybrid was the fastest ride I ever had. Bolts rattling, springs squeaking, the bus shook along through the rain, chattering as if with ague.

Every next turn I expected the engine to drop out or a wheel to snap off.

The road was black as your hat, and the fizzing headlamps barely penetrated the downpour. Sheets of water swept over the hood as we hit flooded ruts. Rain beat through the roof like a mist coming through a cotton umbrella.

Our driver addressed his vehicle as if it were a nag: "Whoa!" as it slowed for a turn; "Giddyap!" as it started up a hill; "G'wan, you!" when he shoved it into low and it faltered.

"Ain't exactly a Cadillac," he informed me, "but give her her own leeway an' she'll git there. Reckon she'll pass anything on th' road tonight."

THERE wasn't anything on the road for her to pass. Presently we left the main highway and turned down a hilly wagon-road, and there was less.

You couldn't see the roadsides for the rain and darkness, and after a couple of miles I began to wonder if we hadn't gone off the map.

"Can't scarcely see fer this weather," Mr. Burlap peered with his nose against the windshield. "But Jessie c'n find her way like she does it by instinct. She's a native to these parts like I am."

In reply to my question about Jessie, he informed me that Jessie was the car. "Named her after a horse I had in the old buggy days, and she's nigh as old, too. Horse Jessie died at thirty-six, an' there's parts of this here Jessie near to thirty-five.

"But she'll get us where we want to git, mister. Don't worry about Jessie."

I wasn't worried about Jessie. I was worried about Edith and me barging off in that broken-down jalopy with this farmer in a thunder storm. I could see the road ahead going downhill like a brown torrent. It was a desolate landscape, and Binghamton seemed a hundred miles away.

"Don't get stuck," Edith warned. "You're sure you know the way?"

"Sure do," Burlap declared. "We're a-headin' south on what I call the Ole Back Road. Follerin' down th' Susquehanna Valley. Ain't used much, this road, 'count

of it's bad. My pa told me back in th' old days that Colonel Dwight use to drive it in his rig sometimes on Sunday.

"Pa's farm was on th' hill up there to th' left—that is, before he give up farmin' to become a grave-digger."

Rain swooped around the car. Edith had to raise her voice at my ear to be heard.

Mr. Burlap's father is the man I told you about—said he saw the body at the ex-mayor's funeral and claimed it wasn't that of the colonel."

"Is that so?" I shouted.

"Yes, sir." The farmer nodded, steering the car around a sharp turn and digging an elbow into my ribs. "Pa was right there at th' grave-side when th' coffin was reopened fer th' autopsy. Pa said it wasn't th' colonel, an' he knowed for sure it wasn't th' colonel. On account of th' hair."

WE skidded down through a gully where the underbrush was so thick it slashed the sides of Jessie's Saxon body. Mud splattered up over the fenders, plastering the windshield. The tires spun in paste, then found traction in gravel.

Our driver shouted, "Giddyap!" as Jessie almost bogged; and I waited for the engine to pull ahead before asking my question.

"How could he tell by the hair? I thought the colonel shaved off his hair and whiskers."

"Sure he did," Burlap agreed. "An' th' body that was buried had its hair and whiskers barbered likewise. Must've been a vagrant at the morgue, see, that was rigged up in the colonel's clothes and hanged to th' bedpost to look like him.

"All right; then it was buried, an' some days later dug up again. It had hair when it was dug up. My pa says he seen it. Fine reddish hair.

"But the colonel's hair was yellow. Th' hair on th' corpse was reddish. Y'see, th' hair of your corpse keeps on growin' even after you're dead."

He cranked down the window at his elbow to spit out a streak of tobacco juice. Rain and wind and some of the tobacco juice gusted back into my face.

I guessed we were about ten miles out of Binghamton and I wished we were back. Edith was getting pretty heavy; but she had an arm around my neck, which helped some. It was warm, though, and wet and stuffy and uncomfortable.

Burlap kept up a bovine chewing noise, peering to see the road and clucking now and then at the car.

Then he jerked a thumb at a roadside mail box in rusty abandonment atop a post.

"There's the old Dinkloofer farm. Gone to grass, now. There was a son but he run away with a circus when he was a kid, an' he didn't never come back an' lay claim to the place, an' it's et up with taxes.

"Ain't no one lived there for years. No, sir, the son never come back. Not after what happened to the old man."

The comment seemed more significant than reminiscence. I waited for our escort to explain.

"Edith said, 'That was one of the five?'"

Burlap ran down the window to spit. "Yes, sir," he nodded, wisting his mouth to complete the operation. "That was one of the five."

"One of the five what?" I asked. The name Dinkloofer

sounded somehow vaguely familiar. I was trying to think back and locate it.

"**O**NE of th' five who was drowned," Burlap's voice went suddenly basso. "One of th' five who went out to th' island a-huntin' the mayor's diamond sparkler, an' didn't never come back. Old man Dinkloofer was the first."

Edith urged, "Tell Charlie about it, Mr. Burlap. He doesn't quite believe the story."

"Don't know whether I believe it all myself," was the answer. "If'n I did, I don't reckon I'd be takin' you there, miss. Not fer five dollars, ner fer five thousand dollars.

"But there's been some mighty queer goin's on about that island, an' it started back about fifty years ago. Started with people sayin' they seen a woman in black row out there, an' th' rumor that th' missin' colonel had this diamond.

"But—Whoa, Jessie!" He pulled up the car. "Tell you about it goin' out there. Here we are."

To this day I don't know where we were. Somewhere on the Susquehanna River, I suppose. The car stopped in a nest of bushes between two huge black trees.

There was a flash and a crack of thunder, and I glimpsed a mud bank and a dock and a rushing sweep of water that seemed as wide as the Mississippi in the rainblur.

A rowboat and a muddy scow were tethered to the dock, and in a second flash of lightning I glimpsed a string of channel islands far out in the middle of the river. I don't say it was as wide as the Mississippi; but in the rain and stormy dark with the water sweeping by at high flood it seemed that way.

We got out in the soup, and I didn't want to go. But our escort lit a lantern and led us down to the boats, and Edith's eyes were shining with excitement and adventure.

Burlap bailed out and untied the rowboat, and I remember him saying we were at Someone-or-other's Ferry. I was thinking of Charon's Ferry.

Gaunt and shadowy in the lantern-light, Burlap was Charon's boatman. We were out to find a lost soul, and the river was as black and forbidding as the River Styx.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIVE

BURLAP chewed, bailed, rowed and told us about Dinkloofer as our boat edged out into the river.

"It was the diamond that fetched old man Dinkloofer. He was a Dutchman, y'see, an' Dutchmen have a yen for diamonds. Mind you, he wasn't the only one."

Thunder interrupted with a crash. Rain blew in flat streaks across the water, blinding the night. Swept out into the channel, our flatbottom boat pitched and rocked.

Our boatman swore, spat and strained at the oars.

"About Dinkloofer," he resumed. "He was the one who started it. When he heard that the colonel had piked off with a val'ble gem, he told my pa he knowed where it was.

"Y'see it was old man Dinkloofer who'd seen th' woman in black rowin' downriver to this island. Dinkloofer, he follered her one time to see where she was a-goin', an' he seen her stop at this island an' go into the ole haunted house.

"It was Dinkloofer first claimed he seen the ex-mayor's

face at an upper window one moonlit night. "It's the colonel's ghost," he told my pa. If his ghost is there, that diamond may be there, too. Sometime I'm a-goin' to take a look."

"Go on," Edith said breathlessly as Burlap halted to stuff his marsupial cheek with fresh tobacco. "Tell what happened to Dinkloofer."

"Well, sir, one night he set out. It was a bad night," Burlap said cheerlessly. "Kind of like tonight. Ole man Dinkloofer told the neighbors he was goin' out after bullheads, but everybody knowed 'twasn't the kind of night to go out fishin' fer bullheads.

"Dinkloofer rowed out to th' island to that haunted house; they found his boat there afterwards. But they didn't find ole man Dinkloofer there. They found *him* down near the rapids at Medwick's Mill.

"Floatin' in the millrace, he was. Drowned as a mush-rat."

Burlap spat overside in finality, and as he bent to the oars I couldn't help looking off through the rainstorm in apprehension. Tons of water surged past us in the dark; rain beat down on our heads; Edith and I were huddled together, soaked.

"The next one was Gawzberry." Burlap drawled the name. "Jed Gawzberry as used to be a farm hand on the west side of th' stream. Jed got the bee in his bonnet he'd like to get his hands on th' colonel's sparkler, an' he come a-rowin' out one night to look fer it, too.

"He didn't tell no one but his sister, an' his sister told it afterwards at Jed's inquest.

"He didn't git th' jewel, either. He was found days afterwards by the mill downstream when a fisherman hooked him up outa th' mud. Jed had been drowned, too."

Bending to the oars, our narrator pulled a dozen deep strokes. His eyes were closed in memory. He was humming *Down By The Old Mill Stream*.

I didn't like any of it. But Edith was crouched forward, peering into the night ahead with eyes as bright as if she saw pirate's treasure. "Tell Charlie about Big Ben."

"**Y**ESSIR." Burlap nodded. "Yessir, there was Big Ben. He was a blacksmith, y'see, down at what they used to call Riverbend Point—a big, husky feller who could bend a horseshoe with one hand.

"He wasn't afraid of nothin', an' he said he didn't give a hang about th' give a hang about th' colonel's ghost; he was goin' to find that diamond an' he didn't give a whoop who knowed it.

"He rowed out to the island one Hallowe'en night when no one in the county dast join him on a dare. Well, sir, they waited all night, but he didn't come back.

"The ice was early that winter, an' they never did find him till the follerin' spring. He popped up down there by Medwick's Mill, too."

I had an idea that if we kept on with this harebrained business I might pop up down by Medwick's Mill myself. Our guide went on to say that Big Ben's pop-uppance had occurred twenty years ago, and that it was a long time afterward before the country people would venture anywhere near the haunted island.

"But folks jest couldn't forget that diamond. It was said to be a whopper, an' it kind of stuck in people's craw. They figgered the colonel would've owned such a gewgaw,

bein' a politician like he was, an' thirty thousand dollars is a heap of money to us farmers hereabouts.

"Only it wasn't a farmer who went after it next. It was a feller from th' city who'd once took in th' colonel's laundry. A smart old Chinaman named Ching."

Ching Ching Chinaman! He, too, it seemed had conceived a belief in the colonel's bonanza. He, too, had boated past the island on numerous occasions and witnessed the vanished man's face at the window.

He, too, had declared his intention of visiting the insular house; and he, too, for all his undoubted Oriental craft and what Burlap called "heathen familiarity with witches," had floated up in the vicinity of Medwick's Mill, thoroughly drowned.

I'd had enough of it. Puffing, spitting, hauling at the oars, Burlap had all he could do to keep our craft from being whirled downstream without diverting us with a bedtime story.

That river was certainly high. Swollen by cloudbursts, the current was running as if a dam had broken somewhere. Displays of aerial electricity revealed glimpses of the racing tide; uprooted bushes, driftwood and water-logged timbers swirled around our boat; I know flood-water when I see it.

"Let's go back," I muttered to Edith. "It's not safe out here on a night like this. This river's rising to a flood."

She didn't hear me. Our nocturnal boatman was adding a fifth face to his collection of the drowned.

"**F**ELLER named Strool. He wasn't a Binghamtonite ner native to these parts; after what happened to the Chink an' those others, you couldn't git nobody hereabouts to go within a mile of that island house.

"Nossir, us folks who knowed about it steered clear of the place, diamond er no diamond. But this feller, Strool, he use to come through here summers with the Chautauqua.

"Comin' year after year, they git to know the countryfolk pretty personal, an' I reckon that's where Professor Strool—they called him Professor—got wind of Colonel Dwight's ghost an' the hawg-size diamond."

Burlap wiped rain from his eyes; shook his head at the memory. "Smart feller, Strool was, too. Mighty smart. Wore nose glasses with a ribbon, an' a flowin' black tie.

"He give readin's on some guy named Shakespeare—all about witches an' spooks an' some Scotch murderer named Macbeth. Like to make your hair curl.

"But I recollect hearin' him once tell an audience he didn't really believe in spooks, they was jest eye-magination.

"Trouble was, he had this goitre. One of the kind"—Burlap gestured in the lantern light—"grows out like a summer squash.

"Strool tried to hide it with his big, professor's tie, but I reckon it growed too large for him. Naturally he couldn't go on readin' about Macbeth with a thing like that."

I gulped. "Naturally."

"So I figger,"—Burlap wagged his chin—"he was gettin' ready to re-tire. Hadn't saved no money, likely, an' he needed a heap to keep himself an' his goitre. Heard about the missin' colonel an' his sparkler, an' reckoned he'd like to find such a gem. Sooo—" he mooded the word suggestively.

So Strool, also, rowed out to the mayor-haunted island. Strool, also, dared the colonel's phantom for the rumored gem. Strool, also, was found in the rapids down below Medwick's Mill.

"And that happened just last summer," Burlap's voice drifted at me through the rain. "Last summer about this time of year. Of course, the sheriff an' police investigated."

He snorted. "But th' sheriff an' police are city folks, an' they don't know nothin' no-how. Drowned by accident, they called it. Same as all the other drownin's out here where the current's swift in th' river.

"They"—Burlap expectorated scornfully—"claim that the boats tipped over in th' channel or the men was drowned in swimmin' or something. Medwick's Mill is four miles below this island, and they say the bodies was carried down by the current.

"They come out an' looked at the haunted house, but they was mighty careful to do it in the daytime, I notice. An' us country people knows you don't see ghosts in the daytime.

"Nossir, you see 'em at night. Just like I seen th' colonel's ghost, myself—at the window—with his yellow beard and mayor's robes an' the diamond flarin' on his chest like a cat's eye—an' I heard th' black dog howlin', too."

Burlap peered at me waterishly across the oar-handles. "That was only last week."

CHAPTER V

THE BLACK DOG HOWLS

RAINWATER turned to icewater running down my spine. It was eerie out there on that black, storm-swept river. Damned eerie! It's one thing to have a farmer tell you ghost stories from forty years ago or even last year. Another thing to have him tell you he's seen the bugaboo last week.

Our boatman looked as if he'd seen it, for a fact.

"Yessir, I was in this very boat. A-rowin' down to Riverbend Point, I was, to call on my Aunt Hattie who's my only livin' relative. Well, I didn't look where I was a-rowin' count of I had a line out for carp, an' I rowed right close to the island.

"Say! It was bright moonlight, an' I looked around, an' I was driftin' right past th' ole house. There it was at a third-story window.

"Plain as anything in th' moonlight. Lookin' at me through th' broken shutters! Th' face of th' missin' mayor!"

Burlap wiped his tobacco-juicy mouth and neighed a nervous laugh. "Durn near capsized myself in this boat," he blurted. "Scairt the liver an' lights clean outa me. Got on down to Aunt Hattie's so fast the oar-locks was smokin'.

"When I told Aunt Hat about it, she told me she'd seen the colonel's face herself a couple of times. Huh!"

He broke off to tug at the oars. The rain had stopped suddenly, and the thunder had retreated into distance where lightning flashes played across far-off night.

When the sky-flares flickered out, the river completely disappeared. There was only the sound of swirling currents and sloshing oar-blades.

We drifted with our lantern through black invisibility.

"It was th' missin' colonel, all right," Burlap nodded at

Edith. "Reckanized him from Pa's description. Seen th' diamond winkin' under his whiskers, an' just as I pulled away there was that awful dog-howl. It was like I told it in th' barber shop last Saturday night.

"**Y**'SEE, young feller"—he blinked at me—"I come to town last Saturday night to git my seasonal haircut. I was tellin' th' barber how I'd seen th' colonel's ghost the night before, an' your girl was in there an' she collared me. She'd come in to ask th' barber if ole Colonel Dwight had ever left any shavin' mug around Binghamton, an' she tells me she's writin' a history of th' colonel."

"I asked Mr. Burlap to help me," Edith said. "I promised him five dollars if he'd bring me out to this island."

"Yessir," our boatman agreed. "An' I wouldn't a-done it, if'n she hadn't told me somethin' I was thinkin' all along. I ain't sayin' I don't believe in ghosts. I've seen too many of 'em.

"But the girl is right, young feller. It wasn't no ghost that sent ole man Dinkloofer an' Jed Gawzberry an' Big Ben an' Ching an' Professor Strool to a watery grave.

"Nossir." Burlap spat a brown streak in conviction. "Ghosts don't ever kill anybody."

"What do you think did happen to those five men?" I muttered.

Burlap feathered the oars and blinked at me. "I think they was drowned, sure enough. But the colonel's ghost didn't do it. I recollect my pa tellin' me that the colonel, after he went bankrupt, started takin' some queer drug.

"Pa said it was gelsemium—an' gelsemium comes from th' root of jasmine. They say it's a mighty queer drug."

"Yes," Edith nodded. "There was a rumor he took gelsemium."

"Yeah"—Clyde Burlap shifted his cud—"an' I've hearn tell that if you take enough of it, it's a sort of preservative, like. That's what Pa said, an' Pa was a grave-digger an' ought to've knowed.

"If you take enough of this drug, you don't ever die. So I think the colonel's out here on this island, sure enough. I think he's still alive."

It was nonsense, of course. There's no such thing as a drug to keep you alive. If this ridiculous colonel were a hundred and ten years old, he wouldn't have any yellow whiskers to show at a window, and the rats in an old house would have eaten him up long ago.

We were risking our necks on this flooded river in a leaky tub for a lot of fiddlefaddle. I was mad at Edith for coming with this ignorant bumpkin, and mad at myself for letting her come.

Then our guide said something that made me madder.

"**T**HE colonel's still alive, an' it musta been him who drowned those others. That's why I ain't takin' any chances. So I brought Pa's gun."

Fishing under his coat, he produced the weapon and laid it across his knee. A rusty, long-barreled horse pistol that looked as if it hadn't been fired since the Civil War.

In the lantern-glimmer his eyes werę sly. He gave a confidential laugh. "I guess I ain't so dumb. Even if they do call me Crazy Clyde."

I felt Edith stiffen at my side. Crazy Clyde! I guess that was a little more than she had bargained for.

"Do they call you that?" Her voice was dismayed.

He smiled at us over the oar handles. "It's jest that they say I ain't quite bright. Becuz at seventeen I was still in the second grade. It wasn't that I wasn't smart, though."

He chuckled. "I never did tell 'em it was becuz I liked the teacher. That's why I stayed in th' second grade when I could've gone on.

"Hell's bells! Other people say they're bright, but jest look at the state the world's in. If they're so all-fired smart how'd they come to elect a mayor in Binghamton like this colonel?"

He laughed cheerfully. "But there was somethin' wrong with Ma. Run in her family. An' when I was six years old I was kicked in the head by a horse."

He took off his hat and leaned forward. "Want to feel th' dent?"

I reached out quickly; and he jerked back, quicker.

"Set down, you're rockin' the boat," he said reproachfully, holding the gun beyond my snatch. He stuffed it back into his shirt. "I'll carry th' hoss pistol, young feller. Don't worry, 'tain't loaded. Ain't no bullets been made to fit it fer fifty years."

"Mr. Burlap," I ordered, "take us back to the dock."

"No," Edith countered firmly. "Go on to the island."

"You're a-payin' me," he nodded at Edith, working the oars. "Reckon I ain't too dim-witted to know where th' money is. Anyway, here we be."

Bullrushes were scraping the gunwales as our boatman shipped the oars; the flatbottom grounded on mud, and there we were.

I was mad as a hatter. Edith and I and a fool with an empty gun on a flooded mid-river island looking for the little mayor who wasn't there!

Just as we landed there was a terrific clap of thunder and the whole sky was zigzagged with lightning like cracks in a black Easter egg.

We saw the house. A black-roofed, beetling silhouette beyond a jungle of crooked-limbed, inky trees.

Lightning short-circuited into blackness, and the thunder rolled away, and there was only the swash of the river and pitch darkness and the furtive whisper of rainwater guttering and draining through soaked underbrush.

But silly or not, Burlap's eyes in that lightning flare had spied something missed by mine.

Grabbing the lantern, he went up the mud-bank with a cry. When we caught up with him, he was pawing a sodden bundle from under a bush. Clothes.

A suit of men's clothes. We gaped at them under the lantern: a voluminous pair of pants—an oversized coat—and, I remember, a pair of number twelve Endicott-Johnson shoes. They were water-soaked and shapeless and tied in a bundle by a belt. The initial on the belt-buckle was *D*.

My hair went up. The buckle wasn't rusty! What large individual had but recently divested himself of these garments and left them here?

"D!" Edith gasped. "D for Dwight! Colonel Walton Dwight!"

That wasn't the time to hear the funeral howl of a dog.

WAHOOOO! . . . Word of honor, that howl coming out of the black almost lifted the forelock off my head. "Good guh-gosh!" I said.

Edith got around behind me and clung. "What was thaaat?"

Crazy Clyde Burlap dropped the vacant clothes and reared up in fright. His voice was half way between a sermon and a moan. "It's the black dog! The black dog of the colonel that for seventy years has kept guard over the island."

"And the colonel's here, too!" Edith pointed at the outside pants, coat and shoes.

"Somewhere in the dark." Burlap stared around bogle-eyed. "Somewhere in th' night! An' he ain't got his clothes on!"

That was too much to contemplate; and we ran, as if by common consent, down the mud-bank, pellmell. Back to the boat.

Only the boat wasn't there. We stood at the water's edge, frantic, while Burlap wildly waved the lantern. The gleams gave glimpse of the sweeping brown current surging through a wall of night—no boat.

Waves purling through the rushes told the story. No one had bothered to tie up the craft. The river had risen inches while we examined that ghoulis bundle of clothes. Our boat had departed by itself.

That wasn't all I saw. Our means of departure having departed, we were marooned—on an island in the middle of a run-away river that was swelling higher every minute.

Swimming that wild current was out of the question, and it looked as if we were in for a night of it. Stuck out there in mid-river with a haunted house, a black dog, an unclad ghost and Heaven knew what other hocus-pocus in the offing.

CHAPTER VI

THE COLONEL'S FACE

BURLAP whimpered, "What're we gonna do?" and I was mad enough to kick him into the drink. The boat floating off was just about the last straw.

"Do?" I snapped. "Well, we aren't going to stand on this mud bank while the tide climbs up our legs and wait for dawn. How wide is this river?"

"We couldn't never swim it," he sniffled. "That channel out there's mighty swift. Th' river's flooded from all these rains. Powerful heap of water comin' down. Ain't no way fer us to get back now."

He stared about in desperation, tobacco juice leaking from the corner of his mouth. "Gee whillakers! It'll be all up with us now if we meet the colonel."

"Nuts!" I swore. I was getting a grip on myself. "We aren't going to meet any hundred-and-ten year old colonel, and we aren't going to meet any seventy-year-old watchdog. We're going to see if there's anyone around that house, and find out who owns those clothes.

"Some swimmer or hobo left them there—about five million names in the telephone book begin with *D*—and lots of men wear suits that size. While we're looking around, we can look for another boat, too.

"As for the dog, it's some stray hound that's swum out here. Sure," I snapped. "Baying at the moon."

I pointed up at a rift in the sky where black clouds had torn apart and left a hole. Greenish moonlight filtered through as I spoke, and trees and river came dimly into view like a photograph developing on a dark, watery film.

Talking loudly, I was getting back my confidence.

I rasped at Burlap, "Give me the lantern. And give

me that gun." I glared at him, holding out my hand.

He complied meekly enough, handing over the lantern and disgorging from his shirt the rusty weapon.

"Good." Edith pressed my arm. She rounded determinedly, her chin out, firm. "I was afraid we were going to run away. It's silly how a dog-howl can scare you, isn't it? Come all this way, and be scared by some old dog."

I was sore at myself for being panicked, but it wasn't the dog that had scared me as much as the clothes. Something crummy about an unexplained suit of clothes on a river bank.

That night on that particular island it was even crummier. There was something lonesome about that coat, those pants and shoes. Something uncanny. As if the man in them had just evaporated.

The wearer had been a big man, too—bigger than ordinary: too big to just evaporate. About the size, I imagined, of the two-hundred-and-fifty-pound colonel.

Going up the mud bank, I gave those empty clothes a wide berth.

"It's just some stray hound." I made my mind change the subject. "No dog could live for seventy years. Here, Burlap, where does this path go?"

HE SIDLED up to stare at the footpath the lantern had discovered in the bushes. It was weedy, half concealed in grass and myrtle; I was relieved not to see any tracks.

"Looks like it goes to the house," Burlap tremulously observed. "I don't know, mister; I ain't never been ashore on this island."

"Stick close behind me, Edith," I said. "Come on."

We moved up the path single file. Underbrush was tall on either side, black and dank. Smoky moonlight slanted down through the crooked, wet branches of pathside trees.

I couldn't see the house from here. In the jungle of weeds and wet brush I couldn't see anything.

I didn't hurry. You don't get much confidence out of a rusted horse pistol, and I let the lantern light go on ahead.

Burlap spoke a thought which had formed in his dented skull.

"Maybe he give it some of that gelsemium drug, too."

I rasped over my shoulder, "Who gave what?"

"Maybe the colonel gave gelsemium to his dog. That's how it could still be alive," Burlap croaked in a raven-like undertone. "Work with the colonel it ought to work with a dog."

I wheeled around, "Listen, you! I've had enough of your ghost story for one evening; the thing to do now is find a boat or some way to get us out of here. I don't care if the colonel drank Egyptian embalming fluid or the Fountain of Youth—if he scrambled out of Binghamton at the age of forty back in the 1870's he isn't around here today.

"That"—I glared at Edith—"goes for you, too."

"Then who left them clothes back there on the bank?" Burlap asked in a quaver. "Who drowned the ole Dutchman an' Jed Gawzberry an' Big Ben the blacksmith an' Ching the laundry man an' Professor Strool? Whose curly-bearded face did I see last week at an upper story window?"

I HAD to remind myself that they called him Crazy Clyde. His lank face was foolish with fear as he craned

and peered around in the moony dark. He almost gibbered.

In a situation like that it isn't comforting to know your guide is just a little brighter than the village idiot. No telling what part of his story was true and what part was star-dust.

Why had I ever let Edith come on this crackpotted ghost-chase? Looking at her there, I knew I ought to have my own head examined for dents.

She whispered, "Go on, Charlie. Go on."

I set my jaw and went on. I wasn't anxious to meet any unclothed athlete the size of the man who had worn those pants. But moving was better than standing, and I hoped that somewhere around we might find another boat.

Burlap halted suddenly behind Edith. "Someone *has* been livin' on this island. Look! They've growed a garden. Potatoes! An' there's wild corn!"

It was a pretty sorry garden: stunted corn and a few wormy plants in a patch of weeds—mere evidence that the plot had been under cultivation at some past time.

The corn had degenerated to stalks and silk, yet somebody must've once planted it there; it was somehow lonely and ghostly, like the dog's howl and that vacant pair of trousers.

"It was *him!*" Burlap panted. "The ex-mayor of Binghamton who hid there on this island and's still keepin' hisself an' his dog alive on gelsemium."

I snarled, "Nuts to that gelsemium stuff!"

"Charlie, it's true," Edith whispered. "There *is* such a drug. I looked it up in the dictionary. It comes from jasmine root as Mr. Burlap said, and it's in the records that the colonel was taking it; there was a lot of talk about it at the time.

"See!" Her fingers gripped my arm. "There's some jasmime growing there in the corn right now!"

In the wet dark we could smell it, that nocturnal-flowered bush flourishing in that shabby garden! To this day the smell of flowering jasmine at night gives me a creep. I can see that bush in that corn-patch and Edith staring at it with dilated eyes.

"Yellow jasmine! That's where the drug comes from! Maybe the colonel—maybe the colonel made his own gelsemium!"

I HAD a mental picture of the colonel out here in his island hide-out compounding his own drug, living on and on and on. I said, "Nuts!" but I could see Edith was pretty convinced. I couldn't tell her that jasmine was likely to grow anywhere.

Burlap was convinced, too. He was shaking like a scarecrow in a wind.

You can argue with a dunce who never got out of the second grade because he liked the teacher, but you can't argue with a girl like Edith.

"Go to the house." Edith prodded me. "Charlie, I want to find out."

I should have spanked her, but I guess I wanted to find out, myself. I was thinking, as we crept up the path, that maybe there was something to this colonel-and-diamond story.

Maybe the bankrupt ex-mayor of Binghamton had absconded to this island lair; lived here as a recluse in majestic seclusion.

Not that he could still be living. But he might have planted jasmine, at that, and tried to keep going on this

phoney drug. Maybe he had planted this stuff years ago.

If he'd been here at all, I was thinking, maybe that diamond was here. Diamonds don't wear out even if politicians do.

Which shows you the thin line of distinction between bughouse reasoning and sanity. At that juncture of our expedition Crazy Clyde was the one who didn't want to go farther.

We crept on up the weedy path, and then we found the dog. He was lying in a bed of wet violets, and I'll never forget the sight of that pooch. There was Rover. In the moonlight we could see him clearly: a pattern of polished white bones. A canine skeleton among the posies.

Yes, and someone had put a bullet through his skull. That hound hadn't bayed at the moon for many a year, and no one was going to tell me otherwise.

He had evaporated from his ribs the way someone on the mudbank had evaporated from those trousers. Gelsemium or no gelsemium, that dog was no longer alive.

"I ain't a-goin' further," Clyde Burlap said.

I said, "No?"

"I ain't a-goin' further," he repeated with a violent headshake. "That's the colonel's black dog. If them there bones can up an' let out a howl, then anything can happen. I'm gonna stay right here. I got enough brains for that."

"Okay," I snapped. "There'll be more lantern-light left for Miss Johnwell and me." We moved off.

He let out a yelp and caught up with us. "Wait! Don't leave me. I'd sure die of fright if'n I see the ex-mayor comin' at me in his birthday suit."

It wasn't a heartening picture. Ex-mayor or mortal, I hoped the man who'd left his clothes under a hickory limb would at least—if he did turn up—be modestly clad in his underwear.

As we thefted along the path I kept a sharp eye out for tracks; but I didn't see any, animal or man. Across the river there were some jagged peals of thunder; but the sky overhead had cleared in patches and a green moon sneaked out of a nest of black clouds and appeared as a drowned face floating in a lake.

I couldn't help thinking of the Dutchman and the farmhand, the blacksmith, the Chinese and the goitrous Professor who had supposedly crept up this path before and ended up down by Medwick's Mill.

Moonlight only exaggerated the blackness of underbrush and trees. Twisting like a snake, the foot trail wound through the dripping boscage; the rain had raised a dank vapor, and the soaked night steamed.

Through the trees at the left we could see the river sliding by like a great tide of coffee. Coasting along the bank, it tore at bushes, slapped at the roots of willows and made a sound like a vast gurgling in a cemetery.

If our progress along the path tells like a *safari* in the jungle, it's because fifty yards of trail on that Susquehanna River island was like a trip across voodoo-haunted Africa. Only too soon the path came out of the bushes and we were confronted by the house.

STANDING in a flat clearing that fronted on the river, it looked as skeletal and abandoned as the meatless dog and that empty suit of clothes. Nobody home.

I never saw a place that looked as run-down, forgotten and deserted. Once it might have been a mansion for summer vacationing—back in the time of General Grant.

Now vines clambered up the sagging walls like weeds on the hull of a sunken steamship.

The verandas were littered with rubbish; the palings had broken in. Shutters hung askew on windows broken in by vandal stones.

Chimney bricks were scattered across the roof; one third-story gable had caved in; the architecture leaned, tilted and tipped in decay; and the silhouette in greenish-moon-gloom was black as coal. It was a perfect abode for owls, mice and bats.

Is anything gloomier than a house deserted to rot on a river bank? It took some resolution to approach that island mansion. We had sneaked up at its back, and I paused to scan the prospect, hesitating to investigate the front.

"Go ahead." Edith shoved me. "Are you scared?"

"Who's scared?"

"You are. I am, too. But now that we're this far let's look at the place. Let's see it through."

"Well, look at it," I growled. "Nobody's lived there for a generation. It's all boarded up and gone to ruin. What more is there to see?"

Burlap uttered a nervous nicker. "It was in front," he blabbed. "A third-story window overlookin' th' river. That's where I seen the colonel's face."

"Come on, Mr. Burlap," Edith straightened her shoulders. "You show me."

"Who, me?"

"Yes."

"I might see the face again."

"That's exactly what I'm here for." She tucked wet hair under her hat decisively, and her chin had a determined thrust.

Stooping, she picked up a crooked hickory stick and, gripping it as a club, stepped out into the clearing, and strode at the house as if to give it a whipping.

"Come on!"

CHAPTER VII

END OF THE LINE

WHERE do women get spunk at a time like that?

Edith had it double. Of course, she was likely to break down afterwards and have an old-fashioned cry; but get her set on some job and she wasn't stopped.

She was as pretty as Venus and as stubborn as a Missouri mule.

I convoyed at her elbow with gun and lantern, and we marched across the mud flat with Burlap at heel like a gaunt, jittery and bug-eyed Beagle.

A near look at the house wasn't reassuring. Everything dripped and steamed. Rotting timber exuded a smell like dead wood in a marsh. Interior, as glimpsed through broken shutters, was dark as a mine.

Rats scurried into hiding as we skirted a side porch. Some small creature jumped down the porch steps and scuffled off through the weeds, and I wondered whether it was the dog we'd heard. I couldn't see any dog tracks around, or any kind of tracks, and I said so.

"They don't leave tracks," Burlap moaned.

I snarled, "Who doesn't?"

"Ghosts. And those as live past their four score years an' ten. That's why the police when they came out here to 'vestigate didn't find no footprints. They don't leave

tracks on this island. Especially those that float away."

I wondered if the owner of those clothes had floated away. I rather hoped so. A lot of things were floating away from the island right then: bushes, driftwood, all the rubble which is collected by a rising tide. I could tell the river was higher, for water gleamed in the thickets where the underbrush was awash.

At the front of the house there was a stretch of open beach; and as we rounded the veranda, river water surged across the beach and turned it into a lake.

That scared me. The river was far above its ordinary level. Six inches higher and it would sweep across the island.

I stared at the channel in alarm. We had to get to high ground and get there quick.

Then I saw at the end of the beach a mired rowboat. I splashed out across the flooded spit of land, Edith and Burlap after me. I couldn't help a cry of disappointment.

It was a boat, all right, but there wasn't any bottom in it. Like the house and the skeleton dog, it had been abandoned for many years.

"We've got to do something," I wailed at Edith. "Another half hour and this island will be under water. Burlap!" I pulled his arm. "We must find dry wood and make a fire. We've got to signal."

He shook his dented head. "No use," he mourned. "Wouldn't nobody see it. Ain't no farmhouses 'long here fer three miles on either side; wouldn't nobody dast come around this island, neither."

"You've got to help me!" I yanked him. "Don't gawp there! We've got to find boards—nails—make a raft! Don't you realize there's a flood?"

His weak eyes filled with fright as if he hadn't noticed this imminent danger. "Susquehanna can rise mighty fast once she's started. Can't remember when she was up this bad. What with her an' the colonel, looks like I'll never see my Jessie again."

THE colonel! With all that river in front of my face, I'd forgotten. I said, "Colonel be damned!" which was something I should have said at nine o'clock in the evening when Edith had told me about him in the warmth and dry security of that Binghamton hotel.

Now I spoke too late.

Edith said, "Charlie!"

I turned to see her rooted in two inches of beach-water, rigid as statuary, her profile fixed as marble, staring at the old moon-gloomed house. Water was already creeping around the foundations, lapping at the warped front veranda, purling around the support posts of one rickety front wing that extended out over the river.

Edith wasn't concerned with that. Her eyes were on an upper story window, a third-floor window of that wing which was built out over the water.

She said in a flatted, metallic undertone, "Charlie, there he is."

Yes, and what's more, there he was! I saw it, and friend Burlap saw it, too. The face beyond the shutters. Moonlight was focused on the window at that moment, and looking up, we saw it clearly.

The shutters hung awry there, and moonglow, raying through the broken slats, illuminated that impossible physiognomy.

If it wasn't a specter, I never saw one. Somnambulistic, pale, it was some distance beyond the window sill, as if

levitated in the room's inner darkness. It hung there like an interior moon.

The features weren't plain, but it was a man's face garnished with golden whiskers and a pompous crest of hair. Black-robed shoulders supported this apparitional countenance; and there, winking and twinkling and throwing out a handful of moonbeams from the phantom chest, was the diamond!

Lord! When a dog's howl wailed up in the night at that moment I almost hopped out of my skin.

Then the moon was drowned by a cloud, and the lunar light went out, and the face was gone. Midnight plunged around us with a thunder crash. Rain sluiced down. A shadow darted by me in the water-swirl.

"Charlie, I'm going in!"

Edith was running for the house.

I CAUGHT her with a flying tackle, and we grappled idiotically in the mud. She wrenched to escape my clutch.

"Charlie, let me go! You can't hold me back! Don't you see what this means? Missing mayor turns up after seventy years! Found recluse in island house! Keeps alive on drugs to a hundred and ten! What a headline—what a newspaper story!"

I panted, "Keep your shirt on. You can't go in alone. If someone's in there—"

She struggled. "Didn't you see the face? Didn't you see the diamond? Didn't you see?"

"I saw something," I whispered. "Stay close behind me. I'll go in first."

Courage? Not a bit of it. I knew that 1870 politician couldn't be there. I was telling myself I'd been subject to a mass illusion: an illusion made up of moonlight and shadows, imagination and the island's seance atmosphere.

The night and river and spook-lore had played on our communal nerves. Spirit mediums and mesmerists know the trick. Extrasensory impressionism. Get people convinced they're going to see something and the vision forms on their retina.

Yet I was certain I'd seen a diamond. It had twinkled like Tiffany's window. It's funny how your mind can reject part of a delusion but hold on to the part you like.

I didn't want to believe in the colonel; I preferred to believe in his diamond. I thought somebody had left a cloak hanging on a hat-tree: the face was an hallucination, but the sparkler was real, pinned to the cloak.

The truth is, that diamond-shine had hit me in the solar plexus and knocked the last vestige of intelligence out of me. I had a treasure-fever delirium of about three hundred degrees.

That I wanted the gem for Edith was no defense. I went into that creaky old house and let Edith come after me. Crazy Clyde had the brains of a sage in comparison.

I crept up on the veranda with the lantern, and there was one of those doors. One of those vacant-house doors that stand ajar on broken hinges, giving view to a black, musty hallway within.

Wow! that house was musty. The breath exuded by that door was a halitosis of mould and damp-rot, decomposing wood and stale plaster, as if the house itself was dead and full of decay-gas.

The river had been in that house, and the wind and the rain. I let the lantern-light sneak in ahead of me,

and the inky, recessed dampness all but extinguished the feeble glimmer.

The hall was carpeted with a slippery, brown paste of silt. Water leaked down bare walls from which the paper had long since peeled; the ceiling was covered with sweat-beads that dripped. The downpour was drumming into the place.

Edith pressing me from the rear, I balked on that dank threshold, listening to inner winds and a thousand minor drips and dribbles.

I advanced three steps and stopped. The silt underfoot felt like grease. My lantern had discovered something crouching along the sidewall. It wasn't a hippopotamus. Only an old, rotted sofa, the leather moss-backed with mould, the ruptured belly giving out viscera of horsehair and springs.

Exploring ahead, the lantern gleams found a staircase. Steps out of kilter; bannister listing, it toiled drunkenly up to the green-black darkness of an upper balcony.

I started, rubber-kneed, for that flight of stairs. Then I got a jolt.

ROBINSON CRUSOE spying Friday's footprint in the sand didn't get one by half. Friday's foot wasn't half as big. There it was, on the muddy carpet of the hall—the print of a man's bare foot, as plain as an impress in plaster.

It was a big foot, too. A left foot. The bare foot of a man proportioned like a pachyderm.

And the right foot was printed ahead of it. Then the left foot again. Then right, left, right, left, those bare-foot prints went up the stairs.

I wasn't going to scare Edith, but she spied it.

She breathed, "Charlie, it's *he!*"

It was like her to have her pronouns correct at such a time. Behind her, Crazy Clyde let out a gasp; and when I spun at the sound, surprised to find him in the van, he was bent at the middle, hands clutching his stomach as if it had turned into a green apple, staring at the footprints with jack-o'-lantern eyes.

"I'm sick," he moaned. "It's him! He was out there a-swimmin' in th' river, an' when he seen us comin' he left his clothes an' run back here to th' house. He's upstairs right now—an' I've swallered my cud!"

The great Pinkerton couldn't have regurgitated a more sensible theory: there was something in common between those size twelve footprints and the size twelve Endicott-Johnson's we'd found.

But I wouldn't accept the deduction. I was too diamond-conscious, right then. I snarled, low, "Those prints might've been left here a week ago. You two stay down here with the lantern."

I fumbled out my cigarette lighter. "I'm going upstairs."

"You and I, both," Edith whispered. "This is my story and I'm sticking to it."

Burlap refused to be left behind with his thoughts, so we all went up the stairs. The footprints crossed the balcony and pattered up another flight of stairs; we followed on tiptoe, bunched together, creeping like mice. I pretended nobody could've heard us.

The rain was beating down a steady roar and around us the walls gurgled like a thousand leaking plumbing pipes. But the stair-steps creaked and cried out as if we were treading on somebody's toes.

Burlap's clodhoppers thumped. Edith rattled her stick against the bannister. I know I was breathing like an accordion.

I'M SURE—an owl-hoot would have sent us tumbling down two flights ahead, but somehow we reached the third floor. The journey hardened my nerves. I was positive the tracks were weeks old.

New or old, they couldn't belong to any ex-mayor of Binghamton, fabulously vigorous at the age of one hundred and ten. No, ghosts, as Burlap had declared, didn't leave tracks on this or any island.

These prints had been made by some prowler who had visited the house like us. They padded down a long third-floor corridor, turned left with the corridor and proceeded out into the front wing.

This quarter of the house was dry. The flooring was warped and bulgy, the plaster cracking, but we ran into dust and cobwebs. Gangrene hadn't infected the woodwork.

I remember thinking that this wing was newer than the rest of the house; the roof was sound; probably a built-on addition.

Not that the architecture was modern or that I gave it much study; but the atmosphere had stuffed to that of a long-closed attic. The footprints smudged down the hall, entered a wide empty room. I sent the lanternlight in after them; then, craning in over the threshold, saw nobody there.

Edith peeped over my one shoulder; Burlap peeped over the other; stalled in the doorway, we all peered.

Edith whispered, "They're gone!"

She meant the tracks. But there was no place for them to go. I flicked lantern light to the corners of the room. Empty! Bare floor, walls and ceiling. One window completely boarded up from the inside. One door—the door where we stood.

"The foot prints went on into the room, circled the dusty floor as if uncertain about where to go. Tracks, like the people who make them, have to go somewhere.

But these tracks were different. They walked around on the warp-tilted floor, then they sidled along the right-hand wall, then they stopped. They didn't go on, and they didn't come back.

End of the line!

Not quite. There was one thing left. My hair roots froze as the lantern light found it at the end of the track. Lying on the floor: a dirty undershirt. Wet and smeared.

As if the man who wore it had come to that final wall, and melted to a B.V.D.

CHAPTER VIII

MONSTER OF THE FLOOD

IT WAS worse than a suit. Worse than white dog-bones. Worse than that abandoned corn patch with its secret jasmine bush. Worse than that moon-conjured face. That lonely shimmy shirt.

I picked it up between two fingers and looked under it as if to see a tiny human form melting off into the floor-cracks.

Nothing. Just the floor. Not even a hole where a mouse could've scurried under the base-board.

Burlap uttered a gruesome croak. "I told you! They

don't leave tracks on this island. Spirits goes around in the air, an' men who lives past a hundred walk light-foot. My pa was a grave-digger, an' he told me. The dead don't leave no tracks—especially those what float away."

The Scotch have a word for it. *Cauld grue*. That's what I experienced then. A wind down my collar right out of an ice box.

Crazy Clyde went on croaking about the colonel's ghost and drowned corpses swimming under water down at Medwick's Mill; and confronted by that footprint phenomenon, I was ready to believe the saga of the five drowned diamond-hunters, and prepared to abandon the search.

I dropped that empty undershirt and it hit on the floor with a wet slap. My treasure-fever turned into a chill. Edith whispered, "The wall!"

I looked at her, my teeth clicking. "Huh?"

Snatching the lantern from me, she held it up. I stared at the wall. I couldn't see anything but blank plaster and shadow-patterns.

"See there," Edith gasped. "That big spider web. It stretches from the ceiling to the base-board. It's just been torn! The spider hasn't had time to rebuild the thing!"

I didn't register. I thought she was scared by the spider—a big, black river spider which came scaling down the wall like an ink-splash on the end of a silver thread.

Whacking out with my gun-butt, I smashed the beast. *Thump!* The blow made a dull sound, blotting the spider on the wall plaster.

"Why, it's hollow!" I gasped. "A hollow wall!"

"Yes. There's an opening here, and somebody's gone through. That's what tore the spider web." Edith pointed an excited finger. "That's where the man who left that gym shirt must've gone."

I was knocking on the wall with the gun, trying to knock softly. Edith was holding up the lantern. Cracks were zigzagged all over the wall like frontiers in a map of Europe, and when one vertical crack suddenly widened it was like a minor earthquake.

A sudden mechanical grinding sound came from the plaster, like the gears of a grandfather clock getting ready to strike. My thumps must have touched off some secret mechanism.

The plaster moved. White dust smoked before my eyes. Hidden hinges squealed and a section of the wall swung inward and I was staring dumbstruck into a secret attic chamber.

I WON'T soon forget that snug little hide-away. It was the sort of top-floor room where your great-aunt might store some heirloom furniture and her wedding dress to keep it from the moths.

The walls were paneled with cedar; the air was stale but dry. In the window at the left the outside shutters were broken, but the glass was intact, keeping out the rain.

The room was bare of furniture; there were no foot tracks on the floor.

But there was a man in that room: a great, barrel-sized, imposing figure—large as life and twice as handsome—dominating the back wall! He was seated in a chair like a king on his throne, facing us with our lantern in the door.

His eyes stared at us, unwinking in the lantern shine. His smile was imperious and commanding.

His personality filled the room; in his judicial robes he looked as important as Henry VIII. Golden hair and whiskers framed his face like an aura around the sun; on his bosom the diamond glimmered like a star.

And wonderfully, impossibly, as if held aloft by inflated ego, he seemed to be levitated, chair and all, in the air.

"His Honor the Mayor!"

Edith's voice was hollowed in awe.

I don't wonder Clyde Burlap fell to his knees in a sort of salaam. The trick of shadows and lantern shine and unexpectedness and eye-magination gave that figure on the back wall a reality that stopped my heart.

It was a wonderful likeness. Remarkable! It took me a minute that seemed a year to see it was a picture.

"Get up!" Edith yanked on Burlap's collar. "It's only a painting. It's that portrait the colonel had made of himself. My, Charlie, isn't it amazing!"

I COULDN'T answer, it was that amazing. I suppose an art critic would have called it a rotten portrait. The flesh tones were too pink; the beard too dandelion-yellow; the features too pompously glorified.

But I'd like to know the artist who did that thing. I'm sure he kidded his subject and his subject didn't know it.

He had painted an election poster: but in so doing he had brought out the bombast and politician character, the back-slapper and skullduggerer, the florid, beefy, Boss-Tweedy, genial impostor of our Grant's Administration period.

It was more than a canvas painted by brush and oils. It was a masterpiece for the American Museum. Framed on the wall, it was so lifelike I half expected the painted figure to stand up and demand to know what we were doing there.

"So that's what we saw in the window!" Edith moved past me. "Looking up from the ground below, with the moonlight through the shutters and the picture hanging at that angle—that's what we saw!"

She raised the lantern higher. Sparks showered from the diamond on the portrait's bosom. I caught her arm. "Edith!"

Burlap, stepping on my heels, asked with surprising sense, "Even if it's only a pitcher, what's it doin' here? An' that diamond ain't painted—"

"I whispered, 'No!'" Ten feet from the picture, I halted again to stare. The gem winked, blinkered and shone, brightening in the nearer lantern light. I whispered, "My Lord, it's real. A real diamond. Edith it's enormous! Pinned to the picture!"

I know I took two steps toward that bonanza. That blazing gem had me magnetized. Then a lot of things happened at once. Crazy Clyde's observation sank in, and I stalled to gasp, "How *did* that painting come here?"

Our dim-witted guide made the brightest remark of the evening: "A picture can't take off its undershirt an' leave foottracks!"

Edith cried out, "We're moving! Charlie, Charlie! The house is moving!"

There was a rumbling under the floor. The room tilted, lurched. Lightning blazed at the window, and forgetting everything else, I rushed to look out.

Four terrific flashes exploded in the sky; and looking down through the rain-blur I saw a swirling tide of water. The house was adrift: we were going down the river!

Then there was a fifth explosion. It came from the

door—the secret door of that attic chamber. A stunning gun-shot. *Wham!* It smashed the lantern in Edith's hand. She screamed.

The room went black as pitch. But there was someone standing in that door. A figure blacker than the blackness.

I knew it had a pistol in its hand; and then it spoke to us in a deep, basso monotone.

"I can see you in the dark, you three! Hands up! Keep them up! So I'm only a picture, am I? Thieves! Trespassers! I'll show you what happens to those who try to steal my stone!"

Lightning flared again at the window, and in the blue witch-shine the speaker was revealed. His bulk filled the door frame in terrible menace. His revolver looked bigger than a cannon.

He was robed in midnight black, and he peered at us with eyes that gleamed topaz under a thicket of tangled yellow hair, and his left hand petted a beard that looked like golden sea-weed.

"The colonel!" Burlap wailed.

This time it wasn't a painting.

IT LAUGHED as the lightning went out: a laugh that rang through the swimming darkness of that house like iron blows on an anvil.

"So you thought you could make off with it, did you? You came here to snaffle my gem? As if the ungrateful voters in Binghamton didn't take enough away from me; the scheming insurance adjustors, the rascals in City Hall!"

"Didn't they get my mansion, my real estate holdings, my stocks and bonds, my private property? Didn't they get enough?"

Booming like a low-keyed pipe organ, the voice rumbled through outer tympani of thunder and the snare-drumming of rain.

The room tipped and tilted, rocking uncertainly, and I was seasick. Deathly seasick. I could hear Edith's breath sobbing; Burlap gulping like a cow. He moaned, "Please, Mister Mayor—"

"Don't appeal to me!" came the booming answer. "And stand where you are. Keep your hands high. I can see you. Don't appeal to me, Clyde Burlap, and don't move or I'll put a bullet through you."

Burlap wailed, "Oh, my glory! he knows my name."

Again that anvil-clang laugh. "Sure I know you. Didn't I get your father a job as municipal grave-digger? Didn't I give him charge of the potter's field? Then he went and told on me!"

"Sure! That the substitute corpse grew red hair instead of like mine. That's gratitude, wasn't it? But what can the mayor of a city expect?"

"Election day they all climb on the band wagon. Every office-seeker and citizen is his friend. Let anything go wrong, though, they forget they elected him. Call him a politician, a ward-heeler a grafter!"

OUTSIDE there was a deafening thunder burst; blue lightning sheeted through the window; we had another flittergibbet glimpse of that yellow-bearded, boom-voiced visitation.

The eyes glittered and the aimed revolver meant business. I stood shatterpated, arms lifted numb, unable to breathe.

The flooring sank, rose and settled as downstairs there

was a rending of timber as if a section of the house were breaking away.

"So you couldn't leave me alone?" Anger harshened the iron laugh. "You couldn't leave me with my last few belongings to live out here in peace!"

"First it was old man Dinkloofer—I ain't forgot even if it was forty years ago—sneakin' out here to get his greedy Dutch hands on my diamond.

"Then it was that yokel, Gawzberry—as if a rube like that could take anything from me!"

"The blacksmith made more trouble—I ain't as muscular as when I used to swim through the Susquehanna ice—and the Chinaman was more clever—he wanted my secret drug as well as my diamond—but I got him, too.

"As for Strool last year, with that vegetable on his neck—but that thing was drowning him, anyhow, and I only saved it the trouble."

I don't know where Edith got the nerve to speak out. My own throat couldn't utter a sound. She said in a strained voice, "You confess to murdering them, then? You confess to drowning those five?"

"Make another big headline for your newspapers, wouldn't it?" was the harsh answer. "As if the newspapers haven't already made me enough trouble! But, all right, lady, I confess. That's all the good it'll do you."

The threat was unmistakable. I was planning to attack him, anyway, and the floor helped me to get started.

There was a lurch as if the house were going over a tidal wave; the flooring tipped up violently, throwing me headlong at the door. The enemy was also rocked off balance, and I collided into him a-cropper.

Luckily I caught the wrist of his gun-hand; with unintentional jiu jitsu twisted the weapon out of his clutch.

I heard the revolver drop; remembered that I held an empty horse pistol; brought the barrel whanging down on my adversary's invisible head.

I must've stunned him momentarily, for he gave a kind of sigh and relaxed like a sack of meat in my arms. I got an asphyxiating breath of whisky that staggered me more than his weight.

But the armistice was only momentary. He revived with a squall; came over on top of me as the floor tilted back; wrapped his arms around me in the dark, and squeezed like a grizzly bear.

I'd like to forget that awful scrimmage, then. Try to imagine a wrestling match with a hundred-and-ten-year-old politician: flimflammer, absconderer and clapperclaw; two hundred and fifty pounds of flesh vitalized by gelsmium—

A monster like that, in a house adrift on a flooded river! Lord!

CHAPTER IX

MEDWICK'S MILL

HE HUGGED. I pounded. We waltzed. Electrical flashes lit the scene. The room swayed with the house as we danced.

Edith huddled by the window, her elbows over her head. Crazy Clyde stood in a corner playing blub-blub-blub on his lower lip with a finger.

The painting of His Honor the Mayor looked on.

The lower rejuvenation of His Honor the Mayor was crushing me in his clasp as if I were a bushel basket.

Whirling me in suffocating embrace. Breathing in my face like a distillery. Bawling, "You can't have the diamond! It's mine! It's mine!"

I pounded on his head with the horse pistol, and the blows made the sickening sound of hammer-taps on a muskmelon. I couldn't knock him out. In my desperation, I saw myself being squeezed to a jelly.

How could I knock out an athlete who survived icy rivers, sported hatless in blizzards, wrestled like the Terrible Turk at the ripe old age of a century?

We waltzed out into the attic where the footprints had ended in a gym shirt; fell on the tilting floor; rolled; acrobatted to our feet; went around the attic, locked together, in a sort of wild, jitterbug swirl.

Cloth tore as the creature's black coat wrapped around me. Every time I hit him, he grunted and tightened the squeeze.

I could feel my ribs beginning to stave. My lungs were collapsing. I couldn't gasp.

With my free left hand I clutched a meaty throat; I might as well have tried to throttle a water buffalo.

The fight carried back into the secret chamber where the portrait watched, its painted eyes seeming to follow us in the lightning flares.

Edith got into it, whaling at my assailant with her hickory stick. The stick broke apart like punk and the splinters got in my mouth, tasting like a chewed pencil.

Crazy Clyde somehow got mixed in, and the four of us in the middle of the floor went merry-go-round.

THE house lurched, throwing us to the floor in a struggling heap, me on the bottom. That squeeze was killing me. In the blackness and jumping storm-light, the play of glares and shadows there seemed to be two mayors: one who mashed me in murderous rough-house; the other, imperious, arrogantly posed in his robes with his princely diamond, watching himself in gladiatorial combat from a box seat.

I could hear Edith screaming and Burlap caterwauling and the monster on top of me bellowing like a bull. He was banging my head on the cedar floorboards and sky-rockets were lighting my brain.

I tried to shout, "Edith! Edith! Get away!" She must have been hitting him with the broken lantern, for there was a shower of kerosene oil.

In this nightmare, I had the impression of my left hand in my assailant's beard, pulling hair out by the roots. He squalled, "Get away? She can't get out of the house! It's sinking in the river, damn you! I've got you trapped!"

Iron smashed me under the chin as, suddenly, his grip let go. I knew he'd recovered his pistol.

I wasn't out cold. Just cold enough to have to lie there as he founced to his feet, gorilla-savage with his gun. "Back!" he roared at Edith. "Back into that corner by the window! Up with the hands! One move, and this time I'll blow your pretty head off."

In a flame-dance of lightning, he towered like a wrecked Dracula. His cape was torn loose, exposing a fat, hairy shoulder. His face was terrible.

Crimson rivulets leaked down his cheeks from red patches of bald scalp where my blows had removed patches of hair. From one side of his jaw the blond beard had been torn. Mouth and chin were a scarlet smear.

He steadied as the flooring tipped, sweeping the room

with his gun. In that snicker-snack of lightning he no longer resembled the glorified picture.

Edith retreated, arms lifted, eyes terrified, moving in automatic obedience.

He stepped at Burlap; dealt him a kick that flung him helter-skelter into the corner with the girl. "Stand there with her, you dunce! Lift those hands and keep them lifted, or I'll blast another dent in your brain. You, too!" he roared down at me. "Into that corner, there!"

I couldn't stir. I could only look up at him in dreary apprehension. Stunned nerves held me spread-eagled.

He walked to me; stepped on my wrist; kicked the useless horse pistol out of my right hand; booted me across the floor into the window-corner.

"Stand up!"

Grasping the windowsill, I pulled myself upright.

"Lift the mitts!"

Somehow I forced up my hands.

THERE was a minute while the room was black and the floor undulated. Silence filled with the crying of wind, water-rush, drumming rain. The house shook and rumbled.

In this midnight the diamond in the portrait on the backwall gave off a faint shine; I could see our assailant's silhouette, blacker than the chambered blackness, posed in midfloor.

Apparently he was making up his mind.

He snarled "I'd like to riddle you—the three of you. But they'd find the bullets in your bodies. The old way is better. By Judas, I'm going to let you drown!"

I tried to tell him he couldn't do that—couldn't drown Edith—but my tongue was stunned; I couldn't utter a sound.

"I'm going to let you drown," the voice came, baleful. "I'm going to drown you like I drowned the others—the old Dutchman and Gawzberry, Big Ben and Ching and Professor Strool."

An electrical flare lit his face, and he roared a laugh.

"The house is going. They'll think it was the flood. We'll be at the rapids soon, and the house will break up into kindling. You can't get out of this room. When I go out I'm going to smash the mechanism of that door so it locks you in.

"But just to make sure, I'm going to bash each one of you on the head before I go, and knock you cold. They'll think you was bashed when the house went down. So you won't know it when you drown . . ."

He was mad. Stark bestial. Something in his grinding snarl told me he was going to do it, and the knowledge paralyzed my will. Edith, beside me, stood rigid as stone.

Nothing we could do in the face of that revolver. That death sentence held us like a spell.

"But first"—our executioner drew out the sentence to its last drop of sadistic enjoyment—"first I'm going to have my property.

"I think I'll leave the picture with you—to watch you drown. But not the diamond. I'm taking that with me. Now my house is gone, I may need spending money.

"Thirty thousand dollars. Oh ho! I want you to see I'm taking my diamond with me."

HE WAS moving backward toward the painting, chuckling in contemplation of our terror. Lightning flashed blue into the room; he shouted, "Don't move!"

Stepping back against the canvas, he made an avid, upward grab.

His hand never touched the blazing sparkler. Those greedy fingers—I'll never forget them if I live to be a million. They reached up—not high enough.

They closed on a handful of air. Then they clawed on the canvas portrait, and for a split second seemed to cling, as if the grabber, fallen to his knees, were clutching the portrait's painted robes.

It was over in that space of a lightning-flicker: the man's blood-curdling shriek; his fingers clawing down the picture; his body going through the floor.

Before our eyes in a flash he had melted away: two hundred and fifty pounds of flesh in vanishment. There was a great gust of wind, a smell of the river, the floor opened under him and he wasn't there.

He had dropped away.

Only his scream remained, trailing up from somewhere far below. I broke from shock with the others; we jumped toward the picture.

I screamed, "Edith, be careful!" On her knees, she was feeling the floorboards ahead of her. She found the transverse floor-cracks and opened the trap door.

And that was the last horror. That square of hinged flooring directly under the picture, swinging downward and revealing that slippery-walled shaft which went three floors down to the river like a laundry chute.

There was some laundry down there, too.

Water roared and boiled, and a gust of river-breath hit us in the face as we peered down, and there was a dreadful, gargling screech.

Lightning lit up the whirlpool under the shaft, and we saw the white face looking up. A bald-headed face. Pudgy and popeyed. Washed clean of its yellow beard and hair.

In that final glimpse all of us had a flash of recognition.

Edith screamed down, "You're not the colonel!"

I yelled, "The fat man from the hotel!"

Burlap wailed, "Hans Dinkloofer!"

The man's answer was to scream his own death sentence. "I'm tangled in the cloak! I can't swim!"

Brown water closed over the face and it was gone. Edith let the trap swing back into place with a slam. Crazy Clyde, scared sane, cried, "Golden Jerusalem! let's get out of here!"

WE GOT out of there. Out of that trick-box room and out of the attic and, four at a time, down the stairs.

We got out of the house. The lower hall was three feet deep in water, and we got out on the gold leather sofa which was floating around like a hippopotamus.

I can see us yet as we paddled that monstrosity across the billows of that thundering flood. Edith sat on the head while I furnished the propeller.

I didn't mind Burlap, squatting amidships and dabbling the water with his fingers, crying, "Toot! Toot! I'm captain!" I was almost loony with fear, myself.

What I minded was the river sweeping us into the eddy at Medwick's Mill. We might have landed in a happier spot, come to think of five others who had drifted to port there.

The old house went on down. As we clambered up on the wall of the flooded millrace, we saw it swirling outward in a deeper channel. I found myself clutching a tuft of corn-silk in my wet hand, and I wondered how it got there.

Little things can bother you at a time like that. It felt like a handful of beard-hair.

Then I was bothered by something bigger. The house turned around in midriver; heeled in an undercurrent and came circling close to the mill.

Thunderbolts darting around the sky gave us a glimpse of that upper window: that ghostly, pomp-whiskered face beyond the shutters, like a spirit materialization, and the beckoning twinkle of that diamond.

Only once after that I looked back—not until we had reached hilltop above the flooded valley. The house, snagged in the rapids, was breaking up.

CHAPTER X

CREAM OF THE JEST

AND that's the story of the mayor of a city who committed suicide and then, after he was buried and the grave-diggers went home, the insurance companies said it wasn't the mayor at all; that some stooge had been buried in the mayor's place.

And the question then, naturally, was where *was* the mayor? Whose funeral was it?

Was it kidnaping—a traction scandal—politics—an insurance gag—a case of *cherchez la femme*? Did the foul hand of murder clutch shadowy fingers around City Hall?

Folks are still asking those questions about this famous case, and if you want to know the answers you must look for them, as Edith Johnwell did, in Binghamton, N. Y.

Maybe you can find out more about him than Edith did. Maybe your research won't be washed out by a flood. Or maybe, seeking the answer to one mystery, you'll run into another—find the impostor impersonated by an impostor.

They never found the fat man's body. They never found the picture or the diamond. The up-state floods were pretty bad that year, if you remember; besides wiping that island clean of that haunted house, the Susquehanna wiped out some riverfront sections of Binghamton.

The police, busy with the flood relief, thought Edith and I must've been attacked by some chance vagrant; they didn't believe poor Burlap's insistence that old man Dinkloofer's son, Hans, had come back after many years' absence.

They reminded Crazy Clyde that he was crazy.

But I remembered the hotel bellhop paging a "Mr. Dinglehooper." The name wasn't registered at the hotel and the boy couldn't remember, but next day there wasn't any fat man in evidence around the lobby.

So I think what happened was this: that man I took for a hotel dick was old man Dinkloofer's prodigal son. Returned to his home town after a circus career (I wondered if he'd been a clown) he'd overheard Edith telling me the biography of the vanished ex-mayor.

From his father's ill-fated involvement, he knew the local legend. Perhaps he'd never given it much credence.

Or perhaps, in need of funds, he'd returned after years on the road to investigate the matter.

Hearing Edith polishing off the old diamond story—finding it still fresh and bright—he'd beat our time out to the island to get there first.

Maybe he raced down the right bank of the river while we toiled with Jessie down the left. I think he swam out to the island, carrying his clothes in a bundle, and landed just ahead of us.

He saw our rowboat making for the mud bank, and he didn't have time to get dressed. So as not to leave tracks, he waded around the island's fringe (the rain wiped out his tracks up the mud-bank) and, invisible in the night, he let out those dog-hows to scare us.

Barefoot in his underwear, he sneaked into the haunted house; up to the attic.

He must have known about the secret room from his father, or suspected its location from a glimpse of the portrait in that upper window. Or maybe he found it by accident, pausing to lean against that bare wall.

At any rate he opened the hidden door. Meantime he heard us entering the house. We were probably close on his heels. He wiped his wet feet on his gym shirt to avoid leaving any more footprints, and ducked into the secret-chamber.

WHAT puzzles me is how he got out. Perhaps he squeezed through the window, shut it after him and climbed down a drain pipe to the ground—a difficult feat for a man of such corpulence.

In which case—unless he failed to spy it in the dark—he would've tried to grab the diamond first.

I'm inclined to believe he opened the trick door, looked in, heard us coming up the stairs, closed the panel and skedaddled into another quarter of the wing, his dried feet careful not to leave tracks.

Concealed from sight, he heard us blunder into the hidden room.

He didn't dare to shoot us, although he'd brought a revolver. He was wild to get his fingers on that diamond; doubtless his first intent was to scare us galley west. So he put on that colonel stunt, coming into the secret doorway behind us.

Where did he get the black cloak? Maybe he found it there in the attic. An old drapery or a black velvet curtain from one of the forgotten bedrooms would have served.

The villainous role was easy under the circumstances, especially to one who had been a showman. That gem-lusting Cagliostro knew how to stage an act when there was a thirty-thousand-dollar bauble at stake.

The false beard, of course, was corn silk.

But that twinkling sparkler was his undoing, as it would've been mine.

I don't mean that the lure of that fabulous stone would have driven me to murder; but certainly I would have fallen victim to that devil's trap, as he had. Yes, he saved me from that.

He didn't know about the trap door and the laundry chute to the river. He knew they had gone there, but he didn't know the exit by which Old Man Dinkloofer and Jed Gawzberry, Big Ben and Ching the Chinaman and Professor Strool had left the house for the mourgish waters of Medwick's Mill.

I felt sorry for those five when I saw the trap, but that greedy fat man got his just deserts. He would've murdered us in cold blood for that stone. It looked as big as the Kohinoor, and the twinkle, more than my hammer-taps, drove him mad.

Edith doesn't like this explanation, but then she isn't writing this story. She refused to write it. She gave up the newspaper profession and the series about vanished men; she says she's willing to leave them to the Missing Persons' Bureau, and a wife's place is in the home.

BUT, while I've put this down, she's done a lot of kibitzing. Her idea is that the bogeyman who attacked us was really the colonel.

She believes that he kept himself alive in that island hide-out with his insidious jasmine drug; that he lived as a recluse in that secret room nourishing himself on gel-semium and preening-himself before his portrait, polishing his diamond and waiting for visitors to victimize as a spider waits for flies.

He kept his whiskers shaved perhaps, to avoid possible detection, but he loved them so much he preserved them in a box.

Then it hurt his ego when we said he was only a picture; so he pinned on his glorious beard to show us what he looked like. I think that's pretty far fetched, and it doesn't account for that handful of corn silk, but Edith sees it that way.

She thinks the colonel was a charlatan; points to the fact that his best friend was a man named Hull, and that a man named Hull became famous around Binghamton at the time exploiting a fake fossilized mummy known as the Cardiff Giant.

Birds of a feather flocking together, says Edith. Edith doesn't like the colonel.

Somehow I do. Going over his record, I've come to enjoy the ingenious fellow. Lots of us today are on the verge of bankruptcy—rather a national institution. As a politician he was the product of his time, and his time produced some pretty slick politicians.

The whiskers, the portrait in oils, the diamond which I've come to believe was probably paste, were common to the bigwigs of the era. But the colonel's ingenuity was uncommon.

The defection was never proved—the insurance companies canceled payment on misstatements in the applications—but I'm inclined to believe the colonel, abetted by friend Hull, rigged up a bogus suicide and rung in a counterfeit corpse.

Then I like to picture the colonel scuttling off to his secluded river island, installing himself with his beard, his portrait and his diamond in the abandoned house.

I like to picture him living there in jolly solitude while the local hawkshaws ran about in bafflement, and consternation addled the rocking-chair brigade.

I can imagine friend Hull dressing up as a woman in black and rowing out to the island with the latest reports. I can fancy the two boys doubling with laughter at the gossip of the colonel's appearance in Mexico.

I can see, too, how a man of the colonel's risibilities might have been offended at some of the talk, especially the self-righteous indignation of investors who had gambled with him and lost.

"Back-biters! Fair-weather friends! Hull, I want you to start a whisper that I've left my diamond out here. Before I *do* pull out for foreign parts, I'll show them!

Pure speculation, of course, because there's no record the colonel did have a portrait or a diamond. But I like to imagine him hanging up that picture. Baiting the lure.

Constructing that man-trap—as a moral lesson to the greedy, if you will—down on his knees on the floor of that upper room. Boring with a big auger.

*"I bore with a big auger."
Colonel Dwight.*

Patrioteer

A Short
Short Story

By Paul Ernst

Author of "He Didn't Want Soup", etc.



ZABE WILCOX spat at a caterpillar, scratched a lean hip under patched overalls, and slouched against the clapboard wall of the store.

Fella was going great guns, all right. Zabe didn't know much about him except his name was Berger and he did something political down to Jerrystown.

"... is a great and glorious country," boomed the man at the steps. "Every one has an equal chance under the government of the people, by the people and for the..."

Zabe chewed his cud of plug and listened without much interest. Two, three people were behind Berger in the store doorway. Zabe was alone at the far end of the porch beside some rolls of sheep wire.

The rest—maybe thirty, forty folks—were on the sidewalk and in the street.

Zabe saw McCarran, who had lost last night's drunk in the end row of this morning's potato field; and little Ned Armbruster, with a wife and two kids living around in his 1924 sedan, and with his eyes all shiny and sweat coming from under his hat brim.

He saw Andy with the crooked leg, and Jake with the rash that come of handling potatoes, and big Art Smith.

"... live in a glorious democracy, friends," Berger wiped the back of his fleshy neck and put the handkerchief away without much interrupting the way his arms waved.

"Equal for all. Equal chance to go where you want to and work when you want to. That's democracy. Anybody that sneaks around and tries to tell you different is a hired agitator and shouldn't be allowed to stay in our great land..."

Zabe spat tobacco juice at the caterpillar again, not much interested. He'd seen Berger get out of the car of young Don Mennis, of Mennis Farms, Inc., yesterday evening.

And he had seen Berger and some of the boys drinking last night and the boys had sure felt it under the sun along the potato rows today; but Zabe had felt little interest in any of it. He had picked a lot of stuff in a lot of places and heard a lot of guys.

The caterpillar, caught in a mess that was none of its making, humped to get out of it.

"... bunch of dirty traitors, friends, and I say let 'em go where there ain't democracy. If I had my way, all such trouble-makers would have to read the Constitution every morning and sing the *Star Spangled Banner* every night standin' on their heads."

ZABE toyed idly with the idea of singing a song while standing on your head. Then he saw Andy edging toward the fringe of the crowd, moving slow on his twisted leg.

Last night Andy had moved a whole lot faster when the Mennis Farms boss strolled past just after Zabe had remarked stolidly that eighteen cents was a hell of an hour's pay. "Gosh sake, Zabe—suppose he *heard* you?"

"... any true patriot... thank God for democracy and fight for it... get down on his knees—on his knees, friends—and kiss the flag under whose glorious shadow he lives. I, for one, would be proud to so salute my country's flag here and now in the sight of all..."

It looked to Zabe as if this Berger had an eye on Andy too, kind of sideways, but he couldn't be sure, and Andy was close to the edge of the crowd now.

Zabe turned his head back and Berger now had a flag either somebody'd handed to him or he had taken from his pocket; he was whipping it around, and then he laid it on the floor of the porch.

"... in the sight of all, friends. That's the way I'm made..."

Zabe's jaws moved slower for a minute with mild surprise, because he hadn't been listening to Berger close enough to be quite prepared for the next move.

It kind of takes you back suddenly to see a guy on all fours nuzzling on the ground with the back of his neck lobster red and his southern exposure pointing off toward the skyline, and you feel sort of uncomfortable for such a guy.

"That's what anybody but a dirty Hunyak would be glad to do," declared Berger. "I'm sure all here would be glad and proud to do the same. You, now." He pointed a stubby forefinger at fat Jim Barsen, who ran the movie house down the street.

"Kiss the flag. Kiss the flag," shrilled Ned Armbruster, eyes shining, sweat on his cheeks. And Barsen puffed to the steps and up them, to put his face down with a set smile like he was rooting for something in the folds of cloth on the dirty floor.

Andy was three paces beyond the edge of the crowd, now, slow on his bum leg, trying to look as if he wasn't going any place in particular, and Berger's gaze was square on him.

"You," he called out. "I bet you know how to treat your country's flag."

Andy stood favoring his crooked leg, trying to look every which way at once, and his tongue went over his lips.

"Come on, come on," roared big Art. So Andy came back slowly and knelt, having kind of a time of it with his leg, and he put his face down.

Zabe voided the cud of tobacco and took out the plug, curved with his hip, for another cud.

"And you, friend?" said Berger.

ZABE bit into the tobacco and looked idly at the crowd and saw that suddenly everybody was looking at him, and it seemed that Berger was looking at him too, with a special kind of look.

"Who? Me?" gaped Zabe.

"Go on, Zabe!" yelled McCarran. And little Ned shrilled, "Kiss it. Kiss it."

"Come here, you," Berger said.

Zabe hesitated in slow perplexity, then slouched toward the man from Jerrystown, lank and tall in his faded overalls, with a sun-lined face disfigured by a mole on the right cheek next to one of the deeper creases.

"I guess," said Berger, "it'd be a good idea for *you* to show if you're a patriot."

"I expect I'm one," said Zabe, worrying it out. "Ain't thought about it much."

"Show us," challenged Berger. And the guys on the sidewalk yelled with each one trying to yell louder than his neighbor and looking sideways at his neighbor; and then there was silence as Zabe's lank body didn't bend.

"Well?" said Berger.

And Zabe said slowly, "Nope," worrying it out his mind while his jaws mechanically mangled the cud.

"Well, friends," said Berger, "I guess we know now who's patriotic around here. I guess we know how much attention to pay to anything a man like this has to say. Do we let him get away with it?"

"Do it! Go on, do it!" screamed little Ned. And Zabe's forehead wrinkled while he tried to work it out straight in his head, and he said, "Nope. I don't aim to kiss nothin' I'm yelled out in public to kiss."

SO BERGER'S fist got him from the side, and the store steps were waves of men crowding up, and Zabe's arm flailed and his lean body humped as he tried to get out of the mass.

But he couldn't. They beat him down, and very soon the blackness was closing in.

His lips touched the flag, though he didn't know that or anything else by then; and a couple of minutes or a couple of hours later he opened his eyes and he was in his topless roadster and the note beside him said:

Get out of here if you know what's good for you.

So he got out, but only out of the car; and there was a good strong lock on the back of the roadster, with a suitcase inside that held all he owned.

The gun was in the bottom of the suitcase. It looked like something from a museum because it was one of the first Colts, huge and brown-shiny, carried by Zabe's grandpap when he went West to help open up the country after being dismissed from Grant's army.

But the old gun didn't look funny in Zabe's fist, with .45 slugs nosing out the cylinder; and it wasn't going to look funny to Ned Armbruster and Art Smith and McCarran and Berger and a couple of others when Zabe Wilcox gave 'em a gander at the lumps on his head and then shoved the muzzle at their breadpans. . . .

BUT after a while Zabe let the gun hang loose in his hand. Because, hell, Ned had a wife and kids, and he'd known big Art and McCarran for a long time; and besides he still wasn't clear and steady in his head, he was worried.

He had been troubled, unsure, when the light went out for him, when he was refusing to do what the crowd yelled to him to do, because there hadn't seemed any real reason not to except he felt crawly inside.

Worried, uncertain, Zabe felt further in the suitcase and got out his own flag. It was frazzled and only had thirteen stars in it which didn't seem right.

And yet he had been offered a mite of money for it once because it seemed there weren't many of them and some early Wilcox had carried it a long time ago.

Zabe, unsure, worried, looked carefully around to see if anybody was in sight, because you don't want to make a damned fool of yourself, do you?

And then he ducked his head in the roadster's back so if and one *should* see him they'd think he was just hunting a wrench or something; and after that he wrapped the old Colt reluctantly in the old flag and put them both away, and stolidly cranked up his car.

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous

matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)



Barth faced Gentry: the crowd was tense for a showdown

Gunswift

By Jack Byrne

CASS GENTRY, coming to Triangle Town with his partner SWIFTY OGDEN, finds that his job is to untangle a sinister web of mystery. A professional gunhand, Gentry quickly decides that the best technique is to start rattling Triangle's skeletons. Only thus will he be able to probe the murder of

MATT McHALE, the owner of the Rocker-M ranch, who was shot down and robbed a year before. Since his death the Rocker-M herd has been severely raided by rustlers, and nesters have overrun the range, taking advantage of the new homestead law. The inheritance of

MARY ELLEN McHALE, the dead rancher's daughter, has dwindled almost to nothing. Deserted by her fiancé, the smooth young lawyer MARTIN BURDETTE, Mary has taken refuge in the home of one of her few remaining friends, DR. GEORGE FARABAUGH; she is a companion for the doctor's wife, ADA, a crippled and embittered woman.

OLD BEARPAW, a grizzled veteran of the Rocker-M, is loyal to Mary Ellen McHale, and he has done his best to protect her. But threatening notes have warned the girl that she is in danger, and on one occasion it is only the fast thinking and faster action of Cass Gentry that saves her from an assassin's bullet.

OLLIE SHAND, cattle-thief, is the man most generally suspected of Matt McHale's murder, for McHale and his men strung up Shand's rustler father. Yet it is Ollie Shand who saves the lives of Gentry and Ogden when

they ride into an ambush by Kettledrum River. Shand kills the ambusher,

TEX CORBILL, formerly the ramrod of the Rocker-M, now a tool of the mysterious Triangle combine. Only a few minutes after the killing Gentry and the rest see a man approach the body of Cordill and take from it a thick sheaf of bills. Then he rides away, but Shand has recognized him to be

VIC BARTH, deputy sheriff in Triangle. Barth's crony is WASH PARSONS, the mayor; and Cass Gentry suspects that this beefy man may be the town spy for the gang of rustlers that is systematically raiding the surrounding cattle-country.

FRANK IRISH, Triangle's shrewd banker, cannot explain to Cass why Matt McHale left behind him so meager an estate. He had considered McHale a wealthy man. Eventually Irish introduces Cass Gentry to one of McHale's most powerful enemies,

ABEL BANNISTER, owner of the Snaketrack ranch. Since the Snaketrack herd has mainly escaped the depredations of the rustlers, Gentry is suspicious of its tough proprietor. But Bannister tells him bluntly that his herd has been protected by gunhands paid fighting wages, and Cass is inclined to believe him.

Triangle Town contains several secondary mysteries which puzzle Cass Gentry. There is HOP RANDOLPH, the gambler, a bitter, heavy-drinking man and yet some-

This story began in the Argosy for February 15

how to be trusted. Why does he despise the young lawyer Martin Burdette. What is the Englishman, TALBOT, doing in town? Who is giving money to DUKE COSTELLO, Triangle's drunk; what is the secret Costello is paid to keep?

WITH Bannister and some of his men, Cass Gentry rides out to Burnt Mills, a nester settlement. Here Cass meets two sinister surprises. The store and saloon is kept by a man whom he recognizes to be PREACHER AXTON, card-sharp and confidence man. And lounging around the store is a gunman named BUCK CHILDRESS whose brother Cass Gentry shot down several years before.

It interests Cass to note that Childress wears a snake-skin hatband, for Cass picked up an exactly similar one on the scene of a recent-rustling raid. It interests him too that the store should be so well stocked with ammunition. So Gentry decides to set off some dynamite. Demanding an explanation, he slaps the snakeskin hatband down on the bar in front of Axton and Childress. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

CLAWS OF THE MOUNTAIN CAT

THE raised voices held the attention of all of them. The Snaketrack hands were moving closer, and Queenie had drawn back against the rear wall, standing stiffly. Her eyes, staring at Cass, had a wild drunken glitter.

"Here, what's this?" Bannister rumbled. "What's loose here? We got no quarrel with these men, Gentry. Exactly what are you up to?"

"I'll tell ye, mister," Buck Childress said suddenly, sharply. "He's at his old tricks ag'in. Hit's me he's edgin' 'round to. That band is made the spit of mine, as kin be seen. Hit's commonly known I wear the same, an' he'll likely claim hit was found somewheres—"

"It was found in the Foxfire wash," Cass charged. "It was shot from a cattle-raider's head. How new is that band you're wearin' now, Childress? Where did you ride last night?"

"Buck was with me!" the woman shrieked. "He was at our shack—"

"Shet yer lip," Childress snarled. "I'll deal with this. I'll hand 'im whut he's come fer."

He had a gopher's pout-lipped look but there was more than a gopher's fight in him. The Childress boys were from mountain stock and they rated tough in any company. Buck's high-voiced drawl had rage behind it and his big-boned hands gripped the edge of the bar with a pressure that squeezed them pallid.

"Hit's plain what yer a-doin', Gentry," he said. "Y' ain't changed yer trade er yer ways. Raisin' hell an' crowdin' trouble—that's whut he's paid fer, gents. Houndin' folks an' spyin' an' bounty-huntin' an' murder is all a day's work."

"Go on," Cass said. "Spill it like they told you, Childress."

"He kilt my brother, damn' 'im," Childress rushed on. "He dickered Tom inter some crooked deal an' double-crossed the boy. He shot Tom down fer a reward—three bullets in the back—"

"You lying rat!" said Cass. "I never saw Tom Childress face-to-face until the day I cornered 'im. He'd been wanted for months in half a dozen counties for robbery and murder. Ten witnesses can testify it was an even draw and that Tom took his bullet in the teeth."

"I got tuh stand an' swaller hit," Childress grated. "Him with his fast gun an' me unarmed—hit's Gentry's reg'lar way. I got no notion why he's fixin' 'round tuh kill me, gents—"

CASS hauled his Colt from the leather and placed it on the bar. Bannister grabbed at his arm, but he jerked away. He had noted the doubtful frown on the rancher's face as Childress talked, and that was another stick on the fire.

Such whisper-talk was a part of the gunhand trade. The like of it would follow Cass Gentry wherever he rode, tarring his name. But to hear it shouted loud—

He stepped away from the bar, fists doubled, striding long toward Childress.

It was a move the lank man had been waiting for.

He came charging fast, arms milling, head turtled, his jutting teeth bared. He was lean and loosely jointed, but his bones were layered with a flat-muscle strength that outweighed Cass Gentry by thirty pounds. He had the extra reach, and he had a catlike quickness, too, despite his look of awkwardness.

He took Cass Gentry's opening punch along the side of the neck, evading the full force of it with a roll of head and tilt of elbow. Cass followed with a jolt into the ribs, ducking under a fist that slapped his ear.

The charge of attack collided them, and Childress lifted his knee in a savage thrust for the groin. Cass was twisting away, pounding him off with a second right to the face, and Childress' knee struck with numbing shock against his thigh.

Cass sprang back, giving ground, and a flirt of his head pulled away from the swinging arm that chased him. The fist fell short of his eye, but the out-jabbed thumbnail scraped a bloody gouge down his cheekbone.

Childress bent into a crouch, his clawed hands slowly pawing. Rough-and-tumble was his mountaineer style, and in it Buck Childress had never met his equal.

He grinned a blood-smeared grin, piling in for the slaughter.

BUT Cass Gentry was no tenderhorn. In the tough school of bunkhouse and barroom, of rail camp and boomer town, he had learned his fighting lessons. So he was cool now; his head was directing his strength.

A roughhouse brawler, nine times in ten, will beat a straight fist-fighter. The tenth time comes when the fighter dances clear, stabbing in and then fading, wary of the clinches.

Cass retreated from the lank man's charge, sidling in an arc that slowed Buck Childress for an instant as he turned to follow. In that instant Cass was bounding forward, snaking a fist through the pawing defense, smacking knuckles into the speckled face. Left and right, blows that bruised and slashed—and he twisted back again, bobbing, as Childress smeared blood from his mouth.

"Stand, damn ye, an' fight!" Childress snarled.

"Come and get it!" Cass breathed, and he shifted tactics suddenly with a rush that foiled the mountaineer's lunge before it started. He knew now that Childress put no striking force into his fists, that claw and gouge and throttle were the dangers they held. If he watched the knees and the lumberjack's trick of toes—

He jumped inside the snatching hands, his shoulders humped and his chin tucked in, and his elbows were

threshing piston-joints as he hammered belly and lungs and heart.

He had bored so close that the lank man's chief guns were spiked. The batter of fists drove Childress back. He grabbed at Cass, clawing with a long-nailed hand that raked neck and ear, and trying desperately to clamp a wrestler's lock, to smother those ripping punches, to tangle his long legs with Cass and throw him.

Cass bulled free, lifting two uppercuts that snapped the taller man's head in a double bounce. He weaved away, crouching, and his hip bumped the bar. He was breathing hard, and he could not see the others in the room. His vision was narrowed to that square of space, to the man crouched before him.

WITH his long hair flung wild, with his bloody mouth working, Buck Childress was beyond pain or reason. He lurched at Cass to pin him against the bar, but Cass weaved right, then left, and lashed two overhand jolts to the side of the face. They landed with a beefy sound, and the solid force of them was a tingled warmth that Cass could feel from wrist to elbow.

They were numbing punches that caught Buck Childress in mid-leap, that drove him sidewise along the bar. His legs sagged at the knees, and he clawed the slabs for support.

He managed to twist his body as he fell, and some blind instinct rolled him catlike, bounced him up again. He shot out a kick as Cass buffaloeed ahead for the finisher, but Cass had been watching for that.

He had checked himself, and the kick fell short. Before Childress could recover Cass was darting in. His left hand grabbed the descending ankle, hauling hard, and the mountain man was thrown. He fell with a fling of arms, and his skull thumped the bar-front. He was spilled in a fork-legged sprawl, his upper body propped by the bar and his head lolling. The nails of one spread hand clawed the floor, and the other hand pawed blindly behind him.

"You had—enough?" Cass breathed. "Now will you—talk turkey?"

But Buck Childress still wasn't licked. Beneath his shirt, clip-held at the base of his spine, was an owl's-head pistol, a snub-barreled stingy-gun, and his hand fumbled out with it. He was lifting his bloody head, his vacant eyes, and his gunhand was reaching out—

Cass kicked the wobbling arm. He smashed his fist into that bloody face, driving the weight of his shoulder behind the bending blows that pounded hollow thumps along the bar. He was snatching the gun, jerking it from strengthless fingers, and he was first aware of the shouts in the room when Abel Bannister tried to grapple him in a bear-hug. Cass knocked the rancher's reaching arm aside.

He straightened, swabbing a wrist across his eyes—and then it happened. The roar of explosion burst in his face, the fire-flash, and a slash of pain seared along his ribs. He jabbed the owl's-head gun around and triggered it, firing as he staggered. His spur hooked the limp leg of Buck Childress and he stumbled, he fell.

The bump jarred sense into his head again and sponged the blur out of his eyes. He saw the room, the bar and toppled table, the booted legs and the faces. He heard the silence.

"Axton," he croaked, pushing up.

But it wasn't Axton. The hound-faced man stood lone and frozen, his skinny hands stretched above his head in terror. No, it wasn't Preach Axton who had sneaked a shot at Cass to save Buck Childress from a beating and who had drawn Cass Gentry's instinctive counter-fire.

She lay beyond Axton, flax-haired Queenie, and Cass Gentry's own revolver had fallen from her hand. She was stretched supine, with one white arm outflung and a white hand clenched at the swell of her breasts where the crimson was spreading.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LADY-KILLER

MEN came running. Cass heard them faintly, saw them dimly. The tramping men clumped the outer porch, and they held their rifles ready beyond the doorway. The Snaketack punchers had lightened their holsters and were spreading watchfully wide.

"No, boys!" Preacher Axton shouted. "It couldn't be helped—it was accident! She went crazy-wild and tried to kill 'im. She shot behind his back—"

Figures shifted at the bright oblong of the door.

"Git gone, you men!" cried Axton. "No need for you in this affair, you hear? We can't afford—there's trouble enough without any more mixed into it." There was urgency in his words, a sharp under-meaning, and the newcomers silently withdrew.

"They heard the shots and got curious, that's all," Axton said quickly, turning. "Just a bunch from a card game in one of my shacks. This thing—it was Queenie's own hellishness. We got to hush it up. The fewer that know—"

No one was listening. The punchers stood awkwardly silent, staring from Cass Gentry to the humped hulk of Bannister who was kneeling beside the girl. Their faces were grave, unreadable.

"I—I never seen who it was," Cass said. His lips moved carefully, his voice was dull, and his eyes looked blankly down at the dangling gun in his hand. "She—I didn't think—I placed her as behind the bar. I took for granted it was Axton cuttin' down on me."

But in his mind now he could see, and vividly, the shape of unseen happenings. Queenie, with that glitter in her eye and her crooked red mouth screaming. Queenie, edging around the bar, pushing close, screaming at her man. He could see Buck Childress sprawled helpless, and a fist bashing his face, and Queenie grabbing the Colt from the bar. Grabbing it and aiming it, and yelling as the hammer fell.

And then Cass Gentry's quick, blind bullet . . .

"THERE was no way to know," he said. "I'd never shot a woman!" He stared into their blank faces.

"She ain't quite dead," said Abel Bannister heavily. "She's breathin' yet, but I dunno. You, Axton, git some kind of waddin'-cloth! She's bleedin' bad. Somebody better fix 'er—I ain't got quite the stommick. Fetch your pill-chest—mebbe whiskey—hell almighty, I can't say what's to be done for her!"

His ruddy face was tinged with gray and he rubbed nervous hands against his thighs with a gesture of revulsion. He looked at Cass Gentry and his face was harshly graven.

"Damn you," he said almost tonelessly, "I should known you had some scheme in hand when you trailed me here. Damn you for a murderin' dog, Gentry."

"My back was turned," Cass said. "I had to shoot—"

"They warned me of you," the rancher said. "What you're up to I don't know, but it's plain what happened here. You crowded Childress into a fight, for nothin' I could see, and near bashed his brains out."

"Are you cockeyed crazy, man? The woman was drunk and she did shoot wild, but one of the boys was about to grab 'er. You had no cause for a single thing you done, unless it was to show—like on Division Street—what a salty hellion you can be!"

Cass took it. There was nothing he could say. He let the owl's-head pistol drop, and he paced two long, slow steps to pluck his hat from the floor.

"The least you might do," said Bannister, "is fog for town and send the doctor humpin'. Or don't you care a-tall?" The Colt .45 lay near his foot and a thrust of boot spun it across the planks. "Take your cutter, too,—take 'er and git long gone! Don't wait on us, mister, not any. Skunktrack you named us; but there's some breeds that even a polecat might be too proud to ride with!"

CASS GENTRY rode. He pointed the chestnut's head up the lonely trail. If there were watching eyes that spied him from the shacks and thickets he did not know. If hidden rifles sighted him from the slopes, he didn't care.

He rode, he rode, and all he knew was the jounce of his body and the cock of the chestnut's ears and the dreary void inside him. If he rode up or down, in sun or shade, he couldn't tell, nor did it matter.

Wherever he rode—however far he stretched his trail or however fast he might run it—he would never outrace or outdistance the memory of bright-haired Queenie with blood staining her breast. The lidded eyes, the parted lips, the wax-white blankness. He would recall the faces of the Snaketrack punchers and the gray look of Abel Bannister.

It had happened now, as had been long foretold. The years had caught up with Cass Gentry. He had cut his wolf loose once too often.

There were inner voices that wouldn't be stilled. "I never would have—I couldn't tell—I didn't see who—" So the voices cried. But who would listen or who would heed or who would give a damn what excuses Cass Gentry offered? Abel Bannister had spoken the answer to that. The Snaketrack hands had told it in their set faces, in their glances that shifted away from Cass Gentry's glance.

A Carson City gambler had pulled his gun one night on a knife-sticking Mex. In the tangle, with a second Mex jumping him from behind, this gambler had showered some wide bullets. It happened that a come-on girl was in the line of fire. Everybody agreed it was accident. It was clear that the gambler hadn't meant to kill her. But just the same. . . .

Cass recalled that gambling man. His story was common knowledge. It seemed that folks steered shy of his table thereafter, and he soon lost his job. When he sat into other games, the players were apt to cash their chips shortly, leaving him sitting alone.

He took to hitting the bottle, and he wasn't welcomed around the bars because of the trouble he started. He

accused total strangers of passing looks in his direction or of giving him too wide a berth. The women in the other dives coined a name for him—The Lady-killer—and got to calling it loud when he appeared.

The gambler stood it for a month. Then he put his gun against his ear and ended it.

CASS shook the chestnut into a run, obeying some dumb impulse to hurry. The wind was cool against his face and he traveled a sparkling silence. The lock of his teeth spread an ache along his jaw, a numbness clamped his upper body, and he was sick and weary. There was no strength in him, no fight, nothing but emptiness. He came to the mouth of the valley, pulling up sharply at the fork of roads.

At length he pushed on in the direction of Triangle Town.

Riding off wouldn't solve it. It wasn't in the cards, nor was Cass Gentry built that way. He had signed his ticket as a tough hand long ago, and now he would play the string out.

He had hoped for a little while, yesterday. . . .

But yesterday was gone. It was lying on the barroom planks, bleeding its life away. The little pretense he had enjoyed, the new warmth that had shaped his thoughts, the careful schemes he had planned—all broken now, shattered and ended. Cass Gentry was finished. He had spoiled his usefulness to Mary Ellen. He was the Lady-killer, and there was no place for him.

CHAPTER XXIII

NOTHING STIRRING EXCEPT DISASTER

THE afternoon was waning when he came within sight of Triangle Town. A plank bridge across a gulley marked the joining of the trail with the projection of Wampum Street, and Cass slowed the chestnut here for a final breather.

He was weak and weary and dead inside. Fatigue flooded over him all in an instant, lidding his eyes and throbbing an ache through his bones. The wound across his upper ribs, where Queenie's bullet had gouged, had stopped bleeding by now.

He had leaned in the saddle, pressing his arm against the dull pain, and his sleeve was stained brown. The eye that Childress had thumbed was considerably puffed, but otherwise he had no scars to show. He was as fit to face the situation as he ever was apt to be.

He rode down the placid thoroughfare, past the red schoolhouse and a spired white church, and Bearpaw was one of an idling group that he spotted in the shade of the elms near the Exchange Bank. The grizzled wrangler came clumping the walk as Cass pulled in above.

"Nothin' stirrin'," he called out gruffly, and then his voice broke abruptly at closer sight of Cass. "What's wrong, boy? Yuh hurt?"

"I'm all right. Go over to Farabaugh's and tell the doc he's needed at Burnt Mills, if it ain't already too late. Woman's been shot there." He spoke slowly, stiffly. "If the doc ain't home he'll have to be reached as quick as can be."

"Shore," Bearpaw nodded. "But what in thunder—" "See you," said Cass. "See you at the shack."

The Wheel of Fortune was shuttered, but a man emerged

from the Happy Hour as Cass nudged the chestnut on, and he suddenly knew what he needed. Whisky—the counter-shock.

A pain stabbed his side as he dismounted in front of the saloon, and he had to press his arm hard, to hunch his body, before the sharpness eased and he could walk again. When he reappeared with his bottle, he led the horse instead of mounting. He chose the shortcut through an alley.

He did not head for the shack, not right away.

The first gurgling drink was fire in his throat, a tingling warmth that was charged all through his body. His stomach constricted, a shudder shook him, and for a moment he thought he would be sick. He sat on a packing box behind some store, and in a little while he was all right.

He drank again, lowering the bottle and staring ahead at emptiness. Except for the soft creep of strength inside him, healing his hurts and his aches, he was a blank. The chestnut turned to look at him, jingling the bit, when he tilted the bottle a third time.

Cass expelled a deep breath. "All right, boy," he said. "I'll make 'er now."

Swiftly Ogden came out of the door as he trudged the path up to the shack. One close look was enough for Swiftly. He let out a soft whistle.

"What happened, pardner?"

"Plenty," said Cass. "This horse and rider had a long, tough day. You tend to 'im—huh, Swiftly?—while I take care of me."

"How drunk are you, boy?" Swiftly asked.

Cass shook his head. "Not as drunk as I'm gonna be."

HE HAD washed himself at the basin, had swathed his upper chest with bandages of torn cloth, was stretched on the low bunk, stripped to the waist, when Swiftly returned.

Swiftly knew when to talk and when to hold his jaw. He nodded toward the bandage. "How bad?"

"A scratch. A close miss, that's all. The bleedin's done and the on'y pain's when I wrench myself."

"How come?" Swiftly said, and Cass told him. He spoke with slow distinctness, for whisky never blurred his voice. The two quick drinks he had downed while Swiftly was gone had sobered him, if anything. They had chased the rolling warmth out of his stomach and replaced it with cool balance, a steadiness.

"So I reckon it's up to you, Swiftly," he said, when his blunt recital was finished. "Accident or not, Cass Gentry is washed up in Triangle Town. There's some crookedness out at Burnt Mills—mebbe the key to all the troubles here, but how and where it branches I still can't say.

"Anyway, I've slammed that door. I jumped too quick, and I missed. They'll have plenty chance to cover up their coyote tracks, to pull more wool over people's eyes."

"Grab some shuteye," Swiftly said. "Things never look so bad, come mornin'."

"They're likely to look worse," said Cass. "We got to face the facts here. When we rode into Triangle, pardner, we had the town on our side. The decent folks, the lead-in' men like Farabaugh, Frank Irish, and Bannister as it turned out—they wanted to see this mess cleared up.

"The little fellers, the average townsman and small rancher, was ready to back the play of any man who'd dig to the bottom of things. That's why I was able to throw my weight around so free. If I tromped the toes

of honest men—like Bannister—they faced their cards pronto. If I crowded the crooks there was no harm done. But now, when this Queenie story spreads—"

He stared at the planks of the bunk above. "Reach me that bottle, Swiftly."

"Look, pardner," Swiftly said hastily, "there ain't no use—"

He bit off the words beneath the stare that Cass turned upon him. Swiftly Ogden had seen that look before, and it was not a pleasant sight.

A stiff-legged walk and that stare in his eyes were the only signs of drunkenness Cass Gentry would show. He would talk and act real sensible. But Swiftly knew what was inside of him.

Cass drank. He wiped his mouth. "From now on," he said, "I never could be sure. I couldn't tell, from the look of a man or the tone of his voice or his attitude, if he had some deviltry to hide or if it was his natural way to face a woman-killer.

"Any proof I might show would be tainted with the stink I've raised today. And the hell of it, Swiftly, is that we were gettin' somewheres. There was Childress, Axton, Parsons, Vic Barth we'd choused into the open. There was last night's bullet that missed my ear—"

BEARPAW came in. He backed against the closed door, wheezing out his breath, peering nearsightedly through the dusk-haze.

"The doc was a'ready out to'rds that direction," he said huskily. "I sent a rider to carry 'im word." He pawed a hand across his grizzled mustache. "She ain't dead yit. She was still alive when Bannister left. Him an' his Snaketrack are down in town."

Cass sat up. He lifted his feet to the floor, and the whiskey hit him. A buoyancy was in his body, an airy lightness, and a dizziness roared up to his brain, exploding there.

He shook his head, blinking the sparkled blankness from his eyes, and the rocking room steadied. He pushed up, and he stood there strong and steady. His mind was clear and sharp and his body had shed its ailments. He was quick and keen. He could run on feathered feet or sing a song or dance a jig-step.

"Might happened to any man," Bearpaw said quickly. "Plain to hell from what they said, that it was accident. I'd set tight, though, till the talk blows past. Them fools yonder—"

"It's no use, Bearpaw," Swiftly said.

"But it's no confounded sense to flaunt the face of the town. That Happy Hour bunch has spread the story all whichaways, an' the rats has crawled from their holes to comb their whiskers. Vic Barth an' Quigg 're struttin' high, an' that hook-nosed gunman Bannister fired last night, feller Cass tangled with on Division Street, is crowin' loud-mouth—"

Swiftly shook his head, gesturing silence.

Cass was buttoning a clean gray shirt. He set his hat at a cock, buckled his gunbelt on. The .45 was feather light. It seemed to leap into the swift, deft fingers that executed a practice draw. He faced Bearpaw and Swiftly as he returned the gun to holster.

"I never yet made myself hard to find," he said, "and now's no time to start it. If Triangle Town's got questions to ask, I'll be on deck to answer 'em. You two steer clear, you hear me? I don't need help nor com-

pany. And I don't need any advice. I'll advise myself."

He was nearing the door when the Young 'Un knocked. The boy squeezed inside with a breathless message:

"Ben Quigg's on his way here to warn you from town, Mr. Gentry. There's hell a-boilin'—lynch-talk! Three-four them nesters just rode in from the Mills. The woman ain't dead, but they say she's dyin'. Them nesters is huntin' your scalp. Quigg claims that throwin' you in jail would be the safest way—"

"It's a bluff, Cass!" Swifty cried. "It's bait to hook you. They know you're tuckered out—they saw you buy that bottle. It's a red flag with a gun trap behind it."

"They're talkin' dangerous," the Young 'Un said. "I only heard the half of it, too, 'cause I been stayin' close to home. The Duke is havin' another of his real bad spells today. I—well, I'd say you'd best be careful, Mr. Gentry."

Cass strode past him, opened the door. "Mr. Gentry," he said. "That's right—that's me—Mr. Cass Gentry." He went into the dusk.

"Is he drunk?" Bearpaw breathed. "Is he wild-eyed crazy? We gotta—hey, where yuh goin', Swifty?"

"Where he's goin'," Swifty Ogden said. "I keep 'em from climbin' his back—that's our agreement."

The hunched old wrangler stared at the slamming door. He glared at Duke Costello's boy, moving his hands in a spread of helplessness. "They'll be shot to dollrags!" he gasped. "Where's my rifle-gun? I gotta find some way—"

His jaw sagged. His gnarled fists clenched, and he pushed past the Young 'Un. His bracketed rifle was forgotten on the wall as he headed across the weed-grown fields in a hobble-legged run. His mouth was stretched wide with the wheeze of his breath, and his arms flailed the twilight shadows.

"Gotta," he whimpered. "Gotta stop 'em!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BADGE I WEAR

CASS GENTRY walked with a stiff-kneed stride, with his shoulders squared and arms swinging free, and he was tuned to the earth he trod, to the evening wind, to that lone, pale star in dark infinity.

He was twelve feet tall, and with every breath he grew another inch. He was charged with a super-strength, a super-wisdom. He could race the wind or jump those yonder housetops. No sound was too small for him to hear, no sight too dim to see, and he could cover all the world with his understanding.

He wasn't drunk, not even a little bit. He was soberer, he told himself, than any man had ever been or any man had a right to be. A drunk man staggers, but Cass Gentry walked with steadfast feet. A drunk man mumbles, but Cass Gentry's tongue was glib with words that he never heard before, so many polished words that his throat wanted to sing 'em. A drunk man is full of storm and temper, of bluster and brag, but Cass Gentry was as calm and cool as an icicle.

He meant no harm to any fellow-man. He was walking in peace, as was his right and privilege, and he would not raise his voice or lift his fist unless compelled to. Self-defense is—

Across the bare field, stiff-striding. Past the loom of a barn, a shadow-shed, a rubbish heap in the alley. He en-

tered a darker split between buildings and emerged on Wampum Street.

With his extra-sight he saw the street enlarged, stretched wide and curving long. It was a quiet Sunday street, its public lamps unlighted, its roadway barren, its walks thinly straggled with movement. A knot of figures was clustered beneath the white globe that fronted the Elk Hotel, and there were ten more shining splotches spaced along. He nodded solemnly as he turned up the walk, bootheels thumping.

Self-defense is the first law of nature. Yeah, that was the ticket.

The Happy Hour was the place. That was where they would gather, and the thicker they flocked the more pleased Cass Gentry would be. He could have reached the lights of the saloon in one giant stride, the length of a block, but he kept to his steady pace. A buzz of talk poured from the door as he approached and he thought that he might drown it out with one good bellow.

But that would be a drunkard's act, and Cass Gentry was a snowman of sobriety. A man with wild whisky in him would not have remembered, as Cass Gentry did, to pause outside the doorway and let his eyes adjust to the glow of inner lights, and to jiggle the butt of his Colt, loosening the steel in its holster.

Cass Gentry even remembered to bend down his head as he pushed through the swinging panels, for he towered eighteen feet by then, a mountain oak with leaves in his hair.

He saw the expanse of the Happy Hour with utmost clarity. The narrow room had crowded since he bought his bottle here. The four-five customers had increased to forty. Men sat around the tables and a thick queue lined the bar.

Cass turned his head in slow survey, standing just inside the door, and he heard the sounds that abruptly dwindled. Faces moved in a curious staring unison, and slow figures withdrew, fading back from him, as he stepped to the head of the bar. He slapped his left hand on the polished plank.

"Whisky—"

HE LOOKED down the room—and saw the faces of Triangle Town. He saw them in a sort of bright detachment, as if Happy Hour had a roof of brilliant glass through which Cass Gentry peered down upon lesser creatures. Except for this glassy separation he might have reached out his arm and cuffed them or pinched a head between his fingers. He stood and watched them. He looked his steady challenge at them, one and all.

At Abel Bannister, with the listeners thick around his Snaketrack table. At Vic Barth, the dark deputy, sitting bolt upright and twisted around in his chair. At Axton, one of four grouped at the bar. At the big and the little he looked, at the bartender and at Mr. Frank Irish and at Hop Randolph, the limpy gambling man.

He could have made a mighty speech to them, but his voice would have blown them down. He stood and waited, and the room throbbed to the same slow tempo that was in the measured hammer of his heart.

That gave him his sense of time—that hammering. It was like a wonderful big clock.

He seemed to know by some sixth sense, even before he heard the squeak of the entrance door and his glance flicked sidewise, that Swifty Ogden would be standing

there. Swifty Ogden, small and dapper, with his face wiped blank of expression, with his thumb hooked daintily over his belt.

The same reasons that had pushed Cass Gentry had brought Swifty here. He came because he was built that way and because it had to be.

The room stirred. Abel Bannister slowly lifted from his chair, staring at Cass and opening his mouth, then pressed his lips together and sank down again. There was a breath of sound as Vic Barth, his dark eyes shuttling, came to his feet.

"You were warned from the streets, Gentry," he said. He held his hands carefully in view, stroking the palms together. "You got one minute to clear out of here."

One instant there were five men at the table between Vic Barth and Cass, next instant they had vanished, creeping the sawdust, hugging the floor. Cass eyed the deputy, unanswering, and other men squatted suddenly along the bar.

"You hear me, Gentry?" Vic Barth said, and Cass saw the tightening of the deputy's neck cords, his muscles bunching for the showdown jump.

"Cass—" said a soft voice from the doorway. "I want you to come with me, Cass."

Mary Ellen came forward and put her steady fingers on his arm.

SHE was darkly dressed and her hair had blown awry. The brown hand spread against her bodice moved with the swell of her breath. Her face was turned up to Cass and her eyes saw him alone in the room.

She held herself proudly, and some trick of the barroom lamps made her features indistinct in his sight, as though she stood remote and visionary in a calm, pale glow. He could shake his head and she would vanish—

But he could not shake those fingers, tight upon his arm. They had fastened there, compelling, and the touch of them was a tenderness Cass Gentry had never known. They were a leap of his heart, a sob in his throat, a reality and a sanity too blinding-bright for instant understanding.

The sound of her voice, the sight and touch of her—and God knows how and why these little things did what they did to him. They shocked all the buoyance, all the overweening strength, from the Cass Gentry giant. They shriveled and humbled him, and he was feebly small and blindly afraid.

The strength that flowed from her hand was the force that held him upright, the courage that hushed his frantic shout, the balance that restrained him from panic-flight to escape the death in this room.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I'll come," and he followed the pull of her hand toward the doorway.

HIS SIGHT was blind, his brain was blank to the instant happenings in the crowded bar. Even Swifty Ogden did not observe the scope of them.

The sword of violence had been shivering above the room, suspended by the thinnest hair, and Mary Ellen's presence might not have stayed the death-stroke if Vic Barth had signaled it. The holocaust was averted by the swift reaction of other men to the girl's appearance.

The hook-nosed gunman who had made his boasts, the barrel-bellied fellow who had lost his job as aftermath to his street fight with Cass, had eased out his revolver. He

stood along the wall, his actions concealed by intermediate figures, and he was lifting the barrel slowly when he became aware of watchful eyes.

Abel Bannister was staring across at him, jaw jutted. The Snaketrack boss had pushed back his chair, and his right hand was hidden from the gunman's view. Mr. Hook-nose lowered his weapon, returned it to holster.

Axton's group along the bar had the same experience. Three of them had dropped their fists to gun-butts. They were posed stiffly, all their attention centered upon Vic Barth, when the hiss of Axton's breath, the roll of his eyes, warned the three of Hop Randolph.

The slight-bodied faro dealer sat at a table six feet distant. He had turned toward them and the gun in his lap was slightly tilted. Hop Randolph was expressionless, but the round black eye of the pistol stared ominously.

And Frank Irish, too, had been quick to act. The brisk little banker had hopped up at sight of Mary Ellen. He stepped forward as the tug of her hand pulled Cass Gentry back, blocking Vic Barth's path by his move. He made his gesture for the whole room to see, sweeping off his Sunday and bending his white-tufted head in a smiling bow.

"Good evenin', my dear," he said, as if Mary Ellen were walking the street to church, proper and ladylike.

The Happy Hour understood and approved that gesture. . . .

OUTSIDE in the thin blue darkness, Cass Gentry walked the solemn-sounding planks to nowhere. Mary Ellen had his arm, and he was a child who needed leading. If his foot dragged, if his step wavered, it was weakness rather than intoxication.

His body was damp with the perspiration that had poured forth as the doors of the Happy Hour fluttered behind them. Swift waves of fever heat, of shuddering cold, had pulsed through him, banishing the whisky-haze. He was truly sober—nerve-shocked into sobriety.

They walked in silence, Swifty Ogden trailing.

There had been death in that place. The sight of Mary Ellen, standing beside him, had revealed the clear picture of it, and the flashing realization that she was facing it with him had brought terror to Cass Gentry. He still shivered with the thought of what she had risked. His brain was numb with the might-have-beens.

They had crossed the packed dirt of Wampum Street. They went along a footpath with the whisper of trees above them and yellow-windowed houses lined ahead. Cass felt the tremor in her hand then, and she halted abruptly. She spoke some soft sound, a throaty murmuring, and stepped away from him. Her hand reached out toward the trunk of a tree.

"Don't," he said. "Don't look at me."

He lifted his head in a moment, and he knew then that her murmur had been a muffled sob. She was leaned against the tree, her wrist pressed against her mouth, and her shoulders were shaking.

"I asked for it," Cass said dully. "You shouldn't—I never was worth the bother."

He spoke in a stranger's tones. The hollow-sounding words came from his without effort, without thought, as if he were a dummy on a stage-actor's knee. He knew where he was—it was Council Street. He knew that Swifty had halted at a distance, and that Bearpaw had also followed them.

The place was Triangle Town and he was Cass Gentry. Yet as he looked at Mary Ellen these realities seemed to fade, and he stood with her in some far beyond, the two of them hemmed in by nothingness.

"I had to," she answered presently. "When Bearpaw came running—when I heard that you—I was glad to do it. It was a danger I could share. I couldn't let you throw yourself away."

"You lowered yourself," Cass said. "You climbed down into my gutter. What happened was my own blame. I cooked your chances today. I killed a woman at the Mills—"

"For me!" she said quickly. "No matter why or how it happened, I share the responsibility. I told you that. I accepted the risks. I was proud—proud, can't you understand?—to show the men in that place how my loyalties stood. I'm not backing down on our bargain, Cass Gentry, though that needn't stop you if you still want to quit."

"Quit?" He echoed the word. "But I'm no use; my bolt is shot here. The talk was bound to spread and I had to face it. I couldn't run and hide my head."

"But you did!" she exclaimed. "You crawled in a bottle and hid. You quit like a yellow dog. You drank yourself brave enough to swagger your body into something your mind was afraid of. I've seen my father do the same."

CASS looked at her blankly. "Yeah," he said in a moment, "I can see you're right. I—I never figured it quite that way. But now that you tell it—why, sure, I'm no better than that Carson City gambler. He shot his brains out, and I tried to fix 'er so that others would do the same for me. I went yellow on myself."

"You didn't!" she cried. "You didn't realize. You're no coward—you're just a fool, Cass Gentry. A stubborn, hot-headed, special kind of fool that I happen to know, being Matt McHale's daughter."

Cass shook his head. "It would been a different thing with him. He was—well, he had his reputation here. He wore no killer's badge. His neighbor folks would understand—"

"And we can make them understand right now," she said. "No man wears a killer's badge unless he pins it on himself. That's what I must make you see. Did you ride to Burnt Mills today just to earn your wages? Did you have the dollar sign pinned on your vest?"

"Damn the wages," he said thickly. "I rode because—"

"I know why. It was because you found me helpless, because the odds were long against me. It was my badge you wore today. If your gun killed a woman then I helped to aim it. How can I make you see the way I feel?"

"The only fear I had, running down the street, was that I'd reach the place too late. I wanted all Triangle Town to be in the Happy Hour. I wanted to show them—and you above them all—that I believed in you, that I trusted you—"

Cass couldn't say a word, he couldn't move, he couldn't see her. She was no more than a voice in his heart and the starlight gleam through the branches.

"Suppose it had been my father badgered there," Mary Ellen said. "Does that help you understand how I felt? Would I have had a single doubt? Would anyone deny that I belonged beside him?"

"But that's just make-believe," said Cass slowly. "You

owe no debt to me. I took the risks of your job on the gunswift's terms."

"You lie!" Her voice was thin, raggedly breathed. Cass saw the shadow-move of her body, and her fingers were gripped up on his arm again. "We've never had those terms between us. You *must* have felt as I feel. You *know* it's more than make-believe. You're all I've got. Don't quit me, Cass; don't take my strength away—"

She was in his arms suddenly. Her body pressed close against him, taut-musled, shivering with the strain of wild emotions. Her lips were against his lips. She was murmuring brokenly, and Cass kissed her hair and the tears upon her cheek.

Then, like a fool, he loosed his arms and let her go.

CHAPTER XXV

NO BEACON TONIGHT

MARY ELLEN sat in the vine-shaded shadow of the doctor's porch. The sting of tears was still in her eyes and her throat had still to subdue the sobbing breathlessness.

Except for the bracket lamp in the entrance hall, the doctor's house was dark. The whole street was dimly dozing. How many minutes had passed since she sat there, bonnet in her lap, waiting to start for the evening service? How long since Bearpaw came running?

She had not been afraid—thank God for that! There had been no qualms, no hesitations, from the instant Bearpaw blurted his message. The knowledge of what she must do had been an instant realization. She had known, as old Bearpaw had seemed to know, that she was the key to the situation at the Happy Hour. She alone could stop Cass Gentry.

And as she ran the footpath, skirts in hand, outspeeding winded Bearpaw, she had felt a pride instead of fear. To face a common foe, to share the danger, to show Cass Gentry and Triangle Town how her loyalties listed—oh, it was a warmth in her breast, an exaltation!

In the smoky, silent room an instinct had directed her. Instinct told her what to say, and how to touch his arm just so, and chose the words she had to speak to him in the safety-shade of that tree just down the street.

But something else, something wilder and deeper, had put her in his arms. Did she love this man, this stranger? Was it more than his misery, her pity for his need that had given her lips to him?

She thought of Martin Burdette, of Martin's arms, and his lips upon her own, and the murmur of his voice against her ear. She had never questioned her love for Martin, the happiness that she would find with him, and yesterday the loss of Martin had been a deep hurt that would never ease. Now she stroked her fingertips over her mouth and stared at the night and could not weigh her own emotions.

She stood up presently and found her bonnet near the steps. The dim silence of the house was suddenly repellent. She thought of the woman in the upper bedroom, Ada Farabaugh in her cripple's chair, and knew that a high, sharp voice would call out at the sound of her entrance.

She had no cheerful word to spare to Mrs. Farabaugh, not now. Time enough to face those sullen eyes, the poor pain-ravaged features, when the gossips of Triangle Town

had scurried to the sickroom to relate the incident at the Happy Hour.

Mary Ellen went down the path to the gate. Let them, let the gossips talk! Let them mumble and whisper and stare! She held her head high as she walked the boards of Wampum Street toward the church. Martin Burdette and Triangle Town had broken her courage once, but now she was Matt McHale's daughter again. Matt McHale's daughter till the last wolf was hung.

The services had already started when she reached the spired building. A meager congregation was singing *Abide With Me*, and few heads turned when she took her seat at the rear. She sat with her bonnet bent humbly, grateful for the solemn hush that followed the singing. She joined the other murmuring voices in the chanted responses to the public prayer. Her eyes closed when the preacher began to speak.

Mary Ellen heard his words without meaning, finding a comfort in the sleepy drone of them. In the middle of the closing hymn she made a quiet exit. It was no fear of staring eyes or nodding whispers that hurried her, but rather that she wanted no disturbance of the sense of peace she had found.

WAMPUM STREET was almost deserted, and the shadows of Council Street were as placid as her thoughts. She peered ahead, thinking she might see a light from the doctor's office, and for an instant she did not understand her own puzzled frown. Something—yes, the lamp in the hall! The front of the house was totally dark now. Perhaps the wick had burned down.

Mrs. Farabaugh had remained in her room all day. She had been asleep when Mary Ellen went down to sit on the porch in the dusk and wait for church time, for she had not replied to a tap on her door. Her usual needs were within reach beside the bed, and it was only upon the rare occasions that Ada Farabaugh's warped pride called for any assistance. She had a limited scope of movement, despite her ailment.

No, it was nonsense. The lamp had burned out, nothing more. Yet Mary Ellen remembered how obviously worried the doctor had been these last few days. He had said nothing, of course, but Mary Ellen had seen the grave lines that etched his face when he spoke to his wife. It was curious, too, about the lamp. It customarily burned all night, the doctor's beacon, and one of Maggie's daily chores was to tend it just before she started home.

Mary Ellen hurried. She pushed through the picket gate, ran up the path. The front door was quartered open—she had not latched it tightly, perhaps—and she stood briefly in the hallway dark, breathing shallowly, reaching for the matches on the little hall table. She plucked a sheaf of them, and the feel of the slender sticks, the familiar scents of medication were somehow reassuring.

Her nerves were strung too tight, that was the answer. She was still keyed, subconsciously, to the wracking emotions of that scene in the Happy Hour, to such breathless shocks as that bullet which had blasted past her own cheek at Cass Gentry in the stable last night.

A careless cook, a burnt-out lamp, the normal silence of a sleeping house—and out of these simplicities she was creating an apprehension that slowed her step, that visioned dangers in the loom of every familiar shadow.

She halted at the foot of the stairs to listen. No sound from above. She heard the solemn strokes of the tall clock

that faced the outer door, and the steady *tick-tock* beat emphasized the gloom, the overspreading hush. She had a silly impulse to call Ada Farabaugh's name, but she checked it instantly. She struck a match, and the puffing glow of the flame was comforting.

SHE went up the stairs. The match burned out as she reached the upper hall, but there was light enough from the end window to see her way. Her hand pushed along the papered wall toward the door of her room, and she was reaching automatically for the knob when double warning snatched her fingers back.

She could see the faint luminance from the double windows beyond her bed and the knob was not in reach. Her door was open yet she had locked it little more than an hour ago.

She might have run, or screamed, or obeyed any one of ten frantic instincts. Instead, held stiffly in some stronger compulsion, her hand slashed a match down the door frame. In its gleam she saw her room disheveled. The bundle from Martin Brudette's office had been ripped open. Its contents littered the floor.

Mary Ellen stepped back. Her dread was a torrent leaping out at her. "Mrs. Farabaugh—" She screamed, but her voice was only a breath, a whisper.

"Ada—Ada!" The name came shrilly from her throat, piercing the hush, echoing the walls, resounding wild.

The tiny flame in her hand, the shivering glow, jerked along the hall. It cast a yellow flicker, a shadow-leap, through the narrow passage. It jumped ahead toward the back window toward the blank outline of Mrs. Farabaugh's door and it revealed the streak of white and the white oval at the base of the rear bedroom entrance.

The streak of white was Ada Farabaugh's arm stretched pleadingly toward the hallway runner. The oval of white was her hair-fringed face turned in agony toward Mary Ellen.

The match-glow faded, winking out with Mary Ellen's cry, but its gleam had endured sufficiently to show the final ugliness—the twisted mouth, the distended eyes, the cruel marks of the murder which had released the doctor's wife from the prison of her cripple's chair.

FIGURES had appeared in the doorways of neighboring houses in response to the girl's first scream. Lamps shone from the porches, voices called and runners came pelting from every direction along dim Council Street. Three men were crowding through the doctor's gate to shout queries at Mary Ellen as she stumbled down the steps toward them.

She could not answer. She had no voice. They charged past her, into the dark house, and one of them carried a shotgun. Other men hurried up, and women too, and the night was roused with a babble of sounds, with the firefly specks of lanterns.

The blurred hours following were chaos.

Council Street became the hub of Triangle Town. Figures dotted the yards, clogged the footpaths, wavered the roadway in sluggish parade. The murder of Ada Farabaugh was an earthquake shock that sundered deep and spread its tremors wide.

Fear merged with the mystery that raced through the town and beyond. A hundred rumors passed from busy mouths to eager ears. Rage and alarm flowed from house to house, from group to whispering group, and swift actions

would result before the hands of the Triangle clocks pointed midnight.

In the early mill of excitement the doctor's house was a bedlam, with a hundred gawkers thronged outside it and twenty searchers tramping and rooting through the rooms. Mary Ellen, huddled in a chair on the porch across the street, ringed in by flustered housewives and nightgowned youngsters, could only mutter over and over that she knew nothing more. She had gone to church leaving Ada Farabaugh sleeping. She had returned to find her murdered.

Ben Quigg and his deputies, when they appeared, did little to soothe the turmoil. They led a second noisy prow through the house, sent men to search the nearby yards and the alley, and the sum of their efforts was an accidental bullet that one volunteer searcher shot into the leg of another.

The neighborhood was still so disorganized that no one had foresight enough to halt Dr. Farabaugh when he turned his buggy in from Wampum Street, half an hour later.

It was obvious that he was unaware of the situation, for his horse moved at the usual plodding pace, and once or twice the doctor leaned his head out to ask what the devil was going on here. Nobody answered. They stood dumbly aside and let him come on until he could see the crowd in front of his fence. He hit his horse a lick and came a-helling.

The women, who notice such things, said that he was the coolest man on the street once he had shaken off the first staggering impact of the news. It was Mary Ellen who finally told him. She scooted off the neighbor's porch when somebody announced that his buggy was coming, pushing people out of her way and calling out to him as she ran. The doctor piled down from his seat, grabbing her as she flung her arms out to him. Some who happened to stand nearby heard what she said:

"Oh, doctor—doctor—she's dead! Ada's dead! And it's my fault—I left her alone. I led the killers to your house—I helped to murder her!"

The tall man lifted her up, light as a feather, when her head fell forward and she fainted.

THE women had to admire the iron discipline that the haggard doctor demonstrated. To a man of medicine, the living are more important than the dead, and George Farabaugh's training was not forgotten even in his own extremity.

He carried Mary Ellen to the neighbor's parlor and mixed a draught for her before crossing the street to the room where his murdered wife lay. Men made a silent pathway for his gaunt figure, slump-shouldered, that moved with dragging step. They understood the terrible emotion that cracked his voice when he stood beside the

body of his Ada, staring down at the bed where Ben Quigg's big Dutchman had placed her.

"Get out, damn you!" he had shouted to the sheriff and his crew. "Get out before I throw you out!" And men had backed away from the wildness in his eyes, the distortion of his bearded face, to close the door and leave him alone with his dead.

For another hour the hubbub continued. Crazy rumors circulated. There was one report that Mary Ellen McHale had admitted the murder. Another said that Ada Farabaugh's death was the result of a shooting on the previous evening when gunfire had been heard in the neighborhood. Such stories did not travel far, however, for steps were soon taken that returned common sense to Triangle Town.

The foremost men of Triangle gathered at the Palace Hotel and formed a citizen's committee. Frank Irish, Henry Gaunt, Eli Lombard, Dan Venable and thirty more respected freeholders took the town's affairs in charge.

Their first move was to put Ben Quigg in his place. He was told to crawl into his office and stay there. Abel Bannister, who had decided to spend the night at the Elk and catch up on his sleep, was hauled from his bed to organize the manhunt. In another twenty minutes the streets had been cleared, rifle-armed riders were patrolling the thoroughfares, and some measure of calm was being restored.

Women who had said that they would keep every light in their houses burning so long as that murderer roamed loose and no household was safe—these women considered the price of kerosene and blew out their lamps. Men who had decided to keep a weapon handy when they crawled into their blankets thought better of this discomfort. By morning the following conclusions had been accepted:

Ada Farabaugh, according to her husband's report, had come to her death as the result of strangulation or suffocation. The bruise on her forehead might have been inflicted by the murderer in attempting to stun her, or might have been caused by her own struggles to escape. Because of the feeble state of her health, no great amount of strength had been required to force her face into her pillow and hold her there.

A careful questioning at every home in the neighborhood, and of everyone who had been near the section in the early evening, was of small avail. No unusual sound had been heard until Mary Ellen began her screaming. No one had been seen to enter the doctor's house, nor had any suspicious action occurred in the vicinity.

The obvious deduction as to the cause and the general pattern of the crime was soon reached. Some sly prowler had entered the house to secure certain papers of value in the bundle of Matthew McHale's possessions. He had forced the door to Mary Ellen's room—the knife-marks were plain upon the wood—and the sleeping invalid had been wakened. Murder had silenced her betraying outcries.

(To Be Continued Next Week)

What happens to the Prisoners in French Guiana when the World Breaks Apart?

Here is the dramatic and powerful story—

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Here's the unforgettable story of a master fisherman who had lost the will to live. He'd seen everything and done everything—and then he got a new kind of fighting fish on the end of his line

YOUNG SHERMAN found Pop Shannon by the pool, tossing in mullet to Tildy and her son Jupiter. He was a very fresh and powerful son; and Tildy who was as fine and big a porpoise as had ever butted a shark, let him maul her unmercifully for a time.

But when she decided that she had had enough, she would put her head down and ram him broadside and take all the playfulness out of him.

It was the Underwater Zoo, of course, down at Laconia, Florida. It was the only thing of its kind in the world, a giant pool where all the species of the briny deep were placed in the tank together to live the same sort of life and possibly find the same sort of death as they would in their fight for survival in the Atlantic, which actually was less than quarter of a mile away, plainly visible from the summit of the big pool.

"Pop," said young Sherman, "you're wanted in the office. I'd swear I saw the big boss himself."

"The big boss?" said Pop Shannon, spilling the rest of the mullet overboard and watching the two porpoises scatter for them. He climbed to his feet. "You mean Mike Descorts? You must mean Mike. On account of the other big boss, Mr. Anderson's down at Guyacil after broadbills, I hear."

"It looked like Mike Descorts to me," said young Sherman. "Anyhow, he's in the office with Dr. Bisbee and another gent who looks like something out of an undertaking parlor."

"Well!" said Pop Shannon, pleased. "Reckon I'll have to go in and see what's what. Mike don't get down this way often no more. It'll be a real pleasure to see him."

He ambled off toward the office.

BEFORE they had put him on the payroll of the Underwater Zoo, Pop Shannon had been captain of his own boat, a charter fisherman which had roamed the seas from

Nova Scotia to Florida, to Bimini and Cat Cay, to Mexico, to the Nameless River in Cuba.

During the winter, you could have found him below the Causeway at Miami Beach, and when you wanted to pay out his money and catch fish, you could count on Cap'n Pop Shannon. He was a blood brother. He knew where they were and what they were eating and how they wanted it served up.

The directors of the Underwater Zoo were John Anderson and Michael Descorts, both of them young and wealthy sportsmen. They had put their money into the concrete miracle on Highway 42, and it had begun to pay them dividends.

A chance remark from Pop about how wonderful it would be to see fish living as they lived in the sea, except that you could watch them through a porthole, had influenced them to build the zoo. They gave Pop the job of taking care of the place. Dr. Bisbee was the actual curator, and young Sherman was his assistant; but Pop's job was one of free-lance design. He about ran the whole place. He loved it, and in his way, he loved the fish.

And you only had to look at the way Tildy the porpoise behaved to see that her heart belonged to Pop.

Pop Shannon went into the administration office and was gratified to see that his visitor was Mike Descorts. They shook hands and then Mike Descorts hugged him.

"You old barnacle-grabber," Mike exclaimed. "It's good to see you again! It really is! I've been away from here too long!"

"That's a fact," said Pop Shannon. "You ain't been down this way for a helluva long time, Mike. What did you think of that white shark we landed, eh? Some baby?"

"Old Chainmouth?" said Mike Descorts. "I'll say he was some baby. And I got your inference, of course. I shouldn't have sent a professional sportsman down to get that mako. But I thought you were getting too old for that kind of stuff, Pop. That was the only reason I did it."

"Maybe you was right," said Pop Shannon. "Your paid hand did land a mako finally, although it's a scrawny critter. And I sure was done in after Chainmouth got through with me. Maybe I'd just better stick to guidin' the boats out and let the fishin' to the younger fry."

"Well," said Mike Descorts, "that's what I want you to do for me, Pop. That's why I'm down here. I'm bored stiff. I want to catch fish, new fish, new kinds of fish, sea serpents, maybe even killer whales. I want some excitement, and you're the guy to find it for me. How's the baby porpoise?"

"Big enough to roll you around," said Pop. "Why'nt you go out and feed him a few mullet? He'll love you for it. His name is Jupiter and he'll come at call. Try it."

"I will," said Mike, and went out to the pool.

Pop Shannon stared at Dr. Bisbee. Pop said, "I seen you waggin' a hand at me. That was what you wanted me to do, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Pop," said Dr. Bisbee. "We wanted to talk to you. This is Dr. Edward Nichols."

"Oh," said Pop. "Another scientist, eh?"

"No," said Dr. Bisbee. "Dr. Nichols is an M.D. not a Ph.D. He happens to be the personal physician of Mr. Descorts, and that is what we wanted to talk to you about."

"Oho," said Pop Shannon dully. He rubbed his chin with his hand, the bristles scratching noisily. "Too bad.

I reckon he's sick then? I thought when I come in that he didn't look well at all. He's all dark under the eyes, and he seems kinda scared, and he ain't in proper shape."

"Mr. Shannon," said Dr. Nichols in a grave voice, "Mr. Descorts is in a desperate condition. You would not think so to look at him but nevertheless, it's quite true."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He is in the grip of a severe nervous breakdown. We don't know exactly what caused it, but it is very real to him—so real that he has attempted to take his own life at least once."

POP SHANNON was horror-struck. Mike Descorts had always been a gay and uninhibited soul, with a tanned body and a broad back, and a love of hundreds of pounds of fighting muscle on the end of the line. Something was wrong, he had seen that himself, but it was hard to believe that a guy like Mike Descorts would try to commit suicide.

"He was in love with a young woman in New York," said Dr. Nichols, "and she treated him pretty badly. Led him on as long as it suited her. Then she married another chap. I think that was what did it. Mr. Descorts instantly began to lead a wild life. He kept looking for excitement, and he didn't find it. He wanted to leap from his apartment one day, and we stopped him. I've been trying to persuade him to get back to fishing, and he finally gave in."

"What do you want me to do?" Pop Shannon said, awed.

"You're to use the big boat," said Dr. Bisbee. "The seventy-footer, *Striped Marlin*. You're to take Mr. Descorts fishing."

"Gosh," Pop Shannon said. "I'll take him fishing all right. But it's kind of a responsibility. Is he all over—that stuff? I mean, he wouldn't try again—"

"He might," said Dr. Nichols. "Look here, Shannon. You must understand this. Mr. Descorts is in a precarious mental state. He has a feeling of complete boredom. Actually, it is frustration. You'll have to watch him all the time. You'll have to see that he doesn't brood. And more than that, you have got to give him legitimate hope of excitement. Now understand me. You'll undoubtedly catch fish, won't you?"

"Sure," said Pop Shannon heavily. "I never wet a hull offshore yet but that I didn't bring back something to show on the hook."

"This time you've got to do more than that," said Dr. Nichols. "You must paint a splendid picture of adventure. Perhaps it doesn't exist. Then make it up. Make up some gigantic old killer of the seas and give him a name and put him far offshore, someplace where you wouldn't usually go. Make it sound new to Mr. Descorts. Tell him that fifty people have hooked the fish and never landed it."

"Like with Old Chainmouth, you mean?"

"Yes, though Chainmouth was a real shark with a real past and it was a pity that Descorts wasn't the one to land him. Anyway, you understand me?"

"Yes, sure," said Pop. "But when he finds out there ain't no such fish?"

"He's not to find out. Maybe you won't find the fish. And if he should get a big one on by chance, say that that is it. Give him excitement. It's got to be new to him.

He's fished all his life so it's up to you to give him a new wrinkle in the way of fishing. I don't know how, and I don't know where. That's your problem."

"Yeah," said Pop Shannon dully. "My problem. It looks like I might have to try and hook into an orca if everything else fails."

"Then do it!"

Pop looked wry. "Did you ever see an orca? It's the blackfish, doc, a killer-whale, runnin' thirty feet long and going to two tons. If we ever made one of them babies mad, he'd knock the *Striped Marlin* into splinters. That would be excitement, sure enough."

"It would be the best thing for him in the world," said Dr. Nichols cheerfully.

"If he lived through it," said Pop Shannon. "I'm getting old but I ain't so old I wanta stand next to a grave on a lot o' squid skins and go lopin' over the edge. Still, that's mighty sad about Mike. I reckon I've gotta help him out somehow."

Dr. Bisbee whispered, "He's coming back, Pop. Talk fast. Don't let him suspect you've been told anything."

POP was stuffing his pipe, his back, to the door. He drew, as if he were finishing up a story, "Well, sir, the old marlin just stood there in the water on his tail, and he waved that bill at me just as pert as you please, and then he flips it down and cuts my line and then he rams a hole through my transom and one through my planking and then he goes down deep home and lets me limp all the way to Nassau with a hole in my bilge."

Mike Descorts had come in. He said, "What's this, Pop, a fish story?"

"Ain't no fish story, Mike," Pop said. "It's the God's truth, so help me. I was telling the doc here about Baby Face."

"Well, what about Baby Face?"

"You mean you never heard o' Baby Face?" Pop said in surprise. "Why, Mike, where you been fishing these last years, in trout streams? Baby Face is the biggest old marlin I ever seen in my life. He'll go to a half a ton the day a man can catch him, and they sure have tried. Blue marlin that hangs off the Bahamas about seventy miles."

"I hooked into him once. Just once. I'd heard about this Baby Face and I went lookin' for him, and I finally raised him. Lord, he was the bigges' marlin God ever made and I ever hope to see, thick around as a sea skiff and longer'n Old Chainmouth."

"He kept my hook and he kept my line and he stole some o' my heart. I played him for six hours before he snapped my thread, and he was just teasin' with me."

"And when he broached and stood on his tail there, wavin' that spear at me like I was a kid askin' for lolly-pops, I do swear and declare that there was ten big hooks hangin' in his jaw, from 10/0 to 14/0, with stainless steel wire leaders flashin' in the sun, and him waitin' for time and the sea to rust them out and off."

No one spoke for a moment. Then Mike Descorts said quietly, "Do you think, Pop, that you could ever raise him again?"

"Aye," Pop Shannon replied. "Ten hooks in his'n jaw? He was raised ten times before I left my Evans there. He can be raised."

There was a fine glow in Mike Descorts' eyes, a glow that had not been there for a long time. And it was nice to see.

BUT after thirteen days that eager light had vanished again, and Mike Descorts was morose once more, and he was thinking too much. Pop Shannon could see it plainly, and it worried him.

Pop wished vainly that he had brought young Sherman along or someone else who could really help, for Nigger John was no help at all.

Nigger John could handle the *Striped Marlin* as well as anyone, but he could not talk Mike Descorts out of the sinister fog that was sweeping in over his mind.

Nor could Pop, at this point. By stalling and wandering through the islands of the Bahama group, Pop had managed to spend a week of the trip reaching the mythical grounds where the equally mythical Baby Face swam the deep and crossed the reefs.

Once at the ground, there could be no more stalling. For six days they had cut the waters off the Emerald Key, east of Eleuthera, using all sorts of rigs and baits, with no luck at all. As a matter of fact, it was not really marlin water. It was too green and too shallow and there were reefs.

Descorts said once, "Pop, are you sure this is the spot? This isn't big marlin water. It's off a little more east, isn't it? You must have made a mistake."

Since Pop had never been there before, he hadn't made any mistake. But he could not count on the weather, and he was in strange waters, so he picked a spot close to Emerald Key so that they could run into a cove if the wind blew.

He didn't want to go east, because if Descorts once started east looking for that fish, he might go too far. A fisherman will often do that.

"This is the spot," Pop said. "Right off there, from the Key, on a southwest tangent, I raised him."

He nodded gravely.

Descorts said, "I can't believe a marlin would come in here. In this close. You must be wrong."

"No, sir," said Pop. "I'm right."

AT the end of six days, they knew every reef and every nook and cranny on the bottom. They even ventured further east on a fine day. By now they were into the gasoline reserves they had brought, and it was going to be the last trip. You can't fish a boat without gas. They would have to go back at least to Eleuthera to replenish the fuel.

This was the farthest east Pop Shannon had ever sailed in the Atlantic Ocean, and he found it very thrilling. The weather held fine, and the barometer hung at thirty-one inches without a flicker.

Toward twilight on that evening, as they purred slowly along on the fading blue-green waters, Mike Descorts suddenly said, "I suppose we'll have to go back."

"Yeah," Pop nodded. "Gas getting low. We could gas up and make another try."

"No, no more now," Descorts said. "Look, Pop, the weather is fine, the sea is as placid as a pond. What's the depth here?"

"The chart says sixty feet or so," Pop replied. "We're still over the banks. Not very deep."

"Let go the anchor," said Descorts. "I'd like to spend a night out here. I want to talk to you and I want to think a bit. You don't get a chance to anchor a night far off shore. Is that all right with you?"

Pop Shannon scoured the sky and shrugged. "Sure,"

he said. "All right with me. Nigger John! You pull'er outa gear and kill the motors and let go the big anchor. Then we'll rustle some supper, hear me?"

"Yassuh," said Nigger John with dignity. "Aye aye, cap'n."

They ate, somewhat listlessly; and as the night came down, the moon rose, and the sea glowed and flashed in the silvery reflection.

Out in the cockpit, while Nigger John cleaned up the galley, Pop Shannon said, "You didn't have much appetite, Mike."

"No," said Descorts dully. "I didn't . . . Pop, I'm tired of playing this game. Let's be honest, shall we? At first, back in Laconia, I thought you were on the level about a marlin named Baby Face. Now I know better."

Pop said, "I do declare, Mike, I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Oh, stow it, Pop, I mean really know," Descorts said somberly. His dark eyes were on the sea, and he acted as if he were staring at something a million miles away. "It's all been a fake. I know it now. They told you, I guess. I warned Dr. Nichols not to say a word. I see he did. What did he tell you, Pop?"

"He didn't tell me nothin'," Pop said stubbornly.

"To take me on a nice long trip?" said Descorts sadly. "To invent a marvelous fish, whet my curiosity, make me interested in something besides the past?"

"I know you're lying, Pop. And in a way, I appreciate what you've done. Because you did it out of friendship, and that's a nice thing. But it was a little unfair. I'm sick, I'll admit it. But even if we had found a marlin named Baby Face, that wouldn't have cured my troubles. Nothing can change what's in my mind, not a thing."

"I'm sorry it's that way, but it is, and there's nothing you nor I nor any can do about it. I'd have been pleased to raise Baby Face, but it wouldn't have changed an iota of the little things in my head."

POP said, "Mike, you're all shot. You ain't the same bright kid I useta know. What's got into you?"

"They did tell you." Descorts scowled down at his knuckles; the water slapped gently at the hull.

"Well, yeah, they told me. I only did what they wanted me to do. I guess I bungled it all up, but I was gonna call the first decent marlin we raised Baby Face. Hard luck we didn't raise one."

"What did they tell you?" Descorts said grimly. The knuckles were white now, and sharp under the skin. "Did they tell you I tried to kill myself?"

Pop Shannon gulped and tried to evade the question but Mike Descorts shrugged and went on: "It's true. I did. I will again, too, and next time I'll bring it off."

"My Gawd," Pop Shannon groaned. "That's a helluva thing to say."

"I won't do it here," said Descorts faintly. "I wouldn't do a think like that to you, Pop, while we're at sea."

"Mike, listen, you can't go doing a thing like that at all. You're young, you got your whole dawgone life ahead o' you—"

"I haven't as much ahead of me as you'd think," Descorts said. "Light your pipe, Pop. I'd like to tell you about it. I haven't told anyone completely, not even that old ass, Nichols. I'd like to talk. It's better when a man can talk."

"Talk away, Mike, get it off your chest."

"I was in love with her," Descorts said. "I'd never been in love with anyone before. Her name was Linda. She was beautiful. She was everything I wanted. And she fell in love with me. It was perfect, one of those things that can only happen once to a man. If he's lucky, it happens once. And then, just like that, she eloped with one of my best friends." He shuddered. "I suppose that seems like an old story to you, but it isn't to me. I tied my life up in that girl. Oh, I fixed myself fine. There wasn't anything in the world for me but her. And now there isn't Linda. So there isn't anything at all."

"Well," said Pop, "there are plenty more fish in the sea." He knew when he said it that it didn't sound right. Pop wasn't much of a one for words.

"I can't see that. I wish I could. I went to pieces for awhile, and drank like a fish. And then I began to get around, and I had a lot of nasty ideas. I was going to kill both of them—I still feel I could. That I'd like to. A man hates giving up the thing he loves. He'd rather scuttle it, the way a captain scuttles his ship. And then go down with it himself."

"Mmm," Pop Shannon said, squinting at the far horizon.

"I'm all mixed up, Pop. And the longer I go on being mixed up, the sooner I'll do something ugly. I can't sleep. When I do, I dream rotten dreams, I feel like doing rotten things. Sometimes my head aches so hard that I'd put a bullet in it if I had a gun handy at the time. Everything is crowding in on me, and it's too much to handle. I'm dead tired, I'm sick of it, I don't want another chance. I just want peace. I'm so damned tired. . . . Are you listening?"

"Yeah," Pop said. "I'm listening, Mike. But there's a kinda funny glow out there on the rim o' the sea. Take a look yourself."

THE dark sky was brightening where the sea met it, far off. Pop rose hastily and went in and told Nigger John to hoist the anchor and start the engines.

Then Pop turned on the short-wave transmitter and receiver and called the United States Coast Guard at Miami, Florida, using the pretuned C.G. channel. He made a qso at once, and said, "This is the *Striped Marlin*, about twenty miles due east of Eleuthera, reporting a ship afire at sea, due east of us maybe fifteen or twenty miles."

He gave the approximate position.

The Coast Guard operator said, "Thanks, *Striped Marlin*. We already have an sos on her. She's the German liner *Bremborg*, trying a dash for home through the British blockade. A cruiser caught up with her an hour ago, and her captain and crew are burning her, scuttling and abandoning ship. What's your length?"

"Seventy feet."

"You'd do well to make for her and aid in the picking up of survivors," said the Coast Guard operator. "We have two cutters on the way from positions some miles north of her, and a U.S. destroyer, the *Blue*, is also racing to her. You'd be a help."

"We'll turn the wheels toward her," Pop Shannon said. "Thanks for the information, old man."

"73's to you," said the Coast Guard operator. "Good luck. You can report back to me your identifications and passengers. sk."

Pop closed down the transmitter and receiver and went up the flying bridge where Nigger John was warming the engines. Mike Descorts had gone up there too.

Descorts said, "Did you find out anything?"

"Uh-huh," said Pop. "Funny we was just talkin' about ships and men and scuttlin's. That's what's happening over there. *Bremborg* afire. We're goin' to help."

He put his engines in gear and stepped up the rpm slowly to the maximum, and in two minutes, the *Striped Marlin* was racing across the placid moonlit sea toward the vortex of orange, on the horizon, where a fine ship was going to her end.

FOR an hour after they arrived, they overlooked the confusion in the sea, awed by the spectacle of seven hundred feet of fiery furnace which floated off the bow, masterless, the flames even climbing up the main mast so that it looked like a frozen bolt of lightning.

There were corpses in the sea. These the *Striped Marlin* passed by. "We've only room for live ones," Pop explained when Nigger John excitedly kept sighting the bodies.

But they found living men too, floating in the sea in life-jackets, calling for help, agonized, some burned, some half drowned.

They had six aboard when they sighted the lifeboat. By then the night had vanished in the brightness of the floating fire, and the sea around was brighter than day and blood-red in the reflection of the towering flames.

Southward, Pop and Descorts could see the destroyer, playing its beam upon the waves. And far to the north, there were other searchlights, the Coast Guard cutters were racing down, still too far away to help.

The wallowing lifeboat they aimed for was only half-filled and it carried a German flag in the stern. When they reached it, Pop heard a pistol crack, and then a wailing went up from the men in the boat.

Descorts said, with strange animation: "What happened?"

"Don't know!" Pop grunted. "We'll come in on them and take them in tow and see what's what. Maybe you'd better get the rifle in case we have trouble with them."

"It isn't that," said Descorts. "Something is wrong with those men. . . . There! There's a man overboard! He's swimming away from the lifeboat—see over there—about thirty feet away and going like a house afire! He must be an officer! He's in uniform, and he's got a revolver—see it in his hand as he swims?"

"Yeah," Pop said. "He kinda looks like he don't want to be saved. We can't go for him if he don't want us. Grab their painter in the lifeboat when we come alongside."

But when they came alongside, the men in the lifeboat pushed them off. And one seaman who spoke English said, "Nein, nein, don't save us. We can float, we will wait! The captain! Captain Frey—he goes there! We tried to stop him but he shot at us—it is Captain Frey and he is going to kill himself!"

Pop shouted, "There ain't nothing we can do! He's got a gun! He might plug us if we tried to pick him up! He'll put a bullet in his head before we could hoist him!"

"Nonsense!" Descorts snapped suddenly. "It's a sporting chance! We've got a chance to save his life, Pop! Make for him but not too close. Watch him and watch your trolling line. I'm putting a hook out astern. Bring my line right behind him when you pass and if I set it, get the rifle and shoot that revolver out of his hand. You can do it! Hurry! The marlin rod is all rigged, I'll put

her over!" He started to work, his face tense and eager.

Pop glowed with terrible excitement and felt his heart banging against his ribs as though it were a hammer.

He stepped the cruiser away from the lifeboat at full speed as Descorts thrust the big marlin rod in the gimbal of the fishing chair astern, tossed the twelve-ought hook and rig overboard and free-spoiled the big reel, allowing the rig to drop astern of them.

Pop shouted, "You'll never do it, Mike! You'll never do it! You can't catch a man—"

"Watch your fish and watch your line!" Descorts snapped. "We've raised the biggest game in the world, Pop, and we've got to do it! There he is!"

POP sent the *Striped Marlin* past the swimming man but fifteen feet off his right side. Then, having passed, he cut the boat in directly ahead of Captain Frey.

The stern wave nearly swamped the swimming man, and he stopped, breathlessly. He had swum far, afraid of pursuit, and now he raised his head to see if he were far enough off.

Ahead of him, he saw the *Laconia* cruiser beating away from him, making no attempt to stop him and pick him up.

Descorts closed the free pool, and tightened the star drag. He watched his line cut in behind the struggling captain as Pop maneuvered the boat with that wonderful dexterity which distinguishes a fisherman from an ordinary yachtsman.

The captain in the sea had a terrible face as he looked for what he thought was the last time at the burning hulk upon the sea. Then quickly, he raised the revolver to his temple and fired.

He missed.

The hook came in behind him and caught him in the shoulders. Mike Descorts felt the tension on the line instantly and he yelled at Pop to stand by.

With all his strength, and with the drag much tighter, Descorts leaned back in the chair and set the big hook with three stiff jolts. He set it as Captain Frey fired. Naturally the captain missed. The pain of the hook jerked his arm away and they could hear him yell.

Pop leaped from the bridge, turning it over to Nigger John who knew what to do when there was a fish on. This time there was a man on, however, and Nigger John's eyes were big as buttons and he looked scared.

Pop got the high-powered twenty-two from the cabin and loaded it and ran astern. The hand with the gun came up from the sea, aimed at them poorly, made a perfect target of itself. Pop fired, sent a bullet smacking through the hand, and the gun disappeared.

Captain Frey turned and tried to swim away. He was far off their stern now, for the rush of the cruiser had carried her away from him.

"All right," Pop breathed with some relief. "He's your fish, Mike. Land him."

Mike Descorts bent to the task. The big marlin rod was bent way over, its tip almost pointing to the sea instead of the sky. It was tough hickory but Captain Frey was a big man; and now and then he would wheel and grab the leader and yank savagely, trying to break the line or the rod, and the strain would be terrific.

The captain would try hard in these jerks to ease the pull of the hook in his left shoulder.

But always when he tried to swim away, the weight of the hook would be there, pulling against him, and he

could feel the inexorable strength of Descorts against him, as Descorts slowly pulled back, raising the tip of the rod and letting it jerk forward as he reeled in line.

Pop said, "He's got a pocketknife. Tight lines, Mike."

Descorts grunted, "He won't—cut this—line, Pop. There's fifteen feet—of steel wire leader before he—gets to the line—and I'll keep it out—of his—reach."

He did, putting on the pressure, holding up the rod without attempting to gain line or allowing any slack. It was too much for Frey to bear finally; for he turned again, panicked, and tried to swim away.

He lost ground at once. Descorts tightened the drag further and started the rhythmic motion of raising and lowering the rod, bringing the dripping wet line in around the spool, hauling the struggling man closer to the boat.

Frey put tremendous power into the battle, considering he was wounded and hooked. He fought with all the bulldoggedness of a tuna, now and then with the surge of a marlin as he floundered up and tried to dive forward out of the water and break the line.

But Descorts felt these things in the tension of his line and was prepared for them. He loosened the drag when Frey surged, tightened it after the surge and hauled Frey back over more ground than he had gained. When Frey tried to put his head down and sulk as tuna do, Descorts brought him up with short hard jerks.

FREY knew he was losing finally and tried to go the hard way. He let himself become a dead weight, and he sank, inhaling sea water. He was trying to drown.

Mike Descorts raised a hand at Pop who had climbed back onto the bridge, and the cruiser reversed sharply, as Descorts worked like a Trojan on the rod, lifting and dropping it, the sweat standing out on his face like water.

Frey came to the surface again, held up by the raising of the rod tip. It was the end. The wire leader had banged the tip of the rod and the game was over.

Descorts could do no more. The *Striped Marlin* was alongside the half-drowned captain, and Pop was standing in the stern with a boat hook in his hand.

"Gaff him!" Descorts said quietly.

Pop leaned over, hooked the captain by the collar of his jacket and raised up. Nigger John helped.

Their "fish" lay unmoving on the floor of the cockpit.

... The ocean was dark again when they set their course westward for Florida, with a boatful of German

seaman, all grateful at having been picked up. In the forward cabin, Descorts was working on Captain Frey. He came out finally and told Nigger John to take over and watch the man until he came to.

"He's going to be all right, Pop," Mike Descorts said. "We really saved that bird. He opened his eyes once when I was cutting the hook out of him. It caught him in the shoulder muscle, you know, and I had a job getting it out. I guess it hurt him into consciousness. He knew what I was doing and he said, 'No—no,' but I told him to take it easy and keep warm and lie still. I told him the war wouldn't last forever and that there were always other good boats for a man to captain, plenty of boats on the ocean, all beautiful, and that he should never put his whole life into one. I think maybe I got across to him."

Pop breathed gently, devouring the beautiful night sky with his sage old eyes. "Yeah, Mike," he murmured, "lots of boats on the ocean for a man to captain, and lots of fish in the sea for a man to—"

Descorts smiled faintly. "You don't have to hint any more, Pop," he said. "I know what you mean. When the war is over. When the cobwebs clean up. A man shouldn't put his whole life into a ship any more than into a woman. I couldn't tell him without telling myself."

There was a long silence. Then Pop said, "Purty night." "Uh-huh."

"That was nice fishin' you did on him, Mike."

"It wasn't bad, was it?" Descorts said. "I thought my line was going to snap. It was never built for that strain he gave it. My heart was in my mouth."

"Listen," Pop said, "maybe I was lyin' about Baby Face, but did you ever hear of the Big Bill?"

"Sure I've heard of Big Bill," said Mike Descorts, his eyes blazing. "He's the biggest old sailfish in the world, got more hooks in his mouth and scars on his body than any fish—Pop! You don't mean—"

"I was clearin' the breakwater at Laconia t'other day," Pop whispered, "and I'll swear and declare he all but ramm'd the bow of my boat no more'n half a mile off the stones. I was keepin' it a strict secret, on account of he ain't been raised in four months, but if you're interested—"

"Big Bill," breathed Mike Descorts, "on a six-ounce rod with nine-thread line would be a little bit of heaven, wouldn't he?"

"Aye," said Pop, watching the stars. "A little bit indeed."

Private Notes from Mrs. M--'s Diary



3 Slept like a top all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning and didn't upset me a bit. Headache's all gone now and I feel bright as a lark.



1 Suffered all day with a terrible headache. Felt dull, tired and out of sorts. Remembered that I needed a laxative and decided my headache was due to that.



2 Took an Ex-Lax tablet before going to bed. It tasted swell—just like a piece of fine chocolate.

The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle*! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects.

Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.

10¢ and 25¢



MEN of DARING

by STOOKIE ALLEN

SKY DANCERS

BENNY FOX, A RUSSIAN AEROBAT, WAS DOING AN ACT IN WHICH HE RODE A BI-CYCLE AROUND THE GORNICES OF HIGH BUILDINGS WHEN HE CONCEIVED THE IDEA OF "DANCING ON AIR."

Betty
and
Bennie
FOX

WITH CLARA, HIS WIFE'S SISTER, HE WORKED OUT A ROUTINE ON A AN 18" PLATTER ON TOP OF A 125' POLE.

LIGHTNING CUT A GUY WIRE ATOP AN EL PASO HOTEL. THE POLE BENT HALF OVER BUT THEY CLUNG TO IT AND CAME DOWN HAND OVER HAND. BUT THE GREATEST DANGER IS BEING CAUGHT OFF BALANCE BY A SUDDEN GUST OF WIND.

AT ATLANTIC CITY A GALE STRUCK WITHOUT WARNING. AS THEY WENT OVER, BENNY CAUGHT CLARA WITH ONE ARM AND A GUY WIRE WITH THE OTHER. HE SUFFERED A BROKEN LEG, AND DEEP CUTS AND BURNS-- BUT OTHERWISE THEY CAME TO EARTH INTACT.

WHEN CLARA LEFT THE ACT TO GET MARRIED, HER KID SISTER BETTY WAS TRAINED TO TAKE HER PLACE. BETTY HAS ADDED A ROPE-SKIPPING ROUTINE-- BLINDFOLDED! THOUSANDS APPLAUDED THEIR DARING PERFORMANCES AT THE N.Y. WORLD'S FAIR.

Long Road to Tomorrow

Dikar struck savagely at the Asafric officer



By Arthur Leo Zagat

SLOWLY America's Army of Freedom, led by NORMANFENTON, has grown stronger; and now the army has marched to the foot of the Great Smokies, where Normanfenton hopes to surprise and vanquish YEE HASHAMOTO's Asafric troops. But this scheme is frustrated; in fact, only the skill and daring of DIKAR and his Bunch saves the Americans from complete destruction.

Having intercepted Yee Hashamoto's messages, General Normanfenton knows what the Asafrics are planning. Three divisions of their troops are stationed at the Panama Canal, and Yee Hashamoto has determined to bring them up through Central America. They will give him sufficient new strength to crush the rebelling Americans. So the Asafric divisions must be stopped, and Normanfenton summons Dikar.

THE task for Dikar is an incredibly difficult and perilous one. Years before many Americans sought refuge in the jungles of Yucatan, and there they are still living, as far as anyone knows; they are isolated, virtually

unreachable. Presidenton Normanfenton asks Dikar to penetrate the Yucatan jungle, find these vanished Americans, and rouse them to attack the approaching Asafric divisions. Dikar must go secretly and alone, without the knowledge or aid of the Bunch. Willingly he agrees to set out on this wild venture.

While Dikar and Normanfenton are talking, someone creeps up to the window. The spy escapes from Dikar, unidentified; and no trace is found of him. But all he has overheard is that Dikar is being sent on some secret mission.

DIKAR has promised not even to tell Marilee about his task, and so he leaves when she is asleep, sorrowing because he may not live to see her again. According to plan, he conceals himself in a truck belonging to a convoy which is led by WALT BENNET.

After a time Walt manages it so that Dikar's truck is left behind by the rest of the convoy. Dressed now in the uniform of an Asafric, Dikar prepares to follow the

This story began in the Argosy for March 1

Mississippi River—down toward his jungle destination. The truck he rode has been set on fire. Then suddenly a wild form leaps at him, knife gleaming; and before Dikar can lift his revolver, he is seized from behind. . . .

CHAPTER X

THE NIGHT KNIFE

JERKED off-balance, Dikar went down into the welter of burned junk. The knife missed him clean as the first Asafric lurched past and vanished in a crash of charred wood. But the other one hung on, falling on top of him.

For moments they struggled silently, their breath harsh and broken. But all Dikar's great strength could not throw off the heavy, powerful body of the Asafric. Dikar was pinned down, writhing; and now he felt a hand slide to his throat and tighten there. Frantically he twisted, but the hand clenched tighter and his strength was ebbing fast.

Then Dikar felt the Asafric's body jerk spasmodically; the next instant it had gone lax. With a last effort Dikar heaved it from him, and he struggled to his feet, gasping.

He swayed there—staring into the frightened white face of Marilee. Her hand still held a bloody knife.

"Marilee! How—"

With a little sob she dropped the knife and ran to him. "First I thought you were an Asafric," she whispered against his chest. "Then I saw your eyes and I knew. And then I—I killed him."

He held her fiercely. "But how'd you get here, Marilee?"

"On top of the truck you were in."

"On top—" Dikar remembered the bump on the roof. "You followed me—" Suddenly he thrust her from him and down, so that she was crouched on the ground. "Stay down, Marilee. The other one is hidin' over there."

The flames from the burning truck were dying now, and all around him the weird shadows were moving, like naked Blacks creeping from every side. "Why did you follow me, Marilee?"

"Because you were mis'erable, an I had to know why."

"I was what?"

"Heartsick, Dikar. I've lived with you too long not to read it on your face when you came back from Headquarters. All through supper I knew it, an after, in our cabin, I waited for you to tell me about it. But you didn't."

"Oh Dikar," a sob caught in Marilee's throat, and Dikar's arms ached with wanting to take her in them again and comfort her. "You'd shut me away from you. There was something between us, cold an dark an—an terrible." He didn't dare even look at her. If he took his eyes off the shadows, that would be the killer's chance to jump them.

"I knew you weren't asleep," Marilee went on. "I knew you were only waitin for me to fall asleep, so that you could do somethin you didn't want me to know about, somethin that made you sick even to think about doin. I had to know what it was. I just had to. So I made believe to fall asleep—"

"You fooled me, all right."

"Then you got up and started down the hill an I trailed you in the treetops, keeping far behind, by the sounds you made. That wasn't like you, Dikar, to make any sounds at all goin through the woods, an it made me even more worried. Then you crossed a clearin an I saw

you. You were—funny. Like you were walkin in your sleep."

"That's the way I felt, Marilee." The truck was almost burnt out. Pretty soon it would be black dark. "Like I was walkin in a nightmare."

THIS was like a nightmare too, the black ruins all about, the dying firelight, the shivery feel of death waiting somewhere in the deepening shadows. No sound but Marilee's low words.

"While you crouched there at the side of the road, I watched you from a treetop down near the last truck. When the trucks started movin, I saw you jump on the back of the last one an climb in, and then, Dikar, I saw another dark figure dart out of the woods, jump on the back of that same truck and hang there!"

"Hang? On the chain! That's why it stopped clankin! Someone else trailed me—the spy, of course. The spy that got away this afternoon!"

"The trucks had gone around a curve so there was no use my yellin, but I cut across, still in the treetops, to where the road curves around the hill, got there in time to drop down on top of the one you were in."

"I thought that was a low branch hittin the roof."

"I was just goin to yell down to its drivers when I remembered that the spy would hear me an get away. So I just stayed up there—"

"An rode like that all night. Oh Marilee! Suppose you'd fallen off?"

"I almost did," she said, simply, "lots of times. It was slippery up there an the cold wind pulled at me. Well, anyways, when the truck stopped, the spy dropped off an dived in among those burned buildins here so fast that all I could see was a flittin shadow. Then Walt was down there under me."

"While he was talkin to the soldiers, I let myself down on the other side of the truck and crawled along in a ditch a ways, an then went across the road fast to the side where the spy was."

"Why in thunder did you do that?"

"I wanted to see who the spy was."

"What for?" The last light flickered out and the dreadful dark closed in. "What difference does it make who he is?" Dikar's body hummed like a stretched bowstring.

"What difference? Look, Dikar. He'd trailed you through the woods without either you or me hearin him. Who else could have done that except—"

"No," Dikar groaned, her meaning terribly clear to him. "It couldn't be a—"

"Look out!" Marilee half-screamed. "Behind!" Dikar whirled to a sudden black shape, his gun whipping up.

"Don't shoot," the shape said, quietly. "Don't shoot me, Dikar."

"Bessalton!" Marilee exclaimed. It's Bessalton, Dikar, not the spy."

YES, Marilee." Bessalton's voice was flat and tired. "The spy. I swam to the Headquarters wall from where the Bunch was in swimmin an I swam back to you, under water, when I fell from the wall, an nobody noticed that I hadn't been with you all the time."

"You were the spy— Why, Bessalton?" Marilee was standing now. "Why did you spy on Dikar, an follow him?"

"That's clear enough," Dikar said grimly. "She fig-

ures that we killed Franksmith, so she's turned Mudskin to get even."

"Mudskin! Me! How can you say such a thing?" Bessalton blazed back.

"I can say it all right." Dikar's throat was tight with his anger, "because it is so. Why else did you spy on us?"

"I had to, Dikar. I had to find out what Normanfenton wanted. I'd sent Franksmith to die on Clingman's Dome, an the others who're buried up there, an now there were only nine of you Boys left. I wasn't goin to let Normanfenton send you to die too. I was goin to stop him somehow.

"An then I saw Normanfenton's face as he said America is in danger, an I heard his voice as he told you that you were the only one who could save America, an I knew that I couldn't stop you from goin where he was sendin you. But I could go along, without your knowin it, an maybe I could save you from gettin killed—"

"Get killed yourself, is more like it."

"Maybe get killed myself," Bessalton agreed, "an go to Franksmith. He's waitin for me, Dikar, somewhere out there in the dark. I've heard him callin me." All of a sudden her low voice was edged by a strange, spine-chilling shrillness. "Every night I hear him callin me—"

"That's crazy," Dikar exclaimed. "He's dead, Bessalton, an—"

"No, Dikar," Marilee broke in. "It's not crazy. I'd feel the same way if you went away from me an never came back. I'd hear your voice callin me.

"When a Girl gives a Boy her love, there is no life for her any more except as part of his life. If he shuts her out from it, he kills her just as sure as if he stuck a knife in her heart, only more cruelly."

That was what Dikar was doing. He was shutting Marilee out from his life—she knew it. That was why she had said this. "Wait." He had to gain time to think this out. "Bessalton, did you see the Asafric that jumped at me with the knife? Where'd he go?"

"I tried to follow him, Dikar, soon as I knew you weren't an Asafric. But I couldn't find him." She shivered. "I was goin to try to kill him."

"Dikar," Marilee said, "why are you dressed up like an Asafric? What are you goin to do?"

He stared at her, feeling a sudden, new anguish. Here it was, the question he'd sneaked out of the cabin to keep from having her ask. "I can't tell you, Marilee," he said at length. That was the answer she'd just told him would be like his sticking a knife into her. "Normanfenton ordered me not to, an Normanfenton's our Boss an I've got to obey him."

"You—can't—tell—me." Dikar strained to see Marilee's face in the dark, but all he could see was that she stood straight in the dimness. "What right has Normanfenton to order you to shut me out from you?"

"Every right," he answered, miserably. "His plan to checkmate Hashamoto's move to smash our whole cause won't work if a hint of it leaks out. Oh, Marilee. I'm sorry. I'm dreadful sorry, but I can't tell anyone, not even you—"

"You are mistaken." A soft, lispng voice said behind Dikar. "Don't move!" All of a sudden black, burly shapes blotted the darkness behind the girls, and lifted knives struck blue sparks out of the darkness. "If you move, American, your women die."

THE river was a dark rush through the night and Dikar was being carried along on the breast of its black flood. His ankles were tied, his wrists tied behind his back so tight that his brow was wet with sweat, and he could barely hear the soft, silken murmur of the question that was being asked him for the twentieth time.

"What is Fenton's plan?"

The Asafrics had tied up Marilee and Bessalton and laid them in the bottom of the little boat, but they'd made Dikar sit between them so that the officer could ask him, again and again:

"What is Fenton's plan, American?"

Dikar kept his lips tight shut, but his eyes looked hate at the man who faced him, from the board across the middle of the boat under which the Girls' legs had been shoved.

"You are not very wise," murmured Lieutenant Yosuke, "to be so stubborn." Dikar knew his name because one of the Blacks had called him that while they were taking their prisoners down to the ruined pier under which they'd hidden this boat.

"If I can report to my commander that I have obtained the whole story, I shall win a promotion. For that," he lifted the gun he held in his lap, "I am willing to pay you with the mercy of a clean death."

The sky was faintly paling with the false dawn and against it, in the very front of the boat, Dikar could see the crouched, motionless bulk of a Black who silently watched the dark bank. The sky's grayness lay on the water, out further, but the other Black, bent over an oar in the back of the boat, kept it in the shadow of the bank.

"What is Fenton's plan, American?"

Yosuke had told Dikar that the glare of flames from the truck had been seen by the Asafrics as they returned from a scout further up the river. They'd come in to shore and two men had been sent to investigate. One of them had returned to report to Yosuke after discovering that Dikar was not alone.

"You would be very wise," Yosuke's silken, patient voice murmured, "to tell Fenton's plan to me now. If you wait till we get to Memphis, you will beg to tell it to anyone who will listen."

Dikar said slowly, "Nothing you can do will make me talk."

"No?" Yosuke sighed. "I imagine not. Nothing we can do to you—you Americans are very stubborn about such things as duty and honor. That is why I have burdened myself with these two women, instead of having them killed back there."

Dikar felt the muscles knot along the edge of his jaw. "What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

Yosuke smiled. "The Blacks," he said. "The Blacks will have charge of the women. You would not like that."

"You dog!" Dikar spat at him. "You filthy, yellow dog!"

"You dare to call me—" Yosuke lashed out to slice the sight of his gun across Dikar's face. Dikar's right hand flashed from behind his back, grabbed the revolver; his left fist cracked against the Yellow officer's jaw. Yosuke sagged down.

Lifting Yosuke's gun, Dikar pounded bullets into the Asafric up front, pounded him over into the river. Dikar laughed triumphantly, twisted to the man behind him. The Black had dropped his oar and was snatching up a rifle. His tied legs cramped between the Girls', Dikar couldn't get his arm around far enough to aim at the Black.

The rifle swept up to point straight at his head, shattered the silence with its roar, the darkness with its lighting. But in that split-second Dikar had thrown himself sideways over the boat's side and he was going down into the lightless rush of the river.

ITS cold struck into him like a thousand knives, numbed him. The weight of the water in his clothes dragged him down into the black depths. He could not kick free from the bonds on his ankles, no matter how frantically he struggled. He was sinking—drowning.

Held air tore at Dikar's lungs, his mind was blurred now. His feet struck the River's bed and kicked, and he was going up again.

His head broke water. Breath burst from him in a great gasp. A scream drew his gaze to the boat, beyond reach, and he saw the Black, gigantic, standing, rifle lifted, butt down, to smash it where the Girls' heads must be.

Dikar brought knees up into his belly, straightened them with a frantic strength that shot him half out of water and to the boat. His hands clamped on the Asafric's straddled legs, his shoulders heaved. A flailing dark form sailed over his head, sent up a tremendous splash.

The splash blinded Dikar and then cleared away. A black log came up in the whitish foam-boil, rolled, and was moving shoreward. It was the Black. If he got to land, he'd spread the alarm and Dikar's journey would be ended before it had hardly started.

Dikar couldn't stop him. He'd lost his gun and he didn't dare let go the boat. Suddenly something struck him—the oar. He grabbed it, pointed its handle end at the swimming Asafric, threw it with all the power he could.

Not for nothing had he killed deer with spears, on the Mountain. The heavy oar flew straight to its mark. There was a crack, a flurry of arms and legs and foam.

There was nothing but foam out there on the top of the rushing waters. Foam and the bobbing oar.

The boat rocked, with someone moving inside. Who? The scream he'd heard had been Bessalton's. Had the Black smashed his rifle-butt down once already? Was Marilee— Her name burst from Dikar in a great sob as he twisted, got his other hand on the boat's edge, fought to pull himself up. "Marilee!"

"Dikar!"

He could breathe again as he looked down and saw two pale ovals in the black bottom of the boat. "Dikar," Marilee gasped. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." He ached all over, would have to rest before he could drag himself up and over, but he wasn't lying. "I'm fine an that Black won't bother us any more." He strained to see what was in the middle of the boat. "How about the lieut'nant?"

"He hasn't stirred since you hit him. Oh, Dikar! That was wonderful, the way you called him a name to bring him close enough for you to get at him."

"What was wonderful was the way you gnawed through

my cords, behind my back. How did you ever think of that?"

"How could I help thinkin of it, with your hands right down on my chin? But I had to scrouge down to get my teeth to them, an if Yosuke had noticed—"

"He was too busy with me to notice anything. What had me shivering, though, was the fellow right back of you. If he'd seen—"

"He couldn't. It was so dark down here I couldn't see your wrists myself, just felt them. I guess you can make me out now because the sky is getting lighter. It must be near sunrise."

"I guess—" Dikar, looking up, checked. "That isn't sunrise, Marilee!" The dim glow that had come into the sky had a reddish, scary shade. "The sun doesn't come up in the south."

"What then?" Marilee was startled. "A fire?"

"No. It's the lights of Memphis! We must be gettin close. We'll be seen as soon as the River carries us past that point of land. I've got to stop this boat!"

"How?"

"If I hold on an kick, maybe I can swing it in enough to hit the point instead of passin it. Like this . . ."

THE thicket of bushes and weeds and tall grass was still more gray than green in the clouded dawn as Dikar lifted from making sure that Lieutenant Yosuke had not loosened the vines with which he was tied up, or worked the gag of leaves out of his mouth.

Marilee and Bessalton pushed through the screen of leaves from beyond which there came the rushing sound of the river waters. "All right?" Dikar asked, low-toned.

"All right," Marilee answered. "We found where a willow makes a curtain of its branches, dipping down into the water, and hid the boat behind it. What did you find out on your scout?"

"There's a road back there." Dikar pointed. "But from the looks of things no one ever stops here." There was no need for him to tell about the bunch of ivy he'd seen swaying from a tall pole beside the road, a yellow skull grinning out at him from its heart. "This ground around here was once cleared, but it's all overgrown like this, deserted and desolate. Down the road a little is a big house, but no sign that anyone's lived in it for years. We seem to be pretty safe here, till we're ready to leave."

"That's good. We all need rest." Marilee's eyes went to Yosuke. "One of us will have to keep watchin him, though, Dikar."

"Why?" Bessalton was looking at the Asafric officer too, her nostrils pinched, queer whitish lines around her mouth, her fingers touching the hilt of the knife she carried in a fold of her sarong.

"Why can't we do what he would, just slice his throat an be done with him? If he'd died like his two men died, you wouldn't be worryin about him, would you?"

"If he'd died in fair fight," Dikar explained, "it would have been fine, but we can't just kill him when he hasn't a chance to defend himself."

"Why?" Bessalton asked again.

"Because we can't. It's the code." Dikar made a little brushing motion with his hand. "Never mind. I'll figure out later what to do with him. What we've got to figure out now is how you Girls are goin to get back to Norrissdam."

"Wrong," Marilee said. "We haven't got to figure that

out, because Bessalton and I have decided we're not goin back. We're goin with you."

"YOU decided!" Dikar didn't know whether to laugh or be mad. "I suppose the President's orders that I am to go alone have nothin to do with it."

"They have not," she snapped back. "Normanfenton may be President an the smartest man in America, but he's not a—an angel. He can make mistakes and this is one time he's made one. Suppose you'd been alone last night, Dikar. Where would you be now?"

Dikar knew it was no use arguing with her. He'd learned long ago that when Marilee said something with her little chin stuck out like that and her small fists curled at her sides, you couldn't change her, but he'd never learned not to try.

"Look, honey. I—" He couldn't just lay down the law to her, he couldn't send her away without her understanding why. "Look. Let's go off where that Asafric can't hear, an I'll explain why I can't take you with me." He put his hand on her arm and they moved off, and only afterward Dikar realized that they'd forgotten all about Bessalton.

Leaves rustled against them, thorns plucked at them. Marilee stopped. "This is far enough, Dikar. Go ahead."

"You mustn't repeat a word of this, even in your sleep."

"Do you have to tell me that?"

"No. Well, Marilee, here's the story." He told her about it, in as few words as he could. "So you see," he ended, "why Normanfenton said that I must go alone."

"Yes. I see why he said it, an I still think he is wrong. Look, Dikar. If you go alone, an you're captured or killed, that's the end of everything. But if the three of us try to get through to this Yucatan, there's three chances of one of us gettin there. The chances might be more against each one of the three, but the chances against America would be less."

Dikar rubbed the back of his head with his knuckles. "I—I guess I'm dumb. When I listened to Normanfenton he seemed right. Now you seem right. But you can't both be."

"No, we can't both be." She moved a little away. "It's up to you, Dikar." Her gray eyes took hold of his. "It's all up to you."

"Up to me? If I say so, you'll stop arguin an go back to Norrisdam?"

"If you say that you must go alone, I will not try to go with you."

She always twisted his words around. The light wind that stirred the leaves was suddenly cold on Dikar's skin. Marilee stood straight and proud in the dimness and something in the way her eyes rested on him reminded Dikar of what she'd said last night: "When a Girl gives a Boy her love—there is no life for her any more except as a part of his life."

A bird cheeped its joy at finding a worm. Underlying the tiny morning sounds in the brush was the sound of the wide river rushing endlessly to the Gulf.

Dikar couldn't think with Marilee's eyes on him. He looked away from Marilee. Through an opening in the shimmering green, he saw a piece of the river. He saw a broken plank, caught in the grasp of the swift current, shoot across the space of muddy water and vanish downstream.

"HELP me, Marilee," Dikar murmured. "You've always helped me to find the right thing to do." He looked at Marilee. Her hand was pressed against her breast, as if something hurt her. "Help me this once more."

"No." The hand pressed harder against the soft round of her breast. "This is a thing I cannot help you with. It is a thing for you to decide yourself."

Dikar couldn't bear looking at that hand, knowing that the hurt under it was on account of him. He looked at the river again. Two branches, held together by their intertwined twigs, came into view. A swirl of the current brought them to the inner edge of the water. Something on the shore caught one of them, held it. The current tore the other one away, slanted it out toward the middle of the river. The twisted little twigs of the one left behind quivered as if reaching after the branch that had come so far with it.

There was no use of it reaching. The river had separated them. The river would never let them come together again. Anything caught in the rush of the river must obey the will of the river.

"No, Marilee," Dikar said, still not looking at her. "It is nothing for me to decide. It is something that has been decided for me. I have my orders an—Wait!"

Out there in the river something black, small, had appeared. A muskrat's head. A long, V-shaped ripple trailed behind it, and the V slanted toward the shore across the streaks of foam that marked the current that had swept the branch out away from it.

The strength of the muskrat was so small, so awfully small against the strength of the river, but the muskrat wanted to get to shore, and it was setting its will against the will of the river.

A spray of leaves hid it from Dikar, but it was much nearer the shore than when he'd first glimpsed it. He swung around to Marilee and his words came swiftly. "What I have to do, I've got to do," he cried. "But I'm a man, not a stick of wood, so I'll do it my own way. You're goin with me, my Marilee."

"Dikar!" A light that had almost gone out flared again and shone brilliant in the gray eyes. "Oh Dikar—"

A loud threshing of brush broke in on her, the pound of running feet. Dikar whirled, threw himself toward it. Something thudded to the ground, just beyond a bush that blocked his view. He got around the bush and stopped, his eyes widening.

Bessalton stood rigid, the blade of the knife in her hand scarlet, looking down at Yosuke who sprawled at her feet, face down and very still.

MARILEE came up, gasped, stopped close to Dikar. Bessalton's head turned to them. "He must have rubbed the vines around his feet against a stone," she said, "till he rubbed them through. First thing I knew, he'd jumped up an started to run. I caught up with him and—and—well, there wasn't anything else I could do, was there?"

"No," Marilee said, flat-toned. "I guess not." Dikar was looking at the flattened-down grass where Yosuke had lain. He could see the vines that had been around his ankles, and even from here he could see that their ends were not frayed, but sliced through clean.

"No, Bessalton," Marilee murmured. "I guess there was nothing else you could do."

"That's what Franksmith told me," said Bessalton.

Marilee caught and clung to Dikar's hand; and he felt a shudder run through him.

"Franksmith," Bessalton said again. Her forehead wrinkled and her eyes were suddenly puzzled. "But—but Franksmith is dead. He is dead and buried, up there on Clingman's Dome. How could he tell me anything?"

Marilee's breath hissed. She let go of Dikar, held her hand out to Bessalton. "Give me the knife, dear," she said very gently. "Please give it to me."

Looking at her, Bessalton was very white and Dikar could see that a sob was tearing at her throat; she shook like an aspen leaf in the fall's first chill breeze. Marilee took the knife from Bessalton's fingers and gave it to Dikar, and put her arm around the black-haired girl's waist. "Come dear," she said softly. "Come with me." She turned Bessalton away from the still form on the ground, led her off. Bushes parted, closed behind them.

Dikar stared where they had gone, his throat dry. This was a mess. They couldn't take Bessalton along with them, that was certain, but they couldn't send her back alone, either. Maybe Marilee could help him figure out what to do. Meantime, he'd better wipe the blood off this knife.

He bent and stuck it deep in the ground, and when he pulled it out it was clean again. Then, to keep himself from thinking about Bessalton, he cut branches from the bushes, piled them over the Asafric. Just as he finished, Marilee came back to him.

"She cried herself to sleep," she answered his silent question.

"We've got to get rid of her, Marilee, somehow. Some night she's liable to hear Franksmith tell her to kill you or me—"

"No, Dikar. She'll never again hear Franksmith talkin to her."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know how I know, but I'm sure of it as I am that you love me. Somethin happened to Bessalton when she killed Yosuke, somethin that shook her up so that—Listen!" Marilee's pupils got big, all of a sudden; black and frightened. "What's that sound?"

Dikar heard it too—a blurring rumble, somewhere inland. "Sounds like a truck's runnin along that road." They listened, and the rumble got closer, louder. "It'll go by, Marilee."

But it didn't. It was slowing. It stopped. A door slammed and bushes threshed as men pushed into them. "They've found us," Marilee whispered. "Dikar! They've found out we're here an they've come for us."

CHAPTER XII

SURRENDER, AMERICAN

"THEY'VE got us cut off," Dikar declared, low-toned. "We can't get past em. We're trapped on this point."

"The river!" Marilee whispered. "The boat's—"

"Our only chance. Come on."

They flitted through the thicket. Marilee left Dikar for an instant and came back with Bessalton, whose face was muzzy with sleep. Dikar handed the black-haired Girl her knife, glanced at Marilee to make sure she had hers, and his own. These knives were all they had to

fight with if they had to fight. There was nothing else.

The Black's rifles and Yosuke's revolver were at the bottom of the river. Dikar's own gun must be too, he hadn't been able to find it.

He let Marilee get a little ahead, so that she could lead the way to where she'd hidden the boat. The first loud threshing back of them had stopped. Dikar could hardly hear the Asafrics at all. That was bad. It meant that they must be Black trailers, whose woodcraft nearly matched that of the Bunch.

Marilee stopped suddenly, very carefully let a branch that she'd pulled aside drop back into place. She turned and her face was drawn, pallid.

"No use," she breathed. "There's a couple of little boats out there on the river, filled with soldiers."

"They've outguessed us!"

"No. They're only fishing, but they're right opposite the willow." Her brow wrinkled. "Listen. Those others aren't comin down here after us. They seem to have stopped movin."

Dikar cocked his head, listened. "Does sound like that. I'm goin to see what—" He darted away, slipping through the thorny tangle. With those clothes on he couldn't move as noiselessly as he'd liked, but the wind in the leaves made a louder rustle than he did.

The wind brought him the smell of Asafric Blacks. That scent swerved him toward where he'd seen the old house. He froze as a yell, high-pitched like the voices of all the Yellow officers, pierced the rustling hush.

"Come out of there." It was around on the other side of where Dikar knew the old house stood. "You are surrounded."

"Surround and be damned!" Wall-muffled, that was a ringing and defiant shout and the voice was that of an American. "If you want me, come and take me."

Instinct rather than anything he'd heard made Dikar turn his head. The Girls had followed him. "If we have to take you," the Asafric was answering the American, "you'll be sorry you ever was born. You'd better come out, unarmed."

Dikar jerked his hand to the Girls to go back. "Wait for me," the American shouted, "I'll be out with the first snowfall." Marilee crept closer to Dikar. "Can we help him, Dikar?"

"I'll see if there's a chance. You two stay here." He was moving again, around to the other side of the house from where the Asafric was yelling, "I shall give you five minutes to come out." Maybe he'd lied about the house being surrounded. "Five minutes, American, and then we come in after you."

A laugh, hoarse, mocking, was the only answer.

DIKAR went rigid, his nostrils flaring. Just ahead of him a dark bulk crouched in the greenery, a long, thin rifle barrel jutting sideways out from it. Somewhat beyond, there was another Black.

"Five minutes, American, counting from now."

Through shimmering green, Dikar could make out the house, its walls silvery-gray except where some flecks of paint still stuck to them, the windows glassless, black and empty-looking, the roof squashed as if a giant's foot had stepped on it.

Around the house was a space, twenty feet or so wide, where only grass and weeds grew, but no bushes. No one could cross that without making himself a plain target

for the American inside. And the American seemed ready.

That was why the Asafric officer was trying to get him to come out. And that was why he had been silent since his last brave laugh. He couldn't watch all around the house at once, but if he kept quiet there was no telling where he was. He could surely kill two or three Blacks before they got him. Their officer was smart to try and save them if he could.

The one nearest Dikar had eyes for the house only. A fellow could sneak up . . . Dikar shook his head, telling himself he had no right to. He had no right to risk the fate of all Americans to save one.

The Black was moving. He took his hat off, put it on the end of his rifle, stuck it out of the bushes, just a little, so it looked like he was putting his head out, carelessly.

No shot came from the house. The American wasn't watching this side.

"Four minutes more," the yell came from the other side of the house. "You have four minutes to think it over."

Leaves rustled. The Asafric Dikar watched was lifting from his crouch. The other one did the same. Half-bent, rifles slanted across in front of their burly forms, they were prowling towards the house.

They weren't going to wait for the five minutes to be up.

DIKAR felt a blinding surge of anger. Next thing he knew he was out in the open and his knife was flashing, had buried itself in the back of the nearest Black.

He pulled it out, twisted to the other, saw white, goggling eyes, thick, purplish lips opening. Before the slow-thinking Asafric could quite realize that this dark man in green was an enemy, Dikar had leaped at him, had sliced his throat.

The green-uniformed body thudded to the ground and Dikar was back in the bushes. "Three minutes," he heard the officer yell. "Only three minutes more." And then Dikar saw Marilee's white, big-eyed face. Bessalton's.

"We're in for it now," he snapped at them. "When the rest find those bodies . . . You two go around that way." He pointed. "Take care of any Blacks you find there. I'll take the other two sides."

They nodded, were off. Dikar was a silent shadow now in spite of his clothes, flitting through the tangle. He spotted a Black and dropped to his belly, slithered up on him like a snake, struck like a snake.

Dikar's next victim saw him. His scream was in his eyes as he died.

"One minute." The officer, flat under a bush, was the only one around in front of the house. "One minute, American, and we close in on you." He was little, wiry. Watch in one hand, revolver in the other, he was looking at the closed door of the house, at the broken steps leading down from it. "You cannot escape." There was no sound from inside the house. "Give up, Americ—"

The officer's back wasn't as tough to Dikar's knife as the muscled backs of the Blacks.

DIKAR felt like he was going to be sick to the stomach, but the Girls' eyes were shining in their pale faces. "I know," Marilee said, seeing what he looked like. "I know what you're thinkin. It didn't seem like fair fight, but it was.

"We weren't up against only the seven Asafrics here,

our knives against their guns. If we'd given one of them a chance to even yell or shoot, the ones out there on the river would have heard the fightin an come to see what was up. We are up against the whole Asafric army, just the three of us, an any way that we can find to even the odds is fair."

We Boys live by a code, Dikar thought, as he lifted to his feet, but Girls cut straight through codes when they have to. "We'll have to get away from here quick now, before others come to see what happened to this detachment."

"How about the American in there?"

"I'll go tell him he's safe." Dikar started toward the house.

A gun cracked inside of it and something plucked at Dikar's sleeve as he jumped back into the thicket. A great, ringing laugh followed him.

"Come on!" the laugh broke into shouted words. "Why don't you come on? I can't kill all of you. Come on an' take me."

"He saw your green uniform," Marilee exclaimed. "He thinks you're an Asafric. But we don't dare yell to him. Those soldiers on the river . . . Bessalton!" She grabbed at the other Girl, but was too late. Bessalton was out there in the open, walking straight toward the house, an odd little smile touching the corners of her mouth.

"Oh, gosh," Dikar groaned. "She's gone nuts again." "No, she hasn't," Marilee was smiling too. "He can see that she's white. Oh, look at her, Dikar!"

The black hair rippled down around the slender, graceful figure, bare-legged, bare-armed, the white sarong outlining every lovely curve. Bessalton's head was high and proud as she walked in the sun.

"The door's opening," Marilee whispered.

Bessalton reached the steps and the door up top of them came wide, and a lean, long-legged man was framed in the opening. He stared at Bessalton.

"I didn't feel the bullet." Dikar could hear him plainly.

"The bullet?" Bessalton sounded puzzled, looking up at the man. His hands were tight on the rifle he held across in front of a faded-blue shirt, open at the throat, and almost as ragged as the dirt-colored pants fastened around his waist by a belt of rope. His jaw was black with beard-stubble, his cheeks sunken, his eyes like burned-out coals.

"What bullet?" Bessalton asked.

"The one that killed me. I'm dead, ain't I?" He chuckled, and there was something suddenly gay in the sound of it, something heartwarming. "I must be. You couldn't be anyone but an angel, come to take me to Heaven."

Bessalton's laugh was startling. "Oh, Dikar," Marilee breathed. "She hasn't laughed since Franksmith died."

CHAPTER XIII

SOUTH TO PERIL

THE gaunt young man closed the door after he'd let them into the house, but there was still enough light to see that there was dust everywhere in the desolate, empty rooms; to see that the slats, where the plaster had fallen out of the walls, like a grid of fishbones.

"Yeah," he chuckled. "It's an awful dump, but it sure

looks good to Jim Corbin." He was grinning, but his eyes watched Dikar warily and he held his rifle ready to shoot. "All-fired good, considering that a couple minutes ago I thought I wouldn't be looking at anything by this time."

"You don't have to keep your finger curled on your gun trigger." Marilee smiled. "We're friends. Honest we are."

"You seem to have proved that, all right." He backed up against the wall beside the door and the way he stood, on one leg, the other a little lifted, he reminded Dikar of a fawn he'd cornered once on the Mountain, intending to catch and tame it for a pet for Marilee. "But I don't get it. I don't get it at all. Why should an Asafric—"

"I'm not an Asafric, Jim Corbin," Dikar grinned. "I'm as good an American as you are. My name's Dikar."

"Dikar! The hell you are!" Jim Corbin's gun-muzzle swung around to bear on Dikar's chest. "I've heard all about Dikar. He's got golden hair and yours is black, and— What kind of stunt are you trying to pull on me, anyway?"

"No stunt, cross my heart an hope— Wait!" Dikar thought of something. "I know why you're hidin here, inside the enemy lines. You're an agent of the Secret Net!"

"So what? That's no secret any more, judging from the visitors I was entertaining a little while ago. I belong to the Secret Net and my call's V-four, and where does that bring us?"

"To where I can prove I'm no Asafric." Dikar smiled. "Listen. Johndawson—he was V-six when I first found him in the Far Land—once told me that there's a question you of the Net ask to test if a station has been captured an is bein operated by a spy. That right?"

"Right enough. What about it?"

"If you ask it, I'll give you the answer."

"You will, hey?" Jimcorbin looked uncertain. "Well—how many feathers in the eagle's tail?"

"Thirteen, an the risin sun may have scorched his wings, but he'll fly again into the red-striped mornin, up an up till the white stars blaze in the blue sky. Is that right, Jimcorbin?"

"Right as rain," the other said, "and if you know that, you're no Asafric. Shake, Dikar." He shifted his rifle to his left hand and stuck out his right. Dikar's met it in a strong clasp.

"This is good." Jimcorbin's voice shook, and then he was laughing, all of a sudden.

"What's funny?" Dikar felt a little sore.

"Nothing. Only I just thought how close I was to

kicking this slat down here." He jerked his head down at a hole in the plaster, right where his lifted foot had been. "That would have set off a charge of dynamite in the cellar, fixed there to blow up my radio set and this whole shebang, with everyone in it, when, as and if I was ever raided.

"Here I've sweated blood for three lonely, terrible years just trying to do a little bit for my country and I'd have wound up by blowing sky-high the guy that's done more for it than anyone except General Fenton himself. Not to speak of—" His look went to Bessalton and came away. "Hell, Dikar. Can't you see how funny that would have been?"

"No." Dikar shook his head. "I can't."

"**B**UT I can see something else," Marilee put in. "I can see that if we keep on foolin around in this house, you'll get your chance to kick that slat. How much longer do you think it's goin to be before someone's sent from Memphis to find out why those soldiers haven't come back?"

"Oh Lord," Jimcorbin groaned. "You're right. We'd better be kiting out of here, an' pronto. Look. If we move quick, we can make it up-river to V-two's shack, at Tennemo, without getting spotted, and that's inside our own lines. What are we waitin' for? Let's get started."

"You get started, Jimcorbin," Dikar said. "We're hidin' somewheres near here till it gets dark. We're not goin up the river, you see. We're goin down it. To the Gulf."

"To the Gulf!" Jim stared. "Why in the name of Luke and the other eleven Apostles would you want to go there, and how the blazes do you think you're going to get there?"

"I can't tell you why, my friend, except that it's not because we've got a hankerin to swim in salt water. An I know as little as you do as to how. All I know is that at least one of us has got to get there, an so one of us will. So I guess it's goodbye." Dikar stuck out his hand again.

Jimcorbin didn't take it. "Okay," he grunted. "If it's down-river, it's down-river. You're not shaking me." Once more his eyes went to Bessalton, and this time they stayed on her. "Not if I can help it."

"Nothin doin." Dikar hated to say it. "You can't—"

"Wait," Marilee exclaimed. "Wait, Dikar. Jimcorbin! That truck out there, that the Asafrics came in—can you drive it?"

"And how!"

"Then we can get a uniform off one of the dead Asafrics, dress Jimcorbin up in it. His hair's black already. I saw only one tree out behind this house, but

USE — **SPEEDWAY** — DE LUXE **BLADES**
 — FOR FAST, SMOOTH, ECONOMICAL SHAVES —



that's a walnut. I can make a dye from its bark that will stain his skin as dark as yours. You'll both look like Abyssinians. You can tie us Girls up in the back of the truck. We can be your prisoners, an you're takin us South."

"By Jerusalem!" Jimcorbin said softly. "It might work. I've heard the Asafrics are careless, down deep in their own territory, so if we can only get through this zone around here, where the truck might be recognized. . . I know all the backroads from here to salt water. I've had to know where our agents are posted. What do you say, Dikar? Shall we try it?"

"It's crazy." Dikar looked from Jimcorbin's face to Marilee's excited one. Inside his head he was hearing a tired, old voice that said, "I cannot believe that if we need a miracle to save America, He will not help us to work that miracle."

And Dikar was thinking how everything seemed to fit into Marilee's scheme: the Asafrics with their uniforms and their truck, Jimcorbin to drive it, even that the one tree near the house should be a walnut tree. It was as if He had brought Dikar and the Girls here, had sent the Asafrics here to take Jimcorbin, all at exactly the same time because that was His way of working the miracle Normanfenton prayed for.

"It's the craziest idea anyone ever heard of," Dikar said slowly. "We'll try it. Get busy, everybody."

Even in here he could hear the sound of the river, the endless rush of its waters, but somehow it was a friendly sound now, a sound that told him he was doing right.

There were four now, not one, and the river had brought them together. They were four, and they were going south with the flow of the river, to work a miracle that America might have a tomorrow.

From: *A History of the Asiatic-African World Hegemony, Zafir Uscudan, Ph.D. (Bombay) LL.D. (Singapore) F.I.H.S., etc. Third Edition, vol. 3. Chap XXVII pp991ff*

. . . The thousand and one versions of the legend of Dikar have brought down to us as many differing accounts of his amazing Odyssey from Memphis to the Mississippi's mouth, but diligent research fails to unearth a single detail sufficiently authenticated to merit repetition in a scholarly history of the time.

It would be surprising if the contrary were true. Men were not concerned with writing history in those days when the Great Insurrection approached its apogee. They were making it.

The guerilla bands with which the Americans had begun their fight for freedom were at last coalescing into recognizable armies that had driven the Asafrics out of a wide swath of territory stretching across mid-Continent from the Atlantic Seaboard to the Rockies' eastern slope.

In far-off Panama, Viceroy Yee Hashamoto's tanks were setting out on their drive up through Central America and Mexico and Texas to destroy the presumptuous slaves. Benighted Europe . . .

. . . In all the documents that we have examined, we can find only two references to Dikar's mission. The first is this poignant entry in General Norman Fenton's diary:

May 20: Today entrusted to Dikar my only hope of saving the Cause from complete disaster. Can any prospect so nebulous be called a hope? Even if he wins unscathed through six hundred miles teeming with Hashamoto's black and yellow troops, even if he somehow devises a way to cross the Gulf, what awaits him?

Have I just sent that fine lad to his death with no reason to justify me except sheer desperation? A dozen years ago an uncertain number of our people, fleeing the invaders, were swallowed up by the dark jungle of the Quintana Roo. Since that day no word from them has ever reached the outer world.

Do they still live? What have they become? What right have I to think that even if they still exist and can be roused to aid us, they can accomplish anything against the armored juggernauts of the Asafrics?

Only He can answer Who has brought us thus far on the road to a free Tomorrow. Devoutly, humbly, I place in His hands the fate of this nation that has suffered so much.

If He fail us—but that must not be. It cannot be.

The other bit of authentic data is a page from the log of Station V-2 of the Secret Net, at Tennemo, Tenn. A code message received here at 11:38 A. M., May Thirtieth, from Operative V-4, James Corbin, reveals that Dikar inexplicably had been joined by his wife, Mary Lee (Marilee) and another girl of Dikar's Bunch, Elisabeth Alton (Bessalton).

These had just rescued Corbin from an Asafric raid on his station near Memphis. The two men disguised as Abyssinians, the girls posing as their prisoners, they were about to attempt to penetrate the enemy's territory in an army truck captured from the raiding party.

We're going to blow up the station, (the message continues) and with it the bodies of the Asafrics who tried to take me, together with that of an extra Dikar killed earlier today.

That last we're going to dress up in my clothes and make sure that he's messed up enough that he'll be counted for me. We're hoping that anyone sent to find out what's keeping the detachment won't notice that the ruins of the truck are nowhere in the mess.

"That way, with luck, there will be no hue and cry after us and we might have a chance to get away with this nutty stunt. Well, OM, thirty. When you hear the boom, look over this way and maybe you'll see old V-4 go up in a cloud of smoke.

That smoke-cloud veils the intrepid quartet from our sight. When it thins again to again permit us a glimpse of them, it is four days later and they are somewhere in that dim region of swamp and bayou on the border of Barataria Bay where centuries before Jean Lafitte and his buccaneers held forth. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

MIRROR OF THE WORLD

THE tree Dikar climbed was like something in a dream. It was very like any one of the hemlocks on the Mountain, where he'd grown up and, in a strange way, it was very different.

It had a straight, tall trunk. Its branches forked and forked again till they became twigs, and the twigs were fringed with short, stubby green needles like a hemlock's.

But this tree had round, purple-colored fruit where a hemlock would have cones. It stood straddled high above a brooding lake on roots like gray, knobbed knees. Its bark was loose on its trunk in long, gray shreds and, strangest of all, its branches were festooned with some gray, dry-seeming stuff like looped beards that made the

tree seem old, older than Time itself and vaguely frightening.

As Dikar climbed the tree, his legs and arms were heavy, the way one's legs and arms seem in a dream, and he was wet with sweat. That was because the air was so heavy in this land, steamy and hard to breathe.

This land to which, following the course of the river, they had come was all strange as this tree. It was choked with plants of a kind Dikar had never before seen, dark green and strange-leaved and murmursome.

Dark little streams wandered slow through it, sullen and silent, very different from the cheerfully babbling little streams on the Mountain. A strange smell hung about the streams and the glowering lakes, into which they spread.

Dikar reached the top of the tree. He saw the sky.

Even the sky was strange in this strange land. It was big and empty and it pressed down close on the lush green land and the land seemed to crouch under it, afraid. It was a strange, strange color, a sort of reddish yellow like metal heated, and no wind came out of it.

He hadn't come up here to look at the sky, Dikar reminded himself. He'd come up to look along the road down which their truck had rocked and slithered last night till the Girls had cried out that they couldn't stand it any more and Jimcorbin had stopped it beside the black glimmer of a half-seen lake.

DIKAR could make out the road for a little way, where it followed the edge of the lake, but then it curved back into the queer green woods and he couldn't see it any more.

It was little more than a path, black mud with green things sprouting out of it. Nothing moved on the part of the road he could see, and from where the road vanished he could hear no sound of life.

No sound of human life came to Dikar, and that was what he'd hoped for. But no sight, no sound of living beasts or birds came to him, though the night just ended had been noisy with startling screams, spine-chilling roars, little scutterings.

It was as if between the end of night and dawn all the wild things had fled something awful that was going to happen. That sky . . . Dikar shrugged, wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, started to climb down. He was a sissy, letting himself be scared by the way a sky looked. Why, there wasn't so much as a cloud in it.

He slid down to one of the tree's gray knees, sprang across four feet of water to the bank where Marilee and Bessalton stood, each holding two of the rifles they'd taken from the Asafrics. Just beyond them was the truck, and from its driver's seat Jimcorbin looked a question at Dikar.

"All clear," Dikar answered it. "Go ahead."

The noise of the starting motor was awful loud in the green hush. Jimcorbin twisted the steering wheel and the truck was moving, turning on the road. The wheels crunched the greenery of the lake's bank and went into the water and the truck went out into the water.

Greenish light trailed the truck wheels like the dark water had turned to a queer, liquid fire where they moved. Jimcorbin patted the steering wheel with his hand, said, "Bye, baby," and jumped from his seat, landed alongside the others.

The truck kept going, that strange green glow rippling where its wheels passed. All of a sudden its nose dipped and it slid slowly, almost as if it knew what was happening, under the water.

Where it had been, was only a great pool of green glow on the surface of the dark water. That faded, was gone.

"**Y**OU figured right," Dikar said. "It got to the edge of that deep hole we found with sticks this morning, before the water drowned its motor."

"Yeah. She did all right." Jimcorbin, tall in his green Asafric uniform, his face dark with the walnut stain Marilee had put on it, looked unhappy. "You know something, Dikar? I feel like I've murdered an old friend."

He chuckled suddenly, the little laughing lights in his brown eyes once more that had never quite gone out of them. "Will you listen to Jim Corbin getting sentimental over a bunch of steel and wood! Well, Dikar, the Gulf's about a mile from here, that way, and the truck's gone, so you're in charge from now on. What's next on the program?"

"Get to the Gulf, of course, and find some way to get across it. Come on."

He took his rifle from Marilee and Jimcorbin took his from Bessalton, and they got started. The path went on and on through the green hush of these dim woods, and turned and got so narrow that they had to go single file, Dikar leading, Jimcorbin bringing up the rear.

They crossed a stream on the bridge of a fallen log, and when they'd gone a little way further the path bent sharply around a big tree like the one Dikar had climbed, and he saw light ahead, striking through the tangle.

The light grew stronger. Dikar pushed through a bush that stretched its twigs across the path.

All of a sudden there were no more leaves, no more trees. There was only the strange, reddish-yellow sky ahead of him, overhead and out in front, and rounding down under—

No. Above and in front of Dikar was the sky, but what was under the sky was water, stretching out and out till it met the sky, the water so still, so smooth, that it was like the mirror into which he'd looked while he'd blackened his golden hair and beard, and just the way that mirror had pictured his face, the water pictured the sky.

The Girls came out of the woods and Dikar heard their breath catch in their throats as they stopped stockstill beside him.

SAND sloped down from their feet to the water, and then the water began and went out, on and on endlessly, and there was no other shore out there but only the reddish-yellow water and the reddish-yellow sky rounding down to meet it, sky and water enclosing a space unthinkable vast and empty.

The water heaved slowly, Dikar saw now, as if the world itself breathed in deep sleep, and halfway up the round of the sky an immense scarlet ball was the nightmare sun of the sleeping world's dread-filled dream.

This sand at whose edge they stood ran away from them, left and right, curving outward till it became two long points of land that reached out into the water, black against the reddish-yellow glow, like two great arms embracing the water. But the water stretched away be-

tween the ends of the arms into that vast and lonely nothingness.

"The end of the world," Marilee murmured, her voice low, hushed. "We've come to the end of the world, Dikar."

Jimcorbin chuckled. "Not quite, kid. Not quite the end of the world. Just the Gulf of Mexico."

"The Gulf!" Dikar exclaimed. "But where's Yucatan?"

"Due south, m'lad. Straight ahead the way we're facing."

"Straight ahead? Why can't we see it then?"

"Because after about thirty miles, your line of sight skids off the round of the earth—"

"The earth isn't round, it's flat. Look." Dikar waved his arm out in front of him. "You can see that it's as flat as—well, it's flat."

"Holy mackerel! Don't tell me you never learned—no," Jimcorbin checked himself. "There wasn't anyone on that Mountain of yours to teach you." They'd told him all about their Mountain, on the way down.

"Well, you'll just have to take my word for it. The earth's round, and that's why the horizon, that line where the sky seems to meet the water, is only about thirty miles from here, but the Gulf goes on and on about five hundred miles more, and then there's Yucatan, where you want to go."

"Five hundred miles," Dikar repeated, dismayed. "That's almost as far as we've come already. I knew it was too far to swim, but five—" He broke off. "What's that noise?"

JIMCORBIN cocked his head and listened to the quick *pop-pop-pop* that had suddenly rapped against the brooding hush. "I'd say it was an auxiliary motor someone's been having trouble with an' has just managed to get started again. The boat it's on is hidden from us by that headland."

He pointed to the arm of land on the left. "By the same token we're hidden from whoever's on it. Now if by some miracle we could get hold of that, Dikar, it would be a better way of getting across the Gulf than swimming."

"By some miracle. It's funny you should say that, Jimcorbin. That's exactly what Normanfenton said he was going to pray for, some miracle to help me."

"Prayer's no good any more, Dikar, in this lousy world—Get back! Hide, everybody! That damned lugger's coming around the headland!"

They jumped back into the bushes, just far enough to

screen them, and then they were peering through the green curtain at the boat that poked its nose into view far out there, and was skimming the glassy surface of the Gulf.

"Oh she's a beauty," Jimcorbin breathed. "A thirty-five footer if she's an inch, sloop-rigged, and as clean lines as I've ever seen. That one was never built in an Asafric yard, not on your life."

"There are Asafrics on her now, though." Dikar liked the boat too. Low to the water, it was like a white bird. "I can see three of them. Yellow. They are officers."

"You've got good eyes, guy, if you can make out the color of their skin, though even I can see the green of their uniforms. They must have been caught in the calm," Jimcorbin mused, "and then found that their pusher was *kaput*. The devil! They're putting about. Now what?"

"They're coming in here!" Marilee's fingers were cold on Dikar's wrist. "They're goin to land right here. We've got to get away quick!"

Jimcorbin laughed a little, harshly. "Looks like you're right. They're sure heading straight for this cove. But that's nothing to get all hot an' bothered about. It will take them twenty minutes or more, the rate they're traveling. However, I guess we'd better be going on our way. How about it, Dikar?"

"Ugh?"

"I asked how about our getting started away from here?"

Dikar looked around at him eyes narrowed, brow knitted. "We're not goin away, Jimcorbin. We're goin to stay here an wait for em."

"Wait for— Are you clean out of your noodle?"

"No. You just said that prayer's no good any more, in this lousy world. Well, you're wrong. Normanfenton prayed for me to find a way to get to Yucatan, an there's the answer to his prayer. That boat's goin to take us there."

"Could be." Jimcorbin whispered. "Could very well be. There are four of us an' only three of them, an' even if they are armed, we can pick them off with our rifles as they come in."

"It's taking an awful chance. The sound of firing will carry for miles across the water. It's sure to be heard at Port Eads or Morgan City, or both, and unless the Asafrics are dumber than I think, there'll be a destroyer out to see what the shooting's for. Those babies are fast. They'll overhaul that sloop in nothing flat, and—"

"There ain't goin to be any shootin," Dikar said quietly. "Listen. Listen to me, all of you."

(To Be Concluded Next Week)

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Argonotes

THE sky is bleak, the day is gray and discouraging outside our window; and we have been thinking with approval of those warm lands where a soft breeze whispers in from the sea and the grass skirts swish pleasantly. We were wishing that we had a nice South Seas story to read.

The desire for change is an important motive in people's choice of reading; and right now, because of the mood we're in, we can't see why it isn't the only one. But it isn't. We know, for instance, that cowboys enjoy Western stories; that policemen often relax with a good murder mystery. We've heard that criminals like to read about crime, but we wouldn't know for sure, of course. The prizefighter hurrying from the ring to finish a boxing serial, the pilot intent on an air story after a dangerous day in the sky—very strange.

Nothing could be less attractive to us than a tale about an editor trapped in his office, sealed in by raw weather. But then again, perhaps there are possibilities in that theme. Perhaps, along about the third installment (sooner, if possible), the editor could be conveyed to a distant and exotic clime, a place disturbed only by whispering breezes and swishing skirts.

And why are we fooling around with daydreams when there is mail on the desk? Attend, first of all, to

JOE HERZOG

As time goes on I find one thing wrong with ARGOSY. My complaint is this: For the huvva Pete, why must you print letters from pests who say they don't like this or that? Of course you can't satisfy everybody, but who cares?

Now a lot of people classify stories, but very few classify serials alone. Here is my attempt at the latter job:

1. The Harp and the Blade—Myers
2. The Sun Sets at Five—Chase
3. Rawhide Road—Foster
4. Lords of Creation—Binder
5. The Whisper Trail—Coburn
6. The Scarlet Blade—Montgomery
7. Buckshot for Henry—Tuttle
8. Crooked Caribbean Cross—Chase
9. Thunder Hoops—Foster
10. Touchdown, Professor—Philips

Those, chum, are what I think are the best serials published in ARGOSY since September, 1939. And now, in case you'd like to know (which you probably don't) the next are my favorite characters:

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Philadelphia, Penna.

OUR next correspondent brings up a matter of interest to all readers of Westerns. He has a pointed question to ask, and fortunately we're able to answer it. Read on; you'll see.

JOSH R. BERWICK

I read somewhere or other that almost none of the Western story writers have ever been in the West and that they wouldn't know what a horse looks like. This article said that they read a couple of books about the West and then start to write stories. It said that most of the information in their stories is wrong.

Now I don't care much whether the information is right or wrong. I enjoy Westerns for the sake of the story, and if a man can write a good story about the West without ever having been there, why all the more credit to him.

But still somehow I don't believe it. I think the best Western writers must know something about their subject, and I've gotten into arguments about it with some friends of mine. They tell me I'm gullible. Well, I wish you would help me out. No matter what you say, I'll keep right on reading Westerns; but I'm curious about the writers.
Albany, New York

WE, TOO, have been told that all Western writers were born and raised in Brooklyn and never got any further West. Well, we can assure Mr. Berwick that it is not true. The sight of Bennett Foster walking into this office under a large sombrero would convince anybody.

Mr. Foster has ridden the range; he knows whereof he speaks. Another ex-cowhand is Walt Coburn; and he told us once that he has got the details and idiom in his stories exactly right, or else his friends out West hoaraw him something fearful.

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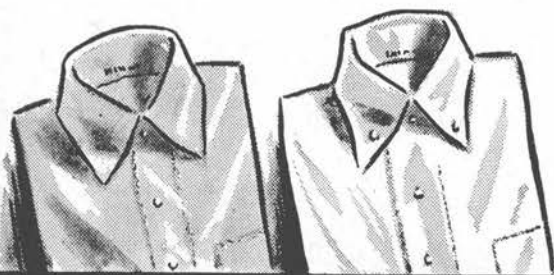
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